

Catrin Dafydd

The Sea

Mae'n arwain i'r môr, mae'n arwain i'r môr, mae'n arwain i'r môr o hyd...

It leads to the sea, it leads to the sea. It always leads to the sea...

Mim Twm Llai

It was the summer before my life changed. The summer before he came into my world. A windy summer that blew me into adulthood. All hair and skin. A few years into the new millennium, and we were headed for someplace new.

Early that Spring, she told me that when she visited her Gran, she'd see shells from her Gran's childhood. Seashells from the seashore, like jewels amongst the small grey and white stones in the front garden. They would lie on the patch of earth between the fence and her Gran's feet. Her Gran's purple slippered feet and white seashells.

Those shells lay there, out of place, reminding anyone who came by, that this little garden could well have been underwater once upon a time, as it may well be again.

You see, my friend's Gran loved the sea, even though she didn't live near it anymore. She was as far away from the sea as could be, by the end. She

lived at the foot of a huge mountain in mid-Wales. As I said, as far away from the sea as can be. Except that she was raised by the seaside, at the cusp of the land in the South West, where the sea and the sky meet and amalgamate. A place where the waves always wait... before they break.

When you are brought up near the sea, you'll always have it coursing through you. That's what my friend said. So yes, the salt was on her Gran's tongue as soon as she came from her mother's womb. It was in her hair. Salty and coarse. And it was dripping through everything.

And one night, as we waited for our shift to start – she told me this story. My friend told me that her Gran brought sea to land. She would sing in her mother tongue to the seashells each morning. In the shadow of the huge mountain. Land locked. But she still sang. And as she sang, her yesterdays became so vivid in her mind's eye that as dawn awoke each day – a new wave would break on dry land.

She told me she enjoyed wearing cheap earrings. My friend. Said it made her feel alive. Of-the-moment. Cheap even.

“Cheap sometimes makes you feel alive,” she said, tossing her hair back before tying it up with a pink hair bobble, “so are you coming on this drive or not? We'll go and see the sea!”

I told her I thought young people called things like that, ‘road trips’, and

she laughed so hard I think I saw her tonsils once, and again afterwards.
At least, that's what I think.

'Go on! You don't have much work to do for your nursing course this weekend' – I remember the wind telling my hair. And I told myself that it would be a good idea to get as far away as possible from him and his loving. And so I agreed to go. All teeth and lips. To see the sea.

She asked me to sit in the back. She said she enjoyed the freedom of having no one in the passenger seat. We talked about why she chose to be a nurse. She said she found the work so tiring that the fuzzy feeling at the end of the day made her think of nothing. And she liked that. Even her lungs were tired, she said. And she liked that too.

She didn't ask me why I chose to follow the course. I just listened, and left *me* behind.

Perhaps that's why it felt so magic. That feeling of driving away from myself. It was my re-invention. In the back of a teal-coloured Ford Focus. And I was glad of it. Glad to get away from him and his long eyelashes. I can still remember the desperation I felt. Tense and anxious. All I had left was skin, containing me, keeping me together as one.

I sprawled my body against the back seat, felt my backbone ride up

against the covers. Enjoyed the fact that she was taking me to see the country. This Wales I'd never known. I only knew my Valley. My people. She seemed surprised. Took it all for granted, she scoffed, checking her lip-gloss in the rear-view mirror.

"I will visit. I will." Her voice was hoarse, I could hear the lie in her promise. It was subtle, but it was there. "I will. Cardiff. Cardiff's not too far from you... Where am I *now*? Gone for a drive. To the coast. Yep, I know! Nice... no, we won't be passing by... God, I'm sorry."

And the voice at the other end told her not to worry. Told her to enjoy life. But I knew that we were in a car park not far off. About half an hour's drive.

How was Cardiff anyway, her Gran continued. Everyone seemed to be going there these days.

"Oh, it's okay, you know. I mean, I like Cardiff. I actually like the place. Plan to settle here. I mean, if I get a husband Mam-gu...!" and they both laughed. Her Gran seemed to understand as well as any other woman. *More*, if anything. And I suddenly became insanely jealous of this sprawl of Wales she owned. The people this girl knew. The way she saw and breathed. Even the way she spoke to her Gran. This jealousy was all consuming and anxiety broke over my back.

“It sounded different, the Welsh you spoke with your Gran,” I said, piercing a small foil circle with a sharp white straw, naked feet up on the car seat. “How the hell did you notice that? You don’t speak Welsh! You’re right though. She wouldn’t understand my type of Welsh,” and blackcurrant squash spilled cold as ice onto my warm tongue, “her Welsh is proper Welsh.” I sipped, and stared.

“Let’s get some chips,” she said then as she put the keys into the ignition. I mumbled in agreement.

“I don’t mind if you want to call with your Gran...” I remember offering, in case she was thinking about me. Concerned that I wouldn’t want to visit.

