

Global short stories competition

September Winner
Welsh Lessons
Chris Westlake

The tiny village chapel was packed full of mourners. Everywhere I looked there were tears and smears of black mascara. The singing was loud and boisterous and yet sad and soulless. I stared at the order of service, which shook uncontrollably in my hand. The words stared back at me, big and bold on the faded paper.

We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Mr R Llewellyn

I was fourteen when Rees Llewellyn entered my life. I lived in a tiny coastal village just off Bridgend in South Wales. Only a dozen or so children caught my school bus, so naturally I noticed when he boarded a couple of stops after my own. He had a strong build and dark hair cut in a fringe. His white shirt hung loose from his trousers and I noticed a ring through his eye brow. The boy made no attempt to make eye contact or start a conversation with anyone; he just sat down and contentedly stared out of the window.

He caught the bus every day for the next week, each day he was just as anonymous as the first. He was in my class for a few subjects, but he sat at the back and did not contribute. At lunchtimes he was alone. He did not appear to have any attitude, but he hardly gave the appearance of being a victim either. His head was held high and there was a swagger about his walk.

A Thursday lunch time, I made my way to the playing fields for our usual kick-around when my path was blocked by a group of lads from the year above. They were always hanging around looking for something or someone to pass their time. Today that someone was me. My bag was pulled from my shoulder. I swung around, blonde hair covering my eyes, sweat forming on my forehead. The bag was passed from boy to boy, surrounding me in a circle. I made a desperate lunch, but next moment I was down on my knees, wet, dirty and humiliated. I was panicking, aware that this could get really bad.

“Leave him.”

The boys turned around to face the intruder, giving me just enough time to get to my feet. They stared in disbelief. The largest and most aggressive stepped forward, shoulders hunched, fists clenched. His forehead pressed against the other boy, eyes bulging theatrically.

“Or what...?”

A group had formed, both boys and girls, excitedly watching the events unfold. Steam seemed to rise into the air from the two boys, heads locked in battle. There was a pause, a moment of silence, everyone watching with bated breath. The second boy, the intruder, spoke no more words. Instead he took a step back, raised his arm, connected with his fist, and the bully, my tormentor, fell to the floor. Blood flowed from his mouth and the boy lay in a shell, arms and hands protecting his face from any further onslaught.

“Just leave him.” The conqueror turned on his heels and walked away, all eyes following his swagger.

I caught the bus that evening and there was Rees, sitting at the front as usual, no different from any other day. I needed to say something to him, anything. Just before his stop, I got up and nervously tapped him on the shoulder.

“Err, just wanted to say thank you for earlier. I could have got a right kicking there.” I held out my hand.

His face was motionless for a moment, as it had been for most of the previous week, but then he smiled. He shook my hand; his grip was firm and strong.

“No worries. What a bunch of morons.”

I think it was the first time I had properly even heard him speak, and I was amazed just how Welsh his accent was. My mouth started working faster than my brain.

“You fancy coming down the beach later? Could meet at the entrance to the car park at five?”

He was already standing up, ready to get off the bus. His eyebrows narrowed for a moment, as if wondering whether he had anything better to do.

“Sure. See you there.”

I was a bit nervous. What I knew of the boy, he was not exactly the life and soul of the party. He had also saved me from a certain humiliation earlier in the day, and so I felt indebted to him. I waited in the car park in the freezing cold, keeping myself warm by jumping up and down on the spot. At ten past seven he appeared, wrapped in a navy duffel coat with a hood.

“Alright,” he nodded.

“Alright,” I nodded.

We wandered down to the beach in silence. It was late September and the nights were drawing in. The waves looked fierce as they crashed against the pebbles. I could just make out Somerset across the ocean through the developing fog. We walked down to the river and skimmed stones across the water.

“So where you come from?” I asked.

“Merthyr Tydfil. It’s just me and my Dad. It’s nice down here, don’t you think? It’s better than all the black mountains in Merthyr.”

I looked around at the seagulls and the green field full of sheep grazing and the castle in the distance, and for the first time I realized that yes, it was nice.

We stayed there on the beach, skimming stones until the night sky turned completely black. We strolled back up the narrow spiralling lanes to where Rees lived, a large cottage with a thatched roof.

“Terrah, then,” he nodded.

“Terrah,” I nodded back.

I turned to walk home, my hands deep inside my coat pocket, when I heard a commotion from the cottage. A man with a beard, short dark unkempt hair and a protruding belly staggered towards Rees.

“Where the bleeding hell have you been?” His words were slurred, his manner confused.

