

## **Toast and Tea**

### **Scenes from a Memoir**

#### **Whistler's Brother**

A lot of obvious things were not that clear to me growing up in a large household. I asked my brother once how do you grow a moustache and he said 'you just don't shave.' My eldest brother occupied the room at the end of the hall and painted pictures. He turned out Blue Boys and American Eagles at the drop of a hat and I thought he was really quite talented, only to find out later his talent lay in paint by numbers. My sisters smooched with their boyfriends on the back-porch off the kitchen only to leave the house and show up two years later with my nephew or niece. My Mom sent me to the drugstore to buy LifeSavers only to find these same candy in my stocking on Christmas Day. My father left at eight in the morning, arrived home at five and I had no idea what he did for a living. All these things happened right under my nose, to me and without me and I couldn't wait to grow up and get a clue, to stop marveling at the painfully obvious world I occupied.

#### **Matchless**

The houses on my street wore the most glorious shades of paint. The local paint purveyor was the Matchless company and their selection of colors was limited but bold. A burnished brownish purple called Indian Red was one of the favorites and it was used on everything from clapboard to hallway floors. Another favorite was Dory Buff and its golden yellow shade adorned the punts down in the harbour as well some of the grander houses on LeMarchant Road. The color that struck me was Brunswick Green, a forest green so deep that it turned a house into a fortress, a serious and almost foreboding layer of skin that trapped and destroyed light on even the sunniest

of days. Our house was white, the color of a marshmallow that had over time with help from the weather and the exhaust fumes from the cars that traveled up the road faded, to the color of clotted cream. Dad would often on a good day, go out and wash the house with a sponge and a squirt of Lestoil and the house would shine for a couple of days. Other houses on the street didn't quite know what color they were trying to be; unsettling yellows, inky black blues, browns that put you in mind of excretions and limpid greens that hung off clapboard, faded and weary. A house up the street looked like it had been painted with shiny raw liver. The people who lived behind these colors probably didn't notice that their house was any color at all and that it wasn't their intention to draw any sort of attention to the fact that maybe they didn't care anything at all about the color of their house, but I noticed. It seemed the older the inhabitants were, the darker the color of the house, the lighter shades used by those families not trapped behind the dark curtain of tradition or maybe it was like what my mother said that dark colors didn't show the dirt.

### **People's Parties**

My father's boss came to our house once for one of my parents' parties. This was not a regular occurrence and the house got a good cleaning, the hard cheese came out and we were told to go upstairs. The raucous banter and the smell of cigarettes wafted up to my room and I eventually made my way down to perhaps glimpse the man who signed Dad's cheque. My Dad worked at a place called Caterpillar on Kenmount Road and they sold tractors. I stopped half way down the stairs and looked between the spindles and saw who the fuss was all about. Mr. Hudson looked to be about seven feet tall and took up most of the dining room, standing by the fireplace with a tiny glass in his hand. He had left his wife at home for some reason. My father seemed to be very happy with it all and ties got loosened all round. Tumblers filled with rye whisky and bottles of

Dominion beer littered the side tables ,trays full of sandwiches with no crusts lay sweating on the sideboard waiting to soak up the evenings liquors. I stole into the kitchen and found my mother in a good mood chatting with Mrs. Walsh about how easy it was to make the ham salad sandwiches since she'd gotten the new blender. A bit of ham, a pickle, some mayonnaise and whirrr; a pink and green coloured cocktail favourite. "Did you see Hazel go at them like there was no tomorrow?" These sandwiches were so good that they never appeared during our regular lives, being reserved no doubt for the finer palates of people like Mr. Hudson who I'm sure went home that night and regaled his children with stories about the kind of sandwiches they served down on Hamilton Avenue, his wife faint from the ease of it all wishing she'd gone with him

### **Garden of Eden**

The first time I entered Lars store on New Gower Street I saw fruit that looked like it should come with a manual. I was lined up for one of their infamous custard cones with my friend and saw out of the corner of my eye a little yellow thing that was shaped like a star. It sat on a waterfall shelf with other fruit that I'd previously thought existed only in cans. I knew there were such things as pineapples but I'd never seen them in the flesh. The individually wrapped fruit made me feel a bit uncomfortable and altogether ignorant and poor, the Japanese pears and blood oranges cut open to show that they were the same but different. Lar would sacrifice each one of the different types of fruit to show us there was nothing to be afraid of and that if we wanted to broaden our fruit horizons we could rob a bank and come back with the unspeakable amount of money required to purchase some of his wares. I'm sure it wasn't Lars' fault that when all the math was done and the distances involved were taken into account that a Chinese pear and all the mysteries it contained would end up costing us an arm and a leg. The man was providing an exotic fresh fruit service to some of the crookedest and cheapest people on the planet and I think

some people blamed Lar for the price of pears in China and that maybe more than one of those little star fruit ended up in his wife's glorious fruit salad every Sunday dinner.

