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*The Meaning and Pronunciation  
of Cwmcysgod*

The place name Cwmcysgod means ‘shadow valley’ (cwm = valley, cysgod = shadow). It’s useful for the reader to note that the Welsh alphabet differs from the English alphabet. For example, ‘y’ and ‘w’ are vowels rather than consonants.

First syllable, ‘**cwm**’: hard ‘c’ as in the English word ‘can’; ‘wm’ similar to the short pronunciation of ‘oom’ as in ‘room’.

Second syllable, ‘**cys**’: hard ‘c’ as above; ‘ys’ similar to the English word ‘us’.

Third syllable, ‘**god**’: as in the English word ‘God’.

Equal emphasis is placed on each syllable.

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## *Glossary of Other Welsh Words*

**bach** – meaning ‘small’. A common term of endearment.

**Blodeuwedd** – the wife of Lleu Llaw Gyffes in Welsh mythology. She was made from flowers by the magicians Math and Gwydion.

**butt/butty** – slang for ‘mate’. It’s not a Welsh word, but is only used in Wales.

**cwch** – cuddle.

**cysga’n drwm** – a good-night wish: ‘sleep soundly’.

**Dadi** – Daddy.

**Diw/Duw** – God.

**hapus** – happy.

**nos da** – good night.

**twp** – stupid.

**ych y fi** – yuck.

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# I

## *Cwmcysgod, 2001*

WHEN THE GRASS CAUGHT, it blackened before they saw any flame, its colour consumed by invisible heat, leaving small patches of mangy, charred stubble. The young fire snaked its way low, fast and eager through the ankles of dry summer grass, rising and falling, clinging to the earth, pushed and pulled by the wind. The Clements brothers drew back on their haunches, tense and excited. Their eyes were pinned to the journey of the fire, watching its tracks weave and split into fractals of fragile destruction until, finally, it climaxed, many paths merging into one broad sweep of smoking, dancing, joyous consumption of hillside.

From the knots and crowns of the distant trees the ravens lifted, wings unfolding, black eyes straining, voices scratching against the sky. The brothers

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turned their backs to the fire and hurried away, delighting in their secret coup, their snatch at power.

They walked in silence, the touch of the sun on their skin a balm dispelling all hurt. Below them lay home, Cwmcysgod, where the furthest reach of the afternoon sun could only skim the slate roofs, leaving the depths of the village in permanent shadow.

The Clements brothers took the sheep's trail back down the mountain, a mud track so narrow they had to place one foot directly in front of the other, looking downward so as not to turn an ankle on the rocks and stones edging the way. This slowed pace dulled their elation and by the time they were back in the village they already felt they'd achieved nothing, as if the glory of their fire never was.

But, unwatched, their fire raced upslope and into the woods. It crept through the hazel copse to spread among the bastard children of pine trees felled long ago. Beds of pine needles sizzled and combusted, carrying the fire closer to the centre of the woods. There, an old woman lay sleeping, curled up in her stench on a bed of milk crates, tears of the past tracking down her weatherworn cheeks.

The wind dropped and the smoke sank downwards to surround the village, following the Clements brothers home. It rolled over the tops of the backyard walls. Entrails of grey smoke danced between the knickers and sheets hung out to dry, undoing the scrub of those eager to wash all of their secrets away.

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Inside the smallest of the terraces, at the smoke's furthest reach, Mary Bone walked from her hall into her kitchen, socked feet soundless on the lino.

'Can you smell burning?'

Her daughter, Catrin, slammed shut the kitchen drawer, catching the skin of her fingers in its edge. She inhaled a gasp of pain and turned to meet her mother's eyes.

'Seriously, can you smell it?' asked her mother, eyes narrowing as she considered the hierarchy of concern between creeping smoke and sneaking daughter.

The girl shrugged, stepped through the back door and nosed the air outside.

'Look up the slopes,' said Mary Bone. 'Black a-bloody-gain . . . those buggers up to their usual tricks. Well, someone'll phone the fire service, no doubt.'

