

## Leaving Bill

by Gaynor Hill

Truda hesitated, how much time should she leave? An hour? Two hours? Three hours? Three hours. Yes, just to be on the safe side. She stepped out onto the doorstep pulling the front door closed behind her.

The black and white chequered tiles of the garden path glistened, slick under her feet with the wet day. Truda paused when she got to the gate and looked back at her little terraced house. She'd had such hopes when they'd moved there thirty years ago. The dark green door with its brass knocker had made the house look solid and reliable, a safe place to set up home and start a family. Three miscarriages later, she'd given up hopes.

It was Bill's fault of course. Truda had married him because she hadn't known any better. Her father had been a lovely man, tall, thin, silver haired, a gentle soul. Truda had been named as a result of his indulgence. Her mother had seen a character called Truda in a war film and been touched by the tragedy of the heroine's demise. When Truda was born, her father had forsaken his Celtic heritage and the tradition of family names for the sake of his wife's happiness. An idyllic childhood had done nothing to prepare Truda for the reality of men.

Drizzle misted the air and Truda adjusted her headscarf not wanting the damp to undo the several hours in curlers she'd endured that morning. Bracing herself against the gloom, she set off in the direction of the high street.

Twenty minutes later Truda could see the lights of O'Hare's, glowing soft and golden through rows of small, square window panes. The Newsagents looked warm and inviting like something out of a Christmas scene in a Dicken's novel. Truda pushed the door open and, the merry jingle of the shop bell announced her arrival.

The shop appeared empty so Truda waited, occupying the time by perusing the large jars of sparkling sweets displayed on the shelves behind the counter. Strawberry bonbons, tom thumb pips, winter mixture, pink shrimps, flying saucers, chewy nuts... Mrs O'Hare slowly shuffled into view from behind a display case. "Good afternoon, Truda. Your usual?" she asked.

Truda usually bought Bill's tobacco from O'Hare's but this time asked for the Radio Times and a quarter of sherbet lemons. Mrs O'Hare made up and bagged the order in her slow and trembling way. As Truda reached out to pay, the old lady grasped her hand with sudden strength and said, "Do take care of yourself, dear." Behind her, Truda felt a rush of cold air as the shop door opened and another customer entered to the jingle of the bell. Grateful for the interruption she smiled softly at Mrs O'Hare and, releasing her hand, turned and slipped back out onto the leaden street.

Any other day, Truda would have left the shop feeling ashamed and tearful. But not today, today she *was* taking care of herself. She had started to feel lighter as though she had stepped onto another planet where the air was thinner and gravity didn't press so heavily upon her. She checked her watch. Twenty-five minutes. She popped a sherbet lemon into her mouth and set off again.

Truda's mouth flooded with the sweet, sharp flavour of the sherbet lemon and it surfaced memories of a sunlit garden, purring bantams and her father bringing treats home on pay day. How long since she'd had sweets? Bill wouldn't let her buy anything in the way of luxuries. He'd say, if she had money for luxuries she obviously had too much, and her meagre housekeeping money would be lighter the next week as a result. There was always enough money for his tobacco and cider though.

Despite the thickening drizzle, Truda slowed her pace a little. She still had two and a half hours to kill and she certainly didn't want to get back home until Bill was gone.

Ten minutes later, Truda found herself outside the Astalet Café. The fluorescent light from inside spilled out onto the puddled pavement but the windows were cloudy and opaque, preventing her from seeing inside. She had to push hard against the door to open it but was immediately rewarded for the effort by the steamy, welcoming warmth within.

The Café was about half full, noisy with conversation and the clinking of cutlery. No one looked up as Truda entered. With her head down, her lone, middle-aged, female form was too unremarkable to cause interruption. The smoky aroma of crisping bacon curled through the air around her as she cautiously approached the counter.

The waitress behind the counter was taller and younger than Truda, voluptuous but with a hardness of demeanour that didn't match her soft, inviting form. Truda thought she must have been beautiful in her youth, but now her dyed hair was a shade too dark and her lipstick a shade too red for the pallor of her skin. She looked up at Truda's hesitant approach and, without even the slightest change to her fixed and pursed expression asked, "Yes please?" Truda ordered an iced bun and a cup of hot chocolate. "I'll bring it over," said the waitress. Truda was thankful for the woman's casual indifference.

She found a small Formica table for two and eased herself down into one of the hard, orange, plastic chairs. She had started to ache and the throbbing at her temple drummed a familiar rhythm. She would have a long, hot bath when she got home. Not the two inches of tepid water she was usually left with after Bill had exhausted the immersion. A nice, deep bath with bubbles.

The waitress delivered Truda's order abruptly and with the same impassive expression. The bun looked a little hard and the chocolate thin

but these stolen half hours in cheap cafés had become her only respite from home and it was that, rather than the food, that she came for. She'd had friends once but Bill, boorish and volatile, had driven them all away.

The bun was sticky so Truda looked around to see whether there were any serviettes. She noticed a group of workmen at a far table looking at her. They seemed vaguely familiar and she thought that perhaps they worked with Bill on the construction site. That would explain why they were in the Café mid-afternoon, work on the site having been halted that morning due to the bad weather. The workmen looked down quickly and in unison as soon as they realised she'd noticed them. They silently busied themselves with the plates before them and Truda fancied that one of them reddened a little. She wondered whether she needed to touch up her makeup.

