

# *From* When the Mountain Swallowed the Morning

Grancha caught me at the Jenks' back gate. He was wearing his big black jacket and his Dai cap, holding a spray of winter irises in the crook of his arm.

'Where you off to now?' he asked, his eyes reading mine, shaking his head. 'Come on. Walk with me.'

We stayed in silence to the end of the road, where I planned to head straight up the hill to Davey. But when we reached the graveyard's iron gates, Grancha put his hand on my arm, gripping me tight. 'Help me with the flowers, girl.'

It wasn't a question. I looked up the muddy lane that ran along the cemetery to Nant-y-Maen.

'Granch—'

But he was already through the gate and on his way up the path that snaked to the top of the sloping graveyard, all the way to my grandmother's plot.

'Wait!' I called, and followed.

Ira was buried apart from the others who died in the landslide, higher up the slope above the two long rows of white-hooped stones that marked the Aberfan Disaster graves. I'd seen photos from the day of the funeral service: two long trenches scarred across the hillside with small pale coffins lined up inside; black-suited mourners leaned over them, grasping at each other's hands, pressing hankies to their eyes; a huge cross of flowers kept vigil on the mountain above. My grancha laid his son to rest in the long communal grave to spend forever by his friends. But Ira's grave was separate. I used to think she was a guardian angel, looking over all the children. As

I got older I realised that Grancha had buried her there so he could spend time with her alone. Sometimes, it seemed to me, he'd prefer to be with her in the ground.

We squatted on opposite sides of her plot and picked through the flowers that covered her grave like a blanket, all stuffed into jam jars and pots. My grancha would bring a bunch of something fresh along most days. My mother said he wasted his time, that he might as well plant bulbs straight in, but he replied that he'd brought Ira flowers every day since they first met and wouldn't stop because she'd gone. He picked them from the mountain, or the side of the river and even the edges of the streets, his wayside bouquets every bit as lovely as the ones he bought now and then from the shops.

He'd met my grandmother when he was fourteen years old and her family moved three doors down from his on Pantglas Road.

'Knew the minute I saw her, she was the one.'

He'd sit outside her house after his shift in the pit, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, clutching the flowers he'd picked on the way, not caring how her sisters would tease.

'I'd wait there all night for a smile. Loved her, see?'

That morning, he pulled the brown and wilting petals from the blooms and gave them to me. 'Stick those in the bag for the bin.'

In the tall dark cedar tree by the entrance to the graveyard, three magpies hopped between the branches, the whites of their bellies standing out against the dark of the needles and trunk.

'One for sorrow,' my grandfather murmured, 'two for joy—'

'Three for a girl—' I added, searching around for another to make it 'four for a boy', as if this would be a sign that I should go, that leaving home, running off with Davey was more than dreaming madness from the night.

Across the valley, the clouds sat low like a sickness, hiding the top of Bedlinog mountain and sinking right down to the Cardiff Road. The things I really wanted to say would not come out, as if my throat was smothered by the stillness of the valley.

When he was done with his flowers, my grandfather settled on the small stone wall at the end of Ira's grave and rolled a cigarette. He could do it with his eyes closed, this rolling, pinching tobacco from his battered green

and yellow tin, tucking it into the paper, pressing it in and licking the edge to seal it. He held the finished cigarette in his palm, looked out across the valley. I wondered whether he was praying, though knew he'd never admit to that. He heaved a weighty sigh and placed the cigarette between his lips.

'Let me do it,' I said, as he pulled his brass Zippo lighter from the top pocket of his shirt. I loved the weight of the lighter and the oily sweet smell of the fuel. He'd taught me years ago to flick the lid and snap my thumb back quick to the wheel so the flame appeared easily. Cupping his hands around mine, even though there was no breeze, my grancha puffed his cigarette to life, muttered 'ta' through the side of his mouth.

I handed him the lighter and sat down by his side, resting my cheek on his shoulder. Sometimes I pretended I was smoking too, though the pictures of blackened lungs they'd shown us in school had been enough to stop me lighting up. I hated the thought of my grancha's bruised insides, his lungs inflamed and thick with years of coal dust and tar.

For a while we didn't speak, but I knew that he was thinking of my mother too and eventually I had to say out loud what we both knew:

'She's getting worse.'

He blew his smoke in a long thin stream that seemed to merge with the clouds taking my words along with it.

'What are we going to do, Granch?'

'Don't ask me, love.' He flicked the end of his cigarette with his thumbnail again and again, even though there was no ash there to fall. 'I don't bloody know.'

When I was in school I did a textiles project on the valley, recreating it with fabric. I started with a square of my grandmother's tweed that I snuck from underneath my mother's bed, used this as the base and built the features up with scavenged cloth. For weeks I went out in the evenings, collecting clumps of sheep's wool that clung to barbed wire fences, used it to stuff the mountains I made from a patch of pale green velveteen that I cut from the back of our sofa. No one noticed. I was the only one who ever pulled it out to clean. I stitched the tall dark cypress trees that covered Bedlinog mountain, using the wool from a jumper my grancha had worn out, the cuffs and elbows frayed beyond repair. To make the River Taff, I pinched a turquoise satin camisole from my mother. It shimmered down

the middle of my work, more gleaming and delightful than the river really was. I combed tiny felted gravestones from the sheep's wool and stitched in bits of myself that no one else could see: threads of my hair, clippings from my nails, the brown hard edge of a scab, two milk teeth I'd saved from when I was a child.

While I was making it, I had to imagine my world from above and now and then I'd find myself slipping into a strange sensation of floating, as if I'd left my body and become a kind of bird looking down. I'd have to slap my arms to bring myself back to my skin, saying my name out loud again and again.

I hadn't had that feeling for months, but there with my grancha that morning, I drifted up again, as if a part of me had come undone.

'There I am,' I thought, 'sitting with my grancha on a grave. Across the wall there's Bryntaf and in that house at the end is my mam, who could be fast asleep by now but could be drinking gin or getting ready to run naked down the street.'

I imagined the picture without me and wondered whether anything would change.

At last a fourth magpie rattled up to the cedar tree and I shook myself back.

'I'm going now, Grancha.'

'Aye.' He put his arm around my shoulders, our thick coats squashing together. 'What time will you be back?'

'I don't know.'

He looked at me then, his grey eyes unflinching.

'Don't leave us, girl.' His voice was quiet. 'Not yet.'