
Opening Extract from...

The Thoughts and Happenings of Wilfred Price, Purveyor of Superior Funerals

Written by Wendy Jones

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THE THOUGHTS AND HAPPENINGS OF WILFRED PRICE, PURVEYOR OF SUPERIOR FUNERALS

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For Solly, whose enthusiasm for watching *Thunderbirds* DVDs made this book entirely possible.

And he saw a tall tree by the side of the river, one half of which was on fire, from the root to the top, and the other half was green and in full leaf.

The Mabinogion, eleventh-century Welsh epic

1

The Yellow Dress

Spring, 1924

It was because of a yellow dress. She was wearing a yellow dress and her arms were bare. It was slightly tart, the colour of lemon curd. He couldn't remember seeing a dress in that shade before. It was pleated silk and sleeveless, with a low waistband and a square neck that was slightly too low, perhaps only by half an inch.

Wilfred wondered how she got the dress on. Maybe there were hooks and eyes hidden on the side, under her arm. Ladies' dresses sometimes had those. Women hooked and encased themselves in their dresses but there was always a way out.

'And there's trifle,' Grace said triumphantly, 'with cream from the Clunderwen Dairy.' Wilfred noticed the trifle was sealed with thick whipped cream, and the cream was scattered with flaked

almonds. She laid the white bowl on the Welsh wool picnic blanket.

'There are grass cuttings everywhere; my brother Madoc mowed the lawn this morning,' she said, brushing splices of grass from her dress. 'I asked him not to, but he would insist.' She waved an inquisitive honeybee away from the bowl. 'I do hope you like trifle, Wilfred. I made it earlier so there would be time for the jelly to set before the cream spoiled.'

She leaned forward to serve the dessert. The neckline of her dress was cut slightly too low, he noticed again. And he wanted to glance but knew better of it, knew how women always noticed those glances from men, no matter how subtle men tried to be. Men's eyes were too slow. It was not only how she got into the dress that Wilfred wondered. He wondered, too, how Grace got out of it.

She laughed lightly and brushed her fair hair from her face.

'Wilfred, are you listening to me? Would you like the trifle, or there's some Bara brith in the house?'

'Grace, will you marry me?'

Wilfred saw an animal panic flash over her but then she very quickly reined herself in. The bee buzzed while Grace served the dessert in the small bowls slightly sloppily, almost as if she was over-focusing on what she was doing, as if the trifle was something safe to think about. With a clink, she had put a silver dessert spoon into a trifle bowl. She gave him the trifle with both hands.

'Here you are, Wilfred, darling – and yes, it would be delightful.'

He wasn't able to meet her eyes – he'd been gazing at her waistband when he'd inadvertently proposed in a shame-faced way. It

wasn't that he had intended to get down on one knee – he hadn't intended anything at all. What he had meant, if only he could have said it, was, '*How do you get out of your dress?*'

After the picnic, Grace went to her bedroom. She drew the curtains so the room was dusky. Wilfred had asked her to marry him! In the moments before he proposed, she had been bending forward, scooping some trifle into the gold-rimmed bowls. Then he asked, and she waited one shocked moment before replying.

'I would be delighted,' she had answered. Or perhaps she had said, 'That would be delightful.'

Earlier in the day, her brother Madoc said to her as she was laying out the crockery, 'You look splendid, Grace. Really quite dolled up. I should think that Wilfred Price will like your dress, too.' But before the picnic Grace had had her trepidations. Would Wilfred like it? What did Wilfred like? She didn't know. In fact, she didn't really know him that well. She knew him vaguely from her childhood and recently they had met at a dance, taken tea and then gone for that walk last Sunday. Then Wilfred had suggested an afternoon picnic and she said perhaps they could eat in her garden, to save carrying the food.

But Wilfred had seemed distant during the picnic. She had been anxious – was it perhaps that he didn't like her in her new dress? She had bought it especially from Mrs Russell's Haberdasher's & Draper's. Mrs Russell said yellow was all the rage with Flapper girls in London, though surely a yellow dress was too fussy for a picnic in a garden in Pembrokeshire?

Grace lifted her arm, looking for the first hook and eye in the bound seams at the side of the dress and undid each of the fastenings. She pulled the delicate garment over her head then shook it out. Grace looked for an empty clothes hanger in her wardrobe, one with a knitted cover because the silk was fragile.

Wilfred had arrived on time for the picnic and greeted her politely but had not complimented her on her appearance and was so distracted that even when Grace offered him sandwiches, she had to ask him twice.

