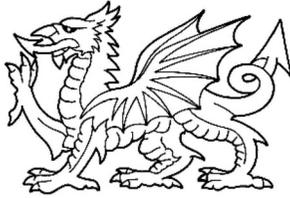


One

The Awakening



Why is it that the most bizarre happenings stick in your memory so vividly? Playing street rugby with Billy Lewis, John Pope, Terry Vaux, and all the King Street gang is one such incident. How we played on a street only thirty feet wide was quite astonishing. All of us kids “dummying,” side-stepping, and even doing scissor movements in such a restricted space must have augured well in later life when we were let loose on a rugby field about seventy yards wide.

Could street rugby be the reason that Wales produced so many skillful ball handlers back then? I am sure that playing on the streets instead of watching television, as in later times, might have kept Welsh rugby on top for around thirty years.

These games were almost a daily event during the summer school break, but the other big social gathering was the soccer (football) games, which were held on the playing field in back of George Street School. Occasionally the police would chase us kids off, because the school was officially closed for the summer and the school gates locked.

I remember John “Digger” Stanley, a boy five years my senior, kicking me extremely hard on the front left shinbone,

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from which I carry a notch to this day. He carried me home to my mother and apologized unreservedly about twenty times as he thought he'd broken my leg. I remember John Cross shooting me in my right leg with an arrow from a five-foot, real longbow. Luckily, the tip was dulled for target practice, but it still put an ugly indentation in the back of my calf. Again I was carried home, and John begged my mother not to mention the incident to his mother, otherwise his new bow would be confiscated.

There were only two ways to get into the school field: through the bars of the surrounding railings— —if you were small enough— —or over the top of the seven-foot high railings— —if you were brave enough. The second way in, however, should not be tried on a rainy day, as Brian Waters will confirm. One wet day, he slipped and found himself impaled with a spiked bar through his thigh. He had to be literally lifted off and rushed to hospital.

On another occasion, the police came to my house to investigate a report that Lyn Clarke had forced the iron bars apart to let the neighborhood children in to play soccer. As soon as I confronted Police Constable Window — —I was age ten and weighed around seventy pounds — —the policemen laughed so hard he almost wet himself. The investigation was closed from that moment.

I also knocked my front teeth through my lower lip when jumping off George Street School nursery building with David Roberts. The roof was flat, and I jumped off without checking where the cement path was located. When I over-stretched to reach the grass verge, my head came down on my knees. Yes, I still have that scar, too! I am sure that by the time school started back up in the autumn our parents heaved a collective sigh of relief as King Street had seen its fair share of ambulances during the summer months.

Another memory is of Ray Prosser, our town's rugby-playing hero, arriving by van to visit his pal, John "Fuzzy" Emmett, who lived directly across the street from my mother's

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house on King Street. When leaving, Ray's van would never start, so about a dozen of the King Street gang, boys and girls, would push it over to Conway Road. On the downhill slope, Ray would jump the clutch as the van gathered momentum on its way toward town. Ray went on to play for Wales and the British Lions, and Fuzzy left town to play rugby league for the Rochdale Hornets. We kids never saw Fuzzy again.

One day my mother sent me over to lend Mrs. Emmett a stick of butter. John had not yet gone north and was sitting in a tin bath in front of the fire having just come off shift from Tyr Pentis coal mine. I couldn't help but notice he had a long scar on his back. It ran from his left shoulder diagonally down to his right hip. Later I asked my mother how this had happened, and she told me that during a rock fall at the coal mine John had been pinned underneath, but he was so strong that he'd arched his back, and six other miners were able to crawl out through the space he'd made. John was never given any bravery award for this selfless act.

I remember watching, as a young boy and from my classroom window at Abersychan Tech, Malcolm Price practicing rugby. I was mesmerized; I had never seen anyone move so smoothly and quickly while changing direction at the same time. I remember wishing that my sister Ann (Bunny) would marry Malcolm Price. Had it happened, I would have been as proud as a peacock, because Malcolm went on to play for the Royal Air Force, Wales, and the British Lions. He then changed codes and went on to play for Leeds and Great Britain rugby league teams. His touchdown (try) for Wales against Scotland at Cardiff, when he made a looping outside break between the center and the wing, without a finger being laid on him, must go down in my memory as one of the best individual scores that I've ever seen! His playing career came to an abrupt halt, however, when he sustained a serious kidney injury. Like Fuzzy, we never saw him again.

Still, none of these memories come even close to what happened one summer day as I was hitting a tennis ball against

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the end of my mother's house. Up the hill from town, the longest car I'd ever seen went past me (I now know that such a vehicle is called a stretch limo). I ran into my mother's convenience store, which once served as our living room, and between gasps told her what I'd just seen going up South View. My mother looked at me as if I were stupid, so I returned to playing tennis against the wall outside. After a few minutes, I heard our telephone ringing. I knew it was ours, because we were the only family within seven streets that had one. Next thing, my mother came flying out of the house, grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me in the direction of Prince Street, two streets up South View. Soon we were making our way up the front path to Grace Jones' house. Grace worked as a nurse at Panteg Hospital with my mother. Grace ushered us into her dining room and there, sitting at Grace's dining table, was the handsomest man I'd ever laid eyes on. Beautiful, even white teeth were set in beautifully tanned skin. He was immaculately groomed, wearing sunglasses and a Homburg hat. I was totally flabbergasted! Who could this Prince of Men be?

Well, the man was Grace's cousin, Ray Jones. Actually, Reginald Alfred John Truscott-Jones, to give his full name, but he is perhaps better known by his acting name of Ray Milland. The Hollywood idol! In his younger days, he'd worked as a mill hand at one of our local steelworks and had accordingly taken this as his stage name. I cannot remember what conversation took place on that day, because I was absolutely star-struck for around twenty minutes. Here I was, in the same room as the man who had recently won the Oscar for Best Actor in the film *Lost Weekend* (1946) and who would later star with Grace Kelly in the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *Dial M For Murder*. This man was a legend in his own lifetime, and I was breathing in the same air that he was breathing out!

By the time I came back to earth, the whole incident was over, but that day I'd learned something that would stay with me for the rest of my life: If you want to be famous, then go where fame is. If you want to be successful, go wheresuccess

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is. Don't stay at home waiting for fame and success to seek you out, because that will rarely ever happen. My awakening was this: to reach any level of notoriety or fame, I would have to go out and seek it. This is the one premise that has driven me throughout my life to travel far in search of new horizons and new adventures.