

## **Tosh and Time**

I have written this text in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. I have used one of my nick names, Tosh, because it starts with the first letter of my first Christian name.

## **Tosh and Time**

It was way back when Tosh was just two years and three months old. He was kneeling on the coconut matting that had been lain over the stone slab floor of his grandmother's sitting room. His mother had just returned from the maternity ward at the local infirmary. He was trying to catch a glimpse of his baby brother all wrapped up in a pristine, white lace shawl. He tried to remove a bit of it so he could see a little of his brother's face but his mother warned him not to be rough. He gave up and anyway his knees were hurting after pressing on the rough coconut matting.

Another introduction took place around the same time but it was such a blur of a memory that Tosh wasn't sure if it happened or not.

"This is your grandfather," someone said. Was it his grandmother who tried to introduce them? An old man stood before him. He was tall, still and old. Did it really happen. Had he stored this hazy encounter in his memory bank for some reason? He never saw the old man again, had he died? Had he been living in a nursing home?

Tosh was testing himself on what he could remember in those early years. He recalled the day, a sunny day whilst he was standing by the front door of 84 Bright Street. He saw two dogs in wonder, he rushed into the living room and called out to his mother, "Come quick a dog is

giving another one a piggyback". His mother before him and walked as quick as she could, she was lame because she had contracted polio at Hull Fair when she was a young girl. As soon as she got to the door, she slammed it so hard, so hard! He'd never heard such a bang as the door slammed shut. The memory lingered for years. He had to be careful what he said to his mother.

Tosh had another grandmother who lived just the other side of the Holderness Road opposite the beginning of Bright Street, long since demolished now. His father's mother lived with Barney, an ex-Irish boxer with cauliflower ears, or so he had been told. Tosh tried to see how cauliflower like they looked but he couldn't see any cauliflowers sticking out of them. He was an ex-boxer who sat on a couch with copies of Tit-Bits strewn all over it. They did have a parlour, that is a room that was unused for only special occasions, which never seemed to happen. He was shown inside but there was no fire lit so they went back into the sitting room. The only other thing he could remember was the grandmother clock on the wall. It was the first and last one he had ever seen. Their visits to his father's mother were brief in duration, for some reason his mother was anxious to get to her mother's place. Had his father's step father been rough with him, he wondered. Uncle Barney, as he was known eventually hung himself from the banister in the stairwell.

Tosh spent most Saturdays at his grandmother's, on his mother's side. Tosh's mother had gone into the corner shop. She bought a decorated tea-pot. The woman who owned the shop was also one of the owners of the estate. Tosh's mother was desperate to get somewhere to live. Tosh, his mother and brother had to sleep in the double bed that his grandmother slept in. He had to sleep next to his grandmother. There

was a round table full of medicines and potions of some kind with an aspidistra right at the centre of it. The window, just behind the table looked right onto the street, no front garden at all. Old gold curtains could be further closed so no one could see inside what had become his grandmother's bedroom, now that she couldn't climb the stairs which led to the rooms above. The roof was leaking and was rotting the floor boards, however, Tosh was told never to venture up to the first floor. What was there he could only imagine.

The only other event that had happened to him occurred before he had a memory to speak of. His mother had placed him, in his perambulator, outside the bedroom window so he could get some fresh air. When his mother went back outside to see how he was, he was gone. He had been kidnapped. Eventually, with some help from the police he had been found. A young woman had taken him. Years later, Tosh wondered if the young woman had just lost a baby and was still in a mental institution.

Uncle Harold lived with his mother, Tosh's grandmother in Bright Street. He could never sustain a job. One day he had to wheel a barrow from the docks to somewhere in East Hull. It was a very slow journey because he had a boil between his buttocks. When he returned home he was told by his father to go upstairs whilst he put the kettle on the iron fireplace that took up most of a wall in the sitting room. Harold's father went upstairs and bathed the area concerned until the boil burst. That was the only story he had heard about his uncle.

On every visit to Bright Street Tosh would see the bowl of cornflakes that his grandmother had made for him to encourage him to get up. The milk had been poured on, the night before too, just to encourage uncle

Harold to get up to go to work. It never seemed to work, but then it was only on a Saturday that Tosh and his family visited them. Uncle Harold had his chair beside a bookcase full of books by Zane Gray which at times he read.

Whenever Tosh's family visited Mrs. Johnson, Tosh's grandmother and his uncle Harold they had a spot of lunch. It consisted of bread and butter and pickled onions. On good days there was cucumber too.

Each time they visited them Tosh's grandmother would put a threepenny bit in a Kraft cheese box for Tosh and his brother.

