

Liminal



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Chris Keil

ALCEMI 

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# Prologue

*She was walking so fast that they had to break into a skipping trot from time to time to keep up with her. On their left, the sea had turned milky, the line of stunted palm trees on the other side of the road silhouetted over the water. On the horizon, the lighthouse on the headland across the bay blinked palely. They were walking past a row of cafes and little restaurants, just opening up for the evening, a waiter in a white shirt setting out chairs on the pavement as a jangle of bouzouki notes followed them up the street. One bar was already busy; looking through the back into the kitchen, Geraint could see someone hefting a saucepan onto a dim blue flame. A boy in a red T-shirt clacked misted beer bottles onto a tray, scribbling the order on a pad and slipping the scrap of paper under a saucer of olives. There was a group of girls at an outside table: teenagers, elegant, darkly animated. One of them looked up with a flashing smile of recognition as they passed, and called out "Jessica!" The others joined in, waving and calling, their voices as sweet and mild as doves in the soft air: "Jessica! Jessica!"*

*She went over to their table and the girls fluttered round her, taking her hand, touching her hair, stroking the bright silk of her shirt. Musical phrases drifted over to Geraint and Angela, antiphonal trills of laughter. Angela blew her nose, and Jessica turned, pulling away from the girls, disengaging their hands.*

*"They're so sweet," she said as they set off again. She turned and waved at them. "They're so sweet."*

*"Who are they?" Angela asked.*

*"My students," Jessica said. "Some of them anyway. Aren't they lovely."*

*Geraint nodded, glancing back at them. They crossed a children's playground, passing between swings and climbing frames, their footsteps scuffing up cigarette-ends and puffs of dusty sand. A couple were sitting on a bench*

under the shadow of the oleander bushes, cigarettes glowing and dimming in the twilight. A shallow flight of steps led up out of the playground onto a bigger street. Jessica turned and waited at the top for them. Angela missed her footing and stumbled for a moment.

“How far is this bloody place?” she said, raising her voice against the shrill buzz of a moped.

Jessica led them across the street, dodging between cars. A motor-bike, loaded with three kids clutching each other for balance, wobbled wildly past them. The narrow pavement was crowded with people, strolling, chatting, promenading with linked arms. Geraint and Angela walked in the gutter to move a little faster, trotting to keep up, stepping up into the press of bodies as cars pushed passed them, music thumping. He got separated from Angela, and stood waiting for her as people jostled past him. She reappeared, carried along in the crowd, her shoulders rounded. They stepped down into the road and hurried on.

Jessica was waiting for them outside a brightly lit café. They followed her into an area of tables looking out over the street, half covered over with a trellis of striped awnings and trailing plants, hung with lightbulbs. A middle aged woman appeared from the kitchen at the back and beamed at Jessica, taking her hand, patting her cheek, drawing the three of them over to a table.

“I came here a couple of times with Aled,” Jessica said. “I thought maybe they could help us.”

Angela’s chair screeched across the tiled floor as she caught Geraint’s eye.

“Plus the food’s really good,” Jessica said. There was a silence. A waiter shook out a paper table-cloth and wafted it down on the table, smoothing it and weighting it down with glasses, a jug of water, a basket of bread. He said something to Jessica, who nodded and smiled, gesturing with her hands. “Megalo,” she said. “A big one.” She smiled at Geraint. “We need some wine,” she said. “Don’t you think?”

From the bright terrace, framed in blue and white canvas, Geraint looked out onto the street, where ranks of strangers moved past in the evening light, like figures in a frieze.

“Last time you saw him,” he began.

The waiter brought the wine in a dark earthenware jug. Jessica leaned across the table, filling their glasses.

“You saw him quite a bit then?” Angela asked her.

Jessica drank, shaking her head with an ambiguous gesture. “Sorry,” she



said. "Went down the wrong way. Good though, isn't it?" Geraint nodded, drinking again. He noticed Angela hadn't picked up her glass.

