



THE BIG FRY-UP

Shaun Levin

Bacon

The butcher round the corner from my old flat in Tel Aviv sold bacon and fresh cured ham. It was one of the only places in the city where you could buy pig meat.

I'd just finished college, I was twenty four, and I was buying bacon for the first time. My friend Anne-Marie was about to become a Jew; it was part of her farewell-to-Christianity breakfast. That morning I told her I'd decided to leave Israel and move to London. Fifteen years after leaving South Africa for Tel Aviv, I was going back to live in English.

Eggs

I hate soft-boiled eggs. The yolk, the softness of it, is like eating a foetus, a chick beginning to take shape. There's too much life in a runny yolk. I like my eggs hard and rubbery. I like them chewy and bright yellow. So when I go for a late breakfast at The Crazy Horse Café on Arcola Street, I insist on an omelette. 'Your usual?' the boss says, meaning: a bacon omelette. I need to find welcoming arms wherever I go.

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What will I tell my son when he asks how he was made? My turkey-baster boy with his father's green eyes and the blonde hair of his mothers. Me cycling for those five wintery months to their flat in Finsbury Park to jerk off into a yoghurt pot, have my cum slurped up into a syringe, passed on like a baton to Denise, who takes it to their bedroom to squirt into Andy. That, my son, is your creation myth. Three gods it took to create our Francis. God the wanker. God the go-between. God the girl on her back with His legs in the air.

Beans

My boyfriend, Mark, wonders how appropriate it is for us to be saying fuck and shit around Frankie.

'I'm not having my son get all giggly around four-letter words,' I say.

'They're not going to like that at school,' Mark says.

'Fuck them,' I say.

Mark came into the picture not long after Francis stopped wearing nappies and wasn't waking up in the middle of the night for feeding. He is my rock and my reassurance. My son says fuck or shit when he bumps his toe or drops his toys. Four-letter words are a way of easing the ache.

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Here's one my grampa taught me: Baked beans are good for the heart,/The more you eat the more you fart./Fart fart is good for the heart,/Keeps the tummy at ease,/Keeps you warm on a wintry night,/And suffocates the fleas.

Mushrooms and tomatoes

My father, when he was dying of cancer — although at that stage he, like us, didn't know he was dying — went on a strict diet, a regimen he thought would stop the cancer cells from devouring his body. Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma is too ugly to show its face; the killing happens beneath the skin, in the bone marrow. If he stopped eating spinach, he thought, all the killing would stop.

After he has gone, we're in the kitchen and my mother's washing three cos lettuces, drying the leaves and packing them in the crisper.

'We only need four or five leaves for the salad,' I say.

'It's habit,' she says. 'For the past year all I've been doing is washing these things for your father.'

Six leaves with each meal. Fresh cabbage, too.

'Never eat your mushrooms raw,' my father tells me on the phone.

I believed food could save him. So my sister and I made carrot and betroot juice, emptied acidophilus capsules into it, and fed it to my father through the tube that hung from the hook on the wall above his bed. We'd brought him back from the hospital for what turned out to be his last three days. Three days, and then his eyes shot open at two o'clock on the Friday morning; his spirit hovered in the house for ten hours of grace before the men from Hevra Kaddisha came to wrap his body in a sheet, strap him to a litter, and transport him eight floors down, standing upright in the lift like a granite Egyptian cat god.

Now, from the seeds of the tomatoes he grew in his roof garden in Ashkelon, we grow cherry tomatoes in our back garden in Stoke Newington. My son calls them Grampa's Tomatoes and insists on watering them whenever

he's here, whether it's been raining or not. And it's been raining a lot this summer.

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We go mushrooming in Roslyn Glen with Denise and Andy, and Andy's brother, John. John's girlfriend looks after the kids – ours and theirs – while we drink magic mushroom tea and sing nursery rhymes to a Reggae beat in the drawing room of Roslyn Castle.

Bubble and Squeak

I was ten when I started shoplifting. It was summer, November in South Africa, and the week leading up to Guy Fawkes.

My cousin (who now lives in San Francisco) and our friend Michael Roberts (who died of AIDS when he was 23) dare me to go into Mr Theocharus' grocery shop and steal fire crackers. So I fill the pockets of my jacket and trousers with Chinese crackers and Catherine wheels and walk out the shop, only to be called back by Mr Theocharus. I hand over the fire crackers in my jacket pocket.

'That's all I took,' I said.

Back at Michael Roberts' house – there are always those boys who are forever referred to by both first name and surname – the maid comes upstairs shouting that Mr Theocharus is here with the police. I throw the firecrackers out of the window into the swimming pool and hide under the bed. Eventually my cousin and Michael Roberts start laughing.

'She's only joking,' my cousin said.

I still love the thrill of stealing things.

Tea

My boyfriend and I eat at the Kurdish restaurant on Stoke Newington Road. (Not on the nights my vegan son is with us, of course. ‘Daddy,’ he says. ‘Eggs have souls.’) The Kurdish restaurant is our treat when I’ve finished a story or he’s clinched a deal (like getting a loan for some company so they can buy gas from the Kuwaitis) or neither of us wants to cook. Adana kebab, lamb shish, humous and salads, then small fragile glasses of tea on a saucer with two heart-shaped cubes of sugar.

‘This is the kind of tea we had in Israel,’ I say.

‘No milk?’ Mark says.

‘Is that an offer?’ I say.

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During the days of my father’s dying in Ashkelon we drank tea with mint or green tea from a box which my mother kept in the cupboard beside my father’s hospital bed.

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I met a man once, the man who broke the heart my boyfriend had to fix, who drank only Lapsang Souchong and Assam tea. For the weeks after he left – and I’d only just bought the boxes of Twinings for his breakfast – I drank Lapsang and Assam, morning noon and night. I was Medusa eating her children so as never to say goodbye to them.

I like my tea strong so that it looks like coffee.

‘Just like my dad,’ Mark says.

I drink tea the way my boyfriend’s father drinks it.

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People say: I won’t leave you for all the tea in China.

Toast

How wonderful to be in England amongst lovers of Marmite. Marmite is the taste of civilization. The civilized world is salty and smells of yeast extract. One of my son's mothers, Andy, says it's a class thing, this love of Marmite; working class people do not eat Marmite. What a disappointment for her then to have her son growing up in Stoke Newington demanding Marmite sandwiches in his packed lunch.

I teach our son the comfort of Marmite and scrambled egg on toast.

'What else could we have on toast?' I say.

'Pooh,' he says.

'Pooh on toast?' I say. The joy of being made to laugh, the pride and relief of having helped create a child with a sense of humour.

'Cut my toast now,' he says.

FIRST PUBLISHED BY PULP.NET at

<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/05/the-big-fry-up.html>

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