

SYLVIA: This gingham paradise you've made for yourself—you know it's not real, don't you? The fifties didn't even look like this in the fifties. You're living in a cartoon.

You want to know what the fifties were like, from someone who was actually there? The fifties were terrible. The idea that anyone would want to would choose to go back there, it's ridiculous.

Do you know how cold it was? November right through to March, everyone huddled round their own fireplace, cause everywhere else was freezing. The whole house except about a yard around the sitting room fire where it was boiling, the rest of it bone-cold. It bit your nose off in the morning. I'd offer to help mum with the dinner, not to spend time with her, just so I could stand next to the oven.

Rationing! Still rationing. Bread you could build houses with. And god it was bland: grey meat, grey people, everything grey. My dad came home once with this amazing new food a friend had been talking about – Mum wouldn't let us eat it cause she'd heard it was made out of mould, It was yoghurt.

That's being a woman in the fifties. Fear. Bomb-shaped holes everywhere, men like my dad back from the war with their body intact but their head different. Everyone making do and mending, things that were already wrecked. And the intolerance: try being anything other than a straight white man and see if you still think it's utopia.

And don't expect not to be groped at work, that's the least of your worries. Your husband is legally allowed his marital rights whenever he wants, it doesn't matter how much your head aches or your back aches or you can't stand the sight of him anymore, the weight of him on you. And no abortion, no birth control. No help anywhere. Divorce him? Good luck, love. Whatever he got up to, you turned a blind eye to it.

My poor mother. Frightened of a yoghurt.

She said to me as she was dying—in the hospice—she said, “What have I done, really?” I said, “Don’t say that, you brought up three children, what’s more important than that?” But she knew. Her life was wasted. All her potential boiled down to such a bitter little existence.

You know what she’d do if she saw you now? She’d laugh. Because it’s ridiculous. Being nostalgic when you weren’t even there. They used to think nostalgia was an affliction, did you know that? A neurological disease. Not a branding strategy for tea towels.

‘Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be,’ that’s the joke, isn’t it? Except it isn’t a joke, because you’re wasting yourself when you could choose not to. That’s what we did for you on those marches, so you could be brave and strong and better, and this is not what I fought for, this is not what we fought for, and it isn’t funny anymore.