

## CHAPTER TWO

### Christmas

from *The Claude Glass* by Tom Bullough

Near the end of the winter term, Mr Gwynne, the new Infants schoolteacher, arranged a stargazing expedition on the hill beyond Offa's Bank. Everyone in the class was invited, but in the end only three children came: Robin, Jessica, the doctor's daughter, and Nigel, whose parents had moved to the village from Cardiff a couple of years earlier. Other parents said that they had quite enough to do already, what with the stock to feed and the nativity play coming up, and a couple of them muttered that old Mrs Crabbit had never had these crackpot ideas.

Mr Gwynne had moved to the village only that summer. He was tall and slim, with dark floppy hair that spilt onto his shoulders and little round glasses that he would turn in his hands when he was thinking. All the girls in the Juniors wished that he was teaching them instead. His family, they soon discovered, came from a town in North Wales, near a slate quarry where his father and his brother still worked. He had left to go to university in London and had lived there for several years, but his voice was still unmistakably Snowdonian – deep, soft and rolling. Indeed, he was the first person in the village actually to have spoken Welsh in over a century.

"Night eyes," Mr Gwynne explained as he turned off the headlights, parking his car in a gateway on the left-hand side of the lane. "The sooner we get used to it, the better. Now, you're all going to be warm enough, are you? It can get a bit nippy on these clear nights."

Robin, Nigel and Jessica climbed carefully out onto the muddy verge, looking up at the sky, which for once was open in every direction – without a hill, a cloud or even a tree to interrupt it. Ahead of them, past the sign that welcomed you into England, the dark, flexing hills fell away beneath the thin moon, until there was only a plain where patches of orange smeared the air on the distant horizon.

"Okay," said Mr Gwynne. "Who can see Orion?"

"I can!" said Nigel. "Up there! Look!"

"And the Milky Way!" said Jessica, not to be outdone.

“Caer Gwydion,” said Mr Gwynne. “That’s what they call the Milky Way in Welsh mythology. I don’t know if any of you remember, but Gwydion was a famous magician, the son of Dôn...”

“He turned trees into soldiers,” said Robin.

“Just so,” said Mr Gwynne, sounding pleased. “I’m glad you were listening, Robin. And he was the brother of Arianhod, whom he chased all along the Milky Way!”

The four of them climbed the gate into the nearest field and walked a few paces until the wall beside the road had shrunk back into the ground. They stood in a line, their backs to the lights and the complications of England, watching as the Milky Way fed itself into the Welsh hilltops. Robin was wearing gloves, a jumper and a thick coat, but already he was beginning to feel the cold and it was some moments before he could steady his arms against his chest and focus his binoculars – one eye after the other, as Adam had shown him.

“You’re cold, Robin,” said Mr Gwynne. “Did you not bring a scarf?”

“I think I left it in your car,” Robin admitted.

Mr Gwynne sighed and set off back towards the lane, his clean wellies crunching on the frozen grass.

“Anyone else forgotten anything?” he called over his shoulder.

“It’s not actually mine,” Robin called back, by way of a defence. “It’s Tara’s... She wanted me to bring it.”

The Milky Way ran straight above their heads, echoing the border from the faint glow of Abberton over Offa’s Bank to the rich black emptiness of the Cefns, and Robin soon began to follow it – past the arching moon, past stars that he knew, like Cygnus, the Pleiades, Castor and Pollux – until he came to a particularly bright star which was sitting on the opposite horizon.

“Is that the Dog Star?” he asked, when he heard Mr Gwynne climbing back over the clattering gate.

He lowered his binoculars and glanced towards him. It was odd but, faint through the darkness, he could have sworn that he saw his teacher press Tara’s scarf to his face.

“Whereabouts?” asked Mr Gwynne, enthusiastically.

“Over there,” said Robin. He waited until he was a bit closer, and then pointed to the north.

“Yeah,” said Mr Gwynne. “Sirius. How on earth did you wind up there, Robin?”

“I followed Caer Gwydion,” said Robin.

