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I

The air in the small Welsh town was sweet with birdsong and the wide black Dee glittered under the old stone bridge as the steam train pulled out of the station, trailing smoke like speech bubbles. It was mid-April and in one of the white houses that made up Little Green Street, forty-five-year-old Tad Jones was preparing to hold a meeting.

Tad's given name was Thomas Kelly Jones, but a long time ago when he was a young poet who took himself seriously he had chosen Tad as his pen name, seeing himself grandly as a father of words. Although to begin with it was a source of gentle mockery, Tad became the name he was known by to everyone, even his wife.

Tad wanted to hold the meeting to discuss plans for a Coronation party in the street on the second day of June. He had decided to take his neighbours into the dining room, because it seemed to him to be more official to sit around a mahogany table, and he had placed a writing pad at the head of it for notes. The notepad also contained his inaugural speech as self-appointed chairman of the Coronation Party Committee. Restlessly, he straightened his tie, smoothed his springy dark hair flat as best he could, and looked at the time. 'They're late,' he said anxiously to Helen, his English wife, eight years younger than him.

She slid her headscarf from her fine, fair hair, took off

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her floral apron and folded it carefully. ‘No, your watch is fast, Tad,’ she reminded him fondly.

It was true, Tad always kept his watch five minutes fast so he could be sure he was never late for anything. But as a result he was quietly resentful of anyone not on Tad time – in other words, the rest of Wales.

Tad put his flat cap over his dark wild hair and went outside and down the path to stand on the pavement, looking for signs of life behind the net curtains in the windows and resisting the urge to check the time again.

He tucked his hands in his pockets, rolled his weight to and fro on the balls of his feet. It was a lovely afternoon and the sky was a cool, pale blue, smudged with cloud. His gaze drifted along the curve of green hills that surrounded the town, and settled on the grey ruins of Crow Castle that stood guard over it. The history that castle had seen! And now history was being made again. ‘The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second,’ he said aloud in wonderment, feeling the majestic words on his tongue.

‘What’s that now?’ asked a stern voice behind him, startling him. ‘Talking to yourself, Tad? That’s a bad sign.’

It was Emlyn Kremlin, his neighbour from across the road, a staunch socialist with a Teddy Boy quiff, which Emlyn claimed was natural because he’d inherited a cowlick from his father. As his father had gone bald in his early twenties there was no one to say otherwise.

‘Come on in, Emlyn! I was beginning to wonder if everyone had forgotten about it.’

‘Why would you think that? I’m three minutes early, I think you’ll find.’

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‘Is your mother coming?’

‘No, she asked me to tell you sorry, she doesn’t feel up to it. But really she just doesn’t want to come.’

Emlyn’s mother, Old Mrs Hughes, was known as a straight talker who had got increasingly eccentric in her old age. She lived next door to Emlyn and would, Tad thought regretfully, at least have made up numbers if no one else showed up. Mrs Evans two doors down had said that while she was very interested in the party, with five children to look after she had enough on her hands and couldn’t possibly get involved.

He glanced down the quiet road one last time, and said, ‘You’d better come on in then.’

No sooner had they sat down than there was a knock at the door and to Tad’s relief he heard Harry and Mai Lloyd, his immediate neighbours, greeting Helen in the kitchen. Harry was a big man whose small face rested comfortably on the pillows of his neck. His wife, Mai, always wore her brown hair twisted in a neat bun and studied local history, or that’s how she liked to describe it. She knew everything about everybody, and some things that they didn’t even know about themselves.

‘Come in, come in!’ Tad said, pleased to see them. ‘Put your trilby on the dresser, Harry. That just leaves Nancy still to come.’

The neighbours all glanced at each other quickly before looking away.

Nancy was a law unto herself, but she was Helen’s closest friend in Little Green Street; blonde and sexy in a slightly dishevelled way, she enjoyed life tremendously – a little too much at times, Tad feared. But as she was younger

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than they were, Helen had insisted she be invited onto the committee to add some glamour.

Nancy arrived just as Helen was putting the tea tray on the table. She had styled her blonde hair in big curls around her face, like Marilyn Monroe, and she was wearing a red check shirt-dress like a cowgirl from a Western.

‘Perfect timing!’ she said, congratulating herself with a smile.

‘Take a seat,’ Tad said, eager to get started. He worried that Nancy was a bad influence on Helen. Putting the thought aside, he opened his notepad and started the meeting. He kicked things off by establishing that the Coronation Party in Little Green Street was his idea and on account of that, he felt he should be the one to chair the committee. Also, it *was* his house after all, but he left that out.

‘Nonsense,’ Emlyn Kremlin replied immediately, ‘it’s not your idea. Every street in the country is having a Coronation Party. Is it mostly for the children, are you thinking?’

‘Well, yes, it’s an important occasion for them,’ Tad said.

‘In that case, I’m not interested, as I haven’t got any,’ Emlyn said matter-of-factly, getting to his feet.

