

The 16.28 to Tenby

'It's that bubble car over there,' Mr Crabb the guard said at Temple Meads Station in Bristol. He pointed to a three-car train, the sort I had been seeing on branch lines. I was now headed for Cardiff. A man named Hicks on this train said that he could remember the days when the Red Dragon Express ran to Cardiff – and here we were, he said, on this manky little train! I did not encourage him. I liked these trains, because it was possible to sit behind the driver in the first coach and look straight out of the front window at the tracks ahead. And it was always interesting to watch the driver's busy hands on the controls.

'We're pushing towards Stanley,' Mr Hicks said.

He meant in the Falkland Islands. He was reading, over my shoulder, the Falklands news in my *Times*. I asked his opinion of the war.

He said, 'We have to do it. Our land's been taken. The Argies have to be stopped. They can't get away with it.' He looked out of the window and grunted. 'That's how Hitler got started!'

The train was rolling. On that line, you did not leave Bristol until you left England, because its suburbs straggled all the way to the Severn Tunnel, ten miles of housing estates and factories. As in other parts of England, the newer industrial buildings looked frail and temporary.

The tunnel lasted a minute or so and then we were travelling in a deep ditch. But I knew from the brown stones of the ditch walls and the way they were cut and pointed, that we must be in Wales, although I could not see anything but a strip of blue sky and these walls. This was confirmed at the next stop, Cyfforded Twnel Hafren, Severn Tunnel Junction.

We surfaced in Wales and at once the landscape looked

different: meadows and crooked hills and all the hawthorns in bloom. The factories were distant smudges. I had travelled enough in the past month to know that it was possible to tell which part of England I was in by the way the fields were marked – whether by a wall or a hedge or a fence, and what kind. The white hawthorns had been planted at the boundaries of every field, in a way I had never seen before: we were in another country. It was in fact a nation of like-minded people. The bilingual signs (*Welcome Croeso*) were as unnecessary as the road signs in Canada, but like Canada's they served a political purpose – a cheap sop tossed to the nationalists.

We passed a tumble-down farm, a small wood-framed factory, a row of poplars, some sheep. Now I understood why the Welsh had taken to Patagonia. I saw more farms, small and poor, but rural poverty always looked to me more bearable than the forms that poverty took in a city. Poverty brought people low, and pushed them into the past. In the countryside this merely meant farming in a cruder way; poor city people had to go still farther back and become scavengers in order to survive.

Newport rose up on the left, a power station and the rolling mills and furnaces of the doomed Llanwern Steelworks. The Victorian house-fronts looked slightly foppish, with multi-coloured bricks and stripes. Sometimes Wales looked like another country, and at other times it seemed like an earlier version of England – upright and antique and dusty and church-going, with all the colour schemes wrong.

There were preparations afoot in Cardiff for the Pope's visit. He was due in three days: an altar had been erected and a 'mass site' prepared up at Pontcanna Park in Llandaff, near the old Cathedral ('Cromwell's soldiers used the nave as a tavern and post office, and the font as a pig trough, and burnt the cathedral's books at a formal ceremony at Cardiff Castle'). No Pope had ever visited Wales.

In Cardiff, on Queen Street, Mrs Prichard said, 'So the Pope's staying with you, Doris?'

'Yes? Oh, well, never mind,' Doris said. 'I'll make him comfortable.'

'He'll want looking after,' Mrs Prichard went on, still not smiling. 'He's got a healthy appetite, that one, all the travelling.'

'I'll tell the milkman to leave me an extra pint,' Doris said. 'The Pope's stopping upstairs, I'll say.'

'You'll want more than an extra pint of milk! I should buy some gammon and cabbage. He's Polish, Doris.'

As soon as I saw it, I wanted to leave Cardiff. In any case, it was seldom my intention to linger in the large cities. In Britain they were cavernous and intimidating, like the fortresses they had once been. They seemed to have heavy eyebrows. They were not for walkers. They were full of indoor miseries that made me impatient. Their buildings were blackened and their people wary of my questions. I never got lost in the countryside, but these cities could make me feel as if I was drowning. It could take a day or two to find out how to leave these places. They were always encumbered with ruins. Cardiff was no place for a pedestrian like me.

My remedy, walking to Barry Island, did not work. It was a peninsula, but even so it was unreachable on foot. There were no paths here, only the mazy roads of South Glamorgan, packed solid with houses. In Grangetown, I thought: They really do look like towns from years ago, living on in old-fashioned, semi-respectable decrepitude. I walked on to Cogan, an awful-looking place. Wales was visibly poorer than England but I found it to be much better-natured.

At Cadoxton I found a railway station and went the rest of the way on the branch line, sitting behind the driver. There were signs painted on the slates of house roofs. They were meant to be seen from the train and the letters were two-feet high. GOD IS LOVE, one said, and another one, CHRIST DIED FOR THE UNGODLY. We passed several acres of rusty locomotives – a sort of graveyard for steam engines – and then came to Barry Island. Half of it was a Butlin's camp, and the rest a small seafront with severe amusements.

I sat on the front, near a stall selling whelks and jellied eels, listening to the flap of the Butlin's flags and wondering what to do next. There were no hotels in this place! It was for day-trippers, miners mostly, who rode out of the valleys for one frantic day. But now miners earned good salaries and were able to go further afield. So Barry Island had its holiday camp and its deserted arcades. I made a note: *Not much like Weston-super-Mare*

– because Weston-super-Mare was twelve miles away, across the bay.

I studied my map and decided to go to Llanelli. My train took me past Bridgend and Port Talbot and Neath.² The landscape was industrial and yet was motionless and might have been dead.³ It was also a pebbledash wilderness of two-storey houses, great chains and terraces of them, arranged on narrow streets, striping the hills. It was nineteenth-century order, the workers' barracks, with rougher hills one range away – the Vale of Glamorgan and then into West Glamorgan. I changed trains in Swansea. Swansea was a vast cankered valley of sorrowful houses and grey churches and shut-down factories. I thought: No wonder the Welsh are religious! In South Wales, industry had burned and cleared the landscape and stacked it with sooty buildings.⁴ But most of the industries had failed – or looked moribund – and I could not look out of the train window without thinking of gangrene.

Llanelli had looked promising on the map. It was in the south-west corner of Dyfed, on the estuary of the Loughor river. I walked from the station to the docks. The town was musty-smelling and dull, and made of decayed bricks. My map had misled me. I wanted to leave, but first I wanted to buy a guide-book to Wales in order to avoid such mistakes in the future.

I passed a store with textbooks in the window. Dead flies lay on their sides on the book covers; they had not been swatted, but had simply starved; they seemed asleep. There were shelves in this bookstore, but not many books. There was no sales person. A husky voice came from behind a beaded curtain.

'In here.'

I went in. A man was whispering into a telephone. He paid no attention to me. There were plenty of books in here. On the covers were pictures of naked people. The room smelled of cheap paper and ink. The magazines were in cellophane wrappers. They showed breasts and rubber underwear, and there were children on some of them. The titles suggested that the naked tots were violated inside. No guide-books here, but as this pornography shop was Welsh the door had a bell that went *bing-bong!* in a cheery way as I left.

² Welsh politeness was soft-hearted and smiling. Even Llanelli's Skinheads were well-behaved, and the youths with swastikas on

their leather jackets, and bleached hair and earrings, or green hair and T-shirts saying *Anarchy* – even they seemed sweet-natured.² And how amazing that the millions of Welsh, who shared about a dozen surnames, were the opposite of anonymous. They were conspicuous individuals and at a personal level tried hard to please. 'You're a gentleman!' one man would cry to another, greeting him on the street.

At Jenkins the Bakers ('Every bite – pure delight') I saw a strawberry tart with clotted cream on top. Were they fresh strawberries?

'Oh, yes, fresh this morning,' Mrs Jenkins said.

I asked for one.

'But they're thirty pence, darling,' Mrs Jenkins said, warning me and not moving. She expected me to tell her to forget it. She was on my side in the most humane way, and gave me a commiserating smile, as if to say: It's a shocking amount of money for a strawberry tart!

When I bought two she seemed surprised. It must have been my knapsack and my vagabond demeanour. I went around the corner and stuffed them into my mouth.

'Good morning – I mean, good evening!' Mr Maddocks the Stationmaster said at Llanelli Station. 'I knew I'd get it right in the end. It's patience you want!'

The rest of the people on the platform were speaking Welsh, but on seeing the train draw in – perhaps it was the excitement – they lapsed into English.

This was the 16.28 to Tenby. We slid out of Llanelli, past the tiny cottages and the brick houses. The average price of these houses was £15,000 and quite a few cost less than £10,000. I got this information from the *Llanelli Star*. On another page some cars were being advertised for £7,000.

Across the yellow-brown puddles of the Llanrhydian Sands was the lovely Gower Peninsula. We passed Burry Port and Kidwelly – there were rolling hills on one side and the muddy foreshore of the Gwendraeth estuary on the other. Then up the Tywi river to Carmarthen, which had a mundane grandeur – it needed either more ruins, or fewer. After Carmarthen, the real countryside began, the first I had seen in South Wales since crossing the Severn. The hills were green and lumpish and the valleys tangled

with short leafy trees, some standing as hedges and boundaries and others in jumbled woods. I always expected to see small ponies in this landscape; they would have suited it. The land pattern and the foliage were new to me and I liked the wildness. It looked wild from neglect, like a place that had once been neat but was now overgrown. It had an untrimmed charm – the grass too long, the boughs drooping, like the shaggy imagery in a Dylan Thomas poem. Thomas had lived four miles south of this railway line, at Laugharne on the River Taf.

Narberth was a small white iron-girt station in a green glade of whirling gnats, a beautiful place for the train to stop in the late afternoon sun, and I felt a bit sad when we pulled out; and then sunset at Saundersfoot – I kept saying that phrase to myself – and Tenby, a town on a high cliff with more cliffs around it and boulder islands in its bay. It looked perfect. It was the loveliest town I had seen so far. I found a boarding house with a view of the harbour and made no plans to leave.

