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Bad Food

by Victoria Watson

It is 1981 and I have a bowl cut fringe. We are gathered around the kitchen table scraping our spoons, ensuring we get the very last bite of Viennetta ice cream, while thanking our lucky stars that it is not apple crumble again. My brother is in jubilant mood, he is 10 years older than me, he has a Parka, a new car, a better haircut and is utterly revoltingly full of himself. He also has a captive audience. He places his spoon in his bowl and pushes his chair back with a smug and satisfied grin. He is about to do or say something terrible. I can barely watch nor bare to look away.

My mother uncharacteristically ignores him, instead she stacks bowls, gathers cutlery, and desperately attempts to bring this Sunday lunch to a close, anything that will mean her 80-year-old mother will go home and leave her guilt-free for another 6 days. Granny, like a wizened Christmas robin is perched at the end of the table, regaling us with stories about her charitable endeavours delivering meals on wheels. We have all sampled Granny's cooking and all experienced her hair-raising driving skills, so a look of deep sympathy is on everyone's face, apart from my brother's.

He widens his smile and just says it, "where was it?" he frowns, his gaze in mock wonder, "where we had those terrible stale ice cream wafers?"

The words hang in the air like rotting fruit. The scraping of bowls stops, the dog sits up in his bed, head angling with curiosity, my father's hand stays poised on his wine glass, stuck between table and mouth, the clock ticks, the oven fan hums and my sister and I gasp.

He smiles proudly, utterly pleased with himself. But he is not finished. Our stunned silence has not put him off. It has only encouraged.

“You know the ones”, he pokes, “they were terrible, really chewy and stale; I just can’t remember where it was,” he lies. “Where were we?”

I swallow a giggle and grab my flat Soda Stream coke. I notice my sister’s shoulders are shaking.

Blissfully unaware my Granny enquires, “tell me, have you heard the cuckoo yet, dear?”

She is oblivious to the mischief making of my brother, selectively deaf to all her perfect grandson’s bad behaviour.

And bad behaviour it was of course, for it had only been a fortnight before when we had all sat awkwardly around Granny’s dining table, labouring our way through a packet of out-of-date ice cream wafers and crystalized ice cream. At the time my brother had to our astonishment attempted to bend his wafer into the shape of a Messerschmitt, but this had all been carried out conspiratorially behind Granny’s back; along with muffled giggles and watering eyes.

Ice cream wafers are my Proust madeleines, my time machines and each time I see them stuck valiantly into a perfect scoop of ice cream I am back to that Sunday lunch years ago, then back still to the meal at Granny’s with all of us trying desperately to dislodge chunks of stale confectionery that are wedged in our fillings. They remind me of my brother’s sense of humour and mischief, his great knack of creating a shared joke, a double bluff or a buttock clenching moment of social disgrace, but mostly it reminds me of how bad food used to be.

Ice cream wafers are no longer the same, we have waffle cones now, chocolate dipped elegant tubes or fancy brandy snaps with Italian sounding names. The chewy wafer is an antique from a different era like gravy boats, prawn cocktails with iceberg lettuce or melon starters with a glace cherry on a cocktail stick. Similarly, children do not get pastel pink iced gems at their birthday party any more or streaky bacon crisps; ah Frazzles! The pathetic imitation that undoubtedly never contained any ingredient relating to streaky bacon at all.

Food is a time machine that obligingly transports us back to parties where we wore velvet knickerbockers and only one child won pass the parcel.

Bad food is a slicker upgraded time machine from the reliable Volvo of good food. It is faster, smoother and can bring on vomit in a speedier 0-60 than anything by Jamie Oliver or Yotam Ottalenghi put together. One taste of lumpy mashed potato and I am waiting in the queue of the school canteen with my hair in a scrunchie talking about Morten Harket’s cheekbones. Cheap white toast with mayonnaise and sweetcorn relish and it is a post pub kitchen feast to soak up the pints of student 2 for 1 Strongbow. MacDonalds’ strawberry milkshakes the neon shade of the girls from Buck Fizz’s lipstick; so cold it makes your eyebrows hurt and so sweet you can feel your cavities begging for mercy and I am drunk and its time I went home.

Findus crispy pancakes and I am sat on a beanbag merely an inch away from the TV, watching Top of the Pops while my parents shake their heads reminiscing over Val Doonican's cardigans. Strawberry pop tarts and I am dreaming of big hair and bigger shoulder pads from the likes of Dynasty, Knots Landing and Dallas, all the while wondering when the roof of my scalded mouth will heal.

Bad food opens up a Pandora's box of yesteryears and they are all sandwiched neatly in a big chest freezer in my mind. They take me back to conversations with people no longer here, to streets I no longer walk down but yet knew each pub, each bus stop, each kebab shop intimately. The trip down memory lane maybe stomach churning but that neon custard welded to my bowl, that watery cabbage stuffed in my pockets, those butter beans that winked at me off the buffet table like some perky uncle, those tongue sandwiches that we laughed and laughed about were really just that; tongue sandwiches. They were all just bad food.

They take me back to school dinners, posh weddings or a steamed up Mini Metro on a freezing November day, looking at the curling Cuckmere and wondering where to hide my Granny's picnic. They move me to simpler times, when most food was disgusting, most sitcom jokes were racist and we all just forgot how bad food was. Because the food was not important, it was just the slimy, watery, congealed, stale, preservative ridden, artificial coloured time machine that was going transport us back to halcyon days, just like we were in Doc's DeLorean in Back to the Future.