

# MUSCLES CAME EASY

*Aled Islwyn*

*Muscles came easy, I said. Looked like a bulldog at eight, size fourteen collar at thirteen and captain of the senior school rugby team at sixteen.*

He was impressed. I could tell. Shuffled his arse on those pussy-sized stools they have at the bar at Cuffs and offered to buy me a drink.

Now normally, I don't. Don't talk. Don't look 'em in the eye. Don't do nothing once I've fucked 'em in the darkroom. Them's the rules. Walk straight out of there. Maybe have a drink on my own, or talk to Serge behind the bar, as I did tonight. Then go back a little later to see if it's busy in there by then.

Guess this guy just happened to see me there at the bar. Well! Let's face it. You can't miss me.

French, apparently. From Lyon. A businessman on his way down to Tarragona. Married. I wouldn't be surprised. But no ring. Not your usual Cuffs customer at all.

Asked me if he could see me tomorrow. How naïve can you get? Didn't disillusion the sad fart. Didn't seem right to, somehow. Said my day job at the gym kept me busy. Wanted to know the name of the gym. And I told him. Said he'd look it up next time he was in Barcelona.

*Yes, do that, mate,* I said. But, frankly, I wouldn't recognise him if he pole-vaulted onto this balcony right now.

Then – big mistake! – he grabbed me by my upper arm

and tried to lean over to kiss me. Jesus, man! How gross can you get? But I still didn't have the heart to tell him to fuck off, or that Serge paid me to prance around in the darkroom with no shorts on. It's Serge's way of making sure the facilities get well used if it's been quiet in there for a couple of nights. I start the ball rolling in there if they seem a bit on the shy side. Pick someone I'd normally go for and give him a blow job. Sometimes it develops into a free-for-all. Sometimes not. But they've got to feel they've had a good night out, these saddos. That's what they're there for... supposedly.

For the most part they've got to grope around in the dark for themselves and find their own bit of fun, but Serge reckons someone like me making himself available for a while helps get things going. And it's always the start of the week he calls me. By Thursday, apparently, they need no encouragement. Never get these club jobs on a weekend.

Wouldn't have touched that French guy with a bargepole in my own time. Just didn't have the heart to tell him the truth. Should have really. I'm just too soft. Always have been, see!

Got up and left him after the kissing fiasco. Went straight back in there and fucked two more. Condoms worn both times, of course. Part of the game ever since I've been at it. Surprised how many of the older ones still ask and check. Guess they remember a time when it wasn't the norm.

Seeing the traffic going backwards and forwards kept Serge happy, I could tell.

Then the last dumb trick I pulled must have had this thing for armpits. Licked me sore he did, the bastard. Not really my thing. But he was good at it, I'll give him that.

Glad of that shower though.

First thing I always do when I come in from these club jobs. Check Mike's asleep (and he always is) then get cleaned up. Check myself over. Thorough. All part of the routine. Important. Never fail.

And so's this brandy. Part of the routine, like. Just a small one. Few minutes to myself out here in the fresh air. Mull things over. How it all went and that. Well-toned body. Well-honed mind. All that shit they pumped into you at college. Well! When all's said and done, it's right, like, isn't it? When you really think it over. Has to be... for the life I lead.

I refused point blank. Told him straight. I'm not dressing up in cowboy boots and stetsons for nobody – and no amount of extra euros.

*O, si, he said, but line dancing is all the craze now!*

*That may be so, I said back, but I told him straight... he's running a great little health studio there, Raul. Legit. The genuine McCoy. Not some poof's palace where a lot of poseurs prance around pretending to lift weights and keep fit.*

I'm strictly a one-on-one guy. Personal Trainer is what I'm employed as and that's what I am. Press-ups. Rowing machine. Circuit training. All the stuff I know really works. I work with clients individually. One-to-one. Assessments. Supervision. Even down to diets and lifestyle choices. A proper trainer.

OK, I do some aerobic stuff with the women clients, I grant you. But they just like to hear the word used often. Don't think half of them know what the hell aerobics means. And told him that's all the pampering to fashion he'll get from me.

*Oh Joel, you not mean it! You think it over, Joel... please... for Raul!*

Love the way Raul says my name. And he knows it. They're not used to it here – Joel – which is strange. I always find. Spain being a Catholic country and all. You'd think they'd know their Bible.

He makes it sound like Hywel. Reminds me of home. Our geography teacher was called Hywel Gordon. Had a hell of a crush on him at one time. He'd been a very promising full

back, but some injury had put paid to that. No sign of injury on him from what I could see. But there you go! Guess it was the bits of him I never did get to see which needed scrutinising the most.

Raul's been good to me these last four years. Him and his missus. Helped me with my Spanish when I first arrived. Fed me. Gave me a job. *I only want best people work with me in my fitness studio*, he'd say. *And I want you*.

They speak Catalan together. Raul and his wife. And their kid gets taught in it at school. Like they do with Welsh back home, I suppose.

Not me, of course.

My nanna could speak Welsh quite a bit. Chapel and that. But I couldn't sing a single hymn at her funeral. And felt a right nerd. If there's anything of value to lose, you can bet your life my mam'll be the first to do so.

*Couldn't be arsed with all that, really*, were her thoughts on Welsh.

Then one day she lost her purse on the bus. Huge kerfuffle in our house. A whole week's wages gone. No wonder my dad left. *I'd have been OK if it wasn't for her with the glass eye from Tonypandy confusing me with all that talk about her Cyril!* The only explanation anybody ever got from her on that little incident.

Poor cow has even managed to lose a breast. *You're one nipple short of a pair of tits, Mam!* I tease her rotten sometimes. She laughs.

*You've got to laugh in the face of adversity*, she says... except sometimes 'adversity' slips out as 'anniversary'. It's a miracle I'm as well-adjusted as I am.

And I bet Raul has me taking these bloody line dancing classes any day now. I can see it coming!

*Don't know why you won't get yourself a tidy job*, she said.

I knew as soon as I picked up the phone she was going to take a long time coming to the point.

*Come back home and be a teacher. Papers always say they're crying out for them round here. And there's you there with all them qualifications...*

*I already got a tidy job, I said. Why I bother explaining every time, I don't know. She'd never heard of a Personal Training Instructor 'til I started calling myself one – as she'll happily tell anyone who's sad enough to listen.*

*Didn't take a blind bit of notice. She never does. High as a kite 'cos of something. I knew it when she first came on the line. I could always tell, even as a child. Her voice almost croaking with that hysterical shriek she puts on when she's dying to tell you something.*

*Our Joanne's pregnant again. At last she came out with it. In one great torrent. The washing machine's on the blink. And to cap it all, the real biggy was her final punch: Oh, yes...! And Dan Llywellyn has cancer.*

Then silence.

