

Thorne Moore grew up in Luton, in a very political family. She read history at Aberystwyth university and law through the Open University. After working in a library, she moved to west Wales to set up a restaurant with her sister, and now runs a craft business and occasionally teaches family history in rural Pembrokeshire, the county where her mother's family were once farmers, carpenters, stonemasons and ministers.

She has a much-loved niece, part share in assorted cats and far too many woodpeckers.

Very grateful thanks to my editor, Janet Thomas, for her patience and perception, to my friend and fellow author, Catherine Marshall, for keeping me going, and to the unnamed girl in the newspaper article, for the inspiration.

A TIME FOR
SILENCE

by
Thorne Moore

HONNO MODERN FICTION

First published by Honno
'Ailsa Craig', Heol y Cawl, Dinas Powys,
Wales, CF64 4AH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

© Thorne Moore 2012

The right of Thorne Moore to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without
clearance from the Publishers.

ISBN 978-1-906784-64-5

Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council.

Cover image: Izzy Ashford

Cover design: Simon Hicks

Printed in Wales by Gomer

*To everything there is a season and a time
to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born and a time to die...
A time to keep silence and a time to speak.*

Ecclesiastes

A weak flicker of sun filtered down through naked branches, catching little by little the wreck of the cottage. It flashed on broken panes, shattered slates, crumbling stone, and then it was gone, leaving me staring into shadow. Picking my way past brambles, I pushed ivy aside to peer in through a blackened rotting window frame, and felt the dark breath of the house exhale around me. Echoes of a forgotten past. My past. All these years this cottage, Cwnderwen, had lain cradled in a tangle of thorns, like Sleeping Beauty's resting place, waiting for the kiss that would awaken the secret it held. All my life, all my mother's life.

Pure chance had brought me here, but I could believe deeper forces had been at work, drawing me to this spot. I hadn't planned it. That morning, setting off in the dark from my mother's door, I'd expected nothing but a long journey home. A week ago, seeing my fiancé off from Heathrow, I hadn't dreamed of finding myself in this part of the world. But all the time I had busied myself with other plans, this house had been here, waiting.

For me.

1

‘That’s my flight, baby.’

I could feel the satisfaction rippling through Marcus, so I released him and turned to look up at the board. BA0115 to New York. ‘God, I’m going to miss you.’

‘And I’ll miss you.’ He hugged me once more. I could tell it was the final parting. ‘But it’s only for three months. That’s nothing.’

‘Nothing for you!’ I growled. ‘You’ll be wining and dining and showing off to all those corporate bigwigs, and I’ll be advertising fudge bars. This is what Einstein meant by relativity, you know. Hey!’ I brightened. ‘I know. Take me with you. Smuggle me in your suitcase. We can run off to Las Vegas and tie the knot with an Elvis lookalike and a pink Cadillac.’

‘Mm. Tempting... but no. Too late. Already booked my bags in.’ He reached into his jacket for his passport and boarding pass as if to check, but really to gloat over them. He’d been angling for this trip for months. ‘You be good, Sarah Peterson. No mischief while I’m away.’

‘No Polish plumbers?’

‘You won’t have time for Polish plumbers. You’ll be far too busy thrashing out the wedding details with Mumsy.’

I groaned. 'No pink Cadillac?'

'Pink rosebuds. Humour her. Go with the flow.'

I muttered, Muttley-style.

He laughed. 'Well. This is it. Take care, baby. Keep busy, be good.'

'Skype, text, email, every day, promise?'

'Twice a day.'

One more quick kiss, so distracted it almost missed, and I watched him walk away into the jaws of the security controls.

So. Where now? Out of Terminal 5, into a sharp March wind under a lowering grey sky, feeling deflated. Not grief and desperation, exactly, but a void was spreading under me, and it needed filling.

I found my car, slumped into the driving seat, and sat there. My phone, which I had left under the seat, gave its customary bleep. I fished it out, flicked through texts, looked at my messages. In just over an hour, I had missed three calls.

No point in ignoring them; see what the world wanted of me.

'Sarah. Yes. Um...' My boss, Trevor, slightly slurred as usual after lunch. 'Hope you are, um... anyway, sorry, looks like we've lost the Solar contract. Not sure what, um... Disappointing, eh? Anyway, speak to you about it when you come in. Are you coming in? Or tomorrow. Yes. Right. Okay?'