Jessica looked at her. "Not really," she said. "A few times." She took a piece of bread and pushed the basket across the table to them. The waiter set out plates, and a big oval dish of salad in the centre of the table. Angela blew her nose. The waiter gave her an admiring glance.

A couple settled themselves at the table next door, the man clicking his fingers for the waiter, setting out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter in front of him with fussy movements. He caught Geraint's eye and nodded, unsmiling. Jessica went into the kitchen to see what was happening with their food, coming back with another jug of wine. A second waiter came on duty as the place filled up, the level of noise seeming to rise in jerky increments, fragments of music glittering in the dark murmur of conversation, harsh notes of irritation or hilarity, sudden incomprehensible shouts, light and sound blurred through the smoke of cigarettes and grilling meat.

Geraint found himself looking over the top of his glass at Jessica; she was saying something to Angela, who nodded dolefully. Her name, he thought, was exactly right: Jessica.... He pursed his lips, afraid he'd been silently mouthing his thoughts, and set the wine glass down carefully in front of him.

Angela had been bundling about in her handbag, and now drew out a photograph mounted on a piece of card. Jessica took it, smiling as she angled it into the light.

"Not how I think of him at all," she said softly, her expression, it seemed to Geraint, inward and drowsy with memory.

"It's the best one I could find," Angela said sharply.

"Let me see it," Geraint said.

It was one of his graduation pictures, two years ago now. His gown hung lopsidedly as he posed, grinning, against the red brick of the college library. Geraint looked at the open, untroubled face, wide eyes that had nothing to do with mystery.

"It's good," he said, smiling back at the face in the photograph. "It's a good likeness."

Jessica had called the waiter over. He pulled up a chair and sat beside her, studying the photograph as she spoke to him, his eyes moving from her to Angela and back again.

"Anglos," Jessica was saying. "Anglos. English." She sighed. "My Greek

isn't up to this," she said.

"I thought you were a teacher," Angela said.

"I teach English," Jessica told her. "Not Greek."

She tapped the photograph. "Anglos," she said again. "Zeetoume afton ton andra. Prin apo theeo evthomathes. Two weeks ago."

She pointed to herself. "Me mena. With me."

The waiter nodded, his smile deepening.

"Wid you," he said. "Wid you." He looked up as a woman appeared in the doorway leading through to the back and called to him, her voice harsh as she gestured round at the crowded room. He motioned her over and she came to the table, nodding and smiling, wiping her hands on her apron before taking the photograph. "My mother," the waiter told them.

She handed the photograph back with a sudden cackle of laughter, wagging her finger at Jessica, shaking her head and chattering, her tone full of delighted disapproval.

"Two weeks ago," Jessica said again. "Prin apo theeo evthomathes." They both looked at her then, shrugging, heads tilted back and hands turned outward, before getting up from the table and walking back towards the kitchen. As they crossed the room, the old lady gave her son a shove and pretended to cuff him round the head. Geraint tipped the last of the wine into their glasses.

*Part One*

Separation

# Chapter One

The waiting room was crowded. He sat down between an old couple, who shifted slightly to let him in. There was a set of shelves along the wall, divided into pigeon-holes full of leaflets, labelled by subject. *Alcoholism*, Geraint read, *Depression... Menopause... Anxiety*. He knew without looking that Mrs Evans was staring at him. The receptionist's phone rang and he caught Mrs Evans' eye. *Tinnitus... Constipation*. There'd been a run on that one, hardly any left. *Prostate*. Geraint sighed deeply. *Sexual problems*. He glanced through a magazine from the pile, stopping as a life-size nipple stared back at him from the glossy page, every detail in perfect focus. He flipped it shut and slid it back onto the pile. The old lady on his left eased herself a little further away. On the bench opposite, Mrs Evans glared at him. Geraint stared at his feet. The buzzer rang, and the girl behind the desk checked her screen; she called his name a little hesitantly, smiling.

Eleri sat him on a chair by her desk and gave him a curved pot to hold under his ear. "How's Aled?" she asked him. "Broken any more records yet?"