## **Mmmm**

I saw people eat the queerest things growing up and vowed to only eat things that looked good. I was playing with a friend of mine one day when his little brother came out of the house with a stick of margarine in his mouth and I couldn't look at him and had to go back home. I stayed in bed one Saturday when the smell of rabbits wafted up into my room. The cream-coloured scum that clung to the cut rim of a Carnation milk can made me a bit uneasy. I couldn't force myself to eat the grey and yellow mass of fish and brewis that sometimes was the evening meal. I more often than not had toast for supper when confronted with a feed of moose. I often anticipated the sweet cereals that were advertised on TV to show up in the brown paper bags my parents brought back from the Dominion up the road only to see Dad walk in through the door with a gigantic bag of puffed wheat slung over his shoulder. I suppose if they'd bought a bit of Captain Crunch, it would have only been eaten and the toy at the bottom would have only been argued over. There was no fear of finding a toy in the oatmeal. My Mom and Dad managed to feed a bunch of savages on a clerk's salary and no doubt would have liked a few sweets themselves. Maybe they kept a box of Pot of Gold in their bedroom and when everyone was in bed they would argue about which one of them would get the coconut cup or the three nut cluster.

## **Grape Tester**

My father often felt taken hostage by the price of fruit and the house never saw much beyond apples or bananas. In a moment of weakness sometimes he would buy a crate of grapefruits off

the Presbyterians and I swear he almost choked on them. I was out with Dad one day and we stopped at the Dominion on the way home to buy some apples and were confronted and confounded by a strange little fruit that was called a kiwi priced at seventy-five cents. Dad liked to taste fruit at the grocery store and often like you would nip a grape or a cherry. He would swivel his head around to make sure the evil produce manager was no where to be seen and proceed to taste test the grapes to see if they were truly seedless. I didn't want to think of it as robbing and really hoped he wouldn't get caught and be made an example to all the other parents who were brought to their knees senseless by the fruit cartels in Florida. When we got out into the parking lot, Dad produced one of the mysterious little kiwis out from under his raglan and handed it to me. The illicit fruit tasted just fine to me and I passed it back to Dad who finished it off claiming it was pretty good except for the fur. Kiwis became a staple in the grocery coat after that and Dad would often think himself right grand and eat them for breakfast out of an eggcup, scooping out the green flesh and not at all wincing at the little black seeds that sometimes got stuck in his false teeth.

### **Imagine . . . Me . . . in Florida**

Mom and Dad went down to Florida one summer to visit my sister who lived in Tampa Bay. I was not invited to go along, left home to imagine chance meetings with Mickey and sand castle building on the endless miles of white sand beaches. I really wanted to go and couldn't understand how they could just fly off like that and leave me behind to count the days till they returned all tanned, filled with stories of the sun shining every day, palm trees and every other cursed shiny thing that we didn't have in Newfoundland. They returned with pictures from their trip and it was all true, there were palm trees and beaches and everybody was happy. I saw a picture of my Mom riding a bike and I thought, Mom doesn't ride a bike! Strange and magical

transformations were happening down in Florida and I was left at home with nothing more than a can of frozen orange juice from concentrate. Dad said that for breakfast he could just go out to the front yard and pluck a grapefruit off one of the laden trees. I had never heard anything so tortuous in my life. If I could have just gone with them and seen those grapefruit trees my life would have taken on some meaning and I began to deeply resent those shitty inedible dogberries that grew so abundantly outside our door on Hamilton Avenue. What was I doing here in one of the coldest, wettest places on earth when they were down there doing all those things with Disney just an hour away? Why didn't anybody stand up and notice that I needed to go away somewhere special and that just the sight of me down there on the beach would have made it special for them too? They brought me back a badminton set and we set it up in the yard and my sister, by accident, she said, walked right through it, bending the poles and tearing the net. It was one of the hottest days of the summer and I ran down to the field crying to get away from the injustice and play with some of my friends who were no doubt gathered down there to enjoy the beautiful midsummer's day. The walk down dried my tears and I were ready to stop thinking about free grapefruits and my malicious sister when I looked around and noticed no one was there and it was just I sweating in the middle of the field with a badminton racket in my hand, the grasshoppers up on bust and the grass crunchy under my feet. I stood rooted to a spot and wished it would rain. The next year my brother went down to Florida and brought back pictures of a concert he went to by the group who sang the song "Play That Funky Music White Boy." I was living in a torture chamber and those pictures hung on its walls with a tray of chilled ruby red grapefruits just outside my reach. My sister and her husband moved to Boston after a while and I wondered if I would ever get down there to throw a cup of tea in the harbour, eat some beans or on the off chance get to see Gerry Cheever's glorious puck-riddled hockey mask.

