

To all who see themselves in these pages

the **FIVE**

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Content note: *The Five* contains strong language and the following themes which some readers may find upsetting.

- **Tim:** references to anxiety, self-harm and physical attack.
- **Tami:** references to ableism and suggestion of image-based sexual abuse.
- **Aniq:** references to Islamophobia, grief and anxiety.
- **Robyn:** references to anxiety, self-harm and physical assault.
- **Cat:** references to cancer and sexual abuse.

PROLOGUE

In this town...

In this town, where the cracks in the pavements are veins under our feet. Where on Sundays, the seagulls pick on cubed colours of puke from last night, and the shining shards of bottles glint prettily by the park railings. Where the sea is blue or green or silver or grey, breathing icily over the streets and houses.

I know this place. I know the people, without having to know their names or speaking to them. I know them as I know the graffiti on the bus stop, and the town clock face that has spent fifteen years insisting that it's twenty to nine. The people are a part of here as much as the roads, the buildings, the history.

There are five who illuminate this place as the streetlights do.

Sometimes they are alone, wrapped in coats or bent into hoods against the roar of rain or reprobation, their tiny headphones muting the world. But sometimes they are two or three or four or five, and that is when they catch the light.

The wheels of her chair sighing their relief on to the pavement, almost lost in the song of her friends' laughter. A

shy look between two, the locking of eyes more intimate than any touch. All the hues of a heart in long, soft scarves. These are different, this five, but different from what? Sometimes all you need to do in order to stand out from the crowd is to smile.

Arm in arm, someone's head on someone's shoulder, a private smile, a half-whispered conversation, dirty jokes and raucous laughter. Best mates. This town has seen generations of them, tightly knotted friends, too young to know that these are the best friends they'll ever have. Too young to know that who they are now, insecure and imperfect and uncompromising, is the best version of them that will ever exist.

In this town...

They have mettle and melody. Joy and juxtaposition. They fight, are friends, and are as broken as the cracks in the pavement and as perfect as the tiny flowers that grow from them. This town, now, belongs to them.

Manon Steffan Ros

TIM



1

Mam says our move is a 'new chapter'. I don't really get it. Because we don't live in a book and we're *definitely* not characters in one. I like reading books and comics. Especially Marvel. Marvel characters aren't real. But Mam, Dad, Rex and me? We're real. We're *definitely* real.

We don't live in a book. But we *are* moving house. Moving somewhere new. And the prospect of being somewhere new makes my brain speed up so much that my mind conjures up too many questions at once. Questions Mam and Dad will *have* to answer otherwise I'll *have* to smash the car window and shout *I'm jumping out, I'm jumping out, I'm jumping out!*

I really don't want to smash the window or jump out. So, I ask one of the many questions swirling inside my head.

'Are we moving because of me?'

Dad stops whistling and starts scrolling through his phone. He then looks at Mam. He always waits for her to answer. I talk to Mam more than Dad. I'm a bit suspicious

of Dad. Mam thinks of an answer as she drives the car and chews her spearmint gum.

When I smell Mam's gum, I think of my last day at school. Well, at my old school. That day, I left at 11 am instead of 3:30 pm. Mam keeps telling me it wasn't my fault. But I think it was my fault.

*

I was in my last art lesson. I love art because I love colours. And giving something colour is a way of making sense of things. The task was to draw love, and I didn't really understand because how do you draw love? It doesn't have a shape or colour. Mam says love is a feeling, and that there are different kinds of love. I haven't felt *love* love so far. You know, the kind of love that makes you want to throw your bedroom window wide open and shout someone's name three times at the top of your lungs. I really want to though, so that I can put a colour to that feeling. So, I explained to Mr Daniels – my old art teacher – that I didn't understand, and all the questions that whirled in my brain came pouring out. He was hairy and smelled like bitter coffee. 'Just draw,' he said. He always gave short answers.

So, after racking my brain trying to think of ways to paint love, I decided to draw a picture of my two favourite Lantern Corps. The pink one and the blue one, kissing. Because when you love someone, you're going to kiss them and hug them, aren't you. And much more. Mam says we don't need to talk about *much more*, but Dad says it's important that I talk about *much more*. Parents confuse me.

Maybe I'll talk to Dad about the *much more* when I feel less suspicious of him.

Anyway, I'm in the art lesson drawing a picture of Pink Lantern Corp and Blue Lantern Corp kissing, and I still don't know if they're in love. But *Lanterns* is just a story on TV, and that isn't real life either, so I guess it's okay if I make stuff up about them (it's *not* okay to make stuff up about real life though, because that would be lying).

