

Leaving 'Swn y Mor'

by

Janet Laugharne

Leaving 'Swn y Mor'

'I know we said selling Swn y Mor was the best option,' Gwladus said, unfairly emptying the last drop of tea from the pot, 'but that still doesn't mean I have to like it. Mum would be devastated.'

'We're doing it *for* mum, remember. For her quality of life,' Eleri answered.

The window next to them rattled, making her jump.

'Listen to that. We're going to get soaked.'

They'd been over the sale so many times, but Gwladus could be like a dog with a bone at times.

'I mean we ought to have rented it out,' Gwladus added.

Before Eleri could snap back, a woman's voice cut across them.

'Are you here on holiday?'

Eleri noticed then the elegant woman sitting in the bay window of Y Sospan Fach. Her voice held patrician Welsh cadences, matched by a smart leather handbag and red deck shoes. She seemed keen to talk.

'No, not really,' Eleri answered. Gwladus didn't do conversation. 'We are clearing our grandparents' house down the coast and doing some walking in between.'

'Ah, I see. Pembrokeshire is a wonderful part of the world, isn't it?'

Gwladus had her back to the stranger. She winked naughtily, just like she used to do when they were children.

‘Are you visiting?’ Eleri somehow already knew she wasn’t. The woman seemed settled and comfortable, as though everything was familiar to her.

‘Me. Oh no. I am a local - a local yokel.’ The stranger smiled, adjusting the expensive gold bracelet on her arm. Eleri looked across at Gwladus. She was chasing crumbs across a red pool of strawberry jam.

‘Do you live in St David’s?’ Eleri asked.

‘Yes, for the moment. I’ve lived here much of my life, off and on. I remember, when I was a child, I used to go down to the beach on my own, all day, every day, and I knew everybody then, everybody. In fact, I recall helping Mrs Bryn Davies, the old lady who lived here for many years, to make scones - in this very room! I liked licking the bowl best.’

Some children cannot be recognised in the adults they become, Eleri thought, looking at the stranger’s immaculate appearance. Now Gwladus, she was just like she used to be as a girl.

‘My maiden name was Cholmondeley. How do you think that is spelt?’ the woman continued.

Gwladus looked at Eleri over her tea cup and rolled her eyes. She disliked people she considered “posh” and she had already put the stranger in that category.

‘I’m not sure,’ Eleri smiled. ‘I expect it has lots of silent letters?’

‘Yes indeed. An awful name. I had so much trouble with it. I was glad when I married and left it behind for something more straightforward. Of course, really, I am Welsh. I was adopted by the Cholmondeleys.’

‘Oh.’

A conversation stopper.

Gwladus pushed her chair back, scraping the wooden legs against the slate floor.

'We have to catch our bus. You pay, Eleri. I'm going to the loo.'

She clattered down the steep wooden stairs to the basement. Eleri settled up and put on her rain gear. The stranger waved to them as they wrestled with the door and went out into the night. She could be seen for a while, a still statue, lit up by the brass lamp in the bay window. An odd woman, Eleri thought. "Bloody snob," Gwladus said, pulling her hood closer round her face. They both agreed, though, there was something about her; and she was beautiful.

It was true, at times, their stay at Swn y Mor had felt like a holiday, with the walks on the coastal path and the visits to Fishguard and St David's. But, in less than twenty-four hours, they would hand the house keys to the estate agents, completing the sale on behalf of the new owners, Mr and Mrs Thomas.

Swn y Mor, solid in its stone and slate, was set back from the road. Driving past, you got the impression of a substantial Victorian building but, if you were a coastal path walker, you soon saw it was a house in decline. Pink willow herb bloomed through the gravel on the drive; a row of fir trees had grown tall and unchecked on one side; and the blue paint on the front door and window frames peeled in curls as the summer heat and winter storms worked on it, baring it to the wood.

Humphrey Roberts, Eleri and Gwladus' great-grandfather, had built the house when he returned from missionary work in India, naming it 'Swn y Mor', *Sound of the Sea*. On summer nights, when the windows were open for air, Eleri used to hear the waves roll in, gush to land on the beach and the hiss of pebbles drawn back. She remembered, when she was a child, picking the sweet, yellow gooseberries in the fruit garden. It was a happy place to visit, isolated and rural, with the sea close by and a back garden for reading and sunbathing. Their mother had

grown up there. But that was a long time ago and now mum needed other things than visits to her parents' old home. The sale would help. Still, it was a wrench to say goodbye to the place, to a part of their family history.

Eleri stood in the front room the next morning and looked out towards the sea. There was a big, open sky with high, scudding clouds and fine-weather rollers coming in, full and smooth, onto the beach. They had organised, labelled and packed everything. Not that it had been easy, a better job for children than grandchildren. Eleri looked across to where Gwladus knelt amongst a small mound of packing. She used to sit there reading on a rug in front of the fire. Today the room was empty and every sound echoed, cobwebs in the corners and deep cracks in the plaster by the window.

'Well, that's that then,' Gwladus said. 'Have you got the keys?'

They picked up the last plastic bags and cardboard boxes to join those that were already gathering dust at home in their attics. Eleri closed the front door for the final time.

She was startled to hear a voice behind her.

'Good heavens! Ladies!! We met yesterday! Was Swn y Mor the family home you talked of?'

The woman was as striking and well-presented as the day before. Close-up and in daylight, Eleri saw how tall she was; still beautiful but older than she had previously thought. Eleri noticed how dirty her own hands were. Of course, she was wearing her ancient, house-clearing clothes.

'This is my husband, Ben,' the woman continued.

Ben appeared from behind their Range Rover, carrying a large plant in a pot. As he put it down by the front door, Gwladus nudged her and Eleri recognised him: Mr Thomas, the 'new' Head Teacher from their old High School days. He'd arrived when they were in the sixth form. She remembered hearing his wife had been a famous model, but she suffered with her nerves and had to give up her career. Mr Thomas didn't seem the sort of man to have a glamorous wife and she never came to school events, so others said she didn't exist; he had invented her. But here she was, all these years later: as elegant as any model could be and much taller than her husband, when they stood together.

'You must call in when you are this way and visit us,' Aileen Thomas said.

Ben Thomas led her away by the elbow towards the car. 'Come on, Ali. We need to go and meet the removal van.'

'Take a picture of us, Ben.' Aileen broke free and took up an effortless pose, with the dark green trees on one side and the sparkling sea behind. She waved Gwladus and Eleri to join her.

'Do you mind?' Ben Thomas said to them. 'My wife was a model. Famous, you know. I'll send you the picture if you like.'

An odd way to leave Swn y Mor, Eleri thought, as they stood together by the dry-stone wall that divided the house from the road.

'Well!' she said when she and Gwladus were in the car. 'It's a small world.'

'Glad he didn't recognise us.' Gwladus searched in her bag for her mints.

'We were hardly terrible twins,' Eleri looked through the rear-view mirror. Mr and Mrs Thomas receded into the distance.

'Speak for yourself. I got into enough hot water for the two of us.'

‘They will look after Swn y Mor. You could see that,’ Eleri blinked. She felt tears prickling her eyelids.

Gwladus offered her a mint.

‘Mum would be pleased,’ Eleri added. ‘She probably knew Aileen Thomas.’

‘Mmm,’ Gwladus murmured, through her sweet.

They neither of them said what they were thinking: That their mum hardly recognised them, let alone Swn y Mor, or someone from her childhood. But Eleri could tell Gwladus felt like her there was a comfort in seeing a new phase for the old house and the prospect of it being brought back to life from its state of decline.