“Of course.” Mr Gwynne smiled and handed him the scarf, then he pointed out Sirius to the others. “And do you know, Jessica, why Sirius is so bright?”

Jessica shook her head.

“Well,” said Mr Gwynne, and his voice began to rise and fall, as it always did when he was onto a subject that interested him. “For one thing it’s very, very big. Okay? It’s twice as massive as the Sun. And, for another, it’s really quite nearby. It’s only about eight and a half light years away.”

“What’s the most furthest star?” asked Jessica.

“Well,” said Mr Gwynne. “The furthest stars that any-one knows about are fifteen thousand million light years away! That’s way beyond anything we could see right now, I’m afraid, but... Let’s see. Can you all find Polaris?”

“I can!” said Nigel.

“Good, Nigel.” Mr Gwynne followed his finger. “That’s it. Dead straight above you. Well, if you look from Polaris across to the nearest part of the Milky Way, and you keep going straight, then you’ll come to a star which looks a bit smudged...”

“Is it a planet?” asked Robin.

“No. It’s a galaxy called Andromeda. It might look a bit small to us, but it is actually made up of hundreds of billions of stars!”

Robin craned backwards, the binoculars clamped to his eyes, trying not to shiver and miss the galaxy, and, while Mr Gwynne was explaining again how to find it, he suddenly came across a star that resembled a bright little cloud.

“That light,” said Mr Gwynne, quietly, a few moments later. “That light you’re looking at now set out towards us more than two million years ago! Two million years ago! That’s long before there were any human beings. Two million years ago, there were still woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers. There were giant rivers of ice running all the way from here to the North Pole... Just think, you’re looking at something from all those years ago! You’re actually looking back in time!”

There were already several cars in the mangled snow of the car park when Robin, Tara and Martin arrived at the village hall for the nativity play. The village hall was quite a new building, with a shingled roof and walls of overlapping planks which shook whenever somebody slammed a door. Climbing to the ground, Robin could just make out the ranks of metal chairs through the ice-coated windows, the orange heaters hanging from the beams and the various

mothers struggling with pieces of set and exotic-looking headgear, stumbling on their unfamiliar heels.

Tara draped Robin's costume carefully over her arm and, taking Martin's hand, led the way towards the big glass doors, her hips swaying and the flares of her trousers swinging round her ankles. Unlike most of the other mothers, Tara always managed to look graceful, whatever she wore. Other mothers would look uncomfortable in their best clothes – like they would have been far happier in overalls and wellies – but heels and sewn-on sequins would always make Tara look more like herself than ever, the same way that make-up would pronounce her eyes and lips.

Inside, a big empty space led away to the stage, where lights were turning green and yellow, blue, red and orange. Pretty much everyone in the village helped out with the school play – mothers and aunts made costumes, fathers and uncles built bulky pieces of set – and the place was swarming with old women carrying Welsh cakes, boys shouting and driving model cars along the walls, and, through the door of the canteen, Robin could see other children too, changing into their costumes among tea urns, cookers and cupboards, while their mothers made last-minute refinements with safety pins, despairing that they would ever get everything done in time.

“Hiya, Tara!” said Mary Cwmithel, who was crossing the stage beneath a donkey costume. “Alright, boys? Dad not with you?”

“Oh, you know Adam, Mary.” Tara smiled and rolled her eyes. “Always something to get finished up first!”

Robin saw Mr Gwynne almost as soon as they arrived in the canteen – sitting on a bench near the back of the room, surrounded by groups of grown-ups and children, his knees beneath a glittering backdrop, which he seemed to be trying to stitch together.

“Noswaith ddu, Mr Gwynne!” said Robin, keenly. “My costume's got a galaxy on it!”

“Excellent, Robin!” Mr Gwynne removed his reading glasses. “And how are your lines getting on?”

“I know Robin's lines!” said Martin.

“I bet you do, Martin!” said Mr Gwynne, shuffling aside to make room on the bench.

Tara hung up her coat and sat down.

“God, Huw,” she said, inspecting the backdrop. “What on earth happened to this?”

“Ah ...”he laughed, and spread the material across her knees as well. “There’s been unrest among the angels.”

