

Monday

You mean you can't hang out your washing in Washington!

By Margaret A. M. Tong

In the 1950s and 60s, I lived in the North East of Scotland in the town of Buckie, a fishing port. My Father and Grandfather were herring fishermen and were part of the Scottish fishing fleet which followed the shoals of herring round the coast of Britain. I grew up with the traditions and culture of the herring fishing community.

I left home at seventeen, and have lived in the Bay Area since 1978, but I've never forgotten the instructions of my Mother and Grandmother.

Most find doing laundry a mundane household chore, but for me it is a ritual which keeps me connected to my roots. I've never been able to wash out the memories of my childhood.

I learned to name the days of the week by the household activities associated with them. I knew Monday because it was Washing Day.

We had no washing machine until Uncle Bill-from-Canada bought one for us in 1958, so everything was washed, and SCRUBBED, by hand. Once a year, we washed the blankets and these were washed by feet in a big zinc tub outdoors. Mam tucked her skirt into her underwear and got into the tub to "tramp the blankets."

On Mondays, no matter what the weather was like, the fire in Granny's living room was lit because it had a back boiler that heated the water for the house. There was no way to regulate the water temperature and it always came out of the hot tap in a scalding stream.

The washing was done in the wooden shed with a corrugated iron roof which was built on to the back of the house. We used the shed for more than laundry; it was also a coal shed, a kitchen, where we stripped washed and washed our hair. Our toilet was in a little cubicle made private by a door with a bolt. There were two deep sinks with a wringer between them, and a big black boiler for boiling the clothes.

Mam rose early to 'steep' the white clothes in a bleach solution. The washing was divided into categories according to use, colour and material, Dad's white Sunday shirt being in a class by itself. Mam called our underwear "smalls," but it seemed to me that Granny's voluminous knickers would have been better described as "biggs."

After Breakfast, Mam rinsed the pre-soaked clothes and filled the left-hand sink with hand-scalding water and with a scrubbing brush and a big green bar of soap she attacked the washing on a scrubbing board. Granny turned the handle of the wringer and rinsed the soapy clothes in clean water in the other sink.

In the Autumn the Herring fleet went south to Great Yarmouth, a port on the east coast of England. While they were there, Dad and Grandad sent their clothes home in canvas sea bags to be washed. I have a memory of being 4 years' old, sitting by the back door on my stool, "scrapin' the oo" ("oo" is "wool" in local dialect) from Grandad's woollen underwear with a blunt knife. Granny had hand-knitted these longjohns to protect against the cold. They had a removable cotton lining, and Grandad wore them under his sea trousers. It was my job to scrape off the piled wool before they were washed.

The windows of the shed fogged up with the steam from the clothes boiling in the black coal-fired boiler. White sheets, towels and cotton underwear were boiled after the scrubbing, and when the sun shone, laid out on the patch of the grass behind the shed to bleach. Modern fabric would be reduced to shreds by this treatment.

A clothes line stretched from the back gate to the shed, and Mam hung smaller things there, the 'smalls', socks, nightdresses and pajamas. I handed her the pegs, and she instructed me, "Like with like, whites together, socks together, heels to the left, all in a straight line." When I grew tall enough to hang the washing out she made me rehang it if it wasn't "put up right."

The "heid o' the brae" (top of the hill), just by the house, was an open space that was used by everyone in the neighbourhood as a drying green. There is a bungalow on that site now, but my early memory is of washing lines hung between poles which Mam and the neighbourhood women used to hang their sheets and blankets. It was a cooperative effort, helping each other hoist the heavy woollen blankets over the lines, and then raising them to the wind with the "hizer" as we called the clothes prop, a long pole with a v-shaped notch at one end. Wind was essential for drying. "A gweed drocht" (a drying breeze) was always very welcome on Mondays.

