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# Life With the Tynans

A print of Hieronymus Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights' in the living room set the tone.



Elaine Dundy and Kenneth Tynan, 1956. *PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES*

By **MOIRA HODGSON**

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**The cover photograph** of Tracy Tynan's captivating memoir "Wear and Tear: The Threads of My Life" is a portrait of her parents dressed in twin faux-leopard-skin pants, sitting on a faux-zebra-skin chaise longue, gazing into each other's eyes. They are the English theater critic Kenneth Tynan, one of the greatest prose stylists of his generation, and his first wife, Elaine Dundy, the American writer most famous for her 1958 novel "The Dud

Avocado.”

Behind the chaise longue, their daughter writes, is a 12-foot reproduction of Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly Delights.” The painting, in which “naked and partially clothed people” are pictured “doing all sorts of peculiar things,” had always terrified Ms. Tynan. The bullfight prints on the adjacent wall weren’t exactly soothing either.

Then again, nor was life with her famous parents. Ms. Tynan has written a moving, candid and often hilarious account of her tumultuous childhood in England and New York in the 1950s and ’60s. Her parents, she writes, were “the original celebrity hounds.” They threw glamorous parties and were friends with the likes of Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Marlene Dietrich, Orson Welles and the omnipresent Princess Margaret. Cecil Beaton and Katharine Hepburn were the author’s godparents.

Clothes are the warp and weave of “Wear and Tear.” Each chapter is cleverly organized around an item of dress: a blue chemise, a fur coat, the author’s first bra (white cross-stitched torpedo), chunky apple-green shoes decorated with bows, and the polyester leisure suits and guayabera shirts that the author’s father adopted late in life. The Tynans were also passionately interested in fashion and style, an obsession Ms. Tynan inherited. Later in life she moved from London to Los Angeles and became a costume designer for films including “The Big Easy” (1987) and “Great Balls of Fire” (1989), directed by her husband Jim McBride, with whom she has two children.

Ken’s middle name was Peacock—and he lived up to it. “Everyone noticed not only what my father said but also how he dressed,” Ms. Tynan writes. As a student at Oxford, he was a dandy, dressed in plum-colored suits, lavender ties and even a bottle-green outfit purportedly made from the baize that covers billiard tables. Elaine, Ms. Tynan writes, was “a petite gamine” who during her late 20s had lived in Paris, where she bought designer clothes at discount prices at sample sales. For her first date with Ken in 1950 she wore an off-the-shoulder orange-and-brown silk Schiaparelli dress. He wore a camel hair jacket, plum-colored trousers, yellow

socks, black shoes and a Mickey Mouse watch. “Impressed with each other’s attire, their mutual passion for theater, and their strong attraction, they married three months later.”

Ken and Elaine dressed up and went out every night, leaving their daughter, an only child, with an au pair even on her birthdays. She writes, “I don’t have a single memory of sitting down to dinner alone with my parents.”

When they were home, things were often chaotic. A family friend, the writer Sally Belfrage, describes the sort of scene she’d typically encounter upon arriving at the front door. The “sounds of screams and smashing crockery and tiny Tracy opening the door, trying to find out which lock was working. Ken shouting, ‘I’ll kill you, you bitch.’ Smash, smash, a whimper from the au pair, and Tracy, poised and calm, saying, ‘Hello, how nice to see you. Come in. Can I take your coat?’ And taking one into the living room, and pouring drinks and sitting down, looking very interested.”

Ms. Tynan compares witnessing their dramas to “watching a horror movie, scary but riveting.” Roused by the noise of battle one night, she discovered her father, clad in white underwear and a flapping blue shirt, perched on a window like strange bird. “I’m going to jump!” he screamed. “Then I saw my mother, naked, smoking a cigarette, moving through the room behind him. ‘Why don’t you?’”

One day Elaine announced it would be nice if her daughter, now 9 years old, curtsied when introduced to people. So when a new visitor showed up at their Mayfair apartment, she did. A giggling school friend commented later, “He isn’t royalty, y’know.” He certainly wasn’t: It was John Osborne, one of Britain’s leading Angry Young Men, author of “Look Back in Anger.”

Ms. Tynan found out that her parents’ marriage was over on her 13th birthday, at boarding school. She received a call from her mother just before bedtime. “ ‘Hi, darling, I’m in Mexico . . . I’ve just divorced your father.’ ” Three years later, Ken married a woman with whom he’d long been having an affair, the beautiful 28-year-old journalist Kathleen Halton. Ms. Tynan calls her “a trophy wife but with brains.” The marriage was rocky thanks to his

infidelities and notorious sexual fetishes, but Kathleen remained with him until his death from emphysema in 1980. She died in 1995.

One of the ironies of Ms. Tynan's early life was that people assumed, erroneously, that she was as sexually liberated as her kinky parents. At school in 1965 she found herself at the center of an uproar when her father, discussing censorship with Mary McCarthy on the BBC, said the word "f—" on the air. She was 17 in 1969 when "Oh! Calcutta!," his musical sex revue, opened to another scandal, this time over scenes in which the cast appeared stark naked.

As a special pre-21st-birthday treat for his daughter, Mr. Tynan organized a screening of Sammy Davis Jr.'s "personal copy" of "Deep Throat." It was held at a private Mayfair club for an audience of 20, including Ms. Tynan's boyfriend and his parents. She was mortified.

Ken had a rare form of emphysema that over the years was exacerbated by his two-pack-a-day smoking habit. He'd gone to Santa Monica for his health and at the age of 53 was dying in a hospital there. Ms. Tynan brought him a bottle of champagne. Emboldened by a few swigs, she told him haltingly, for the first time in her life, that she loved him. He held her hand briefly. "Then he let go and said, 'Now let's talk about something else,' and poured himself another glass of champagne. 'This is beginning to sound like a bad hospital movie.' " She ran into the parking lot and wept.

After his death, he bequeathed his daughter his diaries so Kathleen couldn't have control over them. He wanted them published uncensored, and Ms. Tynan ensured they were, in 2001. Elaine, who had struggled for years with alcohol and drug addiction, died in Los Angeles of a heart attack in 2008. Ms. Tynan was on her way to a desert retreat when she heard the news. As an offering to her mother, she removed the small pink quartz heart she wore around her neck and buried it there.

—*Ms. Hodgson is the author of “It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food.”*