Robin took his costume carefully from its bin–liner, murmuring his lines nervously beneath his breath. The costume was a rich, deep scarlet – covered in planets and stars, comets and meteors – and it flowed most impressively behind him when he walked. These were the robes of the one Wise Man of the West: an ancient Welsh astronomer who had travelled to the Holy Land along the Milky Way, searching for clearer skies, carrying an early telescope and working on the phenomenon of moving stars.

There was only one Wise Man of the West because there were only twenty children in the whole school, and once you had accounted for Mary and Joseph, Herod, the innkeeper, angels, shepherds, cattle, sheep, both ends of the donkey and Three Wise Men of the east, there weren’t a lot of them left. In the Infants’ class there was only one other child of Robin’s age, Nigel, but he was a whole head taller, and tended to associate with the big boys in the Juniors as much as possible. Still, the two of them did share a passion for astronomy, and they would sit together during lessons, finding out from their charts what time Venus was rising, or building a giant spaceship out of cardboard and tinfoil.

“Did you see The A–Team last night?” Nigel asked Robin, as his mother made adjustments to his crown. “When Murdock jumped his car through the middle of that lorry!”

“Yeah! I loved that bit!” Robin lied. He was rarely, if ever, allowed to watch television. “It was like, kapow!” He threw up his hands and pretended to fly backwards through the air.

“And then when it exploded!” said Nigel.

Robin glanced across the room, to check that his mother wasn’t listening. But Tara had taken over work on the backdrop – deep in conversation with Mr Gwynne, their heads close together – and, even though he watched them both for several moments, resplendent in his costume, his lines churning and mingling in his head, neither of them looked back at him once.

Christmas Day was Tara’s birthday – as it had once been the birthday of Isaac Newton and Dorothy Wordsworth. It had snowed for most of the previous week and on Christmas eve, Adam had been forced to use the new truck to get down the track to the main road, so that they could go and buy her presents in Abberton. Robin and Martin had stood waiting in the open field at the bottom of the track’s initial slope, wrapped in duffel coats and woolly hats, their gloves

joined across the shoulders by pieces of string. The drifts between the hedges had been so high that the truck would vanish for seconds at a time with only the roar of its five-litre engine and the snow exploding behind it to reveal that it was in there at all.

After lunch – segregated as ever between meat and Tara’s vegan alternative – they presented Tara with hand-kerchiefs and a new woolly hat, then the four of them went out to the big shed that Adam had built off the edge of the old hay barns. The valley was temporarily calm, the snow settled, and the sky low and cheerless. From the barn, you could look right down into the village – its clusters of tiny stone houses divided up by white fields, the smoke rising straight from their chimneys – the bare English hills beyond them, and the Stone House on the horizon where, so Mr Gwynne said, the famous poet William Wordsworth had once been caught by a thunder-storm and been forced to spend the night.

Beside the shed door, the top of a giant rock protruded from the snowy ground – the visible part as long as the kitchen table. While the shed was being built, they had attempted to unearth it, dug down and around it until there was an immense pit into which the rock went down and down. It was one of Robin’s earliest memories. The sides of the rock had been covered in tiny scratches, which Adam had explained were made by glaciers during the Ice Age, hundreds of thousands of years ago. But somewhere along the line Robin had begun to confuse it with a meteorite, and convinced himself that the scratches had in fact been caused by tiny meteors on its way through the asteroid belt, heading inexorably for their farm.

Just inside the door, there was a toboggan leaning against the wall, sleek and glistening with linseed oil. It had a length of rope attached in a loop to its front, and its runners were steam-curved, coated with metal and wax.

“Wow!” said Robin.

“Wow!” Martin echoed, reaching to touch it.

Tara, Robin and Martin took their seats on the sledge in order of size, and Adam attached the rope to the back of the Fordson Major tractor, warming his bare hands briefly on the chimney before he climbed onto the fertiliser sacks that cushioned the rusting seat. They slid slowly out of the yard, around the house and down the hill into their small offshoot of the valley, the dogs trotting happily in the ruts behind them.

