

Salvage



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ALCEMI 

First impression: 2007

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Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council

Editor: Gwen Davies

ISBN: 0-9555272-0-1
978-0-9555272-0-3

Printed on acid-free and partly-recycled paper.
Published by Alcemi and printed and bound in Wales by
Y Lolfa Cyf., Talybont, Ceredigion SY24 5AP
e-mail ylolfa@ylolfa.com
website www.alcemi.eu
tel 01970 832 304
fax 832 782

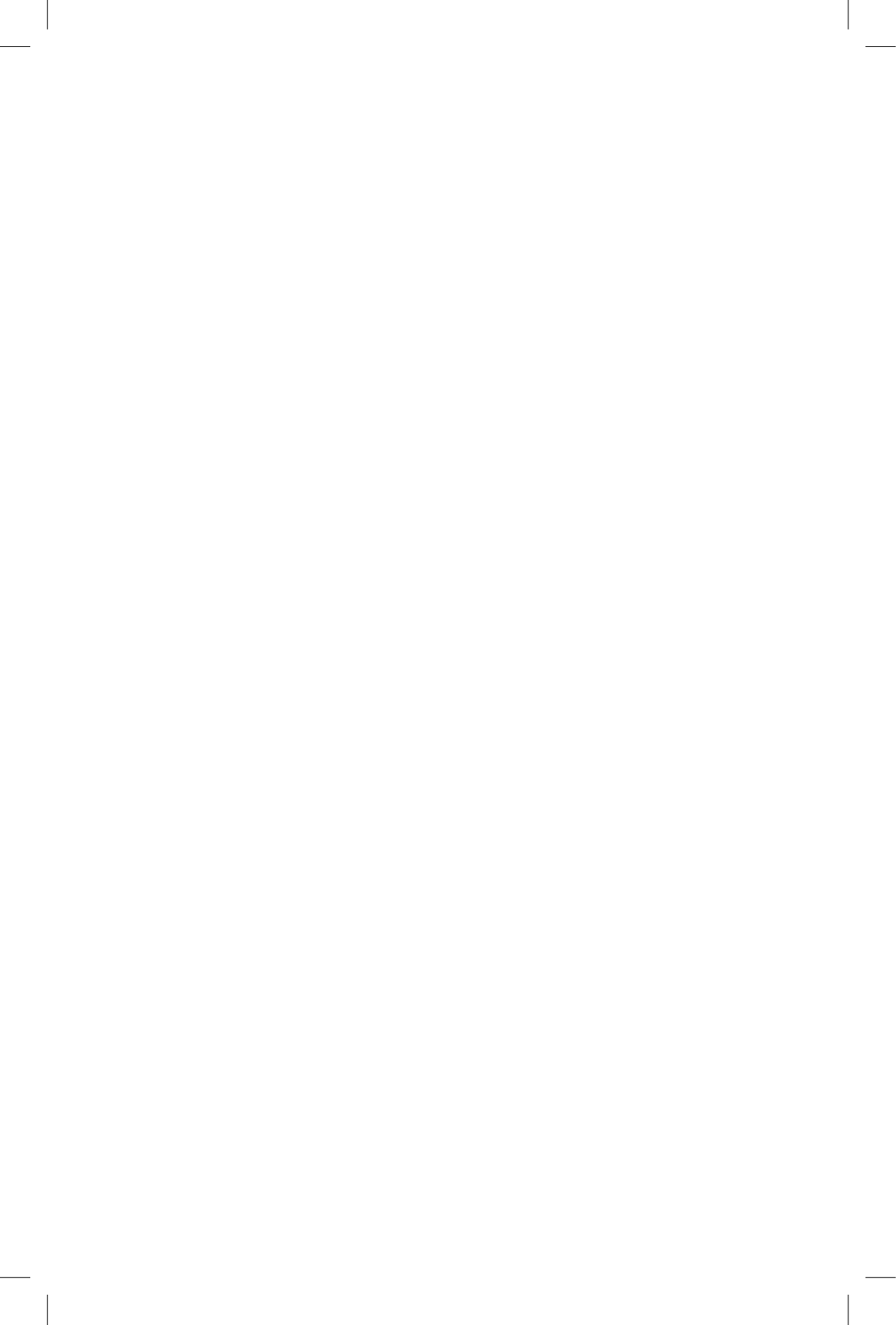
for David



from WHAT IS IT WITH WALES?

