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Shoes for Anthony

Written by Emma Kennedy

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SHOES FOR ANTHONY

EMMA KENNEDY



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For Georgie, Geoffrey and Sarah

GLOSSARY OF WELSH PHRASES

Uffarn den – hell fire
Uffach wyllt – wild wind
Cera yffarn – go to hell
Diawl – devil
Duw – God

CHAPTER ONE

Pen Pych, our mountain: here she came, rising out from the fog, ground up, like a woman quietly raising her petticoats. I loved this time in the morning, when the mountain made her presence felt. The wind blew away the haze of night and there she was, the Queen of the Valley. We were standing, the five of us, stolen tea trays tucked into our armpits, staring up towards the spoil tip that sat at her base. It was such a blot on the landscape, and yet, in a way, it fitted right in: muck and beauty, side by side.

'Race up, then race down, right, boys?' said Ade, spitting into his hand. Ade was my best bud. He had a face so ingrained with dirt he looked like the inside of a teapot. He was wearing a pair of muddied shorts and a jumper so oversized it floated round him as if he were suspended in a well. Nobody had had new clothes in years, certainly not since the start of the war. All the kids on Scott Street were reliant on hand-me-downs and the clothes of the dead.

'Onesies, right?' said Thomas Evans, scrap of a thing, tough as hell. He was like gristle – a chewy lad, we called him – forever breaking his limbs. 'Starting b'there.' He pointed up

to a flat section to the left of the heaped-up spoil tip. 'But feet up, like. No brakes.'

We all nodded.

'Who's doing starters, then?' asked Bozo, shoving his glasses up his nose. One of the lenses was covered in sticking plaster, on account of him having a lazy eye. Plaster was supposed to make his lazy eye less lazy. None of us understood how that worked, mind, but there it was.

'I will,' said Fez, glancing sideways. Fez was a stick of a lad, all knees and elbows, with an explosion of curly blond hair. He looked like a firework. He lived three doors down and was an only child, something that was virtually unheard of in Treherbert. There'd been something wrong with his mam and she couldn't have any more; that's what Bopa Jackson said. Bopa lived next door to us. She knew everything about everyone. 'Better than the *Pathé News*,' Mam said. Still, it meant Fez always had stuff. He was good to hang around.

When it came to clambering up spoil tips, the general rule was low and fast. There was a knack to it: light on the toes, no digging the heels in, don't stand still for any length of time. Easier said than done in rubber wellingtons, but I'd been climbing spoil tips for as long as I could remember. Up and at it. There was no other way.

The five of us took up position, slightly bent at the shoulders, one leg forward. We cast each other a sideways glance. 'On your mark …' I began, getting ready to crouch.

'Go!' yelled Fez, and off he dashed, his plimsolls digging in.

'*Uffarn den*!' yelled Bozo, clambering after him. 'That's not starters! That's cheating, you bastard!'

I got off to a bad start. My first footfall slid away from me and I tumbled at the off. Falling down into a crouch position, I used my free hand to stabilise and began to make inroads upwards. Fez was already a quarter of the way up. He was darting left and right, taking a leaping zigzag approach towards the summit. I'd seen him do that before. I knew it tired him out. He'd have to stop, and when he did, he'd slide down.

Bozo was struggling: for every two steps forward, he was slipping a step back. He had good balance on his left side, but his right was letting him down. That would be his lazy eye, I thought.

Ade and Thomas were neck and neck, just below Fez but higher up than me. I glanced up. There were miniature gullies in the spoil tip. You didn't want to run up those. The clinkers tended to be finer, less stable. You wanted to run up the harder stuff. It had less of a tendency to fall away.

I looked over towards Fez. He was slowing down. I clawed myself forwards with my free hand and tried to push myself up on to my toe tips. A light touch and high knees, that's what was needed. It wouldn't look pretty, but it would get the job done.

I got myself into a rhythm: high knees, touch and up. I was passing Thomas. He looked red in the face, exhausted already. Ade was within reaching distance. I checked his position. He was about ten feet from the top but almost at a standstill. Touch and up. My left foot hit a gully and slid away. I managed to stay upright but the heels of my wellingtons wanted to dig backwards. I had to push forwards.

Bozo was nowhere. He was out of it. Ade and Thomas were flagging. It was just me and Fez. I could hear him breathing,

heavy, laboured. He was finished. He'd have to crawl the last bit. My legs felt strong. I had him. Push, jump and past Fez I went. The summit was mine.

I let out a cheer and straightened up, arms aloft. 'Bad luck, Fez,' I said, watching him crawl over the top edge. He flopped down on his back, his chest heaving.

'Well done, man,' he panted. 'I got stuck at the top bit, couldn't get a grip.'

