



LESLEY PARR

Lesley was born in South Wales, at the bottom of a valley just across from a river and quite near a seaside steelworks. Now she lives in the middle of England (almost as far from the sea as it's possible to get) with her husband and their cat, Angharad, who likes to get in the way when Lesley is writing.

Lesley has worked as a nanny, a shop assistant and a primary school teacher. These days she shares her time between supply teaching and writing. Lesley is strongly influenced by growing up in an industrial town. In her work she explores the beauty that exists in the landscapes of the dark industries of Wales.

About Hollow

Britain 1939. War. Evacuation.

London lad Jimmy is evacuated to a South Wales mining village. Forced to live with strangers in a green and quiet place, he feels lost.

Then he finds a human skull hidden in a hollow tree.

Who put it there? For what reason? With younger brother Ronnie and new friend Florence, Jimmy sets out to discover the secrets that lie with the skull.

As Jimmy pieces together the truth, those secrets, as long hidden as the bones, rise to the surface ...

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HOLLOW

Chapter One

A Different Type of Countryside

There isn't as much sky as I thought there'd be. And what I can see is clear and blue, not the never-ending rainclouds we were told we'd get in Wales.

The guard blows his whistle and the train hoots back. I watch it pull away and my heart squeezes a bit and I want to get back on. I don't know why, it's not as if it's going back to London.

We've been through three stations today – from Paddington to Cardiff Central to here. This one's tiny with only one platform. It's like our lives are shrinking. I straighten Ronnie's tag and we join the back of the line.

Dad said we'd be able to see for miles and miles in the countryside. He got us some library books with pictures of fields and hedgerows with little houses dotted around. But this isn't like that.

Massive, looming bulges of land – mountains I suppose – have stolen most of the sky. I turn on the spot. They're all around, as though the village was dropped into the middle of a big, fat cushion. Before now, the closest thing to a mountain I'd ever seen was a sand dune on Camber Sands. And it wasn't green. And it didn't have houses stuck on the side of it.

There's a tug at my sleeve. Ronnie's looking at me, eyes wide and teary. I lean down so he can whisper in my ear.

'This isn't like the pictures,' he says, sniffing.

'I know.'

'But Dad said –'

‘He didn’t know, did he? He didn’t know we were coming here. He just knew it wasn’t a city.’ I look around again. ‘There must be different types of countryside.’

‘Well this is the wrong type.’ Ronnie sticks out his bottom lip.

This is all I need – a sulky little brother. No one will pick us if he looks a proper misery guts.

‘Be quiet and try to look like a nice boy,’ I say, making sure the string of his gas mask box sits properly on his shoulder. ‘Nice and smart.’

I look over his head to the far end of the platform. The smoke’s thinning, but it still stings my eyes and catches in my throat. I love it. It’s a smell of coal and heat and power. The name on the station sign is clear now:

LLANBRYN

Funny word. Too many letters.

Here we are, a wriggling, squiggling line of Stonehill Juniors. Duff’s at the front with his little sister. She’s even younger than Ronnie; too young to understand why she’s here. I can’t see many faces; most are looking at our teacher, Miss Phillips. Some of us seem excited, some curious, but I bet everyone’s nervous. Even the ones pretending not to be. Maybe even Duff.

Ronnie’s crying again. It’s all right for little brothers to cry but big brothers have to be the brave ones. Not that I would cry, anyway. I’m eleven. He watches sadly as a guard puts our suitcases in a pile near the gate at the end of the platform.

‘I want my Dinky van,’ he splutters.

‘You can’t have it. It’s packed. You know what Nan said.’

‘But –’

‘Ronnie, it’s safe,’ I say. ‘Remember how well you wrapped it in your pyjamas? You did a really good job there.’

He nods and blinks back more tears. I know he’s trying to be brave, too.

Next to the guard, Miss Phillips is talking to a man and a woman. The man is tall and has a thick overcoat buttoned over his large stomach, and he’s got the biggest moustache I’ve ever seen. The woman’s all done up in her Sunday best. She’s walking down the line now, giving out custard creams as she counts us. When she gives one to Lillian Baker, Lillian thanks her for having us in their village. Duff’s close enough to pull her plaits but he doesn’t.

He's not usually worried about getting into trouble; perhaps he *is* nervous. I bet Lillian Baker will get picked first. She's got long, dark hair and her socks never fall down and all the grownups say she's pretty.

When the woman hands a custard cream to Ronnie, she stops and wipes away his tears with her hankie. She's got a metal badge pinned to her coat that says *WVS Housewives Service Identification*.

'What's your name?' she asks. Ronnie gulps and says nothing.

Now that she's close, I can smell lavender and peppermints. She looks at me but I look away. She lifts Ronnie's tag and says, 'Ronald, now that's one of my favourite names, that is.'

'We call him Ronnie,' I say, a bit harder than I mean to.

