Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Seasoning

Written by Manon Steffan Ros

Published by Honno Modern Fiction

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Seasoning

Manon Steffan Ros

Honno Modern Fiction

First published in the English language by Honno Press in 2015
'Ailsa Craig', Heol y Cawl, Dinas Powys, South Glamorgan,
Wales, CF64 4AH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Copyright © Manon Steffan Ros, 2015

The right of Manon Steffan Ros to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

The Author would like to stress that this is a work of fiction and no resemblance to any actual individual or institution is intended or implied.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council.
First published in the Welsh language by Y Lolfa, in 2012

ISBN 978-1-909983-25-0 paperback
ISBN 978-1-909983-26-7 ebook
Cover design: Graham Preston
Text design: Graham Preston
Printed by Gomer Press

Peggy

2010

On my eightieth birthday, Jonathan gave me a notebook. Hard-backed with brown and pale yellow marbling on the cover, like chocolate in cream. I thumbed the bare, thick pages and touched the rough grain of the paper with the pads of my fingers.

'I want you to write something for me,' said Jonathan, his dark eyes locking on to mine. 'I want you to write your story, Mam.'

'No one wants to know. Don't be silly.' I broke away from his stare. My thin, creased fingers were almost as pale as the paper, and my wedding ring clung, dangerously loose, on to my bones.

'I want to know,' he answered softly, resting his big brown hand on mine. I felt his gaze on my face, but I didn't meet it. His kind face would convince me to do anything: he had always been able to.

'I can't believe how many people turned up.' I turned to the cafe door, trying to redirect the conversation. I had sat there all afternoon, accepting gifts, greeting guests, with Jonathan moving constantly between cafe and kitchen, bringing tea and coffee and cake. Francis sat by my side, talking and laughing his big deep chuckle, adding a bass note to the chatter of the party. A string of children came in on the way home from school, and Jonathan set silver bowls of jelly and ice cream on the tables for them. They had made a huge card for my birthday, which breathed dots of coloured glitter over my hands and clothes. It felt odd and awkward to have such small children at an old woman's party. Jonathan had arranged everything, had gathered the whole village to celebrate

my big birthday: the old folk, like me, the young babies and their mothers, the farmers and the teenagers. I couldn't remember their names. Though I would never admit it, the party made me feel isolated. I only half-knew these people, and there was something perverse in celebrating a birthday when my own sons were themselves old, with ghosts of grey peppering their hair.

'I'm serious, Mam. I want you to write your story.'

'An autobiography?' I turned to him, facing those black eyes.

'If you like.'

'People like me don't write autobiographies.'

'No, they don't, and it's a great tragedy.'

Jonathan sighed and arose from his chair. The top of his head nearly grazed the ceiling. 'A book of your memories would be such a comfort to me when you've gone.' He collected a few dirty plates from the tables. Beside me, Francis snored softly, fast asleep on the sofa. A half-smile played on his face, and I wondered what occupied his dreams.

I turned my eyes to the window. It was a miserable day, and the grey-almost-brown clouds threatened snow. Jonathan's tender reference to my death had shaken me: a ridiculous thing to be bothered by on my eightieth birthday.

'I'm going for a walk,' I called, rising from the sofa.

'I'll come with you!' Jonathan called from the kitchen. 'Just let me finish tidying up.'

'No.'

'Should I wake Dad?'

I looked at Francis, asleep on the sofa.

'If he wakes, tell him to wait for me. I'd like to go on my own, if you don't mind.'

I reached behind the door for my coat and hat. Turning to say goodbye, my memory, for a short moment, took me back to another time, when there were no tables here, no tasteful sepia photographs on the wall. For a few seconds, I saw shelves against

the wall, full of tins and packets, and someone smiling at me from behind the shop counter, his apron as white as his hair was black. My stomach jolted with the clarity of the memory.

'All right.' Jonathan appeared, and the present flooded back into every corner of the cafe. I smiled at him. 'Take care as you go, Mam.'

'I'll see you in a bit.'

The wind immediately pierced my clothes and hair and skin, and the cold clung to my cheeks with its teeth. Almost five o'clock, and the darkness was coming. I walked down to Llan Bridge, painfully aware of the slow stubbornness of my steps. I had run down this lane, once upon a time, the kind sun kissing my ankles as I sped past the houses...

