

MY SEVEN SISTERS

**By
Tracy Williams**

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By the time I came back suicide was all the rage in Wales.

Imagine if I'm imagining this. That the Seven Sisters you know and the Seven Sisters I see are completely different. As I don't know yours, I'll tell you about the Seven Sisters that belongs to me.

Seven Sisters is an irrelevant ex-coalmining valley in the forgotten valleys of South Wales. Her main cemetery is called Brynbedd. I am standing in it now, waiting for the spirits to appear. Brynbedd has a beautiful view of the Dulais valley. Even the scars in the mountains created by the open cast mines cannot destroy the scene. Her air is clean, she is all green mountains and sheep and quiet. When I walk the streets or mountains of Seven Sisters there is always a presence beside me.

I'm not imagining this. A figure from the spirit world moves outwards from his headstone to observe me. He is eternally twenty nine in our world. Our world being what I, some kind of writer, call reality. This is *not* wishful thinking or overactive imagination. Beneath the din of the living, I *can* hear him.

I was not present at the funeral. But I can imagine what the boys what have said.

The boys:

Well, well, dew, dew – and all them witty Welsh expressions. In the ground at twenty nine. Helluva boy was he, see. Innit boys? He was larger than life, like. A proper 'eader. Can't believe it, like. Knowing him he's probably mucking about. Any minute now he's gonna jump outta that box and shout, "I fuckin' had you!"

Hey boys, remember when we dug up that old grave over there and played cricket with the bones?

Who says the dead are useless?

Seven Sisters, see – nothing to do here, between you and me.

Give him some time, now boys, and we'll dig him up to see if he's still wearing his multicoloured coat. Did they bury him with his gun?

This spirit of whom I speak, this old friend I constantly seek, was an icon of Seven Sisters. An anti-hero of the Welsh Valleys. Notorious for doing stupid things. A trendsetter among his peers. The boys followed wherever he went. But none of them could ever quite become as larger than life as he was.

Until my thirteenth year, he whose name was house-hold had remained, to me, unseen. Tales of his wild antics went with us, kids wandering the streets of Seven Sisters in the rain, kids becoming teenagers, standing in bus stops, wandering through graveyards, with nothing much to do.

My first actual sighting came in the middle of an afternoon, on the shortcut pathway from Heol Heddwch (translated: Road of Peace) towards Bryndulais School. It was a tall dark figure with an amble, not a walk, a gun slung over its shoulder. His green eyes dazzled through the drizzle, shooting stars straight at me and I knew it was him. Like-creatures we were. Counterparts with an incorrigible zest for life in a place where apathy-of-the-soul sets in early. He emerged through the mist like a flash of heavenlight and we beamed at each other like keepers of a great and wonderful secret: We are alive! Never mind all this rain and wind and damp and cold, never mind about the unmoving mountains. You and me, we're alive! The lifeloving bright star moved towards me and he said

‘Why are you standing there with your umbrella when I’m over here getting wet?’

I moved to share my shelter with him, innocent virgin, thirteen-going-on-thirty year old girl-woman that I was.

‘Come and see me when you’re sixteen. And I’ll wise you up.’

‘I can’t wait that long,’ I said.

We grow up fast in the valleys, don’t we girls?

But I should wait. And wait I did.

The first kiss came over a year later, on the very same hill. He tasted of nicotine and chewing gum and his lips were velvet-soft and sometime later I started smoking too, just to taste that taste that tasted so much like love.

By the time I was sixteen he and I had decided that my jeans would never come off. In my seventeenth year, summer fell on a Tuesday. We were in his car, driving up from Neath and I, worldly wise woman that I then was, had decided we ought to get it over, once and for all, just *do it*, wise up – both of us. I was not

winding him up. I was ready. We'd been messing around for long enough. All the other Seven girls were doing it; and a lot of them had done it with him. What was wrong with me? I'd had enough.

He turned up the mountain road towards Nant y Cafn. I breathed on the window and remembered him, three years earlier, before he could drive, drawing the picture of a farm on the steamed up window of his father's old van, telling me that when he grew up he wanted to have pigs and cows and horses and a lovely wife.

Remember that night he dragged the horse upstairs with him boys? Fuck he was pissed up that night. Horse wouldn't come back down.

Was that why his wife left him?

That Tuesday we crossed the dry grass hand in hand, anticipation as hot as the sun, we were finally getting it done. He was well on his way by then to being as big as male icons in the valleys ought to be. He would be Mr Wales soon. Soon his arms would be too inflated to cuddle anything but a dumb-bell.

We lay down in the field and kissed and as we kissed I pulled up my dress to prepare myself, physically. I felt safe and warm in his familiar caresses, I had grown up with them. Two children we were, preparing ourselves to act like adults.

I looked at him, framed by the bluey-blue sky and he looked into my eyes and he said

'I can't do this.'

The sun broke free of a cloud and blinded me. Somewhere, close-by, I probably heard a cow complain.

‘I can’t do this to you, Trace. If I do this I’ll hate myself for the rest of my life.’

Across the blue eternity above, my heart expanded. As time went by he shielded me from other things too; drugs, violence, crime. When he dropped me off that afternoon, virginity intact, he said

‘Don’t you tell anyone about this, mind.’