I felt nothing, really.

Said I was sorry to hear that, like you do without thinking. But I couldn't honestly say I'd thought of him at all for several years.

She didn't know where it was. *Somewhere painful*, is all she'd heard. The talk of Talbot Green Tesco's last Saturday, apparently.

He had it coming, I suppose. But I couldn't tell Mam that. Wasn't glad. Wasn't sad. Felt nothing.

*Still don't know why you started calling him Dan Dracula.* She was chipping away on an old bone, hoping she'd catch me on the hop. *Always thought it was cruel of you, that, after all he'd done for you.*

*It's because of all he's done to me, Mam.* That's what I wanted to tell her. But didn't.

He's also the one who introduced me to weights. Saw my potential. *Dan Llywellyn is the one who saw our Joel's full potential.* That's what he'll always be credited with. Showed me the ropes. Gave me definition.

*You're everything you are today 'cos of that man*, she declared with conviction.

She was right, of course. And she meant it at face value. Wouldn't know what irony was. Not my mam. If she can't get it cheap on Ponty market, she doesn't want to know.

Her kitchen floor was completely flooded, apparently. Took three bucketfuls of mopping to clean it up. And today it rained there all day.

*You call me a Muscle Mary one more time and I'll fucking give you a good hiding*, I said.

*I haven't called you a Muscle Mary once yet*, he replied, playing child-like with my left bicep.

Well! To be fair he hadn't. Not during today's debacle.

*Pussy-boys are so predictable*, I said. *I always know what's coming next with you.*

*You're just a slave to your ego, Joel*, he retorted. *And that's a very subservient place to be for a man of your physical stature.*

On the bed, Mike rolled on his stomach as he spoke, and lowered his voice to that detached level which always places him beyond any further verbal bruising. It's a ploy he's mastered to perfection. The aim is to intimidate me and exonerate himself. It's a tactical illusion, of course, rather than a sign of true superiority. It's a part of our game. A futile duel fought in a darkened room, while our neighbours, all around us, bathe in a siesta of rest and serenity.

Maybe that's why we laughed. Lying there bickering in our Calvin Kleins on that vast double bed this afternoon. It was the only thing to do. Our last hope of not looking ridiculous, even to ourselves.

We've lived together long enough to be both comfortable and bored with each other in equal measure.

I slapped his arse and told him to go make a cup of tea. And that's when my mobile rang, just as he opened the door to the living room and let the light in.

This guy's from Valencia, right. The one who rang. Owns a club, it seems, and wants me down there next Tuesday night to work his back room. Personal recommendation from Serge, apparently.

I jumped off the bed and stood upright to talk.

Two things, I said. One: Valencia's too far, man. Must be four hundred kilometres, easily. Don't know how much that is in miles. Gave up converting long time ago. But then relented when he mentioned the fee. Said I'd think it over. Oh, yes! And the second thing, I said: *I'm strictly a top. Hope Serge made that clear. This boy's arse is an exit only. Period.*

Silence! Think the aggro in my voice had been too much for him. All I could hear was the amount of money on offer being repeated down the line. And the sound of water boiling in the kitchen where Mike was doing what he does best. Being English.

I've tried to talk to Mike. But I can't.

The news of Dan Llywellyn's imminent demise has followed me around for days. Ever since Mam told me. *And all the memories slogged me in the guts!*

That's the last line of this poem by a guy called Harri Webb. We did him at college – *You see, it wasn't all boys running around in muddy fields and pumping iron*, I told Mike earlier – and I really loved his stuff.

Mike's painting at the time. What I still call the small bedroom is now his studio. Looks more like a clinic if you ask me. I've never heard of anyone being creative and so tidy at the same time. Whilst the canvas is awash with colour, Mike remains immaculate. But that's Mike for you.

He was only half listening to me, I could tell. He then informs me that he's never heard of Harri Webb. *Another one of your trivial poets*, he insists. But inside I know that he takes it as a personal affront to his dignity as an English lecturer that I've managed once again to draw attention to a lapse in his supposedly superior education.

He was still at it when Mam rang in the early evening. Painting that is.

Things are worse than first thought, apparently. For old Dan. He's at home. But he's shrivelled to a nothing and his hair's all fallen out. Sick every other minute, it seems. All over the bus back from town. So she said.

*And what's his wife got to say on the situation?* I chipped in. *The usual fuck-all, no doubt.*

Mam tells me to wash my mouth out with soap and water, but I tell you, that woman should have had 'I see nothing, I hear nothing, I say nothing' tattooed across her forehead years ago. She must have known what was going on. Wasn't deaf, dumb and blind through ignorance, I'm almost sure. And I don't think it was fear either. Doubt if Dan Llywellyn ever touched her. It was just indifference. She'd sit there like a beached whale in front of the telly, stuffing chocolates in her mouth, oblivious to the tip around her. And all I ever did was mumble some banality as I passed her on the way to the bottom of their stairs. Dan upstairs before me, usually.

*You go on up, love,* she'd urge me. And up I'd go.

*Twp* she was, I reckon. Probably still sitting there right now, incarcerated by her cholesterol consumption and jellied in cellulite, flicking from channel to channel in order to shut out the outrages going on around her.

I reckon our Joanne will go the same way. Already showing early signs of abandonment, despite all this breeding she's intent on inflicting on the world. In fact, I'm convinced it's part of it. All these brats of hers are only an excuse for doing less and less. That's the reality. She has no creative aspirations in her at all. Not for herself. Not for her kids. Never did.

*Leave her alone. She only wants to give me more grandchildren,* pleads Mam on her behalf. *Since you clearly don't intend to give me any.*

Joanne and Dean already have three. *That was my point,* I said. Why the hell would they want more? Going by the



evidence so far, the possibility that some hidden pearl of genius is hiding away in their shared gene pool is pretty remote.

They scream a lot. Mam spoils them. Dean disappears down the pub. And Joanne gets fatter by the day, only admitting when pushed that she doesn't really care what the hell they do with their lives... *so long as they're happy*. This is the happy heterosexual life we're all supposed to aspire to, as lived halfway up a Welsh mountain. I swear the sheep have more fun.

It's all over the *Observer* apparently. The latest Rhondda bombshell. Dan Llywellyn arrested amidst allegations of child abuse. They've torn his house apart. Even removed the telly and the video. So it's a real crisis as far as his missus is concerned.

I chuckled to myself, but felt nothing. Said even less.

*You used to spend hours down that gym with him.*

I let her do the talking and grunted in agreement.