"I'm supposed to meet him at the track this afternoon." Geraint could sense her moving about behind him, but didn't like to look round to see what she was doing. She poked something into his ear, working it in until he coughed and screwed his eyes shut. A pump started up with a thin buzzing sound, and then a jet of icy water drummed in his ear.

"Alright?" she asked him. "Not too hot?"

He shook his head, wincing. The water sluiced inside his head. He shut his eyes again, imagining it scouring the canals of his skull, rushing through spirals and sockets of bone.

“*Duu, Duu,*” Eleri was saying. “Where’s all this come from?”

The pump stopped buzzing. He could feel water trickling out of his ear and down his neck. Eleri shone a light in his ear.

“Better?” she said.

Geraint felt a bright gasp of sensation, as though a wind was blowing through his head.

In the car on the way to the track, he found himself thinking of the conversation he’d had with Lydia yesterday after the Friends of the Museum had left. He wondered whether she knew how he searched her face as they spoke. After their conversations he had only the vaguest sense of what had been said. He saw her lips, her teeth, the lucid face in front of him. He was distracted only when she made some extravagant gesture with her hands, long fingers raking the air. He had read her an extract from Giraldus Cambrensis, fetching the book down from the shelf, glancing at her as he read:

*“A certain knight named Gilbert, after a long and unremitting anguish, which lasted three years, and the most severe pains as of a woman in labour, at length gave birth to a calf, an event which was witnessed by a great crowd of onlookers. Perhaps it was a portent of some unusual calamity yet to come. It was more probably a punishment exacted for some unnatural act of vice.”*

“Presumably,” Lydia had murmured, smiling to herself, not looking at him, “involving a bull.”

The traffic lights by the bridge seemed stuck on red. He laid his forehead against the warm glass of the window, looking out across a stubbly field. In the middle distance crows were circling round a little house. The windows were boarded up, and a tree had grown up through the chimney and then died, the whitened branches clawing stiffly against the sky, as though smoke had turned to bone.

On the other side of the river, the lower end of town was empty. The faraway roar of a military jet rose and fell, echoing, above him, as though there were fissures in the sky down which the sound ran, like mercury. The door of the White Swan was open onto the pavement, the dark interior cool. He turned left into the street that ran down towards the Leisure Centre. They hadn’t collected the rubbish that morning; the multi-coloured garbage bags heaped outside front doors

along the street, had the look of the flowers that appear so quickly at scenes of death and tragedy.

The plastic bags reminded him of the latest donation, the contents of most of Protheroe's attic, by the look of it. The long table in the Conference Room was filled with bags and cardboard boxes. He'd unpacked a little of it: a record player, a gas fire, a couple of umbrellas; jars of pickled fruit from 1942, floating in khaki-coloured liquid like anatomical specimens; a set of fifty icing horns; a bag full of little tin dishes for baking madeleines. It would take a week to sort through it all.

At the running track, a breeze lifted the flag above the Pavilion, the dragon rippling, as though seen through water. The seats at the far end of the oval were mostly empty. A rattle of applause crossed the space as a race came to a desultory end, a group of runners breaking step over the line, as though some tight spring inside them had broken. He caught sight of Aled; the boy detached himself from the group and came towards him, pulling the numbered slip over his head and waving it.

"See that, Dad?" he called. "Lucky seven strikes again." He stooped and slipped off the running shoes, walking gingerly across on bare feet.

"Did I see what?" Geraint asked him.

Aled shook his head, smiling. "Angela's over there," he said. "Are we going for a drink?" He cupped his hands and shouted: "Hey Ange! You see that?"

They sat at a table by the plate glass wall of the bar, looking down through the well of the building into a basketball court where foreshortened figures bounced and boomed and echoed. Angela arranged the objects on the table between them, sliding an ashtray into the centre, and positioning salt and pepper on either side. Geraint found himself wondering again just what Aled saw in her, why he wanted to marry her. She was beautiful, of course, in a statuesque sort of way, but there was something conventional, over-controlled, about her. The phrase *carrying a torch* came into his mind. Angela was carrying a torch for Aled in exactly the way the Statue of Liberty carried a torch. She became aware of him watching her, and looked

up with a short smile.