Every Friday he’d play for us, in the lounge of our pub (she was called The Seven Sisters, once a respectable drinking place with a snug, by the time we arrived she had descended into a hellhole of hardened drinkers and teenagers with nothing else to do). And he would sit atop the massive amplifier, bouncing to the drumbeat, dressed in that floor-length wool-knitted rainbow coat, jet black gypsy curls flying into his wild green eyes, with a mic in his hand and the dance beat competing for attention over his relentless rapping. When his mother walked in he’d shout

‘Boys and girls, my mother’s in the house and she’s selling crack.’

He was the landlord of The Seven Sisters for a spell. What did my father say?

‘First time I’ve been into a pub where the landlord is more pissed than the punters.’

He’d get up in the morning, crawl to the pump and, while pulling himself the first pint of the day, declare to the boys asleep on the chairs from the night before, ‘der, it’s ‘ard work being a landlord, boys.’

The Seven Sisters is long destroyed; only a pile of rubble remains; an architectural personification of those of us who are still standing, but will never really

dance again. Any minute now he's gonna arise from the rubble and tell me his pint's getting cold.

Remember when whatshisname called his mother a slag?

He give him a good coupla taps with a sledgehammer that night.

Is whathisname out of the coma yet boys?

Dunno like. He haven't called anyone a slag since mind.

Speeding up, fasting forward, father time, took us to the drinking years – knocking back straight vodka, glass for glass, shot for shot, pint for pint, too pissed to kiss, falling about on the bed or the bar floor, arguing into oblivion then drunk-driving up the old roads to the small mines over the black coal until on that last ever night we swerved not to kill a black and white kitten and he jumped out and grabbed the kitten and then I was sobbing in his arms and the kitten was clawing at his legs and purring as we went slurring down the hill.

‘Now listen to me now, Trace. You gotta get outta this place. If you stay in Seven Sisters it's gonna kill you.’

Three years later he was fucking dead.

Great writer, me; afraid to do my own research. Scared to look in that room. The room that became his tomb. Oh Tracy, you writer, you! Shouldn't you know the facts? If you were any real talent you could hereby set down the minute details of how he did it. You'd have entered the scene of the suicide as an impartial researcher, devoid of terror, free from fear. You'd have sought out the scars on the door that marked the spot where he secured the belt and then, and then... Well, you wouldn't

have fallen into three days of sickness afterwards. You should have it all in black and white, in the name of art and fact:

When found, his toes were less than an inch from the ground. His eyes were wide open. His tongue was hanging out. Hanging from the door, feet less than an inch from the floor. Great writer, me, disguising the truth of the line behind macabre rhyme.

When X found him what did he say?

‘Oh for fuck’s sake, stop fuckin’ about!’

He thought he was mucking about.

“Stop it, you’re freakin’ me out.’

X looked harder at the unblinking eyes. His tongue was blue. His eyes were green.

And what did it smell like in there?

“Oh for fuck’s sake Trace, mun, I forgot to breathe.”

The night before: He went into the Legion as usual, gave his cap to one of the boys and said

‘I don’t need it where I’m going.’

He was offered two cigarettes; one for now, one for the morning. He smoked the first and gave back the second, saying, ‘I won’t be needing that.’

I knew there was something going on when he turned down that last fag.

Didn’t think he was going home to hang himself mind, did you?

Were there last minute changes of mind? Was he stone cold sober or off his head on drugs? Shall we blame the prospect of prison because of the violence or the shame?

Or shall we blame Seven Sisters herself, is it boys? Her relentless indoctrination that boys can't be weak, boys mustn't cry, men should be built like boulders to cross the harsh landscape free of feeling, capable mainly of manly stuff, like killing. Do you kill yourselves without feeling then, boys?

I mean what the fuck is going on in Bridgend? More suicides than anywhere else in Europe, I heard.

Hey boys, listen to this one...

My car broke down in Bridgend yesterday. Needed a tow, like.

*D'you think I could find a f***** rope?*

In my dreams he says, 'I told you to get out o' this place. There's nothing here for you.'

I never would listen to anyone. Larger than life, me. Some great writer, some day, you'll see.

This is how to show your feelings if you are a male in the mountains or the valleys of Wales: Death-by-hanging, self-inflicted, what a way to go.

There were three attempted imitation suicides after his. One was a great success. A very determined nineteen year old boy. Aye, aye, they're getting younger

with every new rope. Watch out Bridgend, you got competition in a tiny little village called Seven Sisters. My friend did not start it, but he was up there at a time before death-by-hanging was fashionable.

How I long for a sighting of him. Come back, if only for a second. I would give anything to know you are haunting these streets.

I exit the cemetery and head up to the housing estate and as I reach the short cut it begins, predictably, to drizzle. I do a fast turn and halt suddenly. Someone is following me. Someone is there. I would give anything to see his face again, to see him ambling towards me with a gun slung over his shoulder and the sparkle of life in his wild green eyes. There will be no room in Brynbedd for me by the time I am ready to stop breathing. Even though it's empty here without him, even though many have died and many more will, I will stay here. I am stronger now. Seven Sisters did not kill me. She made me stronger. A streetwalking somnambulist obsessed with the dead, blown about by the wind in the hope of seeing a ghost. Is this how I shall grow old? Death-by-hanging, self-inflicted. Not a way to go.

I may never print these pages out. Imagine if any one in Seven Sisters reads this stuff. Imagine if I really am off my head, like. Hearing the dead, like.

They'd make fun of the title too.

'She called it *MY* Seven Sisters,' they'd say and spit.

Come on then, boys, come on now – Imagine if I'm imagining it.

THE END