

**The Peggy Chapman-Andrews  
First Novel Award 2015**

**Runner Up**

**When the Mountain  
Swallowed the Morning**

by

**Alison Powell**

## Prologue

The cut must be clean. This is the first rule of dressmaking. Your shears must be sharp enough to slice through the outline of your garment, releasing it from the bondage of fabric with one neat snip. You mustn't use these blades for anything else. Not for cutting dolls from folded paper that will open in a line or for making magic collage-boards from magazines depicting all your hopes. These things, though beautiful, will blunt the blade and then the cloth, when cut, will fray. At all costs you must keep your edges neat.

In preparation for this suit I'm about to make, I've lined up my tools on the small table by the side of my machine, and I've ironed smooth the paper pattern, which hangs by the mirror like wings. First though, before I place a single pin, I will spend time with this dark Welsh tweed that my grandmother gave to my mother on her birthday when she was five.

'It's a family tradition,' my mother's mother whispered to her girl, brushing the downy hair from her forehead and kissing her cherry red cheeks. 'You'll pour your love into this cloth and when you're ready to be married you will stitch it into a wedding suit for your handsome man to wear.'

The girl would have rather had a dolly or a twist of sherbert from Ivor's tin-shed shop in Aberfan, but she did as she was told and rolled the fabric underneath her bed. A year of childish dreams seeped down through the night and into the weave. And then, after the day when the whole valley changed, the cloth absorbed her tears of loneliness and grief.

I suspect this tweed was under the bed the night when I was conceived, though I can't be certain of this. My mother's recollections depend on whether she's red in the eyes or whether her focus is soft and the truth about my father is tucked between the bottle and the sheets.

The cloth, black and imposing, lies now on the white cutting table. My sewing room is at the bottom of the garden, at the end of the sloping path. My grandfather used to keep pigeons in here years ago, but after the landslide he lost interest in them as well as everything else. Packed up the birds in a basket and sold them to a fancier somewhere over the bridge.

Now it has glossed white floors and smooth white walls with three framed pencil sketches that Davey gave me years ago: pictures of forget-me-knots, rosemary and gorse, a charcoal portrait of me. The wardrobe where I keep my fabrics and swatches and threads and clothes awaiting alterations, is white as well. It gives me space to think.

I light three chapel candles and place them round the cloth. I know this light will give the shed a flickering glow that will be noticed. Rose's mother who lives next door will twitch through her curtains and turn her nose at the scene. She'll be on the phone to Rose saying, 'I don't know what that Aeron Thomas is up to now. She's got candles lit. I always told you she was wrong.'

I could pull the curtains over the window and hide, but somehow it seems right that the moon should look in too. That fat pregnant moon squatting on top of the mountain needs to cast its light on this cloth.

I kneel before the table, close my eyes.

I don't know any prayers to recite so instead I start to sing.

'Ar lan y môr mae rhosys cochion'

By the shore of the sea red roses are growing.

## Chapter 1

I found a marble yesterday, tucked into the lining of my green woolen coat. I haven't worn it since last winter and when I plunged my hands into the pockets I noticed there was a hole. On poking my fingers through, I found this glass ball that is now on my windowsill, reflecting the thin October sun. It's one of those big clear marbles we called 'bolshies' when we were kids. The glass is solid, no swirl of colour twisting through, but it has a misty sheen, like you could look into it and see the future.

I used to hunt these treasures out, turning over photo frames and flicking through my books, seeking the incongruous objects that had been left for me to find: a buzzard's feather on the top shelf of my wardrobe; six empty acorn cups slipped into the drawer with my socks; an old pound note pressed into the middle of the dictionary, scrawled with lines from a poem by Auden. I didn't find that one for years. I've had to learn to be patient. To live with the discomfort of anticipation and the hope that it might be relieved.

Or not.

These strange objects started to appear in my house the day I first met Davey Jenkins. We were in that hammock of a summer before we turned thirteen when he first appeared, swinging on my back garden gate. Rose and I were lying on a blanket, playing nine-card Rummy when I looked up and saw this dark-haired boy grinning back. He asked if he could play and I said yes without hesitation. It was as if I already knew him. He hitched up his too big corduroy trousers and knelt on the blanket while I dealt the cards again.

'You en from round here,' I said. We knew all the boys in the village. They were noisy, raucous and rude, but Davey had something softer about him that I loved from the very beginning.

'I'm staying with my aunty for a while,' he said. 'My mam is having troubles. She's sent us all away while she gets herself straight.'

