Mary Griese

The Sweet Business

You're in the back of the Land Rover with your children. They're little with white blonde hair and beautiful, everyone says. You've brought cushions for the cold metal seats and the three of you slide about, bumping along the rough lanes.

It's a trip to the waterfall.

In front are your in-laws squashed next to your husband who's driving, his father's legs placed awkwardly either side of the gearstick. Your mother-in-law is a corpulent woman who instigates every tea-break in the working day. The men are resurrecting the dilapidated farmhouse you discovered in the mountains. Your husband was equally thrilled with your find. It was easier to take it in turns to house-search without the children.

It's full of surprises, the old house – an earth floor in the cupboard under the stairs, chemical toilet, no proper bathroom, the ty bach[1] outside with wonderful views across your fields, the dot of the neighbouring farm in the distance, then mountain.

You are Welsh. Your English in-laws have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into the venture, visiting regularly to help in the daunting renovation. He now supports Welsh rugby and makes valiant efforts to pronounce place-names. She makes Welsh cakes.

The waterfall is your idea. Everyone needs a break. Each day sees elevenses[2] not long after breakfast, lunch at twelve, tea at four, supper at six and at nine, gin and tonic, biscuits and cheese. You forget your little family's usual lack of routine and go along with it.

The green Gordon's[3] bottle protrudes from their small box of provisions. Nice sight. Gesturing to his wife he says, this woman never goes anywhere without a tin of fairy cakes, and you catch a certain fondness in his voice. While the men build you are left with her. If you make it to the village alone you buy a *Western Mail*[4] to occupy her, but by the time you return from feeding lambs and other outside jobs she is waiting with articles to read aloud and the crossword to finish. T something, M something, something O. You always say blank rather than something, which she says throws her and she can't concentrate. By nine you need the gin.

Your father-in-law performs the nightly ceremony, making a big deal, four tall glasses, thick slices of lemon, pours in too much tonic. You'd rather have a double tomorrow. No one is asked if they'd care for another and the bottle is put away. One night, last up, you help yourself then add a little water to the bottle. In case.

The waterfall is a twenty minute drive. It's everyone's first visit. The river starts in the mountain high above the farm; you've traced it on the map. On the road nothing skips your mother-in-law's attention. Passing a woman in a red hat, she says, she's got her hat on. The men take absolutely no notice of her interminable dialogue, if you are next to her you feel duty bound to comment. Sometimes you think she's appealing for your support as a woman. She has five sons and a life of rugby, boxing and cars. When her second son, age three, swallows a Kirby grip[5], the furious doctor tells her to cut his ridiculous hair and if it's a girl she wants, to have another go.

There's a battered sign and un-made car-park. It's a long climb down, but said to be well worth it. The path on the side of the cliff is little wider than a sheep-walk with small hoof marks in a slippery mix of mud and black sheep truckles. Halfway down she freezes and announces she suffers from vertigo. This is news to everyone. She can't move and it's easy to foresee disaster. After a few minutes she allows her son to

[1] *ty bach*: an outdoor toilet
[2] a short break for refreshments
[3] a brand of gin
[4] *Western Mail*: a Welsh newspaper
[5] *Kirby grip*: a type of hairpin

reverse her in a little way and plonk her down on a tump of grass in a slight recess. He tells her not to look down. It's a sheer drop. He has to shout over the roar of water. You're in front clinging on to your small daughter; your son is tightly gripped by his grandfather.

This trip is your idea, like buying the ruin.

At the bottom your daughter says Daddy and he's there taking her from you and whisking her across the narrow strip of mud and pebbles. You look up to see your mother-in-law braced against the side of the hill. No point waving, she's doing as she's told, white face staring straight ahead into the opposite cliff. You glance at your husband, her youngest son, laughing with his little girl. Your son is bouncing along on his grandfather's shoulders, shrieking with excitement, his curls a white ball in the wind. Will he happily abandon you on the side of a cliff in thirty years' time?

The wall of surging water is the height of a cathedral, crashing down to a plateau of polished stone. Edging on to this wet surface you try to explain grandma's fears to the children; your words are snatched by the thunder of wind and water, but they hear their father say she's alright and not to worry. They carry on holding hands in a wobbly crocodile[6].

You look up. Her face hasn't moved. If she looks down now she will glimpse only you. You're the last to tiptoe carefully over the slippery stone and disappear behind the cascade of water boiling onto the boulders. There is no looking out; the blue curtain of river water is thick as brocade. What an experience, you all look at each other in astonishment and make faces, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, smiling, gasping. Everyone glistens with beads of river, as if sweating.

Will the stranded grandmother listen to the details? Once home, you must keep watch or she'll smuggle sweets to the children from her secret stash, in reward for their courage and surviving yet another endurance test. She considers them deprived, but knows your wishes. Their sweet day is Friday. Today is Tuesday. You will never forgive or forget her years of deviousness. The day you caught her smearing chocolate between the lips of your nine month old daughter, "just to give her the taste", the taste you were trying to stave off as long as possible. The taste that made the foolish woman the size she is. Wiping your baby's little mouth you felt tearful and flooded with disappointment, realising what you were up against.

When you reach her safe place on the edge her teeth are clattering together, she's shaking and incapable of standing. Her husband and son take her arms and cajole her into a little movement then another and again until finally she's upright. The children are mesmerised, they've never seen her in this helpless state. Back in the Land Rover an awkward silence reigns.

