

BILL BRYSON

The Life and Times of the

THUNDERBOLT KID



'Bryson at his best:
laugh-out-loud'
Sunday Telegraph

TRAVELS THROUGH MY CHILDHOOD

About the Book

Bill Bryson's first travel book opened with the immortal line, 'I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to.' In this deeply funny new book, he travels back in time to explore the ordinary kid he once was, in the curious world of 1950s America. It was a happy time, when almost everything was good for you, including DDT, cigarettes and nuclear fallout. This is a book about one boy's growing up. But in Bryson's hands, it becomes everyone's story, one that will speak volumes - especially to anyone who has ever been young.



The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid

Bill Bryson



Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

List of Illustrations

Preface and Acknowledgements

1. Hometown
2. Welcome to Kid World
3. Birth of a Superhero
4. The Age of Excitement
5. The Pursuit of Pleasure
6. Sex and Other Distractions
7. Boom!
8. Schooldays
9. Man at Work
10. Down on the Farm
11. What, Me Worry?
12. Out and About
13. The Pubic Years
14. Farewell

Bibliography

About the Author

Also by Bill Bryson

Copyright

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The Bryson family photos [Images 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 14, 18](#) and [19](#) are from the author's own collection.

[mage 1](#): An average American family and all the food they consumed in 1951. Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware

[mage 5](#): Locust Street, Des Moines, 16 February 1953. *Dope Inferno* is showing at the cinema. State Historical Society of Iowa

[mage 7](#): The Paramount movie palace, Des Moines, 1950s. *The Florodora Girl* is showing with Al Morey and Marion Davies. State Historical Society of Iowa

[mage 8](#): Advertisement for Camel cigarettes, with a medical endorsement. Courtesy the Advertising Archives, London

[mage 10](#): 'I dreamed I went to the office in my Maidenform bra'. Courtesy the Advertising Archives, London

[mage 11](#): Naval observers watching a nuclear blast in the Pacific in the 1950s. © CORBIS

[mage 12](#): Schoolchildren practising duck and cover drill in case of nuclear attack, February 1951. © Bettmann/CORBIS

[mage 13](#): Mary McGuire, homecoming queen, in the Drake University Year Book of 1938. Special Collection at Cowles Library, Drake University, Des Moines

[mage 15](#): Chesley Bonestell's vision of Manhattan under nuclear attack. *Collier's*, 5 August 1950. Courtesy Bonestell Space Art

[mage 16](#): Spectators at the Iowa State Fair cake display, Des Moines, 1955. John Dominis/Timepix

[mage 17](#): Charles van Doren on *Twenty-One*, the TV quiz show, 11 March 1957. It was later discovered that the show had been rigged. © Bettmann/CORBIS





Preface and Acknowledgements

My kid days were pretty good ones, on the whole. My parents were patient and kind and approximately normal. They didn't chain me in the cellar. They didn't call me 'It'. I was born a boy and allowed to stay that way. My mother, as you'll see, sent me to school once in Capri pants, but otherwise there was little trauma in my upbringing.

Growing up was easy. It required no thought or effort on my part. It was going to happen anyway. So what follows isn't terribly eventful, I'm afraid. And yet it was by a very large margin the most fearful, thrilling, interesting, instructive, eye-popping, lustful, eager, troubled, untroubled, confused, serene and unnerving time of my life. Coincidentally, it was all those things for America, too.

Everything recorded here is true and really happened, more or less, but nearly all the names and a few of the details have been changed in the hope of sparing embarrassment. A small part of the story originally appeared in somewhat different form in the *New Yorker*.

As ever, I have received generous help from many quarters, and I would like to thank here, sincerely and alphabetically, Deborah Adams, Aosaf Afzal, Matthew Angerer, Charles Elliott, Larry Finlay, Will Francis, Carol Heaton, Jay Horning, Patrick Janson-Smith, Tom and Nancy Jones, Sheila Lee, Fred Morris, Steve Rubin, Marianne Velmans, Daniel Wiles, and the staff of the Drake University and Des Moines Public Libraries in Iowa and Durham University Library in England.

