

Now and Then

Half term, our daughter at the door with our grandchildren, early but she had not woken us. I do not need an alarm clock, unless we are leaving the house earlier than usual, my morning call creeps up from the kitchen through the fabric of the house scenting the air with the delicious yeasty perfume of freshly baked bread. Tom will have remembered to fill the machine with flour and water, salt and whatever he thinks will improve the product, some additions more successful than others. Garlic at eight am is not to my taste although quite the reverse at supper time.

My generous husband bought me a bread making machine a few years ago although I doubt that I have used it on more than a couple of occasions. Tom on the other hand is a devotee of the bread machine. I like to get my hands in the dough, to knead and stretch shape and bake but retirement has seen a shift in the daily pattern of our lives and whilst I had for years made our family loaf now Tom and his magic box has taken on the task.

The smell of baking though has another function. Proust and his madeleine have nothing to compare with the memories jogged for me by the warm deliciousness of freshly baked bread which can take me on an instant journey back to my grandmother's kitchen. Gran, a tiny woman, mother of six, made bread every day of her life during the time I knew her, as she had for years before. She lived on the family farm in a big old house with the kitchen at its centre. The big black range, no Aga for her, fed with coal or was it coke at regular intervals, provided the means of cooking and hot water for the household. I was always fascinated by the little silvery tap on the front which supplied boiling water for Gran's numerous pots of tea. In that house the kitchen reigned supreme, everyone entered the house by the door from the yard which led directly into the kitchen and most found a seat around the big scrubbed table. All the other ground floor rooms had doors directly from it, even the stairs to the upper rooms were in one of its corners.

Every day, until I was eleven and went to the high school, I would go to the farm. On my way home, at first with my mother, I'd stop and visit Gran and sometimes my Grandpa although he and my uncles were usually out on the fields or with, as he would say, 'the beasts'. My memories delete Tony and Jill almost completely but once they were at school I must have been responsible for taking them too. There was surely a baby in the 'pram and then a toddler but I prefer to remember being the only child on the way home, stopping halfway from our little country school to the redbrick house in the village where we lived. Always there, waiting for me, was a tiny loaf of bread, never referred to as 'a roll', mine, and later Jill's and Tony's were 'little loaves'. Sometimes a plain round shape or a plait, a twist or Gran would use a tiny oblong tin which gave the sides a crisp finish. She might sprinkle on the top oatmeal or cracked wheat or my favourite, minute black poppy seeds. Best of all was a cottage loaf smaller than a tennis ball its top so little that I could pop it into my mouth and crunch the heavenly golden brown globe in one four year old mouth full.

If we visited the farm on a Saturday or during school holidays I would be able to help with the baking but I never managed to plait, or set the top of a cottage loaf with the dexterity of Gran's practiced hands. My dough was never evenly divided into three for my plait and the top of my cottage loaf always leaned drunkenly to one side on its base. The look of my attempts may have left a little to be desired but the smell of baking never disappointed nor the taste and despite my less than perfect efforts, the results were always admired by Gran.

The door burst open brought me back to that afternoon as Tom returned from a trip to the hen house with two of our grandchildren. Jonathan in his five year old enthusiasm was anxious to tell me that one of the hens was brooding, although his six year old sister was quick to correct his error.

“Broody, “she said with the superiority every one of her extra eighteen months of life bestowed.

A squabble was deftly averted by Tom who offered to play a game of something or other with the children and he went to set up the board, leaving the children to scramble out of their coats. I thought it might be time for their afternoon snack and the immediate response was a request for me to provide bread and jam, if, that was, that I had flat bread from a packet and not Grandpa’s loaf. Juliette hesitated at the kitchen door. Her head slightly to one side, a gesture she would surely keep well into adolescence, she stopped for just enough time to reassure me with the comment,

”We do like homemade bread Grannie but we get so much of it at home.”

Our daughter carries on the family tradition, you see.

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