Rose and I watched *Eastenders* and *Neighbours*. We knew what troubles were. We offered sorrowful, supportive looks and when he went inside to use the loo we whispered our notions together.

'I 'spect his mam is stuck for money,' said Rose.

'Or she's having a nervous breakdown,' I suggested.

We knew all about those too. Rose's mother threatened to have one every time we went near her.

'Get out from under my bloody feet,' she'd shout. 'Honest to God, I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown with you pair off from school.'

Davey's eyes were green and sparkling like the River Taff, though there was something dark and sad about his voice. The way he moved his hands when he spoke made me think of a small brown butterfly: a dusty Skipper with its quiet camouflage. He talked like us, but different too. He was from Port Talbot, he said, which might have been in Africa, for all we knew. Not that we were stupid, but the only places we had ever been were Merthyr and Cardiff and Newport and once on a school trip to Barry.

'It's down by Swansea.'

'Has it got a beach?'

'Best you've ever seen.'

We spent a lazy morning together, lolling on the blanket playing games of cards and laughing like old friends. Davey was easy to be with. He told us about his brothers and the things they'd discovered down on the shore.

'I found a whalebone once,' he said. 'It was a whole jaw with all its teeth as well. Massive, it was. I brought it home to give to my brother, Jules, for his birthday, but my mother said I had to take it back or hand it in to the museum. I didn't though. I cleaned it up tidy and stuck it in the garage where Mam never looks. You should come over and see it.'

'To Port Talbot?'

'Yeah, you could get on the train. Only takes a couple of hours. You have to change at Cardiff, mind.'

Rose shook her head. 'My mam would never let me.'

Her mother barely let her breathe beyond the end of Bryntaf. One time I took Rose with me to the Social Club on Bronheulog Terrace to see my grandfather. Rose's mother tanned her backside with a slipper when Llew Evans from number 18 told her that he'd seen us and Rose wasn't allowed out for a week.

'Where's your mam to, Aeron?' asked Davey and Rose shushed him up. She knew I didn't have an answer. That my mother was here and there and everywhere. That I would like as not be called to bring her home from The Mack Hotel in Aberfan before the day was out.

I pulled at the grass, tearing clumps between my fingers and letting the pieces fall like green confetti.

'We should go somewhere else,' Davey said.

I plucked another handful of grass and sprinkled the bits on his face. He poked my ribs and rolled towards me, leaning his bare arm against mine. A spark of static fired between our hairs making both of us flinch and then laugh.

'What about that playground down the way?' he asked.

'Moy Road?'

'Yeah. I'll push you on the swings.'

Rose looked at me and then up at the house next door where her mother was busy in the kitchen. All the windows in her house were shut, even though the day was stifling and breezeless. Further down the terraced row, backdoors were open and women chattered over walls or pegged out their washing to dry in the sun. Mrs Jenks at 56 had her radio balanced on the living room sill and was sitting on the back step, knitting baby clothes. Rose's mam was at her sink, peeling potatoes for chips. As always, she had her hair up in curlers, wrapped in a pink gingham scarf that wouldn't come off until after *Daytime Live* had finished.

'Will she mind?' asked Davey, following Rose's worried gaze.

'She doesn't need to know,' I said. 'We'll just run down the end of the lane and honest to God, Rose, your mother won't even notice.'

I was bold because of Davey. I knew that Rose's mam would belt us twice as hard if she found us on Moy Road than if we snuck off on the train to Port Talbot. But I wanted Davey to like me. I wanted him to stay.

Rose picked up the cards from the blanket and tapped them in her hands the way my grancha had taught us. She shuffled the pack again, looked up at her mother then sighed.

'OK, let's go.'

We might have got away with it if we'd had the sense to stick to the swings and the slide and the blue climbing frame in the playground. If we'd stayed within the boundaries of the space that was designed for our generation, rather than stepping over to the memorial garden where even I was absolutely not allowed to go. Davey wasn't to blame, of course. He didn't know. The day was far too hot for talk of ghosts and neither Rose nor I explained what happened there. We didn't tell him how the landslide fell on Pantglas Junior School all those years ago, smothering the children and their teachers and some of their mothers in its rushing wave of black coal. That the old stone walls in the garden were all that was left of the classrooms, or that the flowerbeds bloomed in the spaces where teachers once leaned over desks.

'Let's play hide and seek,' he said.