The farm was a bowl shape set back into the larger hillside: steep fields gathered around a bog which became a sequence of ponds, surrounded by woodland, each with a small waterfall at its lower end when the water was high

enough. They lurched across the frozen fields, trailed by sheep, and began to climb the slope of Cold Winter on the other side, Adam lifting the loader to put weight back onto the drive wheels.

He stopped at the boundary with Werndunvan – the top of the longest uninterrupted slope on the farm, where an audience of sheep had converged noisily to meet them. For the most part, the boundary fence ran along the crest of the hill, although one of Werndunvan’s fields did spill over onto their side – cut in half by an old track lined with hawthorns, the link between the two farms – meeting their own land only a hundred yards from the back of the house, where the ruins of a tiny cottage were pressed against the hedgerow.

“No! ” Tara insisted, shaking her head and laughing. “Birthday privilege! Nothing is going to get me sliding down that hill today... I’m thirty-one, for God’s sake! I’m much too old! ”

“Ta-ra! ” Robin and Martin chorused, but she leant obdurately back against a fence post, and looked away at Offa’s Bank as if she’d suddenly seen something there of terrific importance.

“Okay, ” said Adam. He sat down on the toboggan behind the boys and locked his arms round their shoulders, his breath warm and rich-smelling, making clouds between them. “Here’s what you do, okay? If you want to go left, then you dig in your left boot, and if you want to go right, then you dig in your right boot... Got it?”

The snow flew up so fast that Robin could barely see. The dogs were barking and spinning through the snow beside them. The world was passing at a horrendous speed, the hedge at the bottom accelerating towards them. For a moment he remembered asteroids, the excitement rising in a wave in his chest till he thought that they might burn up. Then they hit a lump of some kind and all three of them were rolling over together, whooping and screaming, the dogs hovering beside them now, unsure if this was a game or a terrible accident.

Face-down in the snow, Robin was laughing so hard he could scarcely breathe. Once or twice he tried to roll over, but he only managed to move again when he heard Adam cackling and a snowball burst on the back of his head. At once, he scrambled back to his feet and launched himself towards him, wrapping his arms round his waist while Martin grabbed one of his legs, trying to sweep it out from underneath him. Adam stumbled, waving his arms as if they really were going to be able to knock him over, but then he swept them squirming onto his shoulder and set off back towards the toboggan.

“Come on!” he said. “Let’s have another go!”

“Yeah! ” said Robin.

“Another go!” said Martin.

He dropped them back in a heap on the toboggan and, frowning slightly at the sound of a tractor, wrapped the string round his hand.

The sound of the tractor grew steadily as Adam dragged the two boys back up the hill, and, by the time they reached the top, there was a tatty red Massey Ferguson on the far side of the fence, all four of the Werndunvan dogs sniffing through the wire at the two sleeker dogs from Penllan, while the sheep of both farms watched from a wary distance. Philip Tolland was pacing out a circle in his field, his eyes pinned to the ground, muttering some-thing incomprehensible to Tara.

“Adam,” he nodded, pausing and looking up.

“Philip,” said Adam, dropping the string of the toboggan, adopting the Radnorshire slur that he always used with other farmers.

Philip nodded a few times, and adjusted his cap. He wore the same clothes, irrespective of the season – a threadbare jacket over a brown sleeveless jumper, grubby black braces holding up his trousers – and his smell was noxious even at several paces.

“What you got there, boys? ” he asked.

“It’s a toboggan, ” Robin murmured, skidding his boot in the snow. “Adam made it for us.”

“Beauty, innee!” said Philip.

Behind one of the tyres of the Massey Ferguson, Robin noticed a slight movement: a small dirty face peered out and vanished again, eyes gaping, with a flat cap, a worn old jacket with the sleeves cut short, coming down nearly as far as his knees.

“Hello, Andrew!” said Tara.

“Tara?” said Martin, rubbing his head against her thigh. “Tara, I want another go on the ’boggan!”

“Hang on a minute... ” Tara’s accent never changed a bit, under any circumstances. “Aren’t you going to say Happy Christmas to Philip and Andrew?”

