

Scenes from life with father

Sydney Smith

Memoir

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Picture a winter's evening in a kitchen in Wellington, New Zealand. An Antarctic wind stalks the house, rattling windows in its quest for a way in. I'm sitting at the table while my meal goes cold. My brothers bolted theirs down an hour ago and escaped to their bedrooms. Mother says, 'You'll sit there until you've eaten every bit.' A bare light bulb burns harshly yellow overhead and picks up a thick sheen on the sliced ox tongue and the boiled potatoes. Only the spinach, with its strong green colouring, withstood the luminous onslaught. I like spinach, especially when it's tossed with salt. I ate that first and have stared disconsolately ever since at the rest. I have tried the potato: it's as hard and unappetising as soap.

More particularly, though, I don't want to eat the tongue. It's a shocking thing to tell a child to eat, an obscene thing. I saw the tongue when my father brought it home, unwrapped it and set it on a plate. It was blue-grey then, and grossly pimped. All innocently, ghoulishly curious, I watched Mother boil and peel it, thinking it was for my parents to eat, not us kids. I know there's adult food and child food, even if nobody has said so.

When we sat down to the meal, I said, 'Why do we have to eat tongue?' Mother said, 'Your father wants it.' The king's wish is our command. His penchant for weird animal body parts – brains, liver and kidney, tripe, sweetbreads – is mysterious enough. Even more mysterious is that he eats his tea at the wrong time of day. Mother puts a lid over his share and slides it into the oven. Early the next morning, while the rest of us are sleeping, he will heat and consume it with a cup of coffee for breakfast. I sometimes see his plate in the morning, ringed with congealed gravy.

When I think of my father, I always think of revolting food.

It's an open secret in my family that my father can't smell. Mother told me he lost his sense of smell when he was nine, in 1932, during a botched operation to remove his tonsils and adenoids. The procedure took place on the kitchen table, she said. (I picture a white-coated man carving a roast. Do humans eat the tonsils and adenoids of animals?) But though we all know, none of us talks about it in front of him. We know it's a banned subject, even though we haven't been told it is.

The operation had one interesting result: my father can sniff up one nostril at a time. Steven and I hang around him when he comes home from work, just for the chance to see him do it. He has a gigantic schnozz, a source of fascination in its own right. It makes our day when he brusquely snorts through his right nostril, then his left. Steven says he'll hold a piece of paper under the nose one day and see if that gets sucked up.

My father's inability to smell has one very bad effect. He cooks the Sunday tea most of the year, except during the lawn-bowls season in summer; he cooks his favourite dishes at other times during the week. He prepares pea and ham soup with too much salt, cooks curried sausages so hot we turn red and breathe fire. He liberally coats his share of meals with salt and white pepper. His meals are a test of endurance my older brothers boast of to their friends. I laugh when I hear them challenge a boy to eat a curried sausage, and laugh harder when the boy cringes; but I wonder too why food has to be a trial in our house.

My father's inability to smell has one brief, noteworthy consequence.

When Mother was growing up, it was the policy in white New Zealand to 'assimilate' the Maori. Mother was sent by her parents to a boarding school devoted to inducting Maori girls into the pakeha way of life. The girls were strapped if they were caught speaking Maori. They were given elocution lessons to banish their Maori accent. And they were taught to reject Maori food and cook pakeha meals.

Maori food is fish and shellfish; eels; birds and their eggs; kumara, the Maori sweet potato; and puha, green leafy vegetables. Plenty of non-Maori people eat these foods; but to me, Maori food is not just the victuals themselves: it is the

way they are cooked, and an indefinable something else which I recognise as soon as I walk into the home of one of my mother's older siblings and which is absent from ours, something about the smell of the air, the buckets of blue-black mussels, of pipis still coated in sand; the sight of degloved eels draped over the lip of the kitchen sink, how wincingly raw they look.

The Maori traditionally cooked their food in an earthen oven, or haangii: it was dug out of the ground by the men and lined with river stones which had been heated in a fire until they were red-hot; the birds, fish and kuumara, prepared by the women and wrapped in leaves, were placed inside the oven, covered with leaves and the earth shovelled on top. The food was left for the afternoon, then dug up.

