

Julian Thomas



Walk With Me, Always

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*Author of Zita and The Delicate Magic of Life*

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Of friendship.

I weep for my sorrow and for joy at having  
a place of trust where I can hide it.

*Marcel Proust*



## The First Prelude

### Mrs Jones Boarding House

Now that small curach was something else besides. I remember thinking that, when I first saw it bobbing on the waves, and me standing on the pier every inch an Irishman in the land of the Welsh. Later I heard it said I was not the first, that the always-there angler half-asleep beneath his ridiculous hat saw it first, but that's not true for the angler was half-asleep in his bait, well if not half-asleep only half-awake and waiting for the never-bite. The small curach came clean to the iron strut as if it meant to, and the iron strut disappearing into the repentant tide like it has always done. I had had my breakfast, the boarding house breakfast apologising on the cream thumb-pressed edge plate for its scarcity and spreading itself to look more than it was, but I tell you one egg and a rasher look mean and cruel however they are arranged on a plate. So I said to Mrs Jones Boarding House: *To be sure now Mrs Jones don't you go dirtying a plate for me for it'll look just as fancy on a saucer.* That was the morning the small curach came to the strut of the pier. Mrs Jones Boarding House replied that the trouble with the Irish is they have too much lip, well that's true I suppose, but no deserving man can hide his disappointment forever. Eleven

JULIAN THOMAS

eggs, eleven rashers, eleven times the same thumb-pressed plate, the always-there breakfast like the always-there angler, eleven days of hardly-a-bite.

I knew she was glad to see me go out of the house that morning because she called after me when I was at the gate—reminded me disdainfully: *Now don't you come back, Mr Mooney, until it's your tea.* Mind you, my name is no more Mr Mooney than Mr Cliff Railway, and it gave me a luckless sense of victory over her knowing she had it wrong. I raised my cloth cap in the airing knowledge of her request and without looking at her I swung through the gate, mackintosh between me and the drizzle, and set out for the pier. I knew what she was thinking—that waster from over the water should have better things to do than hang about the pier all day!

A man of no fixed abode, that's me since my father passed on, and now the livelong day me facing the all-sized mote of those accusing fingers. And many ways they described me, both before and after I gathered in the small curach, and they crack-on about the only bar I ever kick is the one beneath the Guinness. Why now, the Guinness is status—and weren't they expecting me to be drinking it? And me not wanting to touch their watery beer! To be sure I have many faults, but I'll drink the Guinness because my mother, God rest her soul, weaned me on it and because I'm proud. That's our drink, 'tis famous and I feel famous with one in my hand. They do not understand that, they do not understand that any more than they understand to be drizzle-soaked and bent-backed for a pittance is worse than being drizzle-soaked and bent-backed for nothing because

for a pittance you sell yourself cheap, while for nothing you are a somebody.

Mrs Jones Boarding House was beginning to kick up when I left that morning for the pier, but when I returned with the small curach she went right up the wall to the toplofty grey slate.

‘Mr Mooney, it is not time for your tea,’ she flung me.

Then she noticed the small curach, regarded it with a scoffing tilt of her head, and the curiosity of a cat.

‘And there is no place in my house for flotsam!’

How come I never gave her credit for intelligence? But that was the only time I did give her credit. How did she guess, it must have been a guess, mustn’t it, to know where I acquired the small curach? Flotsam she had said, straight-off, with not so much as a nudge. Then I thought she was right: but later I knew she was wrong. She standing on her threshold, the boot-polished step and shiny front door, she solid like the butt end of the promenade reluctantly eyeing what hung from my hand by a wicker handle. All chapel-righteous like the whole unblessed street, and me about to rise for the Irish.

‘It is no good you standing there, Mr Mooney, I shall not be letting you in until it is your tea.’

‘And why not? My money is as good as the next.’

‘Why not, Mr Mooney? Because it is my cleaning day, that is why.’

‘Now that is not good enough for someone who has paid his rent for more days than he has had decent teas.’

She didn’t say anything, stared at me, calculated the loss, then swung around and closed the door with a slam.

