**A PENNY ICE-CREAM AND THE SMELL OF CREOSOTE by Mattie Lennon**

It was Christmas morning 1952. I was being let by the hand to early Mass in Lacken.   
  
Why did my mother have me by the hand since, in the words of Patrick Kavanagh, I was 'six Christmases of age'? It was partly because my mother considered me 'wild' - although in later life I would always claim that I was an eejit but didn't tick any of the boxes that would constitute 'wild'.   
  
The valley was in darkness save for the candles in the windows to welcome the Redeemer. It was a scene that wouldn't ever be repeated.   
  
Rural electrification was just arriving in Lacken and the surrounding area but had not yet been switched on. Post- dawn it would be possible to see poles which had stood, complete with insulators, all summer, sentry-like across the countryside and now strung with high-tension cables. An ESB official, one Mr Heevy from Naas, had called to the school to complain about the number of insulators which had been the victim of stone-throwing. The schoolboys from the townland of Ballinastockan were the prime suspects. Not because they were more destructive than the rest of us but they were young marksmen with a stone or any small missile.   
  
If you stood close to an ESB pole and looked up it appeared to be falling, something to do with an illusion caused by the rolling clouds. The term 'optokinetic movement 'would have meant very little the First Communion class of 1952.   
  
Not every house opted for the ''lectric light'. This was mainly out of economic necessity and the 'cups' on the chimney became somewhat of a status symbol. The switching-on ceremony would be performed in The Parish Hall, Valleymount, in January 1953 but for now the valley's illumination was confined to candles, oil-lamps and the wick-in–a-Bovril-bottle source of illumination known as a 'Jack-lamp'.   
  
Adult Mass-goers spoke of the well-dressed men in Ford vans who were travelling the district selling everything from electric irons, to electric kettles to electric fires.   
  
Conversation in the area was dominated by several fanciful theories. Boiling water in an electric kettle 'takes all the oxygen out of it'. There was also a story about a cat being electrocuted (I heard the word 'executed' used). In the smoke-filled cabins of west Wicklow it was believed that you couldn't wash a light bulb. And then of course somebody came up with the stupid riddle: 'How does a one-armed man change a light-bulb?'. 'He keeps the receipt'.   
  
The fact that improved illumination would highlight physical defect was not overlooked. It was rumoured that one elderly farmer who had two daughters of marriageable age but not blessed with film-star looks was heard to say, 'we'd better get rid of thim two wans before the 'lectric light comes.'   
  
One night when such matters were being discussed in a rambling-house Jack Farrell was sitting in the corner. Jack was a Tallaght man who had inherited a small cottage in the area. There were those who would insist that not all of Jack's stories ran parallel with the highest ideals of veracity. Anyway Jack related the following story.   
  
Jack's father ,farmed in Killenarden (it was at the back of Jobstown... and still is). He went for the pension and was asked if he remembered 'the Big Wind'. The Big Wind was on 6th January in 1839 so if Jack's father remembered it that would leave him over 70 in 1908.   
  
Farrell senior was more than equal to the challenge. According to Jack his father told the pension officer that, on Sunday sixth of January 1839 he was sitting at the fire when a squall of wind took the roof straight off the house and it landed somewhere about Kippure. A pot of potatoes that was hanging on the pot-rack was blown up the chimney and at the top wasn't it struck by lightning. The steam that came out of it was a fright to the world and, says Jack:   
  
*'They were the first potatoes in Ireland to be boiled by electricity'.*   
  
The specified depth for the main-line poles was six foot two inches. Local men were employed as labourers and Neddy Cullen, who was vertically challenged (it was said of him that he could play hurling under a bed) was digging a hole in Tim Browe's field. When he was standing in the hole head and shoulders above the ground he uttered the immortal words: 'If that hole is not six feet deep my name is not Neddy Cullen.'   
  
When the lorry loads of poles began to arrive it was the first time that I had smelled creosote. When they were hoisted by a number of men it was ensured that each pole was parallel with the perpendicular. In the pre-digital age this was achieved with a length of string and a suitable, small, piece of Wicklow granite serving as a plumb-bob.   
  
As children we re-enacted everything that we saw the 'wire men' doing during the day. We were digging holes for 'poles' and taking our mothers' spools of thread to string 'wires.'   
  
I recently saw a cartoon depicting a person of my age with the caption, 'I've become so forgetful that I can now play my own surprise parties.' I understood but I can vividly remember the writing on the first, yellow, warning sign that I saw on an ESB pole sixty four years ago: *DANGER  
Keep away.  
It is dangerous to touch the electric wires.  
Beware of fallen wires.*   
  
My old school mate, Pat Brennan, brought the 'lectric light' out to the shed and the pig-sty using wire from a bed spring. You'd be talking about health and safety! When we were both aged under ten years of age Pat showed me how to by-pass a meter and twenty years later when I was living in a flat in Ranelagh...   
  
No ordinary household would dream of buying a fridge and for me, and the twenty-seven, other juniors in the 'little School' it was a day to be remembered when Mrs. White brought in a tray from Burke's shop bearing twenty-eight penny ice-creams.   
Nocturnal radiance, and a single round three-pin socket was the limit for most houses but electricity broadened the cultural horizons of the community. When Julia Carroll who had spent a lifetime in New York returned for a holiday her husband, Harry Wenkee, was able to show pictures in the local school. And a travelling (called a 'fit-up') show came to Brennan's field.   
  
For most of us youngsters it was out first experience of stage-shows. Singing, dancing and drama meant entertainment for all. Plays such as 'Murder in the Red Barn' mesmerised us rural innocents. Conjuring was, to us, 'pure magic' but the boss of the outfit, Jackie Ellis, was the best hypnotist I have ever seen. Audience participation in his act brought the house down. One of my schoolmates was asked by Mr. Ellis to sit on an ordinary kitchen chair. When his posterior touched the seat he jumped; the chair was 'red-hot.'   
  
The appearance of a fit-up in the area after so many years triggered reminisces among the older males. They spoke of a travelling show which visited the district and set up in the 'quarry-hole' in Ballinastockan in the early days of the century. There would be sly grins when a male septuagenarian would make reference to 'Tilly.' A showgirl from the quarry-hole in the dim and distant past. Even at age 11 I gathered from the nudge, nudge, wink, wink, flavour of the talk that Tilly was in the habit of exposing more than her ankle.   
  
In the 40s and 50s a resident of Lacken or Ballinastockan carrying an acid-battery, (I believe the correct term was an accumulator), to Blessington to be charged was a familiar sight. Electric wirelesses gradually took over and by the late '50s a large carboy surrounded by straw in a wicker basket in Johnny Kelly's garage was the only remaining relic of the old battery wireless.   
  
About the memories evoked by the olfactory sense, Marcel Proust, in The Remembrance of Things Past, has put it much better than I can:   
  
*When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are scattered... the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls... bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory".*   
  
Now, when a neighbour is treating his garden fence and the smell of creosote wafts on the summer air. It is no longer the 21st century. I don't have the free travel. It's 1952 and I am, once again, a six-year old in Kylebeg.