*And round his house! Some weekends, you practically lived there.*

Her hysteria was muted for once. I knew there was so much else she wanted to ask, but never would. Some places are too raw for even my mam to venture. I simply coughed. (This cold I've caught has made me croak incoherently when I speak, making my silence sound less guilty than it might otherwise have done.) Mam's voice cracked in unison.

The mirror by the phone was briefly my only comfort. I flexed my free arm. And smiled at myself in approval. For a moment I remember wishing Mike had been there with me. But he wasn't. It was just me and Mam... the mirror and the memories.

Got a worse drenching that night than I thought at the time. Must have. 'Cos I'm convinced that's where I caught this lot. OK! I know I said I definitely wouldn't do that job. But did in the end, didn't I?

Fancied the run. That's what clinched it, not the money. When you consider that it emerged he wasn't paying mileage for the petrol, it wasn't really that much. But I hadn't been for a seriously long run on the bike for months. So, Valencia, I thought, why not?

The evening went well. Tidy little bar. Changed into my cut-off shorts and leather harness and did a few tricks.

Hadn't even realised it was raining until I came out the back at 4 a.m. If I'd had any sense, would have asked that guy for somewhere to stop over. But in my mind, I'd been looking forward to those empty roads along the Costas in the middle of the night. So wiped the seat, got on and revved my way out of there.

How was I to know the 'Med' was due to have its worst storm for five years that night?

Bloody exhausted by the time I got back here. Had to keep my speed right down, see. Made the journey longer, which meant I got even wetter. Thunder sounding off all around me. Lightning. Hailstones the size of golf balls. Could feel her sliding underneath me. Probably should have checked the pressure before setting out. But didn't. Could feel them tyres fighting the torrent for supremacy of the tarmac on certain corners.

Exhilarating at the time. But glad to get home, I can tell you. It was already light. The sun all bright in the sky as though nothing had happened. Mike still asleep, thank God. Squelched my way to the bathroom to strip out of my bike leathers.

Well! It's been a week and I'm hardly any better. Still coughing my guts up. Sneezing. But the shivering's gone. That was the only hopeful news I could give Raul when he called earlier. Wanted to give the man some glimmer of hope I might return to work before the end of the week.

*The things you do, not to do the line dancing*, he teased, accusing me of being a fraud.

Cheeky buggler! I leaned forward and pinched his nipple through his T-shirt.

*I'm as honest as my prick is long*, I said, choking as I coughed as I laughed.

He didn't flinch. Just laughed along. I'm sure he'd be a kinky little bastard given half a chance. He knows I'm gay, of course. Always has. But we've never really discussed it.

That's what made it rather embarrassing when the phone rang. Raul was still here in the lounge when they called. Over there across the table from me. He could tell I'd sobered up pretty quick after picking up the phone.

It was some bloody detective from the central police station at Pontypridd. Well! You don't expect it, do you? Not in Barcelona during siesta on a Sunday afternoon.

It's another world, you see. That's what I keep telling Mam.

*Nice for a week, love, but wouldn't want to live there*, she keeping replying.

She must have been the one to give them my number. Didn't think to ask him where he got it from. And looking back on it, he didn't really ask me anything either. Confirmed who I was. That I knew Dan Llywellyn. That I'd agree to see them when they came over. And that was it.

Must be serious, mind... coming all that way just to see me.

*This coming Wednesday?* asked Mike in disbelief when I told him. *They are in a hurry.*

*Guess they have to be if Dan is fading fast. They'll want to get their summons served before the death certificate is signed.*

Explained very little to Raul after I'd put the receiver down. He had the sense to down the whisky I'd poured him pretty sharpish. Said he hoped I'd be better soon.

So do I. It's no fun, this sickness lark!

I guess I should have. But I couldn't, could I? Don't ask me why, just knew I wasn't going to before they rang that bell. And all that talk of 'substantial financial compensation' he

kept dangling like a carrot in front of my eyes throughout our ‘little chat’ didn’t make a difference either.

*This isn’t a formal interview, Joel, he said. I’m not obliged to caution you and you’re obviously not suspected of committing any criminal activity yourself. We just want a little chat.*

He didn’t have a Valleys accent. Couldn’t really tell where he was from, the young burly one who talked. Impressive thighs though. He was lean and well-muscled. Not in my league, like. But I knew he was a fit bastard and guessed he probably punched above his weight. Wore a pair of safari shorts, which looked great on him. And a kind of pink cotton shirt, which didn’t.

Found the heat oppressive, he said. Never been to this part of Spain before. Investigating serious allegations made against Mr Daniel Llywellyn who ran the Junior Gym and Recreational Club down Bethel Street for many years.

Well, I knew why he was there! He could have saved his breath on that score.

*How is he?* I found myself asking.

*Poorly,* came the reply. God knows why, but somehow I’d expected more.

He already knew I was gay. He told me so when he first arrived.

*Yes and very happily so,* I fired back with confidence. Thought afterwards that I must have sounded defensive and regretted saying anything.

*So I see. Beautiful city. Lovely apartment. Must be a very nice lifestyle.*

*I like it.* I found myself agreeing like a sheep. He was setting me up for compliance and I wasn’t having any of it.

He also knew I was now working at a health studio myself. *A bit different from your old haunts back in Wales,* he sneered.

Told him I’d taken time off work especially to see them. He said he was grateful. But inside I knew every word he spoke meant something else.

Should have dropped Dan Dracula right in it, I suppose. The stupid bastard. But just couldn't bring myself to do it, see.

Then he said he knew it was difficult to talk about such things.

His mate, meantime – the little short-arse git who hardly said a word – is still sitting in that armchair over by the door to the spare bedroom. Fascinated by art, it seems. Had a good look inside and his eyes devoured every painting we have hanging here in the lounge too.

It seems I can get back in touch with them anytime... or so the talkative one kept reminding me. No problem... day or night. When I'd thought it over. If I could remember any little incident when I'd felt uncomfortable... I shouldn't hesitate. *Any time. You just call me, Joel.* Like all the other lads had done... the ones who'd come forward and were now in line for *substantial financial compensation*.

Wants us to meet again before they go back. Tomorrow evening after the gym closes. For a drink.

I suggested the Zanzibar bar on Las Ramblas. His tourist attire should look at home there.

We shook hands as they left. And I looked him in the eye. For the first time. Didn't want him to think I was scared of doing that. But it's not something I've ever been good at. Looking people in the eye.

Still have his card here in my hand. Detective Sergeant Gavin Hughes BSc. Can't remember the name of the other one. He never left a card. But I told Mike how besotted he'd been with his paintings.