...the place brings out the passions in me just as surely as a few days in the Med dampens them down. Suddenly, what I love I'm crazy over (its green heart, its Orphean tongue, its wild fingers poking the Atlantic) and what I hate....

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PART 1



Chapter 1

“Dolphins! Three dolphins!” someone shouts from the sand.

On the almost empty beach a few heads turn. It’s getting toward the end of one of those strange days that have occurred here off and on for a couple of months now – ever since the storm. There’s an unseasonable nip, a borrowed chill that must be flowing down from the north-east. And no sun: over the sea, morning and afternoon, a pigeon-grey sky just teases with a shilling-piece, an old coin bit of brightness.

Here’s extra moistness rolling in from the waters of Aberhiw Bay and up over the land, even though every stone and slab is already slick with its own sweat. The air feels like something that has to be inhaled strand by strand. It’s an impediment to more than movement. The bark of a dog falls onto rocks a few feet from its origin. A woman calls to her loitering companion to hurry and, at first, he fails to react.

“Dolphins! Look!”

“There – three dolphins!”

Whatever they are, they are superb: bewilderingly speedy and vital. In the heaviness of the afternoon, in the mauve soup of the sea, they are the streak of drama that every wave-watcher has craved.

They are not dolphins but porpoises, common porpoises – though these days far from common – and there are more than three. Seven black-backed, white-bellied pulses of heat in a cool ocean. There are five adults: four females and a young and backward male. With them are two calves, born off the coast of Africa last year. As the porpoise-unit sweeps back towards the arm of the bay (the small whiting shoal, their object, has reformed in the deeper water at the base of the cliff) two of the females plus a calf breach and the watchers’ “Oh-h!” carries along

the tide-line. Then another female and her calf reveal themselves.

The fish are caught in an instant. They are the poor, battered remains of a much larger bait-ball that, far out above the four hundred foot chasm of St George's Channel, have been set upon by true dolphins. This bay – Aberhiw Bay – is small and comparatively shallow, although bulging with the just-turned tide. The route to the open sea is the neck of a bag. To their hopeless prey, the porpoises – back and forth, under and over – must seem able to tighten it at will. Nothing escapes the genially wide mouths. Fish are halved or quartered, still alive or beheaded with a snapping flick of teeth that borders on the virtuoso. Only the backward male is reduced to swallowing fish whole. Soon all that's left of the whiting are their platinum scales, ash-keys of the deep, falling to the bed of silt.

On the shingle, the couple and the dog-owner wait out the period of discouragement.

“They've gone, haven't they?”

“Is that –? No, no. Ah well.”

“What a sight, eh?”

The dog is lured away from its rancid crab shell. The couple link hands and turn in thought from the disorderly land's edge to the surety of home. The last, lone walker of the tide-line straightens up and rubs an aching spine with one free hand. In the other he holds (to be stowed carefully away, now, before the rucksack is shouldered) a small, glass vessel. Old, or at least unusual: once the squat little thing would have held a salve of some sort, would have come complete with – a glass stopper?

For people and creatures alike the bay is becoming a past place.

The porpoise school has already sampled the current along the outside edge of the eastern rocky outcrop. It's colder, more limpid than the bay's contents and carries an assortment of debris from around the point: branches torn from deep kelp-woods, plastic containers, a board of tropical timber....

...But what's this? A flapping blue sheet, from which rope dangles. It holds a precarious shape that the young and backward male cannot help but deflate. He turns and performs a complete somersault, over and through the hanging stream of tiny bubbles that he has just created. But the females are intrigued

by something else. A shadow – no, not a shadow. A bony but still substantial entity, it's rising now from far beneath them, coming up on the strong surge of water that's the peak of the tide.

Playfully one of the mothers nips its flank.

Any languorous swimmer's a mark for the mob. But this set-upon creature leaks a fetid signature more bitter than squid-ink that the porpoises recognize. The primary female's anxiety spills out amongst the group, inciting the babies' whistling. A calf-less sister orbits the stricken diver and plunges down to nudge it upward in a reflexive action, part challenge, part jest.