Light spilled out from the windows of the cottages, puddling the road with squares of yellow. I imagined the comfort of the chairs that rested by their fireplaces, and felt foolish for persisting on walking this way every day. It had been a rest, a sigh in the throes of a busy day. But now, it was a challenge to walk on the long, flat lane, a daily battle that made my joints ache and creak.

There were ghosts all around.

Two Chapel Square, and Rose Cottage where Annie lived with Jack and the children. That was home to a young family from Tywyn now, and they had painted the walls blue and cut down the cherry blossom tree in the back garden. The dark lane which led to Riverside, where I had lived with my mother when I was a little girl, and where I lived again with Francis. There was another memory clinging to Llan Bridge, white in the water, floating silently, a ghost in the river.

Further down the road, the houses petered out into fields and hedgerows. The sky was blackening. I'd only walk to Beech Grove and back. It wouldn't take long.

Long-dead conversations, the whisper of tender moments long gone, seemed to sigh on the wind. Laughter with Annie about silly

things. Pushing the pram along this stretch of road, smiling at the baby and being rewarded with a wet, toothless smile. Watching the seasons. Years upon years of them, colouring the mountains with shades of green, yellow, rust and then a silent smothering of snow.

By the time I reached Beech Grove, a half mile from the village, the night had blackened the road, and the old house arose from the trees, still as if it was waiting. There was no light.

The taste returned to my tongue, a shock of flavour as if I had only just eaten it. It froze me in its intensity, and I churned the sweetness around my mouth.

Was I losing my mind?

I turned back, frightened by the strength of my memories. I had never seen a ghost, but suddenly the shadows in the hedgerows frightened me. I peered into the window of Beech Grove as I passed. Was that Mrs. Davies' shape in the window, tall and dark, waiting for me to come crying to her doorstep?

Don't be ridiculous, Peggy, I thought. It was only a memory. I could see my breath, smoky and stolen by the wind, quickened by my own imagination. A vivid memory, as real as now.

I struggled back through the darkness, the village streetlights orange and still in the near distance. The taste still lingered on my tongue, and other memories came hand-in-hand with it, forceful as a winter wind: each one attached to a brown, sweet sponge cake with a complex, thick smell. Old fingers offering a laden plate. A cup of hot milk, honey-scented steam wisping from it like a fog. I willed my mind to return to the present.

I thought of Jonathan, a man approaching old age now, and his eyes gazing into the darkness through the kitchen window as he washed dishes. I thought of Francis, and his smiling dreams. I thought of the young children who'd come to the party, the children of the children of the children of the people who were my friends.

But the past was a stronger force than this pale present.

Something new had awoken in me. Was it madness, the winds of old age bringing back all the yesterdays, close enough to touch, to smell, to taste?

He was there, I was sure: Mr Daniels, Ffrancon House, tending the green tomatoes in his greenhouse, washing his windows with ashes from the fireplace...

Llan Bridge, its ghosts as pale as bedsheets in the water...

Two Chapel Square, and the stains of age removed: the pastor's house, and Annie Vaughan watching her baby sleeping in the pram under the soft sunshine...

Sunshine? It was night!

I pushed at the cafe door, and the little bell tinkled. I stood for a few seconds, filling my lungs with warm air, filling my mind with the present. When did I get so old that I couldn't walk a flat road without tiring?

'Did you have a nice walk?' asked Jonathan from the kitchen. The small lamps which dotted the cafe had been lit, and the place looked as if it was slowly fading in the half-light. Francis slept on, exactly as I had left him.

'Yes,' I answered, peeling off my coat. I would have liked to explain to him, somehow, how the memories were awakening, sharpening in my mind. But Jonathan wouldn't understand. I wouldn't have understood at his age.

The notebook still rested on the table. I sat on the sofa beside my husband, and stared at it. I couldn't remember the last time I'd written. I opened the book, and the naked page stared back at me accusingly.

I had nothing to say.

'I don't know what I'll bake for tomorrow,' said Jonathan, pushing a damp cloth over the oilcloths on the tables and collecting the crumbs in the bowl of his palm. 'I have a lemon tart and scones, and I think I'll make—'

'A ginger loaf,' I answered. 'With treacle, and syrup.'

