

ONE

And I want to tell you about how – something else saved my life.

I'm too embarrassed to say what, exactly.

My story starts a little bit after his story. I'll just wait till I've got something to contribute.

I -

I -

I - like coffee.

I like coffee, with milk.

I like coffee, with milk and one... uh, spoonful? of sugar.

Yeah, I like coffee, with milk, and one spoonful of sugar.

She would say, 'How do you say, "I like coffee", Gareth?, and I'd say, "I likes coffee" Miss.'

And then she would say, 'No. No, Gareth. Not, "I likes coffee."

"I like coffee." And I would say,

'Well, you can do whatever you WANT with your coffee, Miss—

'but I'm gonna carry on liking my coffee, thanks.'

Obviously I didn't really say anything like that to my teacher.

I just - kept quiet.

He's fucked, obviously.

In the old days, if you were dying, they wouldn't tell you. The idea was, for you to enjoy your last days.

Peace, before you rest in peace.

Crisp packets. You say 'crisp packets' and it sounds to me like you're talking about packets that are full of crisps. Rather than - the packets, the plastic bags themselves.

So if somebody talks to me about crisp packets on the street, I see actual packets of crisps, across the pavement.

And all I think is - are they smokey bacon? Because that's my favourite flavour crisp. Although I will eat any flavour, really.

But saying that – salt and vinegar. I don't really like salt and vinegar.

And you don't like salt and vinegar either?

Because you get ulcers a lot, don't you?

And the vinegar really hurts your ulcers...

So yeah. That's what comes to my mind, if someone talks about crisp packets – can I eat them?

That teacher, the one who was obsessed with the coffee liking, she was the only difficult or hard experience I had with Welsh.

I could've hated the language in a way. When my parents divorced, I moved five miles up the road with my mum to Clynderwen.

I went to the local school, turned up on the first day – to find everyone speaking a different language to me.

This was a bit of a shock. Because before then, I don't think I'd realised there were other languages in the world.

To tell the truth, I don't think I'd realised there were languages in the world.

This was all a bit odd.

But you know what kids are like. Inside six months, me and my brother were brabbling on in Welsh, and my mum didn't have a clue what we were saying.

Every time mum met one of my teachers, she'd insist they were talking about a different boy. According to my teachers, I was happy, full of energy, friendly. According to my mum, I was more –

I think the explanation was relaly simple. The school was lovely. Eighty, ninety of us there, every teacher knowing every child.

And I made great friends there. I was best friends with a boy called Luke Osmond, his dad, Ozi, was - not a painter - he painted pictures, in the sense that he made art, you know.

With boys there's usually an element of competition on nearly every friendship, especially when you're younger.

Luke was the first friend who was more of a supporter, than someone to compete with. He was really handsome, and popular, and all the girls fancied him -

You remember?

- anyway.

It was luck.

Beacuae in that school, and in Welsh, it was like finding warm, safe little family.

At home I was just obsessed with the inevitable nuclear war that was going to kill me, and my mum, and my brother, and my dog - and my step-father.

Unfortunately, after two years we moved from Clynderwen to Bridgend.

Where the school wasn't quite so small. And where the kids weren't quite so innocent and lovely.

And where no-one spoke Welsh – apart from that woman who was obsessed with coffee-liking.

You don't realise, when you're young, how fragile your happiness is.

If you are happy, of course.

I don't want to slag off Bridgend but –

– the place didn't work for me. I got stuck there.

And I stayed stuck there, till I learned Welsh again.

So there we are. That's the story I have to tell today.

The story I have to tell today is - wait for it - how learning the Welsh language saved my life.

I said it was embarrassing.

None of this happened to you. So... all this recreating the horrible little details, what does that actually...

..fuck what's the word?

No. It's gone. If it was there in the first place.

And did you look at the film? On YouTube? Bet you did.

Because you face the truth, don't you...

That's very promising, I think.

That you still see yourself as someone respectable.

Even though you're on the dole, and you can't leave the house, and you spend basically every day in bed hiding from the world outside.

When I started to learn Welsh, I came to depend quite a lot on the words, 'Why not?'. When you're practising conversation, you will for example pretend to make some plan to go somewhere on your holidays. So your partner will say, 'Would you like to go for a walk, so we can enjoy the warm evening air, and the lovely sound of children playing on the streets?'

And you say 'Why not?'

Yes, why not?