'I en hiding. It's childish.' Rose raised an eyebrow, looking for a moment like her mam. Above us the mountain loomed, quiet and protective, and a buzzard circled, its cry like a lost lamb bleating.

'Come on, Rose. Don't be a spoilsport.' I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the bench. 'Davey, you hide first.'

Putting one hand over Rose's eyes, the other over mine, I started to count out loud. 'One – two –'

'This is stupid.'

'five – shut up – six –'

When I got to a hundred I jumped and ran around the edges of the park, hoping to find Davey first and squeeze into a space beside him.

'Davey!' I called into the bushes. 'I know you're here!'

I stood still and listened, but there was no giveaway giggle or shuffle of feet. A chaffinch called from the hedgerow and an aeroplane droned through the sky. I ran once again around the circle then back to the bench and Rose.

She hadn't moved.

'He isn't here, Aeron. He's hiding where we can't go.'

I looked towards the memorial garden.

'Do you think –?'

'I en going in there.' Rose's voice was sharp and she pressed her lips together tight. I thought of Davey tucked behind one of those old school walls, crouching down, wondering what was taking us so long. I pushed my discomfort to my toes and took Rose by the hand.

'Don't be daft,' I said. 'Nothing bad will happen.'

'It bloody will. My mam will go spare. She'll send me up to live with Megan Mai.'

This was Rose's mother's favourite threat. All the kids in the village knew about Megan Mai. She lived up the lane by the graveyard, ate children for breakfast and left poisoned sweets in her yard and whenever we were naughty our mams would tell us that was where we'd have to go.

I dragged Rose up the steps. She sulked through the iron gates, looking around her for people who might see us and report us to her mam. We walked under the sign that read 'to those we mourn and miss so very much'. The air was thick, as if the garden still contained the cries and horror of that day when the landslide came.

'We'll find him now,' I whispered.

'What if anyone sees us, Aer?'

'They won't.'

But I crossed my fingers and looked through the trees to the houses over the road. All the windows had net curtains. Even if someone was looking out, we wouldn't be able to see.

We crept around the first of the low walls and peeked over the edge of the next. We checked along the tree line on the slope at the back of the garden and we looked down into the space between the bank and the long wall that once marked the boundary of the school.

'I don't like it, Aeron.' Rose clutched my arm. 'I want to go.'

'Shush,' I said. 'We've got to find Davey.'

I pulled her round the memorial garden, our search becoming more frantic with the threat of being caught, the fear of losing the boy and a deeper fear below I couldn't name.

I started to shout. 'Davey! Come out! Game's up!'

He didn't appear.

'One more minute and honest to God, I'm leaving.' Rose stood her ground, crossed her arms again.

'OK. Just wait.' I ran around the walls and bushes, calling for Davey, hoping to catch him if he was cheating and sneaking from one place to the next.

'Game's over! We give in!' My throat began to tighten. 'Davey! For Christ's sake, where are you?'

No answer came.

I tore my t-shirt, pushing through the hedge and caught my hair on tough summer thorns, doing my best to ignore Rose's impatience below me.

'That's it. I'm going home.'

But she'd left it too late.

I don't know who told Rose's mother we were there, whether it was someone from the houses on Moy Road who heard us shouting, or whether one of our neighbours on Bryntaf had seen us running down the backs. She turned up, all red in the face and shouting loud enough for half the village to hear.

'Rose Maria Jones, you get from there right now.'

Rose burst into tears. I gave another whispered shout for Davey, urging him this time to run.

'And you, Aeron Thomas. I've phoned your gran and he's expecting you. Get here.'

Rose's mam had brought a wooden spoon from her kitchen and she whacked us both round the backs of our legs. All the way home to Bryntaf, she yelled about how embarrassed she was and how I was a 'naughty thankless girl' who wasn't welcome in her house.

My grandfather was sitting on the front step when we got home, elbows on his knees, rollie cupped in his hand. Rose's mam raged at him and he stared at the smoke that swirled up to the narrow gap of sky between the terraced rows.

'Are you done?' he said at last, and before she could start again he stood and opened the door to our house, sending me in with a point towards the stairs. I scarpered up and shut my bedroom door and didn't dare come out for tea.

