

The Gift

He had tried – a hundred times it seemed – to get her what she wanted. He didn't understand of course, why would he? – but Emrys had heard of such things before, whispered in the corners of the snug or muttered at the kitchen table, wrapped up with the potato peelings. He'd taken his worries to his mother, while she was lathering the shirt collars, so that he didn't have to look her in the eye. 'It's nothing unusual,' she'd told him, 'Women in her condition often have their "cravings".'

The word had fascinated him – Emrys had never come across "cravings" before, and it had an insistency about it, an urgency that was not to be ignored. He found himself saying it over and over as he unravelled his nets and re-knotted the holes, and thinking back he was sure now that it was that word which had started off this other sensation which over the days had begun to fill his head.

No matter what he was doing, where he was going, he found that once the thing had started he couldn't stop himself. And it manifested itself particularly when he was here – sitting on his small boat, on the oil-calm waters, trying to do his best for Bethan. As he gazed at the morning sky, fresh and not yet ogled or dirtied by the myriad of people who would move beneath it over the course of the day, the words just tumbled into his head. He had no idea where they came from – words he didn't even know he knew – like "opulent" or "elixir" or "onomatopoeia". But there they were, effervescing like an ale that had been poured too quickly, gushing over the edge of his being. He didn't know what to do with them – they slipped through his fingers most of the time, like rippling mackerel, silvery and quick, but occasionally one would stay with him – like "mellifluous" or "lilting". But there were so many of them, and they were so beautiful, that eventually he knew that he had to save them somehow. Ignoring his nets which were wafting on the tide he searched the boat and then his pockets and eventually found a stub of pencil and a shrivelled scrap of paper – big enough to squeeze on twenty words. He managed thirty, but as he looked up from his work he realised he had drifted along the coast and that his nets were still empty. Bethan would be distraught but he couldn't help himself. Even as he managed to scoop up an errant few dabs as he neared the shore, he was still gathering the words.

Before he took his fishing boat out on Tuesday Emrys knew he needed to make sure that he was better equipped; He stood in the shadows of the chandler's shop and when the

pavement outside the small post office was empty he sneaked in and purchased a small notepad – with its cobalt sheets of Basildon Bond - pretending it was for his mother. He found a decent pencil in the sideboard drawer and stowed them both deep inside his overall pockets.

That morning the sewin, those wonderful Welsh sea trout, were still not playing and he had no idea how he was going to return to Bethan empty-handed once more, with not a single trout to put in front of her. Over the weeks he had brought her cod and hake and herring, but nothing else would do – she wanted sewin, and if he couldn't bring her that, then really what was the point of him being married to her, she had screamed at him again last night.

This slight to his manhood – as Emrys saw it – cut him to the quick. He was determined to put aside the words and divert all his efforts into his fishing and prove her wrong - but then he'd had to run to Mary Evan's shelves at the library to satisfy himself about the word "quick" - and the fact that it could mean "alive" as well as "fast" was a revelation to him, and he had had to add it to his notebook before it slipped out of his head.

And so even the worry of Bethan and the elusive fish ... and there was another one of those words, he thought, as he pulled his notebook from inside his pocket – even that worry was already slithering away from him, overtaken by a new catch of words, waiting to be heaved in and harvested, as he headed once more to sea.

The pencil scribbled faster and faster, recording the words at horizontals and diagonals and crosshatchings around the page as they overtook him, until at last he was sated, and slumped back on his seat. He tilted his head, allowing the rising sun to warm his face, but as he glanced down he noticed that it had tinted the paper rose and lilac, and that beneath the shaft of colourful light the words seemed to be forming themselves into some sort of order, like soldiers falling into line. Emrys blinked in the sun's intensity, baffled and bewildered. A poem had somehow formed itself, there in front of him – and he, Emrys, had obviously written it!

Immediately he hauled his cumbersome nets onto the deck and set the boat back towards the harbour. The order he had promised the Crown and Anchor for their lunchtime trippers was forgotten; so was the fishy seaweed odour wafting from his jersey as he ran clumsily in his gumboots down the lane to the cottage he was in danger of no longer sharing with Bethan. His creation was imbued with "opulence", he thought, "positively quivering" with love and

romance, the “very essence of generosity”. Bethan might have a craving for sewin, but even she must see that this offering of his, this work to rival anything the best Eisteddfod might ever have seen, was far superior to any sea trout. But as he ran with the paper in his hands, Bethan appeared at the doorway, frying pan in hand, and every word he had ever discovered suddenly slipped from his skin like scales; every word that is except “catastrophe”.

Janet Manning

Winner of the Wyvern Local Prize in the Short Story category,

2019 Wells Festival of Literature International Competitions

www.wellsfestivalofliterature.org.uk/2019-competitions#short-story-competition