

JOHN TODD

Five Foot One-and-a-Half

'You're going out again?'

She'd caught me putting my coat on in the hall.

'I hoped you might stay in tonight,' she said.

I said nothing. Just opened the door.

'Dewi,' she said, 'please stay in.'

But I went out, closed the door behind me.

I set off down the street, no idea where I was going. Thought I might try some new route, somewhere I hadn't been before. Then I thought, what's the point? All the streets in the bloody town look the same. Might as well go the usual way. And end up in the pub again.

I told myself, Dewi boy, you can't go on like this. You got to make up your mind, one way or the other. Either you find somewhere else to live, or you stay home, patch it up with Bron somehow. Ought to do that really, for the sake of the kids. They done nothing wrong. And they want their Daddy around, that's for sure.

I was passing the place where it all began. Sunday morning it was and we was coming out of Chapel, she with her Mam, me with mine. We started talking, the four of us. I don't know what we talked about. But Bron smiled at me the way no-one ever smiled before.

And we started going out together, and I couldn't believe it. And people said, 'Dewi Williams got a girl at last.'

Rhoddri Jones was in the pub, and Huw Jones.

'How's it going, Dewi?' says Rhoddri. 'Look a bit down in the mouth, boy.'

'I'm all right,' I said.

'How's Bronwen? Haven't seen her lately.'

'She's okay.'

Never thought any girl would go out with me, little runt of a chap like me. But Bron didn't seem to mind. Happy enough to be seen walking out with me.

As for me, I was proud. See, I got a girl! A good-looking one too. Not the sort you'd whistle at, not like that Connie Evans. But lots of men be glad to have a girl like Bron on their arm.

Sometimes we'd see them in the town, chaps I used to hang around with. Gwyn Jenkins, Dai Thomas. And there was envy in their eyes, seeing me with Bron. Me, Dewi Williams. Five foot one-and-a-half.

'Been here a lot lately, haven't you?' says Rhoddri Jones. 'Never thought you was a drinking man, Dewi.'

'Thought you lot weren't supposed to drink,' says Huw Jones.

'Some of us do, some don't,' I said. 'Nothing in the Bible says a man can't have a drink, if he wants one.'

'I'd have said you was more the home-loving type,' says Rhoddri.

'Who says I'm not? Just slipped out for a pint, that's all.'

Something was wrong, you could see that.

She was getting absent-minded, forgetting to do things in the house. Like she'd forget to put out clean clothes for the kids. Once she forgot to pack their lunch-boxes and they come home starving hungry, nothing to eat since breakfast.

'Anything wrong, Bron?' I said.

'No,' she said. 'Nothing wrong.'

But she looked away when she said it, wouldn't look me in the eye.

She could have kept quiet. I'd never have guessed the truth. But it seems like she couldn't bear it, seeing me every day and me not knowing. She had to tell me.

Never thought much about what she did during the day. I knew she helped in Jenkins' shop most mornings, then met the kids from school at four. In between I thought she did her housework or put her feet up. Never crossed my mind something else was going on.

One evening, it all came out. She couldn't keep it to herself any longer.

She'd been quiet while we had our supper, sat staring at the tablecloth. Not interested in what the kids ate or didn't eat. Left most of her own food. And her lips were moving, like she was practising something she wanted to say.

When we'd got the kids to bed, she said, 'Will you read Rhiannon a story, Dewi? I don't feel up to it tonight.'

'Okey-dokey,' I said. 'But what's wrong, love? You got something on your mind, isn't it?'

'Read to Rhiannon,' she said, 'then I'll tell you.'

I went to Rhiannon's room, read her a story, then she wanted another one. Didn't want to sleep. It was like she knew something was wrong. Why was Daddy reading to her, not Mammy? At last, I see her eyes begin to close. I crept out the room, went downstairs.

Bron was crying.

'What is it, love?' I said. 'Tell me what's wrong.'

'Oh, Dewi,' she said, 'you're so kind. You don't deserve someone like me.'

'What you talking about?' I said. 'I'm the luckiest chap in the world.'

'Dewi!' she said. 'No, don't come near me. Listen to what I've got to say first.'

'Go on.'

'I've done a terrible thing,' she said. 'You'll never forgive me, Dewi. I've been unfaithful to you. I've had an affair.'

I stared at her. I couldn't speak. My heart began to thump. My breath was coming out in gasps. I had to sit down.

At last, I said, 'What you telling me? You're making this up.'

'No, it's true,' she said. 'Oh Dewi, I'm so sorry.'

'But who? Where?'

'It's all over,' she said. 'Honest, I won't be seeing him again.'

'Who?' I said. 'Who are you talking about?'

'No-one you know. An electrician. He was doing some work next door.'

I stared at her.

'We started chatting. I asked him in for a cup of tea. Then it all happened, I don't know how. It seemed like I couldn't help myself. Oh, I'm so ashamed.'

'But it wasn't just once!' I said. 'You let him in again, isn't it? Not just once.'

She nodded.

