

KAREN ALLEN

Circa 1979

My family - minus my father - moved to a new council house on the Turner Avenue North estate at Illingworth. Our address was 21 Dudley Crescent. I think we moved to be closer to my Aunty Jean, (an amazingly strong and ever-patient woman of steel), who took care of my ten-year-old twin and I during the holidays whilst mum went to work.

This rambling estate is surrounded on 2 sides by steep hills and beautiful countryside: farmer's fields where we roamed free during those halcyon days of summer, climbing the steep rocks of 'Bank Edge' which overlook the Mixenden valley.

The ginnels were our shelter from the rain on days when Aunty Jean, at the end of her tether, told the seven kids in her care to "Go out and play". They were the passages between houses, with the structure overhead being the fourth bedroom of one house adjoined to the one next door. Our voices echoed in the tunnels they formed, the wind whistling through them, as our tennis balls in socks bashed against the walls, under arms and legs, backs pressed against the bricks... "Want a cigarette sir? Yes sir, no sir..." we chanted in time to the rhythmic thrashing. The neighbours weren't too happy though...

Endless games of 'Relievo': being 'on', counting to 100 against the lamp-post with my eyes shut, then trying to find my cousins in their hiding places. Racing back to the base only to find our Peter freeing those I had caught by touching the lamp-post and shouting 'Relievo' at the top of his lungs, and them all running away again as I started back at one, two, three...

Making daisy-chains and 'petal perfume' from Aunty Jean's roses. Mud pies at the bottom of the back garden. Kids falling out in lumps, but best friends again tomorrow.

Most of the back paths and ginnels are gone now, blocked off or bricked up for safety, as is the play area with the swings and high slide, climbing frame and treacherous roundabout, where I split my lip because I didn't hold on tight enough and hit the ground with my face. No soft landings there - just rough tarmac. But back then the bruised knees and gravelly grazes were worn as badges of honour.

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We lived at the top of the estate, where in my hazy memory the houses were generally tidier and pretty well-kept. If you travel down Turner Avenue and followed the road round, past what was the old Morrisons car park, you come to Furness Drive, which was a no-go area – unless you wanted to be chased and beaten by the Furness kids. Although... that may have been a myth. The nearest I got was the back road to the supermarket, I was too scared to venture further and find out.

Furness Drive remains pretty much the same to look at as it did back in the '70s and '80s – worn down and a bit decrepit. But the decrepitness seems to have seeped up the hill, engulfing our old stomping ground in a sadness that I don't remember as a child. The current residents have tried to make the houses look nice, they've pruned and painted. The new buildings, which have replaced the play area and old maisonettes, shiny and bright in comparison, make the old pre-fab council houses look tired and dated.

Huge fences and posts with 24-hour CCTV cameras line Bank Edge now, installed to imply safety to the residents, giving a Big Brother feel to the area. And, as you look out across the valley at the windmills at Ovenden Wood and the beauty of the moorlands and fields, it's all a bit caged in and claustrophobic.

Strange, considering how free we felt there as children.

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