



one

ACROSS THE POND

The clouds were thickening with moisture as the Evans family boarded the ship bound for America. Once launched, they stood on the upper deck and watched as their old world disappeared from view. The clouds opened up and it had begun to rain in the distance. Rhodri understood that Mari was terrified of the uncertainty that awaited them. Getting a fair price for what little they owned was difficult enough. Mari felt as though each item was a piece of her own personal history. It was exceedingly bitter for her knowing that once she left her homeland she would never return again. Standing on the deck, she watched as the waves rolled back towards land and wished, in her heart, that she could jump ship and drift on a wave back to Wales. Her daydream came to a close when her husband Rhodri began to speak to her.

“Well would you look at that, Mari. Here we are high and dry and it is absolutely pissing down behind us. I take that as a good sign, don’t you?”

Mari was not worried about signs. Her main concern was keeping an eye on their three sons amongst the throng of people aboard the ship which was no small task considering their ages. It seemed as though a year had passed since they sold the cottage and began their trek to America, when actually, it had only been about two and a half months earlier. They started their journey in their home town of Pontypool, Wales. From there, they made their way to Newport to catch a train bound for Fishguard where they were to take a ferry across the Irish Sea to Queenstown, Ireland. Neither Mari or Rhodri had ever been as far away from

home as Ireland before. After disembarking the ferry, they then boarded the ship that would transport them across the Atlantic Ocean, all the way to Ellis Island into the New York Harbor. Nearing the end of their journey, they ran into some rough water. The ship heaved to and fro. Rhodri, Mari and most of the passengers became seasick and were heaving too. They left the lower berths, which was where they were assigned, to get some air. The ship's movement seemed worse down below, and the stench down there was enough to turn a pig farmer's stomach. They made their way to the viewing deck with their three boys who did not seem to be affected by the rocking and rolling of the ship at all. Geraint, their eldest son, saw an opportunity to have a bit of fun.

While Geraint's parents were seasick at one end of the ship, Geraint challenged Dafydd to a race. They quietly sneaked around the corner, away from their parents' watchful eyes. Then Geraint, knowing Morgan was too young to run the gauntlet, presented his little brother with an official position. He hoped that it would prevent him from feeling excluded from their game and keep him satisfied. Geraint informed Morgan that his main job was to stand at the far end of the ship and call who crossed the finish line first; his secondary job was to keep an eye out for their mother, who he thought would be mad as hell if she caught them running around. Geraint and Dafydd would race the entire length of the ship which was a daunting task considering the ship's movement on the undulating sea. Full concentration was needed to maneuver around the various obstacles that stood between them and their imaginary finish line. There were deck chairs strewn about; some were empty while others were temporarily occupied. The condition of the deck floor was an obstacle in itself. There were slippery areas where those who had become seasick during the voyage puked before they could make it to the rails. The boys also had to dodge the poor sick bastards who, with their hands cupped over their mouths, were rushing from their chairs desperately trying to make it to the rails. After a few races, Mari caught on to their little game. She heard some commotion

on the deck and assumed it was her boys. She tried to muster enough strength to yell at Geraint to stop running around. She managed to warn them to stop or else she would break their necks just in case they failed to do it themselves. Their mother then turned and made her way back to the rail to join her husband; unfortunately, there were more fish for her to feed. Geraint went over to Morgan and, with malice, complimented him on his job of watching out for their mom.

“Good job, Morg.”

Geraint watched as his mother made her way back around the corner and out of sight. He then insisted that Dafydd and he have one more race to determine a winner. Up till then they had completed two races, each winning one.

“Come on, boyo,” Geraint taunted, “just one more to decide who’s the world’s best deck racer. Morgan, take your position, and this time keep your eyes peeled.”

The determining race began. Dafydd had a good lead, but Geraint was not about to lose this race to his younger brother. He called out, “I’ve got yah now, boyo.”

With that Dafydd turned to see the distance between them; he thought Geraint was about to overtake him. As he turned he tripped over a deck chair and fell arse over tits, sliding across the floor. He was covered in puke, and every other foul-smelling substance that covered the deck. Geraint was laughing so hard he thought his side would split. As Geraint crossed the finish line, he laughingly declared himself the winner and world-champion deck racer.

Dafydd called out, “No fair. Interference!”

“Interference my arse,” Geraint exclaimed.

Dafydd protested, while Geraint, appearing to give in to his brother’s protest, asked him if he wanted to have another race.

Geraint told him, “It’s fine with me; we can do it again if you wanna take a chance on getting in more trouble. Hey, boyo, you don’t have to worry about losing the race. When Ma gets a whiff of yah, she’ll crown yah, all right.”

Dafydd was so upset about the loss he had forgotten about the smelly state he got himself into. Geraint assured him that he would come up with some lie to tell their mother. They both threatened Morgan to keep his mouth shut, or else. Morgan was not sure what “or else” meant. He did have enough sense to know that he did not want to find out. Geraint told Dafydd and Morgan that as soon as they found their parents they were to sit perfectly still until Geraint could come up with a story. He instructed Dafydd to stay downwind of their parents. He did not want any extra attention being drawn to them. Rhodri and Mari felt like death itself. Neither of them paid much attention as to why the boys were suddenly there sitting like little angels. Mari was just relieved that they listened to her when she told them to stop running around. She turned to her husband in between heaves and asked if he thought their being so sick was a good sign. Rhodri was not up to a response but thought to himself that she must have been over the worst of it if she had the strength to be sarcastic. The boys were sitting there for over an hour when Dafydd looked towards Geraint for some guidance. By then everything that covered him from head to toe was dried, stiff and crusty. Geraint could not even look in his direction without bursting into laughter. Just then Morgan called to his parents.

