

Dandelion

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Something strange is growing in the airing cupboard. It's three times as big as it was when we put it in there. A plastic bowl covered with a tea towel sits above the candy stripe pillowcases. The tea towel's almost hovering in the air, held up by the dome of dough beneath it. Mum carries the bowl downstairs, holding it out at arms-length. The dough gives a little sigh when she lifts the tea towel off. There are tiny moon craters on its surface.

'You can touch it if you like,' she says.

I give it a small prod. You can see my finger mark, then the dough bounces back and it's as if I'd never touched it. Mum goes to fetch some stoneground flour from the pantry. She scatters the flour over the table and lifts out the overgrown dough.

'Kneading bread's a good way to get your anger out,' she says. 'Like punching cushions.' Her fist hits the dough. There are knuckle marks, but with the next twist, they're gone. This isn't the reason she's making our bread though, or not the main one. It's because of the chemicals.

Last week she'd bought a packet of the brown bread we usually have and when she opened it, half was brown and half was white.

'I couldn't believe it,' she'd said to me. 'It means brown bread isn't brown at all, it's just white bread dyed brown. That's the only explanation. These companies, they charge an arm and a leg for brown bread, making out it's healthier, and all along it's no better than Mother's Pride.'

'Oh.'

'We're not going to eat shop bread any more. It's packed full of chemicals.'

Mum takes the bread out of the oven. She looks disappointed and puzzled. I feel like that too. It was enormous in the airing cupboard, so why has it only come halfway up the tin now?

Mum's been making the new bread for a month now and it's become part of our tea, replacing the shop bread. Me, Dan and Fran are watching *Newsround* and John Craven's talking about whether or not there really is a Loch Ness monster. I can hear the clatter of plates

¹ Please visit www.sadienott.com

and cutlery coming from the kitchen. Mum comes in, breathing more loudly than usual, and stands with her hands on her hips.

‘I wish you lot would help me for once. Without me having to ask. None of you ever does anything unless it’s on the stupid rota.’ The rota means me, Dan and Fran take turns clearing away, washing up and drying the dishes. Mum wipes her hands on her pinny. ‘I’m not some kind of slave you know. What about women’s lib? I’m not supposed to be stuck in the kitchen the whole time. At The Centre everyone just helps. That’s the beauty of a commune – everyone does everything together.’

How were we supposed to know she wanted us to help today? We’re not telepathic, I want to say. I start to get up.

‘Don’t bother. It’s too late now, I’ve virtually done it all.’

Mum wheels the trolley into the sitting room. We lay out the plates, spoons and food on the low black table. It’s the usual – honey sandwiches, bowls of grated carrot and apple which she’s made in her new food processor, and oranges cut into quarters. And today the other food – the food that changes – is bananas with evaporated milk and demerara sugar, and Jaffa cakes.

I eat a spoonful of carrot and apple. Ee-eer. The taste pulls my mouth out and down. And the taste is still there – in my throat, inside my cheeks, on my tongue – after I’ve taken the spoon out of my mouth. I look in the bowl. There are tiny flecks of green mixed in with the white and orange.

‘What are those green bits?’ I say as if I’m just curious.

‘Oh, you noticed. I added a few grated dandelion leaves,’ says Mum. ‘They’re really good for you. Loads of iron.’

What’s going on?

In bed that night I’m still thinking about the dandelion. Something like this has happened before. There must be some sort of pattern to it – I can’t have these things jumping out at me like this. I can feel a hundred tiny feet running in my chest. I screw up my eyes to help myself think. Maybe it’s to do with the gadgets. The first time, it started out like an ordinary meal too. We were in the kitchen and it was dinner, not tea. We had spaghetti on toast. I remember because I’d managed to get eight spaghetti hoops onto each side prong of my fork. When we’d finished Mum took the plates away and put out the pudding bowls. She went to the fridge, took out a big jug and placed it on the table. Me and Fran knelt on our chairs, peered in,

and backed away. It looked like blood and guts. All stringy, red and green. I felt my throat close shut and my nose crinkle up like a rabbit.

