

THE BLUE BOOK OF NEBO

MANON STEFFAN ROS



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Translated from the Welsh
by Manon Steffan Ros



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*To my friend Alun Jones,
who gave me faith in my own voice.*

DYLAN

Mam says that it's best to write like this now. Because she can't be bothered to teach me, I think, can't be bothered, or can't find the energy. I'm not sure which it is, or if there's any difference.

She used to sit with me for an hour each morning, the hour when Mona sleeps. We did stuff like adding and reading, not like we used to do at school, no graphs or times tables or anything like that. She got me to read books and then I had to write about them, and she marked them with a red biro, telling me where I'd spelled something wrong or said something stupid. And then after doing adding up and taking away, there was no more maths. She started to worry. About the biros too, because we don't want them running out.

'I don't have anything else to teach you, Dylan,' she said yesterday. She'd just read through something I'd written about a romantic novel about a man and a woman who meet on a train, and I think something

clicked in her. 'There's no point carrying on like this.' So she said that, as long as I spend an hour writing every day, she wasn't going to bother me with schoolwork anymore.

She got this book from a house we broke into in Nebo. It was in one of the small drawers of a little desk in the corner of someone's living room. Usually we only steal the really important stuff, like matches or rat poison or books. But she held this notebook in her hands and turned it over a few times before putting it in her bag.

'You have that,' she said later, when we got home. 'To write your story.'

'*The Blue Book of Nebo*,' I smiled, taking the book from her. The pages were blank and wide, like a new day.

'Eh?' asked Mam.

'Like *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, or *The Red Book of Hergest*. That's how they did it in the olden days.' I'd read about them in a book about Welsh history. 'Important books that said something about our history. And now is a part of history, isn't it?'

The book's jacket is a lovely rich dark blue, almost black. *Bible-black*, Dylan Thomas said. But you can tell when a book is a Bible, without even looking at the spine for the title. You just know. My book doesn't

look like an important book, but all books are just words strung together.

After that, I put the book on the top shelf in case Mona got hold of it, and I went up to the lean-to to fix the corner that's leaking. You wouldn't believe how much water can get through a tiny hole like that. It only needed a tiny lump of Play-Doh and then a piece of tarpaulin on top of that, about two inches square. I could only spare one nail, because there aren't many left. It'll do for now.

Mona started crying, and Mam went to fetch her from the crib.

There's a hell of a view from the lean-to. Down towards Caernarfon, where you can see the castle towers jutting out like gnarled teeth, and then the sea and Anglesey beyond it. I can't ever remember going to Anglesey, but Mam says I went loads of times when I was a little boy. There were nice places to go for walks, Mam says, and loads of lovely beaches all around, because Anglesey is an island. I was thinking about that yesterday when I was sitting on the roof of the lean-to, looking out. Seeing the sea and the island, which looks too big to be an island from here. There are trees and fields and places I don't know between here and the sea. Yesterday was a cold day –

cold enough to make my mouth steam, like snow in a saucepan. I sat there thinking about all those people in the olden days, poor things, going to beaches in their cars and sitting there all day with nothing to do. Standing with their feet in the water, then splashing about a bit and then having a picnic. I try not to think about those people too much.

Then I heard Mam coming out with Mona strapped to her chest, and I climbed down the ladder. There was too much to do to waste time thinking about Anglesey and the times that had happened before now.

Our house is in a dead place. What I mean is, it's in the middle of nowhere, and no one ever comes here. Well, almost no one. In the olden days, an elderly couple lived in the house called Sunningdale, which is about seventy-eight steps from our house. They went away soon after The End, same as everyone else.

'What's Sunningdale?' I asked Mam one day after I'd been looking through their windows.

'It doesn't mean anything. It's just a word,' she said. I thought meaning something was the whole

point of words, but I didn't think Mam would want to talk about that now. Her voice was tired and soft, like a pillow. 'Keep away from that house, Dyl. It isn't ours.'

