

# The Power and the Glory

By Lynne Tildesley

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied  
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!  
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;  
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;  
The old snows melt from every mountain-side,  
And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;  
But last year's bitter loving must remain  
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide!

There are a hundred places where I fear  
To go, so with his memory they brim!  
And entering with relief some quiet place  
Where never fell his foot or shone his face  
I say, "There is no memory of him here!"  
And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

Edna St. Vincent Millay 1917

I was fifty-two when my Dad died, so you would think that I would be sort of prepared wouldn't you? But no. He was invincible. As I think back, he never had a day off work through illness in all his life. Even when he sliced a chunk off his knee with sheet steel, he just popped to the hospital and went back to work. Work – that lovely earthy smell on his overalls as he came in at night and I hugged him. I smell it now. He wasn't perfect my Dad, he had quite a temper if roused and he smoked for Britain, whilst telling me and my brother Darryll what a bad habit it was! We never smoked and Darryll never had a temper. He was like Mom who just got on with things. I had to make a point at times, like Dad and that's why we clashed sometimes.

The shockwaves of his dying remains with me, so in writing this chapter I'll add in some of the more light-hearted moments, including my happy childhood just so you don't slash your wrists. One very funny memory (kept our family laughing for years) was that when I was a child Dad was late back from work. We were all a bit worried and I said to Mom, "Mom, if Dad's got run over, can I have his dinner?" I clearly had a food issue even back then.

Dad was a real Black Country man – proud, hard-working and stoical. He was born in Oldbury. I have a theory that Black Country people are only really happy if it hurts. For example, they have to work sixty hours a week, then they're ecstatic. They

moan like hell every budget day when the fags and beer go up but it wouldn't enter their heads to give up. The Chancellor's a bastard out to get the working man, especially if he's a Tory! My Grandfather, upon learning the Tories had won the election would say, "Oh we'n 'av some stick now. The rich'll get richer an' the poor'll get poorer."

Dad, as often as not worked seven days a week. He was a Constructional and Engineering Plater and had been apprenticed to ICI, but worked for a smaller firm, Halesowen Motors when we were growing up. His boss couldn't believe his luck, having a man who could actually read from drawings and got the jobs done in minimum time. If there were any special jobs on, like fancy ironwork railings for pubs and restaurants or jobs in Ireland, Dad was the man. Consequently, and this was always Dad's primary rule – there was to be good food on the table and believe me, Mom knew how to cook good food. It was usually plain, meat and two veg or the more obscure sheep's brains on toast; chitterling in vinegar; (intestines) pig's trotters; jellied eels; grorty pudding or fresh crab, my favourite. I adored the texture; the strong fishy smell; I was fascinated by the two coloured meats, red and white, and liked nothing better than to tuck in to the claws with Dad, fishing the meat out with the end of a spoon. We wanted for nothing and our family loved to party. Dad and Uncle Jack were the two jokers of the family and the funniest joke to tickle me and one I never forgot was:

We've got a dog who's a blacksmith. You kick him up the arse and he makes a bolt for the door.

We all laughed till we cried at parties with me and Mo, my cousin trying to out-do each other by dressing up and singing as Ruby Murray and Connie Francis. We dressed up most Fridays and gave a concert to the adults. No wonder the men all went out for a pint.

I wasn't allowed out of our back yard at Halesowen, as there was a busy main road at the entry. Many a squashed cat had flipped over the wall<sup>1</sup> down into the brook below – a delicious treat for the rats as the tables were turned. So I spent a fair amount of time wandering between the other two houses in our block, amazingly both Mrs Tildesleys. No relation at all. Anyway, I was Hickman back then in 1954.

One of my first memories is standing on old Mrs Tildesley's doorstep, staring at a party going on. She was very very old, probably eighty or more, with a daughter Beth, who was also old. Beth would go into the brew house and crash around the saucepans and crockery, swearing at the top of her voice at nobody in particular. She

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<sup>1</sup> The squashed cat, I assume had been hit, killed, but carried on running, as in the case of the headless chicken who still runs around. Their 'nerves' kept them going for a few minutes.

must have suffered from Tourettes, but of course we didn't know about such things back then. Anyway, Beth didn't frighten me. My Dad could shout louder than her. I was used to loud.

If this party was Sunday tea, it was very elaborate. I should say it was a birthday. I took a first tentative step up into the back room. There was a heavy looking iron on the black grate, with a folded tea towel wrapped around the handle. I noticed it because it had no wire attached like my Mom's iron. It seemed very old-fashioned to me even then. They must have heated it up on the grate or fire. From the kitchen staring into the front parlour, I spied little triangle pieces on plates with frilly doilies. There were crisps, pickled onions and various meats; bowls of fruit salad, trifles, jellies and blancmanges, all the colours of the rainbow. But the real piece de resistance for me was a tall, tiered cake stand choc full of fairy cakes, smoothly iced, with pretty, crinkly violet flowers adorning their crest. I imagined biting off the nipple and slurping my way down to the rest of the soft golden sponge below. I couldn't take my eyes off the cake stand. I had never encountered such beautifully decorated cakes before, nor such a skilfully arranged miscellany of foods all on one table.