As soon as everyone was done with their pictures, Mr Daniels asked each of us to show our work to the class. I was restless and so excited, and I loved the picture I had drawn. But my legs were trembling because I was so nervous to stand up in front of everyone. One by one, everyone showed their pictures, and I kept shouting, *That one's amazing!* or *That's a bit crap!*

Mr Daniels sighed. He called my name. And so I stood up, even though my legs were trembling and beads of sweat were trickling down my forehead.

I smiled, holding up my kissing Lantern Corps masterpiece high.

When someone laughs, and I don't know why they're laughing, my heart pounds and my body heats up. And I think *everyone* laughed, so my heart pounded, and my body heated up quite a bit. I started trembling.

Loud laugh. *He's so strange.*

Louder laugh. *He'll never get kissed.*

Loudest laugh I've ever heard. *He's a perv.*

And then I saw Mr Daniels. Laughing. I was trembling so much I couldn't stop.

I decide to forget about the next part.

The next thing I remember is the smell of Mam's spearmint chewing gum. *It's okay, Tim. I'm here. I'm here.*

I stop trembling in the art cupboard, and I open my eyes. I see Mam crouching down next to me. She's smiling. I feel safe. So, I run into her arms (only Mam is allowed to touch me when I feel like this) and I say, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Are they still laughing? I've ruined it. I've ruined my last day. I'm sorry.' And she says it's not my fault.

Then Mam shouts at my old headteacher, Mrs Kaminski, who always wears maroon (I called her Mrs Maroon), right in the middle of the school car park.

'You've done fuck all to look after him since his diagnosis. It's a disgrace! Thank god we're moving from this shitshow!'

And I sit in the car waiting for Mam. I think to myself how much I hate swearing (especially when Mam does it). I wonder if my new school will be a sh*tshow too.

Mam gets in the car, and I smell her spearmint chewing gum again. Somehow, I feel her love through the warmth of her minty breath. Mam's minty love. There's nothing like it.

*

Mam takes the chewing gum out of her mouth and throws it out of the car window. This is another thing I don't like about Mam. It's always anywhere but the bin. She clears her throat.

'Moving because of you?'

I hate it when people repeat my questions. I think they do it to avoid giving me an answer.

‘You’re avoiding the question, Mam.’

‘We’re not moving because of you. We’re moving because of Dad’s new job.’

When Mam lies, she rubs her nose. This is what I’ve heard Dad say to her. But it’s true, about Dad, that he has a new job. He’ll soon be the Operational Manager for Community Energy Wales/Ynni Cymunedol Cymru. I like Dad for that. He wants to protect and save the planet. He’s like Captain Planet, the Marvel superhero, but a shorter version and not so cool.

‘But it’s a win-win situation really because we’ve also been needing to move you to a better school since your diagnosis.’

Another thing I don’t like about Mam is the way she goes on and on about ‘the diagnosis’. I’ve always known there was something different about me. And I’ve been okay with that. But now, since ‘the diagnosis’, things are different, and Mam won’t stop talking about it.

‘I’ve heard great things about Ysgol Gyfun Llwyd, and they’re highly regarded by other parents with children who have, you know... Other families have actually moved to the town because of how good the school is. They look after people like you.’

When she says people like me, she means autistic people. It’s funny because although she’s been obsessed with it ever since my diagnosis, she can’t seem to bring herself to say the word.

‘Autistic people,’ I say.

And she just nods. She looks at Dad and the two of them exchange this crappy, grey smile. Mam wipes a tear

from her cheek. And while Mam has been obsessed, Dad has stayed exactly the same. I can't decide if this is good or bad. For now, I decide it's bad, because at least Mam cares. I'm not sure if Dad does. And *this* is why I'm suspicious of him.

'Look, there it is!' Mam says as she wipes her cheek.

We pass a tall, colourless, empty building, surrounded by even taller trees. Then I see it.

YSGOL GYFUN LLWYD.

Veritas, unitas, caritas.

I ask what it says underneath. Mam says she knows because it's Latin, and she studied Latin in school. She whispers it as if it were a secret. *Truth, unity, love.* Mam says it's beautiful. Dad lets out a quiet laugh.

My legs start trembling, trembling enough to wake up Rex, who's been sitting on my lap all the way there. When I'm nervous, Rex looks at me and pleads with his shiny brown eyes. He wakes up and turns towards me, and I tell him, 'Look, Rex, it's Tim's new school.'

This manages to calm me down a bit.

But then my brain speeds up again, with loads of questions about this new, unfamiliar school.

All of this is new, and unfamiliar. A new, unfamiliar building. New, unfamiliar classes. New, unfamiliar teachers. New, unfamiliar people. New, unfamiliar town. New, unfamiliar supermarkets. New, unfamiliar house.

