

THIS LIFE

with Patricia O'Reilly



M

y mother was a brilliant baker. Everyone said so, raving about her queen cakes in the days before they were called cupcakes or muffins,

and going into rhapsodies about the lightness of her sponge cakes.

Not only did she bake for us, she baked for the neighbours too, particularly the Corbetts. They were a brother and sister who lived near us in a house full of exotic furniture from their travels and artefacts that Miss Corbett called 'purties'. For a child, theirs was a house of enchantment – red velvet chairs with golden claw arms; a stuffed fox, standing at the top of the stairs; glass cases of colourful birds balanced on twigs; and, quite terrifyingly, a tiger rug complete with head and open mouth showing sharp yellow teeth.

The week after I turned seven, I was entrusted with delivering the baking to the Corbetts. My sense of importance was mighty as, holding the precious box of still warm buns, I went down our drive, out our gate, along the path for four houses and up the Corbetts' driveway. Standing on my tippy toes I banged their brass knocker – a clenched fist.

Mr Corbett, tall and thin with a thatch of grey hair, opened the door and drew me in, chuckling happily and calling to his sister that they had a visitor. Being called a visitor made me feel enormously important. I placed the box of buns on their dining table, covered with a thick velvety tablecloth of maroon and blue and green that spoke of exotic dishes from far-away places.

Miss Corbett, small and roly-poly plump, made little noises of pleasure as she eased back the lid and clasped her hands in delight as she peered into the box, calling on her brother. Their reaction to the warm buttery scent was rapturous. I stood by, not quite knowing what to do.

Mr Corbett asked his sister, 'What do you think? Shall we?' She gave a little squeal and said, 'Yes, yes, of course.' From the cupboard part of their enormous sideboard, he removed a round-shaped tin. He put it on the table and opened it. Inside were layer upon layer of marshmallows, the cushiony pink and white ones with the dusting of icing sugar – each layer separated by crinkly



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sheets of grease-proof paper. In our house, we children only got sweets on a Sunday and then they were carefully doled out with mutterings about taking care of our teeth. This was a Thursday morning.

'Do you like marshmallows?' Mr Corbett asked.

'Of course, she does,' Miss Corbett assured him. 'Everyone loves marshmallows.'

I nodded quite violently, terrified that if I lacked enthusiasm, the box might be lidded and returned to the sideboard.

Mr Corbett lifted out a few sweets and put them on the lid. Miss Corbett tut-tutted and

waved her arm in an expansive gesture towards the back wall that was covered with plates of all shapes, sizes and colours. 'Choose a plate,' she urged me, 'and we'll put your sweets on it.'

'Where are the plates from?' I wanted to know. 'From everywhere,' said Mr Corbett.

He pointed to a square plate with a blue buildings and blue trees – 'That's delph from Amsterdam. And this one,' a delicate oval shape with spidery green leaves, 'is from China.'

I pointed to a black plate with rambling branches of pink flowers. 'Can I have this? Please.'

Mr Corbett nodded enthusiastically, 'Good choice. It's come all the way from Japan.'

He reached up, lifted it down from the wall and gave it a dust with the hanky from his top pocket, the one that even I knew wasn't ever used for nose-blowing.

As Miss Corbett laid out the marshmallows. Ten of them, five pink and five white, I looked at the wall of plates, touched my black one, and announced. 'This is my best favourite.' They smiled and nodded.

I sat at the table and, watched by brother and sister, I ate the sweets, one by one, delicately dusting the icing sugar from the tips of my fingers, while he reminisced about the tea ceremony in a place called Tokyo when they had been gifted the plate.

In his whispery voice, he explained, 'The way of tea is called *Chado* and it's a Japanese cultural practice involving the preparation and serving of tea. The ceremony is influenced by Zen Buddhism. You've heard of that?' It seemed best to nod while I allowed the current marshmallow to melt in my mouth. 'It's based around harmony, respect, purity and tranquillity.'

I didn't know quite what those words meant but I liked the sound of them, repeating them over and over as I skipped back home. A few days later when Mammy opened the front door, she discovered a flat package wrapped in brown paper with a red bow addressed to me. It was the plate.

I never saw the Corbetts again. They died shortly after. She went first and he followed a fortnight later. Their plate, one of my most precious possessions, has centre stage on my wall of plates.

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