'You got sticks of dyno up your arse, Ant?' said Ade, heaving himself onto the flat. 'You went by like a rocket.'

'Bloody plimsoll came off, dinnit?' yelled Thomas, holding the offending item aloft. He slumped down onto the ground and pulled it back on. 'Where's Bozo?' he said, lifting his head.

'Coming,' I answered. 'He's on his belly, mind. About to come over.'

A cry went up. 'Giz a hand!'

I went to the edge, crouched down onto my haunches and, grabbing Bozo's hand, pulled him onto the top. '*Uffach wyllt*,' he said, breathing heavily. 'That's harder than it looks.'

The five of us sat catching our breath. It wasn't much of a vantage point but just enough to look down over the village, the uniform rows of pitmen's houses, smoke gently rising from the chimneys. I imagined it had always looked this way, from the day it was first built, a village for miners: functional, no fuss, at one with the mountain.

'Well,' said Thomas, standing. 'Let's get at it.'

I placed my tea tray on the lip of the spoil tip and straddled it; the heels of my wellies dug down into the clinkers. Bozo

went to place his down next to me but, in his exhaustion, he fumbled it and his tray skittered away. 'No!' he cried, grasping for a corner, but it was too late. We watched as it slid and bounced its way inevitably back to the bottom.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' said Bozo, hands on hips. 'That's a bad business, like.'

'You massive tit, Bozo,' said Thomas, laughing. 'Chuckin' your tray down, is it? It's not a throwing contest.'

'*Cera yffarn*, Evans,' snapped Bozo, his one eye darkening. 'Bloody accident, innit?'

'Climb on behind me,' I said, sitting down and shifting my weight forward to the front of the tray. 'Mine's a bit bigger. You'll fit on. We'll go quicker, 'n' all.'

'Hang on!' yelled Thomas. 'Onesies, innit? We never said twosies.'

'Yeah, but his tray's down b'there, innit?' I replied.

'And he's proper knacked,' added Ade. 'He needs a lift, like.'

'S'pose,' said Thomas. 'But you have to do feet down, like. Make it fair.'

'All right,' I replied, with a nod.

I felt Bozo's arms come about me, his fingers interlocking just below my ribcage. 'Everyone ready?' I cast a glance to my left and right. Ade, Thomas and Fez were astride their chariots, each holding up the top end of their tea tray to stop it slipping away.

'Ready,' they all yelled.

'Kick off, then!' I cried, and with that, I lifted my heels onto the top rim of the tea tray and we were off, sliding down the spoil tip, clinkers scattering, bumping and jolting.

To our left, Thomas let out a whoop, followed by Ade, their excited yelps filling the air. To our right, Fez, screaming, hit a ridge and literally flew through the air, like a man on a magic carpet, his hair whipping backwards and his cheeks flushed pink. Everything else around us was a blur, the distant mountains a smudge of green zipping past as we skeltered downwards. Bozo was yelling something in my ear, but I couldn't hear him, the noise of the slag beneath us scraping and grumbling. I tried to look sideways, to see if we were in the lead, but the bottom was coming up fast, faster than I would have liked. 'Hold on!' I yelled, grabbing the sides of the tea tray. Wind whipping at our faces, we span off the spoil and skidded onto patchy scrub, and as we hit, the tea tray tipped sideways and sent us spilling.

'Cut my leg,' said Fez, holding his shin. He licked his forefinger and rubbed at the long scrape of red dribbling down towards his sock.

I pushed myself up and checked myself for obvious wounds. None to report. Bozo was still lying on his back, his face black from the spoil. We were all pretty filthy. It was the single advantage of being brought up round a mine: nobody minded the dirt. We'd had some chalk, once, spent ages marking out roads for Fez's Dinkies on the flagstones. The mams had gone mental, furious with us for making a clean, white mess on their paving. We couldn't understand it: mad with us for a bit of white when we spent all our days covered in black.

Ade was pushing himself up and dusting coal off his knees. Beyond him, a small, pained moan went up. Ade turned and looked over his shoulder towards Thomas. 'What's up, man?'

'Ankle, twisted, dunno, hurts like hell.' He sat up and pulled off his plimsoll.

'Bet you've bloody broken it again,' said Ade, pointing towards his leg. 'Your mam'll have your guts. You only just got out of the last cast.'

We gathered round him and stared down. There was no denying it. He'd knacked his leg right up.

''Ere, boys,' said Thomas, staring down at his swelling ankle. 'Don't tell me mam it was the tip, mind. I didn't tell her I was taking the tea tray.'

We all nodded and helped him up. We may have liked a scrape, but we weren't stupid.