‘It’s not *just* for the children,’ Tad said quickly, bearing in mind his daughter Lauren was going on fifteen, ‘it’s for all of us, to celebrate this great moment in the history of the British Isles.’

‘Fair enough.’

As Emlyn sat down again, Tad glanced at his notes. He decided to carry on with his speech regardless, because he’d been practising it at the end of the garden where

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Helen couldn't hear him and he didn't want it to go to waste. He liked to think of himself as an orator, but she wasn't so sure.

He took out his wallet and extracted a newspaper clipping from *The Times*. Once he'd smoothed it flat on the table, he announced, 'I'm going to start by reading these words of Churchill's about the young Queen. It's a speech he made in the Commons, which I feel sums up the mood of all of us around this table.' He cleared his throat. "'A fair, a youthful figure, a Princess, wife and mother, is heir to our traditions and glories. She is also air to our united strength and loyalty. She comes to the throne at a time when tormented mankind stands uncertainly poised between catastrophe and a golden age. Let us hope and pray that the accession of Queen Elizabeth II may be the brightening salvation of the human scene. (Cheers.)'"

'Hear, hear.'

'What do mean, "Cheers"?' Emlyn asked.

Tad looked at the cutting more closely. 'That's just what it says here. Cheers, in brackets. That's what the members of the House of Commons did when they heard the speech. To be honest, I expected a few cheers from around the table.'

'Hurrah!' Emlyn said obligingly with a grin.

Tad continued, 'It was Lloyd George himself who gave me the idea for a party.'

Harry roared with laughter and slapped the table. 'Lloyd George? Come off it, Tad.'

Tad backtracked. 'I mean Major Gwilym Lloyd George, the Minister of Food.'

'Oh, Gwilym, was it? Then why didn't you say so?'

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‘I would hardly mean David Lloyd George, would I, Harry? Unless it was a seance.’

Emlyn was looking at Tad suspiciously. ‘And when did Major Lloyd George confide in you? You kept that quiet.’

Tad could feel his wife’s cool gaze settle on him. She could see right through him which disconcerted him at times.

‘I heard him on the wireless,’ he admitted. ‘He was talking about ration concessions for Coronation parties. An extra meat allowance.’

Harry perked up. ‘Forget meat, let’s have chocolate cake,’ he said.

‘And sherry,’ Nancy suggested, nudging Helen with her elbow, ‘as it’s a party.’

‘No, we’re not having drink,’ Mai said disapprovingly. ‘People will get up to all sorts!’

‘We have to have a glass of something,’ Nancy said, ‘for the royal toast.’

‘It’s called the loyal toast,’ Helen said automatically.

‘What? Why isn’t it a royal toast?’

‘Because we’re showing our loyalty to the Queen.’

‘We could just as easily show our loyalty with tea,’ Mai argued.

‘You can’t toast Her Majesty with *tea*,’ Emlyn said scornfully, siding with Nancy. ‘It’s better not to toast her at all.’

Tad raked his fingers through his dark wiry hair and puffed out his cheeks. Emlyn had a point. He felt torn, which was unlike him, as he normally knew his own mind. He was veering from one side of the argument to the other. He did very much like the idea of a loyal toast, and

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being the one to propose it. But he didn't want Coronation Day to end in a rumpus, which it was likely to if there was alcohol involved. He turned the page in his notebook, wrote down *toast/tea?* and put his pen down.

'And we want singing,' Emlyn said.

'Singing goes without saying, Emlyn. I was getting to that. I think we should ask the choir to come and sing the national anthem, all five verses. And whoever wants to stay afterwards can join us for a bite to eat.' Tad was choir-master and, seeing Harry frown, he added: 'Maybe your Rhiannon would play "God Save the Queen" on the harp, to accompany the choir?'

That settled it for Harry, although chocolate cake alone would have done it, and he clapped his hands together. 'Rest assured.'

'We could buy Union Jacks and hang them in our windows,' Helen said. 'They'd look pretty and so patriotic, going all the way down the street.'

Tad caught Helen's eye and she smiled coolly back at him, resting her cheek in her palm and playing with her pearl earring, a habit of hers. She hadn't mentioned this idea to him beforehand and he wondered why. Sometimes she made him feel like a boy, which wasn't always a good thing. He could look at his wife for long moments at a time, with her fair hair, her slender figure and her distant gaze, and have absolutely no idea what she was thinking, whereas he was the very opposite – he tried never to let any of his thoughts go unspoken.

Suddenly, watching her curl a strand of fair hair around her ear, he forgot about his speech. He wanted more than anything to make her laugh.

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She hadn't laughed much since her beloved father was suddenly taken ill fifteen months earlier. He had died before she could get to her parents' home in London. The fact she'd not been there with him to say goodbye weighed heavily on her and the period of national mourning for the death of King George VI on the same day had been overshadowed for Helen by her own private grief.

Tad had done his best to support her, but it seemed as if a gulf had grown between them and she remained elusive, a little out of reach.