'We're out of milk, Mam. I'll go fetch some.'

'Get me today's *Argus* too. I need some way of knowing what's going on in the world.' Mary put two one-pound coins into her daughter's palm and pinched her cheek as if she were still a four-year-old.

'Get off,' said Catrin, waving her away but gifting her mother a hint of a smile, nonetheless.

'You're still my girl, aren't you?'

'I'm sixteen, Mam, for God's sake.'

Mary Bone unpegged the washing from the line she'd strung up between two rusting poles. A plastic



peg shattered between her fingers and the spring propelled through the air and hit the corner of her eye.

Sixteen.

She dropped the sheets into the laundry basket and sat on the tin dustbin to watch the mountain burn on the other side of the cwm. Lighting a cigarette, she thought of her sister. In her mind, Rosalind's fingers also held a cigarette, but hers was surrounded by a flurry of men's hands, offering to light it. It had always been that way.

Mary dropped her smoked cigarette and watched the final half-centimetre burn to the tip. Rosalind closed her silver cigarette case.

In the corner shop, old Mrs Williams sat on a high stool behind the counter, wrapped in her all-season attire of cardigan and coat. Her tiny face peered out from the headscarf tied like a clamp beneath her chin.

Mary's daughter, Catrin, went to the fridge at the back of the shop and picked up the last pint of milk. Catrin was unaware that Daniel Clements had ducked to avoid her, had hidden himself small behind the shelves.

Mrs Williams fastened her eyes on the older brother, Shane, as he fingered the top-shelf porn she herself kept so well stocked. Watched him fall into pages of open legs and easy promises. These teenagers, taking up space in her shop. On their way to

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nowhere fast. Modern mothers were to blame: there'd not been a slapped arse in this valley for years.

The old woman muttered to herself, nodding her acknowledgement as Catrin paid for the milk and paper.

On her way out of the shop, Catrin had to squeeze past Shane Clements. She contracted her body to reduce her existence as much as possible, but still his eyes found her breasts. Up close, his clothes smelled of smoke. Catrin walked on to the cracked sticky tarmac and breathed out a shame that should not have been hers, before making her way uphill and home.

Dai Bevel, tight against his front-garden gate, watched Catrin walk by, as an owl might watch a vole, body motionless, talons ready, head turning on its axis.

'You've got the look of Rosalind Bone,' he said, 'with none of the beauty.'

It's what he always said when he saw her. Dai bloody Bevel.

At six o'clock, fire engines appeared from the B-road, sounding their sirens. A rack of front doors opened up and down the half mile of Main Street. On the side streets too, folk stepped out over their terraced-house thresholds, eager for excitement. Arms knotted across their chests, necks craned. They shook their heads at those lowlife Clements

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boys and hurried back inside, closing their doors to lay supper tables, turn on televisions or sip the sanctuary found in a cup of tea. Mary Bone did not step into the street. She was sitting on the backyard bin, lighting another cigarette.

Catrin put the milk in the fridge and took a peek at the photograph hidden in the drawer.

What it must be, to look like that.

Daylight dimmed and glow-worm headlights pulsed along the mountain road. Dusk then darkness crept over the capped coal tip of Cwmcysgod, spilling over the terraces and blackening the brick and steel bones of the derelict factory. Night swallowed the village and the valley and, last of all, the sky up above. On Main Street, low-lit in amber, yet another Saturday night played itself out. Feet, young and old, trotted in and out of the pubs: the Mitre for the bingo, the Lamb for karaoke. One thousand souls retracing the footsteps of their nights and weeks and years before. Rubbing the ruts of their lives into the kerbs and doorsteps.

In his small kitchen, Dai Bevel stood at the gas cooker, hips aching, heating up milk in the nightly hope of inducing sleep. ‘Cysga’n drwm’ as his mother used to say before locking him into his room at night.

The Clements boys lingered in the darkness outside their own back door, peering through the gap in the curtains, waiting for their mother to be subdued

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