

Running Away with the Hairdresser

The sun was shining that day, although there was also enough of a fresh breeze to send clouds skimming and chasing across the impossibly blue sky. At the top of Pen Brân we had watched the shadows of those clouds darken by turns the far hills and fields. Then, in those fleeting shadows, I detected nothing threatening; no hint of the trouble to come.

In the valley below us, running by the side of the river was the railway and on the tracks, hurtling eastward towards England, was a train. I watched it, I remember, full of longing. I wanted to escape even as I lay on the scrub grass of a Welsh mountainside with the girl I believed I loved in my arms. The girl who, I thought, loved me, but instead of settling in the stillness of the moment, I was yearning for movement; for freedom, for the clouds' wild rampage away from the slumbering world.

She was married, and had a son. She'd brought him along that day. He was a pathetic scrap: six years old, lisping, stick-thin, freckled, and with hair so white and eyes such a watery blue you'd have thought him an albino. He clung to her incessantly as if the wind might blow her away, and maybe he was right to detect the threat of some ancient and elemental force which plucked at her, and called her from their little home above the hairdressing shop, away from the town, the valley, and Wales, and into the dark underworld of England and beyond.

When she spoke to her son she called him, not by his name,

but "boy", as women in those parts often do. The boy was sulking and complaining of a headache, and whenever he said it, his eyes slid towards me accusingly, as though I were its chief cause.

"Come on, boy," she said, sounding and looking more like a big sister than his mother, "I'll race you to the top."

But he grizzled all the more, like the bony bag of misery he was. I didn't help matters much, I'll admit. I resented the sudden appearance of this mawkish creature, the restrictions he put on what we did during our brief time together. The watering down of our pleasures, the whispered words, the way she untangled my hand from hers whenever the kid was within a hundred yards.

We had precious little time together anyway, what with that hunkering, suspicious, ex-army husband of hers, and the hairdressing business with its rows of blue-rinsed old bags lined up beneath the dryers like over-grown turkeys under a grill; all gizzard-neck and gobble-gobble, and bulging, rolling eyes always on the look out for something to peck to death.

She was just twenty-two and only looked sixteen if she looked a day. I was thirty-eight, and a born liar. I told her I was twenty-nine, thus placing myself in the same decade as her. She never guessed the truth. I had never married, and secretly, I had decided that I was never going to get tied down like that. If she assumed otherwise, well then, that was her problem.

I still smoked back then, which is yet another clue to my state of mind – even at almost forty I thought that I was going to live forever.

All of her energy was going into entertaining the boy. They were careening over the hill, plucking daisies and making long chains and winding themselves up in them. I lay back on my elbows, with ankles crossed and a Players Number 6 stuck in the corner of my mouth, squinting at the sun and letting the frown stay creased between my brows even when the sun went in.

"You're sulking aren't you?"

She was standing over me, I remember, and the sun gaped blindly over her left shoulder. The boy had wandered off in

search of bigger daisies. She kicked at the sole of my shoe, "You're bloody jealous of 'im aren't you?"

"Grow up!" I said in a low voice. "Get a grip, for christsake."

She pulled a face, then turned to check on the kid's whereabouts. I took my chance and launched myself at her ankles, and grappled her down. We'd messed around like this before, giggling and tickling one another and play-wrestling, and I was laughing, except that I could detect a hollow edge to the sound. And she wasn't laughing at all.

It was in those seconds that all our dreams began to crack and distort at the edges. I was still laughing my hollow laugh, still caught in the pretext of affectionate play, when her elbow smashed into my nose; hard enough to stun me and hard enough to produce a few droplets of thin snotty blood.

'Bitch!' I snarled, and a few other things besides. I rolled away from her, and blinked and snorted like a scolded dog who's been whacked on the snout with a newspaper.

She was up and running, and for once, calling the boy's name. "Hugh!" she yelled. "Hugh!" over and over, until it no longer sounded like a name or a word you would recognize, but some she-animal's mating call.