I remain especially grateful to Gerry Howard, my astute and ever thoughtful American publisher, for a stack of *Boys' Life* magazines, one of the best and most useful gifts I

have had in years, and to Jack Peverill of Sarasota, Florida, for the provision of copious amounts of helpful material. And of course I remain perpetually grateful to my family, not least my dear wife, Cynthia, for more help than I could begin to list, to my brother Michael, and to my incomparably wonderful, infinitely sporting mother, Mary McGuire Bryson, without whom, it goes without saying, nothing that follows would have been possible.



Chapter 1

HOMETOWN

SPRINGFIELD, ILL. (AP) - The State Senate of Illinois yesterday disbanded its Committee on Efficiency and Economy 'for reasons of efficiency and economy'.

- *Des Moines Tribune*, 6 February 1955



IN THE LATE 1950s, the Royal Canadian Air Force produced a booklet on isometrics, a form of exercise that enjoyed a short but devoted vogue with my father. The idea of isometrics was that you used any unyielding object, like a tree or wall, and pressed against it with all your might from various positions to tone and strengthen different groups of muscles. Since everybody already has access to trees and walls, you didn't need to invest in a lot of costly equipment, which I expect was what attracted my dad.

What made it unfortunate in my father's case was that he would do his isometrics on aeroplanes. At some point in every flight, he would stroll back to the galley area or the space by the emergency exit and, taking up the posture of someone trying to budge a very heavy piece of machinery, he would begin to push with his back or shoulder against the outer wall of the plane, pausing occasionally to take deep breaths before returning with quiet, determined grunts to the task.

Since it looked uncannily, if unfathomably, as if he were trying to force a hole in the side of the plane, this naturally drew attention. Businessmen in nearby seats would stare over the tops of their glasses. A stewardess would pop her head out of the galley and likewise stare, but with a certain hard caution, as if remembering some aspect of her training that she had not previously been called upon to implement.

Seeing that he had observers, my father would straighten up, smile genially and begin to outline the engaging principles behind isometrics. Then he would give a demonstration to an audience that swiftly consisted of no one. He seemed curiously incapable of feeling

embarrassment in such situations, but that was all right because I felt enough for both of us – indeed, enough for us and all the other passengers, the airline and its employees, and the whole of whatever state we were flying over.

Two things made these undertakings tolerable. The first was that back on solid ground my dad wasn't half as foolish most of the time. The second was that the purpose of these trips was always to go to a big city like Detroit or St Louis, stay in a large hotel and attend ballgames, and that excused a great deal – well, everything, in fact. My dad was a sportswriter for the *Des Moines Register*, which in those days was one of the country's best papers, and often took me along on trips through the Midwest. Sometimes these were car trips to smaller places like Sioux City or Burlington, but at least once a summer we boarded a silvery plane – a huge event in those days – and lumbered through the summery skies, up among the fleecy clouds, to a proper metropolis to watch Major League baseball, the pinnacle of the sport.

Like everything else in those days, baseball was part of a simpler world, and I was allowed to go with him into the changing rooms and dugout and on to the field before games. I have had my hair tousled by Stan Musial. I have handed Willie Mays a ball that had skittered past him as he played catch. I have lent my binoculars to Harvey Kuenn (or possibly it was Billy Hoelt) so that he could scope some busty blonde in the upper deck. Once on a hot July afternoon I sat in a nearly airless clubhouse under the left field grandstand at Wrigley Field in Chicago beside Ernie Banks, the Cubs' great shortstop, as he autographed boxes of new white baseballs (which are, incidentally, the most pleasurable aromatic things on earth, and worth spending time around anyway). Unbidden, I took it upon myself to sit beside him and pass him each new ball. This slowed the process considerably, but he gave a little smile each time and said thank you as if I had done him quite a favour. He

was the nicest human being I have ever met. It was like being friends with God.