Haangii food is cooked at all the big family events Mother takes me to, especially funerals, the most important occasions in Maori life. I sit among my aunts and uncles and their children and our cousins once or twice or thrice removed, all of us at long trestle tables, and watch in puzzled revulsion as they tuck in with gusto, talking and laughing all the while. I can't stand the acrid whiff of it and won't eat, despite Mother's urgings. I embarrass her on these occasions: among the Maori, as with all ethnic groups, it is rude to reject a host's food. I can't help myself, though. It looks unprepossessing, smells horrible, and tastes of smoke and dirt. (I have discovered since that haangii food, when properly cooked, doesn't smell or taste like the food cooked in my uncles' haangii. They used dampened sacking to steam the bundles of meat and vegetables, which is the modern custom. I think they neglected to clean the sacks, which were impregnated with the soil of the potatoes they had held before they were collected from the greengrocer.)

At home, with no special occasion to celebrate, my aunts boil pots of pumpkin. I often see them eat a big pile of the vegetable with no other flavouring than a dab of butter, and no other foods to vary the feast. They eat with inexplicable zest. I like pumpkin well enough, in small quantities. I can't understand why they eat piles of it this way. It's as if food to them is something different to what it is to me, perhaps an assertion of their racial identity, perhaps a happy reminder of childhood, perhaps even a sign of affluence in contrast to former years when food wasn't always plentiful.

In our house, Mother cooks the kind of food my pakeha father approves of: roasted meat, stews, fried food and a dish I loathe, in which a magenta-coloured wedge of corned beef is put in a large pot on the stove, to which is added water, then carrots, potatoes and peas. The whole lot is simmered until everything tastes like the salted meat.

Mother cooks Maori food only once, and does it with an openness that belies the secretiveness of the enterprise. One of her cousins delivers a brace of mutton-birds, wrapped in newspaper, which she hides at the back of the fridge behind a gaggle of jars. Mutton-birds thrive on Stewart Island, the tiny anchor at the stern of the canoe-shaped South Island. Being a sub-Antarctic creature, they have a dense layer of fat between the skin and the flesh. The smell when they are cooking is eye-wateringly pungent, and the result so greasy that Mother has to don a plastic apron before she sits down to this delicacy. She spends a good hour over the business, and at the end her mouth, cheeks, chin, hands, forearms and apron glisten with fat. She also vibrates with satisfaction, the kind of satisfaction I routinely see in her sisters when they eat a dish of boiled pumpkin. For days afterwards, she reeks of mutton-bird.

She prepares the treat one Saturday. My father is always out on Saturdays. She washes and puts away the cooking pot and the plate she has eaten from before he gets home. She doesn't need to worry about the stench of mutton-bird, of Maori food, which has invaded every nook and cranny of the house.

I wonder why this is the only time she takes advantage of my father's disability. Perhaps it's that every time she visits her sisters, she gets to eat Maori food – except that I never see her enjoy that the way she enjoys the mutton-birds.

During the lawn bowls off-season, my father bestows on us the privilege of a Sunday drive. This is an event I dread. As soon as we get into the car, he points a warning finger and growls, 'Don't say a word. I have to concentrate.' Mother doesn't think the rule applies to her and chatters the whole way. Father interrupts her monologue to say, 'For Chrissake, will you shut your trap! I'm driving. Do you want me to hit a lamppost?' His voice is as clenched as his fists on the steering wheel. Nothing he can say will make her be quiet. In fact, she seems to enjoy upsetting him.

In this way, we trundle around the bays, which are full of choppy grey water. Out of fear of hitting a lamppost, my father drives well below the speed limit. Other cars pass us. So do cyclists. A granny with a walking stick hobbles by. My brothers dismally watch these overtakers and shoot our father accusing glances. Nothing is said but even I, the girl, know that his driving lacks manly vigour. On the homeward stretch of what to my father has been a reasonably successful outing, despite Mother, he stops at the only milk bar in Wellington that sells jaffa ice-cream. He digs his hand into his trouser pocket, pulls out a fistful of change and gives my brother Lynn some money. A few minutes later, he returns with a bouquet of orange ice-creams in cones. He hands them through the driver's side window. While my brothers and parents tuck in, I hesitate. My father glances at me in the rear-view mirror. 'Eat up before it melts,' he says. It is already melting in rivulets, possibly warmed by the fever of disgust coursing through my veins. I poke out my tongue gingerly and touch the orange ball flecked with brown chocolate chips. It looks like something best flushed down the toilet. My stomach is already turning queasy somersaults. I can't tell him, because I know he won't listen. I feel my eyes bulge with the fear of what my stomach is about to do. My father starts the car and snail-crawls away from the kerb. Shortly after, he pulls over and opens the back door. Nothing, not even his baffled disapproval, can stop the vomit I hurl into the gutter.

It doesn't occur to anyone to excuse me from jaffa duty, least of all my father, who must assume each Sunday that, this time, at last, I will appreciate the treat.