The elegant houses of Tenby standing tall on the cliff reminded me of beautifully bound books arranged on a high shelf; their bow windows had the curvature of book spines. The town was elevated on a promontory, and so the sea on three sides gave its light a penetrating purity that reached the market square, and fortified the air with the tang of ocean-washed rocks. It was odd that a place so pretty should also be so restful, and yet that was the case. But Tenby was more than pretty. It was so picturesque it looked like a watercolour of itself.

It had not been preserved by the fastidious tyrants who so often took over British villages, the new class who moved in and gutted the houses, and then, after restoring the thatched roofs and mullioned windows, hid a chromium kitchen in the inglenook that ran on microchips. Such people could make a place so picturesque it was uninhabitable. Tenby had been maintained, and it had mellowed; it was still sturdy, and I was glad I had found it. But it was the sort of place which denied a sense of triumph to the person who secretly felt he had discovered it – because its gracefulness was well known, it had been painted and praised, it was old even in Tudor times, and it had produced Augustus John (who wrote about Tenby in his autobiography

Chiaroscuro) as well as the inventor of the equal sign (=) in mathematics, Robert Recorde. But, then, there were no secret places in Britain that I had seen, there were only forgotten places, and places that were being buried or changed by our harsh century.

Tenby had been spared, and it was the more pleasing for being rather quiet and empty. I walked around dreamily. For the first time since I had set out on this trip I felt that a watering place was fulfilling its purpose – calming me, soothing me, making me want to snore over a book on a veranda with a sea-view.

'This place is a madhouse in the summer,' a publican named Nuttgens told me. 'It's chock-a-block. Pavements full of tourists, roads full of cars. You can't move! And there's usually a tail-back all the way to Saundersfoot –'

It was hard to tell whether he was boasting or complaining, but in any case I did not want to imagine Tenby being trampled. I liked to think of it always like this, quietly lived in, with book-shelf terraces of houses and twisty streets and that marvellous gauzy light.

Nuttgens said, 'Every business here is owned by an Englishman.' He himself was from Birmingham. 'And all the employees are Welsh.'

I asked him why this was so.

He tapped the side of his nose with his finger, suggesting that the English were cleverer.

Other English people in Tenby also told me this, but it was not so. My landlady was Welsh, the pub across the street was owned by a Welshman, and there were Welsh names everywhere on shop signs. And yet it was true that part of Tenby's appeal was that its English elegance had been softened by Welsh charm, and it had the faintly asymmetrical look one often sees in the most dignified former colonies.

There was a coastal path which went from Tenby to St Dogmaels, a hundred and seventy miles, around the shore of Pembrokeshire. I walked the few miles to Old Castle Head – the rocks at the shore had the look of lions' paws – and because I hated retracing my steps, I walked on to the nearest railway station and took the branch line to Pembroke Dock. This station was

Manorbier Newton. We passed Hodgeston ('the church chancel contains a double piscina and mutilated triple sedilia') and then strange events overtook the train. Or perhaps not strange but merely old-fashioned.

The train came to a sign at a road, saying, *STOP: Open Crossing Gates Before Proceeding*, and it stopped. The uniformed man who was both guard and ticket-collector got out and swung the gates open wide enough so that they blocked the little motor road and unblocked the railway tracks. Then the train shuddered and the birds sang and the train moved across the road. The guard closed the gates, latched them, boarded the train, and we resumed our journey through meadows and farms and low woods.

There was another sign: *STOP: Whistle Before Proceeding*. The train obeyed – its whistle was a two-note trumpet blast – and we crossed the road. It was a hot afternoon, and the country roads smelled of warm tar and looked like dusty liquorice; and we stopped at short platforms, halts in the middle of farms, and at Lamphey in a pasture, the cow parsley lazily brushing the sides of the train.

When most of the rural branch lines were closed in 1964, this line was spared, and it continued to be spared because it carried people to the ferry which travelled from Pembroke to Cork, in the Republic of Ireland, or 'Error' as some Welshmen called it.

We pulled quietly into Pembroke. There were only seven of us on the train – it was not a ferry day. Pembroke seemed a very ordinary town, but had a grand castle. Across the harbour was Milford Haven ('described by Lord Nelson as the best natural harbour in the world'), which was densely and blackly industrial, with its tanks and refineries and its oil-cracking plant. Why were the most prosperous places the ugliest?

I asked Mr Peevey the Stationmaster the way to Haverfordwest. It seemed there was no train that day, but there was a bus. As he explained where the bus stop was his voice grew faint, and then he said, 'Listen. What's that?'

He squinted across the railway platform and turned his head, inclining his ears and spreading out his fingers, listening in a tense sort of way.

'Yes,' Mr Peevey said after a moment. 'Look.'

I did not see anything. I had not heard anything. Mr Peevey

was smiling, and he looked at his watch – a Stationmaster's instinctive reflex, I supposed. He nodded at the air.

Then I saw the specks, thousands of them, just above the ground, like a veil descending through the air. It made me slightly dizzy, their motion, their numbers; it was like seeing spots.

'Bugs,' I said.

'Bees,' Mr Peevey said. 'They're swarming.'

They were darkly gathering, a large fuzzy gust of them approaching the platform.

Mr Peevey was not worried. 'My grandfather kept bees,' he said calmly. 'He could stir them around and get the honey and what-not. He never got stung. You get immune to bee stings. Most bee keepers are immune.'

'I suppose they could be dangerous?' I indicated the swarm.

'Kill you,' Mr Peevey said. 'That's how dangerous.'

He smiled again, marvelling – as people do – at murderous Nature.

'If you start flaking around, look you, that lot will bite you.' He giggled a little, in amazement rather than malice. 'You could be stung to death!'

They were great Bible readers, these Welsh people, and I was sure he was thinking of the text, *O death, where is thy sting?*

'I'd take the long way to the bus stop if I were you,' Mr Peevey said.

On the bus to Haverfordwest – the bus went slowly, and always down country lanes – I decided what it was that bothered me about the Welsh villages and towns. There was only one kind of cottage in the villages, and it was not a particularly pretty style; there was only one kind of terrace in the towns, and it was mournfully flat. They were one note, one colour, one class, and in some places every house was identical, and equally ugly. This in itself was not remarkable – such towns had counterparts in the United States – but these Welsh ones were entirely surrounded by woods and hills and fields, and so they looked sullen, with faces averted from the green hills.

Some towns can be transformed and given a memorable character by a chance encounter. And then it is your secret – you alone are the witness. I had this experience in Haverfordwest. Three people stood in front of a fruit shop. An old woman was

using sign language to speak – she was flapping her hands. A young woman was translating this sign language into spoken Welsh to an old man with a dog. The man replied to the gesticulating dumb woman in Welsh. It was all Welsh and flying hands, and finally the old man took out a beaded purse and squeezed it open. He removed a pound note that had been folded into the size of a postage stamp – he unfolded it (this was like origami) and handed it to the old woman. She thanked him in sign language: this was translated into Welsh. The man replied in Welsh. The woman kissed the pound note and went away with the younger woman.

I still lingered, wondering.

The old man jerked his dog's leash. He said, 'Come on, Jasper!'

After all that, he spoke to his dog in English!

This incident coloured my feelings for Haverfordwest much more than if I had spent my time scrutinizing the voided lozenges on the church crests or marching up to Wiston and reminiscing myself into a stupor over Wizo the Fleming.

From here to Fishguard the land was green and smooth, occasionally erupting into rocky heaps, like the great hill of boulders at Wolf's Castle. Looking north from the village of Letterston, the rocky heaps in the distance were like fortresses and castle ruins. The Welsh landscape was the landscape of legend slightly out of focus, full of blurred castles and giants, and dragons that were actually cliffs. The coast of Fishguard was like that, stonier and bleaker and more ragged than I had seen in South Pembrokeshire. The stonework on some cottages was as patchy and colourful as a quilted blanket.

It was twenty-eight miles from Fishguard to St Dogmaels on the coastal path. I thought it would be a hard day's walk, but it took almost two, because of the steepness and the river detours. As I approached the end of it I met two fishermen, both named Jones, who told me with a kind of urgency that most *nights* they went out fishing for *salmon*, which they caught with *nets* slung out from *coracles*, and what did I think of *that*? I asked them how big the salmon were and what they got a pound. They were ten pounders, worth two quid a pound.

These men directed me to a hotel in Cardigan, up the River Teifi, where they fished. Perhaps they did not like my face. It

was a very bad hotel, and I had a very strange encounter there – and not just very strange, but . . .

First I had to face Cardigan. Cardigan was poor, a place of high unemployment and hard-up people. The poverty was not immediately obvious; but with a growing sense of unease I began to notice that something was wrong. It was a frailty and uncertainty: things were very quiet – and then I studied the clothes, the houses, the food, the signs, the faces; and I saw that it was simple, they were poor.

'And the trouble with these depressed areas in Wales,' a nationalist named Humphries told me, 'is that they get a lot of cranks.'

What did he mean by cranks?

'Food cranks, like,' he said.

I said I inclined towards vegetarianism myself, and had even stopped smoking.

'And lesbians,' he said, in a challenging way. 'They paint pictures and have exhibitions in the Cardigan Town Hall.'

I said that seemed fairly harmless.

'Pictures of,' he swallowed, 'things I wouldn't mention.'

I went to the town hall. It was an exhibition of feminist paintings – mainly scenes of childbirth done in a simple spatterry way. The people running the exhibition were grave bearded men and cape-wearing women; they had an affected gypsyish look, and were rather young. But I saw what Humphries meant by cranks: he meant English people.

Cardigan was Welsh-speaking Wales, so was North Pembrokeshire, so was the west coast, parts of Dyfed and Gwynedd. The limits of Wales spoke Welsh. This was the Celtic fringe, spiritual home of the Plaid Cymru Party, the nationalists, and this was also where English-owned cottages were burned down. Sixty cottages had been put to the torch in the past three years.

I wondered whether the Welsh could be explained in terms of being bilingual, which is so often a form of schizophrenia, allowing a person to hold two contradictory opinions in his head at once, because his opinions remain untranslated. The Welsh had that mildly stunned and slap-happy personality that I associated with people for whom speaking two languages was a serious handicap. It made them profligate with language, it made

them inexact, it had turned them into singers – well, that was no bad thing, they said. I did not think it was a question of good or bad, but only a kind of confusion.