Aled brought drinks over. Geraint watched his son as the boy dipped his head to the pint glass, pursing foam off his lip. He had a sudden memory of an afternoon the two of them had spent blackberrying, the last day of the summer holidays. The fruit wasn't ripe, the taste as sharp as regret, but the intense sourness had been a challenge, making him grin, black-lipped.

"Then we thought: what about the Museum?" Angela was saying. "The big lawn at the front there, down to the pond. All those lovely trees. Wouldn't it be lovely? Mam thought so too."

She put her hand over Aled's, speaking for both of them. "We need lots of room after the church," she said. "We'll be going to the Holly Bush later, of course, the young people, I mean. But we thought: speeches, you know? And everybody gets a glass of champagne."

Geraint nodded. "What if it rains?" he said.

"Not if we had a marquee," Angela said. "Anyway, we need somewhere, long tables, to pour the champagne, you see. White tablecloths, flowers." She sighed, tightening her grip on Aled's hand. Over the rim of his glass, Aled rolled his eyes at Geraint, an ambivalent look.

"Sorry I missed the race," Geraint said.

"And it's having the car-park too," Angela said. "Not everywhere in town you can park a lot of cars."

Aled looked at his watch. "Better get back," he said. "Did Nana get hold of you?"

Geraint shook his head.

"She wants you to call round, something she wants to tell you."

At his mother's house, Geraint found the spare key under the flowerpot and let himself in. He stood in the dim hallway for a moment, breathing in the thin, characteristic odour: rubber, cabbage, and something sharper he could never quite define. He could hear voices from the kitchen. His mother got up as he came into the room.

"Just in time," she said. "Look who's here."

She had been sitting at the table with that little woman whose name he could never remember.

"Rosie," his mother said. "Back again, like the swallows. You

remember my son, don't you Rosie. She's been in North Wales, Rosie has. Sit down, Geraint, you're making me nervous, standing there."

"I was in Conwy," Rosie said. "A bit colder what I'm used to. Come along that A548 from Prestatyn. Busy road that."

Geraint watched her as she spoke. Must be about sixty, he thought. Her face had the grainy, reddened look of someone who lives outdoors, not very clean, but lit by an expression of extraordinary sweetness, bright and direct.

"Takes you through Rhyl," she was saying. "Won some award, that place; Most Boring Town in the world, or something." Her voice was curiously harsh and flat, distanced, as though she was reading. "Left it after Abergele," she said. "Took the B5381 after that, through Betws and Dolwen. Not much traffic; local, you know, farmers and that."

Geraint cleared his throat and looked at his mother. "You wanted to tell me something?" he said quietly, against the grain of Rosie's voice.

His mother widened her eyes at him. "Did I dear?" she said. "I don't think so."

"Course, you got to go to Conwy from there," Rosie said. "Unless you dropped down to Llanrwst. The A470 would get you there, but that can be busy. If it's wet you get that spray. There's a B-road, of course, B5113. You know that one?"

Geraint shook his head. "Aled told me," he said to his mother. "I saw him at the running track. He said you wanted to see me."

Rosie had been taking off various bits of clothes as she spoke: a scarf, a plastic rain-jacket. She had a long coat on under that, then a grey fleece; she slipped the coat off and hung it on the back of the chair. Geraint wondered where she slept at night on her travels, on her endless pointless pilgrimage to nowhere, an itinerary which never seemed to stop unrolling in her head.

His mother came to the front door with him. "You're always in such a hurry," she said. "It's like Aled, I never see him at all these days. And you're getting too thin."

"He told me you wanted to see me about something," Geraint said carefully.

"Not *about* something," his mother said. "Just to see you. I never



see you these days. Worse than Aled.” She took his hand, patting it. “Do you think he’s really going to marry that girl? She’s too tall for him.”

Geraint shrugged. “Looks like it,” he said. “So there’s nothing you need? You sure?”

She smiled at him. “I better get back to Rosie, I’m going to make her something to eat. Tell Aled to come and see me.”