I must have drooled, as the amused adults invited me inside. "Would you like one?" I was asked, "Take two." What a prophetic invitation that would turn out to be! I swear that was where my love affair with food began and much later, my on-off relationships with Slimming World, Weight Watchers, the Cambridge, the Atkins, the Cabbage Soup, Slimfast, Rosemary Conley.....Oh Mrs Tildesley, what have you done?

Tenter Street Nursery at Halesowen was good but we were made to lie down on a bed with a rough red blanket over us, after lunch. I hated that. I would lie there determined not to close my eyes. On the whole though I loved it, especially the garden where we took the toys down the narrow path to the orchard. I especially loved the see-saw, a simple frame of iron bent to fit little bums on canvas seats. We rocked and rocked and rocked. Was this an infant's first taste of becoming one with the universe, the dark green foliage swaying in unison above? And the sun's rays glistened through the branches making me close my eyes, but it remained bright in my head. Was it a sensation from the womb, this overpowering utter contentment? '*The power and the glory*' popped into my head. It was from assembly that morning. Yesterday it had been '*Lead us not into temptation.*' What did they mean these lovely expressions? I knew we were talking to God but what were we saying? This must have been the beginning of my love of words: The Lord's Prayer. We rocked and rocked.

Then at milk time, the teachers made thick rusks by drying out oblongs of bread in the oven till they were rock hard, buttered them and topped them with strawberry jam. The texture was brain shatteringly crunchy. You know how you're crunching something and it's so loud in your ears that you can't hear what anyone around you says? The flavour was hard-baked, bakery-fresh, crunchy lump. Mmmmm.. I was never what you might call a teacher's pet, but could be awfully charming to obtain a second rusk. Then we had to line up for our daily spoon of cod liver oil and NHS bottled orange juice. Was I the only kid on the planet who didn't mind the taste of cod liver? It was only like Dad's jellied eels. I bet they wouldn't like our brains on toast, pig's trotters or chitterling in vinegar then. What were they all screaming at? One lad had to be 'drenched' daily, with Mrs Cook pulling him tightly against her ample frame whilst Mrs Harris rammed the teaspoon of offending oil down his throat. I wanted to shout, ' STOP! Leave him at once.' Alas, the second rusk might be at risk. Let it go. Risky rusk.

Then the Sixties came, along with the Beatles, the Mersey Sound, Tamla Motown and... the Beatles. I worked for Lloyds Bank and went to London on relief work with Joy, my friend, where we saw Lulu and the Bee Gees at Carnaby Street, but not the Beatles. We hit Portobello Road Market one Sunday and spent a whole month's wages on the latest fashions. Thank God the bank fed us at the hostel! We *rocked* we were so cool; like Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton and Julie Christie and soon the Beatles would fall out with their girlfriends and come for us. We wore pop-art and psychedelic jewellery; plastic mini skirts and tie-dye t-shirts; crazy peaked caps and white plastic boots and carried tote bags with the Beatles on. And I swear that this era must have been the greatest, happiest, hippiest decade on earth. We ate Italian. My God we watched a rude French film. Music blasted from transistors on Sundays at Clent or week-ends at the beach. How could anybody possibly be happy who did not live in the Sixties? Almost nothing surpassed it, only my marriage to Mike in January 1970 at St Kenelm's Church, Clent, then later the births of our four children, Craig, Scott, Laura and Abigail. The Beatles betrayed us anyway – they split up.

I got pregnant before the wedding – oh boy, that was a bitter pill to swallow. Dad was.....well.....he was...he wasn't pleased but look on the bright side – he was getting rid of me! Bonus. Father-in-law said we may as well get married in a registry office now. Tough shit - I'm having a white wedding in an ancient country church with loads of guests, flowers, and four bridesmaids. But wait a minute, how traditional this Sixties child? 'Rebels without a cause' and we didn't even jump in a flower power wagon and race off to Glastonbury or Gretna! Thirty-eight years on, I am still married to the same Saint Michael, probably causing him all the grief I ever caused you Dad.

And like you, he stays. Well you couldn't stay for ever but you might have stayed a bit longer.

And now I sit on the arm of the sofa, teacup in hand; the sun beams in through the glass patio doors. Life is safe, as it always was.....and I think about my wedding day when you handed me over to Mike. Then the ensuing jokes about, "Who giveth this woman...?" "I do." Then years later... "Do you want her back?" "No thanks." With eyes tight shut, the sun remains bright in my head. I imagine you out there in the garden with the children. It's easy because that's how it always was. This is what is meant by nobody ever dies. When the sun blinds and warms you, you are there transported back like in a sci-fi movie, through a portal. You'll be here in a minute. I can feel your presence with me.

**The End**