I can't imagine there has ever been a more gratifying time or place to be alive than America in the 1950s. No country had ever known such prosperity. When the war ended the United States had \$26 billion worth of factories that hadn't existed before the war, \$140 billion in savings and war bonds just waiting to be spent, no bomb damage and practically no competition. All that American companies had to do was stop making tanks and battleships and start making Buicks and Frigidaires - and boy did they. By 1951, when I came sliding down the chute, almost 90 per cent of American families had refrigerators, and nearly three quarters had washing machines, telephones, vacuum cleaners and gas or electric stoves - things that most of the rest of the world could still only fantasize about. Americans owned 80 per cent of the world's electrical goods, controlled two-thirds of the world's productive capacity, produced over 40 per cent of its electricity, 60 per cent of its oil and 66 per cent of its steel. The 5 per cent of people on Earth who were Americans had more wealth than the other 95 per cent combined.

I don't know of anything that better conveys the happy bounty of the age than a photograph (reproduced in this volume [here](#)) that ran in *Life* magazine two weeks before my birth. It shows the Czekalinski family of Cleveland, Ohio - Steve, Stephanie and two sons, Stephen and Henry - surrounded by the two and a half tons of food that a typical blue-collar family ate in a year. Among the items they were shown with were 450 pounds of flour, 72 pounds of shortening, 56 pounds of butter, 31 chickens, 300 pounds of beef, 25 pounds of carp, 144 pounds of ham, 39 pounds of coffee, 690 pounds of potatoes, 698 quarts of milk, 131 dozen eggs, 180 loaves of bread, and 8½ gallons of ice cream, all purchased on a budget of \$25 a week. (Mr

Czekalinski made \$1.96 an hour as a shipping clerk in a Du Pont factory.) In 1951, the average American ate 50 per cent more than the average European.

No wonder people were happy. Suddenly they were able to have things they had never dreamed of having, and they couldn't believe their luck. There was, too, a wonderful simplicity of desire. It was the last time that people would be thrilled to own a toaster or waffle iron. If you bought a major appliance, you invited the neighbours round to have a look at it. When I was about four my parents bought an Amana Stor-Mor refrigerator and for at least six months it was like an honoured guest in our kitchen. I'm sure they'd have drawn it up to the table at dinner if it hadn't been so heavy. When visitors dropped by unexpectedly, my father would say: 'Oh, Mary, is there any iced tea in the Amana?' Then to the guests he'd add significantly: 'There usually is. It's a Stor-Mor.'

'Oh, a Stor-Mor,' the male visitor would say and raise his eyebrows in the manner of someone who appreciates quality cooling. 'We thought about getting a Stor-Mor ourselves, but in the end we went for a Philco Shur-Kool. Alice loved the E-Z Glide vegetable drawer and you can get a full quart of ice cream in the freezer box. *That* was a big selling point for Wendell Junior, as you can imagine!'

They'd all have a good laugh at that and then sit around drinking iced tea and talking appliances for an hour or so. No human beings had ever been quite this happy before.

People looked forward to the future, too, in ways they never would again. Soon, according to every magazine, we were going to have underwater cities off every coast, space colonies inside giant spheres of glass, atomic trains and airliners, personal jetpacks, a gyrocopter in every driveway, cars that turned into boats or even submarines, moving sidewalks to whisk us effortlessly to schools and offices, dome-roofed automobiles that drove themselves along sleek superhighways allowing Mom, Dad and the two boys (Chip

and Bud or Skip and Scooter) to play a board game or wave to a neighbour in a passing gyrocopter or just sit back and enjoy saying some of those delightful words that existed in the Fifties and are no longer heard: *mimeograph, rotisserie, stenographer, ice box, rutabaga, panty raid, bobby sox, sputnik, beatnik, canasta, Cinerama, Moose Lodge, pinochle, daddy-o.*

For those who couldn't wait for underwater cities and self-driving cars, thousands of smaller enrichments were available right now. If you were to avail yourself of all that was on offer from advertisers in a single issue of, let's say, *Popular Science* magazine from, let's say, December 1956, you could, among much else, teach yourself ventriloquism, learn to cut meat (by correspondence or in person at the National School of Meat Cutting in Toledo, Ohio), embark on a lucrative career sharpening skates door to door, arrange to sell fire extinguishers from home, end rupture troubles once and for all, build radios, repair radios, perform on radio, talk on radio to people in different countries and possibly different planets, improve your personality, get a personality, acquire a manly physique, learn to dance, create personalized stationery for profit, or 'make \$\$\$\$' in your spare time at home building lawn figures and other novelty ornaments.