New, unfamiliar things make my body lose control. I scream, *I'm jumping out I'm jumping out I'm jumping out!*

I start smashing the car window, and Rex barks loudly.
Smash. Smash. Smash.
Mam and Dad freak out.
Tim!

*

I didn't actually smash the car window, and I'm kind of glad about that. But I did hurt my fist, so much so that I had to go to the new, unfamiliar hospital to get a plaster cast because I fractured it. I told Dr Anna Annwyl straight away that it was my fault, but Mam interrupted me and said it wasn't.

Anna Annwyl is really soft and friendly. Like lilac. Lilac, like her floral hairband. I told her I didn't know anyone in town, except Mam, Dad and Rex. She said I'd get to know people soon enough. I asked her if everyone is as friendly as her in this town. She smiled, and said yes, most people are. She said it's because we live by the sea, and that there are many benefits to living by the sea. It's good for our physical and mental wellbeing. She has a funny accent. If the sea had a voice, it would sound like Dr Anna Annwyl. It lilts and rolls and rises and falls like the waves by the prom. There, I concluded that maybe everyone with this accent is friendly. Maybe *everyone* in this town is friendly. Just like Dr Anna Annwyl.

And I ran out of the hospital, Mam sprinting after me, and I knocked on our car window. Dad jumped and beeped the car horn in his startled state. I told him to roll down the window.

‘Let’s go down to the prom!’

And, since then, for the rest of August and for the first few weeks in our new, unfamiliar town and in our new, unfamiliar house, I’ve been feeling at peace. We can see the sea from here. Although it’s far away, the sea always feels close. And familiar. Rex, Dad and I have been walking from one end of the prom to the other every day at 4 pm since the day we arrived. I saw Dr Anna Annwyl there once and I shouted, ‘You were right about the sea!’

I want to walk the prom every day, forever and ever.

I still haven’t been to the new, unfamiliar Lidl. It looks way too busy. But Mam has, and she’s even chatted to people. She said she forgot to ask their names, and this made me angry. But she said they ‘responded positively’ when she mentioned me. I asked her what she had said about me. She shrugged, and just said she had a good feeling about this place. She didn’t answer my question properly, but I didn’t ask her about it again because I’ve been too distracted by my awesome new bedroom.

Apart from the sea, my bedroom is my favourite place in town. The wifi reaches my Xbox, all my Lantern Corps merchandise is up, my Marvel posters have been tacked to the wall, my clothes have been colour coded, I have a desk big enough for my cool new stationery, and Rex’s bed has been placed at the end of mine. I even spent the whole of my sixteenth birthday here with Mam, Dad and Rex. The highlight of my day was sharing some *Deadpool* chocolate cake on my bed.

I’m sixteen. I love it here. We’ve moved and I’m very, *very* okay with that.

Mam knocks on my door while I play *Marvel Avengers: Battle for Earth* on my Xbox with my plaster-free fist. I do wish I could see Dr Anna Annwyl again, but I don't wish to be ill or injured again. Mam knocks three times. This means she's coming in and that it's bedtime.

Mam drops the weighted blanket softly on top of my body. This helps me sleep. Then, she asks what the date is, and I don't know why she's talking to me like this because she knows that I know it's the fourth of September. *Obviously.*

'Which means?'

'Which means that tomorrow is the fifth of September, and I'll be starting Year 11 at Ysgol Gyfun Llwyd. Stop patronising me. I'm not a child. I'm sixteen.'

Mam smiles in dark blue then, like the colour of tonight's sky.

She says she's got me a present. She says it in Dr Anna Annwyl's voice. It makes me laugh, because Mam sounds strange with a gog accent. She isn't from North Wales. And she knows I don't like surprises either. But she drops a pair of small golden sponges in the palm of my hand. They look like two bright mushrooms. I don't like mushrooms. Or the word fungi. Or when people make a fun-guy joke. It's not funny. And mushrooms aren't funny. The texture freaks me out. But I like these ones.

'Here, these can be your school earplugs,' she says, and presses the palm of her hand into mine. I try them on, and Mam pretends to shout at the top of her voice. She's miming *I LOVE YOU*, and I pretend I can't hear. We laugh. I like Mam when she comforts me like this.

As she leaves, I feel that trembling again. And my mind feels the need to speed up.

‘Mam?’

She pushes the door open slightly, until the corridor light leaves a stain across my carpet, right towards the Lantern Corps action figures on top of my chest of drawers.

‘Do you promise Ysgol Gyfun Llwyd won’t be a shitshow?’

‘Yes.’

She rubs her nose, and the door clicks shut.