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Opening Extract from...

Repeat It Today With Tears

Written by Anne Peile

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PART ONE

The first time I kissed my father on the mouth it was the Easter holiday. A chill clear spring afternoon, the trees still black twigs and a lemon glaze on the white cloud sky. The room looked down upon Phene Street, a small quiet road in Chelsea.

Through the window I had been watching the dog from the Phene Arms, overweight as pub dogs tend to be, rummaging in a garden hedge. Sensing that I was so close to joy, even the heedless dog seemed a toy, a comedic charm staged expressly for my amusement. I watched it for a moment longer, and then I stepped forward and kissed my father on his lovely mouth.

It was a wide mouth but the lips themselves, beneath the modelled philtrum, were thin and pressed, especially so the top one, as if he were frequently angry or displeased or feeling pain. Perhaps because he had once drunk heavily but nowadays did not.

The kiss was of such bliss that even in the moment of its ending, as there was only air between us again, I had acknowledged and accepted that I could never have another like it. I could say that it was an attar of kisses, worth taking even just for once in a life. The Devil is not ungenerous when he makes you a bargain.

My father merely turned away and said, 'Oh, Christ.' In other

circumstances a thought might have flitted across my mind, a spindly stick of anxiety that he had not liked my kiss and that was why he had said, 'Oh, Christ.' It did not though; in none of this did I ever know any doubt.

His back towards me, he stood in front of the painting desk, his long rangy body and the shoulders slightly stooped. On the desk were laid out the inks for an illustration he was finishing, it was a vignette of a landscape with hills, a commission for the *Radio Times*.

In my head there was a self-sufficient triumph, a very quiet and sure triumph for one who was not yet seventeen.

'I'll go now,' I said, to the length of his penitent's back and his bowed, ashamed head. His hair was falling forwards, it was the colour of unpolished brass. I could see that his fingers with their beautiful half moon cuticles – which I had not inherited – were pressed upon the edge of the desk.

'See you then,' I said. I closed the door as on a sleeping person and walked down the three flights of stairs from the room in Oakley Street and felt that I was filled with grace.

I should explain our history, until that day in Chelsea in 1972. Mine more so, because he was only there at the beginning and at the end.

My father, Jack, John ap Rhys Owen, was born in South Wales in 1916. His father was a mining engineer; the family owned the town colliery and much of the town itself. They were wealthy and comfortable although his mother mourned in perpetuity for the daughter named Ora who had died. My father was indulged and a ne'er-do-well in youth. Discreetly expelled from Clifton College, he dallied with this pursuit and that, never settling to anything, spending freely, and drinking heavily.

In the late 1930s, the health of both parents in decline, the family left Wales for ever and moved to a mansion flat in Finchley Road. My father, contrite and remorseful in his hangovers, would buy his mother little boxes of coloured Kunzle cakes to tempt her to eat. Perhaps also to please her, he announced his engagement to one of the girls from the crowd with whom he went to jazz clubs and to Skindles on Monkey Island and for weekends at Brooklands racing circuit. She was small and blonde, I believe. They married in August 1939 and my father joined the Navy on the day that war broke out. During the war his parents died, within weeks of each other. He, serving on the Arctic convoys, was unable to attend either bedside or funeral. It was during the war also that he discovered that he could paint. He went from demob to the Slade.

The only photograph I ever saw of him was taken at about this time. In it he is standing by the wide doorway of a building, a museum or gallery perhaps. He wears a jersey with his shirt collar out over it, a jacket which must have been tweed, and a scarf. His features then were almost delicate, fine in his long thin face; he looks towards the photographer with tolerant contempt. From his mouth it is not clear whether he was about to be cruel or humorous. Even though the photograph is black and white, you would know that his eyes were blue.

Something about him in the photograph is very English. My mother remarked that his family were never proper Welsh, that it was all just affectation, with the name and everything. We never shared his name. In the time that she and my father were together he did not establish that the Brooklands wife, encouraged by her parents, had been granted a divorce in his absence.

