

Toast 1

My mother is scraping a piece of burned toast out of the kitchen window, a crease of annoyance across her forehead. This is not an occasional occurrence, a once-in-a-while hiccup in a busy mother's day. My mother burns the toast as surely as the sun rises each morning. In fact, I doubt if she has ever made a round of toast in her life that failed to fill the kitchen with plumes of throat-catching smoke. I am nine now and have never seen butter without black bits in it.

It is impossible not to love someone who makes toast for you. People's failings, even major ones such as when they make you wear short trousers to school, fall into insignificance as your teeth break through the rough, toasted crust and sink into the doughy cushion of white bread underneath. Once the warm, salty butter has hit your tongue, you are smitten. Putty in their hands.

When I was eight my mother's annual attempt at icing the family Christmas cake was handed over to me. I've had enough of this lark, dear, you're old enough now. She had started to sit down a lot. I made only marginally less of a mess than she did, but at least I didn't cover the table, the floor, the dog with icing sugar. To be honest, it was a relief to get it out of her hands. I followed the Slater house style of snowy peaks brought up with the flat of a knife and a red ribbon. Even then I wasn't one to rock the boat. The idea behind the wave effect of her icing was simply to hide the fact that her attempt at covering the cake in marzipan resembled nothing more than an unmade bed. Folds and lumps, creases and tears. A few patches stuck on with a bit of apricot jam.

I knew I could have probably have flat-iced a cake to perfection, but to have done so would have hurt her feelings. So waves it was. There was also a chipped Father Christmas, complete with a jagged lump of last year's marzipan around his feet, and the dusty bristle tree with its snowy tips of icing. I drew the line at the fluffy yellow Easter chick.

Baking a cake for your family to share, the stirring of cherries, currants, raisins, peel and brandy, brown sugar, butter, eggs, and flour, for me the ultimate symbol of a mother's love for her husband and kids, was reduced to something that simply has to be done. Like cleaning the loo or polishing the shoes. My mother knew nothing of putting glycerine in with the sugar to keep the icing soft, so her rock-hard cake was always the butt of jokes for the entire Christmas. My father once set about it with a hammer and chisel from the shed. So the sad, yellowing cake sat around until about the end of February, the dog giving it the occasional lick as he passed, until it was thrown, much to everyone's relief, onto the lawn for the birds.

My father wore old, rust-and-chocolate checked shirts and smelled of sweetbriar tobacco and potting compost. A warm and twinkly-eyed man, the sort who would let his son snuggle up with him in an armchair and fall asleep in the folds of his shirt. You'll have to get off now, my leg's gone to sleep, he would grumble, and turf me off onto the rug. He would pull silly faces at every opportunity, especially when there was a camera or other children around. Sometimes they would make me giggle, but other times, like when he pulled his monkey face, they scared me so much I used to get butterflies in my stomach.

His clothes were old and soft, which made me want to snuggle up to him even more. He hated wearing new. My father always wore old, heavy brogues and would don a tie even in his greenhouse. He read the Telegraph and Reader's Digest. A crumpets-and-honey sort of a man with a tight little moustache. God, he had a temper though. Sometimes he would go off, crack, like a shotgun. Like when he once caught me going through my mother's handbag, looking for barley sugars, or when my mother made a batch of twelve fairy cakes and I ate six in one go.

My father never went to church, but said his prayers nightly kneeling by his bed, his head resting in his hands. He rarely cursed, apart from calling people silly buggers. I remember he had a series of crushes on singers. First, it was Kathy Kirby, although he once said she was a bit ritzy, and then Petula Clark. Sometimes he would buy their records and play them on Sundays after I had listened to my one and only record a scratched forty-five of Tommy Steele singing Little White Bull. The old man was inordinately fond of his collection of female vocals. You should have seen the tears the day Alma Cogan died.

Sherry Trifle

{...} Once it was cold, the custard was covered with whipped cream, glace cherries, and whole, blanched almonds. Never silver balls, which {Dad} thought common, or chocolate vermicelli, which he thought made it sickly. Just big fat almonds. He never toasted them, even though it would have made them taste better. In later years my stepmother was to suggest a sprinkling of multicolored hundreds and thousands. She might as well have suggested changing his daily paper to the Mirror.

The entire Christmas stood or fell according to the noise the trifle made when the first massive, embossed spoon was lifted out. The resulting noise, a sort of squelch-fart, was like a message from God. A silent trifle was a bad omen. The louder the trifle parped, the better Christmas would be. Strangely, Dad's sister felt the same way about jelly-making it stronger than usual just so it would make a noise that, even at her hundredth birthday tea, would make the old bird giggle.

You wouldn't think a man who smoked sweet, scented tobacco, grew pink begonias, and made softly-softly trifle could be scary. His tempers, his rages, his scoldings scared my mother, my brothers, the gardener, even the sweet milkman who occasionally got the order wrong. Once, when I had been caught not brushing my teeth before going to bed, his glare was so full of fire, his face so red and bloated, his hand raised so high that I pissed in my pajamas, right there on

the landing outside my bedroom. For all his soft shirts and cuddles and trifles I was absolutely terrified of him.

r.

Pancakes

Mum never failed to make pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. Light they were, except for the very first one which was always a mess, though for some reason always the best. Mum made thin pancakes, in a battered old frying pan that was black on the outside and smelled of sausages, and we ate them with granulated sugar and Jif lemon. I loved the way the lemon soaked the sugar but never quite dissolved it, so you got the soft pancake, gritty sugar, and sharp lemon all at once.

It was the best day of the year really, especially when she got going and they would come out of the pan as fast as we could eat them. Toward the end Mum would let me flip one. I always contrived it so that it landed on the floor, then she would say, That's enough, and that would be it till next year.

Flapjacks

On crackling winter mornings, with icicles hanging from the drainpipes, Mother would make flapjacks, stirring them in a thick, pitted aluminum pan and leaving them to settle on the back of the Aga. She would use a metal spoon, which acted as an effective alarm clock as it was scraped against the side of the old pan. They were one of the very few treats my mother ever made for us. My father would eat one or two, probably to encourage her rare attempts at homemaking. While I would have to be held back from eating the entire tray. It was their chewy, salty sweetness I loved. Anyone who has never put a really large pinch of salt in with the oats, syrup, and brown sugar is missing a trick. Sometimes, she would leave a flapjack out for Josh too, and we would sit on his motorbike and eat them together. One bitterly cold day, I came home to a hall that smelled of warm biscuits. As I opened the kitchen door I smelled smoke and caught my mother tossing a batch of blackened flapjacks into the bin. There was a bit of charred shrapnel clinging to the edge of the tin which I tried unsuccessfully to prise off. Now they were being tipped into the pedal bin, tray and all. I'm sorry, darling, she said, shaking her head. There were tears and something along the lines of How could you do that, let the flapjacks burn? You're hopeless, now there won't be any for Josh tomorrow, and then I remember stomping into the greenhouse and telling my father he should get a new wife. One who didn't burn everything.