So I stayed there, waiting for her to open the door, knowing a fella hanging about the front is not what the likes of Mrs Jones encourages. And I was right. Within a minute her pan face was around the parlour curtain and soon she was again at the front door, mop in one hand and my suitcase in the other.

‘Mr Mooney, I give you notice,’ she said abruptly.

Mrs Jones Boarding House adjusted her square frame and pushed my suitcase towards me. Then she plunged a hand into the pocket of her apron, pulled out some coins, counted them in her palm, and was about to give all of them to me when she decided otherwise, and with the dexterity of a conjurer and a touch of self-conscience she let more coins than was fair fall back into the yawning pocket of her apron.

‘Your money, Mr Mooney,’ she said as she turned over the contents of her palm onto my suitcase thereby making a small and ungracious pile of my carry-overs.

‘Now it is more than that, Mrs Jones,’ I said.

‘The rest, Mr Mooney, is for the extra washing I have to give your sheets.’

The door slammed.

Me, the small curach and the suitcase decorated with the unexpired portion on my honest rent money were reduced to parish pumps before the clocked-out re-entry into Mrs Jones’s boarding house.

### **The Curach**

I shall describe the curach, and the way it came to me bob-

bing against the strut of the pier waiting to be lifted from the water. Its wicker handle was the first thing I noticed, nice and convenient I thought, someone has taken trouble. I could tell straightway it had been designed to float, with its pitched sides all black and its pitched cover too. Before I lifted it from the water I saw the air holes: too small they were for my smallest finger. Half a dozen, and the small curach the size of a portmanteau and shaped like the best end of a fat cigar. It sat tidily in the water, knew what it was about, seaworthy, I should know for I worked the ferries with my Dad when I miched from school. I looked up expecting to see the always-there angler beneath his ridiculous hat peering at me over the rails, but I did not, not a face as I clung with one hand to the strut and lifted the small curach from the waves with the other. As easy as that. It was mine, and not a soul on God's earth saw me, that I swear. Off the pier by Bitchell's ice cream I rested the small curach on the wall, the one by the turn to the castle grounds, and I put an eye to an air hole. I couldn't see inside, but I could feel the warmth on my eye. And there was the drizzle and the drips from my cloth cap. I went on up the hill, a little way, wondering. I stopped again. With my pocket knife curiosity I enlarged one of the air holes. Holy Mother of God! The colour of it! It was the bluest eye I ever saw. Then it was on up to the boarding house carrying the small curach, swinging it gently—no doubt at all it was made of wicker and pitch, and not heavy on the arm. And it was quiet in there, like it had been drugged, and me wanting to be alone in my room, with no one interfering in what had come to me at the pier. Of course, it came to me. Whoever

launched it—knew.

And Mrs Jones Boarding House not letting me in. Flotsam indeed!

Lagan more like, when I had come to think about it.

Not until I was out of Mrs Jones Boarding House's unblest street did it cry, well perhaps it was more of a whimper to let me know it was all right and that it was on my side. Then it was into the countryside with all that was mine, contracting to nature, breathing heavily with exertion, pacing regardless of gradient into the green hills carrying the first I ever had, casting about for paternal solitude, the drizzle on the road to fatherhood. Then I saw it, the standing-idle block for milk churns with its three sides of weatherboard and corrugated iron roof, put there for no other purpose than an aid to endurance and life. There I opened the small curach: there I became a father.

Lagan.

He really began to cry then, putting up a noise no matter what.

### Glais Ty'n

A track, bordered each side with dry stone walls, led purposefully from the standing-idle block for milk churns to a smallholding that lay on the other side of an up-and-over bridge.

Painted in white on a stone imbedded into one end of the bridge was written *Glais Ty'n*.

The track continued over the bridge into a well-ordered farmyard where a solemn pile of healthy, seeping manure

occupied one measured portion, while the rest—a cow shed and other buildings were transformed by swathes of whitewash.

