

bringing people in from Abergavenny and Aberystwyth, from Bangor and Bridgend, from Cardigan and Colwyn Bay, and from a hundred other places too. Many of these people don't even have tickets for the match; they just want to be here, in the capital, when it's happening, to watch it on giant screens or in pubs, to feed off and contribute to this insane electricity pulsing through the city's streets.

These are the people cheering us on. These are the people we're playing for.

We turn right and follow the road down into the bowels of the stadium. Darkness, and the sounds of the crowd fading behind us. We get off the bus and head for the stairs that will take us up to the changing-room, and as we do we hear something so quintessentially Welsh they should bottle it and sell it at Cardiff Airport: a male voice choir, here just for us, singing 'Calon Lân'.

*Nid wy'n gofyn bywyd moethus,
Aur y byd na'i berlau mân;
Gofyn wyf am galon hapus,
Calon onest, calon lân.*

I don't ask for a luxurious life,
the world's gold or its fine pearls;
I ask for a happy heart,
an honest heart, a pure heart.

*Calon lân yn llawn daioni,
Tecach yw na'r lili dlos;
Dim ond calon lân all ganu
Canu'r dydd a chanu'r nos.*

A pure heart full of goodness
Is fairer than the pretty lily;
None but a pure heart can sing,
Sing in the day and sing in the night.

Their voices carry us all the way to the changing-room. On one wall, in three-foot-high red letters, is written 'RESPECT THE JERSEY'. On the opposite wall, in the same lettering, is 'DAL DY DIR'. 'Hold your ground'.

We take up the places marked out by our numbers. Inside the collar of the shirts hanging from the pegs is a single word. *Braint*. Privilege.

And right in the middle of the room – without telling any of us, Rob's asked for it to be put here, knowing the effect it will have on us – is the Six Nations trophy, sparkling clean and gleaming like the most precious of metals.

Our trophy.

Our trophy, which we won last year. Our trophy, which we're still defending, even though the possibility of a second Grand Slam went out of the window almost before it had started.

We know the maths. England have four wins, we have three. They also have a superior points difference. Beating them will deny them the Grand Slam, but to win the championship a simple victory won't be enough. To win the championship, we have to beat them by eight points.

Joe Lydon, the WRU's head of rugby, told us what his England Under-18s coach had once said. 'When you play Wales, remember that they're not defending their tryline. They're defending their border.'

Every single one of us has that thought right now, looking at the trophy.

No way. No way is that trophy going back across the Severn Bridge tonight.

Grim faces. Growls, shouts, murmurs. Studs clattering on the floor. The smell of liniment and fear. Tape being ripped and wound and ripped again. Hugs and backslaps. Energy gels, sickly sweet. Blokes spewing in the toilets.

An official's voice at the door. Two minutes. Two minutes.

Another voice. England are already in the tunnel. They're waiting for you. They don't want to go out alone.

Let them wait. We go when the ref tells us to, not a moment before.

Wales out, please. Wales out.

Single file in the corridor, looking at the back of the man in front of you. Something very literal in that: knowing that you've got his back just as the guy behind you has got yours.

Thick double doors between you and the playing arena. The crowd noise a distant thunder, rumbling and muffled, as though we're underwater. They can see us on the screen. They know we're coming.

Ten seconds, the TV guy says. Ten seconds.

The doors open. The noise is like a chemical blast, breaking down and over us. Red lights and dry ice in our faces. We can't

see further than the end of our arms, but we can hear everything, and we can feel it too. Pressure waves of sound, bouncing and reverberating and sloshing like water in a bath.

Then the dry ice clears, and suddenly the entire far side of the stadium comes into view: three tiers climbing to the heavens, wall upon wall of red. Our people.

Lining up for the anthems. The players' wives and girlfriends have two rows earmarked for them on halfway, always in the same place. Each time I play here, I look for Rach during the anthems, and each time she smiles at me. Our little routine: *I'm here for you, go on, play your heart out.*

The English anthem is first. 'God Save the Queen', and God it's loud. I've never heard it sung so loud. How the hell did so many English fans get in here? The place must be full of them. How's our anthem ever going to compete with that? This is going to be embarrassing. Outsung by England before the match has even started – for any proud Welshman that's humiliation right there.

Then 'Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau' starts up.

Wow.

Just wow.

No matter how loud the English had sung, that was nothing compared with this. Nothing. It sounds like the whole country's singing, not just the whole stadium. It raises not only the hairs on the back of my neck but all the way down my spine too. It's so loud that for a moment I wonder if the stadium can contain it, whether the walls will crumble like those of Jericho did at the sound of Joshua's trumpets. I don't sing the anthem – I never sing it – but inside I'm there with every word, lifted somewhere up into the gods up near the roof.