

Better Late Than Never by Susan Martin

Fat blobs of rain splatter on his windscreen as he turns off the storm grey motorway and on to the A470. Flicking on the wipers, Huw sighs, thinking how it always rains when he comes back to Wales. Not that he comes back often and not that he wants to be here today. His shoulders slump as he tries to chase from his mind the scene that awaits him at Top Farm.

He remembers the drudgery of his childhood. Saturday mornings, while his friends strolled to the outdoor baths, rolled up towels under their arms, were filled with work for Huw. Rising early to let out the fussing ginger chickens, he scattered kitchen scraps and watched them greedily pecking for a few moments, before he stole inside the shed to gather their still warm eggs. His father's growl shattered the contented trilling and sent the clucking birds flapping across their dreary enclosure.

'Huw, have you finished with those birds? The fence still needs doing. It should have been done last week. There's creosote in the bottom barn.'

'I'm on my way in with the eggs, Dad. I was thinking I could ...'

'Aye, you think again, Huw bach. You'll get your breakfast when you've done the fence.'

Huw splashed sludge brown creosote carelessly on the old fence, resenting the hollers of the happy bathers that drifted across fields to taunt him. The job was done, after a fashion, resulting in raised eyebrows and an upward jerk of the head from his father.

'Better late than never,' was Gorwel's judgement.

Huw's recollections are interrupted and he exhales slowly when he reads who is phoning him.

'You're on your way, then?' says Ffion.

'I'm on the A470. Is Dad ...?'

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A loud breath fills the car, before Ffion continues, 'He has these turns, Huw. He's not going to die.'

That wasn't the sentiment expressed in Doctor Meredith's phone call yesterday evening but Huw had learned never to contradict his sister.

'Anyway,' Ffion says, 'I've been in touch with Howell and Goff and they'll send someone to value the farm on Wednesday.'

'You said it was just a turn.' Huw fails to keep his voice calm. 'He's not dead, yet, Ffion.'

'He can't stay there. If he pulls through he'll have to be cared for.'

'Oh ...'

'There's a vacancy at The Daffodils Care Home.'

'No!'

'Unless you're stepping up, Huw?'

'Is it ... is it nice there?'

'It is what it is. Call me when you get there. Let me know how he is.' And she's gone, leaving Huw as deflated as the spent Stump Puffballs he'd found one day on a fallen log beside the River Taff.

Now, Huw's slate grey eyes anxiously scan the roundabout signs at Fiddler's Elbow, searching for confirmation he has chosen the right lane in the complicated road layout. This junction had been built when he was a teenager and he'd watched from his hillside bedroom as diggers trudged through the mud, burying for a second time the dissenting Quakers in the village that bears their name. For Huw, that roundabout, alive at night with car lights, had seemed a gateway out of the dreary, coal-fogged village that squatted below his parents' farm. Squashing himself against the peeling paintwork of the window frame in his small bedroom,

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Huw had been mesmerised by the squiggles of red and white car lights peeling off the roundabout in the soot black darkness. His eyes longingly trailed those turning on to the trunk road and heading towards bustling Cardiff where, one day, he'd been sure, his life would properly begin.

This morning, though, he peels off the junction and takes the local road into the valley folded between the mountains, green once again after the clearing of the coal tips. Stationary at the junction while a brisk mother leads a girl on a scooter across the road, Huw gives in to impulse and, when the traffic lights turn green, he turns left off the main road and then right on to the old tram-road, before parking on the soft black earth littered with last autumn's rusty fallen leaves.

Catching the last of the raindrops, as the day cheers, Huw begins to walk, his body relaxing and a slight smile appearing as he meanders through his old stomping ground. Soon, he is under a domed canopy of oval ash leaves. The tall, graceful trees, that had grown alongside Huw, allow dappled light to fall on the worn asphalt that barely covers the old sleepers cut out of the rock for Trevithick's engine. He knows that he should have kept to the main road to the farm, but it has been years since he has been on the tram-road. It's maybe eight years since he last brought Oliver here, sharing with him stories of childhood capers and foolhardy dives from the old viaduct that meant he was, more than once, lucky to have made it back home.

'I know why you left,' Oliver had said, 'But don't you want to come home one day?'

'No!' Huw's short reply had almost collided with Oliver's question.

'It's ideal for cycling. You don't need a camera on your cycle helmet here.'

Huw had not replied. His eyebrows crawled closer to each other and his lips set into a straight line.

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Huw remembers how Oliver had lifted his arms, palms up, wordlessly encouraging Huw to drag his gaze up to the almost cloudless blue sky. This was Oliver's technique when coaching disheartened students at his sixth form college in Finchley.

'I get them to look up and see how beautiful it is.' Oliver had told Huw. 'You can't feel down when you're looking up at the sky.'