The gift of parenthood lay uneasily as I carried the amant Lagan along the track towards the bridge. A collie, hearing the approach, began to bark from the farmyard unnerving me the more: I was not keen on dogs and hoped a gate or chain was in place to restrain the animal. I had never been keen on dogs since a dispossessed mongrel known aptly as Old Harry in my boyhood backstreet took off one thumb of the little girl next door who had befriended it. Soon after that Old Harry was cornered, forced into a coal sack and thrown much against its will into the River Liffey.

On the side opposite where the track entered the farmyard stood a vernacular farmhouse, vernal-fresh with white-painted joints beneath grey Welsh slates. The front door was approached up steps of generous slabs either side of which boulders retained neat and well-managed patches of garden. Tended rose shrubs thrust colourful blooms through the drizzle to be reflected on sunny days in the clinical white of liberal whitewash. Smoke rose from one of the two farmhouse chimneys: there was a sense of capacity and staunchness, the reek of chapel and time, and an uncompromising sincerity pervaded this orderliness giving Glais Ty'n a quiet, sepulchral tone, though the drizzle deflected feelings of salvation. I had been talking to Lagan, as we made our way down the track, about the weather in Wales being no different from the weather in Ireland, and about his functional basket. I had talked to him as if he were able to understand. It helped boost my confidence chatting

on companionably like that. When we reached the bridge I stopped in the drizzle background to read the white-painted words *Glais Ty'n* while the barking dog from the farmyard and the hunger cries from the small curach took so much edge off my resolution.

'Glais Ty'n, Lagan young fellow, we must remember that for it is the place of your second birth. Here now awhile we shall find you some milk, just you see ... providing that dog is not another Old Harry and lets us pass.'

I was nervous knowing I had to cope, and knowing my inability to cope. My brain, usually tuned for most occasions, now lacked adequate explanation for my predicament—and it would have to be an adequate explanation if I was to remove suspicion and be given the hospitality and kindness I needed. I had cut away the pitched cover of the small curach to give it a more open and honest look, though this let in the drizzle onto the little blue blanket and tear-stained face. Those stunning blue eyes crying and watching me, and that little drizzle-tear face that should have been fair but was flushed with exertion. I had not probed beneath the blanket for fear of finding the messes associated with the netherward ends of babies, but had I done so I might have come across the luggage label before Mrs Price Glais Ty'n, and I might have saved myself a pretty kettle of fish.

### Penry

Mrs Price Glais Ty'n was neat, not whitewashed neat, but neat nevertheless. Tidy I should say. Looked me square in

the face with a touch of benevolence in her eyes to give a stranger confidence.

‘Yes,’ she said a bit sharp when she opened her front door, thinking me an odd kind of door-to-door salesman with a suitcase of wares in one hand and a drizzle-damp and vocal baby in the other.

‘I need help for my baby,’ I said awkwardly.

I could see into the hall with its barrage of comforts—all linoleum and warmth and polished brass, and its umbrella stand carved from wood almost black, and inset with a little square mirror, and a reminiscent smell of hospital polish. I put down my suitcase, took off my cloth cap out of politeness and pressed it to my chest like an indulgent President of the United States before the Senate, like I used to do as a kid when pleading honesty when honesty was not an utmost consideration. I tucked in my chin, made myself look more fragile than I was and waited cast-down by circumstance.

‘You had better come around the back then,’ said Mrs Price Glais Ty’n.

Around the back was as tidy as the front.

She had opened the back door from the inside.

‘Mind you wipe your shoes good and proper Mr ...’

‘... Mr McNully ... Niall McNully,’ I said truthfully.

We were in a scrubbed-clean washroom.

I handed over the small curach full of smell and ceaseless crying.

‘It needs its mother, this one, Mr McNully,’ said Mrs Price Glais Ty’n looking questioningly at me. The smell of carbolic and constant ironing lifted me back, just for a moment, to the wretched and carefree street in which my

mother had struggled and died. Carbolic soap, those great red slabs of childhood cut with a cleaver into sparing pieces, were the memories of my mother's constant battle against disorder in our rebellious home. When she was alive all of us went clean as new pins, even my father who resented the time my mother devoted to washing the clothes. He walked the cleanest in our street. *Cleanliness is next to Godliness* was my mother's favourite saying, and my father, who sometimes was surprisingly ahead of his time would retort: *And man cannot live by soap alone*. Plucky, my mother, in that Godless home. I remember, too, my father sizing-up to the priest who called the day my mother died, bawling him out on the doorstep, and the priest trying to be kind and do the best for us. I was ashamed of my father that day, and me no taller than the latch on the toilet door. Oh, yes, I remember my father saying to the priest, amongst other impolitenesses: *And the carbolic goes in the coffin so she can do God's washing*.

