

## **TWO STEAK BAKES AND TWO CHELSEA BUNS**

Without thinking, I bought two of each. Two steak bakes and two Chelsea buns.

Mum would turn in her grave if she knew I was feeding Dad from downmarket high street bakeries. *Fry him some fishcakes you lazy mare*, she would demand. But only I know how much he likes slumming it.

I kick away the junk mail as I push open the door; the frayed carpet catches under it. Trip hazard. Must get it sorted. The flat smells stale with a hint of something floral, like those evocatively named air fresheners Mum used to buy. *Vanilla Dreams. Linen in the Air.*

'Dad?' I call. A pair of his y-fronts hangs off the bedroom doorknob. I knock them to the floor with my handbag and try not to picture what situation he was in, why they would have been left there.

In the living room, the coffee table is piled high with papers. Books. Newsletters. A yellowed copy of *The Evening Standard* sits open on a page with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian. There's a pair of Biro devil horns on him, but she's untouched. I once explained to Dad that she was famous for making a sex tape. He had raised his eyebrows and smiled widely, almost, like he was impressed.

Underneath the papers are two chipped black plates. I bet they've been here since the last time we had lunch. I bet he just wiped them 'clean' with his cardigan sleeve, scraping any stubborn crumbs off with the tip of a bitten down thumbnail.

'It's a mess in here.'

I turn away from his armchair. I can just see him shrug his bony shoulders, stick out his bottom lip and pretend to be some helpless old widower that knows nothing of housework.

‘And, what’s all this? Carrier bags everywhere. They charge you for them now you know?’

The living room is strewn with plastic bags from *The Co-op*, loose change and receipts abandoned at the bottom of each one. 2 MICRO MADRAS, 1 MULLER CORNER, 1 SLCD FRT LOAF.

I get a mouthful of dust as I pull the curtains apart, ‘Nice day out.’ The spring light hits the glass and I imagine its warmth on my sun starved face. There are children in the small play park downstairs. One chases the others while brandishing a large stick. Their winter coats lie abandoned in a colourful pile on the bench. The last time I sat out there with Dad was that weird day in October when it snowed. We laid down carrier bags and shared chicken wings from a box, like grubby teenagers. He told me that story again, about Mum teaching everyone the Irish jig in the Star and Garter. I watched the snowflakes melt in his beard as he talked, and knew it would be the last British winter he would have to endure.

Today the bench is framed with struggling daffodils, planted by some local council worker in between emptying bins and washing swear words off the slide.

‘Would be so nice to be outside right now.’ I shouldn’t have said it. I know he can’t. Not anymore.

Black mould spots have appeared along the window frame, furry mini-beasts settling in, spreading out and taking over. My children are grown, but I will never grow out of

the habit of carrying a packet of baby wipes around. I pull one from my handbag and wipe along the old wooden ledge until the sheet comes away black.

The corner of the room lights up and for a moment I think he's put the TV on, but it's just a trick of the sunlight and grey dust on the convex glass. Odd how quickly we all got used to flat screens. The TV looks antique now. Most of the stuff in this flat does. I can hear Dad explaining what he hates about TV as I roll the carrier bags into a ball. Reality shows. Car shows. That bloody Laura Kuenssberg.

The lino in the kitchen is old and bubbled; it cracks as I cross it fill the kettle. I'm pleased the kitchen is still clean; the shine on that sink is as good as when Mum used to do it. The worktops are bare, except for the three pink caddies for tea, coffee and sugar. The time stuck at two-twenty on the Homer Simpson alarm clock. I take down two of the nice teacups, the special blue and white ones.

'Wedgewood effect,' Dad use to tease. He was always accusing Mum of having delusions of grandeur. He was right though. She always thought she was something special, even when all her family and friends told her she was no better than shit for marrying Dad. Even when strangers launched spit at the Silver Cross pushchair and asked her when she was 'sending us back'.

The tea caddy is filled with letters, bills and menus from Pizza Palace, while a bag of tealeaves is crumpled into the sugar caddy, the top rolled down and held with a blue plastic clothes peg.

'Tealeaves? Who still has tealeaves?' But then I remember that weird phase they both went through of having high tea. Something to occupy the days once they both finally, and reluctantly, retired from that hellhole of a school.

The tealeaves smell okay, I don't think things like this actually go off. 'I'll get the teapot out then. Let's make an occasion of it.'

I head back into the living room to fetch the teapot from the mantle and hear a cry as I pass the window. One of the children is being whacked by another with a stick. The parents rush over to console and berate accordingly. *Helicopter parenting*, Dad calls it. I don't know where he picked up this phrase.

Phil and Kamali from next door now sit down on the bench in their matching denim jackets. It's barely twelve degrees. I can see Kamali shiver from here. Both of them hold tall coffee cups and lean into a mobile phone and laugh at something. They are always laughing, always tanned. Always together.

'Dad, your friends are in the park. I thought they were moving to Crouch End.'