We both heard the splash. It was sudden and it was out of place; there was no water nearby that we could see, and for all those reasons and more it was frightening.

Her cries now took on an even more breathless and distorted quality as she raced toward the sound, with me at her heels. We got there while ripples of black water were still making hypnotic circles around the space where the boy had fallen in. You could see how the land had collapsed in on itself, how years of earth and grass had knotted themselves together into a conspiracy that hid the empty air of an old mine shaft and the underground pool it led to. I stood there marvelling at it, noting the fringed grass at its edges and the lace-like display of roots that were so diagrammatically exposed and the cold air that seemed to rise up

from the water.

Then, rousing me at last from my reverie, I saw from the corner of my eye that she was taking off her shoes and socks, shaking off her jacket.

"You can't swim," I said, kicking off my shoes, and for a second we were both tearing at our clothes like hungry lovers in some passionate race against time. I won the race, and bare feet first, I was swallowed by first the air, and then the water. I went down fast, blind and shocked into the engulfing cold, then came up for air, and then went under again with eyes open at the stinging dark, and precious little time in my lying poisoned lungs.

I couldn't find him. I came up again, gasping and treading water and not even daring to look up to where she stood. The third time I went under seemed the longest. I went down as far as I dared, but found nothing solid there, no silty bed or rocks or debris and no half-drowned boy either.

My mind, however, was playing tricks with me. Perhaps it was the shock or the fear or the cold that caused it, whatever it was doesn't matter actually; all I know is that while I swam around down there I suddenly felt very calm. Happy, almost. And I thought about three things. The first was a song, which I suppose, I seemed to hear rather than actually think about in any concrete way. It was playing in my head like a film soundtrack. It was The Spencer Davies Group's "Keep on Running" and the words seemed to me like directions for that very instance in my life, "Keep on running," they sang, "keep on hiding".

At the same time I had a sort of vision of myself running down the high street in the sunshine, and she was running with me; she was by my side holding my hand and we didn't care who saw us, or who knew about us, or anyone or anything, because we were gone, and out of there and never coming back. But as I swam and ran and my lungs grew tighter and more desperate for air, I lost my grip on her hand. Growing weak, my hand was spasmodically pumping the watery nothingness in search of her lost dream hand when it finally found the thin half-dead reality of his.

It should have been a moment of triumph; of relief, of heroism, of everything that is good and sweet and noble, but instead of that, one evil and corrupting idea leapt on me like a water serpent in the deep. The idea was that I should leave him there, that he was dead already and I needed to save myself. It was a tragic accident and I had done all I could, and I could not be blamed, and she would be free, we would be free. And I saw the boy's life stretching into the future and deemed it a sickly sad future, not worth living.

It is not a memory I am proud of. I could blame all kinds of temporary madness brought on by the lack of oxygen. I might even conjure up some evil supernatural force infecting my mind, a jealous ghost, a spiteful water baby, alien forces of destruction, but these would only be vague excuses, a thin veneer of lies which could do nothing to save me, or salve the wounds of terrible self knowledge. And the truth was I wanted him dead. Not just because I felt that his death would free us, but also because, like some ancient jealous God I wanted to destroy him and thus weaken her.

Then I felt a movement from the boy and without thought, I found myself swimming, swimming upwards, with him hooked under one arm and the daylight like the phosphorescence from an angel's wing calling us home, and back to the world.

I have told no-one of this. Instead I have spent the best part of sixteen years running. But I ran away alone, the vision I had had of the two of us was only that: a vision as illusory as a dream or a human form glimpsed in a cloud. The running away does not make me free however much I like to think it does. The running away is my curse, my punishment for darker sins, even if they were never quite acted on. Those sins may have been left there in Wales, in a dark gash in the hill's surface, in the ripples of a secret pool; the soul's foot caught forever in the weeds.