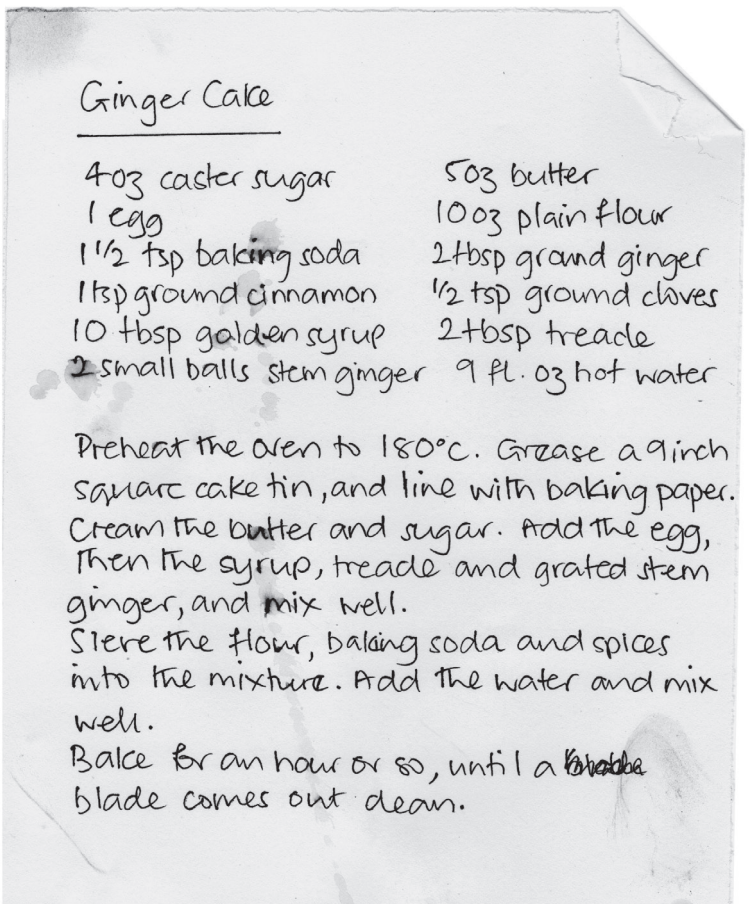
Jonathan stood upright and still, looking at me. 'Yes,' he answered slowly. 'Why not?'

'Do you have a recipe?'

'Somewhere...' He moved to the space behind the counter, where his collection of cookbooks stood proud and colourful. He drew a finger along the spines of the books. 'Here...'

'May I borrow a biro?' I asked. Jonathan turned, smiled that bright grin that belonged to no one but him, his recipe book clutched tightly under his arm.

Mai Davies
Neighbour
1937



Ginger Cake

4oz caster sugar
1 egg
1½ tsp baking soda
1 tsp ground cinnamon
10 tbsp golden syrup
2 small balls stem ginger
5oz butter
10oz plain flour
2 tbsp ground ginger
½ tsp ground cloves
2 tbsp treacle
9 fl. oz hot water

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Grease a 9 inch square cake tin, and line with baking paper.
Cream the butter and sugar. Add the egg, then the syrup, treacle and grated stem ginger, and mix well.
Sift the flour, baking soda and spices into the mixture. Add the water and mix well.
Bake for an hour or so, until a ~~knife~~ blade comes out clean.

It wasn't easy getting hold of stem ginger in a place like Llanegryn. I did ask Mr Phyllip Shop for it, several times, and he would always glare at me over his glasses as he answered, as if I was a child.
'As I've said before, Mrs Davies, there's nobody here who has use for grand ingredients.'

'Well, I would use them. As I've said before.'

Mr Phyllip Shop would then shake his head, bald and shiny as a sweetie jar. Cheeky sod. I could remember him as a child. He used to walk as if he had a poker up his bum then, too.

I plunged my finger into the jar of stem ginger (I'd had to make it myself in the end) and started grating the ball of ginger into the flour, inhaling as much as I could of the spicy sweet perfume into my lungs. I licked my fingers, and felt the sweetness of the ginger-infused syrup reaching my blood.

Without washing my hands (who would know?), I reached for treacle and golden syrup from the pantry, before opening the shiny tins with a bread knife. A tablespoonful of treacle, a thick black river into the snowy flour, and then the syrup. They melted into each other like oil and gold. Water from the kettle on the Rayburn, and an egg. Only one, but a big one from Black Road Farm, the yolk a cheerful yellow.