Late that night I woke from a nightmare, to the sound of a gull in the room below. My dream had made me thrash and twist the blankets off the bed and I woke up shaking both from cold and fear. It was Rose's mother, not a bird after all, come to give my gran a second dose of what for. I couldn't hear her words, but could make a decent guess: I was corrupting her daughter. My mother was a waste of space. My grandfather should bring us both in check. If he didn't sort us out soon, she'd be forced to call Social Services and have me taken in. Every now and then her voice would rise in a question and there'd be a pause before my gran's brief and rumbled reply. I turned to my side and tucked my arm under the pillow, resigned to whatever fate the morning might bring. As I did, I had to stifle a cry: my hand touched a pile of thin, smooth pieces of something hard that felt like tiny bones. I pulled my hand to my ribcage in shock and hugged myself, not daring to put on the light. Feeling haunted and nervous, I tucked my knees inside my thin cotton nightie and clutched the edge of the bed, screwing my eyes up tight against the strange heap of things on the mattress, though I couldn't keep out the thoughts of the dead.

In the safety of the morning, after the back door had slammed shut and I knew that Gran had gone out, I lifted my pillow to find my night time terrors were unfounded: they weren't bones there under my pillow, but shells, still stuck with sand from the beach.

I wanted to run outside and shout across the garden wall for Rose. To say, 'Look what Davey left me! Look what he sneaked into my bed!' But her mother would be on guard and ready to send me to Borstal. I laid out the shells on the carpet, lifting each one in turn to the light: tiny hermit shells

dressed in pink, their spirals twisting to a point; a clam, both halves intact, with earlobe dips to fit a finger.

Gifts from the sea.

Gifts from Davey Jenkins.

## Chapter 2

At the holler of the rag-and-bone men, I ran back to the street to seek the safety of the house. I'd been lying with a book from the library on the open grass patch by the side of the terrace, out of sight of Rose's kitchen window and her mam. I'd hardly read a word, kept slipping through the pages to daydreams of Davey. Dreams in which he turned up again in the garden, with his green-eyed smile and butterfly skin. I wanted to wander the streets to find him, but Rose's mother's threats were far too fresh.

The rag-and-bone men were up by the cemetery end of the street walking their horse-and-cart along and every few paces shouting: 'Raaaaag-bo!' the first part of their cry rising, the second half thudding down to the road like a bird, shot mid-flight. Although the summer heat was blurring up from the tarmac, the sound of their voices made me shiver and hurry to get inside. I turned the key and saw the men in the road as if through the shimmering edge of a migraine.

Before they could shout again, I slammed the door behind me, pressed my cheek against the cool white gloss of the inside and stood on tip-toes to peer through the rectangle of window. They weren't close enough yet for me to see them from this angle and anyway my nervous breath steamed up the glass. My heart thumped against the door and echoed into my ears. We'd learned about the Plague in school: how the corpses of Black Death victims were lifted and flung onto the backs of carts for burning. I was sure these rag-and-bone men did the same, smuggling bodies under their piles of unwanted household things. I was filled with an old terror that one day they would find me on my own, throw me on their cart and steal me away.

I slid along the wall to the front room window, ducked down below the sill to draw the heavy curtains shut. Then I sat on the floor, my back against the wall, knees together, toes curled inside my trainers. I checked my jeans pocket for the shells that Davey had left me, pressed the points of them and pulled one out to smooth my fingers round. I felt safer when I touched them.

The houses on this lower-side of Bryntaf only had one room that was level with the road – the living room with windows front and back so you could see through the whole house from the pavement. You had to go downstairs to the kitchen that opened onto the garden. We were all off-balance on this side of the street.

From where I sat, the top of Bedlinog mountain and the sky showed through the back window. Sometimes I'd pretend our house was flying. From outside the men's voices pulled me back to earth as they came louder, closer, their cry shoving its way through the windows and walls: 'Raaaaag-bo!'

And then I realized that I wasn't home alone.

From up above me, in my mother's bedroom, came the sound of someone banging on the window, followed by the noise of something heavy being dragged across the floor. A thump. A grunt. Then a

crash like all the bottles of perfume and cream and make-up had been swiped from my mother's dressing table to the floor. My mother was down in Cardiff with her boyfriend. My grancha must have come back early from the Club. His footsteps came across the landing: one, two, three.

'Grancha?'

'Aeron,' he called down the stairs in his deep gruff voice. Not unkind, but not a voice you'd dare to disobey. 'Open the front door now.'

'Grancha, no,' I whimpered. 'I can't.'

'Raaaaag-bo!' The men were level with the house now. The clipping hooves of their Shire horse came to a stop.

My grandfather stepped into the hallway with a roll of black cloth slung like a child across his shoulder. He frowned at me, his grey eyes full of steel.