*You see the truth doesn't always come easily in this life, Joel.* That must be his mantra. It's his favourite sentence, most definitely. Heard it so many times this evening, it's spinning round my brain. Which would make him happy back in his little hotel bedroom if he knew.

That was obviously his intention – to plant the seeds that

would get me to spill the beans. But the truth doesn't always come that easy in this life, does it?

Should have thrown the sentence back in his face... and added 'Gavin' at the end, like he kept adding 'Joel' to the end of everything he said to me. Like one big strapping full stop.

Still, he got more than he bargained for one way or another!

A strange evening really. Don't quite know what to make of it.

*Sorry! I just don't do guided tours of gay Barcelona*, I said.

*Oh, don't be like that, Joel!* he pleaded. A wry, old-fashioned smile lit his face.

I gave in in the end. We ended up in Cuffs. Introduced him to Serge.

Shouldn't have really. Gone round clubs drinking, I mean. I'm still taking the antibiotics for my chest infection. Don't finish them till Saturday.

Added to which, Mike went ballistic when he heard I'd shown him some of the nightlife here. *He's a cop, for God's sake!*

He's so paranoid, that boy! It's unbelievable.

I know he's a cop, don't I?

*I've done my share of hanging around in gay bars*, Gavin assured me.

That was much earlier in the evening, when we're sitting outside the Zanzibar, watching the world walk by on Las Ramblas. It's a warm evening. (Aren't they all, out here?) We down a few drinks. Just me and Gavin. His fat-git partner made his excuses after downing two beers in a hurry. Then headed back to their hotel. Needed his beauty sleep, he said.

Slugs do, I thought.

So that left me and good old Gavin, who proceeded to assure me that he didn't intend to talk about Dan Llywellyn all evening. But then again... *the truth doesn't always come easy in this life...* and he knew what I must be going

through... how I mustn't feel disloyal... how wishing to put the past behind me was natural... but how I never would until I had all this off my chest. Oh yes, he understood!

Which amused me, really. He was jolly about it all. One of the lads. Leaning over. Sharing a joke, where appropriate. His hand on my knee when occasion allowed. All textbook, 'You can trust me, I'm a policeman', stuff. I knew his game and went along with it all.

Why shouldn't I let him ply me with drinks? Buy me a meal? As far as he was to know, my tongue might have started to loosen at any second. The one right word from him could have triggered an avalanche of juicy memories at any moment. My guard could be down. Floods of steamy recollections could be streaming from my lips. Salacious anecdotes. Times and dates and sordid details. All the conclusive evidence that would put Dan Llywellyn away for many years.

I'm the big fish he wants to haul. Worked that one out after he rang to ask to see me. And he virtually admitted as much this evening. I was, after all, Dan Llywellyn's 'star boy'. Played for the county at almost everything. Boxed for Wales as a schoolboy. Very nearly made the British Olympic wrestling team. Got to represent Wales in some World Federation weightlifting tournament in Budapest at the age of eighteen. More trophies than my mam could cope with. Which is why half of them ended up in Nanna's house.

So it's down to me.

*You're the man who can nail Dan Llywellyn*, he tells me.

*Seems to me the undertaker will do that soon enough*, I said back to him.

He laughs at that and slaps me on the back. Furious inside, I reckon, 'cos he knows I'm making light of his mission. But he's enough of a professional to know he mustn't lose it. I would, after all, be the dream witness for him, if only I'd play ball. The ending of this dark chapter in the annals of Welsh crime lays in my hands. And maybe old Gavin needs this one for his CV to

secure promotion or boost his self-confidence or his reputation amongst his colleagues or whatever else he feels is missing in his saddo life. He knows he mustn't blow it with me.

Daft sod! Does he really think I'm going to dish the dirt on Dan?

Seven-thirty! The traffic's buzzing. And the sun is up.

I'm not exactly suffering. But I can't get going either. This coffee is just about enough to revive my mouth. The rest of me can follow later, once I'm doing some warm-ups down the gym.

Raul will already be there. Cleaning. Setting everything up for the day. He works hard.

It must have been two o'clock when we left Cuffs. Early really, by Barcelona standards. The place was hardly getting going. But I told him I had work to go to in five hours' time and that he was also flying home today.

All in all, he must have been resigned to the fact that his tactics hadn't worked.

*Guess I can't break you tonight, Joel*, he joked half seriously over our last drink.

*You'll never break me, man. All these sad wannabees who made these allegations against Dan, don't know what they're talking about.*

*Talking about tears in some instances, Joel*, he comes straight back at me. *The tales some of those boys had to tell have left them emotionally scared for life.*

*You'll never find me crying, mate*, I proclaimed adamantly.

*Ah, Joel, the world is full of men like you who've lived to swallow bitter tears.*

*Tears are totally feminine things*, I tell him. *They're void of any maleness. It's a clinically proven fact. No traces of testosterone have ever been found in a man's tears. Only feminine hormones.*

He was stunned for a moment and didn't know whether to laugh or not.



*Oh! Men have the capacity to produce them, I said, but no means of instilling them with any masculine traits. It's a fact.*

When the taxi pulled up outside, he placed his hand on my knee once more. just as I was about to open the door. He half turned to face me full on and willing sincerity into his eyes with all the power he could muster, he said, *Remember, Joel, I'm on your side.*

I'm convinced the line about 'truth not always being easy' is about to get another airing and in a sublime moment of panic, I kissed him. A smacker on the lips.

Think I meant it as a joke. Can't really remember.

Well! Yes, I can. It was and it wasn't. A joke, that is. I was confused. And high. And horny. And he responded. Old Gavin. There, last night, in that taxi his lips went 'Open sesame' and his hand moved up my thigh.

The taxi driver just sat there not caring a damn. He's seen it all before. And besides, the meter was still running. Why would he mind?

Eventually, my tongue slid free and I got out without a word. Just stood there gobsmacked on the pavement as he's driven away. My hand clutching the card I'd felt him slip into my pocket. It's the second one he's given me. I now have a pair. Only on that second one he's written his personal e-mail address in biro on the back.

It's here in my wallet, hidden away.

I've no idea how he got my e-mail address. My mam is off the hook this time. Telephones are an integral part of her communications system. It's a well-known fact. But an e-mail remains a mystery to her.

However he got it, there it was this evening. Waiting for me.

*Thanks for seeing me. I appreciated it and respect your position. But if you ever want to relieve yourself of anything, you know how to get hold of me. My investigations*

*continue. It's a sad and sensitive business. Hope we get to meet again, especially if things get clearer in your mind. Regards, Gavin.*

I couldn't reply immediately. What a relief!

Mike has had several of his paintings accepted by some prestigious gallery. He needed the computer urgently. I was banished out here on the balcony. No! Correction. I banished myself.