The Welsh stared in a friendly way. It could be disconcerting. The English never stared unless they were very angry (an English stare is like the Evil Eye) or wanted to score a debating point. The Welsh were like members of a family, but a large suspicious family. They certainly did have common characteristics, and they were more a nation than I had ever imagined. Sometimes it seemed to me that there was no such thing as English culture in a definable way. But Welshness was palpable, it was chattering and backward-looking. It surprised me that the Welsh had not burned down more cottages, the family feeling ran so strong.

'And they killed the commander,' a Court Clerk named Davies told me, describing a Falklands battle that had just been fought. Then Davies winced and said, 'His name was Jones.'

He let this sink in. He was moved by it. The Argies had killed one of their own Joneses! I had the impression that if the soldier's name had been Brown it would have made less of an impression.

And Marion Lewis at a public house in St Dogmaels said, 'They burn these cottages, the Plaid Cymru,' and she smacked her lips. 'Some of the chaps are very tough, you know. That's what I don't understand – there are still so many English cottages! The chaps do try, but they haven't been successful.'

She seemed a bit sorry there hadn't been more arson attacks.

I was bemused by the Welsh intonation. It was a whining, West Indian lilt, and it could be very soft and lisping, with slushy throat-clearings. It was full of interesting words. Some like *toiledau* and *brecwyst*, meaning 'toilet' and 'breakfast', did not appear to be ancient. And some were grunts, like the place-names Plwmp and Mwnt. But *corn* was the Welsh for horn and was obviously from Latin, and so was *cwn* (dog) and *bont* (bridge), and the word for church was *eglwys*, the same word as the French *église* and with the same pronunciation. I wondered if it was my imagination that suggested that, given the whine and squeak, and the rising querying tone on most words, it was hard to express anger in Welsh. I wanted to see someone lose his temper in Welsh, but I never did.

★

My strange encounter took place at the Hotel Harlech, a dismal semi-ruin not far from the silted-up river. It had been closed for years, and it smelled that way, of mice and unwashed clothes. The smell of rags is like the smell of dead men anyway, but this was compounded with the smells of dirt and wood-smoke and the slow river. I knew as soon as I checked in that it was a mistake. I was shown to my room by a sulking girl of fifteen, who had a fat pouty face and a pot belly.

'It seems a little quiet,' I said.

Gwen said, 'You're the only guest.'

'In the whole hotel?'

'In the whole hotel.'

My bed smelled, too, as though it had been slept in – just slept in recently, someone having crawled out a little while ago, leaving it warm and disgusting.

The owner of the Harlech was a winking woman with a husky laugh, named Reeny. She kept a purse in the cleavage between her breasts, she smoked while she was eating, she talked about her boyfriend – 'My boyfriend's been all around the world on ships.' Reeny's boyfriend was a pale unshaven man of fifty who limped through the hotel, his shirt-tails out, groaning because he could never find his hairbrush. His name was Lloyd, and he was balding. Lloyd seldom spoke to me, but Reeny was irrepressible, always urging me to come down to the bar for a drink.

The bar was a darkened room with torn curtains and a simple table in the centre. There were usually two tattooed youths and two old men at the table, drinking beer with Lloyd. Reeny acted as barmaid, using a tin tray. It was she who changed the records: the music was loud and terrible, but the men had no conversation, and they looked haggard and even rather ill.

The unexpected thing was that Reeny was very cheerful and hospitable. The hotel was dirty and her food unspeakable and the dining room smelled of urine, but Reeny was kind, and she loved to talk, and she spoke of improving the hotel; and she knew that Lloyd was a complaining old fake. Relax, enjoy yourself, have another helping, Reeny said.

She had the right spirit, but the hotel was a mess. 'This is Paul – he's from America,' Reeny said, and winked at me. She was proud of me. That thought made me very gloomy.

One night she introduced me to Ellie. She was red-eyed and very fat and had a gravelly voice; she was somewhat toothless and freckled; she came from Swansea. 'Aye,' she said. 'Swansea's a bloody bog.' Ellie was drunk – and she was deaf in the way drunks often are. Reeny was talking about America, but Ellie was still mumbling about Swansea.

'At least we're not tight,' Ellie said. 'Aye, we're careful, but the Cardies are tight.'

'That's us,' Reeny said. 'Cardies, from Cardigan. Aye, we're tighter than the Scots.'

Ellie screwed up her face to show how tight the Cardies were, then she demanded to know why I was not drunk, and she appealed to the silent haggard men, who stared back at her with dull damp eyes. Ellie was wearing a baggy grey sweater. She finished her pint of beer and then wiped her hands on her sweater.

'What do you think of the Cardies?' she said.

'Delightful,' I said. But I thought: *Savages*.

At midnight they were still drinking.

'I'm going upstairs,' I said. 'But I don't have a key.'

'None of the rooms have locks,' Reeny said, 'that's why there are no keys. See?'

Ellie said, 'Aarrgh, it's a quiet place, Reen!'

'Too bloody quiet, I say,' Reeny said. 'We have to drive to Saundersfoot for a little night life.'

Saundersfoot was thirty-three miles away.

'What is it, Lloyd?' Reeny said.

Lloyd had been grinning.

He said, 'He looks worried,' meaning me.

'I'm not worried,' I said.

This always sounds to me a worried man's protest. I stood there trying to smile. The four local men at the table merely stared back with their haggard faces.

'There's no locks in this place,' Lloyd said, with pleasure.

Then Reeny screeched, 'We won't rob you or rape you!'

She said it so loudly it was a few seconds before I could take it in. She was vivacious but ugly.

I recovered and said, 'What a shame. I was looking forward to one or the other.'

Reeny howled at this.

In the sour bed, I could hear rock music coming from the bar, and sometimes shouts. But I was so tired I dropped off to sleep, and I dreamed of Cape Cod. I was with my cousin and saying to her, 'Why do people go home so early? This is the only good place in the world. I suppose they're worried about traffic. I'd never leave –'

Then something tore. It was a ripping sound in the room. I sat up and saw a tousled head. I thought it was a man. It was a man's rough face, a squashed nose, a crooked mouth. I recognized the freckles and the red eyes. It was Ellie.

I said, 'What are you doing?'

She was crouching so near to the bed I could not see her body. The ripping sound came again – a zipper on my knapsack. Ellie was slightly turned away from me. She did not move. When I saw that it was Ellie and not a man, I relaxed – and I knew that my wallet and money were in my leather jacket, hanging on a hook across the room.

She said, 'Where am I?'

'You're in my room.'

She said, turning to me, 'What are you doing here?'

'This is my room!'

Her questions had been drowsy in a theatrical way. She was still crouching near my knapsack. She was breathing hard.

I said, 'Leave that thing alone.'

'Aarrgh,' she groaned, and plumped her knees against the floor.

I wanted her to go away.

I said, 'I'm trying to sleep.' Why was I being so polite?

She groaned again, a more convincing groan than the last one, and she said, 'Where have I left my clothes?'

And she stood up. She was a big woman with big jolting breasts, and freckles on them. She was, I saw, completely naked.

'Close your eyes,' she said, and stepped closer.

I said, 'It's five in the morning, for God's sake.'

The sun had just struck the curtains.

'Aarrgh, I'm sick,' she said. 'Move over.'

I said, 'You don't have any clothes on.'

'You can close your eyes,' she said.

I said, 'What were you doing to my knapsack?'

'Looking for me clothes,' she said.

I said in a pleading way, 'Give me a break, will you?'

'Don't look at me nakedness,' she said.

'I'm going to close my eyes,' I said, 'and when I open them I don't want to see you in this room.'

Her naked flesh went flap-flap like a rubber raincoat as she tramped across the hard floor. I heard her go, she pulled the door shut, and then I checked to see my money was safe and my knapsack unviolated. The zippers were open, but nothing was gone. I remembered what Reeny had screamed at me: *We won't rob you or rape you!*

At breakfast, Reeny said, 'I've not been up at this hour for ten year! Look, it's almost half-eight!'

Reeny had a miserable cough and her eyes were sooty with mascara. Her Welsh accent was stronger this morning, too.

I told her about Ellie.

She said, 'Aye, is that so? I'll pull her leg about that! Aye, that is funny.'

An old woman came to the door. She was unsteady, she peered in. Reeny asked her what she wanted. She said she wanted a pint of beer.

'It's half-eight in the morning!' Reeny said.

'A half a pint, then,' the old woman said.

'And it's Sunday!' Reeny said. She turned to me and said, 'We're dry on a Sunday around here. That's why it's so quiet. But you can get a drink at St Dogmaels.'

The woman looked pathetic. She said that in the coming referendum she would certainly vote for a change in the licensing law. She was not angry, but had that aged beaten look that passes for patience.

'Oh, heavens,' Reeny said. 'What shall I do, Paul? You tell me.'

I said to the old woman, 'Have a cup of tea.'

'The police have been after me,' Reeny said. 'They're always looking in.' Reeny walked to the cupboard. 'I could lose my licence.' She took out a bottle of beer and poured it. 'These coppers have no bloody mercy.' The glass was full. 'Forty-five pence,' she said.

The woman drank that and then bought two more bottles. She paid and left, without another word. She had taken no pleasure

in the drink and there was no satisfaction in having wheedled the beer out of Reeny on a dry day in Cardigan – in fact, she had not wheedled, but had merely stood there gaping in a paralysed way.

I said, 'It's a hell of a breakfast – beer.'

'She's an alcoholic,' Reeny said. 'She's thirty-seven. Doesn't look it, does she? Take me, I'm thirty-three and no one believes it. My boyfriend says I've got the figure of a girl of twenty. You're not going, are you?'