Ginger cake in the oven and the dishes all washed, dried, and back where they belonged, I sat in the easy chair by the window. The birds glided over the village, and I did my best to ignore the ache in my joints and the chewing pain in my fingers. Everything was all right.

A ribbon of scent wove its way from the oven to my nose. Ginger and sugar. Everything was all right.

Ginger cake had always been Tommy's favourite.

I could almost feel him here, his ghost entwined in the smell of baking. I could almost hear the click of the back door opening, the thump of his work boots on the slate floor, the groan of the chair by the fire as he sat. A curve on his lips underneath the thick

moustache, his eyes smiling. 'What's cooking?' A joke, of course. He recognised the smell, nothing else was like it. He'd cut a big fat square of the cake, surprisingly big for such a restrained man. I would feel the joy squeezing my heart. I loved him, and he loved my food.

Time to fetch the cake from the oven. It was beautiful: brown, moist, risen to a little hill in the centre. Wearing my stained oven gloves, I slid the cake tin to the window sill, and watched, for a while, the steam rising like grey ghosts and fogging the window.

I had to slow down to catch my breath after walking from the chair to the oven. Was it because I was fat? There were certainly more doughy folds around my stomach since Tommy died. The oven bore the brunt of my loss, keeping my hands busy and my mind occupied. Mountains of cakes, scones and loaves rose on every kitchen surface, wrinkling my hands as the dough dried around my fingernails. My hair, which had kept its exotic blackness, became white as clouds of flour rose in the kitchen. I filled my empty house with the scent of baking. And slowly, though I ate my fill of it all, the food died too. The bread and cakes became hard crusts, and the biscuits softened into mush. I left them in the pantry until they grew green, and then left them on the roof of the coal shed for the birds, pretending not to see the rats coming from the river to feast.

And yet, I baked every day, making more and more and more.

'You buy enough flour to feed a family of five,' said Mr Phyllip Shop as he measured it out, his eye tight on the red finger of the scales.

'I enjoy baking.' I silently berated myself for bothering to justify myself to an old toad like Mr Phyllip Shop.

'You need to eat something other than cakes, Mrs Davies.' His smile was cruel as his piggy eyes wandered to my midriff. 'You

need vegetables and protein.'

I pressed my lips together, hoping the hatred and sharp words would not escape from my mouth.

'Not that it's my business...' He raised his eyebrows archly. 'I've warned you now, haven't I.'

Reaching for my purse, I couldn't stop myself. 'Oh, but I'm not baking for myself.'

Mr Phyllip Shop looked up at me.

'Some of the folk in this village think that bread and cake are too expensive. Your prices are very high...'

The grocer opened his mouth, looking for the words. I bit back a smile as a sheen of frustrated perspiration greased his bald head.

'Perhaps some of these terribly poor folk who think my goods are so very expensive should stop having children,' he said, as I left the shop. 'They're like a plague around this village...'

His voice had risen an eighth of an octave as his temper bubbled. I turned back, and smiled at him. That would annoy him more than anything.

'And how is little Francis?' I asked, remembering his young son's pretty, olive-skinned face. 'I never see him around the village.'

'Francis does not need to run around like a feral animal. He is perfectly happy in his own home.'

How odd that I would look back on that very moment as a rebirth, the dawn of my new life. This new woman would make a difference. People would treasure her, and remember her as generous and kind.

I began to give away my food.

The elderly were first. They knew me well enough. Some of them were just a few years older than me. I would get up early to bake, and by two o'clock my basket would be full of goods in small brown greaseproof packages. The pain in my joints grated as I walked with the heavy basket through the village. I knew who needed me: Mrs Ffrancon Mountain View, and Miss Delia End House, both of

them frail and both took a long while to open the door.

Then, I started giving to families too: Helen Cader Lane, who had nine children and lost most of her husband's pay to the bar in the Corbett Arms. She deserved a large donation for all the hungry mouths she had to feed. Two milk loaves, a bara brith, a small cake for each of the children and a bag of scones. Helen looked as if she couldn't understand what I was saying.

'Don't think me rude, Mrs Davies, but I'm not a charity. These children get everything they need...'

'I know that!' I had predicted this reaction, Helen was a proud woman. 'The thing is, Helen, I love baking, and since Tommy died, I have no one to eat it. So it all goes to waste. My own son has moved away...'

