

Twenty Thousand Saints

Fflur
Dafydd

ALCEMI 

First impression: 2008
Second impression: 2009.

© Fflur Dafydd 2008

*This book is subject to copyright
and may not be reproduced by any means
except for review purposes
without the prior written consent of the publishers*

Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council

Editor: Gwen Davies

ISBN: 9780955527227

Printed on acid-free and partly-recycled paper.
Published by Alcemi and printed and bound in Wales by
Y Lolfa Cyf., Talybont, Ceredigion SY24 5AP
e-mail yloffa@yloffa.com
website www.alcemi.eu
tel 01970 832 304
fax 832 782

Men were scarce that summer. The women of Bardsey Island had begun giving each other languorous looks; had begun talking to each other in quivering, feverish tones. Most of them didn't even realise they were doing it. For months, all eyes had been turned outwards, towards the sea and its glittering possibilities, the arrival of each boat a benediction, a sudden breeze across the fusty, August heat. But when those weekly boats failed to deliver a single man, it wasn't long before the women started to peek, cautiously and curiously, at one another. It seemed that, by now, any flash of flesh was enough to cause certain stirrings: the subterranean shadows beneath a stranger's shirt, the surrendering of a best friend's ankle or an inner thigh, the seductive gaze of a neighbour's belly button. And unless today's boat had a man on board – as they'd been promised – it was only a matter of time before their glances and gestures sprouted hands and lips, before their wandering, unreal thoughts became the subject of island murmurs.

Or at least this is how, Leri thought, she would start her documentary, executed by a subtle, velvety voice-over, zooming in on the faces of the women lined up on the jetty, staring out to sea. She adjusted the lens, slowly pulling away from the white dot emerging on the horizon.

“Stop sticking that thing in my face,” her assistant Greta said, closing a curtain of hair about her face. “I've told you I'm not going to be in it.”

The camera skimmed further down the jetty. Leri focused on Elin, one of the island's volunteers, knowing full well she wouldn't resist being filmed. The camera loved her, her porcelain poise, the flutter of fabric in her faux-modest flinches. She was the perfect siren. If only

she were a little more articulate.

“You can *feel* it, can’t you?” she said, looking right into the eye of the camera, something Leri had repeatedly asked her not to do. “That we might be starting to fancy each other a bit. It’s surprising how quickly your body adjusts to these things – your mind might take a little more time to catch up but... I mean, I could, if I *had* to, I may even *want* to in the end... but maybe it’s a good thing after all that they’re sending a man at last, I mean, it might help restore the....”

The sentence found its own way home, as Elin’s sentences were prone to do. Leri framed her face while she waited. This was the problem with Elin. You could get her to start but you couldn’t get her to finish. It frustrated Leri, seeing her hoist those phrases up into the air like kites, but lose interest as they took to the wind, loosening her grip; not even aware of the kite’s dismal descent. Sometimes Leri would have to hoist it back up again, if only to rid herself of that vacant feel of the fragmentary, the incomplete.

“*Balance*,” she added briskly, tying the kite to a post. “Just say the word balance, and I can edit it later.”

“I’m not sure balance is what I meant,” Elin said, “I think I meant... oh I’m not sure what I meant... I think it’s difficult to know what I....”

For once, Leri was prepared to let the sentence dwindle. She shut down the camera and looked at Greta. Greta looked back at her for a second before looking off again. Leri wondered if either one could bring themselves to discuss what was happening between them. Balance wasn’t the right word, Elin was right. If there had ever been any, it had long sloped into some asymmetrical, slanting mess. Leri’s entire world had tilted towards Greta; the green bottles rolling away from the bed, the bed springs bending, and her words, like her clothes, in disarray at the bottom of the mattress, jumbled, ruffled. It was the kind of thing you didn’t mention, until the tilt solidified, until the whole world seemed a little off centre. It was never meant to be part of the documentary, she was very sure of that. *Stay focused Leri*, she kept telling herself. She turned to face the sea; being surprised once again how its swelling mass closed in on them, binding them to their tiny tuft of land. Everywhere you looked, there it was, encroaching

ever closer. It was nothing like the distant mirage of sea she was used to; this was real, pulsating.