“It’s alright Dad,” Rees said, his words calm and soothing. “I’m back now.”

I gradually saw more and more of Rees over the next couple of weeks. No longer did he sit quiet and alone on the bus; now he sat quiet and next to me on the bus. I spoke to him in classes; he was quick with the one-liners and proved to have a dry sense of humour. Rees did not even attempt to show academic interest; instead he stared blankly into space or pencilled impressive sketches on sheets of

paper. Welsh lessons were the only exception. In these lessons he was keen and he was interested. He raised his arm and responded to the teacher in a clear and distinctive Welsh accent. The boys mimicked his accent – but only behind his back - exaggerating the l's as if to clear their throats. The girls seemed to find him interesting; I guess they thought that he was mystifying.

I asked Rees why he did not bother in lessons. He shrugged his shoulders and said that he was not really interested. I contemplated his response and thought – okay, makes sense. I asked why then he was interested in Welsh. He narrowed his eyes and gave me a look as if to say ‘stop asking silly questions.’

“It’s where I’m from, isn’t it.”

Rugby was the school sport and Rees was brilliant at the game. He played in the first team and would terrify the opposition defences by charging straight at them. At lunchtimes we played football. It was so much less physical and demanding than running around with a rugby ball. Rees never wanted to play football, he would joke that football was for English boys and that ‘rugger’ was for proper Welsh men. And yet when I did manage to get him involved, nobody could get near him. He had awesome natural ability and skill.

One evening I called at his house unannounced. We usually arranged to meet at a mutual place, but this night I was bored at home and just wanted to see if he was up for passing some time. When he answered the door, he looked a bit awkward. He hesitantly asked me inside. His Dad was there, beer can in hand, belly hanging over his jeans, mouth open wide in a crooked smile.

“You, young man, are a good boy,” he said, putting his arm around me.

He seemed friendly and harmless enough to me. Rees ushered me away and into his room and avoided eye contact. I was feeling brave when I asked my next question:

“So what happened with your Mum, Rees?”

He continued to avoid eye contact. His head was bowed. I was worried that he might hit me.

“She left him. He drinks. He is a good man but my mum...” he finally looked up and caught my gaze. “My mum deserves more. She is kind of special.” He pulled on his coat and we were out of the house. I did not ask any more.

Rees became a real part of my life over the next twelve months. Every morning we would catch the bus together and most evenings we would meet up, just strolling through the countryside by foot or on our bikes cycling along the coast. He mixed with others in the school more but he never made any real effort. He was known as a joker but not somebody to mess with. I was the only one that he seemed to give a damn about. I liked to think that I was his Welsh lesson and all the other pupils were all the other lessons. He even joked that I was his ‘best boyo.’

One evening as the days were drawing out, we wandered down to the beach, just as we had that first time. I saw a faintly recognisable figure down by the river head. He had a beer can in his hand and he seemed to be singing loudly.

“It’s been a year today since she left him.” Rees spoke fast and there was unfamiliar panic in his voice.

“Why did she leave him?” I asked, trying to catch up, my breathing fast. Rees jumped down off some rocks and turned to face me.

“He was a mess; he is a mess. He used to be a hero of both of ours. He played football for Cardiff and got injured. He never could cope with being a failure. Now he drinks so that he cannot remember what he once had.” He skipped over some pebbles and moved away from me.

We drew close and his father turned around. His face was blotchy and his cheeks were swollen. He held out his arms for Rees.

“Son,” he drawled. “Your mother was the most beautiful lady in the whole of Wales.”

They were the last words that he spoke. He stumbled and fell back into the flowing water with a thud. Rees jumped in after him, but he had already disappeared under the current.

Now as I stand in the chapel, my hands shaking, the image is fixed in my mind. However hard I try to get rid of it, it is there. I feel the salt from the sea as it blows into my face. I can see his face, desperate and lost. And I can hear the splash as he disappeared into the water.

And yet despite my trembling, I stand next to my best friend and I feel strong. The words of the priest echo around the small hall.

We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Robert Llewellyn. A good man...

I turn and watch Rees. For once he looks immaculate in a black suit, white shirt and black tie. Next to him is the most beautiful lady in the whole of Wales. They are holding hands and whispering agreement with the words from the Priest. I do not know what they say, for they speak in Welsh.