I think I can remember Mr and Mrs Thorpe, but I can't be sure. He was tall with white hair and glasses that always seemed to be reflecting some light, so you could never quite see his eyes. She was small and thin and stared at you as she spoke. Sunningdale is exactly the same as it was when they left it, except that I've used their garden for planting and I've cut down a few of their trees for firewood. I want to go inside the house, but Mam says no. For some reason, she's a bit funny about Sunningdale and Mr and Mrs Thorpe.

The truth is, they've probably gone forever. They were old, old enough to have stopped working. They did pointless things, like playing golf and growing tiny trees called bonsai in their kitchen window. They could have just gone away to find their families. They might be with them now. Somewhere in England, probably.

Today, I was chopping down branches from their garden to dry out and use as kindling. Mam was standing at the bottom of the tree, and Mona was tied to her chest, trying to talk. Mam was bundling up the branches as I was throwing them down,

because that makes it easier to drag them home. It's easier for me to climb trees and to go up on the roof and all that, because Mam has a bad leg and walks with a limp. But she still climbs onto the roof of the lean-to with me when it's sunny or starry.

The curtains in Sunningdale had tiny pink flowers on them, and the bed was tightly made, the covers pulled taut and smooth. A wardrobe painted white, and little white tables on each side of the bed, books piled high but tidily on them.

'Come on, Dyl. It's going to start raining properly in a bit!' Mam said, waiting for the branches.

I cut another one and threw it down before saying, 'They've got a lot of books in there.'

Mam was silent.

'And blankets on the bed. A duvet, I think. And two pillows.' I dragged the saw slowly and heavily over another branch.

'It's got nothing to do with us,' said Mam firmly. I knew then that I had to shut up. Mam isn't a woman who argues – she just closes herself, like a door or a book. She thinks that breaking into Sunningdale is different to breaking into the other houses in Nebo, and I can't see why.

She is thirty-six years old today.

We still have the old calendar, the one from 2018,

the year The End came. And we can't be certain that we're in the right place, because the days when we were sick at the beginning all went into one mess of time – it might have been three days, it might have been a fortnight. But never mind. We've guessed where we are. Mam doesn't like celebrating, but I think it's a big thing. Thirty-six years of living! And I've been with her for fourteen of those. She's been with me.

'You've been me with almost half your life,' I said, chucking down another branch.

She stilled and looked up at me through the leaves. Her hair was wet, and she'd zipped up her raincoat over Mona. All I could see of my little sister was a blue fleece hat.

Sometimes I think it's impossible for someone to be as beautiful and ugly as my mother.

I know it's a horrible thing to say. Mam hates it when I call people ugly, even people in stories, and I can't understand that. As long as they don't hear it, what's the harm? But Mam says that the people who see others as ugly on the outside are themselves ugly on the inside. I must be hideous inside because sometimes, I think that Mam is really very ugly.

I don't see many people, so perhaps I can't judge who is ugly and who is beautiful. but I remember The End. I was six, after all, and six years is a long

time to collect memories. I think I can remember women looking like they do on book covers – fat pink lips, smooth milky skin, and soft hair with no bits sticking up. Mam isn't like that. She has a long thin face with huge eyes and a small mouth, and a nose that's too long for her face. Her body is tall and strong, not fat but all hard, no soft bits. Before *The End*, she used to cut her hair short and dye it blonde, but cutting hair is just another job now, and it grows like brambles around her head, thick as dog hair, black as the world goes at night, with tiny silver wires here and there.

I don't think I look like her. I don't look like anyone.

She looked at me for a long time, up in the trees. I thought for a bit that she was going to tell me to break into Mr and Mrs Thorpe's house, but in the end, she just turned away. Mona chatted to herself under Mam's coat – I could hear her voice although I couldn't see her, a disembodied chatter of nonsense words. Sometimes a little hand would reach up to touch Mam's face.

I'll go hunting tonight. Try to get hold of a rabbit or a feral cat so that Mam can have some meat on her birthday. There are traps down on the potato field already. She'll have a good birthday this year.

I caught a rabbit yesterday. She was twitching in the trap, so I killed her quickly with my pocketknife and caught the blood in a bottle. Mam makes a sauce with it to put on the potatoes, because it makes us stronger. She had to drink it sometimes when Mona wanted her milk all the time, because a woman has to be strong to make milk. Sometimes, Mam would drink half a cup of it and throw it all back up again. She says that however cold it is, blood always tastes warm to her, and it makes her feel sick.