But she'd also seen the young Queen's response as a yardstick for her own sorrow, and now with the Coronation only six weeks away, she'd told Tad just that morning that she too was going to look to the future with courage.

He felt a rush of love for her. He knew that when she was growing up in London her family enjoyed celebrating state occasions, that they had meant a lot to her and her family when her father was alive, and while this party was for the whole street to enjoy, in his heart it was mostly for her. 'Yes, of course we shall have flags in our windows,' he declared warmly. 'Good idea!'

Helen gave a small smile and nodded pointedly at his notebook. He picked up his pen and wrote it down.

'We could wear fancy dress,' Nancy said suddenly. 'I could dress up as the Queen, and wear a crown and sash and a slinky gown.' She stood up and posed, one hand on her hip.

'Yes! Let's all dress up,' Emlyn said, his eyes lighting up at the thought of Nancy's gown. He also had a marvellous idea of his own. 'And I'll go as a—'

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Mai interrupted. 'A slinky gown, Nancy? It's a coronation, not a beauty pageant!' She disliked beauty pageants almost as much as alcohol. 'I could probably fit into my lace wedding dress again, I've lost so much weight with rationing. It's white lace, very royal-looking and not slinky at all. It belonged to Harry's mother, you know. I'd make a purple crown, to denote royalty.'

'Loyalty you mean, Mai,' Nancy corrected.

Tad blinked and scratched the back of his neck doubtfully – the only queen that Mai looked like was Queen Victoria.

'Oh!' Helen said with a start, 'I forgot about the tea!' She took off the tea cosy, knitted from scraps of brightly coloured wool by Old Mrs Hughes, and rested her palm against the china pot. 'It's not so hot now. I'll make a fresh one.'

'I'll help you,' Nancy said quickly, scraping back her chair.

Tad watched them leave the room. He heard them laughing in the kitchen. Helen sounded happy and Tad was pleased they were getting involved in the Coronation Party. It was what he'd hoped for. A celebration was a source of joy.

In the interlude, Harry took a cigar out of its case, ran it under his nose to savour the aroma and leant back in his chair with a deep satisfaction as though all the problems of the world had been solved.

Emlyn lit a cigarette and picked a flake of tobacco off his tongue.

Mai stood up and poured milk into the bone china cups. She had an ulterior motive for being helpful because

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Helen was proud of the tea service and Mai wasn't quite sure whether it was quality or not. She held the last cup to the light before pouring the milk, and then she turned it upside down and read the stamp. 'Royal Crown Derby,' she said. 'Fancy!'

'Loyal Crown Derby, you mean,' Emlyn added with a smile, looking towards the kitchen as he heard Nancy's delicious laugh.

When Nancy had first come to the town to visit her daughter Flora, an evacuee staying with Old Mrs Hughes and Emlyn back in the days when they had the farm, there had been a general expectation that she would fall for Emlyn, a single man. It was assumed that her husband had been killed in the war, although this remained unverified by Mai even after some serious probing, because Nancy told her firmly that she never talked about him.

In the end, despite high hopes from the rest of the town, the romantic relationship between Emlyn and Nancy had never got off the ground, but they both knew perfectly well about the gossip that had surrounded them and gently teased each other about it.

Helen came back from the kitchen with the fresh teapot, followed by Nancy, and poured the tea. Harry rested his cigar in the ashtray and Emlyn stubbed out his cigarette.

Once the sugar bowl had been passed round, and the hot tea stirred, blown on and sipped, they were ready to continue with their plans.

'We haven't talked about the practicalities,' Harry pointed out. 'We'll need tables and chairs for everyone.'

'We could borrow them from the church hall,' Mai suggested.

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‘Mai, it’s a long way to carry them from the church to here,’ Emlyn warned. ‘And Harry’s got his knees. We’ve got our own tables and chairs,’ he pointed out sensibly. ‘We can bring them out for the tea party and take them home at the end of the day. Same with plates and silverware. Have you written that down, Tad? Don’t forget to say it was my idea. I don’t want you taking all the credit.’

As Tad put his teacup down and reached for his pen, it occurred to him belatedly that he should have appointed a minutes secretary. It took him a few moments to get it all down.

‘And now to the question of food,’ he said. ‘I propose that we each bring enough for ourselves and a bit extra to share. And Harry, you’ll have to bring bigger portions than the rest of us. We know your appetite.’

Tad meant this perfectly seriously, but everyone laughed.

Harry patted his stomach fondly and agreed. ‘Do you hear that, Mai? Bigger portions.’

Mai tossed her head and a hair grip fell out of her bun. She felt for it on the chair and tucked it back in. ‘You and your stomach, Harry,’ she said.

‘We could make bunting, to decorate the street,’ Nancy suggested. ‘We’ve all got sewing machines. Flora will help, I know she will. She’s good at needlework.’

‘Splendid!’ Tad said, jotting down *Bunting*. He wondered about his own daughter, who was more dreamy than practical, and looked at his wife. ‘What will Lauren do to help, do you think?’