'Born of a scorpion!' said Bopa, folding her arms. 'Can you even imagine it, Em? Stealing ration books! Three gone in Scott Street alone!'

My mother shook her head. 'Who'd steal a ration book? It's wicked, Bopa. Wicked.'

'They may as well knock on doors and tell people to starve! Beryl Morris has been in tears. She's only got half an ounce of kidneys. How do you make that last a fortnight?'

'Is that how long it's going to take to get replacements?'

'Well,' said Bopa, reaching for the kettle that was starting to whistle, 'that's how long Arthur Pryce said it would take. But that's Arthur Pryce. I wouldn't be surprised if Beryl Morris doesn't see another lump of meat for a month.'

'We'll have to help her out. I can ask Alwyn to catch her some rabbits.'

'I've given her two eggs. They're appetite suppressants. Pass me the pot. I'll get it warmed.'

Bopa, our immediate neighbour, was an irascible widow. She kept a clean flagstone and a keen eye on everyone else. She had brown hair, flecked with grey, cut short and hidden under a blue checked headscarf. Her face had a rough quality to it, like a pumice stone, her features sharp and pointed. Some boys reckoned she was directly descended from that dinosaur that can fly – a pterodactyl, it's called. Mam wouldn't hear chat like that in her earshot, mind. Disrespectful, she said.

'I hope you're listening, Anthony!' Bopa barked. 'Keep your whistle clean. Do something wrong and bad things happen! Mark my words. There was a boy from Blaencwm, doing the rounds for the milkie, turned out he was pocketing half the pennies. Guess what happened to him, Anthony?'

I shrugged. 'Don't know,' I mumbled.

'He got polio and died, that's what.'

'Bopa!' protested Mam. 'Stealing doesn't cause polio!'

'Bad things happen!' she cried, raising a finger into the air. 'Bad. Things. Happen! Young boys round here would do well to remember it.' She palmed the side of the teapot. 'That's warm enough. Let's get the tea in.'

Bopa came round at 11.00 a.m. on the dot every single day. She'd bang on the adjoining wall to signal her imminent arrival and in she would come, morning chores completed, ready to update my mother on every scandal and bowel movement troubling anyone in Scott Street.

'I think it's his liver,' she said, blowing into her cup. 'He's got that bilious look to him. Mind you, he's not eaten a vegetable since 1937. "Margaret," I said, "Margaret, you've got to put a carrot in a pie. Trick him into it." He picks leeks

out of cawl, Em. The very thought! I think it's traitorous wasting food when there's a war on. Hitler wants us to starve. He's doing his job for him.'

My mother nodded silently and cupped her tea between her hands.

'You're a bit filthy, aren't you?' said Bopa, her beams turning towards me. 'I mean, I know you're a mucky lot, but if I didn't know you were a boy, I'd be chucking you on the compost.'

'Yes,' said Mam, turning towards me. 'You're in a proper muck. Have you been sliding down that spoil tip again? You better not have had my tray.'

Her eyes darted towards the place on the counter where she kept her tea trays. I said nothing. I'd snuck it back in and wiped it clean using the inside of my jumper.

'Dr Mitchell's round at Anne Evans'. Don't know why yet. Thought I'd pop over after seeing you. Don't like to intrude. He'll be snaffling up any cake that's going. He's a card, ain't he? I swear he can smell a cake from half a mile away. He's like those pigs that can sniff out treats.'

'A truffle pig,' I said, picking dirt out from under my fingernails.

'That's it. A truffle pig. But for sponge. Clever lad, your Anthony, ain't he?'

Mam nodded and shot me a small smile. 'He's always got his nose in that encyclopaedia of his. He loves reading that.'

'Dr Mitchell's seeing Thomas. He's bust his leg up again,' I said.

Bopa raised an eyebrow. 'Look out, Em. Your boy's on the button. Bust his leg, has he? How he do that, then?'

'Don't know,' I said, staring intently at my nails. I slightly wished I hadn't said anything.

'Didn't he only just finish breaking his leg?' I could feel her eyes boring into me.

'Hmmm,' I mumbled.

'He did,' Bopa rolled on. 'Well. Good job Anne hasn't sent that wheelchair off to salvage, innit? He'll be needing that again. How did he do it? Didn't catch it.' She took a long slurp of her tea.

I blew out my cheeks a little and pulled my bottom lip tight. It was an unspoken rule if you were a Scott Street boy: You didn't tell. 'Running or something,' I murmured.

'Running or something,' said Bopa, with a sharp nod. 'It's this war, Em. They're running wild. Feral. He'll have been up to no good. If I had a shilling for every time a Scott Street boy said he was doing something when he was doing something entirely different, I'd be living in Cardiff in a house made of Lardy cake. What did I say? Bad things happen!'