Hate these days when I've been for a check-up. So fucking humiliating. And six months seem to come around so quickly. Condoms and care are all well and good. But I'm wise to stick to my routine.

Mike pointed out that I wouldn't need to go if I didn't play around. The darkroom work really bugs him. He suffers from selective memory. *We met in a bloody darkroom. Mike*, I said. *Remember?*

*You're thirty-three now*, was his response. *Time you grew up.*

Perhaps he doesn't want to remember. It was ten years ago. Not here, of course. Not Cuffs. Ibiza. Another club. A holiday. Our first shag. No condom. No cares.

And now, it's not even a memory.

He'll still want me to accompany him to the opening of his exhibition. He told me all about it as he broke the news. 'Launch party' it's called. More of a small reception. apparently. Just critics and friends. He told me the date and to be sure to keep it free.

I'm still good for wheeling out as the trophy boyfriend, it seems. And don't get me wrong, that's fine by me. So long as Mike doesn't forget at which bring-and-buy he picked me up.

Being told you're all clear should give you a high, I suppose. But curiously, it doesn't. There's relief. And then this empty feeling takes over inside, as you stop off in reception before leaving to make your next appointment in another six months' time.

Raul's missus made such a fuss of Mike last night it was almost embarrassing. Her wonderful meal was already enough of a contribution to the celebrations. She's generous to a fault and I can understand why Raul lives in awe of her every act of kindness. I have never in my life lived with anyone who oozes so much goodness with such grace and I understand that it can't always be easy.

*It's only two paintings*, Mike insisted repeatedly every time she mentioned his triumph.

*Still two more than Van Gogh ever sold in his lifetime*, I kept chipping in, playing the proud partner.

We'd taken the champagne, of course. Not cava, Raul noted, tossing the bottle in the air when we first got there and catching it again behind his back, much to Mike's relief.

Things are pretty tight on old Raul, I think. His overheads are high and with another bambino on the way he can't have much money to throw around.

As we sat down to eat in their tiny kitchen, Mike ceremoniously popped open the bottle. And the kid starts throwing his pasta across the room in excitement. The rest of us just laughed and made a toast of Mike's success and cleared off that first bottle without a care in the world.

Raul suggested a spot of line dancing to follow and I told him to bugger off.

I flexed my biceps to amuse the kid and he in turn tried to knock the muscles back into place with a plastic hammer which must have come with the set of plastic blocks I kept tripping over underfoot.

As the evening drew on, we all seemed bloated and bubbly and larger than life. And I really hated the moment when I knew I had to tell Raul I'd be away another week. It seems so soon after the week I lost when that bug laid me low.

Needless to say. I needn't have worried. His handshake was flamboyant in his sympathies. He knew. He cared. He caressed.

*Si, si! You must, you must*, he said. And with that he

fetched the second bottle from the fridge, saying such sadness had to be drowned immediately.

*He indulges you something rotten*, was Mike's verdict on the way home last night. *You're like a great big toy he just can't get enough of.*

*You used to be like that towards me once*, I replied. *What happened?*

It's not good that it's back.

Mike made all the right noises last night after Joanne rang, it's true, but he's so buoyed by his newfound success, his words just sounded empty and devoid of any feeling.

Even Joanne's voice rang hollow as she tried to speak through the tears. A combination of the waterworks and the Welsh in her voice. Like a drunken sailor trying to sing a shanty aboard a sinking ship on a stormy sea. The meaning made no sense at all, but you could still taste the salt on your lips as the song slapped your face.

It will be two years since I was last at home. That's the trouble. I've started to forget.

She won't come over to see me. Our Joanne. I've asked her. But she won't. Says she doesn't like the food.

Bloody ridiculous excuse!

The truth is, she's never been anywhere much, our Joanne. No further than the prenatal clinic. And even then, our mam has had to go with her every time.

Not the next time, though! The thought struck me like a left hook. Not if it's back.

Knew immediately I had to do the same. Go back. Take charge.

I had no chance to even ask how Mam was. Dean has a go at me as soon as he picks up the receiver. It was late, apparently, and I'd woken up the kids. He's always hated my guts. Likes to think he's something special with his fists. And he'd love to take a pop at me one day, I know. But the sad

wimp has never quite been able to pluck up the courage, 'cos he knows I've won prizes for it. So it's hands buried deep, whenever we meet. Pocket billiards and a mouthful of abuse.

I know I wind him up, which doesn't help, but he's such an easy match to light, I can't resist!

*What are you doing sleeping round Mam's house, any road?* I said. *Can't you provide a house of your own for your family?*

*Very compassionate, Joel,* he retorts, except he can't really do sarcasm. He has to scream it at me, thereby missing the advantage of the higher moral ground which had subtly been his for his taking if only he'd played his cards right.

*You boys fighting again? You'll be the death of me!*

Mam could be heard almost physically wrestling the receiver from Dean's hand as she talked. Her voice was full of sniffing. More tears. I sighed and start to feel depressed.

It seems that she hasn't had the test results yet. I tried to interrupt the moist flow of pessimism by looking on the bright side, but she was having none of it. Easier to wallow in anticipation of the worse scenario than hanging on to hope, it seems.

I was glad to get off the phone.

So much for 'The old town looks the same...' It doesn't.

They've knocked half of it down. And the other half's boarded up.

*I'll be next,* said Mam. *Already feel as though I've been knocked down by a bus. And I'll soon be boarded up. Eight nails in the lid should do it nicely... with some lily of the valleys from you and Joanne resting on top just to set it all off!*

She chokes me when she speaks like that.

*Don't go wasting your money on me now, mind,* she continued. *So long as you keep it dignified, that's all I ask. I don't want anything tacky. And make sure your father doesn't put in an appearance at the last moment. Don't want*

*him ruining my big day. He ruined the last one I had in that chapel.*

*Mam, don't talk like that, I said.*

*Well, the bastard turned up, didn't he? Her loud voice brings high camp comedy to the cancer ward. And don't think I'm the only woman who's ever wished her husband had jilted her at the altar with the benefit of hindsight. The world is full of us.*

*And if you hadn't married him, I wouldn't be here now, would I? Have you thought of that? I said.*

She's only trying to be cheerful, she answered, expecting me to laugh along. But of course, I don't. I didn't. And I can't. Can't cry either. Won't allow myself. I never can. Ended up just sitting there, telling her not to be so daft.

Had a long chat with the doctor a little later.