'Trevor!' I slammed the dashboard, ignoring anxious glances from a couple in the next car. I'd given everything to get that contract. If we'd lost it, it was down to Trevor. Probably messed up the paperwork. So, instead of a project

that could have set us up among the serious players, I was left with a fudge bar. It was sitting on my desk waiting for me. The manufacturer, a friend of Trevor, wanted me to market it, please, with erotic overtones like Flake but a hint of homeliness like Hovis? No. I didn't want to market it at all. I'd told Trevor we should be concentrating on...

Oh, what was the point? It was just a job.

The next message kicked in, and my innards shrank. Marcus' mother. 'Sarah, darling. Caroline here. Did Marcus get off all right? I wanted to come and see him off too, but he said better not. We're all going to miss him, aren't we? Now you are going to come this Sunday, aren't you? Russell and I are expecting you. After all, you're practically our daughter already, so I hope you think of this as home. We've got such a lot to do before Marcus gets back. That wedding to arrange? Let's see if we can sort out that dress this time. See you soon.'

That wedding. *That* dress. Not mine; I was just the mannequin. Caroline was the mistress and commander of the project, wrapping her octopus tentacles around me. The thought of Sunday dinner at the Crawfords without Marcus as compensation was too much to bear. I needed time to ground myself. Time to mourn my beloved's absence without being tempted to murder his mother.

The last message: Freddie, of all people, out of the blue and out of the past. Freddie my one-time occasionally transvestite boyfriend, before I had traded him for Marcus and he had traded me for Japan. 'Hiya Sai, how you keeping? Keep meaning to ring. Listen, when are you performing next? Still doing Murphy's? There's a couple of guys here, I told them all about this fantastic singer I know

and they're going to be over in England next month, itching to hear you. Any dates? Let me know. Love. Okay?'

Of course, I should have realised; Freddie still thought of me as a singer. How long ago was that?

I'd been in a band. We'd started it at college, got a taste for the sound of applause, and tried to keep it going in the big world, seriously convinced that the next gig, the next song, would be It. Fizzled out in the end, of course; once Sean had got himself arrested, and Jemma – Jemma had got herself killed. That had been a dark time and a dark place for me. Too dark to survive, I'd sometimes thought, as I'd begun to spiral into depression and alcohol. Freddie, my ardent fan, had tried to convince me I could make it as a solo act. He set me up as a regular at a local club, promising world stardom, while I'd staggered from one night to the next in a miserable haze of pot and vodka.

All behind me now. I'd come through all that, out into reality. My glittering adolescent fantasies may have been swept away in the process, but at least my black dog days had gone too. I'd emerged, miraculously, the right way up. My casual day jobs crystallised into a career with Frieman and Case Promotions, my anarchic private life morphed into an engagement to a sexy young solicitor. Pension plans, mortgages, kids were on their way. I hadn't sung in Murphy's bar for what? Two years at least. I hadn't sung anywhere except Sophie's wedding, when everyone, including me, was too drunk to notice.

Sorry, Freddie, I'd moved on. Like I should be doing now. No good sitting there, waiting for Marcus' plane to shoot away without me. Decisively, I started the engine. Now all I had to do was find the exit.

‘Where the hell is it?’ I asked the empty seat beside me, and felt another pang at the thought of three months without Marcus. Three months of weekend wedding planning with Caroline and the petty frustrations of a mediocre career in advertising. I needed him already. I relied on his granite certainties. Marcus would know the way out of here.

For God’s sake, Sai Peterson, you can find your own way. Of course I could, and I did, laughing at my own sense of empowerment. Driving home, I decided I needed to break out a bit, treat myself to a tiny dose of rebellion.

Back in my Guildford flat I phoned my mother. I hadn’t seen her since Christmas. ‘Hi Mum.’

‘Sarah.’ Her voice echoed down the phone, set against the mellow drone of Irish radio. ‘How are you?’

‘Coming to see you.’

‘Wonderful. When are you landing? I’ll be at the airport to pick you up.’

‘No need. I’m driving.’

‘Oh you can’t. Do you have any idea how far it is?’

‘Nothing to it. See you Friday night.’

So once I’d balled out Trevor at the office, rescued another contract and given our perfectly adequate trainee, Maya, her wings, I treated myself to an extended weekend. A flight out to Kerry would have been too immediate, out of one set of issues straight into another. I wanted the solitude, the liberation of the drive, windows down, hair flying, singing my lungs out as I headed for an ever-receding horizon. I may not have sung for years, but I was going to sing now. Just once more.