I looked up towards the old clock that sat on the back kitchen mantelpiece. It only had one arm, the long hour one, so as clocks go it wasn't much cop. All the same, I liked to guess what the time was just by looking at its tip. Twenty past eleven, I reckoned.

'Right, then,' said Bopa, thumping her cup down onto the table. 'I've got some cloths to wash. I'll pop into Anne Evans'. Let you know what's what. Ta-ra, then. Ta-ra, Anthony.'

'Ta-ra,' I said, pushing myself up from the table.

'Ta-ra, Bopa,' said Mam, standing to place the tea things in the sink. 'See you later.'

But she was already gone.

'Wash up those cups for me, Ant,' said Mam. 'Now, then,' she added, wiping her hands on the bottom of her housecoat. 'Let's think about your father's lunch.'

The tommy box was a battered old thing, the only family relic I think we ever had. It had been handed down from father to eldest son, pitmen all, for three generations, and I knew to be entrusted with it was a responsibility of some significance.

It was sitting, opened and empty, in front of me on the kitchen table. Chin resting on my crossed forearms, I watched as Mam opened the larder door beyond. 'Your father's forgotten his lunch again. Right, then,' she said, standing with one hand on her hip. 'What shall he have today?'

She stared at the near-empty shelves. There wasn't a lot to choose from. We never had much, but then, as Mam said, if we'd never had it, we'd never miss it.

'Lord knows it's hard enough feeding three men at the best of times, let alone with a war on. He can have that trotter,' Mam mumbled, picking up a gelatinous nub from a slippery plate. 'A slice of bread and … get me some jibbons from the veg box, Ant.' I slid backwards from the table and pulled out two long spring onions from a tangle of muddied home-grown vegetables. I passed them up to Mam, who quickly took her knife to the end of them. Peering into the tommy box, I snuck my forefinger into the trotter jelly.

'I can see you,' said Mam, slapping my hand away. She tucked the jibbons into the side of the open tin. 'Did you get that quarter of twist?'

I licked the stolen, meaty smear from the end of my finger and pulled out a small wrap of chewing tobacco from my shorts pocket. 'Mr Hughes told me to ask you to go in so you can square the bill.'

'He'll have to wait. I haven't got it. No more going in the shop until I get some wages from the boys. That means no penny chews on tick, Ant. Are you listening?' I nodded. Mam took the roll of tobacco, pressed it into the top, rounded section of the tommy box, then laid a slice of buttered bread over the trotter and onions, the soft seal to my father's lunch.

'There you go,' she said, pressing down the tin lid. 'Get that to the pit. And no nicking bits. Quick sharp.'

At the top end of the street, before the houses ended and our mountain began, a gaggle of Scott Street kids were huddled in a tight knot on the pavement. Something was going on. I had time, I reckoned, so I squeezed in. Two matchboxes were being poked with sticks. 'Give 'em a rattle, man,' said Fez, not looking up. 'Then we let 'em go.'

I tapped Ade on the shoulder. 'What's in 'em?'

'Red Indians. Fez's dad brought some back from the pit to give his mam a scare. Fez got hold of them. Reckon they'll fight.'

I pushed further into the circle and crouched down on my haunches. 'Let 'em go, Fez. Come on!'

Fez pushed his finger into the middle of one matchbox and eased the drawer open. Two red antennae popped upwards. The girls in the group gave out small, theatrical screams. 'Don't let it loose, Fez!' wailed one, staring wide-eyed at the tiny, probing feelers.

'Come on, Fez,' urged Ade, 'get at it, man!'

'They'll never stay out,' I said. 'They only like the dark down the pit.'

'We'll see,' said Fez, poking both matchboxes fully open.

For a moment, the cockroaches seemed stunned, as if daylight had shocked them rigid, but then, in the blink of an eye, they were scuttling, feelers swathing from left to right. The circle of children burst backwards like a flower exploding into bloom. 'Stop 'em!' shouted Ade. 'Make the buggers fight!'

'Look out!' screamed one of the girls, covering her face with her hands. 'They eat your eyes!'

The largest Red Indian had scuttled left, but as a defensive plimsoll shot down in its direction, it turned sharply back on itself and headed towards me and Ade. 'Watch out!' cried Ade, standing up suddenly. 'They're bloody at it!'

I was momentarily caught off balance and fell sideways onto my elbow. Around me there were more hysterical screams. A sharp tingling sensation coursed down my shin.

'It's in your boot, Ant!' shouted Ade. 'Get it off, man!'

Fez grabbed the heel of my wellington and tossed it across the street. Nobody moved.