II

The 10.32 to Criccieth

There was no good coastal path north of Cardigan – all the farms and fields were jammed against the cliff edge – but by scaring cows and climbing stone walls I managed a few miles. Then I came to Aberporth and could go no farther. For the next five miles or more it was an army rocket range, and the rockets were booming. The British were fighting a war, after all – ‘this Falklands business’. Over two hundred and fifty men had died just the day before in the battle for a small sheep station at Goose Green. Most of the dead were Argentines, killed by British paratroopers in fury after word got out that a mock surrender with a white flag by an Argentine patrol had in fact been an ambush. ‘*Never Trust an Argie!*’ the headline in the *Sun* said. Was this why the rockets were exploding at Aberporth?

It was true that much of the British coast was empty and practically anybody’s; yet the rest was impossible. Things that were dangerous (like nuclear power stations), or that stank (like sewage farms), were shoved on to the coast. They were safer that way and out of sight. The coast was regarded as a natural home for oil refineries and gas storage tanks, and there was more rubbish on the coast than in any inland dump. The coast was where you got rid of things: they were borne away and lost in the deep sinkhole of the sea. The coast had more than its fair share of car parks and junkyards; and out of an ancient islanders’ fear of invasion – of alien peoples plaguing her shores – the British had over-fortified their coast with military installations, gun emplacements and radar dishes of the sort I had seen in Dungeness and Kimmeridge. And as if that weren’t enough they also had American missile bases and squads of American marines in various coves. These places looked as though they were expecting

another onslaught of rapacious Danes or shield-biting berserkers. Of course, the coast was perfect for practising with machine guns or even bombs and cannons. Traditionally, the sea was safe to shoot at. Here at Aberporth it was rockets, and the incautious walker risked being blown up or arrested as a spy.

I turned back and stumbled up the grassy hill to the coast road. The road was narrow and the speeding cars made it dangerous – just room enough for two lines of traffic. I had to lean against the nettles on the bank to let the cars pass. I walked to Synod Inn, and when I became bored with waiting for a bus, I hitched. With my knapsack and leather jacket and the Ordnance Survey map in my hand, and needing a haircut, I looked like a hitch-hiker – with an unhurried, money-saving, ready-for-anything expression. I got rides easily, with farmers who were only going a quarter of a mile, and with men making deliveries, or heading for work. They usually said, ‘And how are you liking Wales?’

Emrys Morgan, a carpenter, with a rip saw in his back seat, said, ‘Aw, the Englishman is a very secretive man. His attitude is, “I look after myself and God looks after all.”’

I remarked that the Welsh I had met were very polite.

‘Very polite are the Welsh,’ Mr Morgan said. ‘And much more polite than the English. We’re different stock, with a different tradition. We’re European Celts and they’re Saxons and Normans.’

Huw Jones took me to Aberaeron in his old grey Singer Gazelle. ‘This is where the Welsh left for Patagonia,’ he said.

‘I’ve been there.’

‘Aberaeron?’

‘Patagonia,’ I said.

Aberaeron was an unusually neat and orderly town of Nash terraces and plain brown houses, and on some streets there were lovely Georgian houses on the left and pebble-dash council houses on the right.

‘Most people in Wales are Labour Party supporters, not Welsh Nationalists,’ another Jones told me. This Jones was a lawyer – a barrister. He said the Labour Party had a stranglehold on South Wales especially. ‘They could put a bloody donkey up for parliament in South Wales, and if they said he was Labour he’d get in.’

We were riding up to Aberystwyth. The coast here was very

sloping – the green cliffs slanted down towards the sea. In the little bays and near villages there were always acres of orange tents and caravans.

'These people come down from Birmingham and the Midlands,' the lawyer Jones said, 'and they pitch their little tents. They look around and decide they like it. So they see a farmer. Has he got a cottage for sale? He probably does – farmers are having a very tough time, not enough work for their labourers. He sells the cottage. They're very cheap. It's a second home for these people. They just come and go as they please. Those are the people whose cottages are burned by the nationalists.'

I said, 'Wouldn't it be simpler to burn the tents?'

He laughed at this. So far I had not met anyone in Wales who objected to the burning of English-owned cottages, and some people seemed to find it considerate and humane, since they were always burned when the owners were away.

Welshness was also a look of orderly clutter, and Aberystwyth typified it – houses everywhere, though always attached to streets; the cliffs obliterated with cottages, but tidy cottages; a canyon of flat-faced and barren buildings on the seafront, but green mountains just behind. I stayed in a guest-house, Eluned Williams, Prop. 'You're not going?' she would say each morning after breakfast. Business was bad. But I wasn't going. I was doing my laundry. I was off to the beach ('well adapted for bathing, and yields cornelians, agates and other pebbles') to look at the tar-stained stones. I was browsing and sometimes buying in the antique shops – I bought an old walking stick which had a tiger's tooth for a handle. I was looking at the book stores – the University College of Wales gave Aberystwyth its studious air, but the Act of Parliament (1967) had made Welsh equal in importance to English and meant that every municipal and university meeting was twice as long, since they were conducted in both languages. One day there was a Peace March in Aberystwyth. There were signs in Chinese characters, and Buddhist monks, and adults and children, protesting against the building of a nuclear installation in Wales at Brawdy. 'Join us,' a man said to me. I was wearing my knapsack. I shook my head. 'Can't,' I said, 'I'm an alien.' That was the day I was doing my laundry. I was in my bathing suit,

and every other article of clothing I owned was in my knapsack, to be washed.

I took the narrow gauge railway to the Devil's Bridge, through the Rheidol Valley, and the deep gorge of the Mynach. It was a toy train, and full of pipe-stuffing railway buffs and day-trippers. And there were rowdies, boys 'in care', I was told, abandoned by their parents, patronized by the state; they were pale tattooed thirteen-year-olds smoking cigarettes and saying, 'It's fulla fucken trees,' where William Wordsworth in another mood had written,

There I seem to stand,
As in life's morn; permitted to behold
From the dread chasm, woods climbing above woods,
In pomp that fades not; everlasting snows;
And skies that ne'er relinquish their repose . . .

And there were parents, too. I treasured their angry remarks:

'Oh, God, Roger, can't you see he's just desperately tired!'

The child in question was spitting and kicking and crying, a furious little weevil who did not know where he was and perhaps thought, in his animal way, that he was going to die here.

And one mother, looking at the tormented face of her wet baby, grew very cold and sarcastic.

'Someone's going to have a warm bottom in a minute!' she said.

The baby groaned like a starving monkey and tensed its fingers, indicating fear and frustration.

The Welsh people on the train stared at this behaviour and thought: The English!

Ever since Tenby I had noticed an alteration in the light, a softness and a clarity that came from a higher sky. It must have been the Atlantic: certainly I had the impression of an ocean of light, and it was not the harsh daytime sun of the tropics, or the usual greyness of the industrialized temperate zone. Daylight in England often lay dustily overhead like a shroud. The cool light in west Wales came steadily from every direction except from the sun. It was especially strong as a force rising out of the distance and reaching earth again in a purer way as a reflection from the

sky. The sunsets in Aberystwyth were vast, full of battle flames, never seeming to move and yet always in motion. It was a severe shore, and those houses looked harsh, but the Welsh light – the immense cold mirror of the Atlantic – made it gleam, and made its sadness visible.

One evening strolling on the front at Aberystwyth I remembered that, just a year before, I had stopped smoking my pipe. I had not had a smoke of anything for a year. To celebrate I bought a cigar, but Mrs Williams wouldn't let me smoke it at her house ('No one has ever smoked at "Y Wyddfa"' – the name of her house – 'and I don't think I could stand it if they did'), so I took it out to the front and set it on fire and smoked it until there was only an inch of a butt left, which I chucked into Cardigan Bay.

I took a two-coach branch-line train out of Aberystwyth, up the west side of the Rheidol Valley and around the bushy hills. The countryside here was tumbledown and beautiful. Dolybont was an old village of rough stone cottages and a squat church and thick hedges, and with his head out of his bedroom window a white-haired man was reprimanding his dog in Welsh.

The train climbed and paused. There were fifteen of us on it, and two got off. Then it picked up speed on a slope, and soon it was racing out of the hills, doing sixty or more, quite a speed for a little country railway train with squeaky wheels. We went on, tearing past the buttercups. We entered the plain that lay between the sea and the mountains, and on the plain's edge was the small seaside town of Borth, a straggling beachfront with the shadow of the Cambrian Mountains behind it. We swung east at the lip of the River Dovey, past Taliesin ('the grave of the Welsh Homer ... Taliesin, the greatest of the bards, sixth century ...') and then along the riverbank. Aberdovey was under the hills at the far side of the estuary; this whole place was wonderful – the river valley about two miles wide and a great deal of it flat grassy marsh in which sheep were grazing, and the valley sides were grey hills and mountains.

It was muddy and majestic all the way to Dovey Junction, where the river and the valley were shrunken. Because of its steady level progress, a train was the perfect way to see a landscape – it was impossible to be closer to the ground. And it was an

excitement to travel up a contracting valley, from the broad river mouth to the creek at its narrow throat – it was like being swallowed.

We came to Machynlleth ('believed to be the Roman Maglona') where I saw a sign advertising the Centre for Alternative Technology. I asked directions and was told it was three to four miles up the road. I walked there through the woods and found it at Llwyngwern, at the southern edge of Snowdonia National Park, in an abandoned slate quarry. It was a settlement on a hillside and at first sight seemed no more than a jumble of ridiculous windmills and hand-cranked contraptions set among cabins and flapping plastic. The flapping plastic was part of the solar power units, but it was a dull day and no solar power was being generated. Here and there were signposts with homilies on little placards. I copied one into my notebook: 'Waste is really a human concept, for in nature nothing is wasted – everything is part of a continuous cycle.'

The Centre for Alternative Technology was an elaborate and messy reproach to middle-class tidiness, a kind of museum of compost heaps and enormous and unfamiliar-looking toilets. There were buckets everywhere. Nothing was thrown away, and it was boasted that shit could be turned into valuable gas, and eggshells into rich humus, and this tin funnel labelled 'Pee Can' was for collecting urine, 'another valuable fertilizer'.