The wind blew everything white. It made white caps on the steely Moray Firth, and swept white foam crashing on the rocks, as it buffeted the hungry, white-breasted seagulls protesting hungrily over-head. It filled the sheets and blankets till they bulged like white sails that would have blown out to sea had they not been securely fastened to the line by pegs.

The seagulls went hungry on Mondays. To toss crumbs to them, as we did on other days, was to risk their leaving their thanks on the washing.

On rainy Mondays, the washing was hung on a clothes horse in front of the living room fire. The clothes toasted on one side, and Mam tested them constantly, turning them over to dry evenly. She never let them get too dry, however, because they had to be damp enough to iron.

Mam and Granny taught me how to wash. My early efforts were made standing on a stool, with the green soap and rubbing handkerchiefs. By the time I was twelve I had graduated to Dad's Sunday shirt. Collar first, then right sleeve and cuff, right front, back, left front, left sleeve and cuff.

I thought I should stay with Mam and Granny forever, but when I was seventeen, in 1967, I went to Edinburgh University. I did my laundry in laundrettes where my clothes shrank because I was not accustomed to dryers and their various degrees of heat.

I met Richard during my final year in Edinburgh. We lived in the same student house, and one Sunday afternoon we met in the local laundrette. I didn't know him well then, but he was friendly and talked to me as our laundry tumbled in adjoining dryers. He has never let me forget my visible embarrassment at the thought that he could see my underwear through the glass door of the dryer. A few weeks later, he asked me to marry him, and then our underwear and everything else was tumbling together.

In 1978 we came to California. For the first ten years we lived in rented apartments, and shared communal laundry facilities. Doing the laundry was stressful. There was the competition for the machines, and did I have enough quarters? I stopped wearing anything that said "hand wash" only.

Now, we have a house in Albany, which has a laundry room and a garden made private with hedges, trees, and neighbour's sheds. I love my laundry room. It has a deep sink, a washer and dryer, and room to sort the wash into categories. My washing line is fastened to a branch of a tree

and stretches to a hook in the garage wall, and my washing dries quickly in the Californian sun.

A few years ago, a dark cloud came over my Laundry Paradise. Richard was offered a job in Washington, DC. It was a prestigious position, to be Head of a new laboratory and deserved serious consideration. The company made arrangements for me to go there and look at houses.

I expected that I would meet with a Realtor first to talk about our lifestyle, and the things that were important to us in a house, but the Realtor assigned to us, and whose name I've forgotten, arrived to pick me up from the hotel and drove me straight to a house that she knew I'd JUST LOVE and would want to buy at once!

The house was quite inappropriate for us; the decor was pale pink throughout; the master suite was decadent and the kitchen had a token set of rarely-used appliances. For all the grandeur, the house sat cheek by jowl with its neighbours and there was no private garden.

"I think we've seen everything," the Realtor said, dollar signs clicking in her eyes. "No," I replied, "I'd like to see the laundry facilities." She opened a door in the kitchen, and I expected to walk into a laundry room, but the 'facilities' were behind the door, in a cupboard, with an ironing board that folded out.

I stepped out onto the deck which extended from the back, and looked around. "Where do you hang out the washing?" I asked. The dollar signs dimmed and switched off in the Realtor's eyes, and she whimpered "It's not allowed ..."

"NOT ALLOWED?" I'd never heard of hanging out washing not being allowed. "You mean you can't hang out your washing in Washington?"

The Realtor drove me back to the hotel in the grim silence Mam would have imposed on me if I'd disgraced her in front of company, and Richard came back from his final interviews to find me in tears. "I'm not taking the job!" he announced cheerfully. "The lab doesn't have secure funding, and it would be a mistake."

We celebrated the decision with great relief and "The No Washing in Washington" story is in our folklore.

In the early mornings, when the sun is burning off the fog in the Berkeley hills, I hang out my washing in my Albany garden and for a few minutes I'm with Mam and Granny again. "Whites together, like with like, heels to the left, and don't feed the seagulls on Monday."