But she rubbished my offer. And besides, according to her, we didn’t have the time...

When we were deep into Carmarthenshire, she told me that we weren’t far from where she was brought up. Not far from her people. Not far from her accent, and not far from what she knew. Not far from what she had learned before she even knew what learning was. But that she loved Cardiff, and that she was allowed to be herself in Cardiff. All modern and new. And that this was the trouble with things these days.

“Why can’t you be yourself in your home town?” and she shrugged her shoulders and drove on. She’d taken out the Carole King CD by then, and

I was glad. It was grating on me. It had been played each way possible.
Listened to in all manner of ways.

I stared at her through the rear-view mirror. Silver looking glass and her.
Her glow. I can remember now how beautiful she looked. And as I stared
at her, I fell into her. I was hardly there at all anymore. It's as if it was just
her from then on. Her, in a car. Driving towards the sea. Her skin, I mean,
her skin, it made me want to give up. Her translucent skin. Letting me see
inside.

After a silence, she told me that all her friends who hadn't had children
at sixteen had moved to Cardiff too. I'd forgotten I'd even asked the
question, but she seemed to feel guilty about it. She told me, if she
ever had children, she'd want to come back here to live. Bring them up
properly. She said she didn't like the Cardiff accent either. I raised my
eyebrows in the back seat, but she couldn't see me.

And that's when she started crying.

"He shattered my skull, that bastard," she said, sitting on the edge of a
bed in the B and B, "shot a bullet through my brain." In truth, no different
to anyone else's experience but that she made it feel so raw and so real.
I made us black coffee after that. I didn't touch the little mini-buckets of
UHT milk.

But she continued to cry.

I'm still not sure to this day whether it mattered to her who she was telling. I offered her the coffee but she pushed my hand away. I remember it like yesterday. White cup. Black coffee swilling around in it. Fluid coming very close to the edges but never spilling over.

“And d’you know what he told me? D’you know what he said was the *matter* with us?”

And I shrugged my shoulders as she looked up. Wet faced. Smudged mascara. “He said I shouldn’t have lost myself in him like I did. I tried to disappear in him, that’s what he said! Can you believe? I mean, what does that *mean*? What kind of fucking stupid thing is that to say?” and I shrugged my shoulders again.

And then, she stopped crying. As if she’d never known sorrow.

“See, I could’ve been a doctor. I mean, I’m bright enough... but I never wanted the responsibility. Responsibility – it kills me to even *think* about it. Couldn’t the thought of it just *kill* you? I mean, couldn’t it?”

“I could’ve been a nurse,” I said then, and she cocked her head to the side as if I’d said something nonsensical. Of course I could have been, I was about to become one.

But to this day, I know exactly what I meant, and that’s exactly how I meant to say it.

In fact, looking back at that moment now, I think that's when I began to hate her.

So it must have been by the coast, near Tenby, that she got the call.

But just before her phone started ringing in my head, I told her that I thought the sea looked beautiful.

"This isn't the sea," she said nonchalantly, as the ringing began. She had no intention of answering the call until she'd finished her sentence, "you're going to have to wait a bit longer, before you see the *real* sea..."

I watched her talk to her mother, the sun making her nose shine. I watched her expression change. I watched her lips pulsate. I watched her bring her nails to her mouth. I watched her bite them. It was impossible to make out her conversation this time. She wasn't saying much. I turned my head. Tried to give her some privacy, with my body language, at least.

After a while, the call was ended.

"That was my Mam," she said, sucking on her lips, still thinking to herself as she talked to me. "It's my Gran. My Aunty Val's gonna have to go stay with her for a while."

She explained that they were all worried about her Gran. Her next door neighbour, Idris, had spotted her in the back garden in the middle of the night. He'd called the family. Apparently, she was in her nightgown, casting a fishing line across the lawn. Scraping the hook against the green grass. Pulling it back towards her.

She was fishing on the dry, my friend kept saying afterwards. Fishing on dry land.

And all I could do was listen.

I remember that we went down to the beach then. And I picked up a shell. Held it to my ear. A small shell but it could still sing to you and whisper the sea's words. And I'm sure I heard her Gran's singing too. Welsh words. Foreign-sounding. Whispering to me.

The strange thing about it all was that she carried on after that, as if nothing has happened. For a while at least. We drove along the Pembrokeshire coast and she assured me that she wasn't from here. There were two Pembrokeshires. Yes, that's what she said.

So we listened to some chart music, tried to think cheap and to gather superficial thoughts. Letting the drive bring us alive anew. Letting the speed and the fresh air against our faces allow us to make-believe that we were in America. Not here at all.