It's amazingly handy because – if you just say, yes, or more correctly, yes I would like to, you've brought the conversation to a stop -

and it's obvious you've got bugger all to say.

But if you say quickly, 'Why not?', you look really fluent and comfortable in the language, and also you pass the ball back to your partner. And your partner has to think of something pretty substantial to say.

So – next time you're stuck for something to say, why not try 'Why not?'

Or, you're losing yourself.

I know you understand me.

You must do.

If I understand these words, you must too.

But you refuse to understand.

No, no: that's wrong.

You do understand, you can't refuse to understand.

You refuse to acknowledge that you understand.

You choose to be the way you are.

And – why not?

I didn't speak to them because I fucking hated them.

Apart from the thirst for a pint in the afternoon.

Something that unites us all, surely.

Yes.

No.

No.

Please, no.

No, no, for Jesus' sake no!

Yes.

Why not?

They make you want to fuck them.

If someone makes you want to fuck them, they're sexy.

Don't.

Don't.

Jesus.

What did I say?

I believe you, brother.

She shouldn't have settled for the other boy. She should've waited for you.

Fair play – you were horrendously pissed at the time.

A question I've asked myself, sometimes.

Yeah, I wonder why?

I try to be supportive but Christ you don't make it easy.

I don't hate you.

I pity you.

You don't think there might be a lesson for you there?

You keep your mouth shut for once – and good things happen.

Or you're just a sick fuck who's happier in the midst of tragedy.

Wonderful things can happen. Even in the middle of sadness.

It's more than embarrassing. It's impossible. And so you have to just go to the bloody shops, don't you?

We are coming close to the point where there'll be some kind of parting.

Making new friends.

Having fun with the girls. And the men.

But then you see a pair flirting just with one another...

The fact that he can leave the house?

You forgot about the shiatsu.

The shiat-su.

And they really helped.

Perhaps it was just the effect of having someone look after me for an hour twice a week, I don't know. But after the shiatsu, I was more – my mind was quieter.

What?

I remember that moment sometimes.

And remembering that moment, it's hard to believe what I did to her,

But then I remember – everything – and I find I can forgive myself.

You've got to forgive yourself in the end, haven't you?

The work did the world of good to me. Just being out of town, in the country, a bit of fresh air. And just doing something totally different to anything I'd done before. And meeting different people. Really lovely people: people who worried about the world, like me, but people who were determined to do something to help, not like -

I was going to say, 'not like me'. But obviously, I only met these people through being out there trying to do something to help.

So actually -

they were people who worried about the world, like me. And they were determined to do something to help. Like me.

A good day's work. And we'd've had a good day doing the work, too.

In the van on the way home, I'd dream about Barafundle Bay, and just think how lovely it would be to live in that area. and get to go for a walk on Barafundle beach every day. And then I'd dream, that if the world was to get some sense one day, and stop putting shit in the sea, well in the end everything that had been dumped in the seas already would find its way to Pembrokeshire and wash up on Barafundle.

So, you could clean up all of the seas of the world, just by going for a walk on Barafundle beach every day, and picking up what you found there.

Sometimes we'd get to go off somewhere, to do a project over a long weekend. We went up one time to Anglesey, to do dry-stone walling and some farm just outside Amlwch.

Yeah.

I have done.

It rained all through the three days we were there, wind going right through us. We were staying in the village hall, sleeping on the floor, cooking on a camping stove. No shower, no hot water, no telly. A wonderful time. I'll never forget.

That weekend was the first time I, as an adult, heard Welsh being spoke as a natural language.

I remember listening to the conversation between the farmer and the old man who was showing us how to do the dry stone walling, and being shocked how alien it sound.

Obviously this was Anglesey Welsh so no surprise in a way, but still, there was a little voice inside saying, at one time, Gareth, you could understand that language.

At the end of the weekend, the farmer came round with a little envelope for each of us. In my envelope, I found a five pound note.

The farmer'd had the work done cheap, of course, because we were all volunteers. He said, 'Thank you very much boi bach, for helping me with my walls.'

I remember staring at that fiver thinking, this is five quid I've worked to get, and enjoyed working to get, even though that work was outside in the rain and the wind.

With the fiver, I took Rachel out to the local pub, and bought her a drink.

With money I'd earned.

Actually, you get to keep the first five pounds you earn by doing part-time work while you're on the dole. So fuck off.

What d'you mean?

I'd forgotten that.

She didn't say anything. She drank her drink and we had a lovely evening. More than likely she didn't notice.