'He couldn't be bothered,' my mother told me. 'Of course, it would have been different if we'd had a son. If one of you had been a boy he would have tried a lot harder.'

In a mews behind Belgrave Square there was a pub called the Star Tavern. In the post-war years it was a place of great celebrity. Milling and thronging in its bars were film stars and embassy people, lawyers and artists, writers and racehorse trainers and Sunday paper gossip columnists; all of them held in the thrall of the hollering Irish charisma, with its charm, oaths, insults and divinity, of the landlord, Paddy Kennedy.

My mother worked in a government office in Belgrave Square. She and her colleagues called in at the Star, as a scene of entertainment, before their tube or buses. One evening she took a drunken Jack back to her room for scrambled eggs. It became habitual. When my sister was born in 1950 my mother pretended to be married with a brass curtain ring. People in the office sent her to Coventry, she said.

At the Slade they thought Jack very good. For the first time in his life he showed application, they had asked him to stay on and teach a class. He and my mother lived in furnished rooms in Clapham on very little money; in the evenings she had no wish to drink cider and talk of Samuel Palmer. Jack began to stay away from home increasingly; my sister always maintained that she remembered nothing of his presence. He secured commissions to travel and illustrate for Shell guides. My mother took to writing to a man she had met during the war, an agronomist working for the Australian government. It seemed that back in 1946 he had made her an unconditional offer of marriage but, at that date, she had been unwilling to commit to emigration.

There must, however, have been some brief and intermittent rapprochements with Jack. I was born in June of 1955. My mother told me that she spent Christmas Day of 1954 in a hot bath drinking gin. When she found that she could not shift me she went to stay with her mother in Whitstable. I was born in a dim bedroom with lithographs of Canterbury's Westgate and

Bell Harry Tower upon the walls.

My father must have seen me once when I was a newborn infant, before I had a name. They summoned him to the little bungalow and he arrived, drunk, in the taxi hired out by Mr Dunk's garage. He was told that my mother was going to Australia and to let that be an end of it.

The agronomist in Australia developed acute myeloid leukaemia. A sister of his cabled from Canberra to tell my mother when he was gone. My mother took us back to Clapham. It happened that she was a favourite of the landlord, a little wizened man with cycle clips and a belted gabardine. All day long he cycled the quiet South London streets between the Commons, inspecting his many properties and collecting his rents. He found us a proper maisonette; many others were less fortunate in the post-war dearth of housing stock.

My mother began looking for employment, remarking that it was a shame that my sister and I were the wrong generation for her to have been widowed in the war. A lot of women got away with that one, she said. She found a job in a post office in a parade of shops not far from Clapham Common. She was good at figures, she enjoyed balancing columns in red and black and all the attendant paraphernalia; the bobbled rubber thimbles for counting notes, snapping bulldog clips and date stamps to bang down hard on order books. It must have been comfortably predictable and methodical for her, after Jack as he was in those days.

In the long school holidays my sister and I were sent to stay with our grandmother. My sister made friends there with facility; she was always out and about, one year even spending a great deal of time with the road gang who were laying tarmac on the lane to Silk's shop. My sister's name was Belinda but my mother said that it had been his choice and shortened it so that she was

always Linny or Lin. My grandmother disliked me but favoured Lin, dressing her hair with huge white ribbon bows and telling her that she was dainty and helping her to make cross-stitched tray cloths from a material called binker. Me she criticised for being plump and clumsy. When I tried to make amends by refusing cake from the stand on the tea table she would snap, 'I can't think why you're so fat, you never eat anything.'

When my grandmother recognised that I was able at English she softened towards me to the extent that we read poetry together, she would pause at the end of a verse to draw on a cigarette left resting in the ashtray of Benares brass. Her choice of poems was invariably melancholy, Ralph Hodgson's 'The Bull', 'The Forsaken Merman', another one addressed to a bulldog whose master would never come home from the Great War.