I sang everything from Madam Butterfly to Postman Pat.

I sang across England and Wales. I sang onto the ferry at Fishguard. I sang across Ireland. By the time I arrived on the doorstep of my mother's cottage, buffeted by the Atlantic roar, I could barely croak a greeting. She nursed me with honey and whiskey.

We walked and, when I was capable, we talked, about nothing that mattered. She asked me, 'How are the arrangements going?' I said, 'Fine, missing Marcus.' She nodded understanding, and that was it.

Weddings were not a subject I felt I could discuss with my mother. Too sensitive. My parents had divorced, and my father had gone off to Another Woman. Mum had been left like a wounded bird, washing up eventually on this distant shore, with her whiskey bottle and her art.

She was bearing up, I decided, watching her critically. Or putting a good face on it, losing herself in her painting. I ought to come more often; I couldn't have her sinking into lonely depression out in County Kerry. But in the small hours of Monday, as I got ready to leave, I made a mental note to take the plane in future. I really hadn't grasped how long the journey would be.

I did sing a little, as far as the ferry, but the sea was far choppier this time and when I drove onto dry land I was sealed in nauseous silence, vowing never to go near a boat again.

The negativity of sea-sickness refused to wear off, so I stopped at the first town I came to, looking for a coffee and a chance to re-orientate.

As I walked, I caught my reflection in the plate glass window of an estate agent. Washed out, hair limp, bags under my eyes. Great. I tried a smile. Okay, a bit better.

Then I looked through the glass. We'd been pouring over property details in recent months, apartments in converted Regency houses, dockland developments, semi-rural residences with hot tubs and commuter connections. But we had idly day-dreamed about a little rural hideaway, far from the city. Marcus had this romantic idea of a turreted hunting lodge on wild Scottish moors. This was west Wales, not Scotland, but still Celtic. There were hills. I looked to see if there were any turrets among the adverts for modern bungalows and drab terraces.

An old rectory. Way too big. A converted mill. That sounded better. Interesting.

Then I saw it. The name. Cwmdrwen.

Just a fly-blown sheet of paper, squeezed in among building plots and garage leases. No picture to tempt. It had been there for months, years maybe, slowly fading.

'Cwmdrwen, Llanolwen, cottage with outbuildings, suitable for development.'

It was a shock to find a name I knew, here in the middle of nowhere. Except that, on second thoughts, here was exactly where it would be. My mother had once found Llanolwen for me on a map. I had been eight, nine maybe, working on a family tree for a school project, so she had produced her birth certificate.

Sïan Ellen Owen, born 23rd February 1948 at Cwmdrwen, Llanolwen; father John Owen, farmer; mother Gwenllian Owen, formerly Lewis.

My mother had grown up in Peterborough with her aunt Dilys, so the Llanolwen farm had swirled into the ragbag of family myth, but here it was, staring at me through an estate agent's window. I couldn't just pass by. I had to have a look.

The girl at the desk, feeding details to another prospective client, gave me her partial attention and a share of the corporate smile. ‘Can I help you?’

‘You’ve got a place in the window. Cwmdrwen, in Llanolwen. Any chance of seeing it?’

Her hopeful mask sagged as she swivelled to run off the information sheet. Even in the current climate, this was a sale barely worth pursuing. She handed me the sheet. ‘You won’t be able to go in. It’s locked up.’

‘That’s all right. I just want to take a quick look.’

Twenty minutes later, I was in Llanolwen. Another twenty minutes, back and forth, and I still hadn’t found the cottage. ‘The lane to the property forks to the right shortly after the turning to Castell Mawr farm,’ read the blurb. ‘It is marked by a milestone.’ What milestone? In the end, I stopped at the Castell Mawr entrance and got out.

I was in a broad lay-by, neat verges hedged by clipped conifers, with a white gate onto a concrete track clearly signposted to Castell Mawr. So far so good. At the far end the lay-by petered out into rough grass and bramble under a cluster of trees, and I finally unearthed the milestone, buried in the tangle of last year’s weeds.

There was the lane, forking off through the undergrowth, slithering down into the woods. No tarmac, no concrete, no grit, no way my little Fiat could make it down there, so I walked. A pilgrimage into my family’s lost past.

I wouldn’t even have managed on foot if a tractor hadn’t been that way recently, crushing and severing brambles, leaving glutinous mounds of mud and squelching pools in their place. I nearly lost a trainer, but I battled on down into a secret wooded dell, concealed from the outside world.