‘She’ll write a poem about it, I expect,’ Helen said with a wry smile. ‘I suppose she could make food for the children, like those little party snacks from the Ministry of

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Food leaflets. I kept them all, I had a feeling they'd come in useful one day.'

'Wonderful! Mai? How about your Rhiannon?'

'If Rhiannon's playing the harp for the choir, I should think that's enough of a contribution, don't you?' Mai said briskly, folding her arms. 'She's got practising to do. She hasn't got time for fun.' She and Harry had great ambitions for Rhiannon on the music front and they wouldn't let anything get in the way of parental pride, especially not a party.

'Of course, of course, quite right,' Tad agreed soothingly. As a music teacher, he applauded single-mindedness where practising was concerned.

'Anyway, what about Garth?' Mai asked him. 'You haven't mentioned him. He ought to have something to do. He's always out with our girls.'

Garth lived with his widowed mother at the bottom of Little Green Street. When his father drowned whilst fishing, his mother Barbara became a recluse and refused to leave the house for any reason, so Garth did the shopping, the gardening and the outside windows and generally looked after himself as unobtrusively as possible.

Tad was poised with his pen above his notepad and looked around the mahogany table, eyebrows raised in query. 'Any suggestions for a job for Garth?'

'I think Garth's got enough on his plate as it is,' Nancy said, looking in her handbag. She took her gilt powder compact out, opened it with a click and studied herself in the mirror for a moment before tucking a curl of blonde hair behind her ear. 'Don't you, Mai?' She said it so sweetly and kindly that it couldn't really be taken as criticism.

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And yet . . . Mai opened her mouth to argue, and changed her mind.

Harry glanced at his pocket-watch. 'Look at that! It's nearly time for supper!'

Emlyn laid his hands flat on the table. He looked round at his neighbours. 'Haven't we got a lot done! Well, now that that's all sorted, I'll be off,' he said, reaching for his scarf. 'I've got to see a man about a dog. Same time next week, Tad?'

'Hasn't time flown!' Despite his disappointment the meeting was ending already, Tad felt a burst of organisational satisfaction at the way it had gone. 'I hereby bring the proceedings to a close!'

Everyone else got up too, and after seeing his guests to the door, Tad said to his wife, 'I don't know, Helen, they're a handful, I can tell you,' but he looked very happy nevertheless.

It was true, they hadn't resolved everything, but it didn't matter. There was going to be a next time.

Fourteen-year-olds Lauren, Flora and Rhiannon were sitting on the ancient stone bridge, one of the Seven Wonders of Wales, dangling their legs over the thrilling, roaring, foamy black waters of the River Dee, while red-headed Garth was towering above them on the bridge wall, one hand holding tightly on to the black lamp-post to steady himself, acting as lookout for signs of life from Lauren's house.

Suddenly he had news. 'They're leaving! The door's opening! I can see Emlyn Kremlin talking to your mam, Flora.'

'How do they look?' Lauren asked anxiously, because she'd heard Tad planning his Coronation Party speech down the garden by the rhubarb and she had been hoping, for his sake, it would go well.

'Hard to tell.' Garth shielded his eyes from the sun. 'They just look normal to me,' he said. 'Harry's following them, Rhiannon. He's smoking his cigar and saying something to Tad. Now Mai's waving to Helen.'

'Yikes! I'm supposed to be doing music practice, she's going to kill me,' Rhiannon said. 'Help me off, Garth, will you?'

Garth didn't need to be asked twice. He jumped down onto the safety of the pavement and held his arms out to catch her. Rhiannon grabbed his hand and shrieked,

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blinded by a flurry of her long brown hair as she stumbled against him.

‘Garth! I nearly fell in then!’

‘It’s all right, I would have dived in and saved you,’ he said boldly.

She laughed. ‘Would you?’

‘Like a shot!’

‘Liar!’ Flora was kicking her legs against the bridge wall, looking down at the tumbling river, holding her blonde hair away from her face. ‘Have you ever jumped in, Garth?’ she asked mischievously.

It was something that the boys did in the summer holidays, standing above the river daring each other, scared to death, choosing their spot carefully so as to drop with a splash into the deep glossy waters, to emerge cold, wet and elated before climbing up the rocky bank to pavement level and joining the dripping, shivering, thrilling queue to do it again.

Garth had a visceral fear of drowning, which was a good reason for not doing it. For a moment his face tightened, but then he said, ‘No, but I’m going to one day.’

‘I wouldn’t,’ Rhiannon said firmly. ‘I’m scared of depths. I’m all right with heights, though, I can look up at things for ages and it doesn’t bother me.’ She laughed at her own joke. ‘I’d better go home before I get into trouble.’

‘Your parents treat you like a little girl,’ Flora said. She swung her legs around and brushed her blue skirt down. ‘You should ignore them.’

Rhiannon bit her lip. ‘It’s all right for you, Flora. Your mam’s easy-going.’