All of this was true, and there was a great deal of earnest work being done at the Centre to make it monumental, the apotheosis of a dunghill. Their gardens flourished. They made bran cookies and sprout salad and chunky vegetable soup, and their children had rosy cheeks. Wales was said to be full of communes like this, but the Centre charged admission and offered bed and breakfast. It was a happy-looking place and if it seemed a trifle preoccupied with waste matter and a little passionate on the subject of bowel movements, it could be explained in terms of Welsh culture in which both evangelism and toilet training figured fairly strongly. In any case, I was treated with hospitality by the Alternative Technologists. They regarded my knapsack as an indicator that I was one of them, deep down – and having seen what the old technology had done to South Wales I think I was. Any alternative was better than the nuclear reactors on the coast, even the odd

designs they were advocating, the harmless energy of solar panels and the superior, multi-purpose shithouse.

I walked back to Machynlleth. A grouchy guard at the station, Willy Bevan, said he didn't bloody know which was the next bloody train to Barmouth. He consulted his timetable.

'Two-thirteen. But there's an "E" on it. What does *that* bloody mean?'

He checked the footnote.

'Not on Sundays,' he said. 'Today's bloody Friday.'

He consulted the timetable again.

'And one at two-forty-eight. But there's an "A" on it. What does *that* bloody mean?'

He checked that footnote.

'Saturdays only,' he said. 'So the next bloody train –'

I went down the line in a small train to Dovey Junction and I continued on a second train to Barmouth. The junction was in the middle of the river valley, just a halt in a marsh, but the other train was waiting for this one as we drew in. The remote branch lines of Wales were run with efficiency and pride. The services were frequent, even here, and I could easily have crossed the line and taken a train to Shrewsbury and been in London in time for dinner.

The train travelled seawards along the north bank of the river, and then westerly into the glare of the afternoon sun skipping through the marsh. Tracking around a hillside on a ledge, the train swung away from the wide estuary of the Dovey, and its shore of sand and broken slate, and then north to Aberdovey: houses on the steep hillside, tin caravans on the beach.

Caravans – it soon became obvious – were the curse of the Welsh coast. They were technically mobile homes, but they were not mobile. At best they were tin boxes, the shape of shoe boxes – including the lid – anchored in a field next to the sea, fifty or a hundred at a time, in various faded colours. Sometimes they were plunked down on slabs of concrete, and where there were more than a hundred – I counted over three hundred in some places – there was a fish-and-chip shop and a tin shower and another tin outhouse with a sign saying *Conveniences*. What fresh water there was came from a standpipe surrounded by squashy mud. The whole affair put me in mind of nomads or refugees, certain

Afghans or Somalis or Kurds, or the dizziest gypsies who had perhaps made a little money but refused to abandon their old ways, sending their womenfolk out for buckets of water. You wondered how they could stand it so close to each other in such tiny unsheltered quarters, and you also began to ask the questions that true savages inspired – not the civilized Afghans or Somalis, but those people in remote parts who looked so naked and uncomfortable you wondered how they washed and ate and kept dry and did their business. And there was something totally savage in the way they did not notice the incongruity of the settlement, how ugly it was, how beautiful the beach. The caravan settlements were always hideous and always in the loveliest coves.

They were English people, of course, encouraged by the Welsh to have a cheap holiday here. Some lived in orange tents at the margins of the caravan fields. It was always a lurid sight on a hot day, the pink people reading the *Sun* in front of the orange tents, making cups of tea on little flaming tin stoves.

It was like the nuclear power stations and the junkyards and the shallys and sewage farms: you could do anything you liked on the British coast, beside the uncomplaining sea. The seaside belonged to everyone.

After Tywyn and more caravan camps the train climbed to open cliffs and travelled through rocky sheep pastures, and then near Fairbourne passed the foot of Cader Idris ('the chair of the giant Idris'), a high ridge with a three-thousand-foot peak which was one of the most beautifully shaped mountains in England. Then across the bar of the Mawddach estuary, with the watering place of Barmouth lying under a hill. The river was wide and purple-blue in the lowering sun, with flat sandy banks rising to steep hillsides and more mountains. Barmouth looked to be a place of great refreshment, but closer it was excruciating, much too small to contain the mobs, not enough car parks or pavements. The sunburned people were milling around, and – unusual on the coast – the train cut right through the middle of town; everything was halted and tangled while the train made its stop, and Barmouth was suddenly full of pedestrians impatient to cross the line.

I had thought of getting off at Barmouth, but I changed my mind when I saw the numbers of people – in fact, I did get off,

but I hurried back on, not wanting to be duffilled. And I had another reason: there was a note in the Cambrian Coast Railway timetable that said, under certain asterisked stations, '*Calls on request. Passengers wishing to alight must inform the guard, and those wishing to join must give a hand signal to the driver.*'

I decided on Llandanwg. I told the guard I wished to alight there. We continued along the coast, passing four or five tiny platforms, and then the train stopped at Llandanwg, for me alone. Llandanwg was lovely, which was why it was full of ugly caravans. I walked to Harlech.

Welsh mountains looked like mountains, and its cottages like cottages, and its castles like castles. Harlech Castle was the very image of the grey mass of round towers high on a cliff that children dream about after a bedtime story of kings and princesses and dragons. But I kept my vow against entering castles or cathedrals, and instead walked through the Royal St Davids golf course to the dunes and examined the caravans and tents. I did not really hate them. I was fascinated by them, as I had been by the shalys on the English coast. I made notes about the furnishings (camp cots, folding tables, transistor radios playing loud music) and about the food (tea, biscuits, soup, bread, beans). The people in these encampments were great readers of the gutter press – lots of cheap newspapers were in evidence.

Tony Henshaw had been a policeman in Liverpool for five years, Constable Henshaw people called him, and he had thought of making a career of it. 'But last year had finished it for me,' he said.

He was rather cautious with me at first. He claimed that being a policeman in Liverpool was like anything else. But I knew it was not – or else why had he come to Harlech in his caravan, intending to spend the rest of his life here, and him not even being Welsh!

'It's rather a foony business,' Mr Henshaw said, looking around policeman-fashion, no sudden movements.

'Funny in what way?' I asked.

'I was in Toxteth last soomer.'

'You mean the riots?'

'Riots and fighting, like. It woosen't easy. They was kids everywhere in the streets. Everywhere you looked, kids. All of them fighting. The fighting was bad. It was very bad.' He became silent.

I stared and waited, expecting more.

'I can tell you I was scared.'

I said in a patronizing way, 'That's nothing to be ashamed of. You could have been killed.'

'I could have been killed,' he said gratefully.

Then he said, 'You actually feel sorry for some of them. They have no chance, no chance at all. It's awpless, really. The kids, small kids, all in tatters. It's sad.'

'So you quit?'

'I was dead scared,' he said. 'But the situation hasn't changed. I think of them sometimes – all in tatters.'

The next day, without thinking, I walked out of Harlech, past the castle and down the road to Tygwyn. It was about a mile. And then I remembered the train; but now I could see whether flagging it down – giving a hand signal, as the timetable said – actually worked. I waited and at about ten-thirty I heard the train whistle. I stuck my hand out. The train stopped for me. I got on and rode up the coast. It was the 10.32 to Criccieth.

We came to a long tidal estuary, and I saw across the water a dome, a church spire, a campanile, some pink and blue cottages and some fake ruins: Portmeirion. It was a fantasy village, a large expensive folly, built by Sir Clough Williams-Ellis (1883–1978), a Welsh architect. Inspired by Portofino and liking this part of the Welsh coast he created this village from scratch – the colours and shapes were not at all Welsh, and it looked unusual even from two miles away on a moving train. But it was a steamy day and soon Portmeirion disappeared into the heat haze.

In Penrhyndeudraeth, the next stop, there was a large explosives factory. The local people called it 'Cooks', after the former owners, but its correct name was the Nobel Explosives Factory, a horrible conglomeration of vats, tubes, metal elbows and wired-up pipes, arranged on the hillside like an enormous home-made whisky still, and surrounded by prison fences and barbed wire. The interesting thing to me was not that this ugly explosives factory was in a pretty village, or that this grubby dangerous business gave us the Nobel Peace Prize. It was rather that, for fifteen years in that same village of Penrhyndeudraeth, with this dynamite under him, lived Bertrand Russell, the pacifist.

Eight more miles on this sunny day and we drew into Criccieth, where I hopped out of the train. I owned a guide-book which said, 'Criccieth: For several years this small town was the home of James (now Jan) Morris, probably the finest living British travel writer.' The 'James (now Jan)' needed no explanation, since the story of how she changed from a man to a woman in a clinic in Casablanca was told in her book *Conundrum*, 1974. She still lived near Criccieth, outside the village of Llanystumdwy, in what were formerly the stables of the manor house, looking northwards to the mountains of Eryri and southwards to Cardigan Bay.

I seldom looked people up in foreign countries. I could never believe they really wanted to see me, I had an uncomfortable sense that I was interrupting something intimate; but I did look up Jan Morris. She had written a great deal about Wales, and I was here, and I knew her vaguely. Her house was built like an Inca fort, of large black rocks and heavy beams. She had written, 'It is built in the old Welsh way, with rough gigantic stones, piled one upon the other in an almost natural mass, with a white wooden cupola on top. Its architecture is of the variety known these days as "vernacular", meaning that no professional architect has ever had a hand in it.'

She was wearing a straw calypso hat tipped back on her bushy hair, and a knit jersey and white slacks. It was a very hot day and she was dressed for it. There is a certain educated English voice that is both correct and malicious. Jan Morris has such a voice. It was not deep but it was languid, and the maleness that still trembled in it made it sultry and attractive. There was nothing ponderous about her. She shrugged easily and was a good listener, and she laughed as a cat might – full-throated and with a little hiss of pleasure, stiffening her body. She was kind, reckless and intelligent.

Her house was very neat and full of books and pictures. 'I have filled it with *Cymreictod* – Welshness.' Yes, solid country artefacts and beamed ceilings and a *No Smoking* sign in Welsh – she did not allow smoking in the house. Her library was forty-two feet long and the corresponding room upstairs was her study, with a desk and a stereo.