So this was Cwmdrwen. Grandfather Owen's farm. 'Farm' to me, meant something like the farm near Dilys and Harry's retirement cottage in Buckinghamshire. Grand porch, big gables, immaculate lawns, enfolded in rolling wheat fields.

Not this. A cocoon of tangled trees, the smell of old mould and new wet grass, birdsong, and amid it all a small dark cottage.

Even in its heyday, it couldn't have been a serious farm. A smallholding maybe. According to the agent's details, it came with a yard, an overgrown garden and half an acre of woodland, that was all. A rusty gate, wired shut and engulfed in nettles and briar, giving a glimpse out onto rough empty pasture. Cwmdrwen's land had passed into other hands.

But not the house. I'd thought 'suitable for development' meant 'cute convertible out-buildings' but it turned out it actually meant 'totally derelict'. Barns, pigsty, cowshed, whatever they were, had crumbled into rubble. Sculptures of rusted iron stood in the cobbled yard, under heaps of leaf mould. Slates had poured from the cottage roof and the beams were caving in.

The sun came and went and I shuddered. The door was padlocked, to keep chance visitors safe, but I could peer in through a window, and shapes materialised in the darkness. I could see a scaffolding pole, topped with a paint-splashed plank, supporting the sagging ceiling. Tucked beside a massive fireplace with a rusting range, outsized worm-eaten steps wound up into darkness, barred by a plank and yellow warning tape.

I stared at the ancestral hearth. Eternal twilight, the

stench of decay. Dry rot, wet rot, woodworm, all decomposing life was there. Withered leaves rustled on the black flagstones. Cobwebs, thick as rope with dust, dangled from painted beams and draped across mouldering wallpaper.

Then I saw the dresser. It was huge and sad, embarrassed by my intrusion, caught in a state of undress, no glimmer of its former polish and shine. The doors hung askew, the shelves bowed. It must have been my Nan's dresser.

I could remember Nan. Almost. I was three when I'd seen her last. At least, I'd seen polished linoleum, enamel bed frames, drooping flowers, and my favourite teddy bear... and somewhere in the midst of it, a faded wisp, tired of life, drowning in the smell of sickness and disinfectant. But I'd known she was my grandmother, Aunt Dilys' sister. Flesh and blood. And once upon a time she'd lived in this place. She'd stood on those slabs, arranging pretty gilded china on that rack.

That same rack. I'd swear no one had touched the place since she'd left, when my grandfather died. The world had moved on, but not this cottage, not for sixty empty years.

I saw it as it must have been, bright, fresh, lived in, the yard swept clean, pinks and hollyhocks in the garden, John Owen's cows grazing in the pasture, John Owen's young family running in through that doorway, John Owen's wife, round-bellied with my mother, shelling peas in that kitchen.

If it had just been abandoned, why couldn't my mother have grown up here, inheriting it maybe, to bequeath to me?

I stood for a moment listening for the voices of the past, the echo of forgotten laughter. There was a sense of life and

hope continuing. Sun was filtering through naked branches onto celandines carpeting the steep valley side. Spring grass was beginning to glow green-gold in the meadow. In the back garden, a gnarled and mossy apple tree was struggling to produce a few sprigs of blossom. Still, after all those years, life welled up from this soil.

It was wrong that Nan had been forced to trade this for the crucifixion of cancer in the antiseptic loneliness of a hospital far away. All wrong.

I'd made my impulsive pilgrimage to the past. Curiosity satisfied. But Cwmdrwen wouldn't let go. It followed me back to Guildford, whispering, nagging. I really knew very little about that side of my family, despite my closeness to my mother and Aunt Dilys. On my father's side, the Petersons were full of interest; the Oxford don, the bi-plane pilot, the dipso daughter of the Raj. A lot of make-believe, but at least people had bothered to fantasise. The Owens were just farmers from West Wales, with a shopkeeper thrown in for good measure. Enough said. Except that now I wanted more, because I had seen the farm, humble as it was.

Arriving home past midnight, I unearthed my old school project. There I was, Sarah Peterson, in my own family tree, writ so large my brother Sam was squeezed into the margin. Plenty on the colourful Petersons, but on my mother's side just faceless names. When I was adding her parents, I hadn't equated Gwenllian Lewis with the Nan who had withered away when I was three. As for John Owen, he was just a Methuselah who had died, as old men did. I'd been given his date of birth, 1901, which had

seemed so impossibly distant I accepted his death without question. But thinking about it now, he couldn't have been so very old. He had died when my mother was a baby, so 1948? Not yet fifty. TB probably, or a farm accident.