Okay, she noticed. Of course she knew the difference between lemonade and tonic. But she didn't say anything.

Because she loved me.

I decided on Welsh because of the experience of hearing the language being spoken naturally in the North. Now I saw Welsh not just as some dry academic subject, but as a living language relevant to the contemporary world. And also Welsh reminded me of a happier time in my life.

Convient.

Her partner?

The Welsh lessons also helped create a life for me apart from being with Rachel.

The tiwtors would organise trips and nights out, so we'd get the chance to practise 'in an informal context.'

The theory was we'd be less embarrassed about using our crap Welsh if we were all wrecked.

The theory worked: often, when you're so pissed you have to concentrate just to walk straight, your fear of mis-mutation will evaporate.

I really enjoyed the Welsh lessons, I've got to say. Not because of the lessons themselves – but because of the people I met. Andy Welsh – got the name because, even though he came from London, he was really into Welsh things. Rod, the Gay Canadian with the Massive... Harp. Pamela, the author from Rhode Island – the first author I met ever. I was so impressed with her because, no matter where we'd drink, she'd always have a large bourbon with a single cube of ice. Marion, the blonde from Berlin, who was such a communist she refused to join the Party, because they had betrayed the spirit of Marx. And then Andrew and Mary, the married vicars.

She was just trying to make things better for you.

Because she loved you.

Because she loved you.

Yeah. Well.

She loved you, as much as she could.

Because there's something you've forgotten.

Or have left out deliberately.

When we went on our nights on the piss, one of our tutors would always be there. Her name was Lowri.

Lowri worried me, I've got to say.

I found myself – I was just very aware of her.

I was very aware that I was waiting for her to arrive.

Then I was very aware of who she was talking to.

What she was wearing.

How much of the shape of her body I could see.

In a way, it was natural enough. Me and Rachel had been together for a while by now, obviously I was going to notice if anyone girl started paying attention to me.

But still I felt a bit uncertain about it.

So I told Rachel about Lowri.

I didn't say, one of our Welsh tutors is a bit of a piece and I find myself staring at her breasts quite a lot.

I said that one of our tutors had developed a bit of a crush on me.

She was pleased, if anything.

Thought the fact that someone else fancied me would be a bit of a boost.

Fair play, she went through the motions, asking 'She's not fitter than me, is she?'

And of course, it was easy enough for me to say, No

Yeah.

And not nothing but the truth.

I didn't tell Rachel about that, obviously, it wasn't -

I haven't got the words.

I didn't see Lowri after that. She wasn't teaching us any more and she'd always have some excuse for not turning up to our nights in the pub.

I heard though that she and her boyfriend split up a couple of months later.

Some things just don't work out.

Happy to help.

The next day we had a night out, but only me and Andrew and Mary, the married vicars, turned up.

After an hour, we moved from the bright bar where we usually met to a smoky pub round the corner. And because the pub was smaller, and quieter than the bar, we all started to feel a bit self-conscious speaking Welsh.

Not just because of the fact that we were speaking a different language to everyone else – but because speaking Welsh was obviously a bit of an effort for all of us.

We turned to English in the end, and for the first time.

It was like getting to know each other once again.

But not quite the same people were speaking now.

I talked a little bit about 'my situation'.

How much shame I felt.

Because I think shame is a big part of it.

You live in a rich country, you've got enough to eat, you've got somewhere to live, but you can't cope. Of course you're going to feel ashamed.

And then you have to cope with the shame, on top of everything else.

And everything else is too much for you anyway so – you're fucked.

And Andrew, or Mary, I don't remember which one, said

'We don't see things quite the same way.'

They said

'We are all fragile.'

They said
'Each of us will have to face things that we can't bear alone.'

They said
'All of us are broken by life.'

They said
'And so there's no question of coping, or not coping.'

They said
'All of us will need help from somewhere.'

That second, I felt the weight of shame lifting from me.

Walking home, I considered this business about going into the school and thought – why not? What's the worst that could happen?

And for the first time in my life, I said that dangerous sentence to myself without hearing the answer 'nuclear war, obviously' in the back of my mind.

No, I don't think we're going back.

We're going to find a way of moving on.

I'm going to, anyway.

TWO

Like me, in Clynderwen, doing Welsh lessons all morning every morning, to catch up.

They didn't have the words.

And grateful.

The truth was, I'd loved those kids - since the first afternoon. I was just too shy, or too embarrassed, to admit it.