Your husband drives a different route home. He spots a handwritten *Things For Sale* sign and suggests following it, maybe out of curiosity, maybe in the hope it will break the tension. After two miles, no houses, another sign and into badly-fenced marshy land, he pulls up at a sprawling shack in the same grey tin as your sheep shed. A piece of hardboard is nailed to the gate*: "Everything for sale, books, furniture, good home wanted for hens, ducks and a racehorse. We are going to India"*. A young bearded man steps from a faded multi-coloured Transit[7] and lifts his hand.

You can just see him in India, having done Wales. Your mother-in-law cringes and tightens up and says the children can stay with her (to be saved from contamination or stuffed with fudge?), but they're already out.

She is alone again.

The men and children are directed to the poultry and you are taken into the house. You half wish she's with you, but this would prove as fearful for her as the waterfall. What you view as intriguing, she'd see a tip[8]. Old rugs rolled up, saucepans placed to catch leaks, trays of china, a deerhound stretched out with a pile of pups. Novels, books on self-sufficiency, organic veg, herbal medicine for farm animals, homeopathy, fill every shelf of a plain dresser. You ask if the dresser is for sale. Everything you see, says the man.

---

[6] *in a wobbly crocodile*: in an unsteady line

[7] Ford Transit (a van)

[8] pile of rubbish

The next room is bare apart from a rough concrete trough about eight foot square and four foot deep. A naked girl sits in the soapy water breastfeeding a young naked baby. Above the bath is an ingenious shower: a tangle of pipes with punched-out holes, attached to ham hooks on the ceiling. The man strokes her wet hair, she smiles at us. You pass through to a makeshift dairy with old hand-milking machines and see the glossy racehorse from a dusty window. There are sheds, bikes with baskets, hens pecking and fat ducks splashing in tin baths.

You select ten books and ask about the dresser. It's forty pounds. You don't have that much money on you. He says take it now and bring the money another time. *Really?* Yes he says, you'll feel worse than me if you don't. And you know you'll remember his wise prophecy forever. Casually, he clears the shelves and the men carry the dresser out to the Land Rover in two parts and tie it on the roof. The children badly want some ducks. Their father says maybe, he's pleased with the dresser.

Driving home you attempt to describe the extraordinary tin house to your mother-in-law, but she shudders with distaste and doesn't want to hear. As the men put the dresser into place in the kitchen she prepares tea and six plates of fruitcake. The dresser is basic, as homemade as the bath. You love it, unhooking a cup and stacking plates will replay the day and the man's wise words. How can you buy such a thing, she says, it'll have to be scrubbed out. You're not keen on getting wood wet.

Coming across the adventurers has revived your spirit, removed you for a moment from her cakes, biscuits and "I'll just put the kettle on" and transported you to India.

The men and children are on their way back to the house in the marsh with forty pounds and a cardboard box for two Silver Appleyard[9] ducks.

Seeing her poised with cloths and sprays, you make the decision to begin on the dresser in the morning. She picks up the newspaper and says five letters: B something, something, something Z. You ask if she's okay, after the waterfall ordeal. She nods, reads out the clue again and says, I know: blitz[10]. Then stays as she is, head low over the newspaper, unusually still. And quiet. You assume she's just glad you didn't guess it and is concentrating on the next clue. You'd like to suggest an early gin. Eventually she looks up with eyes full with tears, a revelation in someone usually devoid of emotion.

It must have been the noise, she says, of the water. I just couldn't stand it. It was incredibly loud, you say. The force of water, the power, she says, virtually crying. You don't realise.

You get up and put an arm round her thick shoulder. She's quiet for a moment. You never touch this woman or need to squeeze her words out. You know she's lived a life she hadn't envisaged. She has few friends. When young and slim she gave up all her girlfriends to join her fiancé's prestigious cycling club, they biked fifty miles every Sunday. Now, though bewildered by your family's daring move to the wilds and the risks involved, still she speaks of you all with a strange, guarded pride. You rub her arm. Her company would be bearable if you could only admire her for something, but the sweet business is too disrespectful.

I'm being silly she says, the water was going in the opposite direction. And she tells you about the war[11]. Her war.

When the sirens go off she tucks her two baby sons in the big old carriage pram and runs them half a mile through Bristol to her mother's house, all hours of the day and night, bombs falling all over the city. With her husband and father fighting in France, she and her mother are alone. You sit back down to listen and don't ask why they couldn't live together.

One night, a water pipe bursts directly in front of the pram which flies into the air; she sees it land upside down as she's thrown to the ground and stabbed in the leg by a shard of metal. A warden comes running and lifts the pram over like a feather; miraculously her babies are unharmed. He takes them all to an air raid shelter for hot drinks.

---

[9] *Silver Appleyard*: a breed of duck

[10] *the Blitz*: the German air attacks on Britain in 1940

[11] *the war*: World War II

Another time, her husband has three days leave and she's late, dashing to meet him at the station. In her haste the baby she's carrying slides out through his shawl down between the platform and the stationary train. He too is unharmed.

She has your undivided attention.

It was very hard with rationing, she says, smidgen of butter for a week, didn't see a banana till the fifties. And no sweets of course. No sweets in the war.

(2019)