“Happy Christmas, Philip!” said Martin, still half-concealed behind her. “Happy Christmas, Andrew!”

“Happy Christmas!” said Robin a moment later, staring at the pair of enormous boots beneath the tractor.

“And you will send my best to Dora from us, won’t you, Philip?” said Tara.

“Right you are,” said Philip.

“Please, Tara!” said Martin.

“Well, why not, then?” she agreed, crouching behind Robin and Martin as they climbed back into their places, looping the string over their heads. “So long as we miss that molehill!”

“How old is Andrew?” asked Robin that evening, once their mother had finished reading to them.

He and Martin were sitting on the arms of an arm-chair, to either side of her, the hoods pulled up on their green and red dressing-gowns. The living-room was lighter than the drawing-room, with two sets of windows instead of one, fragrant plants on the windowsills, toys, tapes, a telephone and other signs of livingness scattered about the place. The book that Tara had been reading from lay open on her lap – an illustration showed a thin, bedraggled knight in rusty armour clambering from a ditch with his broken lance in one hand.

“Andrew must be almost seven,” she said, after a moment’s thought. “He’s just a few months younger than you, Robin.”

“I’m four,” protested Martin.

“You’re an idiot,” said Robin.

“No, I’m not!”

Unusually, Tara paid no attention to their squabbling, stroking her chin with her finger, and instead she seemed to be inspecting the wall across the room. In the hall, Adam was picking out a few chords on the piano – a song by John Lennon, who had recently died – and the smell of his pipe tobacco wafted through the intervening door.

“Why doesn’t Andrew go to school, then?” asked Robin.

“Why don’t I go to school?” said Martin. “It’s not fair!”

“You will go to school soon, Mart.” Tara put a hand on his hair. “And Andrew ought to go to school. I’m sure that he’ll go there soon enough.”

There was a series of high, rippling notes on the piano, then the clack of the lid, and a moment later Adam’s head appeared around the doorframe, the pipe in his mouth and his hair standing upright at the front.

“Good story?” he asked.

“There was a knight,” said Martin. “And he was riding on his horse, and he went riding right into a branch of a tree and he fell off and he landed in the ditch!” “Was he okay?” asked Adam, with concern.

“Yes,” said Robin. “But his armour was all bent and then his horse went riding off without him!”

“Well!” said Adam, lifting his eyebrows. “And do you think it’s your bedtime now, or do you think we ought to go and watch the telly for a few minutes?”

Robin stared at him. Then he turned to Tara to check that this wasn’t some kind of joke.

“Oh, go on, then,” she said, closing the book. “Seeing as it’s Christmas. But only for a bit. Then you are both coming upstairs for a bath.”

The two boys scurried through the hall into the drawing room and Robin jumped over the back of the sofa, rolling on top of the cushions. Going to the corner, Adam unlocked the cupboard and fiddled with the dial on the television until the air was filled with strange, high noises.

A series of white dots moved across the black-and-white screen, then a tall dark man in a suit and a bowler hat came striding into a circle, turned and fired a gun straight towards them. A moment later, there were the shapes of dancing women, rising strings and the twang of an electric guitar, and, curled next to Adam, who for once smelt of whisky and tobacco instead of sheep, Robin watched almost without breathing – jumping when a man got shot in the back, and when a car came screeching from a shadowy side-street and carried the murderers away.

Across the room, Tara sat in the armchair near the woodburner, writing in her diary, as she did every night. From time to time, she looked over at the three of them – Adam jiggling his legs when things got exciting, Martin perched on his lap, Robin goggling from the cushions and the folds of his dressing-gown – and she watched for a few moments before she returned her attention to the page.

Later, when Tara had dozed off, the tall dark man was in a jungle full of waterfalls with a beautiful blonde woman in a white bikini, and when the woman declared that there was a real, fire-breathing dragon nearby Robin thought that nothing in the world could have got any better. He loved dragons, and especially the battling red and white dragons that Mr Gwynne had told them about at school, that King Lludd had captured by digging a hole in the precise centre of Britain and lowering in a cauldron of mead to make them drowsy.