'Get up now and open that door.'

Then, of course, I did as I was told.

The horse-and-cart and men were waiting outside in the road. One man leaned against the cart, cupping his hands to light a cigarette. He wore a red checked shirt with a grey neck-scarf and he nodded towards me. His partner stood beside the horse, facing down the street, holding the reins slack around his hand. Both men were wiry with muscles that seemed to be outlined in coal, their angles sharp and defined. The checked shirt man had jet-black hair and a thick moustache that twitched as he pulled on his rollie.

From behind me, my grandfather pressed his palm between my shoulders and pushed me out onto the pavement.

'What you got there then, Iestyn Thomas?' asked the man by the cart, looking directly at me. His voice was thick like he'd run his tongue through treacle.

'Herringbone Welsh tweed. 10 yards.'

The man blinked, lazy and slow, and shifted his gaze, at last, to my grancha. He took another drag on his cigarette.

'Not cheap, that, mind, Iestyn.'

'No one wants it here, Nate.'

'Best we 'ave it then.' He hitched a thumb towards the cart, then jerked his chin at me. 'Youer girl can choose a plate.'

'We've got loads of plates,' I blurted out, not wanting to go near.

The checked shirt man spat a loud 'huh huh' laugh from the pit of his belly.

'It's a contract, girl. Come on.'

My grandfather heaved the roll of fabric to the cart, while I pressed Davey's shells in my pocket and followed the man to the other side where he lifted down a basket. He placed it on the ground by the wheel and grabbed my wrist firmly, pulling me to squat beside him.

'Which one do you fancy?' he asked, so close to me his breath was hot on my neck.

I could only see a pile of white china, my eyes too tunneled up with fright to pick out one from another. I pointed at a plate at the front of the basket, one that glinted fierce in the sun. The man picked it out with his free hand and offered it to me, though he still had hold of my wrist and as I took the plate he held my gaze as well. And then, still looking at me, or into me rather, he turned my wrist so the tender inside skin was facing up and he ran the rough tip of his forefinger slowly down from the crook of my bare elbow all the way to the end of my middle finger. Time stretched out with a hum and I slipped inside a breath and there, in that space between everything, there was, for a moment, no cart, no plate, no fear. Just the earthy smell of that man and his dark eyes. Deep in my groin, something shook itself awake, sharpened my spine and shuddered right up to my throat.

Letting go of my wrist, the man gave a half smile, his eyes suddenly alive and filled with the wildness of wolves. I burned with a blush, pulled my hand away and ran, clutching the plate to my chest. His laugh, dirty and thick, followed me past my grandfather, into the house, down the stairs to the kitchen and out into the sunlit shelter of our garden.

Later, when the hollers of the men were far away and my grancha was sitting on the cold back step, watching the robin that perched on the apple tree, I asked him why he gave the cloth away. I brought him his mug of milky tea and he shuffled an inch or so towards the doorframe so I could sit beside him with mine. We sat like that most days after dinner, even when the fog was so thick in the valley that you couldn't see the end of the garden. There was a corrugated roof that sheltered the yard before the raised beds started and we would even sit out in the rain. Grancha would smoke cigarettes and I'd watch the sky or read, and now and then we'd talk. That summer evening, the skies were wide and blue and clear and I asked him why he'd given the cloth to the rag-and-bone men.

'I don't know, love,' he sighed.

I took Davey's shells from my pocket and placed them on the ground between my feet, forming first a circle, then nudging the circle into a square.

'Your Nana got that tweed from her Mammy. Them used to be weavers in West Wales, the Bankses. Your Nana's Daddy brought them here when money got tight. Went to work down the pit.'

I stopped my fidgeting and listened.

'Made me a suit, your Nana did, for our wedding day. Smart and sharp, like you wouldn't believe.' He flicked the ash from his cigarette and a few grey flakes landed on my arm. 'Gave the rest to your mammy when she was only a dwt and made her promise she'd do the same.'

His voice changed then. Became deeper, quieter as if he'd forgotten I was next to him. 'She stuffed it under the bed. She's never stitched a bloody thing.'

The robin trilled loudly and flew to the wall.

'More chance of that bird getting married than your mother.'

He drank his tea noisily.

'She says that Des will marry her soon,' I said.

My grandfather snorted and shook his head. 'Don't hold your breath.'

And then, after a while, he said, 'Aeron, I gave the cloth away because of you.'

I pushed the shells into a pile.

'But why?'