It had worked for Huw then and it works now. Looking up, he focuses on the alder trees, their dark, fissured bark made hard and strong each year the River Taff, sparkling with chubb and brown trout since the mines closed, floods their water-loving roots. Pendulous blossoms, their yellow petals buffeted by the breeze, hang below leathery racquet-shaped leaves. With a smile, he remembers snapping the soft, young branches in the spring, and taking home a bunch of sticky, peppery catkins for his mother. Her words of thanks and kisses had been poor reward compared with the swift pat on the head from his father as he passed through the parlour. Huw had held his chin high and looked up at his father's rare, relaxed smile. Gorwel had winked at his son.

His father, Huw's reason for being here, for coming home, jolts him out of reminiscing. He has to get to his father. Turning, he hastens towards his car, his eyes falling on the carpet of wild garlic along the riverbank, their sulphurous, onion smell filling the air.

Soon, Huw is back on the twisting valley road that climbs up from the river to the village of Pantcae. As a boy, he'd travelled from school to the bus-stop at the corner where the soaring tower of St. Mathias' Church watched over the tangled roads. Here, at four o'clock, an untidy knot of tan satchels and scuffed shoes appeared, before pupils broke from the group and darted home for tea. For Huw, there was a trudge up the steep hill until the pavement gave way to earth and stones. It was this part of the day, those precious fifteen minutes or so, that Huw looked forward to, despite the climb. Autumn was the best time,

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when the hedgerows offered up fat blackberries, so plump and ripe that they would burst on Huw's fingers, staining them with sweet purple juice. Usually, he had the track to himself, though if it was a particularly wet day Huw's father might pick him up. When Gorwel had been at the bus-stop that fine April day during Huw's lower-sixth year, Huw hesitated to pull open the mud-splattered Land Rover door.

'Everything all right, Dad?' Huw asked, biting his bottom lip. 'Is Mam ok?'

'She's fine. She's at your Auntie Enid's.'

There was a long pause as they set off, during which Huw felt he hadn't breathed. Then Gorwel's deep voice broke the silence.

'No girlfriend yet, then?'

'No, Dad.' A tingle crept up Huw's neck and across his face. Desperate to fill the silence, he continued, 'There's Carys - she's my friend but not my ...'

'Not going to be a girlfriend, is there, boy?'

Huw's mind struggled to form words that his mouth could not deliver.

'Well?' Gorwel asked.

Huw's head, bowed as if in prayer, shook from side to side.

'Right. As long as I know.'

'Does Mam know?'

'You say nothing to your mother.' Gorwel's words tore into his son. Huw hunched lower in the seat at the thought of having to keep this secret from his mother any longer. Gorwel continued, 'Leave your mother to me. Her and her chapel ways ... well, you know what she's like. But she'll come round.'

Huw's eyes widened.

'Thanks, Dad.'

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Gorwel nodded. He raised his ruddy right hand, his forefinger pointing at his son.

‘You hold your head up, mind, Huw bach. You understand me?’

It was the closest Gorwel would come to saying he was not ashamed of Huw, and from Gorwel that was practically as good as saying he was proud of his son.

Huw knows he has to reach his father before it is too late. He owes him that. Yet driving through Fox Street, Huw can’t help but notice how the shops of his youth have given way to new retailers. A bakery selling sourdough loaves has replaced the ironmongers. Clee’s newsagent is now a deli with two lollipop bay trees in terracotta pots guarding the door. Outside the green-grocer’s, shallow wooden crates of globe artichokes and rainbow chard have replaced the beetroot and jibbons he remembers. And there it is: Ffion’s shop, with its window display of organic soy candles. Huw can’t help slapping his knee and a small chuckle escapes his lips as he begins to climb to the farm. How Oliver would love this gentrification, or ‘post-industrial urban regeneration’ as he’d call it. And isn’t this the sort of place they’ve talked about for their retirement? Oliver has often said how much he loved visiting Pantcae and the surrounding valley.

The farmhouse appears in front of Huw as he turns the final corner. A shallow sigh slips from his lips and his head tilts to one side, as if it is better to see all the memories this way. It is a fine looking house; Gorwel has kept it in a good state of repair. It will need updating, of course, re-decorating, but What is he thinking? The reality of his thoughts hits him with a sudden electric clarity. He shakes his head, his brain unwilling to accept what his heart knows. With a sharp rap on the door, Huw enters his childhood home.

The young vicar in bible black stands as Huw enters the bleak bedroom. His father’s house has many rooms but the old man is now stranded, Huw realises, in this one room, imbued with memories. Here, sitting beside his muddy-kneed son on the bed, Gorwel had

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taught Huw to tell the time, twisting around the clock's hands to form new puzzles. And here, Gorwel had stood, a gnarled hand hovering above his son's shoulder, as the younger man wept beside his mother, who had died as she had lived, as graceful as a bird.

Now, Gorwel's teeth, in a glass, grin at the good book on the bedside table. With death at his borders, Gorwel, anchored to the world by heavy quilts, looks up, with glassy eyes, at his boy. Fearing a hug will break his father, Huw stoops to kiss the willow-thin old man.

'You're home, then, Huw bach. Better late than never.'

'Aye,' says Huw, settling into the house that throughout all the London years has glowed at his periphery, 'I'm home, Dad.' And he thinks he probably is.