Runner-up

The Velocity of Me

Laura Chambers

I dug my heels fiercely into the sand and squinted up at the overpowering sun which was beaming down overhead. I had grown to strangely cherish those rays since Jay and I had been on the move, and as admittedly pathetic as it was, I was grateful for this maternal warmth that seemed to encompass me. The dreamer in me often imagined this sunlight as a layer of intense heat, knitted together to take shape as a safety blanket in which I was comfortably contained within. Such security was non-existent within my previous years, and so I intended to cling to it just as I had done so with my worn out teddy bear in those miserable winter nights which had passed.

With these thoughts racing, I turned my attention to Jay and looked on as he cast the rusty fishing rod back and fourth into the sea, with each time deeming his effort hopeless. That same sun seemed to deflect and veer away from his broad shoulders and cruel body. It was as if he had refused this blanket of security, and it too had no intention of comforting him. I had always recognised the grand presence in which he solidly held, and almost admired the fact that he would enter a room and immediately take an invisible status of boss. He had a certain gorgeous air about him in which I had never witnessed in a grown man before, and until this day still believe I will never again witness in any other human form.

This particular charm sat well with him, and he knew full well of the capabilities associated. I had seen him take advantage of this time and time again as he played the part of someone else, and fooled others with his combined manners and sharp ability to morph into the perfect gentleman. That way, no-one suspected a thing. I was sure that he covered his tracks immaculately, as we ventured on, moving from place to place in the run down motor home that had quickly become my tower. The chipped paint didn't bother me, as I had never known another home which was stable or of better standard. I liked to think of it as our escape route, and felt satisfied that if trouble ever arose in the town in which we had settled for the week, month or however long it would be, then we could hop into our motor home and speed off into another life. We played our roles perfectly and stuck to the rules. Our lives had become facades; a series of fake identities, false details and nothing more than lies build upon lies. I had almost forgotten my previous life, and had mourned briefly for it in the beginning weeks, though I knew of course that I had left nothing behind but a dull foster home and a half empty backpack which I carted to and from the temporary homes in which I was transported to.

My mother had played a temporary role in my life, which lasted all of 2 weeks. I was abandoned as a baby and found on the steps of the large, spiral church which lay within the small town in which she seemed to simply drift by one day. I was under the notion that as she passed by, she must have been struck by a sudden epiphany, which told her to 'leave the baby, go on! He is stopping you from succeeding. He is a burden, nothing more.' I never knew much more about the events of that day, or the following years, but had always harboured an image in my mind of how easy giving me up had been for her, and how much fun she must have had, living in a world of endless partying with no responsibilities. She had later confirmed the validity of this image when she turned up at the foster home in which I was shipped into, barely introducing herself whilst begging for money which evidently, I did not have. It was obvious she needed it to feed the combination of addictions in which she was suffering from. I recall that day so vividly in my mind, remembering the tremendous force which kept me rooted to the spot as she begged on her scratched hands and knees in front of me, hysterical with shakes and shivers. I felt powerless, and so incredibly helpless as I battled with the nagging in my heart. I felt a sinking amount of pity for this woman and though I tried to shake it, I felt that I held great responsibility for her, deep down inside of me. I had always dreamt of meeting this woman, and now here she was in front of me, begging for anything that I could give to her. A switch flipped in my brain. I jumped into some kind of manic mode, in which I did not know even existed within me. It was the first time in years I had moved at such a fast pace, with so much energy. I felt alive. I began to bundle my mother into her car which had mounted the curb on the opposite street. I told her to wait there, promising that I would be out shortly, whilst scanning the street up and down, reassuring myself that I would not get caught, that my foster parents wouldn't be home for hours. With this certification, I sprinted towards their red-bricked bungalow across the way, and made a dash for my tiny hideout of a bedroom. Everything lay just as I had left it before I was interrupted by the woman shrieking and hammering at the front door, which was of course, my mother making her grand entrance

into my life. I grabbed my faded backpack, and crammed into it the few items in which I owned: toothbrush, diary and a pencil case bought by the last set of foster parents who had temporarily taken care of me. With a deep breath, I had a final sweeping gaze of my room and shut the door tightly behind me, as I thought, yet another room, in another stranger's house that I leave behind.

I was very aware that time was moving quickly, and so I made my last stop of the house, which was to be my foster parents' bedroom. I knew where the secret stash of money was kept, and so finding this was not a problem. Within the drawers underneath their bed lay just as I had expected, giant wads of cash sorted into stacks. I grabbed about 6 bundles, knowing that it would be enough to keep my mother going, and yet would still leave behind a reasonable amount. After all, I wished no harm upon these people, yet still felt no affection towards them or their money whatsoever. I kicked the drawer closed once finished, and ran the whole way down the stairs and through the front door, making my way towards the beaten up ford in which my mother had now passed out in. She awoke sharply on my arrival, and once she had realised the money was a done deal, jammed the keys into the ignition and we sped off, out of the street in which I had been slowly adjusting to, and out of the lifeless world of foster care.

