

1 WILLY JONES

“Dad, are you up yet?” shouted Becky into the dingy, unlit cottage as she closed the front door behind her with a bang in case he wasn’t even awake. She immediately wondered whether she should have left it open. The smell was terrible. “Dad, it’s me, Becky! Get up now, please, Dad!”

She drew the curtains on the lounge front window, which was quite large for an old Welsh country cottage, but it was still small by modern standards. She opened it as wide as it would go and locked it on the old-fashioned stays and then went into the back kitchen.

Part of the reason for the smell became obvious immediately. Kiddy, the old black Welsh sheepdog was cowering by the back door looking decidedly sheepish herself.

“Don’t worry about it, old girl, you couldn’t help it. He should have let you out hours ago”. She opened the back door in and spread the dog’s mess further across the lino floor. “Shit!” she said involuntarily as a new, even stronger wave of stench arose from the freshly disturbed and aerated pile of crap.

As soon as the gap was wide enough, Kiddy gratefully slipped out into the garden, happy to be away from the source of her embarrassment.

Becky took a bucket and stinking floor cloth from under the sink, but had to empty the dishes onto the worktop before she could fill the bucket in the sink to clean the floor. In the absence of hot water and proprietary cleaning products, she used cold water and soap powder

There were no rubber gloves either, so she couped down and began to clean up after the dog.

“Shit, shit, shit and more shit!” she muttered to herself. “This house is one big shithole!” As she moved around the two-foot long brown streak, the soles of her daps stuck to the floor. The whole kitchen needed power-washing with boiling water, she thought.

When she was satisfied with that small patch, Becky went into the garden and the outside toilet and poured the water away. Then she washed her hands and the bucket out under the outside tap; poured bleach from the toilet into it and refilled it with water, leaving the floor cloth to soak and hopefully clean itself.

She re-entered the kitchen, put the plug in the sink, turned on the only tap, opened the window and put the dishes in the water to soak as well. The only cooking utensil that had been used since she had last been there was the frying pan, but all the dishes were dirty and so were a lot of cups, whisky and beer glasses.

She knew what that meant. A fry-up and tea in the morning, late morning or early afternoon; a fry-up and beer in the evening and a few whiskies before bed. The situation was becoming impossible and Becky was rapidly losing patience with her father, although she did feel sorry for his poor old dog for having to live in a pigsty like this with her father, who didn’t seem to mind the smell and degradation.

As she was washing the dishes, she looked out on to the short mountain range which rose a few miles beyond what was now euphemistically called a garden, but which had been beautiful when she had lived at home. The mountains had always held a pulling fascination for her; she took after her mother in that

regard. Her mother had done the dishes two or three times a day at that window and stared at those mountains for forty-two years.

She and her father liked to think that she was happy playing in or wandering around them now that she was no longer with them. She had died of cancer of the cervix five years before. It had been a complete surprise, because she had never attended the check-ups organised in the hospital. Diagnosed and dead within three months; it had been a terrible shock.

However, these days, Becky knew more about the disease, and had had tests herself, and suspected that her hard-working, stoical mother had known that she had a problem, but she hadn't wanted to be a burden and perhaps quite liked the idea of being dead and away from the drudgery of a small, isolated, lonely, mountain farm.

"I was going to do them as soon as I came down!"

"Oh! You gave me a shock! I do wish you wouldn't creep up behind me like that. I've told you about it before, haven't I, Dad?"

"That's a nice way to greet your old Da, I'm sure. Anyway, I wasn't creeping about and even if I were, I am allowed to in my own house".

"How are you feeling today, Da?" She sometimes lapsed into the old vernacular and called him 'Da' and sometimes they even spoke Welsh, but not so often since Becky had come back from horticultural college and her mother had died.

"I'm all right. I just get so tired and I can't see the point of getting up early when it's cold. Why not wait for the sun to warm the place up a bit first and stay in bed? Is there any tea? I'm parched. My mouth tastes like a labourer's jockstrap".

"Do you have to be so disgustingly graphic? I haven't got two pairs of hands, you know! I had to clean up after poor old Kiddy because you were too 'tired' to let her out, and this place was too filthy to eat anything out of.

"And you really ought to take more care of yourself", she said turning and looking him up and down. "You look a complete mess".

William Jones was standing before her in his pyjama bottoms without any slippers. His half a head of white hair was sticking up at all angles and the muscles in his face looked as if they were still asleep. A whiff of his breath as he spoke revealed that she had been right about the whisky nightcaps – probably enough for a full headdress.

"Why don't you brush your teeth and swill some water over your face to wake yourself up?"

"I don't need any lectures on personal hygiene from you, thank you very much. I have my own routines, established over sixty years and they have always been good enough. I won't be changing them now, not for you nor anyone else. Your dear old mother never complained and her standards are good enough for me.

“Anyway, if you must know the ins and outs of a cat’s arse, I was just on my way to use the lavvy. So, if you’ll excuse me...”

He went outside. He had always washed under the outside tap unless there was snow or ice on the ground, and a shower or a bath were still once-a-week, special occasions.

She dried her hands on a tea towel, filled the kettle, lit the gas under it, dropped three teabags into the teapot, after checking that it was empty, and went back to the dishes.

“Go and put some clothes on, Da”, she prompted him when he came back in and reached for the towel hanging on a hook behind the back door. “I’ll make us some toast and the tea will be brewed by then. Go on now, and don’t take too long about it”.

She warmed the pot, put the teabags in and poured the water onto them, then she pulled the plug from the sink and lit the grill. She had brought her own food as she usually did, because William rarely made it to the shops, and the inside of his fridge was an offence against decency. She would have to tackle it later, but she wanted to have had her breakfast first.

As the grill was warming up, she remembered the dog, and put the scraps she had brought into her bowl. There would probably be a half-opened, half-used, dried-up tin of dog food in the fridge, but that would have to wait and Kiddy deserved a treat from time to time.

Just before she heard her father starting to come downstairs, she shook the tablecloth outside the front door, replaced it with a new one and laid the breakfast out.

“See, you can look nice when you want to, Da”.

“No-one’s going to see me, so what does it matter? You didn’t put any beer with that melted cheese”.

“No, you get through enough beer during the day without having to have it for breakfast as well”.

“Beer in cheese is not like drinking beer, it’s traditional. Welsh Rarebit, that is. It’s a centuries-old Welsh custom, but you likes your melted cheese the English way, without beer”.

“One day, you will just be grateful, and the shock will be so much that I’ll keel over and go to join Mum on the mountains out the back. Parents complain that children are ungrateful, but old people, or you anyway, are much worse”.