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‘We’ll walk back with you. I want to find out what’s happening.’ Lauren sympathised with Rhiannon. Tad wasn’t as strict as Harry and Mai, but he was definitely a lot stricter than Flora’s mother Nancy, who was glamorous and full of fun and who thought the most important thing in life was to be happy.

Lauren would desperately like to be a rebel like Flora. She only behaved herself because she didn’t want to upset her parents, especially not now. Her mother had been in mourning for a year and a half and it seemed to have lasted for ever. She hadn’t said anything, nor cried much at all, but it was like seeing the reflection of a candle in a mirror – she’d lost her brightness.

Lauren knew it was for her that Tad wanted the Coronation Party to be such a success, so that, like the Queen, her mother could put her grief behind her and have something wonderful to think about instead. He wanted her to remember the Coronation with joy, in the same way as the Queen would remember her special day. ‘What will we wear to the party?’ she asked suddenly.

‘I’m going to wear red, white and blue,’ Flora said. ‘It’s patriotic.’

‘I’ll do the same,’ Lauren said quickly.

‘Me too,’ Rhiannon said.

‘What about me? I haven’t got anything red or blue,’ Garth said. ‘Only my school shirt is white.’

‘There you go! That’s a start, Garth! You just need a bit of red and blue and you’re all set.’ Rhiannon was always kind.

They walked with Rhiannon back towards her home in Little Green Street so that she could practise her music,

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and she fluttered her fingers in the air to limber them up and get them in the mood.

Nancy was coming towards them in her red check dress, swinging her handbag in the crook of her elbow. She fluttered her fingers back at Rhiannon. 'The Coronation Party is on, and I'm going as the Queen,' she announced as she passed them.

Why hadn't they thought of that?

'What is my mam going as?' Rhiannon asked, but Nancy didn't turn round.

There was a quick way to find out, as they were nearly home, so they said goodbye and arranged to meet later.

Lauren's parents were in the kitchen when she arrived home. Her mother was at the sink, peeling potatoes in her apron, and Tad was hunched over the table writing up his notes on the meeting.

Her mother turned and smiled, and Lauren's heart melted as she put her arms around her from behind, and kissed her shoulder. Her mother felt warm under her cotton shirt. 'We just saw Nancy and she says she's dressing as the Queen.'

'So is Mai, as long as she can get into her mother-in-law's wedding dress.' Helen's eyes gleamed with amusement. 'You know Mai. She feels hers looks more royal.'

Lauren grinned. 'Are we all supposed to be going as queens? We were going to wear red, white and blue, to be patriotic. Are you going as the Queen, too?' Helen rinsed the potatoes in the pan and left the peel in the colander, ready for the compost heap. As she dried her hands, she turned to Tad almost shyly. 'I'm wearing my bluebell-blue

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dress,' she said, and as she caught his eye she blushed, as if he wasn't her husband of many years but someone that she had only just realised she'd fallen for.

'You look beautiful in that dress,' Lauren said.

'It goes with your eyes.' As Tad looked at his wife, his serious face lit up, as if he was seeing an awe-inspiring and life-changing vision. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words didn't come out – it seemed to Lauren that his loving feelings came soaring out of his brown eyes instead.

Embarrassed by the display of affection between her parents, Lauren tried to lighten the tone. 'What else did you decide on?' she asked.

Tad checked his notepad. 'Food, music and bunting, and I'm going to hand out flyers to everyone in the street, on behalf of the committee. I've nominated myself to do it.' His dark wiry hair was standing on end, as if he'd had too much excitement.

Worst luck, Lauren had inherited that hair, which went mad if she was caught in the rain. People would look at her in surprise when she tried to straighten it and tell her they wished they had naturally curly hair, but she knew for a fact they wouldn't appreciate it if they did.

'Anything else?' she asked hopefully.

'We're having Union Jacks in all the windows,' her mother said.

'That was your mother's idea, credit where credit's due,' Tad said fondly. 'On Coronation Day itself, the choir's going to come and sing the national anthem, all five verses, and we'll have the loyal toast, with tea or sherry, and then

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whoever wants to can join us for the party. You're going to help with the children's food.'

'Okay! I can't wait!' Remembering she had school work to do, Lauren picked up her satchel. 'I'm going to get on with my geography,' she said, and hurried upstairs to sit on her bed with a feeling of relief as she took it all in.

Her mother only wore her favourite blue dress on very special occasions, and she hadn't put it on since her father died.

Lauren saw it as a sign that things were good again and her mother was going to be happy.

She had been sad herself when her grandad died, but her sadness seemed neatly packaged in the corner of her thoughts where she would only come across it now and then. For instance, when she received a birthday card containing a ten-shilling note with *Love from Grandma* on it, seeing just one name instead of two had made the tears come out of nowhere, and they smudged the handwriting and her mother kissed her head and gave her Tad's blotter to dry the card with.

But her mother's sadness had been too big to be tucked in the corner. It took up all the space in her mind so there wasn't much room for anything else, especially not for loving them. And she and her father had got used to that.