I looked down at my bare foot. No Red Indian. 'Where is it?' I said, panting.

'It'll still be in there,' said Ade, gesturing towards the discarded wellington as if it were an unexploded bomb. 'Go get it.'

'Where's the other one?' I said, scrabbling upwards.

'Over there by the drain,' said Fez. 'Do you want my stick to pick up your wellie?' He held out a whittled branch.

I shook my head.

My wellington was resting at an angle against the kerb. I hopped over towards it and peered into the opening.

'Flick it, Ant,' encouraged Ade. 'Pick it up. Flick it out.'

'I don't know how to do it.' I said, my cheeks reddening.

'Oh, *duw*, he can't do it,' murmured Fez. 'You do it, Ade. You don't mind a Red Indian.'

'Move aside,' said Ade, crossing the street towards me. 'And give me that.'

He took my father's tommy box in his left hand. Bending down, he took the heel of my wellington, banged it sharp on the kerb and upturned it. The cockroach fell out. Slam went the tommy box. A crunch. A grind. A peek. He looked over to the others. 'I killed it,' he announced.

A cheer went up and everyone ran over to stare down at the pulpy mess smeared across the bottom of my father's tommy box. 'There you go,' said Ade, handing it back to me. 'That's how you finish a Red Indian.'

I took my wellington and pulled it back on. Ade was having his back slapped, the hero of the hour. I stared down at the splattered innards smeared across the tin box's bottom. Father wouldn't want that for his lunch.

'Wanna try and catch the other one, Ant?' said Ade, beaming.

'Can't. Got to take this for Father.'

He nudged his head upwards. 'Ta-ra, then.'

'Ta-ra.'

Nobody watched me go and I turned away, slightly embarrassed. I looked down at the mess of splintered legs and yellow gore. I couldn't wipe it clean with my jumper

sleeve so I'd wait until I'd crossed the black tinder track that served as the marker between street and mountain. I'd clean it in the brook.

Beyond the tinder track was a stream that tumbled down between the hillside crevasses and veered left, away from the top of the village. Dropping down over a thick tussock, I splashed into the cold waters. The depth was deceptive, and water cascaded over the rim of my wellingtons. I leapt backwards but it was too late. My feet were soaked. No matter. I was used to it.

This part of the stream was always clean. The river changed as it passed the colliery, picking up coal dust and clinkers, a black bubbling mass that drifted onwards, but here it was still as the mountain intended: clear, crisp.

I bent down and scooped some water onto the bottom of the tommy box, but the innards proved sticky and stubborn. I reached into the water for one of the flat pieces of flint that covered the riverbed and, wiping it first on the leg of my shorts, scraped off the remains of the cockroach. Such a squashed mess. A small surge of annoyance flushed through me and I tossed the mucky flint downstream.

The Tydraw Colliery was situated in a narrow part of the valley between our mountain, Pen Pych, and her sister, Graig-Y-Ddelw. If the wind was blowing towards you, you could taste it coming: a thick, deep tang of black stuff that stuck to the back of your throat. I hopped over a rail track where a few empty drams were sitting idle, and made my way, between grey stone buildings and corrugated iron structures, towards two large pithead wheels. There was a constant beat of shunting coal trucks and grinding cable, and a cloud of steam, the trusted

marker for the prevailing wind, billowed low, whipping across the rooftops of the outbuildings. I watched its thick bloom lick across the valley. The wind was coming from the west.

A group of pitmen, about four or five miners, was sitting on some upturned drams to the left of the pithead. The tallyman, a short, stocky fellow with a cap pulled low over his forehead, was standing above them, gesturing back towards the lamp house.

'*Cera yffarn*! I'm going back down after I've had my buttie, man!' said a blackened man, legs splayed either side of the end of the dram. 'You'll only have to give it me back.'

'Stop being daft, hand it over. You know full well – if you're up, you hand it in.'

'Christ, man,' said the fellow, reaching into his waistcoat pocket and pulling out a small metal coin. 'There. Now leave me be, daft bugger.'

He took a bite from his sandwich and grimaced. 'Bloody jam again,' he said, his cheeks bulging outwards.

'Every day you get jam,' said another man, sitting on the floor with his back against the dram. 'Every day you moan. Ask your sweetheart to put something else in your sandwiches, for Christ's sake.'

'I would,' the first man replied, 'but I make them myself.'

Groans rang out. I found myself grinning. 'Bloody hell, Alf,' said the man sitting on the floor. 'Your jokes don't get any better. No wonder you haven't got a sweetheart.'

'Don't need a sweetheart these days, innit?' said Alf. 'You can get a tup easy enough. Pretend you're a soldier on furlough, the girls throw themselves at you.'