But this swimmer will not be helped. A mere tweak, a hint of contact, has it spraying particles of its outer layers, the whipping up of a milky cloud of itself which, rather than deflecting the predator, is a magnet for tiny fish. These stand off and hover. They dart. They probe the intricacy of its flowing structure, the soft and the gristly. The sweetly enticing and the inert.

The wide extent of its grin.

Stupidly the thing seems diverted from its own, original plan. It spins on its axis and drifts inshore. When the rotation's stilled, it lies along the top of the current, its own length deep. Content, apparently. The tiddlers and fry, startled into dispersion, come sneaking back and new recruits are added to the flotilla. Bronze pollack and gurnard and baby wrasse. They blossom as shimmering, motile wreaths around each of the four limbs until turbidity wraps them into a single smeared event.

The tattered kelp has soon caught up with and overtaken the whole entourage. It begins a leisurely re-descent to the lobster floor and the black flicker of eels. But by this time the murderous posse that's a porpoise school is half a mile distant. They have the bulk of Bardsey Island in their sights... where they have breached the herring gulls settle, gleaning scraps.

Chapter 2

You don't walk a cat. Nobody does. Yet it had begun on that same beach for Elly Kent, with someone walking a cat. Elly was exactly a week too early for the dolphins. They were only irregular visitors to the bay: she would have needed uncharacteristic luck to meet with them. Or at least that's how she would have described it, believing herself to be constitutionally hexed.

But afterwards she'd remember much else that was stand-out-strange about the holiday, that free week at the cottage.

She considered it a phenomenon that they should be granted Richard's cottage at all... *not* Richard and Pippa's cottage, note, which might have been normal usage for any other couple. This was *Tŷ Awydd*, according to the smart, gold lettering. This was Richard's cottage – the tasteful little bolt-hole that they'd heard so much about but never banked on seeing. Because that was Richard Congreve all over. He needed you to *acknowledge* what he had although that need was rarely potent enough to make him want to share it. “Wonderful weekend. Can't beat Wales if you get the weather. Wasted on the Welsh. You must come down for a day. It's two hours from Chester, max. I keep thinking, Elly and Martin'd love it here.”

This was as much as Elly expected, as Richard's second season of ownership flowered and began to fade.

... and then, even this expectation diminished. Richard was Elly's husband's oldest friend. In their troubles he'd been Martin's only friend. But some novelty now entered the relationship. Without warning, the crack appeared as a change of tone, though only she would ever have noticed the fissure: “Can't tell you, I'm afraid,” Martin responded to some innocuous question. It was about doings at the hospital where, since their return to England and thanks to Richard, Martin now

worked. After a fashion. Martin's high forehead, indelibly pigmented by a foreign sun, puckered with the realization. "Not seen Richard all week."

As he lounged back with his book, Elly noticed the cheap dark trousers, bought especially for his new job, were already bagged at the knees. A striped cotton shirt gaped open across the tanned neck and the lightly-fuzzed upper chest. No formal clothing could contain her husband for long. The reading matter, Martin's trusty shield against the world, was raised again.

This coolness spread. "For a Chinese? I don't think so – he seems not to have a moment to spare these days."

After all the years of patient Sancho Panzadom, maintained by postcard and letter and then email, after all those years looking forward to the pause in whatever important trip Richard was breaking into just to visit them, her husband began to speak about his best friend in a dissociated, an offhand manner.

Richard had done *something*.

As Elly ploughed studiously through the heaped forms on her desk top in the 'Women Into Work' Portakabin and a stray bar of brightness worked its way through the Venetian blind, she thought she may never get a glimpse of *Tŷ Awydd*. Well, what did it matter? She'd seen the world. But she would find out what had provoked the rift. Childhood allies in a new school, teenage *mates* on the prowl – a thirty-year friendship doesn't go bad overnight. Whatever this is, it must be throbbing away like an abscessed tooth in the back of his mouth – and my husband's no stoic. He'll have to have it out.

But she hadn't. Martin, always close, now kept secrets for a living. It, whatever it was, could neither be forgiven... nor revealed.

Sudden as a thaw – and just as this irritating old alliance seemed on the brink of dissolution – came the offer of the holiday.

What to pack for a Welsh summer holiday? When you've been accustomed to serious warmth, more than you think you'll need.

