

Persil and sirloin of beef in a Newcastle kitchen

It was already past 12 o'clock. Where had they got to? Freda put more coal on the fire. It was a relief to have coal, it was a relief to be in 1952. Those wartime winters had been bleak though not as bad as that of 1947. Now that coal was less on the ration it was possible to be warm again. Freda began to worry. It was Christmas Day and her sister only had a few stops on the 49 bus. The clock ticked, the clock tocked. It was now 1 o'clock. The sprouts were ready, the batter for the Yorkshire puddings was ready. The oven was hot. The table was laid. But Nancy had the meat with her and where was she? Freda thought I'll just do a bit of dusting and clean the shoe cupboard under the stairs. Her husband shouted up from his chair next to the fire.

"Freda man, where's that sister of yours. I cannit wait any longer man. I'm clammin for me bait. I mean divvent get us wrong man, but it's Christmas Day."

"Ah calm yerself doon and al mek us a cuppa. Am rite out of fettle meself."

The clock said half past one.

"Geordie I'm ganna dee the washin: I cannit be doin with this. Them antimacassars needs a good scrub."

Freda filled the sink with hot water from the copper. It wouldn't be needed for washing up now. She put her pinny on and whisked up the soap suds. There was hot steam. She was cross, she was upset. Her arms were red in the hot water. Those sprouts had cost a fortune and even the carrots were best of the best. Looking now at the disintegrating sprouts she thought about all the times that Nancy had let her down. Late, always late. Late being born, late for

her own wedding, late for their mother's funeral. Now late, late again. Freda looked at the clock. It was half past two.

The back door flung open and in burst Nancy. Flushed, her husband Harry behind, very flushed.

"Eee Freda. I'm sorry. Harry just wanted a couple of pints and then we missed the 49 and the next bus didn't come."

"Hadaway man, I divvent believe a word of it, you've never been on time in yer life, not for nowt or owt."

"Ah come on man let's get on with wor dinners."

"Ah don't want any dinner, it's too late and anyway look at the sprouts they're not fit for the dog."

Nancy pushed her way to the sink.

"Howay hinny stop yer blathering and let us see to the meat."

Freda grabbed the beef and thumped it on the draining board. She turned to look at the clock. It was 3 o'clock.

"It's 3 o'clock and I'm not eatin now."

As she scrubbed, the sirloin of beef slithered into the soapy water with a forceful splosh and the soap suds rose up and covered her ample chest. It was a tragedy in motion. She picked up the wet beef and hurled it at Nancy. It fell to the floor and for a minute the world stood still: they stared at it.

In later years Freda realised that that would have been the moment to laugh, to burst out laughing and see the funny side but that was now. It was not then. Then it wasn't funny at all. There had been twenty-nine Christmas Days since. They had not spoken a word since Nancy said

"Howay Harry, we'll not stay where we're not wanted."

That was twenty-nine years ago. Not a card, not a letter, not a word. Geordie was dead, Harry was dead and Nancy was dead. All gone.

Freda looked at the clock. It was Christmas Day 1997. It was time for Her Majesty's speech. What was she going to say about Princess Diana's death? Would she be generous, would she forgive – if there was forgiveness that was needed. She knew now, in 1997, what she hadn't in 1952 – she knew all about generosity of spirit or the lack of it. If only they'd laughed in 1952 and had a sense of give and take.