At the Museum, a couple of teenagers pushed prams slowly past the display of mesolithic arrowheads, turning to stare at stone axes and Bronze Age daggers. In his office, Geraint called Lydia’s number, but there was no reply. He got out the file on the Pluffgoulu twinning project: *Twin Towns, Twin Histories*, and shuffled through the most recent correspondence.

*We can donate to you our exhibit THE HISTORY OF FISH, which you know is very populous in Bretagne, especial in Pluffgoulu. We have the net and seagull, together with some part of boat.*

He found Janice in the Conference Room, going through the Protheroe stuff with her placement student. They’d unwrapped a vacuum cleaner, and were examining a cardboard label tied to the hose. Geraint opened a cigar box, full of teaspoons.

“Somebody called for you,” Janice told him. “Reporter from the *Post*. Roddy something. Said he’d look in again this afternoon.”

He went back to his office and checked his email. There was a message from Mike: *Can I have your policy paper on access and social exclusion. I want to bring it to the Heritage Services meeting on Monday.*

Geraint sighed, thinking of the teenage mothers; on rainy days there might be four or five of them, moping about on the ground floor. They couldn’t get the pushchairs up the stairs, so their knowledge of the County’s history must end in the late fifth century. Did that constitute exclusion? He got out the draft of his paper and stared at it, wrote: *School Visits* in the margin of the front page, and put it back in the file.

He went to the library and reached down the 1903 volume of the *Proceedings of the Archaeological Society*. Taking it back to his desk,

he felt a flicker of excitement as the book fell open at the familiar, mysterious words:

*Now Eugenius, together with his sister Brygga, having given up their patrimony and renounced worldly pomp, retired to the remotest part of Armorica, where they built a monastery of stone. About this time Eugenius became blind, and whilst Brygga was tending to him, a white hound came from the wood and stood on the edge of the river, and behind the hound came a stag and a boar. Not long after these events St Brygga resolved to go to Rome.*

He read the passage through again, smiling to himself. That's all there was. All that had remained of St Brygga was a page or so in the Life of St. Eugenius, existing only in a Latin manuscript in the National Archives, and quoted in a paper given to the County Archaeological Society a hundred years ago. That, and St Brygga's Chair above the sea. A life bounded at one end by a slab of stone on a headland overlooking the bay, and at the other by the decision to make a journey. St Eugenius lived out the rest of his life blind and sisterless, surrounded by disciples, working miracles. St Brygga set off for Rome, and disappeared for nearly fifteen hundred years. It was as though she had been travelling all that time, reappearing suddenly.

There was a knock on the door. Geraint shut the book and slid it into the drawer of his desk. Janice appeared in the doorway for a moment, showing the visitor in, giving Geraint a look he couldn't interpret.

"This is Roddy Hughes," she said. "He's from the *Post*."

He looked about eighteen.

"It's a piece on what's available for kiddies locally," he said. "With the summer coming, and the half-term. Things to do on a rainy day like." Geraint got out the leaflets they'd produced for the last Archaeology Day – *Dig This!* – dozens of kids with hammers and goggles smashing boulders of Newport shale into shrapnel. When Roddy sat down, the shoulders of his jacket rose up to the level of his ears. "It's for the Mams really," Roddy said. "What Shall I Do With The Kids Today?" He framed the sentence with quote-mark gestures. He'd been with the paper a year now. His uncle was their main photographer, did all the sports stuff. Roddy was more on the

social side, he told Geraint. He didn't much like doing the Magistrate's Court, but you had to work your way up. "What I'm really after is investigative stories," he said, putting his notebook away and standing up, his suit rearranging itself around him. "Disappearances," he shook Geraint's hand, "and even better, reappearances. Know what I mean? Here's my card."

He got through to Lydia just before the Museum closed. When she answered the phone he heard children's voices in the background; she broke off to speak sharply to them: rapid words in Greek.

"I know it's short notice," he said, thinking how little he knew about her.

"It's OK," she said. "I meet you there."

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"Why it's a chair?" she asked him, pushing her glass across the tablecloth towards him. "On a cliff?"