“Then again, since when has a man had anything to do with *balance*?” continued Elin, as two herring gulls perched themselves on the jetty behind her, chests puffing proudly as they circled her words with their pink splay of feet. “What we need is a good *body*.” She kicked the squawking duo away, “everything in the right place, all the necessary bits. I’m fed up of these sweet, pretty men... when you get them into bed, it’s all bones and skin and soft kisses. There’s no weight there, no force, no rhythm. It’s like making love to a... feather, like being invaded by a...” Another kite fell from the sky. Leri was annoyed. Making love to a feather, that was fine. It was a nice comparison, simple and compact, it said everything that needed to be said. She could instantly imagine what it would feel like; the feather softly grazing her neck as it attempted its seduction. Why Elin had to go and spoil it all by adding another simile, she didn’t know. She was about to tackle her on it when the final word landed at her feet, a gunk of feather and saliva: “Quill. Like being invaded by a quill.”

There was something mesmerising about Elin’s movements across the jetty, which made Leri turn the camera back on. The early morning sun was bursting out of the still waters around them, dazzling them. The jetty fell from view, and it seemed that Elin was walking on water. She might be able to do something with that for the opening credits, thought Leri excitedly. Not your average documentary, her viewers would say, noting her name as it flashed in bold white type across the bottom of the screen.

“Just keep walking Elin, OK, and keep your head poised like that. Let your arms go so we can see a little more flesh. That’s it. Beautiful, just beautiful...”

Elin needed no coaxing. She was continuously emphasising her angular dimensions by wearing short skirts, crop-tops, and those subtly-sexual swimming costumes that came undone in the back if you jolted about a little too eagerly, as she was prone to do. Today she was wearing a short, yellow skirt, picking incessantly at its hem. She was always touching herself in some way, Leri had noticed – rubbing that tight, concrete back of hers, caressing her long arms, or reshuffling her breasts.

Leri had given up complaining about it, finding that even speaking to Elin forced a sentence to retreat, to curl in on itself (“Do you have to keep fiddling with yourself like that, it’s so...” she had said, her voice losing its verve.) Elin had argued she needed reassurance that she was still whole. “I mean, in a place like this you can easily forget that you’re a *complete*, real person. Your mind plays tricks,” she said, cupping her left breast in her hand. Leri zoomed in on this last gesture.

She wasn’t sure she could use it, but it had something; a kind of absurdity that would be otherwise difficult to capture.

“He could be the most ‘balanced’ man in the world and still not have anything to talk about,” Greta complained. “We don’t know anything about him, do we? At least give the poor boy...”

“Man,” Elin corrected, stepping out of her golden silhouette. “We want him to be a man. He’s twenty six, apparently. If he’s not a man at twenty six then... well...”

Leri saw the boat advancing in the distance. Suddenly, Elin seemed plain and the jetty no more than a strip of pale wood. Raising her camera once more, she could make out the boatman’s face, as well as a host of faceless life jackets.

“You have to ask yourself serious questions about a man who wants to come and live on a bloody island, especially *this* one, on his own, at twenty six years old,” Greta threw this last comment over the jetty, into the sea.

“Well you won’t have to bother with him, will you? He’s staying with me at the lighthouse,” said Elin, as she bent down to dismantle a stray, desiccated crab claw on the jetty, “so it makes sense that I should have first refusal, doesn’t it? I mean he’s *one* man and... well I’m not sharing him with...”

“Well you might have to!” Leri shouted, as the kite morphed into a balloon and glided silently away.

A writer-in-residence had been suggested by Gwyn, the island’s manager. Leri had been present at the meeting. Despite seeming so joyous on the phone, layering his small talk with biscuit-crunches and coffee-slurps, saying what a wonderful idea a documentary was, he was brusque when he met her in person. “Don’t make a nuisance of

yourself,” he’d said, twisting a greying eyebrow, “they won’t like that I’ve brought you.” She soon realised that she’d been set-up, that Gwyn had planned to propose the writer in residence at a choice moment, knowing that the board members were unlikely to show their objection with a camera present. Which was exactly what Gwyn wanted; quiet approval, no-nonsense acquiescence. It hadn’t particularly mattered to Leri, either, considering the material was irrelevant. “The first meeting is just the first step in the game-plan,” the executive producer had told her. “Get them to trust you. If you can appear a little bit stupid, then great. If they see you filming the really mundane stuff like a board meeting, they’re less likely to think you’ve got an agenda.”