I vaguely recall the hours which followed, as we drove late into the night. She talked and talked, mostly sentences in which I could not conceive, and riddles in which I could not untangle. I sat there in a motionless heap, with my fists clenched and my tongue bitten. We drove endlessly, going from late night store to another, each time consisting of my mother walking in and running out 5 minutes later yelling as we sped away and on to another. The back seat was filled with confectionary goods from each store. I remember the way in which she ate and ate, chewing each muffin or chocolate bar for a considerably long amount of time. When she was done, she chucked the wrapper behind us, as it flew around the back of the car, searching for a place to settle in the midst of the wind hurling through the cracked window. I couldn't help but feel sorry for these wrappers, floating in the dark corners of her car, and almost compared myself to them in the way that I too had been thrown away by her, and left to fend for myself. A mere piece of litter fluttering out of her careless hands.

I woke up, alone in the passenger seat of the car, with my feet curled under my body and my hands over my head. I had passed out, perhaps from the busy day in which I had spent busting my body trying to please my mother, and make her just appreciate me. I saw the note pinned to the windscreen almost immediately, reading

“ you gave me what I wanted, kid. I appreciate that. Don't stop dreaming.”

I began to shake uncontrollably, not knowing whether it was from the icy cold conditions, or from the shock of the bizarre day which had passed, now seeming to me like nothing more than a dream. One thing I knew, was that it was not brought on by her abandonment. Her desertion was indeed inevitable, but I couldn't help feeling like it was slightly too early. I grieved for the loss of flesh and blood company in which she had provided. Giving myself 10 seconds to wipe the tears away and gather myself, I grabbed my backpack and headed across the road to a bar lit up against the black night backdrop. The door was heavy against the slight frame of my body, and I had to give it an almighty push to get inside. It was busy, full of drunken old men who chugged beer and joked about their wives, and women who spent the entire night smoking superkings. I headed straight for the toilet, knowing that I was by all means underage and would stick out like a sore thumb amongst the crowd. I knew though that most of these people were in drunken stupors, and probably having too jolly a time to notice a young boy like me entering into their world. I locked myself in a cubicle and curled up on the floor against the door, with the hypnotic state of sleep drifting over me.

I woke up some number of hours later, and was blinded by a stream of light hitting me through the window. I rubbed my eyes until my vision was clear, and saw that my surroundings had changed dramatically. I felt an intense burning on my wrists, and was alarmed to see that they were bright red and raw with friction burns. I was now lying on the floor of a vehicle or truck, with a blanket wrapped round me and a bottle of water lying about an arm's reach away from me. I sipped on the water to banish the sour taste from my mouth, and grabbed my head as it felt as if it was somehow drifting away from my body. I crawled forward towards the set of double doors at the rear end of the vehicle. I was bewildered, at first, but given the day I had experienced and the meeting with my mother, I wasn't

expecting anything more normal. Plus, anything had to be better than waking up on the floor beside a toilet, I figured. I kicked the doors open, and sunlight surrounded me. I was up high, that was certain. Mountains, trees, bushes bursting with flowers and colour lay ahead of me in every direction. I saw a lake near by, and at a second glance noticed that there were hundreds of fish swimming in laps within the crystal clear water. I saw a man perched on one of the rocks to my right, smoking a cigarette and tapping his foot. He greeted me, informed me that he was sorry for the methods in which he had used to get me here, and hurled a piece of rope my way, which explained my burnt wrists. I stared, straight into his piercing black eyes, and inhaled the fresh, airy breeze. I was to be his new partner, and that this was my future, no questions asked, he said.

His name was Jay. He had required an assistant. He was a wanted man, and I was wanted by him, to carry out the crimes in which he could no longer do. This, I could provide. And years later, I do not blame him for kidnapping me and dragging me into a hellish world of outlaw and crime, for it is this world in which I have found a paternal sort of love. Jay needed me and even wanted me to be around, he had done the opposite of my mother and had actually picked me rather than abandoned me. He did not get paid to care for me, like parents I had in the past. We shared the winnings of each crime, and even gained a new motor home in which we now live in, years later. He had tied me up, thrown me in the back of his van without agreement that night, and yet it gave me hope that someone had even wanted me enough to go through with this. It was a lifestyle with Jay in which I had found completion, and within Jay's captivity, I had found more happiness than any foster home could ever provide.