'They're egg and beetroot, Wilfred,' she had encouraged. Grace had read in her *Miss Modern* magazine that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. But Wilfred had seemed almost saturnine until she'd suggested the trifle. Fancy being proposed to because she had offered a man trifle!

Grace opened the wardrobe, hung the dress on the brass rail then looked at her reflection in the tainted mirror on the inside of the walnut door, thinking, Imagine! I'm going to be married. A married woman.

Wilfred drove swiftly along the coastal road. He was shocked. What on God's earth had he done? He'd left the picnic – said his goodbyes – gone to the garage, jumped in the hearse and started driving somewhere, anywhere, far away from that garden and Grace, but he couldn't stop thinking about what had happened, couldn't focus on the road, barely even saw it. How had he come to ask her? He hadn't meant to, hadn't even wanted to. Yet he had: 'Grace, will you marry me?' He saw her in his mind's eye sitting on the blanket,

in a yellow dress, her feet to one side. He realized he hadn't looked her in the eyes when he proposed.

Wilfred rammed his foot down hard on the accelerator and the engine roared. He yanked the visor down; he was driving into the sun. He shoved the gear into third with a crank and saw the quivering needle of the speedometer leap to the right.

He thought he would stop here, before Saundersfoot, get out, walk, think. Saundersfoot would be jam-packed with day-trippers taking the sea air. But this cove was quiet. He threw on the brake and jolted to an abrupt stop.

Once he was on the sand and had removed his shoes and socks, Wilfred, deaf to the screaming gulls, blind to the shifting clouds and light, strode briskly. He must clear his head. He must pull himself together. His apprentice-master, Mr Auden, had instructed him to get married, saying, 'The moment you have a profitable funeral parlour you will need a wife. Don't wait. No life without a wife, Wilfred.' But Wilfred had made a mistake. But people made mistakes – made them all the time. He wiped the sweat from his temples. He must do something about it. Rectify it. Yes, just because a chap blundered once he shouldn't have to pay for it for the rest of his life – good God, no! He'd act, tell the girl, say he didn't want to get married, after all. By damn – he hardly knew her! She was nice, but then what girl wasn't? He'd spoken out of turn. There we are then, it could happen to any man, but it didn't need to *mean* anything. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

Wilfred stepped over a rock pool, hardly noticing it. At work he saw time and time again how each person had to take every

opportunity, to make the absolute most of things. And he certainly wouldn't want to waste his life because he'd once made a mistake.

The solid ripples of wet sand were uneven under the soles of his feet and slightly unbalanced him as he walked. He ran his hands through his hair. He had desired Grace but, well . . . a man could want all manner of women; it didn't follow he had to marry them, he thought, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. Wilfred felt himself strong in his decision, felt the solidity and the power in the muscles of his legs, felt his capacity to punch and hit out. He kicked a pebble. He would seize the day. He'd explain it to Grace straight away, that he'd made a mistake. She would understand; he felt certain. Yes, she would understand.

Wilfred stood on the imposing doorstep and tapped the brass door-knocker. He had lost all sense of time while pacing along the cove perturbed by his predicament, and it was now early evening. Grace's mother, Mrs Reece, a bony woman with a sharp nose, unlatched the front door.

'You must come in,' she said formally. 'You'll be wanting to speak to Doctor Reece.' Mrs Reece directed Wilfred into the hallway. Grace appeared at the top of the staircase, covered her mouth then rushed along the landing corridor and back into her bedroom. She was no longer wearing her yellow dress, Wilfred noticed.

'Doctor Reece is sitting in his surgery.' Mrs Reece said. She rapped on the door. 'Doctor Reece, Wilfred Price is here. He is requesting an audience with you,' she called shrilly through the closed door. Grace's father appeared and held out an arm, indicating that Wilfred

was to enter the front room where his patients visited him. It was a dark room with peacock-blue wallpaper and a couch to one side.

'Wilfred? Have a seat. Take this chair.'

Wilfred waited as Grace's tall father walked behind his desk and settled down heavily in a high-backed chair, Wilfred sitting down a second or two afterwards as good manners dictated. Dr Reece slowly moved his stethoscope off his blotting pad and placed it next to the table telephone.

'Now, Wilfred,' he began austerely, 'you have come about Grace.'

'Yes, sir,' said Wilfred, quickly pulling down the cuffs of his shirt.

'To ask for her hand in marriage,' Dr Reece stated. 'She has informed us of your proposal today.'