Nothing.

- coward.

If you say so.

End of the story. And for once, the story comes to an end on a happy note.

Unfortunately, although stories come to a tidy end, lives don't.

Lives carry on after the story's end: or they come to a close before the story is complete.

But now I had a whole life ahead of me.

A life I could do anything I wanted with.

Perhaps not quite anyway, but...

And secondly, Lowri joined the school.

Lowri and me avoided each other for a week, but Friday night a crew of the teachers were going out. Of course, Lowri went along, to get to know people.

And I went, because I wanted a drink.

By half nine Lowri and me came to be sitting near one another.

I started talking to her, to be polite.

Because none of the other teachers spoke Welsh, people moved round the table, leaving me and Lowri sitting together.

Lowri felt I'd been unfair with her.

I had been leading her on, to some degree.

Nothing I'd said but... the way I looked at her.

At her body.

I said perhaps I hadn't controlled myself around her as well as I should have done.

Because of her beauty.

She said, do you think I'm beautiful, then?

I said, fuck aye.

I said to Lowri, the thing is, I'm a paranoid neurotic mess.

She said no you're not.

I said, I am, I'm just ridiculously neurotic and needy.

Neurotic and needy [*replacing Gareth's use of the English word with the correct Welsh*], said Lowri, a Welsh tutor to the last. And that's the last [=most recent] thing you are.

That's the last [=final] thing I am, I thought. A learner to the last.

But I didn't say that. What I said was, I am... needy, and I should know.

Lowri said, perhaps you don't know yourself as well as you think. I'd say there was something quite... tsen, about you.

Tsen?

Tsen?

Tsen?

Tsen?

For ages I was stuck, I couldn't figure out what was this 'tsen' thing Lowri was accusing me of being.

And then I realised. I'd taken that she'd said a word beginning with the sound 'ts', which goes in the place of 'jay', when people are being offensively correct and insist on saying for example things like 'garets' instead of 'garej'.

But what she had said was something beginning with 'zed'.

Zed Eee Enn.

Lowri had said there was something 'Zen'.

About me.

Once I stopped laughing, I said – what the fuck?

Lowri said no, seriously. There's something Zen about you.

You don't say much, and when you do say something, it's something really simple that comes straight to the point.

And you don't do much, but when you do do something, you don't discuss it for ages or worry about are you doing the right thing. You just do what needs doing.

With some people that are quiet, you get the impression there's loads going on in their heads. But you're not like that. You give the impression that your mind is quiet, too.

I tried to explain to her the things that were going on in my mind, all the time. The stupid, selfish, cruel, paranoid, neurotic, needy things. I tried to give examples –

– but I couldn't.

I didn't have the words.

Because me and Lowri always spoke Welsh together. Of some sort.

There's something he's not telling you.

And in a way it's not my place to tell you, if he's decided not to.

But I'm not sure he's made a clear decision about it.

Sometimes he forgets this little detail.

Amazing to think people can forget things like this but - it happens.

Or perhaps he's just too embarrassed.

Rachel hits him.

Not every day, nothing really serious, but sometimes - when she's drunk.

Or when she's really angry.

I'm not saying it's the same thing when a girl hits a man as when a man hits a girl.

Because it isn't.

He was never in fear for his life, he was never in fear of serious injury.

Perhaps that's why he puts up with it - because, in a way, it's not something serious.

Also - well, he's a demanding neurotic mess, she hits him every now and again.

You've got to have give and take in every relationship.

He tries to look at it as a problem of Rachel's.

Something she will have to sort out.

Something that doesn't affect him.

But - obviously - it does affect him.

Because it shows him

That Rachel hates him.

Otherwise how come she hits him?

So the person who lives with him, who sleeps with him, who looks after him, who feeds him, who makes him laugh, who plays with him, who fucks him, who has made him better

- the person who knows him better than anyone -

she hates him.

It's hardly a good sign.

It was like a second that lasted a year.

Me, the girl, the ratboys—

One of the boys shitting himself. The other boy smiling.

And I just breathed.

In, out.

My mind, for once, completely quiet.

And I hit the bastard.

He went into the wall, and straight down.

Blood flowing from his nose.

A little yellow tooth on the floor.

The other boy standing, his mouth open.

The girl laughing.

Then the boy got up, and jumped on me.

He tried to chew my ear off, but of course I'd hit him in the mouth and damaged his teeth, so he hurt himself by trying.