I skinned the rabbit and took it home, and said, 'Happy Birthday, Mam.' I'd been to fetch the birthday card this morning and had put it on the mantelpiece. There's a photo of a racing car on it, and 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY – SIX TODAY' written on it, but never mind. That's the only card we had left. I had thirteen birthday cards, but we decided to burn the rest after The End, because we didn't know anything then, not even to store kindling in a dry place for winter.

'Thanks, love,' Mam smiled. Mona was on the floor playing with the toy snake Mam had made out of a sock. I put the rabbit in a pot on the fire.

'Did you skin it?'

'Yeah. Pelt's drying out in the shed.'

Mam nodded.

I don't remember Mam's birthdays before. Well, I remember the most recent ones, of course, but not the ones before The End. But I remember my own birthdays. The cakes and the candles and the shiny wrapping paper on the presents. And I remember the other children's names, though I can't remember their voices or the way they moved or laughed.

Freddie.

Dewi.

Ned.

Ella.

James.

Oliver.

Harry.

Endaf.

Betty.

Swyn.

Eloise.

There must have been more than that, but I can't remember. I've tried and tried, but the more I try, the less I remember. It's like trying to remember a dream.

We ate the rabbit with walnuts. It was lovely. We've kept half for tomorrow, because you'd not believe how much meat you can get off a rabbit.

Tonight, when Mona was in bed, we sat on the roof of the lean-to because it's a clear night.

'You're enjoying the writing,' said Mam, and I wasn't sure whether it was a statement or a question.

'Yeah, but I think something needs to be written about The End. It doesn't make sense otherwise. And I don't know enough about it.'

Mam nodded. 'You were only little then. It was a long time ago.'

'You should write, Mam. Share the book with me. Just say what happened.'

'I was rubbish at writing at school.'

'You've read thousands of books since then. You'll be better at it now.'

And we agreed, Mam and me, to share The Blue Book of Nebo. She'll write about the olden days and The End, and I'll write about now, about how we live. And we've agreed not to read what the other has written, just in case. In case of what, I'm not sure.

'Except if something happens to one of us,' Mam said with a gentle little sigh, and I didn't reply because I didn't need to. I get it. We were quiet for a while.

'I'd love a smoke right now,' said Mam. She says that sometimes in the evenings. Smoking is a thing from the olden days where people put a small thing on fire

and then put it in their mouths, then they swallowed the smoke. I can't remember much about it, only the smell. It was warm and thick and lovely to begin with, and then went stale and bitter after a few hours.

'Is that what you'd choose as a birthday present? If you could have anything you wanted?' Mam stared out over Anglesey and thought about it. She smelled like outside.

'Nothing,' she said after a while. 'I wouldn't choose anything.'

That sounded lovely, and I knew it was a lie. Everyone wants something. 'Anything in the world, Mam. Even from the olden days.'

Mam sighed. 'OK. I'd have a Bounty.'

'What?'

'Bounty. It was a chocolate bar, Dyl.' I can remember chocolate, of course, but not that kind. I remember Dairy Milk and Penguin and Milkybar and Freddo. 'The inside was all pieces of coconut. Sticky with sugar. I always ate the chocolate first, and then the middle bit. The milk chocolate one came in a blue wrapper, and the dark chocolate one had a deep red one.'

'Are coconuts like walnuts?'

'No, no. They're sweet, and they're lots and lots of little bits, all stuck together.'

I regretted asking about it then, because Mam goes quiet when we've talked about the olden days, and it's not the kind of quiet you get when you work but it's a kind of quiet when there aren't any words that fit.

'I never thought about it, you know,' she said after a while. 'Nobody did. You just walked into a shop or a garage, and if a bar of chocolate or bag of crisps took your fancy, you bought it.' She shakes her head. 'Even if we weren't hungry!'

'But why?'

'I can't remember,' Mam replied. She was quiet for a bit and then she said, 'Because it was there.'