There were several mute moments. Dr Reece picked up the blue glass paperweight on his desk and turned it in his large hands. Wilfred watched. This was his opportunity. He would say what he'd practised saying on the beach earlier. He waited a moment longer. The grandfather clock ticked and marked time. He would just wait until Dr Reece finished knocking the papers on the desk to straighten them. And replace the paperweight. And then he'd tell him. Wilfred knew that in these moments, many things were held in the balance. Dr Reece patted the paperweight. What Wilfred earnestly felt, and thought would be simple to say, was proving more complex. He still didn't want to marry Grace, but the execution of his sentiments was more formidable than he had imagined.

Eventually Dr Reece looked up. 'There are', he boomed confidently, 'one or two matters on which you will understand I require clarity. It is your own funeral business, is it not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'May I be so bold as to ask the state of the business's affairs?'

'I get by, sir.'

'You don't go without? You earn sufficient living from the funeral trade?'

'I do, sir.' Then added, 'Just about.'

'No debts in the company? We wouldn't want that, would we now, Wilfred? Perhaps from the purchase of the hearse?'

'No, sir.'

'It isn't something one imagines one's daughter marrying into, mind. But you say that it's a solid business, which is important what with all this unemployment. And there will always be custom for an undertaker, mercifully less so now than during the Great War.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is it what you would call a family business?'

Wilfred nodded. He looked down at his shoes, scuffed by the sand, and took a deep breath, ready to speak.

'So any children,' Dr Reece continued, running his hand across his beard, 'well . . . that's getting ahead of ourselves. And you intend to do well by Grace?'

Wilfred hesitated. 'Sir . . .' He would speak out. 'Sir, I . . .' He moved forward in his chair and the waxed floorboards underneath him squeaked.

There was a knock at the door. Grace's brother Madoc poked his head round. 'I'm popping off to the picture palace in Tenby with Sidney to watch *The Thief of Baghdad.* See you later, Father. Evening, Wilfred. Oh, and I've mended the lock on the suitcase.'

'All right, Madoc,' replied Dr Reece, smiling leniently. 'Forgive me, Wilfred,' he continued, stroking his thick grey beard, 'these are most personal inquiries and are liable to stir one to great feeling. Because Grace is delicate, Wilfred, and she will need your solicitousness and patience, now and in the years to come. We need not dwell on it, only to say you must give Mrs Reece and I your absolute word of honour that you will be an upright husband to our daughter, Grace.'

'Yes,' Wilfred said quietly.

Grace lifted the roof of the hive then broke the honey seal. Her hands moved clumsily as she pulled out the first frame. She was wearing her brother's white apiary suit, and the gloves, certainly, were too large for her but Mother thought it highly imprudent to purchase a suit especially for Grace when Madoc's just about did. Nurse bees were crawling over the honeycomb busy caring for the larvae, feeding them nectar and pollen. Grace cautiously turned the cedar frame over – there was more honey than she expected. She stroked the bees away before uncapping the wax-topped hexagons and watched a golden line of honey as thin as a silk thread, flow lethargically into the waiting bowl.

Grace liked how beekeeping required dexterity, holding the frame in one hand, scraping the honey off with a knife with the other. Slowness was needed, so as not to alarm the bees and make them swarm, as was patience. Slowness and patience were lovely qualities though she struggled to have them herself. She felt not much could go wrong in a world that was slow and patient.

She liked being in the garden and spent many spring mornings tending to the white peonies, irises and foxgloves and lightly trimming the old, woody lavender. The lavender was the most important plant: bees flocked to it. Tomorrow she would filter the pale spring honey through muslin then pour it into sterilised jam-jars, labelling them: *Lavender honey, Narberth, Spring 1924.* She wasn't sure why Mother told her to date the jars, as honey didn't spoil: it would last an eternity, as far as anyone knew. The honey that was buried with Tutankhamun and had been unearthed two years ago was still fresh and edible. Later she would take the honey to Mrs Annie Evans at the Conduit Stores where it would be sold. She liked to keep herself busy, she didn't want time to think.

The hum of the hive made a soft sound. The bees were calm and drowsy now: that was the effect of the smoke. They hovered lazily or flew slowly. She wondered, when they were married, if Wilfred would like to do beekeeping with her. It was now almost a week since she had last seen him, six days since he proposed to her. She wondered what he was doing and what he was thinking; whether everything was all right. The relief she had felt at his proposal was beginning to fray. She had expected him to send a postcard or even use his telephone asking her to meet, but there had been nothing. She could use her father's surgery telephone to call him, however. She knew his number, had memorized it from his weekly advertisement in the *Narberth & Whitland Observer*:

Telephone number for all inquiries:
Narberth 103.