Music mattered to her in an unusual way. She once wrote, 'Animists believe that the divine is to be found in every living

thing, but I go one further; I am an inanimist, holding that even lifeless objects can contain immortal yearnings . . . I maintain, for instance, that music can permanently influence a building, so I often leave the record player on when I am out of the house, allowing its themes and melodies to soak themselves into the fabric.'

Perhaps she was serious. Inanimate objects can seem to possess something resembling vitality, or a mood that answers your own. But melodies soaking into wood and stone? 'My kitchen adores Mozart,' the wise guy might say, or, 'The sitting room's into Gladys Knight and the Pips.' But I did not say anything, I just listened approvingly.

'I suppose it's very selfish, only one bedroom,' she said.

But it was the sort of house everyone wanted, on its own, at the edge of a meadow, solid as could be, well-lit, pretty, cosy, with an enormous library and study, and a four-poster: perfect for a solitary person and one cat. Hers was called Solomon.

Then she said, 'Want to see my grave?'

I said of course and we went down to a cool shaded wood by a riverside. Jan Morris was a nimble walker; she had climbed to twenty thousand feet with the first successful Everest Expedition in 1953. Welsh woods were full of small twisted oaks, and tangled boughs, and moist soil, and dark ferny corners. We entered a boggy area of straight green trees and speckled shade.

'I always think this is very Japanese,' she said.

It did look that way, the idealized bushy landscape of the woodblock print, the little riverside grotto.

She pointed across the river and said, 'That's my grave – right there, that little island.'

It was like a beaver's dam of tree trunks padded all around with moss, then more ferns, and the river slurping and gurgling among boulders.

'There's where I'm going to be buried – or rather scattered. It's nice, don't you think? Elizabeth's ashes are going to be scattered there, too' (Jan Morris was married to Elizabeth before the sex-change).

It seemed odd that someone so young should be thinking of death. She was fifty-six, and the hormones she took made her look a great deal younger – early forties perhaps. But it was a very

Welsh thought, this plan for ashes and a grave-site. It was a nation accustomed to ghostliness, and sighing, and mourning. I was travelling on the Celtic fringe, where they still believed in giants.

What did I think of her grave? she asked.

I said the island looked as though it would wash away in a torrent and that her ashes would end up in Cardigan Bay. She laughed and said it did not matter.

At our first meeting about a year before, in London, she had said suddenly, 'I am thinking of taking up a life of crime,' and she had mentioned wanting to steal something from Woolworths. It had not seemed so criminal to me, but over lunch I asked her whether she had done anything about it.

'If I had taken up a life of crime I would hardly be likely to tell you, Paul!'

'I was just curious,' I said.

She said, 'These knives and forks. I stole them from Pan-American Airways. I told the stewardess I was stealing them. She said she didn't care.'

They were the sort of knives and forks you get with your little plastic tray of soggy meat and gravy.

Talk of crime led us to talk of arson by Welsh nationalists. I asked why only cottages were burned, when there were many tin caravans on the coast that would make a useful blaze. She said her son was very pro-Welsh and patriotic and would probably consider that.

I said that the Welsh seemed like one family.

'Oh, yes, that's what my son says. He thinks as long as he is in Wales he's safe. He'll always be taken care of. He can go to any house and he will be taken in and fed and given a place to sleep.'

'Like the travellers in Arabia who walk up to a Bedouin's tent and say, "I am a guest of God" in order to get hospitality. *Ana dheef Allah.*'

'Yes,' she said. 'It's probably true – it is like a family here in Wales.'

And like all families, I said, sentimental and suspicious and quarrelsome and secretive. But Welsh nationalism was at times like a certain kind of feminism, very monotonous and one-sided.

She said, 'I suppose it does look that way, if you're a man.'

I could have said: Didn't it look that way to you when you were a man?

She said, 'As for the caravans and tents, yes, they look awful. But the Welsh don't notice them particularly. They aren't noted for their visual sense. And those people, the tourists, are seeing Wales. I'm glad they're here, in a way, so they can see this beautiful country and understand the Welsh.'

Given the horror of the caravans, it was a very generous thought, and it certainly was not my sentiment. I always thought of Edmund Gosse saying, 'No one will see again on the shore of England what I saw in my early childhood.' The shore was fragile and breakable and easily poisoned.

Jan Morris was still speaking of the Welsh. 'Some people say that Welsh nationalism is a narrow movement, cutting Wales off from the world. But it is possible to see it as liberating Wales and giving it an importance – of bringing it into the world.'

We finished lunch and went outside. She said, 'If only you could see the mountains. I know it's boring when people say that – but they are really spectacular. What do you want to do?'

I said that I had had a glimpse of Portmeirion from the train and wanted a closer look, if there was time.

We drove there in her car, and parked under the pines. She had known Clough Williams-Ellis very well. 'He was a wonderful man,' she said. 'On his deathbed he was still chirping away merrily. But he was very worried about what people would say about him. Funny man! He wrote his own obituary! He had it there with him as he lay dying. When I visited him, he asked me to read it. Of course, there was nothing unflattering in it. I asked him why he had gone to all the trouble of writing his own obituary. He said, "Because I don't know what *The Times* will write in the obituary they do of me.'"

We walked through the gateway and down the stairs to the little Italian fantasy town on the Welsh hillside.

'He was obsessed that they would get something wrong, or be critical. He had tried every way he could of getting hold of his *Times* obituary – but failed, of course. They're always secret.'

She laughed. It was that hearty malicious laugh.

'The funny thing was, I was the one who had written his

obituary for *The Times*. They're all written carefully beforehand, you know.'

I said, 'And you didn't tell him?'

'No.' Her face was blank. Was she smiling behind it? 'Do you think I should have?'

I said, 'But he was on his deathbed.'

She laughed again. She said, 'It doesn't matter.'

There was a sculpted bust of Williams-Ellis in a niche, and resting crookedly on its dome was a hand-scrawled sign saying, THE BAR UPSTAIRS IS OPEN.

Jan said, 'He would have liked that.'

We walked through the place, under arches, through gateways, past Siamese statuary and Greek columns, and gardens and pillars and colonnades; we walked around the piazza.

'The trouble with him was that he didn't know when to stop.'

It was a sunny day. We lingered at the blue Parthenon, the Chantry, the Hercules statue, the Town Hall. You think: What is it doing here? More cottages.

'Once, when we lost a child, we stayed up there in that white cottage' – this about herself and Elizabeth when they were husband and wife.

There was more. Another triumphal arch, the Prior's Lodge, pink and green walls.

Jan said, 'It's supposed to make you laugh.'

But instead it was making me very serious, for this folly had taken over forty years to put together, and yet it still had the look of a faded movie set.

'He even designed the cracks, and planned where the mossy parts should be. He was very meticulous and very flamboyant, too, always in one of these big, wide-brimmed antediluvian hats and yellow socks.'

I was relieved to get out of Portmeirion; I had been feeling guilty, with the uncomfortable suspicion that I had been sight-seeing – something I had vowed I would not do.

Jan said, 'Want to see my gravestone?'

It was the same sudden, proud, provocative, mirthful way that she had said, *Want to see my grave?*

I said of course.

The stone was propped against the wall of her library. I had

missed it before. The lettering was very well done, as graceful as the engraving on a bank note. It was inscribed *Jan & Elizabeth Morris*. In Welsh and English, above and below the names, it said,

Here Are Two Friends

At The End of One Life

I said it was as touching as Emily Dickinson's gravestone in Amherst, Massachusetts, which said nothing more than *Called Back*.

When I left, and we stood at the railway station at Porthmadog, Jan said, 'If only these people knew who was getting on the train!'

I said, 'Why should they care?'

She grinned. She said, 'That knapsack – is that all you have?'

I said yes. We talked about travelling light. I said the great thing was to have no more than you could carry comfortably and never to carry formal clothes – suits, ties, shiny shoes, extra sweaters: what sort of travel was that?

Jan Morris said, 'I just carry a few frocks. I squash them into a ball – they don't weigh anything. It's much easier for a woman to travel light than a man.'

There was no question that she knew what she was talking about, for she had been both a man and a woman. She smiled at me, looking like Tootsie, and I felt a queer thrill when I kissed her goodbye.

12

The 20.20 to Llandudno Junction

'I love steam, don't you?' Stan Wigbeth said to me on the Ffestiniog Railway, and then leaned out of the window. He was not interested in my answer, which was, 'Up to a point.' Mr Wigbeth smiled and ground his teeth in pleasure when the whistle blew. He said there was nothing to him more beautiful than a steam 'loco'. He told me they were efficient and brilliantly made; but engine drivers had described to me how uncomfortable they could be, and how horrible on winter nights, because it was impossible to drive most steam engines without sticking your face out of the side window every few minutes.

I wanted Mr Wigbeth to admit that they were outdated and ox-like, dramatic looking but hell to drive; they were the choo-choo fantasies of lonely children; they were fun but filthy. Our train was pulled through the Welsh mountains by a 'Fairlie', known to the buff's as a 'double engine' – two boilers – 'the most uncomfortable engine I've ever driven,' a railwayman once told me. It was very hot for the driver, because of the position of the boilers. The footplate of the Fairlie was like an oriental oven for poaching ducks in their own sweat. Mr Wigbeth did not agree with any of this. Like many other railway buff's, he detested our century.

This had originally been a tram line, he told me; all the way from Porthmadog to Blaenau Ffestiniog – horse trams, hauling slate from the mountain quarries. Then it was named 'The Narrow Gauge Railway', and opened to passengers in 1869. It was closed in 1946 and eventually reopened in stages. The line was now – this month – completely open.

'We're lucky to be here,' Mr Wigbeth said, and checked his

watch, a fob watch, of course, the railway buff's timepiece. He was delighted by what he saw. 'Right on time!'

It was a beautiful trip to Blaenau, on the hairpin curves of the steep Snowdonia hills and through the thick evening green of the Dwyryd Valley. To the south-east, amid the lovely mountains, was the Trawsfynydd Nuclear Power Station, three or four gigantic grey slabs. An English architect, noted for his restrained taste, had been hired in 1959 to make it prettier, or at least bearable, but he had failed. Perhaps he should have planted vines. Yet this monstrosity emphasized the glory of these valleys. I found the ride restful, even with the talkative Mr Wigbeth beside me. Then he was silenced by a mile-long tunnel. The light at the end of the tunnel was Blaenau Ffestiniog, at the head of the valley.