I pushed him off, and he went down again.

He didn't get up this time.

No-one moved at all.

They were all, the boys and the girl, looking behind me.

I turned round.

And saw the headmaster standing there.

The headmaster shot at the boy, and yelled at him - that's it, you little shit, I've got you now.

He hadn't seen me hit the bastard.

He'd seen the bastard jumping on me - the quiet, conscientious classroom assistant - and taken it that was the start of the violence.

As any sensible person would have done.

I was going to get away with hitting the bastard, and the bastard was going to be excluded from the school.

I went over to the girl.

She threw her arms round me.

Saying thank you, thank you, thank you.

And I knew I'd done the right thing for once.

I looked up.

Through the window.

And outside, sitting on a little seat in the kids' vegetable garden, was Lowri.

Obviously having stopped for a sly cigarette on her way to the next lesson.

The cigarette in her hand, burned right down to the stub.

End of the day, Lowri was waiting for me.

She said, I think we need to discuss what happened today.

We went to the pub. Not the one where the teachers usually went.

Somewhere quieter.

One of the other assistants saw me and Lowri going off together.

He gave me a little smile.

But Lowri wasn't smiling.

Lowri went to the bar. She came back with the drinks and sat.

And there was some little voice in my head saying I shouldn't be in the pub with Lowri, I should be home with Rachel.

I let the voice carry on, until the words didn't make sense as words any more, until the voice turned into a sound, until the sound of the voice got lost in the sound of my body, blood and breath, the sound of the pub, the sound of the town and the world outside, until the sound of the voice disappeared entirely, until my mind was completely quiet.

Lowri said she had been in to see the headmaster that afternoon, and had told him what she'd seen.

Specifically, me arriving, seeing the boys attacking the girl, and shouting at them to stop.

Then she saw the bastard jumping on me, and biting my ear.

And then she saw me pushing the bastard off.

And then she saw the bastard hitting the wall, and in doing so hurting his nose and his teeth.

She had seen me do nothing but defend myself.

She certainly had not seen me hit the ratboy, as he was alleging.

And then – they called last orders.

And Lowri said – do you want to come back to my place?

And I said – why not?

We had missed all the trains, and Lowri was too pissed to drive so she flagged down a taxi and said, how much to Cardiff Bay?

The bloke said, forty quid?

The trip took about half an hour. On the way, we said nothing.

In my mind the voice was screaming that I should be thinking about Rachel, Rachel needed me.

I looked into my mind.

I found the neighbourhood where this voice lived.

And I pulled it out.

I wound down the window.

Threw the voice out of the car.

Watched it bouncing on the surface of the M4.

Disappearing under the wheels of one of Oriel Jones and Son Llanybydder's lorries.

And although I was broken, now I was complete.

And I just sat there for the rest of the journey.

Looking at Lowri every now and then.

Looking at the shape of her body.

Thinking

Nothing.

We went up to her flat, and just fucked straight away.

I really, really enjoyed it.

I had her once in the missionary, just to warm up.

Once with her on top, for me to enjoy the view.

Once from behind, to show her who was in charge in the situation.

And once standing up, her face knocking against the wall, just to make the point completely clear.

Once we're finished, she says you hurt me a bit the last time.

And in my mind, there's nothing.

So I say nothing.

And in the end to fill up the silence Lowri says, I enjoyed it though, don't worry.

We went to bed. To sleep.

Sleep came to me in minutes.

Lowri wakes for a second. She says, this feels so innocent.

I answer – it's a gift we're giving one another.

And she smiles.

After sleeping for a couple of hours, I get up and go into the kitchen to fetch water.

I go out onto the balcony, to check my phone.

There's a message from Rachel saying – I don't care what you've done, it doesn't matter, nothing matters, just get home here or please just let me know you're safe.

While listening to the message, I feel the night breeze on my skin and I'm thinking – nothing.

I look down.

There are people still about, moving between the bars and clubs of the Bay.

Hordes of them.

But they're all so tiny.

They're screaming and shouting –

– but by the time it reaches my ears, the sound has turned into a whisper, joining the whisper of the breeze, and the whisper of the sea.

Just little whispers. Nothing – threatening.

Everything comforting me, somehow.

Lowri comes out to the balcony.

She's naked, but for a golden cross hanging between her breasts.

She stands next to me, with her head on my shoulder.

All the troubles of the city are tiny things, that can never trouble us.

And suddenly it strikes me –

– I can live like this.