To avoid any further embarrassment, Truda fixed her gaze on the café window. She couldn't see much, condensation filmed the panes blurring her view of the world outside. Truda tried to think about how her life would change now but anything beyond the next few hours seemed hazy and unclear as though her future also lay beyond the cloudy glass. She contented herself with thinking about the evening. She had laid a fire early this morning. It only needed a match to its rolled up newspaper bed and it would be roaring in no time. She'd light the fire first so that the house would be warm by the time she'd had her bath. Then she'd settle to watch the television, her feet up on the stool and her knitting in her lap. She'd have her sherbet lemons to finish and no one to please but herself. Her heart rose and she remembered what it was to be happy.

A square, illuminated clock hung on the café wall. Truda could see the large bright blue numbers clearly from where she sat. Half an hour had passed whilst she'd finished her food and looked as far ahead as she was able. Plenty of time for another hot chocolate and a look through the Radio Times.

After her second hot chocolate Truda braved the stares and sympathies of strangers to do her little bit of shopping. Ed Turner and his son, Ricky, were serving in the butchers.

Ed gave her a sad smile as she approached. "Looks like you need a good steak," he said quietly.

"Just two chops please, Ed," Truda replied.

She noticed Ed adding a couple of extra chops to her order and, worried that she might cry, turned her attention to the far end of the counter. Ricky was serving one of the young mums from the Estate. He flashed a sparkling smile at the giggling woman and winked as he handed over a pound of sausages. Just like Bill.

Truda had met Bill in The Trafalgar. She had made a new friend at work, Peg, who had persuaded her to go out that Saturday night. Truda's mother said Peg was "no better than she should be" and Truda had felt a little nervous in her company. She had walked up to the bar behind Peg, holding on tightly to the hem of her friend's flimsy blouse with her fingertips. As she timidly took in the unfamiliar surroundings, Bill had caught her eye and winked. Later he had caught her heart.

Bill's eyes were the pale blue of a winter sky and their contrast against his thick dark lashes made his gaze intense and unnerving. His body was muscle hard and nut brown from carrying hods of red brick and cement in the summer sun. Truda had never met anyone so self-assured, so certain of their worth and their due. When she was with him she felt less fearful, less daunted by the world. Love-blind she mistook his arrogance for confidence and his vanity for self-belief.

A week after their wedding Truda found she had scabies. Bill told her he must have caught them from a toilet seat but Peg soon put her right about that. She saw him clearly that day but it was too late, for better for worse.

The giggle became a cackle summoning Truda back to the present. She put the chops in her bag, thanked Ed and continued with her tour of the shops. All in all, she managed to kill another twenty minutes.

Truda took the longer route home, her slowing steps belying her increasing pulse rate. Even so, she was twenty minutes short of the three hours by the time she reached the house. It was getting dark and the street lights had come on revealing rainbows in the oil flecked gutters below. Everything seemed quiet and Truda couldn't see any light coming from inside the house. She paused at the gate and tried to calm her racing heart.

As she opened the front door, Truda strained to hear any suggestion of life within. Silence. A flick of the hall light switch revealed things to be exactly as she'd left them. Had he gone? Truda winced as she put down her shopping bag and hung up her coat, every movement now recalling the morning's assault. She turned towards the mirror to take off her headscarf and clasped her hand to her mouth to mute an involuntary sob. Her eyelid had swollen to the size and hue of a ripe plum and the colour had bled across her temple and cheek. Almost hidden by the swelling, she could see a flash of crimson staining the white of her eye. It wasn't the worst she'd looked after Bill had lost his temper but it came pretty close.

Truda walked towards the kitchen. She could see Bill's feet sticking out from behind the kitchen table, his work socks still crusted with sand and concrete from the site. He never changed his socks when he got home from work but traipsed muck through the whole house until after supper when he went up for a bath. She moved closer so that she could see the whole of him. He'd gone alright, well and truly. She'd seen death before.

Her father had died in his sleep one evening and Truda had found him the next day when she went to the flat to check on him. He was sitting in his armchair with his head bent forward as though dozing, a half finished cup of cocoa on the table beside him.

Bill had not made a good end. He'd come home mid-morning, angry about losing the day's work and toting a two litre bottle of cider. Truda had known what was coming and, an hour later, it did. After the first blow she'd turned to the kitchen wall and braced herself for the onslaught but he'd only landed a few more punches. It had taken a moment for Truda to realise he'd stopped and, when she'd turned around, she'd seen him sinking to his knees before her. One side of his face was drooping like a candle softly melting in the hot sun.

She'd known what was happening. Mr Jackson next door had suffered a stroke last year. He had recovered but his face still looked a little uneven. Mrs Jackson had lauded the ambulance men for reaching her husband so quickly, every minute counted with a stroke. You had to get help quickly.

Truda had watched Bill fall sideways to the floor. His eyes, pale as water, had been open and there had been a flash of fear in them. She'd made to move toward him, to help him, but as their eyes met she'd seen the fear pass and malevolence return.

She'd turned away to fetch her coat. How much time should she leave?