Still stalled in England, Martin was returned triumphant from his third search for the car keys and, at last, about to open the hatch of his mother's car. Elly lingered beside it but with an ill-grace. From

an adjacent garden the radio cricket commentary filtered through a screen of copper beech and on the gravel sat a heap of luggage, battered from its numerous skirmishes with baggage handlers throughout the world. Only the model design of the small Ford they were loading up gave away the year.

Otherwise it could be nineteen sixty-nine: she'd been born that year.

Or nineteen eighty-nine, married then....

Unease was beginning to spread though her, a sensation that had nothing to do with inappropriate clothing nor missing keys. Yet overhead the sky remained a hard bright blue, while the shadows of the trees out on Edens Drive shortened. Preparation for travel, there was its origin. So often they'd packed up, moved on or been about to move on, and stood together in this way at stations, airports, or in sweltering streets waiting for taxis. Not necessarily happy – not always filled with optimism – they'd been care-less, deep down. Both sure of the other. They'd had a buoyancy about them a cancelled ferry or the absence of that English-speaking contact couldn't puncture.

Now she could feel, or convinced herself she could feel, Marjorie observing them from some vantage point high up in the apex of the house. Needing to become exuberant for show, she tapped Martin's shoulder playfully and obviously to draw him around. "Hey, Martin! Welsh summer? What d'you reckon, an oxymoron, or what?"

He wasn't listening, draping a canvas bag across the spare wheel now, so as to prevent its grime getting to his new boots. Then – as an added precaution – he padded out the space with a plastic carrier of journals... now a couple of books....

Her instincts had been proved. Marjorie's head was a bobbing pale sphere against the inner shade of the master bedroom. Watching.

If Martin was aware of his mother he chose not to look up. "What are you taking – to read?" he asked Elly.

"Me? *To read?* Nothing."

"Uh-huh." He left her standing there.

Elly looked up. She chose *The Collected Saki*. Waved it at Marjorie.

Or, she thought with a shiver, this scene could be taking place in nineteen ninety-nine: off to Goa then.

Goa had cured Elly of books: the writing of them.

Yet Goa was *the* place for fiction. So little about this pocket of India could be believed. Religion? Its population had faith in Allah, but also in Our Lady of Miracles, in Buddha, Bom Jesus and Vishnu the Preserver. Money? Nowhere else had Elly seen business conducted with such loud-mouthed persistence – nor had she been given so many gifts. Her newborns, her people, must be able to make their entrances, improvise their stories on this stage. Within a month she'd cast the young man, Christopher, on the run from his London childhood. (He has Martin's fair colouring and Martin's brown birthmark on his left hip – which will just be visible as he swims illicitly in the pools of the tourist hotels after dark. It will be a Martin-ugly foot probing into the circle of a floodlight and watching the water fleas dart towards the bait, before stroking away). Christopher steals mangoes from gardens and begs a fish from out of the nets being drawn up on Caranzalem Beach. A cough develops, a persistent cough that he will never be free of again, and he notices it first as the poor, just-caught *bangra* sizzles on the heat, the surprise in its popping eye. He will find, any moment now, Lakshmi – Lakshmi who looks so very like Ruth in outline, but with a longer more delicate neck, no husband.

Hour after hour, in a school-room so completely filled with heat only strict immobility could prevent its being in the constant forefront of the mind, the real Martin and a class of twelve year-olds chanted *And when the folk there spy me, / They will all come up to me, / With 'Here is the fiddler of Dooney!' / And dance like a wave of the sea.* Elly had heard them at it – had heard the unbroken voices cry out in un-requested repetition: *And dance like a wave of the sea! And dance like a wave of the SEA!...* all the little headmaster's favourites: Yeats, this term.

Ruth cleaned. And hour after hour Elly rattled away at the story that would never be finished, on the opus which would end up rotting in a heap picked over by illiterate children. When the dust had been swept between the joints in the sissoo wood boards and the new

mildew wiped from around the window panes, at Elly's insistence, Ruth made the tea.

Pungent kerosene vapour, filtering out to where Elly *tap, tap, tapped*, was a signal that Ruth's duties had been performed for another day. Beneath Elly's fingers Lakshmi eludes Christopher's reach, giggles and slips from the room as Ruth steps out onto the creaking veranda. For that instant Ruth is a usurper, Lakshmi real. Then Elly and Ruth settle to drink from pewter mugs – English objects that have been slipped into the kitchen by the headmaster himself. But beside Ruth's mug there is a cloth and bits of cutlery for polishing... and these she'll pick up and handle in exquisite caramel-and-cream hands, without pausing in her speech – or loss of attention if she is the listener.

