

The Second Drawer Down

An Anti Food Memoir

By: Jillian Adams

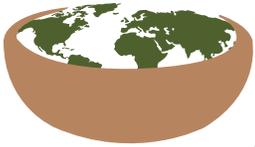
I am aware that in my nostalgic hankerings of my 1950s childhood in Geelong, Australia, my memory, addicted to the happy times, prefers date and walnut studded Chinese chews to the cabbage and mince dish Mum called Chow Mein.

The kitchen of my childhood was the family hub. Without a television the kitchen table the place where we congregated, where we ate, where we sat, where we listened, where we played. Its cushioned bench where I sat each mealtime is the place where the best and the worst food memories of my childhood were deposited. This is where I watched Mum peeling apples, mincing leftover roast lamb and kneading the dough for shortbread. It was also a place of awful food and treacherous times. The place where I sat terrified watching the clock for the time when my father would arrive home from work when earlier in the day Mum had uttered those dreaded words, “Just you wait ‘till your father gets home.” The kitchen of my childhood was a safe warm place in my sponge with cream and passionfruit icing brain. It was also a place of fear and danger in my dopamine-free boiled cabbage brain.

This memoir is an anti-memoir.

Food historian and writer Bee Wilson describes the wooden spoon as a simple essential kitchen tool, one that technology has not been able to replace (Wilson 2012: ix). Luce Giard remembers it with just-cooked-to-perfection-custard coating its back in her eggy vanilla and sugar scented memory (de Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1998: 179) and Irma Rombauer holds hers over a pot of madly simmering jelly to test for the “point of setting.” Long stretched drops of jelly drip languorously from it as she holds it there, waiting (Rombauer 1931: 722). In our kitchen the wooden spoon was an instrument of terror. My nostalgically remembered mother used hers in the conventional ways mentioned by Bee and Luce and Irma but my angry mother pulled it from the second drawer down and slapped us hard with it, usually for the most minor misdemeanours.

The turrets and rounded towers of Glastonbury Orphanage, now part of a modern



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housing estate, rise high above the single level brick veneer houses that surround it. In my childhood the orphanage and the children it housed fascinated, saddened and terrified me. In our 1950s kitchen Glastonbury Orphanage loomed large. Dinner, the most terrifying time of all meals, was when the horrors of life in an orphanage loomed large. Like many families we had certain foods on certain nights. Roast two-tooth (lamb) was always followed by shepherd's pie. Mum would feed chunks of leftover lamb through her meat mincer and lay it in the pie dish, cover it with mashed potato and bake it. It was always so dry. Or she cut slices from the leg, dipped it in batter, fried it in her Sunbeam Frypan and served it with tomato sauce.

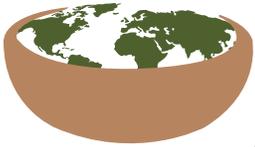
Tripe was the worst dish she ever served. You always knew it was coming when the off-white sheets of limp honeycomb shaped stuff appeared on her chopping board. She cut it onto cubes then boiled it--scraping off the grey scum as it gathered on the top of the simmering water. Years later, I ate Tripe in Italy. It had been cut into spaghetti-like lengths and was served in a putanesca tomato sauce. Delicious as this version was, I still imagine those chewy diamond shaped tripe pieces drenched in white sauce disguised with chopped parsley and Heinz tomato sauce. I wonder now, how did I ever get to pudding when presented with a plate of tripe.

We stayed at the table eating everything on the plate until excused, with the starving orphans at Glastonbury orphanage on our minds. Pudding was the reward for gulping down what I now recognise as over-cooked brussell sprouts or chunks of kidney in the steak and kidney pie. I felt for those children but there were many times I would gladly offer them my curried sausages or Chow Mien and move on to pudding.

When dinner was finished you asked, "Please may I be excused?" Once you had finished every green pea you'd be given permission to leave. I would fold my serviette, replace it in its ring holder and scuttle from the bench seat under the table to after dinner freedom.

Breakfast in the summer months was always Kelloggs Corn Flakes or Sanitarium Wheat Bix. We preferred Corn Flakes as there was always a small hard plastic collectable prize deep in the packet. We were never allowed to fish it out but whoever was lucky enough to have it tumble into their bowl got to keep it. Wheat Bix we didn't like so much. For starters they were a difficult colour to eat. But when milk was poured over them they held their shape and turned into soggy rectangular mass. The edges--where the milk had not penetrated--stayed crunchy and dry. Hot milk made them even more of a slop of them.