My brother, who was normally quite an intelligent human being, once invested in a booklet that promised to teach him how to throw his voice. He would say something unintelligible through rigid lips, then quickly step aside and say, 'That sounded like it came from over there, didn't it?' He also saw an ad in *Mechanics Illustrated* that invited him to enjoy colour television at home for 65 cents plus postage, placed an order and four weeks later received in the mail a multi-coloured sheet of transparent plastic that he was instructed to tape over the television screen and watch the image through.

Having spent the money, my brother refused to concede that it was a touch disappointing. When a human face moved into the pinkish part of the screen or a section of lawn briefly coincided with the green portion, he would leap up in triumph. 'Look! Look! *That's* what colour television's gonna look like,' he would say. 'This is all just experimental, you see.'

In fact, colour television didn't come to our neighbourhood until nearly the end of the decade, when Mr Kiessler on St John's Road bought an enormous RCA Victor Consolette, the flagship of the RCA fleet, for a lot of money. For at least two years his was the only known colour television in private ownership, which made it a fantastic novelty. On Saturday evenings the children of the neighbourhood would steal into his yard and stand in his flowerbeds to watch a programme called *My Living Doll* through the double window behind his sofa. I am pretty certain that Mr Kiessler didn't realize that two dozen children of various ages and sizes were silently watching the TV with him or he wouldn't have played with himself quite so enthusiastically every time Julie Newmar bounded on to the screen. I assumed it was some sort of isometrics.

Every year for nearly forty years, from 1945 until his retirement, my father went to the baseball World Series for the *Register*. It was, by an immeasurably wide margin, the high point of his working year. Not only did he get to live it up for two weeks on expenses in some of the nation's most cosmopolitan and exciting cities - and from Des Moines all cities are cosmopolitan and exciting - but he also got to witness many of the most memorable moments of baseball history: Al Gionfriddo's miraculous one-handed catch of a Joe DiMaggio line drive, Don Larsen's perfect game in 1956, Bill Mazeroski's series-winning home run of 1960. These will mean nothing to you, I know - they would mean

nothing to most people these days - but they were moments of near ecstasy that were shared by a nation.

In those days, World Series games were played during the day, so you had to bunk off school or develop a convenient chest infection ('Jeez, Mom, the teacher said there's a lot of TB going around') if you wanted to see a game. Crowds would lingeringly gather wherever a radio was on or a TV played. Getting to watch or listen to any part of a World Series game, even half an inning at lunchtime, became a kind of illicit thrill. And if you did happen to be there when something monumental occurred, you would remember it for the rest of your life. My father had an uncanny knack for being present at such moments - never more so than in the seminal (and what an apt word that can sometimes be) season of 1951 when our story begins.

In the National League (one of two principal divisions in Major League baseball, the other being the American League) the Brooklyn Dodgers had been cruising towards an easy championship when, in mid-August, their crosstown rivals the New York Giants stirred to life and began a highly improbable comeback. Suddenly the Giants could do no wrong. They won thirty-seven of forty-four games down the home stretch, cutting away at the Dodgers' once-unassailable lead in what began to seem a fateful manner. By mid-September people talked of little else but whether the Dodgers could hold on. Many dropped dead from the heat and excitement. The two teams finished the season in a perfect dead heat, so a three-game playoff series was hastily arranged to determine who would face the American League champions in the World Series. The *Register*, like nearly all distant papers, didn't dispatch a reporter to these impromptu playoffs, but elected to rely on wire services for its coverage until the Series proper got under way.