He'd no office to take me to. We stood out in the corridor out of earshot, keeping our voices down and shifting sideways whenever anyone walked past. The staff use that corridor as a short cut to the car park when they go for their illicit fags. It sees a lot of traffic. Our whispers had to blend in furtively with a sea of uniforms, camouflaged by smiles and the slight whiff of smoke.

She's been slightly overly pessimistic, apparently. That's what he told me. It turns out he's more worried by her mental state than by the cancer. Well, not more, maybe, but as much.

*You're going to be OK.* I tried to reassure her when I finally returned to the ward to sit with her a little while longer.

The doctor had just told me her depression manifested itself in laughter, so my heart sank as she roared hysterically in response. She lunged at me sitting in my chair, before throwing her arms around my neck and all but falling out of bed.

*It's back, my boy, she howled. It's back. And so are you.*

Listen to the darkness.

You can't, of course. That bloody clock won't let you. Like it won't let me sleep. Five nights I've been back home and five nights I've just been lying here contemplating how much I hate that clock. I've always hated it. When it chimed away in Nanna's house, I hated it. And now I hate it here.

To put it in boxing terms, it seems to punch above its weight. Stands there in the corner. Looking petit. A wallflower with time on its hands. Delicate casing and a poofy face. Calls itself a grandmother clock. *The only thing of any value I ever got from my mother*, Mam says. It may be old, but I doubt it's worth much. Just a clock with attitude. A wedding present to my grandparents, in the days when even the cheap pressies outlived the marriage.

Hear that tick-tock measuring the emptiness; its tenacity audible above all the other anxieties throbbing in my brain. Like a bantam fighter, it just keeps coming at you. Wearing you down. Numbing your pain. Making you oblivious to the killer punch that's about to get you on the blind side.

Curiously, Mam asked about it tonight. The clock. She wants everything to be in full working order if she's allowed home tomorrow. Had I wound it up?

*No, but it's winding me up plenty!* I replied.

She laughed that exaggerated laugh the doctor seemed to find so worrying.

I've thought about it. That chat I had with him yesterday. She's not suppressing depression. More like celebrating her inherent over-optimism.

Mam will always laugh. She always has. It's what pulls her through.

I've made her bed up. Ready for tomorrow. Hoovered round a little. Even wound up that bloody clock for her. Well! It's what she wanted.

It hasn't happened, has it? Mam isn't home tonight, as planned. I'm still here on my own. Just me and the clock.

More tests are needed, apparently. They want to be absolutely certain. Of what, I'm not too sure. But it seems they can't decide what to do. The consultant has been consulted and the specialist has had his say. And the doubts that are mostly left unsaid are deafening.

I could tell she was down, bless her. And when I rang Mike earlier, he said I sounded down myself.

*I can feel the despondency in your voice*, he said. How profound is that?

*Well, is it any bloody wonder?* I bellowed back.

He always has to use big words to deal with any gut feeling anyone may ever have. It's his defence against any genuine raw emotion. Yes, I was pleased to hear the exhibition continues to be a great success... and no, he doesn't really care a damn about what I'm going through here. I could tell by his voice. He never has cared. That's the truth. Not about me, where I come from, or my family.

The trouble is. I don't really miss him. It's been ten days and I've only made contact with him twice. Both times, what I really needed to find out was how everyone was doing; Raul and the gang, etc. Things in the flat. Not Mike.

Dan Llywellyn turned up a lot tonight. Not in the flesh, of course – what's left of it! In conversation. A verbal resurrection from Mam.

I know he's there, of course. Same hospital, different wards. He's in a lot worse state than her. She kept repeating that. Never mentioned dying, but I knew that's what she meant.

*He'd love to see you. Why don't you pop along and have a chat?*

She needn't have bothered naming the ward. I've known which one it is since I first went to visit Mam. It's where the terminally ill are kept. 'God's waiting room' the staff call it on the sly. It's out on a limb. The ground-floor ward nearest the gardens.

One of the cleaners I got talking to the other day told me it was to enable the earth's gravity to make their journey



easier at the end. Dust to dust, earth to earth, ashes to ashes... she could quote the lot.

By the sound of her, she'd caught religion and I didn't have the heart to tell her it was probably more to do with the fact that they built the mortuary round the back.

I wound that clock in vain last night. And now I wish I hadn't. Really only did it for her. And she's not here.

A torture for my own insomnia. Should have left it to its own devices. Do unto time as time does unto all of us.

When I next see that cleaner, I'll tell her that. She looked easily impressed.

*It's all right for you, Joel, he said. You're one of the lucky ones. You got out. Looked after yourself. Made something of yourself.*

I told him to go to hell.

*I know you don't mean that, he said, eyeballing me like a pneumatic drill as he spoke.*

Then he went straight into this sob story about Darren Howley.

That was his name apparently; this gawping, chubby geek I'd noticed in Spar this afternoon. Looked around forty. A beer-bellied no-hoper. The valley's full of them. Except this one had a real talent for staring. I wasn't flattered. I wasn't angry. I just wanted Mam to recover quickly so I could catch the first plane back to Barcelona.

Well! It seems he was once a promising football player. Went to Dan Llywellyn for coaching. Ended up on drugs and off the rails.

*A life blighted, Gavin called it.*

It seems this Darren called him on his mobile after stalking me round Spar.

*I keep in touch with many of those boys, Gavin explained. Or at least I allow them to keep in touch with me. Feel protective towards them, you see. Seen so many lives destroyed.*

*Mine's not destroyed*, I started to protest.

No, quite, he interjects. *Like I said, you're one of the lucky ones.*

*Made things happen for myself*, I said. *No luck about it. Stuck at it in school. Went to college. Learnt Spanish. I'm a self-made man. Made things happen for myself.*

*The trouble is, the Darren Howleys of this world are wondering why the hell you didn't make things happen for them as well, Joel*, Gavin continues. *Or stopped things happening to them, is more to the point. Do you know what I mean?*

I knew by now that he was intent on saying his piece, so I stood there with my back to the wall and my hands deep in my tracky bottoms.