My grandmother had always been a statuesque woman, standing on her dignity in the square neck costumes with dress clips that she had worn since the 'forties. But in the summer that I was twelve I saw that she had lost weight rapidly. It became apparent to me that she was bleeding from inside, I wished not to have realised this symptom. Her remarks were more spiteful and unkind, even to Lin, although my sister appeared either not to notice or to care. For her there were men and boys everywhere. Lin exuded sexuality; she had been what my mother called 'bosomy' for years, now she seemed swollen by sex, not just in her breasts but in her hips and her parted lips which she made rough by chewing them. There was a sex smell that came from her too, not least from the top of her head. The odour from her pillows filled the air of our bedroom. The only concern that seemed to trouble Lin was the greasy condition of her hair, several times a day she puffed it despairingly with a little bottle of dry shampoo. In a magazine she had read that washing only made it worse.

My grandmother died in the Cottage Hospital at Whitstable in a ward where an old woman with beribboned pigtails screamed and capered up and down. My mother said that I was old enough to look after myself in the summer holidays anyway. Most days I sat reading with mugs of cocoa into which I dipped Marie biscuits. I got through the books on the living- room shelf which were Howard Spring novels and Somerset Maugham short stories; then I began going to the library on Lavender Hill where they let me borrow from the adult section.

I had a place at the grammar school. My mother took me to Kinch and Lack, the school outfitters in Artillery Row. My waist was too big for the standard uniform; they said that they would have to order the gymslip specially. On the train back from Victoria to Clapham Junction my mother fretted over the expense.

'If your bloody father had ever given us any money…'

I watched the backs of people's houses passing the train windows; strips of garden, corrugated sheds, bands of bright curtaining, a tortoiseshell cat waiting to be let in. When I was seven she had told me that he was dead. We had made a cake with water icing and silver dragees for a doll's tea party but she had tired of the game and become angry, picking up the miniature cups and saucers and throwing them across the room so that the weak cold tea splashed up the skirting board.

'One day I'll be dead too, like your father, then you'll be sorry.'

'Is he dead?' I asked her, there in the compartment of the train.

'I don't know, but he might as well be. I'd never go to him for anything, the bastard.'

At Clapham County Grammar School they gave you a rough work exercise book with a soft green cover. In the back of it I

began to compile a list of everything I knew about my father. I was obsessively neat with my secret list; it was for me a sort of collector's album. I tried Lin but she had nothing to add.

'Don't you ever wonder about him?'

'No, why should I, he's nothing to me.'

'But do you think he might be still alive? Do you think he lives somewhere in London?'

'Not if he still drinks like she says he used to and anyway, I don't give a monkey's either way.'

I gave up with Lin but, by careful timing, I found that I could goad my mother into bitter or impatient reminiscence in which I was able to discover new incidents of his biography.

'He was nothing but a spoilt mother's boy, overindulged from the start. He told me how he broke his leg when he was about three years old. They had to put him in traction and to stop him getting bored and fretful they got the colliery band to come and play on the lawn underneath his bedroom window. He always did think the world owed him a living…'

There was the one photograph of him, kept in the middle drawer of the heavy dark sideboard. When I was alone I used to take it out and hold it in front of me, staring so hard that I could vivify the image and believe that he lived and breathed for me. I felt that he understood me. I do not recall that there was ever a time when I looked upon my father's face with anything but adoration.

'He was never faithful, not from day one, I know that for a fact. He used to be at it with some damned woman from that pub in Pont Street, she carried her own silver swizzle stick round with her, if you please. I knew quite well he used to come straight from her to me, I could smell her on him. He had that way with him, that little boy lost act he used to put on, especially when he was pie-eyed, women used to fall over themselves for him.

He just lapped it up, of course; he took it for granted, because his mother had spoilt him rotten. In the end he stopped bothering even to pretend about what he'd been up to. That's when you really want to worry with a man, if he doesn't even try to pretend anymore.'

My mother was ironing while she relayed to me my father's unfaithfulness; she moved the iron with angry jerking movements so that the casing of the flex rubbed against the edge of the board; it was already unravelling to show the wires beneath. She finished the garment and banged the iron upon its stand.

'Husband and father – him, don't make me laugh.'

