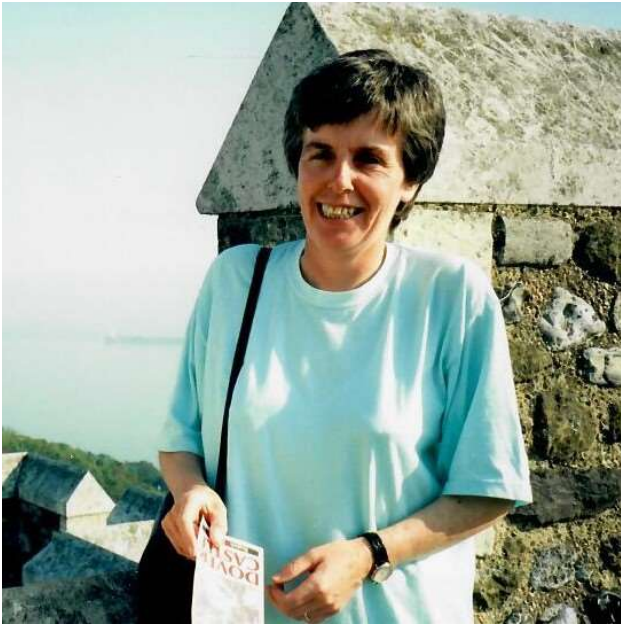


“SHE CAME FROM HEAVEN
AND DANCED ON THE EARTH” *

The Rhondda Valley in the south of Wales does not immediately suggest celestial. In the middle of the last century it was a coalmining area and it was from one of its many villages that Jen emerged. Perhaps it was the very harshness of the life there that drove the people, the men in particular, to create something that would lift them above and beyond the black stuff. And that something was music and the beauty of the Welsh Male Choirs. Jen was a product of that life and music permeated her being to the point that I suspected her very thinking was done in song.



She was already a trained teacher when she and I and a number of others shared a house in South London. We were a mixed bunch, mainly English and Irish with a single Welsh representative. Jen had a gaiety and a lightness that was infectious and a generosity that knew no limits. Small in stature but big in heart, she resisted formality at every turn. I never knew her to wear skirts or dresses. She dressed mostly in jeans with casual tops and sweaters, boots or sandals depending on the season. She adored stage musicals in particular and attended every production of Andrew Lloyd Webber. She knew the songs by heart and could be heard singing them any time of the day or night with rugby gusto. And when her beloved team

togged out for their country, Jen joined the supporting flag-waving crowd as they belted out,

“They were singing
hymns and arias
Land of our fathers “

Classroom teaching was not for Jen. She strained against the rigidity of the syllabus and the regimentation of children. A short stint in a regular primary school was as much as she could tolerate. So she became a peripatetic teacher for the scattered groups of the travelling community in the greater London area. Working with the marginalized proved to be her true calling and she was in her element driving from one site to the next with the freedom to organize her visits to children who were hungry for what she had to offer. Jen always claimed that she gained far more from her contact with that community than she ever gave. An old faded moss green Morris Minor, called Millie, was her mode of transport. She sat low in the driver’s seat, her head barely visible above the steering wheel so that from a distance, Millie appeared to be driverless. But they were a duo with the drone of the engine providing the accompaniment to Jen’s vocal efforts.

Jen did not confine her motoring to the task of teaching. Many trips were made to railway stations and to Gatwick or Heathrow Airports to ensure that friends got that flight or to meet travel weary friends who were arriving from

far-flung countries or continents at ungodly hours of the morning. I have a vivid memory of accompanying her on one of those journeys late one night. We had waved goodbye to the traveller in the airport terminal and made our way back to the carpark. We then discovered that neither of us could remember where we had left the car. We lost track of time as we roamed countless rows of vehicles while I promised all sorts to St. Anthony if only he would help us to locate Millie. Meanwhile, Jen sang new words to "Don't cry for me Argentina" as she appealed to Millie to show herself. Which she did. Eventually. They were great pals and in all their years of partnership, that car never let Jen down.

As time went on, bigger vistas opened up for Jen. The plight of women and children in post war poverty in Africa drew her and she found a different and more demanding outlet for her energy and generosity firstly in East Africa, later in West Africa and finally in the Cameroons. We maintained contact throughout those years and she was always a joy to spend time with when the opportunity allowed us to share our individual experiences. She retained her Welshness - the beautiful lilt of the Welsh accent, her passion for rugby and music and an independence of mind.

Over twenty years ago my son was born and Jen was almost as ecstatic as I was when she sang her congratulations to me by phone. She was planning to be in Dublin at some meeting and hoped to visit us before her return to England. She made it to Dublin but not to Naas. I was terribly disappointed as I wanted her to see this miracle of mine in the flesh. She contacted me to explain her situation, how the meeting had over run and that next time she was home from Africa there would be a firm plan in place and she would see my son and heir. It was not to be. The Cameroon claimed her through a fatal illness and she is buried there.

* A quotation from a park bench somewhere in the south of England.

Maria Higgins.

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