King Lludd had moved them to Snowdonia, of course, where he’d buried them in a kistvaen, and where, five hundred years later, the evil King Vortigern had tried to build a tower, which invariably fell down during the night. It was the boy Merlin who had revealed the truth, digging beneath the tower to uncover the dragons who, by night, were fighting each other still: the cowardly white dragon of the Saxon invaders and the brave red dragon of the Celts.

Beneath the kitchen table at Werndunvan, Andrew and Meg were playing with a ball that had materialised from somewhere earlier that evening: red, pink and white, carved with the smiling face of an old man with a beard. The two of them fought for it, wrestling and feigning anger, occasionally darting out across the floor to catch it before they darted back behind the blue plastic curtains of the tablecloth, where you could pretty well believe that you were invisible, where no one else could possibly ever know that you were there.

Outside of the tablecloth, a couple of the dogs were dozing among the scattered chairs, gnawed bones and bits of shredded newspaper that covered the floor – as near to the Rayburn as possible without getting under Dora’s unpredictable feet. As usual, she was in the coveted spot, rocking gently over the bar, the front of her black dress lifted slightly by her stomach, her thin dark hair tangled with grey, cut vaguely to her shoulders. Four or five plumes of steam were rising around her. The droplets that formed on the ceiling converged into drops, which hung more and more heavily until they splashed back down to the floor in splotches of cleanliness.

Outside of the kitchen, the night was clear and far below zero. The stars seemed hardly higher than the chimneys, shining from the fat waves of snow spread across the hills, while the smudges of woodland looked more like holes in the earth than anything substantial. Only the one window of the house was alight – small, dirty and all but buried in the hillside. The front gate seemed open in welcome, not because its hinges were snapped and the earth and grass had moulded themselves around its lower bars. A foot of snow hid the broken slates and the corrugated iron that clung to the roof. The glass in the windows shone in independent constellations.

With a rush of freezing air, Philip reappeared with Vaughn in the kitchen door, kicking off the snow on the doorstep and his boots on the lino, padding across the floor in poorly darned socks till he reached the shelf where he kept his GL cider. Taking one of the brown litre bottles and the glass that he always used, he sat down at the table, pushed his feet towards the Rayburn, tipped back his cap on his head and filled himself a pipe.

On the television, James Bond had finally been trapped, his sidekick killed and the dragon revealed as a tank with a flame-thrower on the front – not that Andrew, Philip or Dora was paying it much attention.

“Buggerin’ hell, but it’s cold!” said Philip contentedly, through the smoke. “What’s for tea, missus?”

Dora's rocking steadied a little and she began to shuffle the pans around on the hotplates.

"Lamb," she muttered, stirring something furiously.

Vaughn cocked his leg against the sideboard and Philip swore at him, inspecting the couple of cards they'd received from the neighbours: the usual mix-up of reindeer with fluorescent noses, mistletoe and small blond children with wings. Naturally, they hadn't sent any cards themselves. Under the table, Andrew and Meg remained motionless, the ball still on the floor behind them, Philip's face discernible through the crack in the tablecloth that followed the crease on the corner.

"I'm going to build a fucking good shed, I am, " remarked Philip, his eyes on Ursula Andress while Dora stumped across the room with a saucepan, steam billowing out behind her. "We need a shed and that's just the bloody place for him. On the flat behind the barn, there! Perfect!"

Dora returned to the Rayburn with a leg of lamb and poured sauce onto it from a second pan before she deposited it on the table. The meat had been boiled till it had mostly come loose from the bone. The sauce, on inspection, was custard. Philip clasped his fork and moved several large lumps to his mouth. Then he drained his glass and filled it back up again.

Leaning back in his chair, he lifted up the edge of the tablecloth and peered beneath it, frowning.

"You under there, boy?" he said. Then, seeing that he was, he removed a piece of the lamb with his fingers, dunked it in the custard and tossed it down to him.

"Here you are, girl," he told Meg, as he threw her down a piece of her own.