But her mother would be appalled at the thought of Grace approaching Wilfred. 'Too modern,' she would admonish. Mrs Reece would consider telephoning a gentleman, even if he were one's fiancé, extremely forward. And perhaps it was, thought Grace.

Nine days later, Grace still hadn't heard from Wilfred. She stood on Mrs Prout's doorstep, rang the brass doorbell and heard it trill sharply. Waiting on Mrs Prout's doorstep, Grace realized there was nothing obviously strange about the house: it was like many houses in Narberth – symmetrical with lime-washed walls a foot thick – but it had an eeriness to it that she could feel even when walking past. And the vicar would dislike her coming here, she was certain, because he had preached against it at the end of October, the Sunday before Hallowe'en; the Revd Waldo Williams MA knew his congregation.

'Necromancy is very wrong – evil. It is the work of the Devil, of Lucifer himself,' he announced, and he had read a lengthy passage – twenty-two verses – from the Book of Deuteronomy. He laid his gnarled hand on the open page of the Bible and intoned magisterially the words of Moses to his flock, '*"There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire or that useth divination, or an observer of time, or an enchanter or a witch. Or a charmer or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard or a necromancer".*' Then the Revd Waldo Williams MA, his voice rising to so great a pitch that his throat was strained, proclaimed, '*"FOR ALL THAT DO THESE ARE AN A-BOM-IN-ATION TOTHELORD".* Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy.' Then, just before Handel Evans struck up on the organ, the Reverend added in a breathy whisper, 'We should be like the fowls of the air or the lilies of the valley: they don't worry. No, no.' But the Revd Waldo Williams's words wouldn't stop Grace: she was fond of the Reverend but this was far more important than chapel. Grace *had* to know.

Mrs Hilda Prout threw open the door, looked Grace up and down and stated, 'You'll have come with a question.'

'Yes,' Grace said, taken aback by Mrs Prout's abruptness. 'There is something I'd like to ask, if you don't mind.'

'Well,' said Mrs Hilda Prout, 'every question has an answer. And you must cross my palm with money.'

There must have been a Mr Prout once, Grace thought, as she followed Mrs Prout up the wide staircase and past the mahogany grandmother clock. Mrs Prout entered a small parlour that was crowded with two glossy mahogany sideboards, a tweed-covered settee with white antimacassars, a glass cabinet and several gold-framed paintings on the wall. There were ornaments too, of china, silver and glass. The old woman went to the window where she opened a carved bible box, unwrapped a huge Welsh bible from a cream linen cloth then set it down on the occasional table in the centre of the room. The table tipped slightly under the weight of the book.

'Is it the key you'll be wanting?' she asked.

'Yes, Mrs Prout.'

'Then run to the back door and fetch it from the lock.'

Grace turned swiftly, weaved her way around the furniture and

ran down the stairs, coming back with a rusted iron key that was as large as her hands.

'This will be a question about birth?'

'No, Mrs Prout.'

'Death?'

'No, Mrs Prout.'

'Then it must be about love. So we will ask a prophet.' She split open the pages of the family Bible and tucked the key deep into the Book of Jeremiah.

'Why Jeremiah?' Grace dared to ask, still standing.

'Because the prophets were wild and love is wild, isn't it, Grace?'

Grace knew enough to agree.

'If you had come to ask me the day on which you'll die, I would have put the key in the Revelations of Saint John the Divine. Do you want to know the date of your death, Grace?'

'No. No, thank you, Mrs Prout,' Grace replied modestly, pulling the sleeve of her cardigan over her hand. 'I have a question about love, only love.'

Mrs Hilda Prout clamped the Bible shut with a flat thud.

'Step back,' she snapped. 'Ask the key your question.' Grace did as she was told. She spoke faintly but felt bold. She waited. Then slowly, almost achingly so, the key began to move, twisting itself over. Grace was transfixed. She chilled. It wasn't right, keys weren't supposed to turn on their own, not when no one was touching them. How could a key twist in a Bible by itself? It was unnatural. Now the key lay stock-still. It was over. But then it turned again.

'Yes,' Mrs Prout said, unsurprised as if she had known the answer all along. 'You'll marry him.'

'Yes?' Grace exclaimed. 'Yes, I knew it would be yes! Oh, thank you, Mrs Prout.' Her anxiety melted within her.