‘Don’t you turn your nose up at it,’ said Mum.

‘What is it?’ says Fran.

‘It’s rhubarb fool. It’s nice. It’s got sugar in.’ Mum poured it into our bowls. ‘Eat up,’ she said. ‘It took me forever to make it, what with the chopping, the boiling and cleaning the liquidiser afterwards.’

I took a small mouthful. It was so sour, I did a strange frown. I couldn’t help it. Suddenly Mum looked the way people in cartoons do after someone’s punched them in the face. She turned and walked out of the kitchen. While she was gone I moved the rhubarb fool round my bowl to make it look like I’d eaten some. I looked up and glanced at Dan. Our gazes met then bounced away. I looked at Fran, she looked back at me, and away, like our eyes had touched something very hot. No one said a word. And I just couldn’t stop staring at the rainbow pattern the sun had made on the glass of the liquidiser upside down on the draining board.

I open my eyes again, see the outline of my cuddly toys lined up along the bed and breathe out. I think of Dad and the sausage, beans and mash he makes for us every Saturday. How he puts a slice of lard in the frying pan and, by magic, it turns from white to see-through. The sausages sizzle and spit. Sometimes they split open and their insides come out, all lumpy, as if the sausage has grown a brain. Dad and Dan always eat the brain-sausages so I don’t have to.

I realise I can’t feel the running-feet in my chest anymore and close my eyes.

The food goes back to usual. You don’t think about the horrible food. It’s like it never happened. And then it happens again. We’ve finished our cheese on toast and Mum brings out the pudding. It’s light brown and speckled and, however lightly you breathe, you can’t get away from the stink. I start thinking about the game me and Megan play when we’re lining up for school dinners.

‘Hope it’s treacle pudding today,’ she says.

‘Hope it’s not prunes,’ I say ‘Or semolina. Or horrible gelatine pie.’

‘If the only food in the world was prunes or the leftovers in the pig bucket, which would you eat?’

‘The leftovers,’ I always say. We laugh.

‘What’s that?’ says Fran.

‘Prune fool,’ says Mum. ‘Come on, try a bit.’

I feel like my talking doll. Someone's pulling the string in my back and it's the pause before one of the recorded phrases comes out. *Thank you Mummy. It looks nice. Please may I leave the table.* But nothing comes out. Only silence. I take a tiny mouthful and my tummy jumps in, sending a sick taste up into my mouth. I swallow the sick back down. Mum's watching me and all of a sudden her face looks like the woman on the front of Dad's Picasso book. She's very still and tears are falling down her cheeks in slow motion. Tears are running down my face too. She takes my bowl, and standing with her back to me she slowly eats the rest of my fool. I keep still, so still, not knowing what to do.

Dan stares ahead frowning. He pushes his bowl away a fraction of an inch.

'But it's yucky,' says Fran, pulling a face.

'Oh, for goodness sake. Get out, all of you,' says Mum. 'Be unhealthy, see if I care.'

The food returns to normal again – our sort of normal anyway. Honey soaking into Mum's heavy bread. The oranges cut in four. Grated carrot and apple. Every now and then, when you least expect it, you take a big mouthful and realise there's dandelion in it again. 'It's only a tiny bit, I thought you wouldn't notice,' Mum says, or 'No, there's none in there today,' but you know there is because of the taste and the way Mum's not looking at you.

Then – there in the kitchen – you see a sign. A new gadget. The Salton Yoghurt Maker has five pots which you fill with milk, you plug it in to heat it up, and after a while the milk turns into yoghurt. Not proper yoghurt though, like Ski. It's called live yoghurt.

'It's full of good bacteria,' says Mum. Bacteria are little creatures so small you can't see them. 'Try some,' she says. 'You don't have to eat it if you don't like it, just try it.' I try it. I can feel the creatures on my lips.