On impulse I switched on my laptop to search. Amateur genealogist friends had assured me it was all online these days. It took a while to find my way around, but eventually death records popped up. So many John Owens, but only one in the right place, right age. John F. Owen, 1948, second quarter, aged 47. I could purchase the certificate if I wished. Why not? I had a week for the interest to fade, but I was still curious to see what the certificate said when the envelope finally dropped through my letterbox.

Staring out of the window, I pictured again that cottage, the place where my grandparents had loved and laughed and raised a family. An idyllic life cut short by this. This thing no one had told me, or even hinted at.

Cause of death, cerebral destruction by gunshot.

My grandfather had been shot.

2

1933

Not a bad day for a wedding, all things considered. The thunder has edged away over the hills, rain already drying on the slate steps of Beulah chapel, splashes of blue between the torn clouds. The wind has died down, but a gust snatches at a loose wisp of her hair as she emerges on his arm.

Mr and Mrs Owen. So simple, a little chapel solemnity, names scratched in a register, and Gwenllian Lewis has been raised to the status of married woman, absorbed with a word into a man's identity.

'Here we are, my good people.' The Reverend Harries is shepherding the bridal couple, a big strong man, straining his black cloth with solid flesh and certainty. He clasps their hands, Gwen's in a paternal way, John's in a supportive grip as he presents them to the world.

Surely she should feel something, sense some change in her bones?

Nothing. Nothing but the sharp sting of the storm's tail on her cheek.

A bride is supposed to feel happiness, but for Gwen that carries a suggestion of sin. Gratitude then. Yes, there can

be no impropriety in gratitude. She takes her John's arm, grateful that in this random lottery of mating she has won someone she can be proud of.

A tall man, features gaunt and bony as a prophet. She glances at his profile, sharp against the washed sky, jaw firm like a warrior, deep-set eyes steady as an eagle's fixed on prey. There is nothing weak or servile about him. Yes, she can be proud.

She feels trepidation too. All brides are allowed that, and it is no wonder that she should feel it now, gazing with slight myopia on the assembled worthies of Llanolwen. So many faces, and so few whom she knows. Just her sister Dilys, supporting her father.

Dilys, eight years Gwen's junior, girl still within the emerging woman, is surveying the crowd jauntily, appraising the matrons with disparagement, the young men with an occasional flash of brazen approval. Irrepressible Dilys. She turns her head, bobbed hair swinging, and meets her sister's eye. In an instant, her air of critical evaluation vanishes, subsumed beneath a warm smile. She reaches out to Gwen.

'Bless you, Gwen.' Unconditional warmth and reassurance.

But Gwen has no time to respond, for the Reverend Harries' hand is directing her. A young man with a camera is preparing for the official dignified memento of this day, and Gwen must be manoeuvred, steered into position on the steps, her new neighbours ranged around her.

Then introductions. John plays his part with dignity, saying, 'My wife,' as if it slips naturally from his tongue already. Smiling nervously, Gwen greets face after face,

desperate to remember names. Farmers, quarrymen, shopkeepers... so many to remember.

‘Good luck, John.’

‘God be with you, John.’

‘The Lord’s blessing on you, John.’

‘And you, Mrs Owen. You have a fine man there.’

Wishes and prayers for John, but congratulations for her. The luck, they are saying, is all hers.

‘Mrs George,’ says John. ‘Our neighbour at Castell Mawr.’ He presents Gwen for inspection. ‘My wife, Mrs Owen.’

Gwen will not easily forget Mrs George. Matriarch of the parish, taller than most of the men and built like Pembroke Castle, with something of the bullfrog about her, blooms nodding belligerently on her hat. She looms over Gwen, sharp eyes probing, unrelenting in their search for weakness.

‘Well, Mrs Owen, you are very welcome. Lewis, was it? Hm. Lewis of Penbryn.’ She speaks as if a heathen tribe had invaded the Christian sanctity of Llanolwen. Then she relents. ‘Henry Lewis, is it?’

She turns her bulk in the direction of Gwen’s father, where he leans on Dilys. Since his seizure, he has been all out of balance, left side drooping, mouth askew. Some of the younger people take him for a drunkard and sniff their disapproval.