'Where are you off to, then?' Mr Wigbeth asked.

'I'm catching the next train to Llandudno Junction.'

'It's a diesel,' he said, and made a sour face.

'So what?'

'I don't call that a train,' he said. 'I call that a tin box!'

He was disgusted and angry. He put on this engine driver's cap, and his jacket with the railway lapel pins, and after a last look at his conductor-type fob watch, he got into his Ford Cortina and drove twenty-seven stop-and-go miles back to Bangor.

I walked around Blaenau. I had thought of spending the night there, but it seemed a dull place and I felt negligent, being away from the coast. It was still like a bright afternoon when I took the 20.20 to Llandudno Junction, but moments after leaving Blaenau Station we plunged into a tunnel two miles long. When we emerged I began looking for the peak of Snowdon on the west, and imagined that I saw it at Dolwyddelan. The castle ('in 1281 Llewelyn the Last was here . . .') was solitary and high and looked like a bad molar. At Betws-y-Coed I searched for Ugly House ('once an overnight stop for Irish drovers'), but could not see it. The village was pretty but overcrowded this hot evening, and I had a happy truant-playing feeling as I left on the empty train rolling north through the Vale of Conway, stopping at Llanrwst and Dolgarrog. Now the light was golden, and the motion of the little train lulled me as we travelled along the river under the peaceful hills to the coast.

*

I was not frightened at the hotel in Llandudno until I was taken upstairs by the pock-marked clerk; and then I sat in the dusty room alone and listened. The only sound was my breathing from having climbed the four flights of stairs. The room was small, there were no lights in the corridor, the wallpaper had rust stains that could have been spatters of blood. The ceiling was high, the room narrow: it was like sitting at the bottom of a well. I went downstairs.

The clerk was watching television in the lounge (he called it a lounge). He did not speak to me. He was watching *Hill Street Blues*, a car chase, some shouting. I looked at the register and saw what I had missed before – that I was the only guest in this big dark forty-room hotel. I went outside and wondered how to escape. Of course I could have marched in and said, ‘I’m not happy here – I’m checking out,’ but the clerk might have made trouble and charged me. But I wanted to punish him for running such a scary place.

I walked inside and upstairs, grabbed my knapsack and hurried to the lounge rehearsing a story that began, ‘This is my bird-watching gear. I’ll be right back –’ The clerk was still watching television. As I passed him (he did not look up) the hotel seemed to me the most sinister building I had ever been in. On my way downstairs I had had a moment of panic when, faced by three closed doors in a hallway, I imagined myself in one of those corridor labyrinths of the hotel in the nightmare, endlessly tramping torn carpets and opening doors to discover again and again that I was trapped.

I ran down the promenade to the bandstand and stood panting while the band played ‘If You Were the Only Girl in the World’. I wondered if I had been followed by the clerk. I paid twenty pence for a deck chair, but feeling that I was being watched (perhaps it was my knapsack and oily shoes?) I abandoned the chair and continued down the promenade. Later, I checked into the Queens Hotel, which looked vulgar enough to be safe.

Llandudno was the sort of place that inspired old-fashioned fears of seaside crime. It made me think of poisoning and suffocation, screams behind varnished doors, creatures scratching at the wainscoting. I imagined constantly that I was hearing the gasps of adulterers from the dark windows of those stuccoed

terraces that served as guest houses – naked people saying gloatingly, ‘We shouldn’t be doing this!’ In all ways, Llandudno was a perfectly preserved Victorian town. It was so splendid-looking that it took me several days to find out that it was in fact very dull.

It had begun as a fashionable watering place and developed into a railway resort. It was still a railway resort, full of people strolling on the promenade and under the glass and iron canopies of the shop-fronts on Mostyn Street. It had a very old steamer (‘Excursions to the Isle of Man’) moored at its pier head, and very old hotels, and a choice of very old entertainments – ‘Old Mother Riley’ at the Pavilion, the Welsh National Opera at the Astra Theatre doing *Tosca*, or Yorkshire comedians in vast saloon bars telling very old jokes. ‘We’re going to have a loovely boom competition,’ a toothy comedian was telling his drunken audience over near Happy Valley. A man was blindfolded and five girls selected, and the man had to judge – by touching them – which one’s bum was the shapeliest. It caused hilarity and howls of laughter; the girls were shy – one simply walked offstage; and at one point some men were substituted and the blindfolded man crouched and began searching the men’s bums as everyone jeered. And then the girl with the best bum was selected as the winner and awarded a bottle of carbonated cider called ‘Pomagne’.

I overheard two elderly ladies outside at the rail, looking above Llandudno Bay. They were Miss Maltby and Miss Thorn, from Glossop, near Manchester.

‘It’s a nice moon,’ Miss Maltby said.

‘Aye,’ Miss Thorn said. ‘It is.’

‘But that’s not what we saw earlier this evening.’

‘No. That was the sun.’

Miss Maltby said, ‘You told me it was the moon.’

‘It was all that mist, you see,’ Miss Thorn said. ‘But I know now it was the sun.’

The town was dominated by two silver-grey headlands of swollen limestone, Great and Little Orme. From Llandudno’s pier-head on a clear day it was possible to see the Lancashire coast, and from West Parade on the other side (where Lewis Carroll stayed with the Liddell family and wrote part of *Alice*),

Bangor and the shore of Anglesey were greenishly apparent across Conway Bay.

There were two Indians in my railway compartment trying to open a briefcase. It had a combination lock, and they had the combination, but still they could not open it. They quarrelled a little, taking turns sighing at the stubborn lock, and then one said, 'You would be so kind?' I took the briefcase into my lap and spanked it and it popped open. It contained some combs, a bottle of hair oil, a blue diary, a Bengali movie magazine and a plastic pouch that was zippered shut. While one Indian removed a comb from the briefcase the other Indian picked up a valise and left the train, muttering.

The remaining Indian combed his hair and said he had never seen the muttering one before in his life. They had met over the briefcase.

This Indian, Mr Amin, said, 'I am in catering business.' He smiled and added, 'That is to say, catering and restauranting.' He owned a curry shop in Bangor.

'I like Bangor and I am liking Wales,' he said. 'And the Vellish I am speaking as vell.'

'Say something in Welsh,' I suggested.

'I can say some few words for you,' Mr Amin said. 'You are helping me with my briefcase and making me so happy. I am thinking and that other man, too, perhaps we are not unlocking my case! And - what you wanted?'

'Welsh,' I said.

He straightened his head and in a clacking voice said, '*Bore da. Good marning. Croeso. Velcome. Diolch yn fawr. Oh, thank you very much. Nos da. Good evening. Cymru am byth. Wales for ever.*'

I said, 'Are you going to stay in Bangor for ever?'

'Who knows about for ever?'

'Let's say five years.'

He said, 'Yes.'

'How many Bangladeshis are there in Bangor?'

'Not more than eight.'

'Do you have a mosque?'

'No,' he said. 'But sometimes we use a certain floor in the Student Union building.'

'Do you have a mullah?'

He said, 'Ven five or six pray, vun can be mullah.'

I asked, 'How many children do you have?'

'Questions! Questions!' He seemed short of breath, his face was a tight fit, he probably took me for the tax man.

'Sorry, Mr Amin. I have two children. Boys.'

He relaxed and looked envious. 'You are lucky. I have three girls, and then I try again, and then I just get a boy last year.'

We entered a tunnel - silence - and then emerged, and Bangor lay before us, big and grey. Mr Amin gathered his briefcase and paper bags and made ready to get off the train.

I said, 'You could have settled anywhere in Britain, Mr Amin. Why did you choose to settle in Bangor?'

He said, 'Because it reminds me of my town in Bangladesh. Bangor is just very like Sylhet.'

Was Sylhet severe and monotonous like this? Perhaps so. In any case, Indians had often told me how Cheltenham reminded them of certain towns in the Punjab, and Scotland was reminiscent of Simla, and after the Sultan of Zanzibar was overthrown he took himself to Eastbourne, claiming that it somewhat resembled his fragrant but decrepit sultanate in the Indian Ocean.

I stayed on the train and crossed the Menai Strait to Anglesey. The island was flat, as if it had detached itself from the mainland and become waterlogged. Its meadows were no more than gentle swells, and small houses and broken cottages lay scattered at great distances. It possessed the haunted look that Cornwall had, its rocks like ruins, its stillness like suspense. It had been the Druids' last outpost and it looked it. In such a flat grassy place it was possible to see that there was nothing threatening, and yet this apparent openness was itself eerie and suggested invisible dangers. It was the sound of the wind, the pale light, the flat shadows on the low ground.

The first station was the famous but practically unsayable Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwilllantysiliogogoch ('St Mary's Church in a hollow by the white hazel close to the rapid whirlpool by the red cave of St Tysilio'). It is usually called

Llanfair P.G. but the full name appeared on the station signboard, which was fifteen feet long. There was nothing else of interest at the station or in the town, and indeed it was indistinguishable from the other twenty-two places called Llanfair (St Mary's) in Wales. I was told that the long name had been concocted by the village tailor a century before so that the place would seem singular, much as Cross Keys, Pennsylvania, had been officially renamed Intercourse.

The stations and villages along the route to Holyhead looked worn down and depressing. It was as if all the millions of lonely Irish people who travelled this way – this was the principal route – had devoured the landscape with their eyes, looked upon it with such hunger, that there was little of it left to take hold of and examine. It sometimes seemed that way to me in Britain, in the busiest places, as if a castle's ramparts or a hillside or a village – supposedly so picturesque – had been eroded by two thousand years of admiring scrutiny, the penetration of people's eyes. No wonder they now stood on the shore and looked out to sea.

Bodorgan Station was empty, and nearby was an empty hotel; Ty Croes was one ruined cottage; and then the land grew stonier and harsher and looked the sort of place where only Druids could be happy – wind-flattened grass and pitted rocks, a few throaty crows and flocks of barking seagulls.