'Don't thank me; thank Jeremiah,' Mrs Prout stated flatly. 'And how is your brother Madoc? He had a bad war, didn't he?'

'He's well, thank you.'

'But he wanted to stay in the Army?'

'Yes.'

'Has he gone back yet?'

'Not yet. Before long. I'll go now, Mrs Prout.' Grace opened her purse and handed over a neatly folded shilling note. 'I can see myself out.'

'Aye, aye,' murmured Mrs Hilda Prout, 'and take this key. Lock the back door with it before you leave.'

Grace felt confident now she had spoken to Mrs Prout, now she knew what would happen.

Wilfred had to do something about Grace. He scratched the remains of a couple of dead flies from the window screen, lifted up the wipers and sloshed the glass with water before wiping it dry. The Super Ford hearse needed to be clean and ready for the chap he was burying soon: Mr James L. Davies of Dourigan House, Templeton. The newspaper was right; twenty-four was an early age. No wonder there was quite a gloom over Templeton. *Deep sympathy is evinced with the bereaved at their loss* it said in the obituary.

He knew he would be expected to call on Grace. Wilfred began

cleaning the top of the car, leaning over to reach the middle. He had proposed to her. He put the chamois in the bucket of cold water, swirled it about, wrung it out and went back to wiping under the wheel hub, where there was a lot of grit. Wilfred then wiped the mud from the numberplate. How was he going to break it off? He put some more wax on the chamois and gave the headlights a rub.

It was no good being this worried about the predicament with Grace; he couldn't go around worrying about it all the time – and now he had a rash on his forearms that itched at night. And his stomach was in knots. Wilfred opened the car door and stroked the dashboard – it was varnished burlwood – then wiped away some fingerprints. His Super Ford hearse was six years old so needed very careful handling. Wilfred tried to imagine what his apprentice-master, Mr Ogmore Auden, would have advised him to do about Grace. Certainly, when Wilfred was an apprentice, Mr Auden absolutely forbade what he called 'fancy business with the ladies', and consequently, Wilfred had had none during his apprenticeship. He had been very shy around girls; he knew next to nothing about them and now he was an undertaker, he still didn't know very much about ladies.

He put some more wax on the chamois and gave the headlights a rub. It was a beautiful motorcar, sleek as a cat, and age and careful polishing had given it even more grace than when it was completely new. The car was solid, square, dependable. It didn't break down, didn't get lost but took his passengers inevitably and elegantly to the place they least wanted to go: the freshly dug grave of a loved one.

At any rate, Wilfred decided, standing back and admiring the car, it was clean enough for a superior funeral. He was the proud owner – *very* proud owner – of a Super Ford hearse. With a motorized hearse, despite the cost, all that polishing and the occasional temperamental behaviour from the engine, Wilfred was on to a winner. He was fond of his motorcar. Could he say that he loved his Super Ford hearse? He wouldn't go so far as to say that. Could a man love a car? He put the silver key in the ignition. Did he love his car in the way he had thought, in that disastrous moment, that he loved Grace? *Did* he love Grace? he asked himself. No.

He looked up through the skylight in the garage roof and thought how the sky went on for ever. There *must* be an answer to every question out there, somewhere. Questions must have answers. His father found answers in the graves and in the stars, by digging into the dark earth and by looking up into the lights in the heavens. And then Wilfred realized, looking at the gleaming metal and glass, that his father might have an answer.

'Da?' Wilfred called, putting his head around the kitchen door. His father often sat peacefully at the small kitchen table, drinking tea from his blue teacup, but now the cup was standing empty on the table. It was really Wilfred's cup but his father had appropriated it. The cup had been a present from Auntie Blodwen to Wilfred: she'd gone to Tenby for the day on her honeymoon and brought it back for him. Printed on it in red ink was a rhyme that Wilfred knew by heart:

However far we wander
Wherever we may roam,

Our thoughts are always turning
To those we love at home!

TENBY

If his father wasn't in the kitchen having his Typhoo tea and browsing through the *Narberth & Whitland Observer* then Wilfred knew exactly where to find him. He marched out of the back gate, turned left and made the short walk along Church Street, past James Williams's bottling factory to St Andrew's Church. As he walked along he thought about his father – a good man who lived a simple life – and thought how a life well lived resonated peacefully. His da dug graves when he was required to, then in the day walked the countryside around Narberth picking mushrooms, fat hen, parsley and berries, or came here . . . Wilfred was right. There, sitting on the earth, his knees apart, was his father close by his mam's gravestone.