The playoffs added three days to the nation's exquisite torment. The two teams split the first two games, so it came down to a third, deciding game. At last the Dodgers appeared to recover their former poise and invincibility. They took a comfortable 4-1 lead into the final inning, and needed just three outs to win. But the Giants struck back, scoring a run and putting two more runners on base when Bobby Thomson (born in Glasgow, you may be proud to know) stepped to the plate. What Thomson did that afternoon in the gathering dusk of autumn has been many times voted the greatest moment in baseball history.

'Dodger reliever Ralph Branca threw a pitch that made history yesterday,' one of those present wrote. 'Unfortunately it made history for someone else. Bobby Thomson, the "Flying Scotsman," swatted Branca's second offering over the left field wall for a game-winning home run so momentous, so startling, that it was greeted with a moment's stunned silence.

'Then, when realization of the miracle came, the double-decked stands of the Polo Grounds rocked on their 40-year-old foundations. The Giants had won the pennant, completing one of the unlikeliest comebacks baseball has ever seen.'

The author of those words was my father - who was abruptly, unexpectedly, present for Thomson's moment of majesty. Goodness knows how he had talked the notoriously frugal management of the *Register* into sending him the one thousand one hundred and thirty-two miles from Des Moines to New York for the crucial deciding game - an act of rash expenditure radically out of keeping with decades of careful precedent - or how he had managed to secure credentials and a place in the press box at such a late hour.

But then he had to be there. It was part of his fate, too. I am not *exactly* suggesting that Bobby Thomson hit that home run because my father was there or that he wouldn't have hit it if my father had not been there. All I am saying

is that my father was there and Bobby Thomson was there and the home run was hit and these things couldn't have been otherwise.

My father stayed on for the World Series, in which the Yankees beat the Giants fairly easily in six games - there was only so much excitement the world could muster, or take, in a single autumn, I guess - then returned to his usual quiet life in Des Moines. Just over a month later, on a cold, snowy day in early December, his wife went into Mercy Hospital and with very little fuss gave birth to a baby boy: their third child, second son, first superhero. They named him William, after his father. They would call him Billy until he was old enough to ask them not to.

* * *

Apart from baseball's greatest home run and the birth of the Thunderbolt Kid, 1951 was not a hugely eventful year in America. Harry Truman was President, but would shortly make way for Dwight D. Eisenhower. The war in Korea was in full swing and not going well. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg had just been notoriously convicted of spying for the Soviet Union, but would sit in prison for two years more before being taken to the electric chair. In Topeka, Kansas, a mild-mannered black man named Oliver Brown sued the local school board for requiring his daughter to travel twenty-one blocks to an all-black school when a perfectly good white one was just seven blocks away. The case, immortalized as *Brown v. the Board of Education*, would be one of the most far-reaching in modern American history, but wouldn't become known outside jurisprudence circles for another three years when it reached the Supreme Court.

America in 1951 had a population of one hundred and fifty million, slightly more than half as much as today, and only about a quarter as many cars. Men wore hats and ties almost everywhere they went. Women prepared every meal more or less from scratch. Milk came in bottles. The

postman came on foot. Total government spending was \$50 billion a year, compared with \$2,500 billion now.

I Love Lucy made its television debut on 15 October, and Roy Rogers, the singing cowboy, followed in December. In Oak Ridge, Tennessee, that autumn police seized a youth on suspicion of possessing narcotics when he was found with some peculiar brown powder, but he was released when it was shown that it was a new product called instant coffee. Also new, or not quite yet invented, were ball-point pens, fast foods, TV dinners, electric can openers, shopping malls, freeways, supermarkets, suburban sprawl, domestic air conditioning, power steering, automatic transmissions, contact lenses, credit cards, tape recorders, garbage disposals, dishwashers, long-playing records, portable record players, Major League baseball teams west of St Louis, and the hydrogen bomb. Microwave ovens were available, but weighed seven hundred pounds. Jet travel, Velcro, transistor radios and computers smaller than a small building were all still some years off.