But the older ones know better. Henry Lewis is a man of talent, hymn writer and crowned bard, once renowned throughout Wales, even if his fame has long faded. Gwen hears the murmur of a line from one of his best-known hymns, and the Reverend Harries is bending over him with respectful unction. Her father, who could once weave

words like a true druid, struggles to mouth a response. The minister beams understandingly.

Henry looks up to smile at his daughter, but his benediction only compounds her guilt. She should not be leaving him. It is wrong.

‘A name we know,’ says Mrs George, with grudging approval, nodding at the once great man before turning her scalpel gaze back on Gwen. ‘And you are his daughter.’

‘She is,’ says John.

Mrs George nods again, lips pinched. ‘From Howell’s Groceries, they tell me. Well, you will not find life so easy here, Mrs Owen. You’ll have no time for idle gossip over the counter with our John to care for and a farm to keep.’

‘I know it,’ says Gwen, fixing her smile with determination. It is no more than she had expected, this instant suspicion of the stranger. She could insist that she is well acquainted with hard work. For years, she has carried the Lewis household through the shame of bankruptcy, the struggles, bereavements, support to her father, mother to Dilys. And her mother’s family were farmers over in Hebron, so she is no stranger to farm work either.

Gwen says no more. They will learn her metal soon enough.

‘Hm,’ says Mrs George again. Behind her, her son William, stiff in his finery as John’s best man, smiles with provisional approval. An easy-going, friendly man, as far as she can tell, but even he is reserving judgement. He’ll wait to see if Gwen does well by her man and then he’ll smile whole-heartedly.

She draws a deep breath of relief as the Georges move

on, and another neighbour draws John away in earnest talk. More good wishes for him on this momentous day? She listens.

‘...twin calves and the beast won’t survive. It will be a sorry loss.’

Farming does not stop even for weddings.

Gwen’s arm relinquished, she looks round, searching for an ally, aware how completely she has already been wrenched from her former life.

She should have wed in Seion, her own chapel in Penbryn, with her kindly Reverend Phillips to bless her and her fellow townsfolk to see her on her way, but another bride had elected the same day to wed and Seion is occupied with her lace and lilies.

John had not thought a change of date appropriate. Besides, this is his chapel, his spiritual home. *Thy people shall be my people, thy God my God.* So here she stands, in Llanolwen, alone and quiet, in her simple grey frock, for Gwen is ever quiet. A biddable woman.

A dozen pairs of eyes meet hers, summing her up. She must not wilt.

‘My God, they’re a suspicious lot.’ Out of nowhere, Dilys is by her side, facing down the Llanolwen dames. ‘You’ll not get many laughs to the shilling out of them.’

‘Hush!’ Gwen bites down a laugh. ‘Don’t offend my new neighbours. These are John’s people.’

‘So they are,’ says Dilys, with stout diplomacy. She does not value John as his new wife does. She likes her admirers noisy and brash, not sober and stately, but then Dilys, with her strapping good looks and shameless confidence, will always have her pick.

For Gwen it has been another story. Few boisterous young men appreciated her frail gentility, and since her mother's death, family duties have taken her from the contest. Dilys might not give the likes of John Owen a second glance on her own account, but for her sister's sake she'll respect a man who has resolutely set his hand to the plough. If Gwen is content, so is Dilys.

It is Dilys who will now return to Penbryn to tend their father. Another coil of familiar guilt knots itself in Gwen's belly. Dilys, of all people, should not be condemned to nursing spinsterhood.

'Dilys, about Dad. I hope—'

'Hush, don't be daft, girl,' interrupts Dilys, happily. 'Don't you go worrying about us. Dad and I will be just fine.'

'Perhaps when I am settled...?' Could she bring her father to Llanolwen, to live with them? Would John permit it? She has not dared ask him yet, but soon perhaps.

'Don't fret yourself,' insists Dilys. 'You have enough to think about. And if any of these fine folk are a bother to you, you let me know and I'll sort them out.' She will too. She's already eyeing up one young man, prior to sorting him out, and he's returning the compliment.

'I'll do very well, thank you,' says Gwen with a smile, letting her sister take her arm.

'I've heard them muttering. Don't you let them think you are just some shop girl of no account.'

'Indeed not. I am Henry Lewis' daughter,' says Gwen, with self-deprecating mockery.

'Yes, let them remember that! And they owe you respect on your own account. I know they think John is such a mighty singer—'

‘Indeed he is!’