The copper of Mrs Price Glais Ty'n stood in one corner—swept ash beneath and whitewashed bricks around. A mangle stood over an open drain next to a stone sink and a pulley-operated airer from which draped assorted bedlinen was suspended above an ironing table. Mrs Price Glais Ty'n put the small curach onto the table and was about to take out the baby when she asked:

'What is the baby's name?'

'Lagan,' I replied.

'Unusual name that. Cannot say I have heard it before,' commented Mrs Price Glais Ty'n.

'Irish,' I said casually

‘I thought as much,’ replied Mrs Price Glais Ty’n eyeing me gravely, and she lifted the soiled and hungry baby from the small curach.

And there it was, the luggage label tied to Lagan’s left ankle. Written with an indelible pencil on one side of the label was *Penry*.

### **Blue Eyes**

Not until Lagan had been washed and bottle-fed did Mrs Price Glais Ty’n remark on his eyes.

‘Indeed, Mr McNully, your Lagan has the bluest eyes I ever saw in a baby. Mind you, they do lose their sparkle as they grow older. Such a pity, isn’t it?’

Blue is recessive to Brown.

And Mr McNully has Brown eyes.

And Mr Price Glais Ty’n is a bit of an expert on genetics, him breeding from his milking herd, like.

### **The Wheel-Tapper**

Mrs Price Glais Ty’n continued.

‘Now you just take the baby back to its mother, Mr McNully. That is where it should be and that is where it belongs on a damp day like this. Not tramping the roads, I should say so. When Mr Price comes in I am sure he will run you home in the Popular.’

‘It is not home for me, not yet awhile,’ I said launching myself into a great pack of lies.

‘Now, Mr McNully, I do not follow you, but it is no

business of mine.'

I was sitting on the washroom's upright wooden chair—I was not complaining with Lagan dry and fed and asleep, how could I? But it would have been nice to try out the comfort of the inner sanctum. Mrs Price Glais Ty'n was giving me that wide, steady stare for which the Welsh are acclaimed, the look that is perceived to be one based on broadmindedness but is, in reality, so narrow that suspicion is whittled to its finest point. Pity really, she a good person with an otherwise open countenance.

'It will be Fishguard first and then over to Ireland, that's where Lagan and I shall find home,' I said.

'No, you not walking all the way to Fishguard, surely now. Well, that is the daftest thing I heard. So Mrs McNully is in Ireland then, is it?'

'I wish to God it were so ... but it is not. But I have to be honest with you, Mrs Price, you being so helpful ... Mrs McNully has run off with the wheel-tapper from Machynlleth Station.'

What imagination, I thought. What a lie.

'Well, Mr McNully, that is a terrible thing for a wife to do, and leaving you with the baby and all that.'

Mrs Price Glais Ty'n removed her steady stare from me and looked sadly at the sleeping baby in the small curach on the table. She had feeling, that farmer's wife: and I could swear her eyes moistened over, very kind to the calves I should bet. She was sitting on an upright chair too, one she had carried from another part of the house, but hers had a cane seat.

'Would you like a cup of tea and a slice of bread?' she

asked suddenly.

I said I would, and no sooner than Mrs Price Glais Ty'n left the washroom than I heard the sound of a tractor coming into the farmyard. I went over to the window not from curiosity, nervousness more like, me being out of place and out of depth becoming a father in one day.