“Sex.” She said to me, as the car sped through the little villages and on towards the westernmost point of this place they call Wales. “Tell me about the best sex you’ve ever had. Come on! I wanna hear it! Every damn detail baby!” and so I did, until it was better than anything I’d ever experienced. All I could remember was the last time. With him. And his eyelashes against my cheeks. Our strange love.

“And you,” I said, “you can’t expect to get away with that one! Come on, spit it out. I’m all ears. All ears!” and she squealed with laughter. She told me she liked role-play. She liked to dress up as somebody else, and try and act out how it should be done. In London or somewhere. That’s what she said.

And then after that, she wanted me to light her a cigarette. I didn’t know she smoked. She said she didn’t, but that she kept a packet hidden in the glove compartment at all times. For emergencies, holidays and losertype-boyfriends who had pretty, pretty faces and cold, cold hearts.

So I lit her a fag.

As she puffed, she explained. She wanted a fag that afternoon so that she could imagine that we were Thelma and Louise. Only that we weren’t really going to do anything as dramatic as drive over a ravine.

We were different to Thelma and Louise, she puffed away, we were just going to see the sea before heading back to Cardiff. And that was good enough for her.

And when we got there, I understood.

Blue swaying blankets. Sun diamonds on the waves. Salty sea spread in front of me as if I could drink it all. Like a thirst you get when you make love. Like the longing for something you don't even know you've lost. Real and ballsy. Wet but contained. And no one but us on this windy little beach.

"My family belongs here," she said all light and fluffy, before she fell back onto the sand, laughing and closing her eyes.

I sat, hugging my knees, wondering why my Mam had never brought me here. Wondering whether my brother ever saw the sea before he died. Or wondering at least whether he had *memories* of the sea in his little head before he left here for someplace new.

And I felt a longing as I sat there looking at the water stretching to the horizon. A yearning for something I couldn't reach. A need for something I hadn't needed before. Little did I know that a baby boy was lying inside of me as I sat there.

And that's when she fell asleep.

I watched her breathe deeply. I sat there, guarding her and breathing cold air until it hit the back of my throat and threatened to stop my breath

forever. I reached into my pocket for the shell and listened, thinking again of the seashells in her Gran's garden. Far away from where they belonged. Roads away from the sea.

She stirred in her sleep and after a while, I could tell that she was dreaming. It reminded me of watching my Gramps on Christmas Day afternoon back in Bedwas. The way the lids start to stir, the way curling lips give you clues. She stirred, she wasn't dreaming anymore. Something was troubling her.

She sat bolt upright on the sand. Tried to shake the thoughts from her head. Tried to nudge her nightmare back to where it had come from.

I'll never know what went through her head.

All I know is that nothing was the same after that.

The journey back was strange. We took a different route. Drove deep inland. She even asked me whether I'd mind if we called with her Gran on our way. But I never got to go in. I wouldn't have understood them, that's what she said. I didn't speak Welsh, and with her Gran being ill and so confused of late, it would be better if I stayed in the car and listened to some music.

But while she was gone, I did get out of the car briefly. Just to catch a

glimpse of the seashells in her Gran's front garden. The ones I'd been imagining. And that's where they were. All white and pure. In amongst the stones. Inland and alone.

And then we were off again, driving back to Cardiff, except that she was quiet this time. In fact, she was so quiet I knew that she was battling with herself instead of talking to me. Most silences are perfectly fine. People mumble or breathe in a way that makes you realise that the silence is offering them solace. But other silences are heavy with thought. I don't know how you can sense it, but you can. And that's how her silence felt.

All I knew was that the connection between us had severed. We no longer breathed in harmony, even though we had hours left together in the car. A diaspora of our minds, except that it had nothing at all to do with me.

The last I heard, she was getting married to some doctor from Plymouth with a handsome face and a toothy smile. And she was still living in Cardiff – all modern and new. I heard that her dress was pearly white and that her translucent skin shone in the sun on the big day. I always used to wonder whether her Gran lived to see that day. I suppose it shouldn't have mattered really. Not to me. But it did. And it always comes to my mind when I catch a glimpse of that little shell, still on my dressing table.

And my little boy arrived. To the disapproval of many. But not mine. Of course, my friend was long gone by then. She doesn't even know to this

day that there were three of us on that road trip to the sea. But I don't care. I've learned that you don't have to tell people things in order to make them legitimate. And besides, I have him. So there are two of us now. In our house in Bedwas. And he's teaching me things, this little boy. He got me thinking again about my friend's Gran recently. Of the seashells in her garden and of our visit to the sea. Only in the last few days, he came home from school and taught me that the sea in Welsh, is y môr. He looked surprised that I didn't know such a simple word, because these words are his. And he thought that they were mine too.

And I remember thinking to myself that y môr was the exact word to describe the sea we saw that day. It wasn't the sea. It couldn't be. What was missing from the scene, and what gave me that ache, that longing, was y môr. And to think that inside me was a boy who already knew it.