Ruth lived far beyond the school in an ochre-walled hamlet that had been engulfed by the capital and yet was without electricity or a dependable well or even a name. She lived in a corrugated-iron cabin, smaller than the bungalow she had just cleaned and swept, with her husband, two daughters, a son, her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law and her husband's ancient uncle. As the weeks passed and Elly's interest flattered the girl, who was younger than Elly by several years, they discussed Ruth's small tribe and their territorial difficulties: the daughters, "old enough to be useful" but who often ran away rather than watch their small brother. Uncle Bikram, who could not be dissuaded from spitting on the polished cow-dung floor and whose shameful gobbets must be removed constantly to avoid her mother-in-law's displeasure... and Ruth's modest but outrageous ambition: to save enough for the adored son ("my Michael,") to enter the school where his mother was a servant – as a pupil. Ruth's Catholicism could not unbind her from her lowly *Shudra* caste. Even after death she might be refused burial amongst the patrician corpses that lay around the little Church of Our Lady of Succour – but for her son there was this slender hope of extrication by learning.

Of the husband little was offered unless questioned. *What does he do?* He was a gardener. He watered the lawns and spindly palms of the hotels on Dr Atmaram Borker Road: morning and evening. For the rest of the day he circulated among the villas of wealthy, Portuguese-speaking Goans in Fontainhas and the western suburbs of the town.

He owned a bicycle. Elly had glimpsed him riding at immense speed through the swirling dirt, pounding the pedals from garden to garden with a selection of his own tools strapped in a leather harness to his back. A sinewy little man, darker than Ruth, beneath his fawn patina of dust. Whenever Elly mentioned his name Ruth's mouth began to twitch and her hand flew to cover it. *Did she love him?* Ruth giggled, threw up both hands and tugged the tangerine scarf over her sleek black hair... *He works very hard*, was the answer – when she could control her laughter.

Finally, after several near-misses, they came to the heart of the problem.

They were eating apricots, apricots big and syrupy as nectarines. Elly had bought apricots to share and the juice streamed out of them, threatening their clothes and then seeping into ears and hair as they threw back their heads to avoid it. And with the shrieks and excitement and the overwhelming gush of sweetness, the stone was revealed in Ruth's meagre dessert: sex was the problem. In the land of the *Kama Sutra*, in the land of graven cavortings, where neither gods nor goddesses seemed averse to a spot of voyeurism, sex was the problem. No time for, no privacy for, sex.

Once every few weeks the mother-in-law and sister-in-law would be cajoled into taking Uncle Bikram in the weird wooden contraption that passed for a wheelchair, over to see his last remaining friend – a friend who, though wizened as a tortoise neck and older even than Uncle Bikram, still sold roast jackfruit seeds on a pitch near the multi-coloured brilliance of the Mahalaxmi Temple. If Ruth had been sufficiently submissive and her husband sufficiently filial, they would take the children with them. For maybe one whole hour on a Sunday evening, the house would be unoccupied....

But so many things could happen to forestall this erotic hiatus. Uncle Bikram might fancy himself ill at the last moment and refuse to enter his conveyance, a daughter in sheer naughtiness might have chosen that moment to disappear, one of the husband's many employers might have demanded emergency pruning of their casuarina bushes (Sunday meaning nothing to the non-Christian among them). But worst of all, Ruth confessed, the wretched man could find himself

just too exhausted. Bathed and hopeful they would lie down, hand in hand in the shaded room: but Ruth's urgent whispering is answered with a snore.

Ruth was recalled with affection. But the gentle brown girl could mutate without warning into a provocative icon, ever since Elly's return to England. The memory of Ruth flagged up how that return had been to a corner of Marjorie's house. No squabbling children, no unmarriageable sister-in-law, certainly no elderly uncle spitting on the floor... just her and a husband and Marjorie, never more than a wall-width away. A configuration that, as Ruth warned, "is very bad for the love."

But they'd just been thrown out of Goa and love was the last thing on their minds.