He heaved another sigh as if it pained him to explain. 'To show you what you did yesterday was wrong.' He always dished his punishments sideways and never dealt in slaps or belts or bolted doors. Still, I knew this stealing from my mother to chastise me was wrong. I'd have taken a pelting from Rose's mam's strap, rather than face the fall out from this.

'We were only playing,' I mumbled, though knowing the weight of it all. We'd been 'only playing' where my grandmother died, where their little son, Huw, was killed, where my five-year-old mother's friends had suffocated under the mountain of coal waste that slipped and swallowed the morning.

'Neither of you deserve to have that cloth.' He flicked his rollie into the red clay flowerpot he used as an ashtray and, standing up, brushed the front of his trousers with his palms. He pulled his green Dai cap deeper over his eyes and set off down the sloping garden path.

The sides of my mouth tugged downwards and the tears were hot on my cheeks.

'That's not fair!' I shouted after him, as he reached the garden gate.

He looked back for a second, shook his head.

'No, girl, nothing bloody is.'

### Chapter 3

In the back of my wardrobe, pushed into the far corner underneath the winter blankets, was a jigsaw puzzle that my mother bought for me from *Toys R Us* in Cardiff. The shop was huge and stacked from floor to ceiling with boxes of games I'd seen advertised on telly: *Kerplunk! Hungry Hippos, Mousetrap, Downfall*. There were huge baskets full of fluffy toy animals that made me want to climb inside and curl up with their soft fake fur on my skin. There were Barbie dolls and Sindy dolls each with their pink plastic houses and cars and sets of clothes to dress them up in; shelves of Sylvanian Family creatures; rows of moon-faced Cabbage Patch Kids. My mother said I could have whatever I wanted, but then got angry with me when I came to her with the jigsaw.

'That? What's wrong with you, Aeron? You don't have to pick something cheap. Why don't you have a Barbie? Or a My Little Pony? Have whatever you bloody well want.'

And then when I clutched the jigsaw to my chest, not knowing what to say, she snatched it from me and took it to the desk.

‘Please your bloody self. You’re a moody little bitch.’

The box had a picture of the seaside, with yellow sand that curved around a bright blue sea. On the beach, families sat in circles of deckchairs, reading books, eating picnic sandwiches, smiling at kids who wore cheerful clothes and rode donkeys or built sandcastles. There was a row of pastel-coloured cottages at the base of a hill and further up the hill were two bigger, separate houses, one pink and one blue, like the fondant fancies Mrs Jenks would sometimes offer Rose and me.

That evening, after my grancha had left for the Social Club, I pulled out the box from the wardrobe. I didn’t feel like doing the jigsaw but wanted to look at the picture. I traced my fingers round the pink house on the hill, pretending that we lived there. I imagined the smell of the sweet salty air and the feel of the sand on my feet. If we lived there, I was sure my mother would stay home and be happy. My grancha would grow his carrots and beets and spend evenings in a pub with a view of the ocean. If ever we had worries we would write them out in the sand, let the waves take them away. I wondered if Port Talbot, where Davey lived, might be like this, picked out a little green house in the terrace and pictured him there with his brother and his mam.

I put his shells inside the box to keep them safe, then went across the landing to my mother’s room.

When he took the cloth from underneath her bed, my grancha knocked my mother’s things from her table: bottles of perfume, pots of neon eye crème, tan foundation, dusky-coloured blusher, brushes and combs, all were scattered on the floor. One by one, I picked them up, rubbing my sleeve over the table to clear the dust and arranged them neatly in front of her mirror. I changed the sheets on her bed and tucked in the clothes that had spewed from her wardrobe and drawers, opened the window to let the early evening breeze slide in. With the room back in order, I sat on the edge of the bed and sprayed her Bodyshop White Musk perfume on my wrists, rubbing it behind my ears the way I’d watched her do. I took a black mascara stick and brushed my lashes long, dabbed my lips with bright red Diva Rouge. I pouted at myself in the mirror feeling like Mariah Carey or Madonna.

Sometimes I’d see my mother’s face in my reflection, as if my skin had shifted and her fierce eyes gazed out from mine. Other times I couldn’t find a thing of her in me. Where she was tall and lean, I was short and skinny like a stick; where she was sleek and dark, I was pale as a duck egg, my blue veins showing through. I thought it must come from my father’s side, this paleness, imagined that some day I would pass him in the street: a man with tired grey eyes and blue-white skin, so thin you could almost see through it.