But as it turns out, Gwyn was the only one with the agenda; and she was at the bottom of it, while the writer’s residency sat smugly at the top. The board members, eyeing the camera as though it were a wild animal waiting to be roused from its lair, were polite enough in their objection. The thought of squandering the island’s minuscule funds on a writer, when there was a jetty waiting to be extended, a tractor waiting to be painted, and a field waiting to be excavated was almost beyond hilarity, said a ginger-haired woman in a purple cardigan. Never mind about that, said a balding man with a thin voice; it was perfectly obvious that the scheme was a whitewash. “After that Venus woman,” he added, coughing into his lukewarm latte.

Leri learnt that the proposal came soon after the sudden, premature departure of Chiara Venus, the island’s first ever artist-in-residence. The islanders, despite their initial scepticism, had begun to accept Chiara as one of their own, and there had been talk of making her position permanent. That is, until Chiara’s first exhibition in the school-house had revealed that they themselves featured in several of her oil-paintings. Howard, the island’s farmer, had seen himself portrayed as an archangel, who seemed to be, from a great height, zapping a cat’s genitals with his lazer-beam eyes.

“We don’t even have cats on this island!” Howard snapped, slapping his palm down on the mahogany table. “We don’t want another fantasist like that on the island! A camera crew is bad enough!”

The writer-in-residence, Gwyn argued, would be a different experiment altogether. Someone to survey and observe, to live quietly

in their midst; a watchful, probing eye.

“A perv, you mean,” said a young woman whom she now recognised as Elin. “Plenty of those here already, thank you.” Howard shifted uneasily in his seat.

“You’re not seeing the whole picture here,” Gwyn gestured with his hands, “a writer could really do wonders for the place. Write something dynamic, exciting about the island. Something racy – something to really sell the place.”

“We don’t want to sell the place, Gwyn,” Elin noted, disapprovingly, “we need to make the island... well... sort of...”

“Sexy,” shouted Gwyn. “Yes you’re right, Elin. We need to make the island sexy.”

“That’s not what I...”

“A writer should do it. He’ll really be the making of us...”

“He?” Elin raised an eyebrow. “It would be a...”

“Yes,” Gwyn thundered, his eyes flaming. “A man, yes. It would, of course, be a man.”

When she’d got back to the editing suite in Cardiff, Leri had deleted the entire sequence.

He’d been clever, thought Leri, as she saw the boat approaching that afternoon. He knew the clincher would be to offer them a man.

The boat was now gliding into place by the jetty, the ropes slithering from the boatman’s hands.

Leri flung the camera over her shoulder and started filming. She focused on the boatman’s brown face and scanned the inside of the boat, trying to locate the writer in question. As usual, it was impossible to distinguish one particular man from the dark mass of bobbing heads, all penned into their puffs of orange. She turned around again to focus on the beads of sweat gathering on Elin’s brow – these were much more interesting, travelling their way southwards over the smooth stream of her face, stalling suddenly in that pert, pointed chin.

“Not now, alright, it’s just not a good time to... I’m not really in the... just don’t.”

Leri turned the camera lens towards Greta, who was picking the skin from her lips, throwing Leri a bloodied smile. Leri filmed her pacing back and forth on the jetty, her raisin-coloured hair rising now

and again in the wind, her cheeks shading a sudden pink, her glasses hiding her eyes. Leri thought warmly of those evenings they'd spent together, each glass of wine a little sweeter, a little denser. She still found it hard to believe that she had reached out towards her and she had not been rejected. Her drunken memory kept on replaying the one solitary image, that of Greta's shirt sliding from her shoulder, the cool moon skin rising to her touch.

The camera had been idle during those few days, tucked away in the canvas bag underneath the table in their cottage, Carreg Bach. The documentary hadn't seemed important then, and she'd let the islanders be, knowing how much they disliked its dark gaze. She'd done what Greta had suggested they do all along, what she viewed as the best way to start the documentary: see people beyond the cold contours of the camera, peel away the layers gently, so that when they did some *real* filming they wouldn't always be trying to find things. *Like found poetry*, she'd said, *it is what it is*. All very well and good, thought Leri, if there was nothing more to it. But she knew better.