## **Toast**

A salve that dressed all our wounds. It was our mother. A pas de deux avec Monsieur Tetley. Robin Hood by the bag. The linoleum in front of the counter by the toaster worn away. Toaster as cigarette lighter. Four loaves every two days. Sunny Bee for sandwiches, keep the tag. Marmalade, jam, molasses and crumbs on your Good Luck. Mammy's Bakery on Alexander Street like a thousand Moms in the kitchen with the back door open. No use cryin over burnt toast. A toast to the New Year; here's to no whole wheat. French Toast, too many hens and not enough toasters over there. Take this toast and eat it, the Body of Christ, the holy, rosy crust. The three-bun bread a trinity, save me the heel. Spalls in the butter dish and Fleischman's yeast making my Mom's buns rise. Toutons for supper, molasses messy.

## **Tea**

Let it steep. Cup or mug. Bag in or out. Carnation Milk, how could they. King Cole by the bag and the whistling kettles. My father and his slurp out of the saucer, to cool it down he said. Electric kettles, not convinced till I saw the rust-coloured coil. Shares in Tetley and a box of bikkies. Salada and the ceramic armadillos, collect them all. In the woods, nothing like it. A river of tea, another kettle drowned. An Eversweet oil slick. Mom got a tea mouth. Tea stains are tannins, use a bit of bleach. Coffee makes you pee. Pekoe Tea. A spoon named for it. A gypsy's stock and trade. Three lumps and a drop of Homo morning noon and night. Tom Tom Titty mouse, a cup of slops in every house.

## **Marco Polo**

Mom received a spice rack for Xmas one year and promptly mounted it over the stove. Things were going to change we thought, our soups and stews would begin to take on new tastes, colors

and textures. We were a salt and pepper family, a bit of savoury for the dressing. Mom stood in front of the rack for years and pondered the dill weed and celery salt. The brains over at the Barbour Spice Company had forced yet another traditional cook to rethink her approach to the family meal. Tarragon, cream of tartar, the leafy remains of some guy named Basil and a curious powder called cumin that smelled like Mario Lanza's armpits had no place in my Mom's kitchen. She knew her way around a bit of paprika, which was clearly the stuff she saw sprinkled on the potato salad down at Mrs. Healy's, the same powder that graced the tops of Satan's own eggs. The rack was kept over the stove for years and very little was used. The steam and grease of our bland supper's collected on the bottles causing them to weep brown teardrops. It would have been something I thought, if all the herbs and spices up and down the road and across the island were collected and sent back to Barbours. A tractor trailer load of unused onion salt with a polite note of No Thank You attached. Please forward to the housewives in Ontario who were bending over backwards to find just the right cut of meat to use up the last bits of powdered mint or that Albertan woman with one-point-two children who has nothing better to do than spend half the day leafing through Chatelaine beating herself out with the soup of the month. Please send one of your representatives to Newfoundland where you will be pleased to find a lifetime's supply of chili powder, unopened. We fear your efforts in extracting the salt from celery, garlic and onions have been in vain. Your minions should attempt the powdered essence of salt beef and make the holes a bit bigger on your shakers if you want to become friends with the wives and mother's down here. No doubt you have received similar feedback from the kitchens in Finland and Scotland. The vibrant colors in the bottles faded over the years and the rack became more of a decoration, its two shelves filled with palms from Easter Sunday and pictures of newly arrived nieces and nephews, the turned glass bottles themselves re-employed as dandy little holders for thumb tacks and push-pins.

## **Pickled**

Growing up I was plagued by pickles. Fake crystal bowls with petite silver spoons graced the center of our table and they contained impossibly purple vinegary beets and sickly yellow and green mustard pickles. I was expected to complement my supper with these condiments, yet I could never figure out how they could possibly enhance the taste of a roast pork dinner. The blood of the beet spread over our dinner plates, got under the pale green peas and turned our beloved gravies a sickly pink.

