

Weak Spot

CERI MORGAN

Having grown up in the Valleys, she had a weakness for working-class men. She loved the way they would seam stories of adoration, stitching one improbable emotion onto another, until they stretched suspended in the air around them. Men with names like Gareth, Geraint, Gwyn; all those G beginnings. She loved them so much that when her own son was born, she would call him Gwilym; ignoring her mother's sniggering down the phone at this old man's choice.

Years before that, one Christmas Eve, twenty-year-old Carys had sat in the pub for a moment with a friend and her father. A cheerful man who looked like Bruce Forsyth, he was a retired fire officer for the region. Something—the weather, the whisky, the music on the sound-system—took him back. Describing how they had lifted body after body of the children buried in the collapsed spoil tip at Aberfan, he began to cry. Carys's aunt was a Disaster survivor. A teacher at the infants' school, she had apparently got her class out through a window. Carys was unsure of the details. It was only in middle-age that she learned that her grandfather—lame from a football accident as a young man—had gone to help with the digging. 'Everyone did,' was the brief explanation offered by her father.

What Carys knew about coal came ten, twenty and thirty years after Aberfan. The slag heaps which framed her childhood—black in Hirwaun, white in Merthyr—gradually disappearing as they were cleared or landscaped to look like hills. The miners' strike and the playground taunts of 'scab', whilst the children of the striking fathers stood in silence waiting for their free school meals. Carys's family had teachers, not miners, but it was still poor. All the same, her parents scratched a few pennies here and there and gave tins of food to the cause. 'They are starving,' her mother had said. The sight of food banks three decades on reminded Carys of an unhealable grief.

Some things you should never get over. If a lost love can chip you to the bone, what do you do when there are no chipping places left? Whole families marooned in villages on the side of mountains. Carys's village made the headlines when the miners bought back the mine with their redundancy pay. Hirwaun—*long meadow*—, with the fields of fine, smokeless coal underneath. At the time, Carys had been dating a miner's son. His father decided not to take the risk; opting to work for a neighbouring opencast. His mother was afraid there would be fighting at the party held at the pub where Carys worked; serving the men who came in with an eyeliner of coal, drinking one pint quickly to quench the thirst and then slowing for the second. 'No man wants their son to be a miner,' one of them told her that night. Still, they raised a glass to militancy.

When the Tower Colliery finally closed, it was because it was all mined out. The newspaper photos of the empty shower stalls a ghostly reminder of South Wales's last deep pit. A dream of generations in the dust.

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