

Dear Ceridwen I

They ring to tell me they are coming, but only after they arrive will tell me what the visit is for. I understand. By now I know all their procedures well enough. I wonder if they think that I am a cold person; I don't cry when they tell me. Only you, Ceridwen, would notice the way my body sets hard along the shoulders, the fogging of my already clouded eyes.

I am carrying up the coffee tray from the kitchen when I hear their feet outside the front door: a woman's, light as Daisy's feline step, and a man's, heavy as the weight of the news he is about to break. Their voices are subdued, talking in whitewashed tones. Defeat sags in their silences like old elastic.

I am relieved that I've had time to tidy before they arrive, not that one person and a cat can make much mess in a three storey building, but the room looks cosy and the fire is lit. I can imagine Nain's approving voice, 'There's nice, Bethan.'

I usher them to the sofa and place steaming coffee cups carefully into their waiting hands. I spoon sugar into their cups, the only comfort I can offer, and settle into the armchair to hold myself together to hear their news. You are there in my mind's eye, Ceridwen: the way your dark hair escapes in riots of curls from a scarlet band, the scuffing on your familiar brown suede boots, more vivid than these strangers seated in my living room.

Across the room the policeman leans forward uncomfortably, longing to have already left. The woman sips coffee, clears her throat and brushes back a strand of dark hair. Her eyes are red-rimmed, as though she has

stood too close to a bonfire, so I know that she will be the one to tell me.

After they leave I sit for a long time in the arm chair hardly moving, hardly breathing. When I stir, the December sky outside is darkening and I realise I'm cold; the fire has died down to almost nothing. I shiver and shake myself.

"You've been hours in this chair, girl," I say out loud.

I feel stiff when I stand to pull the heavy plum velvet curtain behind the armchair to blot out the darkness. I force myself to go to the coal tunnel, scuttle in hand.

Back upstairs I riddle the ash through the stove's grate. Fat tears begin to fall as I drop the plump coals onto the flaming fire lighters. I sit in front of the stove while the fire catches. It begins to blaze behind the smoky glass and I rock till the guttural wails slowly subside into sobs.

'There now, Bethan, you wipe your eyes, cariad. A hot bath and a plate of hot toast is what you need.'

"If only that would do the trick, Nain," I reply, as though it's normal to hear the dead.

'Don't you worry about doing the trick. It won't happen all at once, cariad. One day at a time will do you. Come to think of it, an hour at a time'll do. It's not like she's dead now.' Nain's soothing tone shifts to her hands-on-hips voice, brisk as an egg whisk, 'So, which is it to be first, Bethan-girl, bath or food?'

"Bath."

I always think of Nain as being with me, Ceridwen. I imagine what she would say constantly, but this is the first time I actually hear her voice. I haul myself upstairs to the bathroom. Nain is quiet now; faded back into my head, I tell myself, but I cling to the words as though they are as

real as the hot water tumbling into the blue enamel bath.
It's not like she's dead now.

A sudden idea comes to me. I leave the water running onto a crumbled orange bath bar, bubbles foaming up around the seasonal scent of cinnamon and orange, and go to my bedroom to rummage through my drawer of notebooks. I pull out the assortment of books: a kaleidoscope of beautiful bindings. You used to sit on my bed after your bath, your wet hair drying back into soft, dark springs, making a damp patch on your white nightdress. You would set out the notebooks in a circle around you before picking them up one by one. The soft aubergine suede one was your favourite; the one that I bought from a craft stall in Greenwich market during the year we lived with Timothy.

"What does it say?" You asked every time.

"All my secrets, Ceridwen."

"Can I read them when I've learnt to read squiggly writing?"

"No, you can't."

"I can read this. Look, this is my name."

At the bottom of the drawer is an unused book, the cover a thick slice of purplish-blue velvet; your Christmas present to me last year. I pull it out and reach into my bag for the silver pen covered in Celtic knot designs; the one Nain bought from the gift-shop at Conwy Castle on one of her educational expeditions to show you your heritage.

"You can read this one, Ceridwen," I tell the empty room.