“Look Ma, look! I can see her, I can see her!” he yelled out excitedly.

With those lovely words, their seasickness seemed to magically disappear.

Rhodri and Mari miraculously made it to their feet, and with their knees still shaking, patted their foreheads, cheeks and mouth with their sleeves in unison. Rhodri lifted Morgan up onto his shoulders so he could see above the crowd. It was Morgan’s favorite place in the whole world. He knew nothing could ever harm him there. The Evans family tried to move towards the bow of the ship, but to no avail. The viewing deck was chock-a-block full with excited immigrants waving their little American flags. As the ship neared the Statue of Liberty, that great lady, standing tall with her torch stretched to the heavens in New York

Harbor, Rhodri was moved to tears. He knew it was the most awe-inspiring symbol that he would ever see. Mari just wanted off the ship and to plant her feet on dry land. As the family disembarked the ship, Mari placed her hand on Dafydd's shoulder to help guide him down the ramp.

"Duw, Dai, what in the world happened to yah, boyo!"

Geraint jumped in with the perfect answer for Dafydd.

"That lady back there threw up on 'im," he claimed pointing back into the crowd.

"Oh you poor dear. Don't yah worry. We'll get yah cleaned up," Mari said sympathetically.

Dafydd looked over at his brother Geraint with a sigh of relief on his pathetic face. Geraint felt completely chuffed by the acknowledgement of his fast thinking. He blamed the dastardly deed on a woman, knowing full well his parents would never want to further embarrass a lady by questioning her about the incident.

The pace of life in America was ten times faster than it had ever been back in Wales. Back in the old country, without exception, everyone had a routine imbedded in them from childhood. A person could tell what day it was and the time by who went where and what they were doing. Mrs. Dai Price would make her way to the market every morning, after stopping at Fugoni's Café for a cup of coffee, scones and a chat with Myfanwy Powell. The postman, Ianto Jones, delivered the mail early in the afternoon. He needed time to steam the letters open and read everything that was coming into the town. He felt it was his public duty, and no one could call him a slacker on that. If there was ever a bit of gossip you wanted to know, you just asked Ianto. He was more than eager to share his information and even embellish a bit if he didn't think the gossip was juicy enough.

On the rare occasion that there was a real medical emergency, everyone in town knew "The Collier's Arms" was where they could find Dr. Llewelyn, nursing a pint of Ansell's bitter ale while sitting in his favorite chair next to the fireplace. He knew

all the children in the town by name as well as who their parents and grandparents were and where they lived. The town was like a jigsaw puzzle. Everything and everyone fitted tightly together into one scene that was repeated from generation to generation for as long as anyone could remember. The only thing that was changing in Pontypool was the mines were not producing as much coal as they had in the past. The mining company had begun down-sizing. Rhodri was one of many who was made redundant. That was one reason he left Pontypool to emigrate to America. In New York, everyone was rushing to and fro trying to eke out some kind of existence. They had no interest in knowing anything about you and avoided eye contact whenever possible. It was like being tossed from a reflecting pond into the churning white water of a fast-moving river. The native New Yorkers couldn't care less about your existence. They considered many of the immigrants to be less than human.

Rhodri and Mari decided that New York was not the place to rear the boys. They moved southwest and settled in a small town in Pennsylvania called New Salem. It lay nestled in the foot hills of the Allegheny Mountains, less than twenty miles from the West Virginia border. It was a proper coal-mining town. The Evans family was amazed by how much Pennsylvania looked like Wales, especially the area they chose to live in. Rhodri and the boys felt right at home the first time they laid eyes on the town. Rhodri went to work in the mines while they moved into the company housing that was set up for the miners and their families.

A heap of discarded slate was the town's landmark. It was only about a mile down the valley and stood about seventy feet tall. It did not matter where you stood in the town, whether you were in the patch or in the valley where the churches and businesses were, the great heap of slate was ever visible. A faint ominous vapor of smoke continually rose from the cracks at the top of the heap giving the illusion that it was volcanic and could erupt at any moment. The townies nicknamed it "Slate Dump Mountain." Directly behind the mound were the coke ovens,

which looked like row after row of tiny brick igloos. Railroad tracks were woven throughout the countryside. The scent from the coke ovens enveloped the town year round. The ragamuffins that were raised there thought the whole world smelt of coal. Their whole world did.

Rhodri and Mari developed a daily routine reminiscent of the one they had back in Wales. As winter approached a thick gray fog bellowed from every chimney thickening the air and sky until, on some days, even the sun would be eclipsed by the smoke. New Salem was a typical American mining town. In Pontypool everyone was Welsh, but in the area where the Evans' now lived, there were many dialects. Each ethnic group took pride in the fact that they were now Americans, first and foremost, but they still enjoyed gathering into their cliques. Many of the miners would have a couple of drinks after a hard day in the pit. Whether you called The Gaslight a pub, a bar, a tavern, or a beer garden, that was where the miners met after their shift was over. There were other places to drink in town, but The Gaslight was directly across the road from the collier.

Where your family originally came from was not an issue for the men who worked in the mines. The miners were all on the same footing. Each of them worked hard for their wages. Most of the miners, along with their families, lived in company housing known as The Patch. They all shopped at the company store. The first thing a man was given when he hired into the mines was a tally number. In fact it was the only thing that was given to him. Everything else came out of their wages. The mining company automatically deducted anything that was owed to them before they received their pay package. They deducted the cost of renting the tools, including any wear and tear on them, and took a portion of what was owed to the company store. The men that worked the mines did backbreaking work, sometimes only receiving some change for wages at the end of the week. Because the company store extended credit to the miners and their families, the store could keep their prices high. There was not another store around that could compete financially with them.