### **The Ferguson**

Grey it was, spanking new and grey. Straight from the end of the Huddersfield production line was Mr Price Glais Ty'n's tractor. At £224 it was an expensive ride, and Mr Price Glais Ty'n had had it for a week, so I was told later. Aggressive-looking wheels I thought, like a Roman chariot's wheels, toothed and menacing, and the proud farmer atop, coming home like an emperor to his orderly house, to food aplenty, to womankind about her homely duties. Glais Ty'n was all a man could ask for, in my opinion, and I felt somehow glad and proud that my Lagan's second birth should have been in such a worthy place. I watched Mr Price Glais Ty'n tuck away the Ferguson for the night, all cosy and safe in the tractor shed, then he seemed to be heading for the back door and the washroom, but Mrs Price Glais Ty'n caught him, called him to the front door. I could hear her explaining about me and Lagan, and he not saying a word. Then it was my tea and bread, and Mr Price Glais Ty'n standing in the washroom in his stocking feet.

'Mrs Price tells me you are making your way to Fish-guard. Well, I can tell you what I can do for you, to help like, I could drive you as far as Aberaeron which will set you

off tidy on the right road.’

I thanked him for his kindness, and for Mrs Price’s kindness. I kept on thanking him to show him Irish good manners not understanding the amateur geneticist in him, not realising what was going through his mind as he peered at me and my baby.

And when I think back to him and his new tractor and his lifestyle and his knowledge I know he should have been teaching in some college or another and not heaping on his education to extinguish Providence.

### **The Popular**

It started first time.

Lagan and I were in the back, Mr Price Glais Ty’n in the front like a chauffeur making me feel guilty, him driving us specially. He did not say much as we drove along, me doing all the chat, making up one story after another and thinking shall we ever get to this place Aberaeron. But of course we did. The little short-of-eleven-foot Ford Popular urged its way into the town, eventually, and stopped outside the police station.

‘This is the best place for you, Mr McNullty,’ said the farmer too sweetly for comfort. Before I could say: *To Hell or Connaught* I was out of the Popular and into the police station with Mr Price Glais Ty’n carrying the small curach like he was my man.

### Constable ap Harry

Constable ap Harry, or Harry the Police, was phlegmatic, cautious and slow-witted. Now I should not want to appear bitter, though bitter I was, when I say the police need men like Constable ap Harry who are phlegmatic, cautious and slow-witted. I liked him. And I think he liked my Lagan. A plodder I should say, nudged on by Mr Price Glais Ty'n Bloody Geneticist, but certain to get there—and as certain others take the credit. Eventually he telephoned the police station at Machynlleth, not before a lady had arrived expressly to take away Lagan. She said: *I'll do the honours*. And Constable ap Harry smiling knowingly at her, like she could have been Mrs ap Harry. *I'll do the honours* indeed! What honours, I thought afterwards, because I might never see my Lagan again. So quick and casual: no fuss. Me gullible. And I thinking Constable ap Harry slow-witted.

Well, I hardly need tell you that the police at Machynlleth found no Mrs McNullty attached to the wheel-tapper. And no need to tell you that Constable ap Harry tracked down Mrs Jones Boarding House who said with satisfaction: *Surely not that awful Mr Mooney of no fixed abode*. More, that slow-witted constable even found the angler with the ridiculous hat who put in his claim to fame as well.

No wonder they took away my Lagan.

### The Ferry

Next day Constable ap Harry escorted me to the ferry at Fishguard. He suggested politely I should not return—you know how it is with the police: *I advise you, Mr Niall*

JULIAN THOMAS

*McNullty, not to come back to Wales for we have long memories here and we would not want to charge you with kidnaping, would we now?*

But it was the question he asked just before I got on the boat. His very last words to me, as a matter of fact.

‘Tell me, Mr McNullty, have you ever been to Madeira?’

And he a slow-witted man. And me trying to be too clever by half.

‘Me, constable! Never a drop has passed my lips.’

On the ferry I thought about Madeira, and since. Thought I might work a ship there. Thought, too, that if ever I got rich I would return to Wales in spite of Constable ap Harry’s warning and find out what they did with Lagan, because he was mine, he came to me, if only for one day he came to me—whatever the always-there, half-asleep angler said beneath his ridiculous hat.