One day Tosh's mother and father took him to the North Hull Estate. It was quite a walk from the bus stop. He was taken to a house with a front garden and a passageway that led to a back garden. Except it was just bare earth. The council house was to be their new home. His father must have carried his baby brother. He remembered being placed in a perambulator by the fire. His brother was placed in a cot. There was a fire blazing away in the hearth. He was given a dummy to suck on. For some reason he threw it into the fire. His father had to go all the way to the Beverly Road for a new one at the all night shop that was part of a petrol station.

As soon as Tosh was given his new dummy it suffered the same fate. His father went again to get him another one. Yes, you've guessed it, it too, went up in flames.

"That's it, no more for you!" his mother said.

Later, he wondered if parents think that two year olds can't tell the difference being breast fed to a dummy being placed in their mouths.

Afterall, the difference between sensation and no sensation is quite stark.

The house was quite well built. For sure it was cold in the winter months and a little before and after them too. Afterall, it was cheap council rents that gave the opportunity for some tenants to save up enough for a deposit on a private home.

As soon as he was five, Tosh was enrolled in the Endyke Lane infants school. When he was six there was the coronation. The school had 30 coronation cups but there were 33 in the class so none of them got one. He had a chromium plated tea spoon but no coronation cup to stir it in. The only other thing that Tosh could remember was being hit hard by the head mistress, on his bare thighs with a table-tennisbat for not being able to spell the word Collar. Tosh hat been haunted by that experience for twenty-five years when he finally was able to spell the word

In junior school a teacher asked, "Are there any more questions? Anything at all, you'd like to ask?"

"How are babies made", Tosh asked. He hadn't believed the tale about gooseberry bushes. There was one in his back garden by then. A row of sweet Williams and half eaten cabbages. Cabbage whites were the culprits.

Did Tosh know how provocative he was being? I'll let you be the judge on that one!

Tosh's father worked so many hours that he had a physical breakdown. He had to sleep in a darkened room and neither he or his brother could

go in to see him. After a while money was running short. Tosh's mother spent the nights working on a crossword that was made up of place names on a world wide map. It was a competition she couldn't resist. She worked so hard she won £80, which was a considerable sum at the time. It paid off the grocery bill she had run up at the local store. She also bought her husband two suits. One more casual than the other. Tosh's father returned to good health and started work again.

When Tosh was eleven he had to take the 11 plus exam. The 11 plus examination was dreamt up by Cyril Burt, who claimed he had examined the I.Q. of twins separated at birth. He also included other I.Q. papers by academics based in the United States which came to the same conclusion within two decimal points. Burt not only dreamt up his own results but the American academics as well. The whole basis of the 11 plus and the Grammar Schools was based on a lie.

Of course the 11 plus survey couldn't have been done because there weren't enough twins separated at birth. Another overlooked problem was that children who were separated from their siblings were given to step-parents of a higher social class. So the result of the survey wouldn't have been as Burt claimed anyway.

When Tosh entered junior school he was in the C stream. The pupils whose parents lived in owner occupied houses were in the A stream. After all, the parents must have more lucrative careers because they were more intelligent, in order to afford to buy their own homes. Stands to reason, doesn't it! The B streams were a mixture of the two.

When Tosh took his GCE mathematic paper, there were questions that he hadn't been given instructions on: long division with decimal points was one of them. Later he also wondered if middle class parents had given their children Intelligence questionnaires.

Tosh, failed the GCE exam. He went straight into the A stream at the Secondary Modern School which was part of the Endyke Lane school he had been in until he was 11. And yes there was a dyke at the end of Endyke lane. It had, years earlier passed under the Beverly Road, that led to Beverly itself. Tosh had on occasions hiked the eight miles to Beverly. He wondered just how long ago had the place been occupied by beavers.

After the summer break Tosh was due to enter the senior school. The one thing he hadn't been warned about was a kind of mugging that went on to initiate the first year entrants. Graham, the pupil he went to school with had his head put down the toilet. Someone pulled the chain and he had an inconvenient head shower.

Tosh, on the other hand, got grabbed by an older pupil. He had placed Tosh's head between his legs, just above his ankles. He was waving his arms about and shouting, "Look, look, look."

Tosh could see the shadow of the older boy's arms waving around. He wondered what he could do to extract himself from this situation as soon as possible. He had an idea.

Tosh put his cupped hands behind the heels of the older pupil's shoes and pushed forward with his shoulders and the rest of his body. He saw

the older boys arms moving around faster and faster until the boy fell backwards onto the concrete.

Tosh got up and ran onto the football field. It was the school's playing field. Tosh ran to the middle of it and kept his distance until the bell rang out to indicate the end of play time. Some play time!