In the bath I begin composing lines in my head, the way I compose poetry late at night when I should be falling asleep. In the living room, dried and dressed in the pink flannel pyjamas that you always laughed at, I settle onto

the sofa: two slices of hot toast with real butter, a whole pot of fresh coffee, pen and notebook at my side. On the mantelpiece two sticks of vanilla incense burn: plunder from your room, their scent reminding me of the Victoria sponge cakes I baked for each of your birthdays.

December 18th 2003

Dear Ceridwen

It is almost six months now since you went missing. I'm waiting for you to come home, and, while I wait, I decided to write you a story.

We lived here at Tÿ Gurig until you were six months old. Timothy rang every day to try to persuade me to live with him in his cramped flat off the Bermondsey Rd and, in the end, we moved.

The smell was what shocked me most about London: the taste of pollution always on my tongue. The tap water was flat and dead after it had seeped through so many other bodies. It was no place for a baby, but Timothy was on course for a partnership and constantly told me we'd have a house in Greenwich or even Blackheath one day. It always seemed to me that the heath and Greenwich Park had more square feet of dog turds covering them than grass, but I didn't like to sully Timothy's dream.

When I met Timothy, on holiday in France, his tendency to be possessive seemed so romantic, but the shine wore off when he began cataloguing my every move, keeping mental lists of who I spoke to, whether I smiled when I spoke to them, whether I moved my head closer to listen when one of his friends was making conversation. I should

have seen it coming, but instead I tried harder to placate him, tried to convince myself that his jealousy was something else; something tender and adoring. It was my dream, to be part of a family with a mother and a father. I wanted that for you, but not that much. He didn't have to hit me twice.

Back at Tŷ Gurig there was no lawyer's salary to live on, only Nain's pension and the odd boost of money when she sold a painting to a local gallery. It was good to be back in the fold of the mountains, the rain cocooning us from the world, Nain's lamb cawls to comfort us. But living off Nain and benefits didn't appeal, despite her protests.

The job in Bristol was ideal. Writer in residence with East Bristol Library Services sounded wonderfully glamorous and the humane hours were a bonus. So there we were, in a little rented Victorian house on Ruby Street, a stone's throw from Eastville Park, within cycling distance of the library, and round the corner from Trinity Street with its whole row of shops crammed with Asian and West Indian vegetables.

I think we would have met Caro and Stephen sooner rather than later. Everyone in the area seemed to know them. The Soulful Living Community occupied two big double fronted houses facing the park, both owned by a woman called Clare, though Stephen and Caro never seemed short of money themselves in those days.

You were almost three when we moved to Bristol. Bryn was home from the States.

"Are you going to be alright here, Bethan?" Bryn looked the spit of Dad in the photos, sleek mousy hair neatly brushed back, unlike my unkempt mane, and soft blue eyes like rain on slate, not like the brown eyes I'd inherited from Mam and Nain. Nain always said Welsh men were

built like corgi dogs for the mines; long backs and short legs, compact and powerful, but Bryn was a copy of our English dad, long all over.

"I'm going to be fine. Thanks for all this Bryn. I don't know how I'd have managed without you."

"Ah, but you would manage though, wouldn't you? You're a Prichard woman."

I smiled and shrugged up at him. I was Bethan Loxley when we went to live with Nain, but I told her I wanted her name for my seventh birthday.

I met Caro later that day, in the doctor's surgery. She had one of those long double buggies with one baby behind the other. They were, about seven months old and pale skinned like their mam. Caro had the look of a Viking princess, I thought, and it was reassuring to be invited to someone's home in a strange, new neighbourhood.

Caro's front door was purple, side by side with a second purple door in the next house along; mirror images. The carefully painted signs above each door were almost identical too: *Soulful Living Community House 1*, *Soulful Living Community House 2*. Inside, the air was heavy with incense and the kitchen was full of the smell of spices. Three women sat around a big circular table. Caro was dressed in a white kaftan over pale blue silk trousers, her feet bare, tiny bells tinkling from the cord around her waistband. Her blond hair hung straight to her waist.