After a while the yoghurt maker moves into the airing cupboard because, Mum says, you get the heat for free in there and save on the electricity. When I walk past the airing cupboard on my way to bed I can almost hear the yoghurt and rising bread nattering to each other in tiny bubbles and burps.

'What's that stuff?' says Fran. After several weeks of usual food, Mum's spooning something green and slimy into our bowls at dinner time.

'It's stinging nettle soup,' says Mum. Fran's mouth is a big letter O. 'Don't worry. The cooking takes the sting out.' I don't believe her. 'You need to try it. Only a mouthful. It's full of minerals.'

I pick up the bowl in both hands, hold it high in the air and throw it with all my might. It smashes down onto the black and white lino squares. The bowl breaks and the soup oozes out over the floor. Some splashes up the wall and runs down the pine panelling like pale green tears.

Except I don't. I couldn't. The feeling got stuck. It came roaring up from my tummy, through my chest and into my arms and here it is, trapped. My arms are as still as stone. The feeling's fizzing between my shoulders and elbows, between the skin and the bone. No thinking, no words, no running out. Just the tiny pin pricks, buzzing in my arms. From high up in the corner where two walls meet the ceiling, I watch the me below.

She sees the water gathering in my eyes and the frown lines between them and how I'm hardly breathing to avoid taking in the smell of the soup.

She says, 'I don't know why I bother. I just don't. You're ungrateful, the lot of you.'

I look down, ashamed. My head is full of the words from the school grace: *For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly grateful.*

'You don't appreciate anything I do for you. It's for your own good. You lot drive me completely up the wall.' She's pacing, like a bear in a cage, round the kitchen, up and down, a blur in her yellow and brown striped housecoat.

She picks up my bowl and tips it back into the saucepan, scraping it out with the wooden spoon. 'You'll be the death of me, you kids, you really will.' She picks up Dan and Fran's bowls and puts their soup back in the pan too.

The me-in-the-air watches the me-at-the-table.

Mum strikes a match and a flame whooshes out of the mouth of the grill, like a big blue tongue, out then in, to cook the toast. She slams an empty saucepan on the top of the stove. The tin opener grabs the edge of the can and spins it round as she twists and twists the handle. She turns the can upside down and with a single angry shake the beans hurtle into the pan. Black crumbs rain down on the stainless steel as she scrapes the toast over the sink. A burnt smell rises. Plate – toast – beans, plate – toast – beans, plate – toast – beans. Three knives, three forks thrown in a heap on the table.

'There!' she says. 'Happy now?'

She paces again and washes up noisily. We eat our beans on toast which taste different from usual. Drier and hard to swallow.

A few months after she first made our bread, Mum takes me to the airing cupboard again. The people at The Centre have given her a present, she says. She reaches up to the top

shelf and carefully lifts down a Tupperware container. There's a sloshing sound when she lowers it and I can see a dark shape inside.

'It's a special sort of fungus,' says Mum. 'It's fermenting. You leave it in the airing cupboard for two weeks and after that you drink one teaspoon of the liquid each day.' When she says 'you' does she mean her? Or me?

She places the container on the floor. I stand back. When she lifts the lid she seems scared of what's inside. The smell comes out first. It pongs like the drinks left over after their party, only worse. The smell swirls up my nose and inside my head before I have a chance to stop it. And then I catch a glimpse of the thing through the half open lid – a giant mushroom, the biggest you've ever seen. Like a UFO landed in a dark brown sea.

These days, whenever Mum sends me to the airing cupboard to get a towel or to put pillowcases away, I sometimes see the bowl of expanding dough in there, and the little pots of germ-filled yoghurt. But I never let myself look up to the place right at the top where Mum put the alien mushroom. I don't look because I'm scared – scared in case the line of liquid has gone down, because then I would know Mum's been drinking it. Sipping it up, spoonful by ponky spoonful.