For the next week, Tosh ran to the middle of the playing field and wouldn't let anyone come within fifty feet of him.

At the end of the first year he came third to last in the class. The two pupils after him were sent down into the B stream.

There were around 33 pupils in each class. The following year he was 20<sup>th</sup> and his studies improved.

In his third year, Tosh asked a question to his art master. He was beginning to take an interest in art The question wasn't about art though. However. He learned that the art master, who also took assembly was an atheist. He asked him what that meant. He learned that atheists didn't believe in any of the gods.

Tosh tried the church. He had befriended a fellow pupil who belonged to the Salvation Army. Later on Tosh attend a Methodist church but felt no guidance from a god. He knew he could sense a tree by hugging it but how could he know that a god exists? He decided, if something couldn't be sensed it wasn't there.



Tosh's mother took him to Hammonds, the main multi floor store in Hull. It was Tosh's fourteenth birthday and he wanted some tubes of paint, artist's quality at that. He had other parcels under his arms and asked the shop assistant if she could hold them whilst he got his wallet out of his back pocket.

"What did your last slave die off?" she asked.

A few years later he would have replied, "That's an existential pre-supposition", instead Tosh said, "Starvation, I didn't feed her." He said it in such a matter of fact kind of way, that he was pleased with himself. That didn't last long, however, because his mother said, "I'm never going shopping with you again".

Tosh decided to take the smug look off his face but still felt he gave a good response to the question.

The next summer Tosh hitch-hiked to York. He visited the art gallery and part of the old town and what a shambles it was, too. He arrived back home for a late tea.

In his final year Tosh was second in the class. He couldn't take any GCE's because it was a Secondary Modern School and it just wasn't possible. When the career's adviser visited the school he asked Tosh what he would like to do?

"I'd like to be a naturalist," he said.

"Factory or shop?" the career's officer responded.

Tosh chose the shop as slightly more better than working in a factory. Doing the same thing every few seconds didn't appeal to him at all. He went for an interview at the jewelry shop and became a shop assistant.

Tosh's take home pay was £2. 19 shillings and 10 pence. He gave his mother £2 10 shillings and so he had 9 shillings and ten pence to spend in the week.

When he turned sixteen he wasn't given a rise so he left the job and became a post boy at Hull University. The post boy was the lowest of the low. The porters were above him and the head porter, Bob Long was above them all. He was the guy who announced Lady This and Lady That, at the university's grand events. He had to listen to the head porter as he sat on his grand chair that no one else was allowed to sit on. He used to ramble on and on during their tea breaks, smoking his pipe as he did so. Once, fourteen fire engines arrived because Bob Long had emptied his pipe in the waste paper basket which had caught alight and set off the fire alarms. There were nuclear materials on the university campus, that's why the fire response was so large.

Tosh decided to write a couple of poems for the staff magazine. He was surprised that they were accepted. The librarian, Philip Larkin came to the postal unit and complimented him on the writing of his poems. Tosh thought it was a compliment to encourage him to write more, which he appreciated.

Tosh found a friend who took him to a night club in town. Some guys told his friend that if he went there again he would be beaten up. There was more trouble at home, too. He had been entertaining another friend in

his room when his mother interrupted them. His friend had to leave. After he had said goodbye to his friend in the passageway he went inside to face the music. It was Bible time alright. Luckily, that chat he had with his art teacher had helped him. Afterwards, he wrote to a friend in West Hartlepool and left to visit him the following week, just a day or two after he had turned seventeen.

Postscript.

Later his Uncle Harold turned up on his mother's doorstep. He never went back to his home. At least he tried but when he went back the house had been demolished. All the family's ornaments had gone. There was some good specimens, too.

Tosh had telephoned to speak to his father. He had been out of contact for some time. He spoke to his mother who told him that his father had died.

He took the train up to hull wearing a black tie.

His mother told him that his father couldn't sleep because of a pain in his stomach. He was taken to the infirmary and was to be opened up to see what was going on inside him. There was a cancer as big as a football. When the surgeons tried to remove it there was so much bleeding that he died.

Tosh paid his mother another visit

Tosh found out that his Uncle had been walking around with a broken femur. He was in hospital and his mother had gone to visit him. The

doctor had told her that his brain had become pickled. Was that a result of staying in his bed for most of his life? He died not long afterwards.

Tosh received a letter from his mother. There were two sentences that stood out to him: “Don’t send any big letter’s through the post, they don’t go through the letter box.” (It was the catalogue to an exhibition he had work in that was touring Russia.) “And if you were thinking of coming up this year, don’t bother. There’s no room for you.”

That was the last letter Tosh had opened from his mother, which resulted in no further correspondence between him and his family. .

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