But worse than Wheat Bix, was porridge. Mum made a big pot every winter weekday



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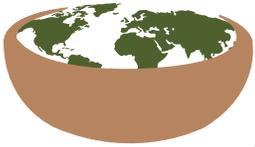
morning leaving the pot on the stove to keep warm until we had all helped ourselves to it. For the first few out of bed, the porridge was delicious but the longer it sat the worse it got. Dad, always up first to clean and polish the row of shoes left in the hall each night for him, left for work early. He got the best of the porridge and the best of the milk. He argued that we too could have the cream--it was the privilege of the first person up and so he refused to shake the milk bottle to mix the layer of cream on top with the fat-free milk below it--except for the mornings the magpies beat him to it and pecked through the shiny foil seal as it sat outside by the front gate. And then there was the morning of the Milk Bottle Pyramid. That morning someone had gathered all of the full milk bottles in the street and made a pyramid of them outside our house. It stood there unbalanced and tentative in a light breeze then toppled over leaving broken glass and milk over the foot path and the drive way.

My portion of the porridge had been simmering in the pot for some time before I got to it. It was always grey, thick and hard and made worse with thin skimmed milk left in the bottle. I would gladly have given it all to Goldilock's bears...or the orphans at Glastonbury.

On Saturday mornings Dad made melted mouse's cheese on toast for us. The cheese was aged rind cheddar from the Colac cheese factory. The fat from the cheese melted with the lashings of butter and soaked into the toast underneath and we would be oily fingered begging for just one more slice.

Whilst we sat with our breakfast cereal each weekday morning Mum made sandwiches for us to take to school. I remember her softening butter in a cup that she sat in hot water, and peeling and mashing boiled eggs. She suffered from hay fever and it was always at its worst in the mornings. She sneezed all over the buttered bread as she lay it out on the bench. Then she would butter it and sneeze some more, then fill it with whatever filling she had decided on for that day (we were never asked) and continue to sneeze. Devilled ham paste, curried egg, walnut celery and cheese, luncheon ham and tomato sauce, Kraft cheddar cheese and Vegemite. The baker always arrived at the back door as she was making our sandwiches out of day old bread. I wished she would make our sandwiches with the fresh bread he delivered. Friends at school had sandwiches made out of fresh bread and treats like pink lemonade cake wrapped in waxed paper. I had sneezed-in stale bread sandwiches and a banana often squashed in my bag after a "bag fight" on the way to the bus.

Once a week we were allowed to buy our lunch from the corner store. For what now seems like a very small sum of money, I would buy a cheese roll, always



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made with fresh bread, and a chocolate éclair. I would go to the shop order and pay for it on the way to school then collect it at lunchtime. Then the shop was pulled down to make way for a Safeway supermarket and carpark.

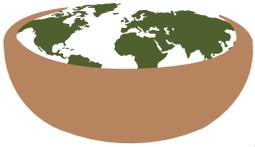
As a child I hadn't understood my mother's command, "hold your stomach in." As a plump teenager I battled with its consequences and the kitchen became my personal war zone. The cake tins with their assortment of home baked biscuits and cakes Siren-like tried to seduce me and I battled with them every day. "Just one bite," they would call; "A crumb won't hurt," "Just have a tiny taste." But that was in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that had nothing to do with the taste of the food. I learned from the girls at boarding school to taste and spit and quietly wrap unwanted food in a serviette, hide it up my sleeve then dump it in the toilet.

Once we had an exotic guest visiting from Pakistan. Ajaz was the most different person I had ever encountered. His skin was brown and he spoke with an accented voice. He read my future in the lines on my hands. Mum explained the reason why he only ate the vegetables she cooked: Ajaz could only eat meat at home in Pakistan because the meat was killed in a special way.

My father was a member of a community service club called Apex and so when a fellow member, a young Pakistani named Ajaz, was visiting our town to visit the International Harvester factory there, my father was asked if our family could accommodate him during his stay. The purpose of his visit, Dad tells me, was to learn how to service machinery. For his last night with us, and to thank us for having him stay, he offered to cook dinner. He wanted to make a chicken curry. He would get a chicken from our neighbours, kill it the way meat was killed in Pakistan and prepare the dish using ingredients he had brought with him. Mum said we had to eat whatever he served. Even she had to eat whatever he served so we were equal on this one. Although not his recipe, I found a Pakistani chicken curry recipe on the Internet:

Chicken curry recipe from Pakistan

1/2 chicken cut into pieces and skinned
shazeera (caraway seeds)



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cardamom pods
turmeric
coriander powder
oil
1 onion sliced
yoghurt
1 tomato chopped and cooked slightly
red chilli powder
garam masala
ginger garlic paste
salt

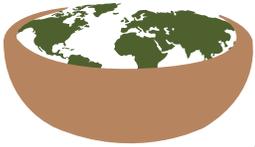
First fry up spices: shazeera, cardamom, turmeric, coriander powder in oil with the sliced onion. Then cool it and blend with the yoghurt and chopped tomato. Set aside. Fry chilli, garam masala and garlic and ginger paste in oil - just use the same pan then add the chicken pieces and move them around to coat in the spice mix. Then add the onion tomato and yoghurt paste, some water and salt and simmer covered for about 15 minutes. Check after 15 minutes ... it should be done when the oil separates and sits on the top and the chicken is tender. Serve in a deep bowl with roti bread or rice.

We kept chickens but we they were for their eggs. Occasionally Dad would catch one and chop off its head but mostly they lived a hassle free life in the chook yard scratching away at food scraps and snails and complaining with painful cackles and squarks each time they laid an egg. We ate their eggs but we never ate chicken.

Dad and Ajaz chose and collected the chook from our neighbours late in the evening the day before the dinner. They chose a plump brown feathered hen with smooth legs and short spurs and carried her across the road, home, in a hessian bag.

Whenever Dad killed one of our chickens he would sharpen his axe, hold the chicken's legs together and settle it on the chopping block, then quickly chop off its head. The silent shock of its death was replaced by our laughter as we watched it run, headless around the yard. This chook had to be Koshered. Dad explained that they couldn't just chop this chook's head off because of Ajaz's religion. Instead of a quick chop, they would cut its throat with a sharp knife then put her in a hessian bag where she would bleed to death.

But when Ajaz slit her neck she got away. She flapped down the drive and into the



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garage, with Dad and Ajaz chasing her ready to throw the hessian bag over her. Hers was a terrifying death. She was flapping and squarking and trying desperately to fly away but instead she trapped herself in the garage, and dripping blood and bashing about in the confined space she perched high on top of a Sunshine biscuit tin with pictures of the smiley face biscuits it once held. She sat there quietly for a moment then ran out of life and fell to the ground. I don't remember who drew her and plucked her but I remember the dread of the thought of eating her.

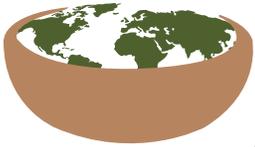
Mum could not waive the "eat everything ..." rule, but she promised us small helpings. In exchange for this collusion we did have to eat what Ajaz served with out any fuss. Our kitchen was full of smells I had never smelled before and my eyes were burning. The meal was served--rough chunks of meat and bone swimming in heat and fire--the hen perched on the smiley Sunshine biscuit tin before its descent into this firey broth. Even Mum would have preferred to scrape the contents of her plate into the chook bucket that lived under the kitchen sink and eat a milder meal.

She suggested we drink water and have a slice of cucumber between each mouthful to lessen the burn but we struggled through it pronouncing it to be delicious. Over time the heat has gone out of the meal but I still see us, our hessian bag, the chicken alive, dying, dead and cooked in a watery turmeric yellow broth. Just this once my mother conspired with us and endured her strict dinner rules with us. We were in a war zone but for once it felt good to have Mum on our side.

Curry has never been incorporated into my mother's recipe collection. She made curried sausages and curried egg sandwiches with Keens Curry paste but never again tried an authentic curry. Here is her recipe:

Mum's curried sausages

8 BBQ sausages



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dripping (rendered fat from roasted meat)

1 large onion, sliced

1 tablespoon (this is the equivalent of 2 American spoons) Keens curry powder

1 dessertspoon plain flour

2 cups water

1 banana

1 apple

1 tomato

1 tablespoon (2 American spoons) sultanas

salt and pepper

Method

Place sausages into a pot of boiling water and simmer for five minutes. Cool, de-skin and slice into pieces. Chop the apple, banana and tomato. Melt the dripping in a large frying pan and the onion and the sausages. Lift them out and put in the curry powder and flour salt and stir into the remaining dripping then add the water and stir until it thickens and boils. Add the sausages and onion, banana, apple and tomato and sultanas and season with salt and pepper. Cook for 15-20 minutes. Sprinkle with chopped parsley and serve with mashed potato or boiled rice.



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