*They know you see. They know what you went through.* The verbal assault continued. I held my ground in silence. *And they can't for the life of them work out why you didn't put a stop to it. Back then, they didn't have your balls, Joel. They didn't have your brains. They were dependent on a bright lad like you to speak up and save them further misery. Speak up and break Dan Llywellyn's vicious circle. But you didn't, did you, Joel? Why is that, Joel?*

*I still don't know what you're talking about*, I said. *No one ever messed with me I didn't want to mess with me.*

*I know you, Joel. I just know.*

*You don't, mate! You don't know me at all...*

*And I'll get it all out of you too, one day – the hard way if I have to. But it will out. You listen to me good...* he paused a moment while a distraught-looking relative went scuttling past in pursuit of a member of the medical staff. His half-turned eyes judged when she'd be out of earshot and, before continuing, his voice lowered an octave, just to be on the safe side. *One day, I'll have you there in front of me, just like you are now. Only it won't be a fuckin' hospital corridor. And you won't be looking so smug. You'll be crying your fuckin' eyes out, Joel. Just like all those other sad*

*bastards I've met on this investigation. You'll be so relieved to have all that shit of years ago out of your system, you won't know whether they're tears of joy or anguish sobbing down your cheeks and nostrils. You'll just know that you've wrenched out a gutful of pus that's been there hiding inside you all those years, Joel. And I'll be the one you'll be grateful to for giving you the best feeling of relief you'll ever know in your life.*

*Dream on, sunshine,* I said. And he sort of smiled. Knowing it wasn't the place or the time to pursue it further.

The worried lady was making her way back from the smokers' den, the nurse she'd managed to collar barely hiding her annoyance at having her fag curtailed.

*Can't pretend it's not good to see you again,* he chips in casually as the two women made their way back towards the wards.

*Really? Gee, thanks!*

*How's your mother?*

*As if you cared!* I retorted sharply.

*Well, I sort of do, really,* Joel, he replied. He'd moved from menace mode to vague benevolence with barely a facial distortion, only the subtle shifting of the balance of his body weight conveying his newfound mood of conviviality. *How is she?*

If the mood had changed, the persistence hadn't.

*You're only here 'cos Darren what's-his-name's call reminded you that I'm still in town,* I said. Equally calm. Equally polite. I put a jokey lilt in my voice to neutralise the tension. *You knew I'd be up here at visiting time.*

*So how is she?*

*Coming out day after tomorrow,* I replied. It was like giving in, really. Telling him that which I'd only just heard myself from Mam. But what could I do?

*So you have tomorrow to yourself then?*

Found myself agreeing that I did, without thinking through any implications.

*Come play a game of squash with me tomorrow afternoon, he says. At my club. I'll sign you in.*

Played a little at college, but not really a game I ever got into. I'm built for bulk sports, not speed. Had to say yes though, didn't I?

The trouble is, these old routines of mine don't work here. This view's all wrong. This brandy doesn't even work the same. Not like it does when I unwind in the early hours at home in Barcelona.

Mam's lean-to isn't quite the same as our balcony. No warm night breeze. No sound of a city still throbbing somewhere in the distance. Just Welsh rain on the windows, so lacking in force or purpose, you can see how it leaves the bird-shit untouched.

Beyond Mam's ramshackle excuse for a garden, I can glimpse the dawn creeping its way up the mountain. Typical of life here – all routine and no passion.

Except old Gavin's left me knackered tonight. So I guess the passion's always there, if you know where to look for it.

He thrashed me at squash, of course. No surprises there. I could barely remember the rules. Not that that mattered much. When you play with Gavin there are no rules, it seems.

Almost five when I got in. Coming out of his car, I could see some lights just going on in other houses. People getting up for work, I suppose. Routines.

As we drove back from Cardiff, I told him all that heavy stuff he tried the other day in the hospital wouldn't work with me.

He laughed with condescending candour and said, *No, I know*, as though none of it mattered after all.

God, his wife must be a tolerant woman, I told him.

He didn't say a word to that. Didn't even smile. Just drove.

*You never said nothing.*

The police had apparently told him of my reluctance to

testify against him. And that was the most he had to say to me. Almost all he had to say to me. An anticlimax in the end. It was bound to be.

I knew it had to be today or never. Mam came home this afternoon. And no way am I going back to that place just to visit Dan Llywellyn... even a dying Dan Llywellyn.

*I don't know why you don't do the decent thing and go see him, Mam's been nagging ever since I came home to see her. After all he did for you...*

Sat her down in that foyer place. The concourse they call it. Large waste of space designed to delude you into thinking you're entering or leaving a grand hotel. Placed her bag by her side and told her I wouldn't be long.

The taxi was already late.

*The bus would have done me, of course, she proceeds to tell anyone within earshot daft enough to listen. But our Joel wouldn't have it. He's very good to me. Come all the way from Spain to look after me, he 'ave.*

I tell her to wait. Though God knows where I thought she was going to go without me.

*Such a sensitive boy. He loves poetry and all that stuff, you know. Won prizes for all sorts of things at school. Don't be fooled by all that brawn... he's a sensitive boy.*

Mercifully, her voice drifts to nothing as I disappear down the corridor. The relief I feel is short-lived, as I see Mrs Llywellyn coming towards me. On her way to sneak a fag, apparently. After years of chocolates and the telly, she's succumbed to the joy of a new source of brain death, it seems. A packet of twenty and a gaudy-looking lighter were clutched in her fat hand.

*Oh! What a good boy you are!* She oozed all over me. The sentence that followed the most she's ever said to me. *Your mam said you'd go to come see 'im before he goes. I know you'll do him no end of good. In there, sixth door along.*

All those visits to her house! Out the back with Dan. Upstairs with Dan. Picking up some piece of kit I'd left there.

Dropping off some piece of sports equipment I'd borrowed to work on at home. He and me in our man's world. Her, silent and redundant.

She shuffled down the corridor towards the smokers' yard.

*Won't be here long*, are the first words I say to him. Could have kicked myself, of course. But take comfort in the fact that he never has had much sense of humour. ('Getting to be perfect is no laughing matter,' he'd say to me as a boy whenever I started messing around during any sort of training.) So the irony, like so much else, is lost.

He didn't really seem to be suffering. I felt a little cheated. But he's gone to nothing. That much is true. Just a sad shadow staring at me from the pillow.

*You didn't squeal*. He made his voice as loud as he could muster. *You never told 'em any of our little secrets*.

*It's a long time ago now, butt!* I said.

He struggled to move his right hand from where it lay on top of the bed, finally lunging for what he thought would be the safety of my forearm. When I pulled my arm away in rejection, it fell back on the blanket again without a murmur.

His face remained unmoved. No sign of disappointment touched those dark sunken eyes. He'd managed to sense my meaning without as much as a lilt of the head. All shows of remorse were held in reserve, ready for the big one.

*You moved far away, didn't you? Spain, is it? They told me you were far away... and wouldn't talk...*

Each little verbal outburst came shrouded in a silence with which he seemed ill at ease. Like memories of a life once fully lived. Once vibrant and clandestine. Now, dribbled onto pale pillows. Like small deaths.

They kept me there. Transfixed by curiosity. Those little words of nothing.

A gargle from his throat made me lower my gaze for a moment from his hollow eyes to his dead man's lips. The two thin lines quivered slightly, but remained perfectly dry. And I remembered the time he'd tried to kiss me. The only time.