'Every girl in Treherbert knows you're a pitman!'

'Doesn't matter. Go doe-eyed, tell 'em you've signed up. Being sent to France or Africa, like. Might not be back for Christmas, you say. Might not be back at all. If only I'd had a tup with a girl, like! Oh, to die a virgin!' He clutched at his chest, dramatically.

'And they give you tups? For telling 'em that?' said the man on the floor.

'Works like a dream,' said Alf, leaning back.

'And what happens when they see you the next day in your pit kit?'

Alf shrugged. 'Jobs done b'then, innit?'

'*Uffarn den*! You're a menace, Alf Davies,' said the man sitting on the floor, shaking his head. 'I wouldn't let a woman anywhere near you.'

'Aye, aye,' said Alf spying me. 'What's this? You're Davey's boy, aren't you? Scott Street? Bethan's brother?'

I nodded and came to a standstill.

'Brought his tommy box? Forgotten it again, has he?' Alf continued. '*Duw*, he'll forget his trousers one of these days. He's underground. You taking it down?'

I shook my head. He shoved the last of his sandwich into his mouth and tilted his head as he stared at me. A thick, bready grin stretched across his face.

'You ever been underground, boy?'

I shook my head again.

'Fancy going down? Would you like to?'

I nodded.

'Ignore him,' the man sitting on the floor said in my direction. 'Lampy'll never allow it.'

'Course he will. We all had to go down a first time,' said Alf, sliding off the dram and coming towards me. 'I'll keep an eye on him. You going to be a miner, then?'

I nodded one more time.

'Course you are. Good Welsh lad. Black stuff is in your blood. Come on, then. Let's get a token from the lamp house. I'm Alf. What's your name? Tallyman will want it.'

'Anthony Jones,' I said, holding tight to the tommy box. 'I don't know if I can go down, though. Father might not like it.'

'There comes a time when all sons must go against their father's wishes, young Anthony. It's how we become men. And besides, you want to see underground, don't you? See what it's like?'

I did want to see it. From the six o'clock siren that rang over the rooftops, to the clattering of hobnailed boots coming back at night, underground was the driving heart of our village. It was spoken of every evening, ingrained into every crease of my father's face. It was our way of life. It was my future and I had never even seen it. 'Yes,' I said. 'I do.'

'Come on, then,' said Alf, wiping his fingers on the bottom of his dust-covered shirt. He pressed his hand into the middle of my back. 'Let's go down.'

'He'll have your guts for garters!' shouted the man sitting on the floor.

'Ignore him,' said Alf, pushing me forwards. 'It's an adventure, innit?'

I followed him to the lamp house, a small outbuilding to the left of the pithead. It had no door, and I stood in the open frame, hanging back. Alf went forward.

'Give us two tokens,' he said, leaning across a scarred wooden counter. 'I'm taking Davey's boy down. He's brought his father's tommy box.' He nudged his head back in my direction.

'Are you mad? I'm not letting a boy down. How old is he? Ten? Eleven? Get away, man. Finish your butties. And you …' He strained round to look at me. 'If you want to leave your father's box with me, you can.'

'Don't trust him. There's a reason he's that fat,' said Alf, leaning back against the counter and grinning. 'Come on, Lampy. Let him go. He wants to see it. I'll not let him out of my sight. Take him down for five minutes. No more.'

'No, Alf,' said the lamp man, shaking his head. 'It's not happening.'

'I'll trade you a coupon,' said Alf, shooting me a wink.

'For what?' answered the lamp man, his tone softening.

'Dunno. Something you need, something you'd look good in … stockings?'

I suppressed a giggle. The lamp man rolled his eyes. 'Alf Davies, you're a right card. Give me a coupon for cheese and you've got a deal.'

'Cheese? Hate the stuff.' He spat on his hand and held it out.

'All right,' said the lamp man, taking Alf's hand and shaking it. 'Five minutes, mind. No more. Straight down. Straight up. And I want that coupon first thing, Alf. Got it?'

'Got it,' said Alf. He turned and gave me a lopsided grin.

Alf took the helmets from the lamp man and gestured for me to go outside. 'Now, then,' he began, fixing me with

intensely blue eyes, 'here's your helmet and that there's your lamp.' He held up a heavy metal pack that was attached to the helmet by a cord. 'And this is the battery for the lamp. Tuck that onto the back of your belt.'

'Haven't got a belt,' I said, struggling to keep the front end of the helmet from falling down over my eyes.

'Then shove it down the back of your shorts,' said Alf. 'Or hold on to it. Here's your token. Stick that in your pocket. Before you go underground, you hand that to the pit cage tallyman. That's how he knows how many men are down.'