Lauren had tried to understand how she was feeling. At night, lying in bed with the light off and her whole room turned to grey, she'd imagined what life would be like without Tad in it, without his energy, his passion and his words. It was like looking into a bottomless pit, nothing

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there but space, and it terrified her so much that she had to switch the light on again and read an ancient Enid Blyton to calm herself down.

She went over the scene in the kitchen and mention of the bluebell-blue dress. Mum's feeling better, she thought. Her prayers had been answered and the answer seemed like a beautiful gift. She clasped her hands under her chin and closed her eyes and said a fervent thank you to God.

Emlyn hadn't gone straight home after the meeting. He headed to his mother's house first because he'd been struck by a marvellous idea for a staggering costume for the Coronation Party, but he would need her help.

He was greeted at the gate by his mother's Pembroke-shire corgi, Waffles. The little dog was short enough for a cow's kick to pass right over his head, and dutiful enough to ensure the herd was kept together at all times. The dog was the last evidence of the family's farming days, and the herding instinct was in his veins to an infinite degree.

These days, for want of cows, Waffles kept the residents of Little Green Street together by going from house to house to check on their whereabouts, probably in his working dog's mind regretting the fact that they were not half as intelligent as the animals he was used to, and nothing like as obedient.

Emlyn's mother, Old Mrs Hughes, was sitting in her parlour, bathed in the mellow glow of polished horse brasses. She was knitting a hat from brightly coloured scraps of wool, some of which had found their way into her grey hair, where they dangled like ribbons.

'Well, Emlyn, is it going ahead?' she asked him doubtfully.

Emlyn glanced in passing at his reflection in her ornate brass mirror and smoothed back his dark quiff. He was, if

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truth be told, the best-looking man in the street. 'It is indeed,' he confirmed. 'Tad tried to make a speech, to convince us, even though we were convinced already. Said he's got the idea from Lloyd George.'

'No!' Old Mrs Hughes exclaimed. 'I thought he was dead long ago!'

'Not him, his second son, Gwilym.'

'Gwilym? Why didn't you say?'

'I'm just telling you what Tad said.'

'Lloyd George, indeed,' Old Mrs Hughes scoffed. 'Tad's too clever, sometimes.'

Emlyn felt his mother had put her finger on it. 'It's going to be fancy dress,' he added. 'Nancy's going as the Queen.'

'Heavens! I don't think the Queen would like that. Sunday best is good enough for anyone.'

Emlyn himself had no objections to seeing Nancy clothed in the slinky gown of his imagination, and as the Queen was busy herself on that day he didn't think she would mind either.

'Oh, I don't know. I think it's a tribute to enter into the pomp and ceremony of the occasion. Where's your button box?'

Old Mrs Hughes stopped knitting with her needles in mid-air as though bracing herself for a shock and looked at him suspiciously. 'What are you up to, Emlyn Hughes?'

'I'll tell you what I'm up to. I'm going as a Cockney Pearly King, if we've got enough buttons.'

Old Mrs Hughes's puffy eyes widened. 'That *is* a good idea. The button box is in my sewing cabinet. Fetch it to me, Em.'

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Emlyn opened the cabinet and took out the button box, which had a vaulted wooden lid like a small treasure chest and was gratifyingly heavy.

His mother put her knitting to one side and placed the box on her lap. She unfastened the latch and opened the lid.

Emlyn had never had cause to look in the button box before but he was impressed by the orderly interior which was divided into sections, depending on size and colour. Even better, what gladdened his heart was that by far the bigger portion of the box was taken up with mother-of-pearl shirt buttons which women in the Hughes family had cut off diligently and saved for just an occasion such as this.

The idea of being a Pearly King had come to him in Tad's dining room at the committee meeting in a flash of inspiration.

'How many buttons do you need?' Old Mrs Hughes asked him.

'All of them, I should think.'

'Dew! That many? That will be some sewing, Emlyn.'

Emlyn had had the good fortune of seeing a Pearly King up close in London when he went to pay his respects at the King's funeral the previous year. It was a rainy day and he had walked from Euston to King's Cross Station to join the crowds for the arrival of the royal train.

That day, Euston Road had bloomed with umbrellas that flourished in the intermittent rain like fungi, and Emlyn had smoked to pass the time, and now and again looked idly up at the office windows with people's faces pressed to the glass, and watched workmen perch precariously on ladders, fighting off all boarders with curses and

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threats. But time and again, with nothing to do but wait, no matter where Emlyn looked it was the Pearly King that drew his eye.

The Pearly King was wearing a pearly hat covered in white ostrich plumes, and a costume covered in pearl buttons. Emlyn had eased himself sideways through the crowd to get a closer look at the man's finery, and saw that the mother-of-pearl buttons were arranged across the back of his jacket in the design of an ornate crown, with embellishments.