"I'm so glad you came, sweetie." She had a loud, confident voice and spoke as though we were old friends.

You squeezed my hand more tightly.

"Come and meet everyone." She waved a hand over the women assembled around an assortment of jewel coloured mugs filled with steaming fruit teas.

"This is Clare, our angelic benefactor." A woman in her thirties with limp mousy hair nodded in my direction.

"And Juliet, who lives next door with her gorgeous girls."

Juliet smiled in my direction, a small, neat woman with strawberry blond hair in an expensive cut. I took in the three little girls who were concentrating hard on building a wooden block marble run on the kitchen floor.

"Say hello, cherubs," Caro said, in the children's direction.

"Hello," three voices chorused without looking up. They had their mother's pale, freckled skin and fine hair, slightly redder.

"Good girls. This is Heloise, she's our big girl, she's six, and Freya, whose just a bit older than Ceridwen, I think, and Caitlin."

Caro turned back to the table, to the last woman who was jiggling both of Caro's babies on her lap, "And this is Lynne, who is my absolute rock."

Lynne smiled, not taking her eyes off the babies, "Pleased to meet you," she said quietly. She was a small, square shaped woman with cropped brown hair and tiny eyes.

"And this, of course, is Bethan and her goddess of a daughter Ceridwen." Caro introduced us with a flourish of her arm.

"Hi." It sounded lame as soon as it came out.

"Stephen's upstairs working at the moment," Caro said in an almost reverential tone. "He's a writer like you. He can't wait to meet you, Bethan." She turned to you, "Would you like a rice cake, sweetie?"

"Yes, cake please," you said. You looked puzzled when she handed you the flat, dry rice cake.

"Look, Mam." You turned the crumbling circle of compacted rice grains around in your hands, as though it might turn into cake if you looked hard enough.

"It's a bit different from ordinary cake, cariad." I laughed nervously, "Have a bite." You nibbled your way through a tiny segment and wrinkled your nose.

"Yes, cake please," you repeated in case Caro had accidentally given you the wrong thing.

"We'll buy a cake later, love." I whispered, pulling you to me as I sat on the chair being offered by Juliet.

"You don't let her eat sugar do you, Bethan?" Caro asked, wide eyed, but smiling.

"Well, I..."

"I'll give you some leaflets, sweetie. You probably have no idea how much harm some foods can do to developing little bodies. It's a minefield trying to parent our children with all the pressures on us from the modern world. Stephen's writing a book about it." I could see Lynne nodding emphatically as Caro spoke. "Would you like a drink?"

I eyed the mugs on the table, "Well, if it's no trouble, coffee if you have it."

"I'm afraid we don't keep stimulants in the house."

"Right. Maybe a glass of water then."

"And Ceridwen?"

I hesitated, not wanting to make any more gaffs with the only people I knew in a strange city. I guessed that squash would be out of the question and wondered if there was anything wrong with juice, but you were ahead of me, "Blackcurrant, please."

"Of course, sweetie. We get this wonderful sugar-free, organic cordial from the whole food store on Trinity Street. Harvest. Have you found it?"

"I haven't found much yet, but the vegetable shops are good. I found this amazing cheese shop on a side road off Whiteladies Road when we went exploring Bristol a couple of days ago. I..." I was talking too fast.

"Cheese shop?"

"Yes, it's..."

"We don't eat dairy products."

I bit my lip. Five minutes and already I was offending them. I smiled uneasily, you saved the moment again as Caro handed you the blackcurrant juice.

"Diolch."

"Pardon, sweetie?"

"It's Welsh," I put in, "she's saying thank-you."

"Adorable!" Caro enthused, stroking your curls as she sat next to us.

Within a month I was talking Soulful Parenting with the best of them, inspired by Caro. At home I couldn't quite bring myself to stop baking cakes to Nain's recipes or refuse you the occasional bar of white chocolate, but I never mentioned these things to Caro.