Nuclear war was much on people's minds. In New York on Wednesday 5 December, the streets became eerily empty for seven minutes as the city underwent 'the biggest air raid drill of the atomic age', according to *Life* magazine, when a thousand sirens blared and people scrambled (well, actually walked jovially, pausing upon request to pose for photographs) to designated shelters, which meant essentially the inside of any reasonably solid building. *Life's* photos showed Santa Claus happily leading a group of children out of Macy's, half-lathered men and their barbers trooping out of barber shops, and curvy models from a swimwear shoot shivering and feigning good-natured dismay as they emerged from their studio, secure in the knowledge that a picture in *Life* would do their careers no harm at all. Only restaurant patrons were excused from taking part in the exercise on the grounds

that New Yorkers sent from a restaurant without paying were unlikely to be seen again.

Closer to home, in the biggest raid of its type ever undertaken in Des Moines, police arrested nine women for prostitution at the old Cargill Hotel at Seventh and Grand downtown. It was quite an operation. Eighty officers stormed the building just after midnight, but the hotel's resident ladies were nowhere to be found. Only by taking exacting measurements were the police able to discover, after six hours of searching, a cavity behind an upstairs wall. There they found nine goose-pimpled, mostly naked women. All were arrested for prostitution and fined \$1,000 each. I can't help wondering if the police would have persevered quite so diligently if it had been naked men they were looking for.

The eighth of December 1951 marked the tenth anniversary of America's entry into the Second World War, and the tenth anniversary plus one day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In central Iowa, it was a cold day with light snow and a high temperature of 28°F/-2°C but with the swollen clouds of a blizzard approaching from the west. Des Moines, a city of two hundred thousand people, gained ten new citizens that day - seven boys and three girls - and lost just two to death.

Christmas was in the air. Prosperity was evident everywhere in Christmas ads that year. Cartons of cigarettes bearing sprigs of holly and other seasonal decorations were very popular, as were electrical items of every type. Gadgets were much in vogue. My father bought my mother a hand-operated ice crusher, for creating shaved ice for cocktails, which converted perfectly good ice cubes into a small amount of cool water after twenty minutes of vigorous cranking. It was never used beyond New Year's Eve 1951, but it did grace a corner of the kitchen counter until well into the 1970s.

Tucked among the smiling ads and happy features were hints of deeper anxieties, however. *Reader's Digest* that autumn was asking 'Who Owns Your Child's Mind?' (Teachers with Communist sympathies apparently.) Polio was so rife that even *House Beautiful* ran an article on how to reduce risks for one's children. Among its tips (nearly all ineffective) were to keep all food covered, avoid sitting in cold water or wet bathing suits, get plenty of rest and, above all, be wary of 'admitting new people to the family circle'.

Harper's magazine in December struck a sombre economic note with an article by Nancy B. Mavity on an unsettling new phenomenon, the two-income family, in which husband and wife both went out to work to pay for a more ambitious lifestyle. Mavity's worry was not how women would cope with the demands of employment on top of child-rearing and housework, but rather what this would do to the man's traditional standing as breadwinner. 'I'd be ashamed to let my wife work,' one man told Mavity tartly, and it was clear from her tone that Mavity expected most readers to agree. Remarkably, until the war many women in America had been unable to work whether they wanted to or not. Up until Pearl Harbor, half of the forty-eight states had laws making it illegal to employ a married woman.

In this respect my father was commendably - I would even say enthusiastically - liberal, for there was nothing about my mother's earning capacity that didn't gladden his heart. She, too, worked for the *Des Moines Register*, as the Home Furnishings Editor, in which capacity she provided calm reassurance to two generations of homemakers who were anxious to know whether the time had come for paisley in the bedroom, whether they should have square sofa cushions or round, even whether their house itself passed muster. 'The one-story ranch house is here to stay,' she assured her readers, to presumed cries of relief in the

western suburbs, in her last piece before disappearing to have me.

