

## Cousin Billy

One winter's day in December, my sisters and I ran home from school. There was a magical excitement in the air that children can feel when they see the first Christmas trees appearing in parlour windows. Our cousin Billy who lived in Grove Terrace was just turning the street corner. He waved to us. Hiya we chorused, proud to show our friends that he was related to us. Billy was an amateur boxer and very popular in the village. People said he was an excellent dancer too. That seemed strange to me. I couldn't imagine him dancing. Such a tall, broad, gentle giant of a man. He was about thirty-years-old. I was only ten. Billy had four children two boys and two girls all younger than me.

We were all hungry and when we opened the front door the appetising smell of simmering broth with leeks and parsley wafted down the passageway. My older sister was helping my mother get the tea ready and was lifting teisen lap from the oven. The smells impregnated the house. There was a welcoming coal fire in the gleaming black leaded grate that was my mother's pride and joy, though it took an hour to clean every morning. On occasions when I wasn't well enough to attend school and the daily ritual of the fire grate cleaning began, I would be allowed to curl up on the cushioned rocking chair at the side of the grate and watch. First my mother spread sheets of newspapers out to avoid getting the cheap coconut matting dirty. The half dozen candlesticks were lifted down from the mantle shelf to be cleaned with liquid Brasso; they graduated in size and gleamed like gold. The mantle shelf had a decorative brass patterned edging tacked onto it and below this a brass rod was suspended, all cleaned and polished with Brasso.

On the hobs of the grate a large black leaded kettle simmered and sung all day. Resting on the fender was a blower. It was a large sheet of metal resembling a shield. This was placed on top of the fire to rest against the chimney breast. The blower caused the fire to draw in air. Like an angry lion, the flames roared behind it.

Sometimes late in the evening, socks would be draped over the brass rod to air, but never in daytime. The fireplace seemed majestic to me such was my mother's devotion in keep-ing it shining and bright. Black lead and Brasso competed for attention. She would have small beads of perspiration all over her face after cleaning it. The blackened rags and stained brushes were put away in a cardboard box. Everyone admired the grate but I secretly resented the fact my mother seemed to be its slave.

I remember December 19th. My sisters and I came down-stairs in our winceyette nightgowns. Breakfast toast was keeping warm on the fender. It seemed a day like any other. The wind was howling and rattling our back kitchen sash window like an invisible, uninvited, guest trying to get in. When we were dressed and ready, black fur pixie hats were fastened securely under our chins before we set off up the rough hill at the side of Stanley Street to school. The hats had been made out of an old simulated fur coat that had belonged to a neighbour. When we walked home from school at tea time the first of winter's snow-flakes covered our hats, swirling around us, kissing our noses and landing on eye lashes like soft feathers. We shrieked with delight.

I knew something was wrong when I came into the house. The fire burned brightly banked high with small coal, but the grate was not cleaned. It was thick with last night's coal dust . 'Hurry up and eat your tea quickly girls,' my mother said. 'I want you in bed early tonight.' Her eyes were red as if they had been rubbed. 'You've been crying, our Mam,' I accused.

My father and brothers were out the back kitchen. The door was closed as they bathed in a tin bath by a smaller fire grate. Their voices were whispering but I heard my uncle Dai's name mentioned once or twice. My father, older brothers, cousins and uncles were all coalminers and worked at 'The Windsor Colliery' in Abertridwr. After we had eaten our tea, my mother told us quite simply that cousin Billy had been killed at his job underground at the mine.

Billy's funeral was held on Christmas Eve.

By Ethel Oates