He poured more wine for both of them.

"It's not really a chair," he said. "It's a big limestone rock. It's about the right height to be a chair, and it's sort of curved on top, as though someone had been sitting on it."

"Looking out to sea," she said.

"Exactly. Anyway, it's always been called St Brygga's Chair. Our local Saint. There's almost nothing else known about her. Just that passage in Eugenius's Life. She decides to go to Rome, and that's the last we hear of her." He hesitated, watching her. "Until now," he said.

He could feel the pressure of his secret knowledge, beating like a dull pulse under the sudden anxiety of sharing it. "It's nothing new," he said. "Just that no one seems to have noticed it." The girl brought their food, and he waited while she set out plates and dishes of vegetables. "There's a Life of St Theosebeia," he said. "It was written by Eustace of Nyssa. It's not exactly a best seller, but it's been translated several times, it's a text you can get hold of. No one put the two things together." Geraint cleared his throat, admiring her patience. "Theosebeia was the Abbess of the double monastery at Thessalonika."

Lydia looked at him then, intense and vivid for a moment.

“The Greek connection,” she said. “You are interested in these holy women.”

“I’m interested in this one,” he said. “She fascinates me. Her life is so mysterious; you just see glimpses of it, like looking through smoke, but you know she’s someone who’s driven by the spirit, by inspiration. Everything about her is out of the ordinary. She represents the magical possibilities of life: the blinding flash that changes everything.” He shook his head. “Not easy to explain.”

Lydia patted his hand, smiling at him. “Go on with the story.”

“Towards the end of the Life,” Geraint said, “there’s a description of some of the Abbess’s companions.” He paused. “One of these companions is called Brygga. Well, Briggana, but it’s the same name, I’m sure.”

A couple sat down at the table next to them, nodding and smiling, Mel Evans and his wife.

“How’s Aled?” the man asked. “Saw him play in the Charity Match last month – that knee of his alright?”

Geraint nodded and smiled at them. He looked back at Lydia.

“It says she had come from the far West, and that she *“excelled in holiness and philosophy.”* It describes how she leaves the monastery, and builds an oratory near Corinth.”

Lydia looked up at him. “I was there with my husband,” she said. “Go on. There is more?”

“Yes there is. I copied some of it down. Listen.” He took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket, smoothed it out on the table:

*Sometimes, when thirst seized that noble woman, she would bring modest refreshment to her mouth by the green herbs and moist grass. In that hot country, where the sun is very strong, she discovered a place with a little moisture. She dug it with a sharp stone as much as possible and at night fall she returned and offered God the usual prayers. The next day she came and found the pond filled with water and edible herbs, fed by a never-ceasing spring.*

Mel Evans caught his eye. “Very good,” he said. “Very fine.”

Lydia was watching him with a sort of amused tolerance.

“Forgot the salad,” the waitress said, making room for the bowl in the centre of the table. “Sorry about that.”

“Edible herbs,” Lydia murmured.

Geraint lowered his voice. “This oratory she built,” he said. “The Life says it looks out: *across the Gulf at an ancient temple*. He waited for her to say something. “Don’t you see?” he said. “There’s two things: firstly, it’s very exciting to know what happened to St Brygga. She’s our local saint, and now we know where her journey ended. But also, the description of her oratory, it’s quite precise: the spring, the ancient temple across the gulf.” He drank some wine. “I think we could find it, maybe find the very place, or near enough.”

Lydia shrugged slightly, the corners of her mouth turning down.

“Maybe,” she said. “There are many ancient temples.” Her gaze seemed to turn inwards, overcast with memory, like the shadows of clouds on the sea. “Maybe it’s possible.”

She told him she couldn’t stay out late; her mother-in-law was in the house. Geraint nodded, wishing he’d asked her more about herself. On the pavement outside her front door she tilted her cheek towards him to be kissed.

“Do you have children?” he asked, hearing how abrupt the question sounded, shutting his eyes as his lips brushed the line of her cheekbone.

“Of course,” she said.