My father buys the fruit and vegetables each week. Although we have moved from suburb to suburb in Wellington, each Saturday he visits the same greengrocer, a man who understands what he wants. To my father, a bargain is the uppermost consideration when buying anything, especially food. At the end of the trading week, the greengrocer sets aside everything that is spotted, bruised, spongy, wounded, and offers it to my father at half price. He snaps it up.

While we were young, he bought the potatoes each week. But after my brothers left home, with more money at his disposal, he seized the chance to save by periodically buying a sack of potatoes. It is my job to peel and prepare them for

roasting. I enjoy cutting the string that sews the lips of a new sack together, because it means that for a week or two our potatoes will be delicious. Nothing can compare to firm creamy flesh coated in fat and baked until crisp. But as the weeks pass and the sack slowly empties, the potatoes become spongy, sprout, grow spots of blue fungus and take on a bitter flavour. I know it's useless to tell him that it isn't a bargain when the potatoes are inedible by the time we're halfway through the sack, that it's excessive to buy a sack when there's only him, Mother and me to feed. My father can't hear anyone else's opinion.

Mealtime is a species of torture, minus the screaming. I eat my peas, beans and carrots, because they are the least offensive items on my plate. I linger over the rest, talking myself into believing they aren't as bad as they look. I feel my father watching me for signs of rejection, his expression suspended between anger and hurt. Whether he chooses to growl or hang his head in pain, the outcome for me will be the same: his happiness depends on my acceptance of his food.

Lynn moved to Australia for work, and when he comes back he has new recipes to dazzle us with. He discovers that our father has taken over all cooking duties and takes appropriate action. For the week of his stay, he ensures that he, not my father, cooks the evening meal. He introduces us to stir-fried vegetables with a pinch of curry to heighten the flavour. Not only that (and that is dramatic enough to me), he buys the vegetables each day, fresh from the greengrocer's. Not only *that*, he buys the best, free of spots, bruises, fungus, tears and holes in the leaves. It is heaven to eat green beans that taste like beans, cauliflower given colour and speckles by the curry powder, and to try new vegetables, broccoli, red pepper, all feeling deliciously firm-soft in the mouth.

A week later, he flies back to Melbourne and our household returns to my father's regime. With changes. My father inexplicably decides to cook stir-fried vegetables – Lynn has told him how. His reason is inexplicable because my father learned how to cook five or six dishes in his youth, while training to be a cook at the People's Palace, and ever since has stuck to them like grim death. But he announces to Mother and me that he is cooking stir-fry, and that is what he does five nights a week for the next year. On the first night, he closely follows my brother's instructions and measurements. After that, he goes his own way. He

has no sense of smell to guide him. He doesn't know the difference between a pinch of curry and a tablespoon. Well, he understands the difference in quantity, but not the effect it has on Mother and me. Unused to sautéing vegetables, he cooks them to mush.

Also – and this comes out in amused asides to Mother – he uses cheap, damaged vegetables. Though he holds his eldest son in awe for living overseas, for working in an office, for having spent a semester at university (he and his pub mates passed the cap around to buy Lynn a leather briefcase engraved with his initials at the start of the term), he views him with scorn for being sucker enough to buy vegetables at full price.

He gives up the stir-fry tyranny after he and Mother visit Lynn in Australia. He comes home with a crockpot and makes Hungarian meatballs, to Lynn's recipe, every Saturday for unnumbered years afterwards. Nothing can deter him from his culinary course, not complaints from Steven when he visits on Sunday ('Hungarian meatballs *again*'), not uneaten meatballs idling in a puddle of yellow grease and which he has to throw out. He has no concept of the false economy, that food which isn't eaten is dearer than food which is, no matter how much more it cost to buy.

As I turn from adolescent to adult, I think of my father as a nub of survival, every thought bent solely on the task of living from day to day, and oblivious to others. I don't think of him all that much, because I have other problems to occupy my mind. For example, people can see my thoughts through the transparent cover of my forehead. Though I hurry along the street, my head ducked protectively low, I know it's useless, that everything I think and feel is on display for all to see and condemn. So I stop leaving the house. I stay in my bedroom day and night, coming out only to use the toilet and get something to eat. I stop washing because of the cameras behind the bathroom mirrors which record my movements.

It comes as a surprise when I realise my father knows something is wrong. I thought nobody had noticed. He rings me every morning during smoko. For the first few months, I answer because when the phone rings, that is what people do. Nobody else is home to do it. He asks me what I want for tea. He asks me to do

this task or that. When I cry, he quickly backs down – ‘I’ll do it tonight,’ he says. But after these months have passed, the sound of the phone is a nagging pressure, an inconsolable child who won’t stop its frightened crying. He’s scared I will kill myself and he wants proof each day that I’m still alive. Sometimes, I don’t answer. I count the rings: eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four. The phone falls silent. Has he got the message? No, it starts again a few minutes later. He must have been called away for something. That night, when he comes home, he interrogates me about why I didn’t answer his call. I don’t know how to tell him how much I hate the sound of the telephone.