As Wilfred trudged over the lumpy grass with its coffin-shaped hummocks and the indents where other centuries-old boxes had collapsed, he could see that his father was talking – he knew – to his mam. His father came here almost every day and the grass where he sat was constantly flattened. When he was younger Wilfred had thought his father was foolish for talking to someone who was dead, that it was a waste of time spending an afternoon in the graveyard of St Andrew's, especially when it was sunny. But then, what was that verse in the Scriptures? *For love is stronger than death.*

Wilfred saw his father reach out and put his arm around his mam's humble gravestone and lean his head briefly against it. Is it foolish, Wilfred thought to himself, to cuddle a cold slab of white

marble and pretend it is a person? He waved at his father and his father began to slowly, almost arthritically, get up to greet him.

'What are you doing up here then, boy?'

'I could ask the same of you, Da!' Wilfred joined his father and they sat and rested peacefully, the three of them: Wilfred, his father and his mother.

The awkwardness of unsaid words settled between them. Wilfred wanted to tell his father all about Grace; say: 'I asked Doctor Reece's daughter to marry me. I proposed. But I didn't fall in love, I don't love her and I don't want to marry her. What shall I do? I don't know what to do.' He yearned to admit his vulnerability and uncertainty to his da, but he and his da didn't talk about private matters so Wilfred said nothing. But it was as if his father had heard him.

'There we are then, Wilfred, my son,' he said. 'There we are then.' And with that he placed his weathered hand on the soft earth in which his wife was laid, and Wilfred understood.

Ten days later, Wilfred was walking home when he jolted involuntarily. There was Grace, right in front of him, plain as day, a real, solid person, standing on the pavement in the High Street by the Angel public house. She was holding a wicker basket with jars of honey in it. For a split second he didn't know what to do. Then he froze his face – put on his 'funeral face' as he called it, very serious, very formal – 'as if you've never laughed or used the WC in your life,' was how Mr Auden described it. Occasionally Wilfred used his funeral face when he wasn't at a funeral. He straightened his necktie and began buttoning up his waistcoat.

'Wilfred? Where have you been?' Grace asked plaintively.

Wilfred was at a loss. Grace . . . the proposal. His stomach turned. He felt a sense of dread. Suddenly it was easy to look serious.

'I've . . . I've been busy, Grace, with a funeral. Young man over Loveston way, died of flu.'

Grace was watching him intently. Grace always seemed to be watching intently. She had been watching like that at the picnic when he asked her to . . . He didn't like how Grace looked at him, didn't like the way she asked where he'd been. He didn't like it at all; and then with a flush of realization – he didn't like *her* at all!

'Grace, I don't want to marry you.' There! He'd said it. He'd said he didn't want to marry her. It was said. It was over now. He would never have to see her again.

Grace was speechless.

'Pardon, Wilfred?' she said weakly.

Wilfred knew he meant it. He would say it again with resolution – properly and slowly.

'Grace, it is not,' – how shall I put this, he thought – 'I don't, I think it's best, I think, if we are no longer engaged.'

'Pardon?' The basket was hanging limply in her hand. A couple in tennis whites holding racquets strolled up to them; they wanted to go into the Angel Inn but Grace and Wilfred were standing in front of the doorway.

'Sorry,' said Wilfred, and he stepped aside, aware the couple were waiting.

'Thank you,' said the woman pleasantly.

'Better get in before it starts to rain,' the man added cheerfully, swinging his racquet and looking up at the gathering clouds, adding, 'I expect Wimbledon's been rained off.'

'Yes,' said Wilfred, trying to sound perky. Grace was still blocking the entrance, dumbstruck and unaware of the tennis players waiting for her to move.

'Excuse me, miss,' the man said.

'But, Wilfred, we are supposed to get married.'

Wilfred noticed the couple looking on with interest, especially the chap: the moment they'd ordered their drinks they'd be talking about the to-do outside the Angel.

'Please could you move so these people can get in?' he said to Grace, but she stood there, stock-still. He took her arm and tried to move her to one side of the pub's door as the first fat drops of rain began to splatter. She looked hurt, Wilfred could see.

'Grace, come to one side,' he said more gently, guiding her. Grace's eyes had welled up and her face whitened.

'But Wilfred . . .' she said, blinking, two tears falling out of her eyes. 'But Wilfred . . .'

She was looking up at him with her watery blue eyes and had said his name as if it was an answer. She didn't seem to realize she was crying. Wilfred knew he had to be brutal – swift and savage – in the way one had to be when one breaks an injured bird's neck, smacking its small head down hard on a stone wall. He would say it again, here in the High Street, in front of the couple who wanted to go into the Angel, as it was beginning to rain. He spoke clearly and confidently.