A subdued murmur had run through the crowd and he hurriedly put out his cigarette. As the cortege approached, Emlyn held his breath. He saw the royal crown glittering poignantly in the rain on top of the flag-draped coffin, then the solemn figures of the Duke of Gloucester and the Duke of Edinburgh following the carriage, both wearing dark coats and carrying black silk hats.

Immediately the gun carriage drew level, the Pearly King took his cap off with a dramatic flourish and held it over his heart, the gesture so sincere yet so extravagant that in that moment Emlyn, despite being a chapel-goer, would have killed to have been him. He had never coveted anything so much in his life as that outfit. His own black coat and the trilby pressed to his heart seemed a very sorry affair in comparison.

Now, looking at his mother's button box, it seemed to him that the first step before anything else was to have a design. Apart from the crown, he would like something additional to represent Wales. His immediate thought was to have a red dragon, but that would be a challenge created out of white pearl buttons, so a daffodil or leek might

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be better. He could even have both, one either side of the crown.

Once he'd created the design, he would put his mind to a hat. 'Before I go, I don't suppose you have any ostrich feathers?' he asked his mother hopefully, as if it was the kind of thing that people sometimes had hanging around the house that you didn't notice until you wanted them.

But to his surprise, his mother said that she was fairly sure she had got some somewhere, and she would keep an eye out for them.

That sorted, Emlyn clapped his hands together. 'Right then,' he said cheerfully, getting to his feet, 'the sooner we get started, the better,' and he went to his own house to unearth his funeral suit.

Harry Lloyd also had an idea of what he would wear on the day.

He had an enduring memory of the previous coronation, that of King George VI, which had taken place in 1937 when he was twenty-nine years of age and Mai and he were just married. He and his parents had been sitting in the kitchen, listening to the commentary on the radio, when he heard the 'Crown Imperial' march for the first time. Sitting with his elbows on the Formica table, Harry had unexpectedly found himself moved to tears by the music. The triumph and the fanfare had swept him up into a different world, and he had leapt to his feet, roused into action. Unable to contain himself, he had thrown himself into conducting the orchestra with his teaspoon.

His parents had been startled – the cups rattled in their saucers, his mother patted her heart to get it going again

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and his father told him sharply to stop playing the fool, but the memory thrilled him even now.

The man in charge of the orchestral music, Adrian Boult, came from Chester, just a train journey away, and Harry realised he might well have seen him around in person at some time whilst shopping, without knowing it.

To Harry's great joy, this very same man – Sir Adrian Boult as he was now – had been invited as guest artist to the town's musical festival for the past two years running. Both times, Harry had sat in the audience utterly mesmerised by the famous conductor's economy of movement, his grace, the elegant way he used his baton. He wielded it like a wand, magicking the spirit of the music out of the air so that it swept you away. He came to a decision. He was going to go to the Coronation Party dressed as his hero.

There was no need to go to any expense either, he reflected, which was an important consideration. All he needed was his suit and tie, and a baton for conducting. He remembered Adrian Boult sporting a lavish brown moustache, and it occurred to him that he might be able to grow one in time for the party, if he put his mind to it.

Mai had gone upstairs to try on his mother's wedding dress. His mother had lent it to Mai for their wedding, but she'd left the other guests in no doubt as to who carried it off better, so Harry was very glad it was getting a second outing all these years later without his mother being present.

Harry went up the stairs and tapped on the bedroom door.

'Don't come in yet!' Mai said quickly. 'I'm not ready! Is it done up, Rhiannon?'

'Most of it,' Rhiannon said. 'Can you breathe?'

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‘More or less.’

Harry raised his eyebrows on his side of the door. Being able to breathe in a frock seemed to him to be a minimum requirement, but he didn’t know much about ladies’ fashion.

‘Ready!’ Rhiannon announced. ‘Come in!’

Harry went in and for a moment felt as if he was seeing his wife just as he’d seen her eighteen years before. ‘My word!’ he said happily. ‘I’m a lucky man!’ Which is exactly what he’d felt on his wedding day.

‘Undo it, Rhiannon, I’m going to pass out!’ Mai said frantically, flapping her hands, and as Rhiannon unfastened the dress she gulped for air as if she’d been under water. ‘It’s a bit tight,’ she confessed, and her voice was flat with a combination of breathlessness and disappointment.

‘You could leave it undone and wear a cape to hide the back,’ Harry suggested kindly.

‘Harry Lloyd, get away with you!’ Mai said, flapping her hand at him, shocked to the core. ‘Leave it undone?’ But she went to the mirror and looked at herself in the lace dress. Her face softened and she turned to Harry again. ‘A cape?’ she asked hopefully. ‘What sort of a cape?’

Harry waved the general shape of a cape in the air. He knew better than to carry on talking. He kissed her fondly on the cheek. It was sometimes better to let Mai think about things in her own time, so he went downstairs to put on his recording of the ‘Crown Imperial’ and find something suitable in the cutlery drawer to conduct with.

The Hand was a historic white-stuccoed hotel built high on the banks of the River Dee, near the parish church at the end of a narrow road of white-stuccoed cottages and quaint shops. It was where the Dee Male Voice Choir met every Thursday evening for choir practice.

