

## TIPSY CORNER

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Steering the bus into Pentre Bach, Dewi idled past the darkened cottages, watching for the cat. He'd already dropped his last passenger and didn't expect to pick up any more livestock between here and town. He never did on this late run.

Once over the rumble strips, after the cat had crossed, he'd speed up on the long straight between here and Topsy Corner. The road between there and the river bridge used to lurch about like a drunk but it was cut off now by a five-barred gate, overgrown with scrubby trees.

The cat was on the verge. Haughtily, it sauntered off. Dewi grinned. 'Take your time, why don't you?'

It was amazing what you saw from a bus cab that flicked by unnoticed in a car. A particular lie of the land, rabbits, foxes, ghostly hunting owls, convoys of rats on rubbish days, regular-as-clockwork cats and, every Friday night, a fed-up collie waiting for his master to come home from the pub.

As he sped along, lights, shadows and rippling reflections played tricks with his eyes. He knew he was alone but still, checked the rear-view mirror. Then, seeing livestock at Topsy Corner, he braked. The doors opened with a long hiss, a sigh, and a young bloke climbed on.

'Where to, mate?' Dewi asked.

Patting pockets on his black leather jacket, his passenger mumbled: 'Only up the road.'

Dewi waved him away. 'Have it on me.'

Driving down the long, pulling bend to the bridge, he watched his passenger via the mirror. He was staring straight ahead, eyes blank, face white as paper. Doesn't look too good, Dewi thought. Hope he doesn't throw up in my bus. Doesn't smell of drink, though; not like the codger with the patient dog.

His thoughts rolled along faster than the trundling bus wheels. No problems with the jacket – he'd got one very similar – but those things on his legs! Gaiters, weren't they? The bloke was a dead ringer for the motorcycling cop in 'Heartbeat'. Mam and Dad watched it to relive their misspent youth; he watched it for the old buses. So, where was his bike? And, for that matter, his helmet?

At the crossroads, he stopped, looking right for a break in traffic. 'Next stop do you?' he called, setting off again. No response. The mirror reflected an empty bus.

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'Must've already legged it,' Dewi muttered, realising he'd left the doors open again. He'd get fired if anyone found out. Explained the weird smell, though, he decided, as the doors shut with another long sigh. Some chemical muck on the fields, most probably.

On Friday night, the dog-owner had a scrap with four old crones well-oiled with funeral sherry. Battered by handbags, he staggered off into the paws of his waiting dog. The women hammered on the bus window, screeching: 'Hope he bites you! Hard!'

Come Pentre Bach, Dewi was alone again. Rain cloud was storming in from the west. Still, they hadn't seen a drop in the past week – almost a drought by local standards.

The sea shimmered. Nuclear waste from Sellafield, maybe, but magic anyway. Topsy Corner was deserted.

Saturday morning, Dewi tinkered with his car, a second-hand Golf, dreaming all the while about motorbikes. Going to work mid-afternoon sorted of rounded off a good day. The weather hadn't disappointed, either. It was blowing a gale and raining cats and dogs. Dead leaves kept plastering the windscreen, jamming the wipers.

The cat wasn't waiting at Pentre Bach but just in case, he inched over the rumble strips. He could already make out the distant figure at Topsy Corner.

Same black jacket; same gaiters; same pants; same scuffed boots with cracked insteps. Once again, as the bloke patted his pockets, Dewi waved him to a seat. He took the same one, sat there staring straight ahead, a cowlick of dark hair brushing his forehead.

How come a young bloke like him looks so glum? Dewi wondered. A row with his girl? Wrecked his bike, more probably.

He opened the doors at the crossroads. 'Get off here if you want,' he called.

There was more traffic than usual – rain always made folk take to their wheels, like they'd shrink if they got wet. He watched the doors, looked right for a gap, glanced in the rear-view mirror. Nobody there.

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With a shrug, he closed the doors then wrinkled his nose. That weird smell filled the bus again. A mile further on, his guts somersaulted. If his mystery passenger was a plain clothes inspector, he was done for.