‘Snap!’ I’d say and he’d laugh.

‘My daughter,’ he’d reply. ‘I wondered where you were.’

I was painting my nails when the car roared up outside the house, music blaring loud enough for all the valley to hear. I looked through the window and saw my mother, wearing tight black jeans and knee-high boots giggling out of the passenger side. I ran from her room to the landing as she flitted into the house.

‘Hiya!’ she trilled into the living room. ‘Anyone home?’

I darted into the bathroom to scrub the make-up from my face.

'I'm up here!'

'How's my lovely girl then?' she cooed, coming up the stairs, pressing her cheek to the doorframe. 'There's good you are. Having a wash before bed?'

I nodded, even though it was barely past seven, ages before bedtime.

'Won't be a minute. Des is outside.'

'Mam, wait. I need to tell you something.' I didn't know what. I couldn't tell her that the cloth had gone.

'Not now, love. Later, OK?'

As she leaned in to kiss me, I caught the sour stench of booze on her breath. She swung back through the door and into her room.

'Oh. What's happened here?'

'It's a surprise,' I lied, drying my face and stepping out onto the landing. 'I made it all nice for when you came home.'

I crossed my fingers behind my back and leaned against the wall.

'Right. Well, that's nice. It's nice. But there's really no need. I can do it myself.'

Downstairs the front door was open and I could see the racy blue of Des' car. The engine was still running, the music booming from the open windows down the street. He didn't come in.

'We're going for a drink in Aberfan, then back to Cardiff.' She yanked her wardrobe open, started stuffing clothes that I'd folded so neatly into a black plastic bag. 'Go and say "hiya" to Des, will you?'

Des sat in the car, staring straight ahead. He had thick black hair, shiny with gel, combed up at the front in a quiff. His muscles bulged like balloons from the sleeves of his white t-shirt and he punched his fists on the steering wheel in time to the music, making me feel nervous. He didn't look over to where I stood by the door.

I raised my hand in a half-hearted wave and whispered 'Hi' too quietly for him to hear. I wondered if I'd have to live with him when he married my mother like she said he would.

'Out the way then, Aeron.' My mother skittered down the stairs again, wearing a fresh white shirt that slipped from her shoulders, showing the straps of her bra. She threw the bag of clothes into the back seat of the car. 'Tell Grancha I'll see him next week.'

She squeezed my face in her hands and kissed me again.

'My lovely girl.'

Des revved the engine loudly.

'Ta-ra, love.'

He pulled away before she'd even shut her door, screeched the car around in a circle and roared off down Bryntaf with my mother waving out from the window.

The house was quiet after she left, as if everything had been spiked alive by her presence and was holding tight to make sure she'd gone. I sat on the sofa, watching the last long knives of evening sun cut through the room, causing yellow lines of dust to sparkle and swirl. Mam used to say that these were paths to the angels and I'd sit for hours willing golden cherubs and Gabriels to slide down to the house and play.

I watched the dust settle on the mantelpiece and on top of the telly beside me. There was a thick layer on the grey curved screen. Enough for me to write my name in with my finger. I leaned across and scrawled in big looped letters:

Aeron J. Thomas

Then underneath I drew a heart and wrote:

Davey

Later, I pulled the heavy Yellow Pages from under the phone and started searching through for details of the rag-and-bone men, thinking I could phone them in the morning and tell them I wanted my grandmother's cloth. I'd bring them their plate and I'd smuggle the cloth beneath the bed before my mother even noticed it was gone. She wouldn't need to know about our playing on Moy Road, or shout at Rose's Mam for smacking me around the legs, or get angry with my grandfather for what he had done. I'd bring it back and then, one day, she'd give the cloth to me and I'd love it until I was old enough to make a wedding suit for my husband, a man who'd look at me the way my Grancha looked at my grandmother Ira in the photo he kept by his chair. I searched under the listings for 'House Clearance' and 'Removal Services' and even under 'Stables'. The only thing I found was the scrapyard up in Dowlais where they took in cars for parts or crushing.

I was about to give up and go to bed when the telephone wrenched through the stillness of the house.

'Aeron, love, it's Joanie from the Mack. You'll have to come and get youer Mam – she's causing bloody ructions down by here. I don't want to call the police, you do know that, but I'll have to if this carries on.'

'Did you phone the Club for my granch?'

'I did. He's having none of it tonight. I'm sorry, love. Hurry, mind. You know what she's like.'