Because they both worked we were better off than most people of our socio-economic background (which in Des Moines in the 1950s was most people). We - that is to say, my parents, my brother Michael, my sister Mary Elizabeth (or Betty) and I - had a bigger house on a larger lot than most of my parents' colleagues. It was a white clapboard house with black shutters and a big screened porch atop a shady hill on the best side of town.

My sister and brother were considerably older than I - my sister by six years, my brother by nine - and so were effectively adults from my perspective. They were big enough to be seldom around for most of my childhood. For the first few years of my life, I shared a small bedroom with my brother. We got along fine. My brother had constant colds and allergies, and owned at least four hundred cotton handkerchiefs, which he devotedly filled with great honks and then pushed into any convenient resting place - under the mattress, between sofa cushions, behind the curtains. When I was nine he left for college and a life as a journalist in New York City, never to return permanently, and I had the room to myself after that. But I was still finding his handkerchiefs when I was in high school.

The only downside of my mother's working was that it put a little pressure on her with regard to running the home and particularly with regard to dinner, which frankly was not her strong suit anyway. My mother always ran late and was dangerously forgetful into the bargain. You soon learned to stand aside about ten to six every evening, for it was then that she would fly in the back door, throw something in the oven, and disappear into some other quarter of the house to embark on the thousand other household tasks that greeted her each evening. In consequence she nearly always forgot about dinner until a point slightly beyond way too late. As a rule you knew it

was time to eat when you could hear potatoes exploding in the oven.

We didn't call it the kitchen in our house. We called it the Burns Unit.

'It's a bit burned,' my mother would say apologetically at every meal, presenting you with a piece of meat that looked like something - a much-loved pet perhaps - salvaged from a tragic house fire. 'But I think I scraped off most of the burned part,' she would add, overlooking that this included every bit of it that had once been flesh.

Happily, all this suited my father. His palate only responded to two tastes - burned and ice cream - so everything was fine by him so long as it was sufficiently dark and not too startlingly flavourful. Theirs truly was a marriage made in heaven, for no one could burn food like my mother or eat it like my dad.

As part of her job, my mother bought stacks of housekeeping magazines - *House Beautiful*, *House and Garden*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping* - and I read these with a certain avidity, partly because they were always lying around and in our house all idle moments were spent reading something, and partly because they depicted lives so absorbingly at variance with our own. The housewives in my mother's magazines were so collected, so organized, so calmly on top of things, and their food was perfect - their *lives* were perfect. They dressed up to take their food out of the oven! There were no black circles on the ceiling above their stoves, no mutating goo climbing over the sides of their forgotten saucepans. Children didn't have to be ordered to stand back every time they opened *their* oven doors. And their foods - baked Alaska, lobster Newburg, chicken cacciatore - why, these were dishes we didn't even dream of, much less encounter, in Iowa.

Like most people in Iowa in the 1950s, we were more cautious eaters in our house.^{[fn1](#)} On the rare occasions when we were presented with food with which we were not comfortable or familiar - on planes or trains or when invited to a meal cooked by someone who was not herself from Iowa - we tended to tilt it up carefully with a knife and examine it from every angle as if determining whether it might need to be defused. Once on a trip to San Francisco my father was taken by friends to a Chinese restaurant and he described it to us afterwards in the sombre tones of someone recounting a near-death experience.

'And they eat it with sticks, you know,' he added knowledgeably.

'Goodness!' said my mother.

'I would rather have gas gangrene than go through that again,' my father added grimly.

In our house we didn't eat:

- pasta, rice, cream cheese, sour cream, garlic, mayonnaise, onions, corned beef, pastrami, salami or foreign food of any type, except French toast;
- bread that wasn't white and at least 65 per cent air;
- spices other than salt, pepper and maple syrup;
- fish that was any shape other than rectangular and not coated in bright orange breadcrumbs, and then only on Fridays and only when my mother remembered it was Friday, which in fact was not often;
- soups not blessed by Campbell's and only a very few of those;
- anything with dubious regional names like 'pone' or 'gumbo' or foods that had at any time been an esteemed staple of slaves or peasants.