The butcher’s shop sends him out twice a week on delivery rounds. He drops by our place to leave plastic sacks of frozen chips, parcels of meat and groceries. At night, as soon as he gets in from work, he scrapes animal fat into a big saucepan, lights the gas ring under it and, when it begins to smoke, pours in frozen chips. As the ice hits the hot fat, a battle ensues, with roars and crackling explosions. From my room, I hear him shake the pan to break up the clumps of potato. He scoops the cooked chips into an enamel dish and calls for me to come and eat. At first I do. I like chips. But he cooks chips day after day, week after week, month after month, and by the time two years have passed, I have stopped eating them and, behind his back, throw them in the bin. So as not to hurt his feelings, I hide them under rubbish and, since that never seems enough, I crumple newspaper and shove that on top. I try to tell him I can’t eat chips every day. By this time I am seeing a therapist and have started to assert myself in small, timid ways. I know it’s useless but still I try. He wants to help me, but everything he does is pressed in and squeezed tight and made rigid by his belief that life is a grim struggle for survival. He doesn’t listen to me, not even when, out of desperation, I invent a story of the doctor putting me on a no-fat diet.

In the end, I stop the chip regime by leaving the country. I know in hindsight that nothing less could have stopped him.

I come to live in Melbourne when I’m twenty-five. Although I’m still sick, I know that if I want to get well I have to get far away from my old existence. The day I told my father I was leaving home, he asked, ‘Why?’ I said I wanted to live my own life. Baffled, offended, he asked, ‘Why?’ As we all knew in my family, I had

been earmarked to take care of my parents until they died. I had entertained garish fantasies in which I withered to a grey stick and died the day they did. Perhaps he had had a similar fantasy – though if he had, its tone would have been very different. Whereas mine had the bitter tang of a curse, his would have been like the fulfilment of an anxiously held wish: to protect his daughter forever from the dangers and depredations of the world. My decision to leave his protection was not simply an act of rebellion but of insult, a rejection of his kind of love. During the month after I told him I was leaving, while I prepared for flight, he didn't speak to me.

To my father, food was just something you put in your stomach to stop the hunger pangs. It had no joy, no pleasure, no opulence. It was function. This attitude sprang from his anosmia, his inability to smell. Taste, which we experience through the tongue, comprises a third of the sensations we enjoy when we eat and drink; we taste sweet and salty, sour and bitter. The rest, which is called flavour, is supplied by smell. My father had lost on that long-ago operating table most of his ability to enjoy food. He had lost any sense of the richness and complexity, the experience, of eating.

Nevertheless, anosmia can't explain his peculiar rigidity. I wish I could understand him better. But he didn't talk about himself, didn't speak of his past, didn't mention his parents, who were dead before I was born. I will never know what forces of austerity shaped him into the man I grew up with. All I have is the petrified residue of his habits in which he is captured, a fly in amber.

The last time my father cooked for me, I was living in a shared house; he and Mother had come over for a holiday and to attend the Melbourne Cup. They were staying with Lynn; they didn't want to see where I lived, as it would remind them too sharply of what they had lost. On this night, my brother was out and would not be back until late, so the cooking duty fell to my father. He boiled a lump of pickled pork, peeled potatoes, chopped cauliflower and cabbage. It had been three years since I had eaten one of his meals, so the dinner is printed indelibly on my mind. It was served on white plates, and the only colour to be seen was the pale mucous pink of the pork, the washed-out green of the cabbage and the black spots on the potatoes. I stared in disbelief. By this time,

I was used to other kinds of food and had a whole new vocabulary to go with them: risotto, creamy hummus, beef strips threaded onto bamboo sticks and reclining in the aromatic ooze of peanut sauce. My father's meal was a shocking reminder of another life, one of hunger despite a full stomach. He saw my reaction and growled at me to eat. I managed half a potato out of duty and pushed my plate away. Cruel as I knew I was being, I couldn't hide my revulsion. I couldn't do it to please or placate him, and I couldn't do it for love.

Sydney Smith is a past winner of *The Age* Short Story Competition. Another of her memoirs was published in *Griffith REVIEW 22: MoneySexPower* and her story 'Flame Red' appeared in *Griffith REVIEW 26: Stories for Today*. She is the director of the Victorian Mentoring Service for Writers.