‘Yes, yes of course he is. But you have talents too. You tell them to ask at Seion who is the most accomplished harpist and pianist in the county. Tell them how Lady Richards complimented you, Christmas last.’

‘I’ll do no such thing.’ Gwen is watching a young girl, a toddler, hiding behind her mother’s skirts and summoning up courage to peep round at the new lady. When the child at last succeeds, Gwen smiles and the girl smiles back, a sunburst of innocence.

Dilys follows her gaze and the sisters exchange glances, an instant flash of understanding between them. Children. That is what marriage is about. The highest blessing. Neither gives voice to the sentimental thought, but they recognise it in each other, and Dilys squeezes Gwen’s hand.

The fulfilment of motherhood. Is that at last a flutter of happiness she feels?

But the day is too much of a whirlwind for her to dwell on it. John is returning to claim her and Dilys steps back with a reassuring nudge, Gwen’s bridal posy clasped in her white-gloved hand.

‘The trap is waiting,’ says John. His hand is firm on her elbow. No time for dawdling.

‘Wait,’ she pleads.

He relinquishes her reluctantly as she hurries across to receive one last kiss from her father.

‘You be good now, girl.’ Henry Lewis laughs. As if there could be the need to say that to his Gwen! He is pushing her away, reassuring her that all is well, that she is doing right in leaving him. Not for the world would he stand between his beloved daughter and the sanctified joy of

marriage. A marriage that will free her from their cramped and sorry life in Penbryn.

She kisses his hand. She must not linger. Her husband is waiting.

The monstrous Mrs George is guarding the gate. 'Well, John. Mrs Owen. You know where we are if you need anything. Mind you take care of him, girl.'

'Indeed yes,' the Reverend Harries booms. 'We must keep our finest baritone in full working order.'

Gwen smiles her compliance.

Outside in the road, the pony and trap are waiting. Someone has threaded poppies and blue ribbons into the harness. It is an unexpectedly frivolous touch and no one owns up to it, a gesture not altogether appropriate for this very quiet affair. There is no cake and tea. It would not be seemly, with her father being so infirm, John having so many responsibilities and money being so tight. It is more fitting that they just drive away, newlyweds, to Cwmdrwen.

John helps her into the trap, strong hands lifting her slight frame. Children in their Sunday best run around, being called to order by disapproving parents. The little girl who had found courage to smile at Gwen comes forward boldly, thrusting a handful of daisies up at her.

Gwen extends her hand to accept the miniscule gift. 'It's very pretty. Thank you.'

But John's hand reaches across to hers, pulling it back. The child looks into his face, her new-found courage drained, lip quivering. John's grip tightens on Gwen's arm, reminding her that all her care lies now with him. Obediently, she sinks back into her seat, heart pattering, eyes forward. The child runs back to her mother.

Panic. Sudden and overwhelming panic. It surges through Gwen. This is all too soon, everything has swept along too fast, she is not ready for this.

What does she want with marriage? She wants her old world back. She wants her old home, her two small rooms over the shop in Penbryn, surrounded by those who love her. She wants her work and her Sunday School duties, her quiet hours at the piano, and the greetings of everyday acquaintances. She was happy there, content with spinsterhood. Children – she could be aunt to Dilys’s brood, wouldn’t that be enough?

She should not be here. She must tell them it’s all a mistake. In the rush, she’s had no time to think.

But truthfully, there has been no rush. This wedding had been the sacred seal on a modestly temperate relationship, devoid of unseemly passion, arranged with calm decorum.

Her Reverend Phillips had set it all in motion, ferrying his pious music lovers from Seion to a mission concert at Pen-y-bont. The harp had been indifferent but the piano was passable and the singing excellent. Especially the baritone.

‘A splendid performance, MrOwen. Our community is honoured. And here is an admirer, Miss Lewis of our Seion Chapel. An accomplished musician of some renown in our own small circle, I might add.’

She had been passed to John, almost like a bag of sugar over the counter, and Gwen had not resisted. Why should she? She never nursed impossible dreams of true love and romance. If there was passion in her, it was in the secret response of her viscera to John’s splendid voice. Enough to justify her compliance, and after that she simply

succumbed to the absolute taciturn possessiveness with which he marked her out as his. Weekly visits, never rushed, never untimely or improper; Mr John Owen coming to pay his respects to Miss Lewis.

Until this burst of panic, she has remained spellbound by his stateliness, the righteous dignity of a farmer of unimpeachable standing. Why doubt now? This is her duty, the world approves; she must be calm.

