

## NUMBER SIX AND ME

Thirty years after my 'O' level Welsh had last seen the light of day, I decided to dust it off and give it an airing at the Urdd Eisteddfod in Cardiff. Ticket safely in hand, I went through the turnstile and was met by a chubby lady who spoke the language of heaven slow enough for me to understand.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “How are you?”

“OK. OK. Lovely. OK.” I replied, concentrating hard.

“Are you coming into the pavilion or just to the field?” she asked.

*“I am coming on the bus,” I answered. “Only a learning woman I am. I need exercising. It’s no odds to me if I go to the pavilion. Only here to exercise I am.”*

Now it was her turn to concentrate hard. “Have a map,” she said. “You will need a map. You can see where everything is. You must know where the toilets are. You will need to go. And here is a bag for you to use.”

As I took the red plastic bag, two thoughts crossed my mind. The first speculated about what sort of toilets were being provided and the second was a realisation that the time had come to do something about improving my Welsh.

“What interview with the examiner?” asked Jackie as we hurtled along the M4 motorway towards Pontypridd and our Welsh-for-adults’ GCSE. She lifted a strand of hair from her carefully tousled curls and put it back into place.

“The one this afternoon,” I said.

“I thought the exam was this morning. No-one told me anything about this afternoon.”

“Written papers all morning,” I explained, “and then, this afternoon, a half hour interview with the examiner.”

“Christ Almighty,” wailed Jackie. “I haven’t got to talk in Welsh, have I?”

“That’s the idea,” I said. “Where have you been? Colin’s been going on about it all year.”

“I don’t listen to anything he says,” she admitted. “What am I supposed to talk about?”

“Well,” I said, “Colin’s advice was to stick to something you know. I’m going to talk about my pets and the garden.”

“I hate gardening.” Jackie was miserable.

“And Colin said,” I added helpfully, “that the examiner always asks what you would do if you won the lottery and that makes things easy.”

“Why easy?”

“Because Colin says you can show the examiner all the different tenses that you know: the woulds, the shoulds, the coulds and so on.”

“Stuff Colin,” said Jackie.

It was lunchtime. Jackie was calm, I was calm. No, I wasn’t. I was terrified. The written paper had been fine. Written papers are what I do best. Me, a pen, a piece of paper and the clock. I can do written papers. I can’t do interviews. In English, I can’t do interviews. In Welsh I stand no chance at all. I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t ...

The door creaked open and the secretary appeared looking for the next victim.

“Mari?” I think it was the fact that I was hyperventilating that betrayed me. “Don’t be nervous. I’ve given you to examiner Number 6. He’s very nice.” She ushered me into the room where Number 6 was pacing up and down like a prisoner.

What do you suppose it is that can turn a mature, reasonably intelligent woman into an incoherent and almost incontinent wreck? Nerves? Lack of confidence? Insanity? Whatever *it* is, I had it by the bucketful that day.

We started on Hello, how are you? What's your name? He was speaking slow perfect Welsh. Me? Well I was managing the slow but then something in my brain snapped and my composure disappeared, quickly followed by my dignity.

"Have you got any pets?" asked Number 6.

*"I got one cat and five chicken," I stammered. "I had six chicken but one chicken dead. She had her death last week. She was Henrietta chicken but called Number 6 like you. Because when I am giving chicken food, I shout names: Julie! Bud! Barbie! Molly! Nen! Here is five chicken but where is Number 6? She missing always. Now she is dead. She had her death last week."*

"Was she old?" asked Number 6, slightly stunned.

*"She was ill," I replied, gravely. He opened his mouth to say something but he was too late. I was off again. "There was a funeral. She is under the rose. The five chicken others are in a line by the fence and they are singing 'Oooooooh!' My father digs in the geography. Not the geography. The earth." Boy, oh, boy, was I hitting my stride now. "I give Henrietta chicken to the earth. Not the earth. The ground. She is Number 6, like you. I am singing 'The Old Rugged Cross' but the five chicken others are not sad. The five chicken others are waiting for the raining worms. They know it will rain worms when my father digs an asshole. Not an asshole. A hole."*

It was at this point that I realised that I wasn't using all the tenses I knew, so I was disappointed to hear Number 6 say,

"Thank you. I think that's enough."

“No!” I shouted, suddenly a woman possessed as I saw my pass grade being buried along with Henrietta chicken. *“I was waiting for you to ask me what I would do if I were to win the lottery. There is a want on me to tell you. I must give you the knowledge. I would like to retire. I should give money to my family. I could enjoy life.”*

I said that’s enough.” He clicked the recorder off and escorted me to the door.

*“Thank you very big,”* I said. *“You have been OK.”*

“Interview go alright?” said Jackie coolly.

“Not bad,” I said.

“Mine too,” she said.

We didn’t talk much on the way home. At first, I was too embarrassed to recall let alone relate my experience, but then I noticed with some satisfaction that Jackie’s perfect curls were stuck, glue-like, to her sweaty forehead.