He was in the Golf, going home, when he realised the bloke had been bone dry from top to toe.

On Sunday, his day off, Dewi was roused from his lie-in by voices downstairs. Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he trailed into the kitchen. Why aren't they ready to go? he wondered.

Dad was supposed to be ferrying Mam to her sister's in Devon but he was slumped at the table, nursing his hand. Mam was standing over him, wearing her best exasperated expression.

'Slammed the garage door on it, didn't he?' she snapped. 'On purpose, too, probably!'

'Blame the wind,' his father wailed.

Dewi sighed. Like kids, they were, sometimes. 'Don't fret, Mam,' he said. 'I'll take you to Auntie Bethan's.'

Although he dodged the hug, she still landed a kiss on his forehead.

Driving to Auntie Bethan's took six hours. Refusing her offer of a bed, Dewi said he should get back to Dad. Dodging more hugs, he left about half nine. By midnight, he felt dog-tired. Hauling buses about all week could catch up with you.

He stopped at all night services near Gloucester, downed an all day breakfast, a chocolate chip cookie and two coffees and eventually stopped yawning fit to break his jaw.

Figuring the twists and turns of the A5 would keep him on his toes better than the boring A55, he headed next for Shrewsbury. Once into the mountain wilderness, he had the road almost to himself.

The rain had stopped and now the wind had blown itself out, it was bitterly cold. Jack Frost was up Tryfan and Lake Ogwen was black glass. With the window open to stop his drooping eyelids shutting tight, the car was an icebox. Never mind; barrelling through Nant Ffrancon Pass, he felt almost euphoric. Will I see the cat, he wondered, with a jaw-wrenching yawn. Or the biker. Bit late for either at nearly five in the morning, though.

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The rumble strips outside Pentre Bach jolted him awake. He swore. Soon be home, he told himself, and I'd best not turn up at work looking like a zombie because I'll get a random dope test if I do.

Sluggish thoughts turning much more slowly than his wheels, he spoke out loud: 'keep the speed down ..... ice on the road ..... the cat could run out anyway .....

Next time, an almighty crash woke him. Head spinning crazily, he looked around, swearing monotonously. Ahead, the road lurched about like a drunk. The five-barred gate, torn off its hinges, lay in the mud and the Golf, his pride and joy, was literally wrapped round a still-shuddering tree, a total write-off.

Leaden-footed, as if dreaming, he stumbled towards it through tangled undergrowth and mouldering leaves, muttering: 'Know that smell.' Then he heard an engine. There was his mystery passenger, astride a to-die-for Triumph bike. Its exhaust puffed vapour into the night and a wind that Dewi couldn't feel ruffled the bloke's hair.

A definite dead spit for that 'Heartbeat' copper, he thought, staggering over.

'Am I glad to see you!' he announced.

'My turn to give you a lift,' the biker said. 'Sad to say.'

Dewi hitched a leg over the pillion. 'Why "sad to say"?'

Ted Evans steered the empty bus into Pentre Bach, waited while the cat crossed then drove on, bumping over the rumble strips.

All the drivers knew about the cat. Some talked about a ghost, too. On the old road, forty odd years back, a biker stove in his head skidding on black ice.

Tipsy Corner next. Ted's guts churned. The gate was fixed and the wreck gone but you could still see where Dewi ploughed through the trees. He tried not to look, like he looked away going past the cemetery - couldn't bear to think of the lad cold in the ground. His parents were beating themselves to a pulp with guilt. 'If only this; if only that,' they kept saying, as if it could make a difference.

Late at night, folk said, the biker hitched a lift from some poor mutt then just vanished. Ted reckoned it was piffle. He didn't believe in ghosts. Once up the crem chimney or six feet under, that was it.

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They're out late, he thought, touching the brakes as two figures materialised at Topsy Corner. For a moment, his blood ran cold. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn it was Dewi flagging him down.

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