Greta was someone who refused to be a subject; that's why she liked her so much. But it was a hindrance when you were trying to get a job done, especially one as covert and complex as hers. Greta was now distracting the linear narrative she had planned for the documentary. She was always enthusing about histories and reconstructions, about different emotional journeys that needed prompting, flashbacks that had to be cut in. Greta had been getting to know the islanders, by way of taking part in the archaeological dig at the north end, and seemed to think that along with the bones and artefacts and worthless pieces of jewellery, she was unearthing something else entirely. "I just don't know why you're so dismissive of the documentary, Leri, you've got a real wealth of material here, and all you want to film is lichen and choughs. You've got a chance here to really make a difference."

Leri knew this, of course. She knew it, and she had her own plan, and she hated staring into that pleading face night after night, not being able to voice it, unable to unfurl the exquisite map of her story at Greta's feet. But she was too close, now, to start sharing things. If you shared something, someone soon forgot whose idea it had been, and she'd learnt that the hard way.

As was customary, the islanders formed a chain in order to sweep the cargo swiftly from boat to trailer. Greta stood right at the front, so that she could get the first peep at the new arrival, while Elin stood right at the back, hands on her hips. Leri recognised this as a quiet, skilled manoeuvre. Better still if the stranger saw her last of all. He would be glad he had waited for such a glorious scene. Leri climbed up towards the boathouse, perched for the right angle. As the chain dismembered itself, the real cargo came. An elderly couple in matching hats, taking what looked like a first retirement holiday; three nuns, carrying their Bibles and baskets, and two birdwatchers, binoculars hung like macho medallions on their grey-feathered chests.

And that was all. The white boat swayed emptily in front of them, laughing. Foam rose and dissolved, in and out of shot. Leri lowered the camera.

Eventually, Brian, the boatman gazed back at them, bemused.

“What the hell are you lot gawping at?” she heard Brian say. “I know you’re desperate for a man, but you must be joking. I’m flattered, of course.”

She saw Elin charge up to the edge of the jetty, young enough not to be afraid of Brian’s rope-burn temperament. He was waiting to raze your skin with that rope at any moment, holding it out in friendly gesture.

“Where is he?”

“Who?”

In one gracious leap, Elin was off the jetty, and into the boat.

“The writer, the one who was supposed to arrive today!” she said, steadying herself as Brian loosened the ropes and sucked on his cigarette.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, darling,” puffed Brian, tilting his eyes.

“Stop looking at my tits, Brian,” she snapped, “and answer the question.”

That really wasn’t the protocol for talking to Brian, Leri thought. Her register was two octaves off the scale. Greta looked at her, urging her to get filming. She lifted her camera once more. Brian *was* kind of fascinating. He was the kind of man she’d only seen in a good mood

when his wife had been taken seriously ill, a man who had recently refused to come back and collect twenty day-visitors, because one of them had vomited on his dog during the crossing.

“If you don’t mind, darling, I’ve got things to do,” he said, turning his back on Elin.

This was good, this was very good, Leri thought, the camera whirring its approval. Greta flashed a conciliatory smile.

The roar of the engine drowned out the rest of the scene. The residual crowd watched as Elin flailed her arms around in protest, and Brian sneakily started steering the boat away, the rope closing in on Elin. But Elin wouldn’t have it. Once she realised what was happening, they saw her, at a fifty metre distance, jumping off the boat, into the water.

They hauled her back onto the jetty, where she made the most of her audience, draping herself over the pale wood, imprinting her dampness onto it, barely moving, whispering the occasional breath. Her small, brown eyes bolted open.

“A woman!” she spluttered.

Leri forced her way forward.

“Are you alright?”

Elin looked up into the black eye of the camera.

“Oh for God’s sake Leri, this is not going in your programme, I’m not... I mean I don’t, but that’s not why...” Elin choked, sitting up. “It’s a woman.” Her voice was slick and salty. “Brian told me just now. The writer. She phoned him to say she’d missed the boat... she’s coming on the next one, not that that’s...”

“Another woman,” groaned Greta. “That’s *all* we need.”

“A woman who missed the boat,” Leri mused, as the camera’s eye shut tight.