The Concession

‘Have you finished, Owen?’ his mother shouts from the sitting room. ‘You’ll wear out the crockery if you’re not careful.’

Owen is washing dishes, swishing his fingers through hot water, whipping up froth and blowing bubbles from his palms onto the tiles above the sink, where they stick for a moment then pop. He’d like to play out but it’s too dark. A cruel January night is pasted to the window, jet, thick with hoarfrost. No other boys are about and the girl next door, Derys, only wants to cut out paper fashion dolls and practise ballet in her bedroom slippers.

*Watch me pirouette, Owen, watch me.*

He can’t help but pull a face whenever he thinks about her.

When he was eight he bought bubble tubs from the newsagents out of his one shilling pocket money from his father. He would stand on the corner, lips puckered, blowing into the metal hoop, until a perfect bubble floated away down the high street and burst on the chip shop window. He enjoyed watching the swirl of colours, like petrol floating on a puddle after a downpour; he liked to see the world blurred and wobbly through balloons of soap. His dad would call him a sissy if he could see him now: blowing bubbles and washing up.

He grabs the tea towel, leaving the saucepan to soak: the saucepan with the layer of blackened baked beans. The handle has melted where it’s riveted to the metal and the kitchen smells of scorched Bakelite, burnt toast, and wood smoke. ‘Make you a cup of tea in a minute, Mum,’ he calls. His mother is sprawled on the sofa— watching *Top of the Pops—*as wrung out as the dish cloth that Owen drapes over the taps to dry; all done-in she is, from two cleaning jobs and a mile walk from the bus stop. He smells cigarette smoke and hears her cough then swear at the television as she thumps it.

‘This bloody valley,’ she says. ‘Never a decent reception.’

Swearing makes Owen’s toes curl, his back stiffen. No need for it, he thinks, and he wishes she wouldn’t do it. His dad didn’t like it. ‘Place for it in a pit or a dockyard or down the steel works,’ he said. ‘No call for language in a woman.’

Owen fills the kettle and lights the gas hob with a match, spoons tea into the pot. The television is nearly ten years old. The picture flickers, the black and white fading to a foggy grey. His father said he’d bought it just after Owen was born. A celebration.

‘Hire purchase,’ his mother said. ‘Means you’re still paying when the bugger breaks down. Typical of your father.’

It was not surprising his father liked the best. The higher the purchase the better. Clever man. Job in the colliery offices. Always the first to buy the latest: the blue radio with dials and shoulder strap, the red Dansette record player, the Hotpoint Iced Diamond fridge with plastic lolly sticks. Smartest man for miles in his work suit. (Derys’s mum says you can tell a man has a good job if he wears a suit.)

In the summer he took Owen fishing, taught him how to thread a worm onto a hook, how to set up a keep net, how to cast a line far out across the lake with a whip of the wrist.

‘Stay quiet, son,’ he said. ‘Watch and follow me.’

But you can’t follow a man who’s not there. Owen wonders where his father works now and if he still wears a suit.