Still the urge rushes through her veins to jump down and run. But it is too late. John clicks. The horse trots forward, the trap sways and Gwen clutches at her hat, her heartbeat thundering in her ears.

There is a muffled comment from someone in the watching crowd, laughter hastily shushed. 'Mind your tongue now, Huw Morris. No call for that sort of talk. This is a solemn occasion.'

Solemn and irreversible. She breathes deeply, determined to master her nerves. There is no going back. Cwmdrwen. So near, and yet so apart. The descent into the trees calms her, reminding her of her all-consuming duty. The past is over and this is to be her future.

She has never been here before. They courted at the Chapel or in Penbryn teashops. She gazes around, careful to mask any hint of disappointment. She had really expected no more. Though mercenary thoughts played no part in Gwen's decision to accept John, she had made a point of learning what she could of his situation, listening to the gossip of Penbryn tradesfolk.

A farm, but no treasure-trove. A precarious tenure that John's wastrel father Frank had nearly lost, squandering all in the Butcher's Arms and roaring home drunk each night

to beat his wife and children, letting his land go to ruin, the rent unpaid, eviction and penury looming. Thank a merciful God, said the gossips, for dropping him, dead drunk, under the wheels of a cart.

But the same merciful God has cast the son in a different mould. John is honoured, a man of iron control and moral probity, holding fast through the lean years since the war by working himself to his knees, wasting nothing, surviving against odds that would have crushed a lesser man. Day and night he has fought to be what his father was not. Every inch of him has rejected the demons that destroyed his childhood and his reward is universal respect. Poverty is no matter. Cwmderwen is his patrimony, however humble and now it will be hers.

Never mind the gloom. The sun will make all the difference. There is a cosy little farmstead down here under the overhanging trees with a cow byre, a barn creaking on ancient timbers and a pigsty, its solitary resident paying her cursory attention before returning to snuffling among the litter. Cobbled yard, pump over the well, a few chickens pecking around. The cottage is solid enough, if dark. Without the gleam of sunlight, it looks dour and forbidding, but as with the human frame, it is the heart within that counts.

As John hands her over the dark threshold, she is determined to approve. There are no luxuries, no extravagances, but she asks for none. The house is a man's house, without softness. A thin worn cushion on the hard high-backed chair by the range is the only concession to comfort in the kitchen. The small parlour is immaculate in perpetual readiness but lacks the dainty trimmings a

parlour needs. A religious text and a print of Queen Victoria, spotted by damp, are the only decorations.

She can add the woman's touch, the fresh curtains, embroidered fire screen, bright china on the heavy old dresser. No instrument. Unexpected, that. Even when her family had fallen on hard times, they had kept the old piano for her to play. Perhaps it can be brought here, if a cart can be spared. She has secretly dreamed of playing in her new home, accompanying John while he sings. Of course she is no concert performer like him, but it is an image she cherishes.

That may come, but she has other things to think about for now. There will be precious little time for music while she finds her feet. A new home, new duties, a new life. A husband. Wedded love. Marital obligations.

A stirring of panic again. There are things yet to face that she will not allow herself to think about for now. Be busy, girl.

Her trunk stands in the corner. John and his friend William came to fetch it yesterday. On the scrubbed table is a basket of provisions; tea, milk, butter, eggs, cheese, bacon, a loaf of bread.

Its brazen presence catches John by surprise and he frowns. Then his jaw relaxes, under orders. 'We have good neighbours. Mrs George and her daughters.' There is tight-lipped inhibition in his voice, clearly begrudging this gesture of good will. Is it on her behalf? Does he take the basket to imply that his neighbours doubt his new wife? They need not fear. She has coped for years.

'They are very kind.' There is a pride in her too, stiffening her resolve to conquer, sweeping away the last vestige of

that foolish panic. She will prove to the doubters that she is no mere burden on her man, without dowry or sense. With her help and management, Cwnderwen will continue to thrive and John will not be robbed of one iota of the respect he has laboured so hard to earn. She will be a good wife, care for him, bear his children. None will ever accuse her of falling short.

John is watching her intently. With love? That is beyond her expectations. With possessiveness, yes. Respect, she hopes. That is all she truly craves. 'Well, Mrs Owen,' he says. 'Will it do?'

'Mr Owen, it will do very well.' She removes her hat with a shy smile and puts the kettle on to boil.