'Grace, I am not going to marry you.' Somewhere inside himself Wilfred heard a snap, like the fine neck of a small bird being broken.

Grace stood facing the counter, her back to a wall of shelves lined with tins and with sweet jars.

'Next time ring the bell – I didn't know you were here!' exclaimed Mrs Annie Evans. 'Quiet as a mouse, you are. And you're wet.'

'Oh, yes,' said Grace, noticing the raindrops on her bare, goose-pimpled arms.

'There's rain we've been having now just. I was on the horse and trap this morning, delivering grocery to the farms in Lampeter Velfrey and got drenched. Oh, it never stops.'

Grace smiled automatically.

'Have you brought the honey? Your mother told me you would.' Mrs Annie Evans shuffled behind the high counter in the middle of her small grocery shop.

'Yes,' replied Grace, though her voice sounded feeble to her, almost faint. She lifted the heavy basket on to the counter.

'Well, I can't keep myself from saying it. Your mother called three days ago – she bought Glitto polish and Nippy scouring powder – and told me *all* about you and Wilfred Price. Heck, you must be tickled pink.'

Grace smiled. She placed the glass jars one by one on to the wooden counter.

'It'll be the summer wedding, won't it? Nothing nicer than a summer wedding.'

'Well . . .' mumbled Grace. The air in the shop was cloying and

she was aware of the slightly nauseous smell of camphor and sweetly ripe apples.

'It'll be the talk of the town. Will Madoc be able to get leave from the Army – he'll be an usher, won't he?'

Grace looked down at her trembling hands.

'And only last week I saw a pattern for a *beauteous* veil in *Fancy Needlework Illustrated*. It would go nicely with your fair hair. It will be your mother embroidering the veil, won't it, now?'

'I should think so.'

'She's nifty with the needle, your mam.'

Grace noticed her fingers trembling.

'By damn, it will be difficult for Wilfred to concentrate on funerals with a wedding on his mind.'

'Yes,' Grace murmured. She coloured.

'Oh, you're the image of the blushing bride!' said Mrs Evans, unscrewing the lid on one of the jars and dipping her little finger in it. 'Delicious. That's three jars at a shilling each; I'll be owing you three shillings now. And I'll take it off your ma's grocery bill as usual, shall I, Grace?'

'Yes, Mrs Evans.'

'Well, mind you keep providing Conduit Stores with honey, marriage or no marriage. There's a thing now: Grace Reece, Doctor Reece's only daughter, getting married.'

Grace felt a surge of anxiety.

Later that afternoon, back in his workshop, Wilfred's relief was palpable. It was as if his body had shrunk with the reprieve; even

his neck seemed smaller and his shirt collar looser now all the tension had left him. It was easy again, since he had refused Grace, to smooth a plank; he was more able to hold the tote and the handle to plane the plank along the grain. He used his strong nail to clean some sawdust stuck to the blade. When he was engaged to Grace, he couldn't plane the wood well; he stuttered with the weighty cast-iron tool and sometimes nicked the plank. During the engagement, he couldn't go with the grain in his carpentry and he couldn't go with the grain in his life. Wilfred thought how these sayings – metaphors, he thought they might be called, he would check that in his red dictionary – were often true. But Grace was gone now. And he wouldn't need to see her ever again.

He cleared the sawdust from the beech he was shaping into a casket lid. He felt remorse. She was hurt. He, Wilfred, had hurt her feelings; she'd cried, and he regretted that. He hadn't wanted to upset her in the same way that he hadn't wanted to marry her. Now there was her father to contend with. Her father might be cross. Or he might not make it his business. And there would be gossip, though he wasn't sure whom Grace had told; Wilfred had told no one. But there would still be gossip. He would be teased at the Rugby Club and talked about in the tearooms. To be born in Narberth was to be gossiped about. He would feel ashamed but he would survive it.

He looked up at the glass roof of the workshop: the sawdust was shimmying in the spring sunlight that had come after the rain shower, and he breathed in the aroma of glue and freshly sawn wood. He had made a misjudgement, he knew, in asking Grace to

marry him. But the bigger mistake, he told himself, would have been to marry her. They both would have been unhappy then. For ever.