At school, in the lessons for which I had no facility and did not enjoy – singing and physics and maths and geography – I used to stare out the tall white windows to Wandsworth Common and pass the period by musing over the physical characteristics of my father, none of which had been copied into Lin or me. We were both dark-haired and dark-eyed, our mother's hair was black and her eyes were green, a feature she had told us that men always seemed to go for. Lin was taller than me and slim in the places where she was not swollen with sexuality. As well as having less height I was still constantly plump so that games and PE lessons and sometimes even just having to walk along the roads to and from the school, were experiences of misery.

Sometimes by lucky chance a random event would trigger my mother to recall some new aspect of her life with my father. One evening the London news carried a story about maternity services, she was impatient with the plight of those adversely affected in the report.

'And they think they're badly off,' she said to the sincere faces talking and nodding on the television screen. 'When I

went into labour with Lin, all the bloody hospitals were full. He was nowhere to be found, of course. Sholie, the woman from upstairs, she had to come with me in the ambulance. They drove me all round London until they got me a bed at the Princess Beatrice, and that was as posh as you like. He didn't turn up for two days and when he did he was blind drunk. I looked up and saw him weaving down the middle of the ward and I thought, oh, my God, it's not fair, it's just not bloody fair. All these blasted well-to-do women with their perfectly pressed nightdresses and every one of them had these beautiful crisp pyjamas to wear for doing the exercise classes. I had nothing, nothing but a hospital gown. I told him to bring me in some underwear so he went to Harrods and bought me a pair of silk drawers, one bloody pair.'

'What was wrong with them?'

'What was wrong with them - one pair of knickers, when you've just had a baby, you work it out. God, he was a useless bastard.'

'What colour were they?'

'What colour were what?'

'The silk knickers, what colour were they?'

'I don't bloody know, do I, after all these years.'

My mother had kept none of Jack's possessions except for two books. One of these, an early sketchbook from the Slade, was subsequently thrown away. She had let us use the spare pages for painting when we were small and later she disposed of the damp, stuck block we had made of it. The second of the books was *Dream Days*, a collection of stories by Kenneth Grahame. The cover was blue, stamped with a twining art nouveau design of briar and blossom, in the centre there was the suggestion of the arch of a doorway framing the initials of the publishers – TNS, Thomas Nelson & Sons. The design was repeated on the end papers within. My father had written his name – John (Jack)

ap Rhys Owen – on the page facing the frontisplate. In the picture plate beautiful, ephemeral children in sailor suits gazed through a grove of trees towards a sacred hilltop castle, rising up out of a mist. Their hair and hat ribbons were lifted by a breeze, you knew that this breeze would be soft and fragrant and without menace.

When I first found *Dream Days* and its inscription I asked my mother whose it was.

'Whose d'you think? It was your father's. I don't know why I don't chuck it out. Tatty old thing.'

In the first year at Clapham County there was a lesson they called Language; it was taken prior to learning Latin. We were taught about the origins of the English language, about place names and how the names of trades had given people their surnames. After one lesson I went to ask the teacher at her desk and she explained to me that ap Rhys was son of Rhys, that in modern days it was less usual and was often foreshortened into Pryce.

'Why do you ask? Your name isn't Welsh,' she piled her papers together and snapped her handbag closed as the end of lesson bell drilled.

'I just wondered.'

It was over the counter of the post office that my mother met her permanent man friend. His name was Ron; he was a driving instructor for the British School of Motoring. He used the post office branch to pay in his takings, ten shilling and pound notes and silver coin in a canvas bag. At home my mother announced that she was signing up for driving lessons. Ron had a wife and children in Tooting and so their first meetings were illicit and at odd hours.

Watching Ron, sitting on the sofa in our flat, I thought that he slightly resembled a frog, because of the way his eyes bulged and the position in which he sat with his short legs bent in their narrow trousers. He had brown curly hair which had begun to recede; he was some years younger than my mother. She had taken to wearing lipstick again, a crimson shade named on the base 'Gay Geranium'. I wished, for her own sake, that she would shave her legs above the knees. Ron dressed in casual shirts and because his stomach was large he belted his trousers low down. One of his two characteristic habits was to make an extended grinding noise with his teeth to emphasise statements or to express surprise. His teeth were notably fine and white despite his heavy smoking. The other habit was the repetition of rhymes and phrases which served him as recurring punch lines in conversation; there was 'Owing to the wind and rain, Christmas will be late again' and 'All coppers are bar stewards'.