Helen sighed, and bit her lip. She was weighing her pride against her children's rumbling stomachs. Nothing is stronger than hunger.

'If you don't want them, please, don't take them,' I added quietly. 'I'll give them to someone else. I know that your little ones have plenty. They're such strong children... Full of energy! I'm only offering what will go to waste. You'd be doing me a favour...'

That was enough for Helen. She smiled, relieved, and accepted the packages. She knew, of course, that it *was* charity, and that I pitied her, but to pretend otherwise was important. As I left, after refusing a cup of tea, she touched my arm gently, and I turned back to the tired young woman.

'Thank you, Mrs Davies.'

I nodded and smiled, and felt warm all the way home, my gnawing arthritis forgotten.

In a few weeks, I was feeding the whole village. The children of Llanegryn learned that the old fat woman from Beech Grove was giving out food for free, and a knock on the door became a regular occurrence, with little eager faces when I opened it. I made a promise to myself that no one would be turned away empty-

handed. Beech Grove grew lively, as it had been when Tommy was alive and Kenneth was a boy. I had a purpose again: I was mother to all the children of the village.

Every spring, the gypsies would come in colourful caravans, and hordes of pretty dark-eyed children would spill out onto the common. They were my favourites, and the mothers and grandmothers accepted my offerings without embarrassment and with a smile, and would make me a cup of tea with water boiled over an open fire. Their children encircled me, hanging onto my legs, making me feel wanted, as if I was part of something.

I loved the look of surprise that dawned on faces when they realised that I'd brought them food for nothing. And yet, I did receive something from them in return: A feeling that could not be measured in coins.

I opened my eyes suddenly, before letting them settle into the darkness for a while. The fire was almost out, the last few desperate flames licking up from the orange log. I had fallen asleep in front of the fire again, I realised, yawning. This was becoming a regular occurrence. I was exhausted after baking and delivering all day.

Slowly rising from the chair, my back ached. The arthritis. I moved from one piece of furniture to the next, leaning on them as I went. From the chair to the dresser, from the dresser to the corner cupboard, and then on to lean on the doorframe between the parlour and the kitchen...

Knock, knock, knock.

I froze, then stood up straight forgetting the pain in my back. The embers gave just enough light for me to be able to read the fingers on the clock. Half past eleven.

I felt my heart thumping.

The tramp: The one that came yesterday. It must be him. He was an odd character, not a single tooth in his mouth and stinking of

manure. He had asked for food, and I'd soaked some bread in milk so that he wouldn't have to chew with his gums. Had he seized the opportunity to attack an old woman at night?

His toothless smile flashed into my memory, and sent a bolt of fear down my spine.

Knock, knock, knock.

Slowly, and as quietly as I could, I tiptoed over to the front door. A different sound, now: very, very different.

Gentle crying.

All my fears forgotten, I rushed for the door. I pulled the heavy oak and stared out into the blackness, narrowing my eyes so that I could focus on the small face that stood in the doorway.

'Peggy?'

She nodded, wiping her tears with the sleeve of her jumper.

'Come in, my dear!'

I moved to one side to let her in. Peggy Riverside! What was she – six, seven years old? What in God's name was a little girl doing out of bed at this hour, never mind walking the dark roads?

'Sit by the fire, my dear.'

I shut the door, before rushing to put another log on the embers.

'Will you take a hot drink?'

Before she had a chance to answer, I had rushed to the kitchen to warm some milk on the stove. Standing above the saucepan, I watched the little girl in the next room, sniffing and wiping her nose on her sleeve.

Peggy Riverside was a tall, thin, and rather plain child. Her hair was long, and hung like rats' tails around her shoulders, and her skin had a faint yellow tinge. Many of the poor children had this sallow complexion, their parents too poor to buy fresh vegetables and red meat. Her nose was long and narrow, her lips thin, but it was Peggy's eyes that drew attention. They would have been beautiful on any other face, big and grey like stone. I had taken a few baskets of food to Riverside, but not as often as I did to others.

Something about Jennie, Peggy's mother, made me uncomfortable – the lack of a smile, the lofty thanks, and the perpertual darkness Riverside cottage seemed to be in. She wasn't thankful.