Wilfred dusted the plane with a piece of lint, which he took from his dungaree pocket, and looked for some fine sandpaper because the edges of the coffin lid needed smoothing. Imagine being unhappily married for eternity. He shuddered at the thought. It must be like . . . well, what would it be like? He remembered the sense of dismay he'd had when he was a schoolboy at Narberth Church School and was given hours of homework. He began sanding the bevelled edges of the lid. Being unhappily married might feel a lot like the dread of doing hours of prep – mathematics prep – algebra and logarithms, inescapable problems with no obvious answer, no solution he could ever find, every day for the rest of his life.

He folded the sandpaper in half and brushed the dust from his hands. He'd been impulsive before, there was that time he punched boss-eyed Sidney Thomas during a game of hidihop on the castle field and given him a bloody nose because he'd been chanting, 'Wilfred Price got no mam! Wilfred Price got no mam!' His impetuousness, he thought, was something to do with being an undertaker and spending so much time around death, because death was absolutely certain and being a bit rash in life balanced that certainty a little.

He remembered too, though, how womanly Grace had looked in the yellow dress she had worn to that picnic. It was a lovely dress. She was an attractive woman. And he truly hadn't wanted

to hurt her. But if Wilfred had learned anything through all this, it was not to be impulsive. Beautiful women and lovely dresses: it wasn't enough.

Grace yanked the head off a lavender flower and rubbed it between her fingers, crushing the small, lilac petals to release their scent. She held her fingertips to her nose, inhaling the soothing aroma of lavender oil. Lavender oil healed burned skin. But it wasn't Grace's fair skin that was burning – the spring sun was too weak for that. It was inside her that a fire was beginning to rage, threatening to scour her out and leave sooty ashes.

Grace shifted in the deckchair – why were these things so uncomfortable to sit in? She was slumped, her spine curved and her back aching. Splices of the conversation with Wilfred kept flashing into her mind.

'Wilfred? Where have you been?' It had come out all wrong, Grace had realized a split second after she had said it. Then Wilfred's consoling of her, *'Please could you move so these people can get in?'* and the sure strength of his touch on her arm. The memories were so full of heat and they caused her to blush violently with shame. That couple had overheard! She twisted in the deckchair and turned the other way, wiping her eyes: her new Elizabeth Arden mascara that was supposed to be waterproof rubbed off on to her hand. And she'd cried! Wilfred had seen her actually cry; cry because she'd cared, because she liked him, had all her hopes pinned on him. And she didn't want to care. So she imagined herself once again, standing outside the Angel, this time answering back. 'Really, Wilfred? It is

such a relief you said it. Actually, I was going to say the same to you. It would have been disastrous!' and laughing elegantly, reaching up to her hair and smoothing it behind her ears. Then she imagined commenting on the weather before dashing into the Star Supply Stores with Wilfred looking after her wistfully, Wilfred the hurt one.

Grace tried to reconfigure the memory so she had some dignity, so Wilfred would see her as the light, carefree woman she wished to seem: casual, informal, unburdened. She wanted to care for the marriage as little as he cared for it.

A bee landed on the frame of the deckchair; it appeared unsure which way the flowers and the nectar were so it hovered lazily, as lost and lacking in direction as she was. The deckchair irritated Grace – the ticking was scratchy – and the lackadaisical bee irritated her. Perhaps she could take the bee, grab it in the palm of her hand, encase it and squash it while it buzzed frantically and abruptly stung her. It would be easy to crush. She, Grace, could also crush, kill and cause death. Perhaps the violence of the bee's panic would ignite the fire of feelings she knew she was holding deep inside her.

Grace twisted, edging her hand near the resting bee. She could just cup her hand over it . . . but the bee would sting her and she might jump and yelp and cry and rage, might ultimately erupt with everything pent up within her. She would issue such an almighty scream that she – and Narberth – would explode ferociously into an ever-expanding nothingness. She doubted that Narberth, even the world itself, could contain the rage and pain and the shame

that she felt sitting here in the deckchair in the back garden. The honeybee, still resting on the beech frame, buzzed obliviously. She watched it do a quiet two-step on the wood.

But perhaps, Grace thought, Wilfred loved her really. And it was all a mistake. At that thought, her heart soared and it seemed as if the sun suddenly burst out from behind the clouds and illuminated the day. But Wilfred had meant it. He had *repeated* it. He said he didn't want to marry her not once, but twice, maybe three times when hearing it just once made her feel hope itself was lost. She closed her eyes while her shame attacked her and humiliation seeped out of her skin. Why didn't Wilfred want to marry her? She needed to know. Although the why was no longer as burning a question as the one that now preoccupied her: was her monthly period late?