During the first weeks of Ron's visits to our flat I felt some sympathy towards him, I saw him as a pathetic and vaguely embarrassing little man. When the extent of my mother's partiality for him became obvious I saw that there was no longer any need to feel sorry for Ron.

When we heard the door bell late at night I said to Lin, 'Is that him, again?'

She snapped back at me, 'Why shouldn't she have someone? It's none of your business.'

Lin was animated in Ron's company; they exchanged ripostes and repeated jokes of marked unkindness from a television show named *The Comedians* which they both enjoyed. Once when Lin and I were standing beside each other Ron called to my mother, 'Look at these two standing side by side, it's like Laurel and bleeding Hardy.'

When Lin was at home she was sometimes allowed to join my

mother and Ron to drink the bottles of Young's beer which he brought clinking in on his late-night visits. They threw cigarettes to each other across the room, rather than getting up to offer the packet. My mother chain smoked on these occasions. Ron would say 'Blimey, Mo, what d'you do with them, eat them?'

As the evening wore on and the rapport between Lin and Ron increased my mother's mood would become edgy and irritable; she would make an exaggerated show of emptying ashtrays and clearing away their glasses. Then Lin, calculating that she had pushed my mother far enough, would give a small pleased smile and leave them alone together on the brown sofa.

Sometimes on Saturday afternoons when I was doing homework at the table Ron would walk through to the kitchen, eyeing me warily, although I consciously tried never to look disapproving or embarrassed. 'Thought your mum deserved a cup of tea,' he would say and return with a tin tray of cups and a packet of Embassy cigarettes.

In certain subjects at school I was an outstanding pupil. At first the teachers had treated me with wary reserve because Lin had been unruly, rude and a troublemaker. She left during the year that I began; she went to Pitman's College for a shorthand and typing course and then on to a rapid succession of jobs where, invariably, she became involved with at least one man. Most recently she had joined an academic support department at the London School of Economics. For a few weeks a young fair man used to call for her; he was a student activist named Ted. Ted and I ate McVities ginger cake together.

'When is Ted coming again?' I asked her one day.

'He's not, I've packed him up. I got sick of it; he was always going on about the bleeding Greek colonels.'

I worked very hard at all my subjects at school because it brought me praise and because there was nothing else in my life

that I liked very much. I also applied myself with extra dedication when I began to suffer from recurrent bouts of tonsillitis which frightened me and filled me with dread. Every time I used to think that I was going to die. When the pain in my throat was at its most intense I used to wonder how much pain human bodies could tolerate and whether and when they just gave up and died. I had heard that animals crawled away to die. I would listen for my heartbeat in my head against the pillow, fearing that at some point it would not repeat. I used to imagine essays that I had handed in being marked, but me being already dead. I did not discuss these fears with anyone. I had tried, with Lin, but she was derisive. 'You're round the twist,' she said. I knew that my mother would be impatient and dismissive; worse, that by attempting to impress upon her how real my anxieties were, I would only make myself feel those anxieties the more, while she herself remained unmoved. I was, in any case, a secretive child by nature. It was silence and the crafts of concealment that won me Jack.

So, by immersing myself in the school subjects I would pretend, for as long as possible, that an illness was not going to happen again. I always knew, with a dreadful inevitability, when the infection was coming on. I would try to resist it with extra study and with diversions and home-made cures of chocolate bars or bits of ice picked from the freezer compartment; I took long walks across Wandsworth Common or chose new books from the third-form paperback library which was operated from a large brown cupboard. Some hot nights I would read through, finishing a book at dawn; but the course of the illness always had its way, as I had known it must.

My mother viewed the illnesses as personal inconvenience. 'You can't expect me to take time off work,' she would say. 'Get yourself to the doctor's again.'