

The Worst Meal Ever: Vivien Wilson

I was five years old and waiting for the dinner bell, which, like a death knell, summoned the junior school to the dining room. My sister, to her eternal embarrassment, was called from the sixth form to help staunch my howls of despair. She sighed, patted me on the back and told me to behave. The problem lay with the smell on certain days when the reek of over-cooked cabbage pervaded not just the dining room, but the whole place. Hot lunches were mandatory at my English school back in the 1950s and it was decided that vegetables were a necessary component of every meal. They tasted of soap, cheap horrible soap. Not that expensive soap would have tasted any better! It was simply impossible to swallow the stuff without gagging. Any benefit from the vitamins would have vaporised to cling to the dingy walls and trestle tables of Lynton House School for Girls.

For four years the teachers allowed me to leave the yellow mush on my plate, until Miss McCarthy, the Principal of the Junior School, decided that I must learn some manners. '*For what we have just received, may The Lord make us truly thankful,*' my friend Liffy hastily intoned, signalling our release from torment. Our table was the last to be dismissed. I was about to follow the others, when a hand was placed on my shoulder and Miss McCarthy's voice boomed out, 'No, not you, Vivien, you're to remain in your seat until you've finished everything on your plate, and by that, I mean *everything*. You're to eat that cabbage.' I took a bite, gagged, but could not swallow, so spat it into my handkerchief. Outside, in the playground, I could hear my friends having fun. Miss McCarthy stood over me, her arms folded. She waited and I stared down at the hateful vegetable congealing on my plate. The wall clock ticked loudly. Still, I could not swallow another mouthful. After about half an hour she looked at her watch and shrugged, 'You may leave now, but tomorrow I expect you to eat everything on your plate!'

Luckily, cabbage was not on the menu the next day. The next day was Friday which meant fish which was always served with peas. The memory remains and, to this day, I still cannot eat cabbage!