But she keeps on smiling. 'And you're a Travers, too,' she says, eyeing my tag. 'Ronnie's brother is it? So are you a James or a Jimmy?'

'Jimmy.'

'All right then,' she says. She gives me a custard cream and moves back up the line.

'She smells like Nan,' Ronnie murmurs. His lip's wobbling again so I take his hand and give it a squeeze, just like Dad would do.

'Eat your biscuit,' I say.

Miss Phillips claps her hands and calls out to us. We all go quiet.

'These nice people are Mr and Mrs Bevan,' she shouts down the platform. 'They are here to take us up to the institute.'

I wonder what an institute is. It sounds grim.

'Welcome to Llanbryn!' Mr Bevan booms. I'm not surprised he booms. He looks like a boomer.

I glance at the sign again. It doesn't look like it says what *he* just said. Ronnie's trying to copy him, screwing up his face, trying to make his mouth fit around the letters.

'Lll ... clll ... cllaaa ...'

'Stop it,' I whisper. 'No one will pick us if they think you're simple.'

'Don't worry about your cases,' Mr Bevan says. 'We've got men taking them up for you.'

I feel Ronnie's grip tighten on my hand and I know he's thinking about his Dinky van again. These men – whoever they are – had better be careful with his case. If he loses that van, he won't stop crying till the war ends.

We set off, our gas mask boxes bumping against us, Mrs Bevan and Miss Phillips chatting at the head of the line. Mr Bevan waits as we cross the road outside the station then joins Ronnie and me at the back.

‘Are you ready for your adventure, boys?’ he beams.

What’s he talking about? Adventures happen in jungles or on raging rivers or in the Wild West. Not here. Not in Wales with a whimpering little brother and a custard cream.

Ronnie’s stopped crying so that’s something. He’s twisted the top off his biscuit and is licking the creamy bit.

‘Are we going up there?’ he asks, his eyes darting nervously from Mr Bevan to the mountainside houses.

‘We are.’ Mr Bevan nods.

‘It’s a long way up,’ Ronnie says.

Mr Bevan turns to the houses and tilts his head from side to side. A big grin breaks out on his face; stretching his moustache and making him look like a happy walrus.

‘Not for a big, strong boy like you!’

Ronnie beams.

‘Come on then!’ Mr Bevan ruffles Ronnie’s hair. I smooth it down again. No one will pick us if he looks a proper mess.

We start to climb a wide track. Bushes and trees grow on either side. Ronnie asks if it’s a forest. I catch Mr Bevan’s eye and see his moustache twitch over his smile.

‘Stop asking stupid questions,’ I hiss in Ronnie’s ear.

Then, up ahead, Duff’s little sister drops her custard cream. She stops dead and just stays there until her face turns a greyish shade of blue. I’ve seen her do this lots of times before, when we’ve been out playing, but Mr Bevan looks horrified.

‘What’s she doing?’ he asks. He’s a bit sweaty and not just from the climb. It probably won’t look good if one of their evacuees kicks the bucket before we even get to the *institute*.

‘Holding her breath,’ I answer. ‘She can only do it for so long, then she really starts.’

‘Starts what?’

‘Wait for it.’

I don't know if it's got anything to do with the mountains curving all round us, but her wails are even louder here, not far off an air raid siren. The two women rush over to Duff's sister and Mrs Bevan opens her handbag. She feels around inside, pulls out a chocolate bar and snaps off a piece.

'Dairy Milk,' Ronnie whines. 'I should've dropped *my* biscuit.'

As we move off, Florence Campbell picks up the custard cream and stuffs it in her pocket. I pretend not to see. I don't think Florence can believe her luck – two biscuits in one day. I bet she's never had two biscuits in her whole life.

We keep climbing until we reach another road. We follow it round the corner until an enormous brown brick building comes into view. It's three storeys high, bulky and strong looking.

'Here we are,' Mr Bevan says, standing in the arched doorway. He looks really proud, like he's showing us Buckingham Palace. 'The Llanbryn Miners Institute.'

I look from Mr Bevan to the institute. They match, the way some people do with their dogs.

'Everyone's in the main hall. They can't wait to see you.'

The room is massive, much bigger than our school hall. It's all dark timber, polished up till it shines. It smells of warm wood and dust. There are steps and a raised platform at the far end, a bit like a stage. The room's bursting with people all staring and muttering; surely they can't all want an evacuee? Some must be here to gawp. They sit in rows in front of the stage and, as we walk past them to the raised bit, I can feel the place swallowing us up – my little brother, all the others and me.

We step on to the stage and Ronnie's sticky hand slips into mine.

'Jimmy,' he whispers. 'What if no one picks us?'

I look down at him, at his little cow's lick fringe and big, dopey eyes. 'Don't be daft. Who wouldn't want us?'

I think he believes me. I wish I believed myself.