After the village of Valley there was a causeway to Holy Island. We passed a large factory, Anglesey Aluminium, and slowed as we approached the town of Holyhead.

Holyhead was one of a number of British towns that seemed to be dying – blackening like an extremity with gangrene. It was too far, too barren, too still. It had gone to sleep and would die without waking. The ferry business – boats to the Irish port of Dun Laoghaire – was so bad they were advertising free litre-bottles of whisky for anyone who made the trip. But the ferries remained empty: no one had any money here. In Anglesey, where the local accent was not Welsh but rather a jaw-twisting Birmingham neigh, I was told that the unemployment rate was thirty per cent. It was a meaningless statistic – most statistics struck me as sounding frivolous and hastily invented – but the fact remained that people in Holyhead were visibly idle. They did not work, nor did they do much else but sit and stare. The tennis courts and

football fields were empty, the bowling greens were empty – no sports. There was little drinking because no one could afford it; no movies.

'I sleep late and watch TV,' a man named Gower told me. He had been on the dole for five years and was only thirty-two.

The streets were empty. I walked through the town and felt a sense of despair, because I could not imagine that things would ever improve here. No one I met believed that the future would be any brighter, and a number of them said casually that they had thought of emigrating. Whenever British people spoke of emigration they mentioned North America first. Europe was just as bad as Britain, they said, and Australia was too far.

The younger ones had some hope. I deliberately sought out youths in Anglesey and asked them what their plans were. One thirteen-year-old told me he wanted to be a plasterer. I guessed that his father was a plasterer, but I was wrong. A fourteen-year-old told me he wanted to join the Royal Navy, and another's ambition was to be a carpenter. They hated school and perhaps they were right to hate it; what job would school prepare them for? A sixteen-year-old told me that he was about to take an exam, and then he wanted to go to college. What would he study?

'Catering,' he said. His name was Brian Craster.

I asked him if he meant cooking – being a chef.

'Yeah,' he said in his neighing accent, 'it's a two-year course.'

'Then you get a job.'

'If there's one going. There's not much work around here. Just British Rail or the Tinto factory' – Rio Tinto Zinc ran Anglesey Aluminium – 'but they've started to lay people off.'

'Do you do any cooking now, Brian?'

'A bit,' he said. 'I can make cakes. Shepherd's pie and that.'

'Where do you want to be a chef?'

'Maybe London. Maybe get a job at the Savoy.'

None of the youths I met in Holyhead had ever been to London. Brian Craster wanted to go, but he seemed a little fearful and that made him sound defiant.

It was all council flats and uncut grass, barking dogs and broken stone walls. I felt sorry for the children, kicking tin cans, their hands in their pockets and their hair blowing, dreaming of being plasterers.

I walked through most of the western part of Holy Island, around South Stack and then back to the harbour. In a bus shelter overlooking New Harbour I saw a poem written in black ink.

Now it is 1984.

Knock-knock at your front door
It's the suede denim secret police
They have come for your uncool niece
Come quickly to the camp
You'll look nice as a drawstring lamp
Don't worry – it's only a shower
For your clothes – here's a pretty flower

DIE on organic poison gas
Serpent's egg already hatched
You will croak you little clown
When you mess with President Brown!

As I stood copying this into my small notebook, a middle-aged couple approached the bus shelter. They were Owen and Esther Smallbone from the council estate just west of Holyhead. They had a small flat for which they paid £16 a week. Owen Smallbone had been an accounts clerk at the harbour, but had taken leave of absence for medical reasons – a bad back. When he had recovered sufficiently to return to his job, there was no job, and he had been on the dole ever since – four years. Esther sometimes earned a little money looking after the children of working mothers – the Smallbones had no children of their own – but there was not much child-minding these days, because the mothers were being laid off, weren't they? They were always the first to go. Recently, Owen's back had begun again to bother him, which was why they were taking the bus. They were on the way to the General Post Office on Boston Street to purchase a Television Broadcast Receiving Licence (Including Colour) – for an 'apparatus for wireless telegraphy'. They rented a Sony 'Trinitron', eighteen inch, for £12 a month. The licence for watching it would cost £46.

They were very suspicious of me. I wondered why, and then I saw the reason. I had put my notebook away, but I was still holding my pen. So I had probably written that crazy poem, or if

not the poem then perhaps I had drawn the picture of the penis, or else set down my telephone number with the message *Ring Roger for a good time, guys*, or – and this was the most likely – I was the one going around Holyhead scribbling FREE WALES and FWA, one of the arsonists. My knapsack told a story.

The Smallbones glanced at my pen. They were very annoyed. They were decent people, but even decent people could not find work these days. They were law-abiding – masses of people never bothered to buy a TV licence and didn't give a tinker's cuss when the television-detector van parked in Mostyn Close and trained its radar on the flats, with them inside the flats watching *Championship Darts* or *The Dukes of Hazzard* without a licence. And the Smallbones respected public property. They hated graffiti, and this on the wall of the bus shelter had been written by perverts, lunatics and fanatics. Sometimes it made them ashamed to be Welsh. Sometimes they felt like just jacking it in and going to Nova Scotia like the Davises, but that was years ago, and who wanted to hire a man with a bad back?

Ten minutes passed. The bus did not come. I waited a few more minutes and then decided to walk. The Smallbones were still waiting, and after I had gone they examined the walls of the bus shelter trying to determine which scribbles were mine.

I returned to Llandudno Junction for the third time and then to Llandudno. Now I noticed that there were seagulls on the platform of Llandudno Station, thirty or forty of them, waiting the way pigeons waited at Waterloo.

At last I decided to leave Wales. I took another train to Llandudno Junction. Today was Friday and the train was full of people returning to their homes in industrial Lancashire and West Yorkshire. Some had been further afield than Rhos-on-Sea and Colwyn Bay.

'The people crowded round us,' Janet Hosegood said. She was a librarian in Runcorn. She loved to travel. She had spent last year's Easter vacation on a group tour of three Chinese cities, Canton, Suchow and Shanghai, as she was telling old Mr Bolus, who had never been east of Mablethorpe.

Mr Bolus said, 'Ee?'

'They'd never seen eyes like ours,' Miss Hosegood said. She was fifty-one and loved country walks. *Spinster*, she wrote when

marital status was asked for. She hated the abbreviation 'Ms' - 'Miss!' she usually said, showing her teeth.

Mr Bolus said, 'Ee?'

'In Channah,' Miss Hosegood said.

'Ee?'

'People's Repoblic,' Miss Hosegood said.

'Aye,' Mr Bolus said.

'Cause their eyes are slanty-like,' Miss Hosegood said.

'Aye,' Mr Bolus said.

'Six 'oondred and fifty pound it cost us, all in,' Miss Hosegood said.

But Mr Bolus had been distracted from this talk of China by the bulldozers outside Colwyn Bay, preparing to build something. *It can only be something awful*, he thought, for here there was mile after mile of shallys and villas and caravans and tents, facing the Irish Sea.

At last Mr Bolus looked away and said, 'Ee?'

Although it was a pleasant, rattling two-coach train, it was rather full of people and belongings. But what was especially annoying to the others was the appearance of Roland Painter-Betty and his dog, Ollie, the pair of them pushing down the aisle and then taking the only empty seat - seats, rather, because Roland snagged the window and the dirty great Alsatian leaped on to the seat next to him.

'Wonder if he paid full fare?' a man named Garside muttered.

Janet Hosegood said, 'That dog should be on the flipping floor.'

And they also hated the sight of Roland Painter-Betty's earring and chunky bracelet and Liberty scarf and the kind of puce-coloured shoes no normal man would wear.

It was all caravans from Abergele eastwards, places with names like 'Golden Sands', just tin boxes, miles of them, on flat stretches of sand - no trees.

We crossed the River Clwyd and came to Rhyl, which was stained with soot and looked punished. Its fun-fair and amusement park were silent, and it looked truly terrible.

Verna and Doreen, neighbours from Wallasey, had turned away from Rhyl. This was the last day of their holiday and they didn't want it spoiled - Verna explained that the sight of grotty places could leave a bad taste in your mouth. They talked about

a mutual friend, Rose, who had recently moved into Stanley Road.

'How's she getting on, then?' Verna asked.

'Talks to everyone. She's got a word for everyone,' Doreen said.

'She's a Londoner.'

'Well, this is it, isn't it? Your Londoners are a very outgoing people, aren't they?'

Some of the caravans were on marshland, sinking badly, some of them broken-backed on Morfa Rhuddlan ('where in 759 the Welsh under Caradoc were routed by Offa of Mercia').

No one said a word to Roland Painter-Betty or Ollie, stinking and slaving on the seat next to him. Everyone knew Roland was getting away with murder. But strangers were not addressed on British trains: they might be maniacs, they might be rude, or worse they might come from the class above you. If it was certain the stranger were a foreigner, then it was just possible someone would say, 'I wish you wouldn't do that.' But Roland was a native, and probably a poofter, and they could be so touchy - worse than women, some of them.

We stopped and everyone looked out of the windows: Prestatyn. It was red-brick, once important to the lead industry, then a holiday resort that had never quite caught on. *Come to Sunny Prestatyn*, posters said, mocking the bleak place. The tide was down and sand mounted towards the shore, forming banks and low dunes. Behind Prestatyn lay the empty green hills of Denbighshire.

The River Dee was hopeless with sand - seven miles wide at this point but scarcely navigable, as the brown bubbly flats seemed to prove. And the land was flat, too; the sheep had cropped it so closely and so evenly it looked like the surface of stagnant water. The town of Flint had turned its back on the river. It had a sullen wintry look and the British industrial smells of foot-rot, dead mice and old socks. The junkyards outside Shotton were a warning, for Shotton's steelworks were shortly to close and become junkyards, leaving thousands without jobs.

The sky was yellow-grey, like some kinds of smoke. It was June and in the immense torpor of the steaming day the passengers had begun to doze off, only one person acknowledging the fact that,

just a mile from Chester, we crossed the Welsh border. Mr Bolus said it had been the Welsh border for a thousand years.

Janet Hosegood was talking, still telling Mr Bolus – he was deaf, I had now decided – about the People's Republic of China, her last year's holiday.