'Why don't you go to him?' I said. 'Go to this chap. You want him, you go to him.'

'But I don't want him! It's you I want! I love you, Dewi. I've never loved anyone else.'

'You expect me to believe that?' I said. 'After what you just told me?'

'It's true! I swear it. I wouldn't be telling you, if I didn't love you. I couldn't go the rest of my life keeping it a secret. It would be like I was still deceiving you.'

'How could you deceive me at all,' I said, 'if you loved me?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I can't answer that.'

I got up on my feet.

'What are you going to do?' she said.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't know what I'm going to do.'

Some chaps would beat their wives. Dai Lewis beat his wife when he found out she was having it off with that Italian. Then he trashed the Italian's car. I wasn't going to do nothing like that. Not a violent man, me.

'I'm going out,' I said.

'Where are you going?'

'I don't know.'

She came with me to the door.

'I got to be on my own,' I said.

'I hoped we might talk a bit more.'

'Nothing to talk about.'

I went out into the street, walked a few paces, then I had to stop. The tears was coming, I couldn't stop them.

I thought, you been kidding yourself all these years. You thought you was giving her everything she wanted. Everything she wanted! Who'd want a little chap like you? Five foot one-and-a-half! Only half a man, you are.

I got myself another pint, didn't really want it.

Rhoddri Jones was watching me.

'Can't get used to you sitting there, Dewi,' he says.

I said nothing, wished I'd sat somewhere else.

'Got a problem?' he says. 'No, I won't ask. None of my business.'

That's right, I thought, none of your business.

He leans over and taps my knee.

'Whatever it is,' he says, 'don't make more of it than there really is.'

I thought, what can you know about it? Old bachelor like you. You never had my sort of problem.

He says, 'Did I ever tell you my brother Tegid?'

'No,' I said, glad he was changing the subject. 'What about him? He's in Cardiff, isn't he?'

'That's the one.'

I knew he had this older brother in Cardiff. I'd heard they didn't get on.

Dai Jones got up.

'I'm going for a pee,' he said.

Whatever Rhoddri was going to tell me, Dai Jones had heard it all before.

'Doing well for himself, Tegid,' says Rhoddri. 'Director of his firm, you know.'

'That's good.'

'Used to go around together when we was boys. Looked up to him, I did. My elder brother. Don't suppose you ever met him?'

'No,' I said. 'I seen him around, but I never spoke to him.'

'The brains of the family,' says Rhoddri. 'Top of his class at school. Good rugby player too. Everything going for him, Teg. There was just one thing.'

'What was that?'

'He had this stammer. Couldn't get his words out, sometimes.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Not that it held him back. Always did well at everything he tried. Proud of him, I was. Always talking about him. My brother this, my brother that.'

He sighed.

'So what happened?' I said. 'A quarrel, was it?'

'I was in the Square one night,' says Rhoddri, 'with some other lads. And I was talking about Tegid. And I mentioned something he'd said. My brother said so-and-so, I said. And I put in the stammer, I don't know why. And the other lads laughed. Well, if there's one thing a young lad likes, it's getting his mates to laugh. So I carried on doing it, see. And they laughed and laughed. Then suddenly they stopped. It was dead quiet. And I looked round and there was Tegid standing there.'

I whistled.

'There's unlucky,' I said. 'What did you do?'

'Not much I could do, was there? The damage was done. I said something like, "Sorry, Teg bach. Just a joke." He didn't say nothing, just turned around and walked away. And, you know, Dewi, he's never forgiven me. And that was thirty years ago.'

'That's a sad story,' I said.

'And it's not as if I often did things like that. Making fun of people, that's not me at all, Dewi.'

'I believe you.'

'Just a silly boy showing off, that's what it was. But Tegid didn't see it that way.'

'Shows how people can get things wrong,' I said.

I was thinking of myself, of course. Was I making a mistake too? Maybe what Bron done got nothing to do with her feelings about me. It was like she said, something happened she couldn't help. We all do daft things sometimes, behave like we was some other person.

'Drink up,' says Rhoddri. 'I'll buy you another one.'

'No, thanks,' I said. 'I've had enough.'

I see that look on her face tonight. Wanted me to stay in, be with her. Not just for the kids. Not just making the best of things.

I got off my chair.

'Going already?' says Rhoddri.

'Got to be getting home,' I said. 'Home-loving chap, remember?'

Just a little chap, I am. Five foot one-and-a-half. But everyone got a chance to be loved. You get a chance like that, you don't throw it away for one piece of foolishness.

I see Huw Jones coming out the gents.

'Tell you about his brother, did he?' he said. 'Sick of that tale, I am. You'll get it again tomorrow, I warn you.'

'I shan't be here tomorrow,' I said. 'I got other plans.'

John Todd was born in Hope in Derbyshire and now lives in Sutton

Coldfield. He has been a local government officer and a lexicographer. He has been writing short stories for the last five years. Two of his earlier stories were shortlisted in competitions and one was published in an anthology of new writing in 2012.