

Play Paradise

Much has been written about Senghenydd the village of my childhood. There had been a huge colliery disaster in October 1913 and four hundred and thirty nine men were killed. Senghenydd in the past had been called 'The Valley of Tears', but I can only think of it as the sweetest place. Some of the long and short terraced streets are built quite high on the sides of the valley. Many have known three or four generations of the same families. Some have housed large families who have shared poverty, grief, love, and joy. Time cannot obliterate the strong character of these houses or dim the memories, good and bad, of those who have lived in them.

Although it was forbidden, many of the children in our street and the surrounding terraces played in and around the ruins of the old Universal Colliery. Our parent's warnings that it was dangerous fell on deaf ears. The washeries where the coal had been washed were situated very close to Parc Terrace where I lived. They were low sloping structures, about half a dozen of them. Sometimes we were content just to sit on them and make daisy chains, chanting nursery rhymes or singing songs, our mothers glancing at us whilst shaking mats or scouring door-steps. About a quarter of a mile beyond where the streets ended, were the two cream brick giant chimney stacks of the colliery. We would run around the base platforms on which they were built. There was very little room on the ledge and we shrieked and laughed when we teetered dangerously close to the edge. The platforms had a forty or fifty foot drop. We were always giddy when we stared upwards. The cream bricks seemed to touch the white clouds and our small arms stretched out and hugged the chimneys to keep us steady.

A mile beyond the chimney stacks stood our play paradise – the shell of a large red brick building called The Compressor. It had once housed the pump for fresh air to go down underground to the colliery. It was three storeys high with large areas of the grey roof slates missing. Inside were masses of large jagged concrete slabs with twisted rusted wire running through them; like giant icebergs all at strange and weird angles. Small groups of nettles grew randomly, and clumps of weeds grew out of its skeleton walls. The Comp, as we affectionately called it, was a truly dangerous place to play. It had an unpleasant dank smell. Sheep sometimes wandered in so there were droppings everywhere. The sheep always ran away when they heard us approaching. It was our private playground. We could scream and shout and sing as loudly as we liked. In all its ugliness we loved it. Like a motionless, voiceless Svengali, this old ruin of a building attracted us like a magnet.

A watchman called Mr Carriegar lived very near and his barking dogs always alerted us that he was coming. We were usually a group of seven or eight boys and girls: Tony Williams, Georgie White, Bertie Griffiths, Gerald Meredith, June Thomas, Sylvia Meredith, my cousins Hilary and Madeleine Davies, and my sister and I, Joyce and Ethel James. Like all the other girls I could only climb to the second level of The Comp. The boys, however, could climb easily to the highest parts, their Tarzan shrieks echoing around this huge semi-structure. Bertie Griffiths, in his plimsolls, was so fleet of foot, he could scale a sheer wall in seconds. We would gaze in awe, dazzled by the brilliance of his agility and lack of fear. It

was as if he were a famous circus performer. Sometimes the boys would encourage us girls to climb higher, pulling us up, stretching limbs until they hurt. We loved it, never caring that our knees were scratched almost raw on the concrete.

It was a fascination to be inside a building yet seemingly outside with the sky visible through gaps of wall, roof, and miss-ing floor. There was nothing lovely in this place only the sound of our laughter. I would look up and watch clouds pass by on a blue summer sky. When it rained we would skip around gaping black chasms of darkness in the floors, to shelter underneath an intact piece of roof. The boys would leap over these gaping holes with no fear. We knew we should run home to the dry safety of our homes but were blissfully happy, and unaware in a way that only young children can be, of the awful grief we might have caused. I can still smell the colourless glycerine and rose-water that was used to sooth chapped hands and knees. In a small plain white bottle, at two shillings it was an extravagant buy for my mother. My three sisters and I shared the small bottle and it had to last a whole week. Early evening when the zinc bath, which hung on a nail in the backyard wall, was brought in and we were bathed, my mother would gently pat the lotion on our knees and the backs of our hands. 'Ouch ouch' we would shout in turn, though I still longed for a bottle all to myself it smelled so lovely. Our lovely long wyncette nighties were soft on our scraped legs.

My childhood friends are scattered now, though occasionally I see Bertie, his feet now encased in smart leather shoes, he semi-shuffles to the tune of old age and I wonder if he longs to step back in time for a day, as I do.

By Ethel Oates