It was dark outside and the streetlights were on as I ran along the back lane onto Bronheulog Terrace and down to the red brick Mackintosh Hotel. Music, singing and laughter rolled out from the open windows, in the way they did in that rowdy half hour before last orders were called. Des' blue car was parked at the front, below the steps that led up to the pub and the disco lights from inside the Mack spiraled their colours out over the bonnet.

As I arrived, the pub door opened and slammed and Des hurtled out, his face pulled hard with anger. I stood back into the shadows beneath the window. Behind Des came my mother, her dark hair wild around her face.

'You're a liar!' she screamed from the doorstep, bending forward with the force of her shout, her eyes wide, her mouth all red and bloody.

I hadn't seen this version of her for months: her eyes black and vacant, as if she'd left herself.

'I saw what you did.'

The pub door opened again and the landlord, Keith stood out, grabbed mother around her shoulders, held her to his chest.

'Get off me!' she screeched, kicking back at Keith's shins with her heels. He struggled to stay firm as she wrestled and twisted, and he looked down at me as he grunted. 'Your Aeron's here, Sally. Stop making a fuss.'

I stayed still, feeling as though the warm pub wall was holding me up, hoping Keith might lift my mother like a baby and carry her, walk the pair of us home. My mother was fighting hard though.

Des grabbed her bag of clothes from the seat of the car.

'You're mental,' he shouted back, throwing the bag to the pavement. Part of me wanted to run in and rescue it. Another part was too afraid of being slapped or kicked to move.

'Fuck you,' my mother cried and bit Keith's wrist.

'Sally! For Christ's sake!' He had to let her go and she hurled herself down the steps, full pelt at Des.

I stood away from the wall, though kept my fingertips on the brick.

She fell into Des, pushing him back against the car, then staggered upright, reached to scratch his face.

'Mam!' I took a step towards her. 'Mammy, stop.'

My mother turned to me and Des took his chance to shove her away, pushing her shoulders so hard she fell back onto the steps. 'You're fucking deranged.'

'I warned you,' Keith roared at Des from the doorway. 'Get in that car now.'

My mother pulled herself to her knees beside the bag of clothes, tore it open and started pulling everything out, throwing her things towards the car and into the road: dresses, bras, a white linen skirt.

'Take them,' she yelled. 'Take them to Hell.'

I moved to her side as Des backed away towards the car, kicking the clothes as he went.

My mother's eyes were far away and dangerous, but knowing no-one else could help, I wrapped my arms around her, pressed my cheek into her neck. 'Mammy, please, stop.'

Des got into the car and started the engine, then roared away down the road, flicking his fingers back at us all through the window as my mother slumped into my arms, clutching at her clothes and crying.

She leaned heavy on my shoulder as we staggered up the hill. She reeked of cigarettes and booze and deeper still was the acrid stench of her sweat. Halfway home we stopped in front of Capel Aberfan for her to smoke.

'Have a fag will you?' She threw her box of Regal Kingsize at me.

I picked the packet up from the pavement, put it in her bag on top of the clothes I'd salvaged from the street.

'No, thanks.'

'Miss Goody Two Shoes, you are.' She exhaled as she spoke, her voice coming out half choked. And then she bit her lip and laughed. 'I'm sorry, love. I'm not supposed to teach you to be bad.'

She looked up at the chapel and pointed her fag at the sign which read: 'Lord save us: we perish.'

'Got that bloody right.' She leaned against the gate, dragged hard on her cigarette. 'Aeron, I don't mean to be spiteful. Come give your mammy a cwtch.'

When I didn't move to hug her, she tutted, threw her half smoked cigarette to the pavement, ground it with her foot. 'Please your-bloody-self.'

'What happened tonight, Mam?'

'Don't start.'

Grancha wasn't home when we got back and my mother went straight to her bed. After midnight though she opened my door and stood there silhouetted by the moonlight that shone in through the window on the landing. I woke from a nightmare fearing my dream had let a creature slip slantways into the room.

'Mammy?' I whispered.

She was wearing a long cotton nightie that once belonged to her mother, her wiry body outlined through the thin material. For a while, she didn't speak and I wondered whether she was walking in her sleep. She held the doorframe with both hands as if she might fall.

I pulled the covers back and went towards her.

'Mam, are you OK? Sit down.'

I reached for her waist to draw her into the room, but she slapped me sharp across the cheek.

'What have you done with it, Aeron?' Her voice was flat and deep.

'What do you mean?'

I stepped back into the room.

'My mother's cloth. Where is it?'