She had her reasons, of course. Things hadn't been easy on Jennie Riverside, raising Peggy alone, without the comfort or salary of a man. But that wasn't the point. It wasn't too much to expect a little gratitude, was it?

I added a spoonful of gloopy golden honey to the milk, before pouring it carefully into a tin cup. Peggy was still and silent, sitting by the fire.

'Careful! It's hot!' I warned before she sipped some of the milk. 'What are you doing here so late, my dear?'

Peggy sniffed. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Davies.'

'You don't need to apologise. But you'd better tell me, in case your mother gets worried.'

A few fat tears escaped from her grey eyes.

'There you are,' I soothed, sitting beside her. 'Don't cry, now.'

'I think that there's something the matter with my mother.' Peggy pushed the tears from her eyes with the tips of her long fingers.

'Why do you say that?'

'She does such strange things sometimes, Mrs Davies.'

Peggy looked up at me, and stared into my eyes for a few long seconds. I felt a bolt of horror passing from her eyes to mine, and tried to hide my nervousness from the child.

I swallowed constantly, as if I could swallow my fear.

'Like what, my dear?'

'She never sleeps, you know.'

I stared at Peggy.

'She sits in her chair in the kitchen all night, staring at the wall.'

'She probably snoozes in the chair. It must be nice and warm there, by the stove.'

'She never says hello to me, or anything. She pretends I'm not there.'

Peggy coughed until there were more ugly fat tears rolling down her thin face.

'Oh, my dear Peggy...'

I enveloped her bony frame in my thick warm arms, and held her close to my breast, biting back my own tears as I felt her small body shaking with sobs.

'And today, she made a soup on the stove, with potato and carrot and turnip. But when I looked into the pot to get myself a bowlful... She'd put a rat in it. Whole. The fur and the eyes and everything.'

I wondered if Peggy could feel my heart drumming in my chest. I bit my lip as I tried to clean my brain of that horrific image, that vile rat soup, but it refused to leave. My mind's eye insisted on showing me the little claws, the shiny black eyes, the curling tail like a rope in the pot.

Jennie Riverside would have to go to Denbigh Asylum.

'Where is she now, Peggy?'

'Still in her chair by the stove. I got up from my bed and told her I was leaving because I was frightened, but it was as if she couldn't hear. She stared right through me.'

'Did you tell her where you were going?'

Peggy shook her head, much to my relief. A small, skinny woman like Jennie should be no match for a woman of my size, arthritis or no arthritis. But I had no idea how to deal with a mad woman.

'Your mother is ill, Peggy. She's going to need to take a holiday for a while.'

'What will happen to me?'

'Don't worry. We'll go and see the Reverend tomorrow, and he'll sort everything. You can stay here tonight.'

'Thank you, Mrs Davies.'

'You can take off your jumper and socks, and I'll get you a blanket.' I turned towards the stairs, before facing her again.

'When did you last eat, my dear?'

'Lunch time.'

I pressed my nails into the palm of my hand. It was nearly midnight. She must be famished.

After fetching a woollen blanket and tucking it around Peggy's frail frame, I cut her a square of dark, dense ginger cake. The smell momentarily took me to another time – Tom's workboots on the slate floor, the dustiness of his work coat. I shook my head to shake off the memory. Peggy would like the cake. Peggy would have liked the cake hours before, as she reached her little hand to open the saucepan lid, as she stirred the soup with her spoon, exposing the wet grey fur in her supper.

Discontent settled like a storm inside me as I placed the ginger cake on a plate. This is who needed my bread, my cakes, and I had avoided her because her mother was not sufficiently thankful. Was that at the root of my generosity? Did I chase that warm glow of appreciation?

'Here you are, cariad, something for you to eat before you sleep.' I handed her the plate, and after thanking me, Peggy started picking at the cake with the tips of her fingers.

'Oh, Mrs Davies, this is wonderful!' She broke off bigger pieces of the brown sponge and stuffed them into her small mouth. 'Oh, thank you Mrs Davies!'

A tear pushed its way out of the corner of my eye, and glistened down my cheek like dew. I don't know exactly what touched my heart. A mixture of things, perhaps: Tommy's ginger cake; the hungry mouth of a child and her eager fingers tearing the cake; the cruel neglect of Jennie Riverside. And something else, something that was planted deeply in my consciousness since before I could remember: the inherent joy of seeing somebody enjoying my food.