They look up and wave at me and I fold myself into the curtain. I don't want them to see me. Why are they always so concerned about what goes on in here? Getting Dad's food shopping and making sure he's online, those are my jobs. They're probably just after this flat, probably want to knock through the walls and make a bedroom for any tiny third world orphans they're planning to adopt. They look like the type, selfless and wholesome, their pockets bulging with the pink pound.

'Why do you like them so much Dad? They're so smug. And thin.'

They're the reason Dad started changing up his allotment, swapping scotch bonnet peppers and calabaza pumpkins for Swiss chard and curly kale. I use to love all those vegetables from back home, but Dad said there was no point growing them without Mum here to cook them properly. I still don't quite know what to do with kale.

On the mantle sits a bowl of Werther's Originals, which I think have been there since last Christmas; the pink teapot, covered in a web of brown stained veiny cracks and a wedding photo. Mum's got this stark look on her face and she's clearly pregnant with Cara. I'll never understand why she chose such a close fitting dress.

'Oh, look at you Dad.' The sharp skinny suit and afro, perfectly spherical like a black halo. It's the only photo of them that makes me see what so many at the time did, and that's just how odd they look with each other. There's something missing from the mantle, the photo of us on Brighton Beach. I love that photo, each of us balanced on the sea wall in a line, me next to dad then Cara and Maeve, and Mum on the end, a sliding scale of colour. Of course it wasn't done on purpose, but I do wonder if Mum and Dad ever questioned why each of us girls got increasingly lighter skinned. It's kind of funny, I guess.

'Has Cara still got that bloody photo?' She had taken it the last time she was here, said she was going to make a copy for each of us and get them framed, a Christmas present that she bragged about in advance. Instead, on Boxing Day, we were each handed an unwrapped bubble bath set, which she went onto boast wasn't from the '*Boots two for fiver*' but from the luxury spa hotel she had taken herself off to after *her* tough year.

The sound of the kettle click brings me back into the moment. I take the teapot into the kitchen and rinse out the dust and the crumbled carcass of a wasp. In the coffee caddy I find a bag of Demerara.

'Dad, you rebel.'

I clear my throat and put the baked goods onto the plates, 'Well this is pure class,' I giggle. 'Hmm, I do miss our dinners out on the town. That Persian place in Bayswater, I've never been able to find it again.'

It was our last meal out, if chips on a bench aren't being counted. A freezing cold night, but the rain had finally stopped and we headed into an unfamiliar restaurant, solely because it had a wood fired oven baking bread. It arrived at the table glistening with melted butter and parsley. Dad tore at it with his shaky hands, stopping every so often to suck Fanta from a can.

'I had a Moroccan girl once,' he said as the waitress collected our plates.

She smiled politely and batted her eyelashes as he laughed. He enjoyed playing the senile old man. 'They look good curvy don't they?' He asked me. 'Not like British women. British women are either too skinny or too fat. No in between. Except for your mum of course. That woman was so beautiful.' He tipped his head back and closed his eyes. Why could he never tell me anything romantic and virtuous about their relationship? Why did I always have to be subjected to the fact that they were still having so much sex?

The sugar is crusted into a block and I have to use a butter knife from the drawer to hack away at it. The tin slides noisily across the worktop.

'I know, I know. Too much racket.'

When I was a child Dad nicknamed me 'Fairy Elephant.' He would shout it as I made my way up and down stairs, followed by, 'You're a large girl, try harder twinkle toes.'

I wish I could make him a bit more politically correct, tell him how improper it is to call women fat. Explain the sensitivity of such issues. Especially to me. I look at the bag with the Chelsea buns inside and rub my hands over my hips. I'm not fat. But when I

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stand next to my sisters, it looks as though I was fed on a separate diet. I guess I've always taken after Mum, with her thick thighs and pack of Gingernuts stuffed down the side of the sofa. But Cara and Maeve are just like Dad. I found myself staring enviously at Cara's stick thin legs as we walked through Epping last month. She's not a fan of the forest, but had convinced me to go as it was 'Dad's thing', and we should honour the tradition. It was horrible when his leg was first amputated and he realised he could no longer disappear under that canopy of trees every Sunday like he used to. I'm glad it's something we can continue together. It'll help me get back into shape. It will help my relationship with Cara.

The sun cuts through a spot of grime on the window. I so wish we could go for a walk together, unburdened by any of this. Some tea dribbles from the spout onto Kim Kardashian's vapid face. The steak bakes are cold. I fluff Dad's cushion and place it back on his chair. I pick up his flat cap hat and spin it around on my finger. Outside, Phil and Kamali are still looking at the phone, rather longingly, and I wonder if it really *is* a photograph of a dark eyed orphan. Maybe, they should have this flat, knock the walls through and fill it with the clutter of childhood. With life. It's time. I've held onto it for long enough. Dad's already been gone nine weeks. I can't believe it's Spring. You're meant to move on in Spring aren't you? To clean your home, plant new flowers, call your sisters, start a diet.

I must move on.

I pour a lone cup of tea from the cracked pink teapot and start tucking into two steak bakes and two Chelsea buns.