Perhaps my inclination never to answer back was the root of all our troubles. On the day my parents left me and Bryn with Nain to go house hunting in Oxford I screamed and cried to go with them. My mam finally left in tears, looking back anxiously at me while Nain held me and tried to cajole me to wave good-bye. When they didn't come back I cried myself to sleep night after night, thinking that if only I hadn't fussed when they left somehow the car crash would never have happened. Some irrational part of me resolved never to upset anyone again.

In Caro's presence I was suddenly aware that I'd never given much thought to parenting. You were born at Tŷ

Gurig, which Caro heartily approved of, regretting that she'd lost the battle to have her twins at home, but proud that she hadn't given in to the suggestion of a caesarean section. After you were born, I simply fed you and did whatever you seemed to need.

Caro told me I was an instinctive Soulful Parent, "Perhaps it was growing up with an artist and wise woman or living close to the Earth in the mountains," she said. "You're so blessed to have this natural connection between your body and Ceridwen's. You wouldn't believe the harm my upbringing inflicted on me. I have to fight every inch of the way to find that space inside myself where I can give to my girls. That's why learning Soulful Parenting has been my salvation. All my instincts were so crushed, without the teaching I'd never be able to submit my will to the needs of their souls."

I was relieved to be told that I was instinctively soulful, but I still had a lot to learn. Each week, we sat in circle of brightly coloured velvet cushions on the floor of the big living room, the babies sucking wooden rattles and climbing around Lynne, who always sat slightly out of the circle to assist with Indigo and Xanthe.

"Lynne, sweetie, I think their nappies should be changed soon." Caro always smiled when she spoke. "And that gorgeous organic spinach needs just lightly steaming to puree down for their tea. You can bring them here to me while you're cooking."

Caro turned her smile on me, "That reminds me, Bethan. I know you love those cute little Asian veg shops, but you know they hardly carry any organic produce. I think you would be better off shopping at Harvest."

"I'm not sure I can afford..."

"Nonsense, sweetie. What we afford is all about priorities and what could be more important than putting the purest food into the temple of your child's soul? Isn't that right my little goddess?" She smiled over at you, playing with an assortment of little girls whose mothers were ranged around the circle.

"Isn't it odd how they're all girls?" I blurted out.

"What's that, sweetie?"

"I suppose I just noticed. All of us have daughters, but no sons."

Caro simply smiled at me, tilting her head to one side, as though she were about to explain how to boil an egg to someone who was a little slow.

"That's a very important point you've made, Bethan. You see the souls of boys and girls develop so differently, at least that's how it's meant to be if they are given the right space. The male and female essences are quite distinct. They each have their own purity and their own gifts. That's why the training for Soulful Parenting follows two beautiful, but distinct paths. I'm really only qualified to teach the goddess path, having girls myself. We think it's so important that the girls' souls are honoured and nurtured for their feminine uniqueness. That just can't happen if they are overshadowed by budding bringers at this early stage."

"Bringers?"

"Our soulful name for little boys."

A bit airy fairy, Nain would have said, but wholesome food, cloth nappies, cotton clothes, wooden toys, no sugar and no television didn't start any alarm bells ringing. I felt privileged to have found these wise people who took me under their wing.

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I look up at the clock, it's after nine and I realise that I'm ravenous.

'You should put a nice cawl on, girl. You'll be skin and bone if you only live on toast, mark me.'

"Not tonight, Nain. It's too late to start defrosting chunks of lamb. Maybe tomorrow."

'You should take some out of the freezer tonight then. You have to look after yourself, you know.'

"Okay, Nain. I'll do an omelette now and take some lamb out for tomorrow. Happy?"

There is no reply, only scratching on the living room door.

"Hey there Daisy, where've you been all day?" I scoop up Daisy's plump, purring body. "Come down with me and get some food." I set her down and she pads after me, winding round my legs.

"There you go, Dase." I say, pouring biscuits into her bowl. "You and me have to stick together."

I reach into the fridge for eggs. "One omelette coming up." I'm grateful for Daisy to talk to. "Then a bath and bed." Daisy glances up at me, yellow-green eyes like the shiny buttons on your favourite cardigan when you were five. "I know I've already had a bath today, but it's better than Prozac, Daisy – baths, poems and novels, the only way to sleep."