Harry, Emlyn and Tad were sitting at a table by the window in the cosy, nicotine-yellow, smoky bar. The grey pewter tankards hanging above the bar gleamed, the spirit bottles glittered, and an empty pint pot sat on the piano for tips. They liked to get there half an hour early so that they could have a beer before the rehearsal began, to lubricate their voices.

After finishing his first pint, Emlyn cleared his throat and did a few vocal exercises to limber up. He sang ‘*Lolo-lolobbbbbbb*’ in a deep bass, as if he were singing down into a canyon, and graduated through the scales to a chilling falsetto of ‘*Leeleeeleeeleeeeee!*’

‘You need oiling, Emlyn,’ the landlord observed soberly.

‘It’s true, I do,’ Emlyn replied happily, picking up his empty glass. ‘Same again, Billy, please.’

Seeing Emlyn stand up, Harry finished his off quickly and asked for the same again, and make it quick, too, before Mai turned up. His wife usually arrived at five to seven, just for the singing, and drank a small, sweet sherry piously as if it was communion wine.

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‘We’ll start with “God Save the Queen”,’ Tad said, ‘to get into practice.’

At that, Harry stood up with alacrity and nearly knocked the table over with his wide girth.

‘Where are you going?’ Tad asked him, taken aback.

Harry looked surprised to be asked. ‘I’m standing for “God Save the Queen”.’

So Tad stood up too and as Emlyn returned, he was pleased at their formality when all he’d done was get another round in.

This was a big year for Tad, not only because of the Coronation but because the Dee Male Voice Choir had been practising since last summer for the International Musical Festival that took place every year for one week in July. As choirmaster and conductor, he felt they had a good chance of winning, even though they were up against male-voice choirs from all over the world. This year was going to be particularly special because the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh were attending the festival as part of their tour of Wales in July.

The festival was a magnificent event dreamt up by a local man after the war to make the broken, war-torn world whole again through song. Their motto was: *Where Wales Welcomes the World*. Everyone in the town got involved. The contestants arrived by train or by coach, travel-worn and weary, from Denmark, Germany, Norway, Italy, Canada, Spain, Yugoslavia, the USA, all of them laden with bright costumes – including surprising hats with tassels, and shoes with pom-poms – and the townspeople were there to greet them with cups of tea and a warm welcome. They took them into their houses, and communicated through

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the language of gestures and smiles, and gave them a clean bed and hot meals and made them feel at home. When the visitors competed, their hosts were their supporters, and they went to watch and cheer them on.

It was an ambitious endeavour, to unite the world, there was no doubt about it. But for one week every July since 1947, the miracle happened. The town needed it, because there were times in life that only a miracle would do. The Dee Male Voice Choir had lost almost half of its good lads to the world war. For those men that were left, it had taken them some time to have any heart to get together and sing. But now, eight years on, they presented as full and powerful a group of singers as anyone could wish for. Being a music teacher, Tad considered himself perfectly qualified to say that.

For now, as they weren't immediately practising 'God Save the Queen', they sat down again.

Harry quickly managed to get a quarter way through his second beer, and was in a hearty mood. 'You know, it's thanks to Wales that the Crown Jewels stayed safe during the war,' he said. 'I have it on good authority that they were hidden in a slate mine towards the coast.'

'Whose authority? Mai's?' Tad asked sceptically.

'A policeman, a local, told me,' Harry replied. 'In confidence, like.'

'It must be true then,' Emlyn said, straight-faced.

'The royal wedding rings are made of Welsh gold too,' Tad pointed out.

'And Queen Victoria's bed, that one they made for her and Albert in Penrhyn Castle, was made out of Welsh

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slate. It must've been like sleeping on a billiard table,' Emlyn said cheerfully.

'How would you know, Emlyn?'

'He's thinking about his misspent youth,' Tad said. 'Passing out in the pub after a long night.' With all these close links between royalty and Wales, they felt practically related, and it left them with a warm glow of satisfaction by the time the women turned up.

The women made up the audience in the rehearsals. They drank sherry, shandy or plain lemonade, and had a convivial night of it, and when the men took a break the women sang their own songs sometimes, if they were in a singing mood, and Nancy kept time by clapping along because she didn't have a voice for singing and didn't know the words either.

Helen hadn't been to choir practice for over a year because of her bereavement, so, as Tad finished his drink, he was surprised and gratified in equal measure to see her appear in the doorway, pale and ethereal. Her fair hair was freshly curled back from her clear face and her navy coat was slung loosely over her shoulders. She smiled when she saw him and came over to his table, to him, and rested her hand briefly on his shoulder. It felt light, barely more than a shadow falling on him.

'I'm going to sit in the corner with Nancy,' she said into his ear.

Her soft cheek brushed his for a moment and as Tad watched her join her friend, he was aware she had left the scent of her Côté perfume behind. He breathed it in, glad she was here. This year, the atmosphere at choir practice

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