My mom made her own pickles, and they rounded out the centerpiece, her crystal dish containing a mixture of tomatoes, apples and onions. Onions never did much for me and their inclusion in the family pickle often kept me away. Mom often put her pickling spices in one of her old beige stockings and it bobbed and weaved in the pot, releasing its gingery bay leaf fume. I never truly appreciated my Mom's effort til later on in life when pickles were the furthest thing from her mind, her cupboard stripped bare of cherished recipes, a lifetime of cooking stolen and forgotten.

## **Awry in a Manger**

Every year Dad would go down into our basement and bring up the Xmas decorations, retrieving familiar boxes filled with glass balls, speckled birds and jewel-toned light refractors. The trips back and forth from the living room to the basement over the years always resulted in a casualty or two. The ornaments were made from the thinnest of glass and we made sure that they were hung on the sturdiest branches a good inch in from the tip.

Nothing took the beating quite like our manger set, a beautifully rendered hand-painted scene that graced the top of the sideboard in our living room. As kids we lovingly positioned the characters around the manger, with its light coming from the back and the angel on high. The wise men's robes were ruby red, gold and evergreen and they stood in contrast to the more humble shades of brown and grey worn by Joseph and Mary.

The first year I noticed things were not all well in Bethlehem, the bed of straw under baby Jesus had been replaced with tinsel and the star blinked more than it shone. The next year Balthazar's head looked like it was glued back on and Melchior went missing altogether. The livestock took a hit the next year, when one of the horns fell off the oxen, making it look like a lazy bloated unicorn.

It must have been something about the dark corners of our basement and Dad's hurry to rid the house of all things Xmas at the end of the season that turned our manger into a religious crime scene.

I'm not quite sure where all the characters who were once real and part of the myth of Christ's birth went, but it eventually came down to Jesus, Mary and Joseph nestled on tinsel and sitting high atop our brand new color TV set.

## **George Hamilton**

At the beginning of every summer, my sisters would marinate themselves in olive oil and iodine, climb the wooden ladder that led up to the tarred roof and expose themselves to the sun. I was told not to follow them up. This was not a problem for me, as none of them featured in my pubescent fantasies and the sight of their bare breasts glimpsed, not an experience we wanted to

carry around the house the rest of our days. I blamed it all on disco dances and Florida. We were a family of sun worshippers and a good tan was essential. My family would sit or lie still on blankets or lawn chairs for hours on end while the sun transformed them from the pasty white ghosts of a six-month winter into members of some indeterminate brown race. Everyone smelled like coconut. I couldn't sit still long enough to turn brown and wasn't a fan of the flaking sheets of skin that hung off the backs and chests of my siblings. Winter skin was usually burned off by early July and the true caramelization occurred during long August days. By Regatta day my brother began to look like Al Jolson from the neck up. My sisters were the color of roasted chicken. We all confused the second-degree burns with the picture of health, never minding the fact that the skin we were given was to last us the rest of our lives. I liked the way the sun hit me as I played in the field and felt no need to sit that still with all my thoughts running around, my arse stuck to the sweaty slats of our vinyl summer chairs. Mom was a fan of the lounge and would kick back all relaxed with her beehive and cat's eye glasses, a glass of Freshie at her side, iceberg lettuce and cello tomato salads somewhere in the distance. Dad sat quite formally, back straight, arms out and turned every now and then as the sun shifted in the sky or dipped behind a rogue cloud, the shovel marks like stigmata finally receding from his palms. At the end of the day before late supper everybody wound up at the back of the yard as the sun set over the canopy of maples in the Murphy's back yard. Upon re-entry to the house we ate cold food and the whole family flinched from Noxzema and were eventually embraced by the cool warmth of cotton bedsheets. Open windows invited moths that beat themselves silly against the perpetual light under the Virgin Mary in our upstairs hall. With tightened and charred skin we slept motionless and awaited the next days glorious rays.

### **In the Eaves**

Every Friday night my mother would rest her feet on my father's lap and they would play hide and seek with a flask of rye and talk about everything and nothing. It felt good to watch them. My father would often misrepresent how much was left in the bottle and try to usher my Mom upstairs so he could drain off the last few shots. Most times Mom conceded and warmed up the bed, but more often than not, was quite aware of the fluid ounces and made him laugh a bit longer, forcing him over to beneath the sink where he kept the bottle and with his back turned he would pour up another couple. The fluorescent light over the stove softened the kitchen, knocking off all the days edge and they were all deep breaths and gentle smiles. My parents recognized themselves most on these nights and I was always glad to just be around them, their authority a million miles away till it was time for me to go to bed and the true cooing began.

–John Graham