I'd flinched in repulsion and lashed out with my fists.

Kisses were for girls and proper poofs, I'd thought.

Today, I know differently. My stomach muscles tightened, squirming at my adolescent reasoning. I drew in breath. The way I would before a lift.

There was no one there to see me. He has a room to himself. The dying do, it seems. It's a private affair.

When the taxi finally drops us off, it turns out Joanne's long since let herself in. What you call a surprise party, apparently.

The kids ran around like idiots and shouted, *Welcome home, Nanna!* when prompted.

To crown it all, when Dean arrived from work at the end of the afternoon, a dirty big cake appears. It's candles. And streamers. And most of all, it's a load of bollocks.

*She's in cancer remission, not joined the circus,* I shouted.

Mam didn't want that crap. I could tell.

But she's laughing as I went upstairs to change into my jogging suit.

Four hours later, it's her and me again. The remnants of a cake and a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen.

She's gone to bed, exhausted. And I'm lying here in the bath.

It rained solid for the two hours I was out. And Gavin had his mobile phone switched off, it seems.

He caught me unawares. I'll give him that.

That first punch to my belly stopped me in my tracks. And I never saw the second coming, either. His fist colliding with my face with such clarity its terrifying thunder still throbs from the pit of my jaw to the top of my skull.

Floored in one fell sweep, he towered over me, asking repeatedly. *You were abused, weren't you?* His voice intense and calm. The emphasis placed on a different word with almost every repetition. It isn't a passion on his behalf; it's a technique put into practice.

In intent, my *Yes* was a defiant shout, but gasping as I was for breath, I know that the reality of my utterance was nothing more than a whisper in the autumn air.

Barely a mile down the hillside from the scene of my humiliation, Dan Llywellyn's remains were burning in the municipally-approved manner. Even as I lay there, stunned into neo-silence, I remember noting that I was thinking that thought.

Conspicuous contempt had been the motivation for our run. Or so I thought. His idea, of course. *Let's run while old Dan burns? I'll pick you up!*

Our fun run through the Pencwm woods high above the crematorium was planned to coincide with the very hour of his funeral. A show of disrespect. A symbol of indifference.

In reality, it was nothing of the sort, of course. It was his planned revenge. Now that it's too late for me to add a gold star to his CV. Now he's been humiliated by a high-profile investigation that's come to nothing. Now that promotion is that much more difficult to achieve.

*Yes.* I desperately tried to articulate a second time as I felt his trainers thundering into my ribs.

*And he buggered you? Go on! Say it! Tell me what I already know, you piece of shit.*

At that point, my hands tried to stabilise the floor. And failed.

I flinched as I saw his right foot raised again and aiming for my face this time.

Once again, *Yes* formed submissively in my brain. The trees above me swayed. The sky-blue faded. Pain was all around. Rolling over on the earth, my capacity for thought was consumed by it.

*Then why the fuck wouldn't you tell me?* This time, his voice doesn't come from far away. He's in my ear. I smell him close. Feel him grab me by my vest, dragging me to my feet... *You stubborn Welsh bastard!*

Instinctively, I aimed a fist to ward him off. But one arm



was already planted round his neck for balance and, staggering backwards, I dragged us both down. Drops of blood spraying both his face and the leaves beneath.

It's a long time later that I laughed. His outstretched arm ignored as I fumbled on the ground for a wristwatch that somehow managed to get dislodged in the assault.

He only allowed himself a smile.

Finding the watch, I stagger to my feet of my own accord and follow him to the car. We're both mute.

My senses remain disconnected. Even now, hours later, the pervading pain is the only message any of them will carry to my brain with any conviction. All else is fluff. Pain stands alone. Still throbbing, black and sore. Thorough and unrelenting. Worse than anything my memories of a bruising youth can bring to mind.

Mirrors have always been my friends. Until tonight. The wardrobe door's been left unlocked, allowing the reflective façade to swing away from the sight of me.

I can bear no light. I can bear no blanket. Tonight, I lick wounds. And curse.

*Just leave it there... and... and go away*, I said, straining to be civil to her.

If I've said I tripped and fell while out on my run then that is what she will accept as truth. That is what she'll tell the world. After all, that's what she told Mike. I know how Mam works.

*What exactly happened?* he asked in that tone of voice he reserves for cynicism.

*Oh! Mam exaggerated as usual*, I said when I eventually decided to ring him back. *You know what she's like. It's just a scratch.*

It was two days ago that he spoke to my mother. He just happened to ring almost as soon as I'd come into the house. Bad timing. I'd hardly had time to hobble to the bathroom to clean up before Mam could take a proper look when I heard the ringing.

Made the effort to take myself downstairs last night to ring him back. My mobile won't stretch as far as Spain. But I'm struggling for normality.

That's what you get when you hide yourself away in a darkened room. Self-absorption becomes self-destroying. Self-pity dulling your ability to deal with the world.

The telephone rings. Not often. Just once or twice a day. Joanne. Some of Mam's cronies. Mike. A social worker. The front door bell goes too. But that's an even rarer event. No symbolic roses have arrived to put my bruises in the shade. No perfumed bloom has been forthcoming to make tender my unsated nose.

A good bottle of brandy might have been the manly gesture. But, no. Nothing has been forthcoming from him. All I get are trays. Left on the landing by my mother as instructed. A knock on my bedroom door heralding each arrival. Mere supplies for a self-imposed prisoner.

*I'm OK. Honestly. Just leave me alone.* Had to shout at her several times before I heard her footsteps retracting that last time.

To all the world, I'm here to look after her. But the will to nurse anything except my own ego has left me. I just lay here on this bed, thinking that after this fiasco's over, I never want to come back to Wales again.

*OK! I'll go back for Mam's funeral, I conceded. But that's all.*

Mike just smiled over his cup of tea. I smiled back.

He doesn't believe me regarding almost anything I've told him since my return. But it's all true.

We were both up early this morning, Mike and I.

He had some faculty meeting at the university. Wanted to know if I'd met Gavin back in Wales. *You know, your gay detective friend*, he said, pretending not to remember his name. *The one who came here that time with his fat colleague with a taste for fine art.*

*Oh him!* I replied. *We collided once or twice in the corridor. But he never got what he wanted from me.*

Serge wouldn't believe me either at first, when I said I wouldn't work the darkroom for him any more. But wasn't too concerned.

*Don't worry. I find someone else.*

Maybe I wasn't that sensational after all. But maybe it's just that there are always others. Others who'll come do what we do after we've long since given up. Moved away. Moved on.

I figure darkrooms are like Wales. I won't go there again. Well! Only in my memories.