I tried slipping the battery pack down the back of my shorts, but it was so heavy it fell out the hole of my right leg and dangled behind my knee. I looked towards Alf, who was clipping his own to the back of his belt. I didn't want him to think I was stupid, so I pulled the cord upwards and decided to carry it instead.

'Right, then,' said Alf, patting me on the back, 'let's get to the pit cage.'

The cages hung from the base of the pithead wheels, and as we walked towards them I felt strangely elated. I was going underground. We'd find Father and he'd see me and p'raps, even though I wasn't allowed, like, he'd be pleased? It showed gumption, spirit. He admired those things in a man. P'raps he'd admire them in me?

'Your sister, Bethan,' said Alf, casually, as we walked towards the cages, 'she stepping out with anyone?'

I shook my head. 'Don't think so. She hasn't brought anyone home.'

Alf sniffed. 'She up at RAF St Athan, isn't she? In the WAAF. Not fallen for any of those fancy airmen, then?'

I shrugged.

'What's all this, then, Alf?' said a man sitting by the cages reading a paper.

'Taking Davey's boy down. It's all right. Lampy's said so. He's got a token. Five minutes down, and then we're up.'

The man frowned. 'Your father know about this, does he?' he said, looking straight at me.

I looked down at my wellingtons and my helmet slid towards the bottom of my nose. I shoved it upwards. 'No,' I said. 'But I've got his tommy box. And he likes gumption.'

'Gumption, is it?' said the tallyman, his forehead frowning. 'More like bloody madness. Lampy said yes? Has he lost his mind?'

'Quit blathering!' said Alf. 'He's only going down for five minutes. I'm not taking him down to do a shift. Besides, he'll be down here for good, soon enough. May as well see his home from home, innit?'

'I don't like it,' said the man, folding his paper and standing up. 'Five minutes and no more, mind. They're blasting this afternoon. I want him back up before they start.'

'On my word,' said Alf, reaching for the metal bar that spanned the large empty cage in front of us. 'Anthony, give the man your token.'

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small, scratched circle of metal.

'In you get, then,' said the tallyman, taking it. 'Don't put your hands outside the cage. Drams coming up. They make a racket.'

I stepped inside the cage and stood next to Alf. To our left was a cavernous hole, the shaft that held the larger cage

for shuttling coal drams. Our cage was big enough for about ten men and, instinctively, I shuffled myself into one corner. Alf slotted down the horizontal metal bar in front of us, then reached up and fixed a vertical bar across it.

With no solid walls to the cage, I felt exposed, as if the mountain could eat me up at any moment. My stomach bubbled and I found myself rushing forward to cleave into Alf's side. He glanced down and let his arm drift around my shoulders. 'Ready?' he said. I nodded. 'Away, then!'

A sudden jolt and we plunged downwards into the pit, blasts of warm air shooting through my fringe. It was blacker than I'd imagined and I narrowed my eyes, hoping they'd acclimatise to the gloom. I raised my hand in front of my face. I couldn't even make out a shape. I felt disorientated, anxious, and my nails dug into Alf's shirt, desperate to hold on to anything for a scrap of comfort. The noise! Metal on metal, grinding, ugly sounds filling the air. I wanted to block it all out, but I was paralysed with fear, as if I'd been punched, very suddenly, and couldn't move. My ears popped and an odd sense of weightlessness overwhelmed me, as if my feet were bobbing in water. We were now going so fast I couldn't tell if we were going down or coming back up again. I wanted to call out for it to stop. I didn't like it.

A light sparked above me. Alf had turned on his helmet lamp. 'Twist that,' he yelled over the rattling. He pointed towards a large dial on the top of my battery box. I turned it and a small round light appeared in front of me, catching the contours of the rock as we descended.

I grimaced. 'Not long now,' shouted Alf, seeing my expression.

A deep rumbling tumbled upwards, like a train, a wave of dark noise. The cage shook and I stumbled away from Alf, falling into the side rail. My head jerked forward, sending the beam from my helmet shining down into the shaft. The light caught something metallic, the noise roared louder, I felt the breath catch in my throat, and my eyes widened. Something was coming up and it was coming fast. I heard a voice shouting, felt a hand gripping me in the middle of my shirt. Alf yanked me backwards, there was a sudden dazzle of lamps, and the coal dram cage with its men on board shot past us. It knocked the breath from my lungs. I gasped for air, shut my eyes tight and buried my face deep into Alf's smoky shirt.

A bump. A pat on my shoulder.

'That's it,' said Alf. 'We're down.'

He undid the two metal bars at the front of the cage and we walked out into a tunnel. It was about fifteen feet wide. Small electrical lamps ran along the walls either side of us, and below my feet were tracks that disappeared off into pitch black. The smell was dense, claggy, warm earth and coal, the air filled with dust. I lifted a hand to my forehead. I was sweating. It was hot. I hadn't expected that.

'There's a fallen section that way,' said Alf, pointing off down a side tunnel. 'They're working it up with timbers. Your da's b'there. It's not far.'

'Will my brothers be there n'all?' I asked.

Alf shook his head. 'Nah, they're loading drams down by the seam.'

A series of loud thuds rumbled above us and the tunnel shook, sending small grumbling waves up through my legs. I looked towards Alf. 'Was that thunder?' I said.

'Bumpers,' he told me. 'It's the mountain settling after the seams are worked. Happens all the time. Come on. Follow me.' He strode off.

I kept as close as I could, occasionally breaking into a trot when I had to. Ahead of us, the dark, black circle tightened and I began to feel the dank creep of something claustrophobic. Skewed timbers held up roof falls, moisture dripped from the ceiling, creatures scuttled as we passed, and the hair on the back of my neck began to bristle. A sharp chill was icing up my spine. I didn't want to be afraid. But I was.

'Conveyor belt's running,' said Alf, as another intense rumble sounded from inside the walls. 'It runs down the seam. Brings the coal up, men down.'

We walked on, indecipherable voices drifting up through the dark. Ahead of us, the tiny black pinhole began to open out, larger with every step nearer, until we found ourselves stepping into a chamber filled with light. A group of men was fixing interlocking timbers. It was bright. I blinked.

I heard a voice call out. 'Pass me that cleat!' I recognised it. It was Father.

A tight ball of panic surged through me. I wanted him to be impressed, to be proud of how brave I'd been, to pat me on the back, call me 'his boy', but now, standing here, waiting for him to turn round, I knew exactly how he was going to react. I looked back the way I'd come. If I ran now, I'd get back to the cage without him seeing me. I turned. A hand fell on my shoulder.

'Someone to see you, Davey!' called out Alf, a laugh in his voice. 'You'll never guess who.'

A bundle of hunched, blackened men all turned round, the whites of their eyes dancing in the lamplight.

'*Uffach wyllt*,' said one of them, nearest me. 'He's brought your boy down.'

My father stepped forward, sledgehammer in hand. His face, black with coal dust, was as dark as I had ever seen it. I stared up at him. Father was a tall man, broad across the shoulders, a rugby player in his youth. Could have played for Wales, they said, but he broke an ankle and that was the end of that.

'I've brought your tommy box, Father,' I said, holding it up.

He raised the back of his hand and struck me, sending a sharp sting throbbing across my cheek. I raised my arm to protect myself. 'I just thought I'd—'

'Not another word, Anthony.'

My father stared down at me, livid, and then his eyes darted towards Alf. 'Was this your doing, Davies?'

'He wanted to come down,' said Alf, lightly. 'I was merely obliging.'

'You bloody idiot. They're blasting shortly. Take him back and get him up.' Taking me roughly by the shoulder, he drew me to one side. 'Anthony. You must never come down here again. Do you understand?'

I stared into his eyes. 'I'm sorry, Father. I wanted to see—'

'Get out of here!' he yelled. 'Now! I don't want to see you underground again.' He bundled me forcibly back towards the tunnel and pushed me so that I nearly fell. Turning towards Alf, his jaw tightened. 'I'll speak with you later, Davies. Now get him out of here.'

'Looks like we're not wanted,' said Alf, pulling his hands from his pockets. 'No need to get a cob on, Davey. Boy was only

bringing you stuff to feed that belly. 'Ere,' he added, taking the tommy box from me, 'best not forget why we came, eh?' He tossed it towards my father. 'Ta-ra, then. Enjoy your lunch.'

Father surged forwards but was held back by a man behind him. 'Leave it, Davey,' he said. 'You can square it with him later.'

Alf tipped his cap. 'Come on, then, young Ant. Adventure over.'

'I'll catch it later,' I said, following him back down the tunnel. 'I'll get the belt for this. And I've got you in trouble, 'n' all.'

'Don't mither yourself,' he said, shooting me a glance. 'I've had worse. He'll give you some snaps, tell me off. I'll shrug and take it. We'll shake hands and that'll be that. Tell you what, how's about you say hello from me to your sister Bethan? That's a fair trade, I say.'

'All right,' I agreed with a nod.

'Shake on it, then,' he said, holding out a filthy hand.

I took his hand and we shook. 'No telling the other lads, mind. Or they'll all want to come down. Anyway,' Alf added, 'more important … how do you like underground?'

I looked around me. It was filthy, hot and cramped, and yet something about it called to me. 'I like it very much.'