

Butterfingers

Kim Morrison

'Right, that's it!' Our father spits what's in his mouth and thumps his hand on the table. The cutlery leaps to attention. A ball of bread smacks the wall. For a moment it is suspended; a fat moon, threaded through with jam. Flat, it falls and I turn back towards him. My brother is studying the table cloth. I do the same. Tonight it is the one with orange flowers. It is not quite the same shade of orange as the wallpaper behind me. I know this room so well, I can compare without turning—not that I'd dare move. In my school uniform, I am a blue girl in a mismatched orange sandwich, waiting. And here it comes, right on time, the lesson for today. My legs wrap around the table's legs and press hard, hanging on for the ride.

'Now. Let's take this from the beginning. I don't know how many times we have to go through this. You kids just never learn.' His voice is low and level now. The words march and obey. 'To get rid of this problem, we have, we have ... what? Sandra?'

Under the cloth is a shiny surface that looks like wood. Below this, there is soft, real wood which I sink my nails into. Once, I crawled under the table to pick up a coloured pencil and I saw all these little pale yellow chips that looked like tooth marks. I went and got the boot polish and filled them in.

'We have a special, separate onion board,' I say quietly.

'Good. And WHY do we have a special, separate onion board? Michael.'

Mikey is swirling in the tablecloth pattern. His mouth is tight and white. He doesn't hear. Thump! The cutlery is once more ordered to attention.

'Michael!'

'Yes, Dad?'

'I asked you why we have a special, separate onion board. Do you know?'

'Yes, Dad.' He keeps staring. Come on, Mikey.

'Well, why?'

I hold my breath. My knife is straight steel on a bed of daisies. I turn it so that it points at Mikey. I send the answer to him along my knife, thinking him through, phrase after well-worn phrase.

'We have a special, separate onion board so that the onion smell

doesn't sweat into the breakfast toast.'

I complete Mikey's answer in a garbling rush—'The breakfast toast and all other non-onion things are to be made on the other cutting board, so there is no onion contamination.' I say it like a password; too tired, too quick. He doesn't like my tone, young lady, he's had just-about-a-gutful, so he leans round and cuffs me. I grip the legs harder and when I open my eyes the flowers are blurred and dewy.

'If you know the answers so well, then how the hell is it that the same thing keeps happening? Which one of you was it this time?'

I can feel his eyes settling on one, then the other, slowly back and forth. I imagine them dry and scratchy in their sockets.

'Alright, since you won't own up, we'll try something new. If you aren't using the wrong cutting-board, it could be the margarine that's the problem.'

He gets up and opens the refrigerator. His feet are bare and stick on the lino. The fridge door opens with a rubber suck. He takes out the white plastic tub and lifts the top off one corner. It makes a cracking noise and he turns from the waist in our direction with his nose inserted into the used hollow. He leaves his face in this position, swings his eyes up towards us and pronounces, 'Smells like onion.' He is a detective and triumphant. I expect him to hold a finger in the air to mark his deduction.

Mikey and I wait, almost holding our breath, wondering what path he will take now that he has established that his toast smelled like onion not because it sweated the flavour out of the special, separate onion board, but because the very tub of margarine itself contained the onion odour.

Our father slowly replaces the top of the container. He tosses it in the direction of the bin. 'Wasted,' is all he says. He bends back into the refrigerator. I can see the square outline of his wallet against the strain of his trousers. He takes out the milk bottle, folds back the silver foil. Underneath the lid is a cracked crust of dry cream. He sniffs into the neck of the bottle and says only one word—'Onion'—and throws the bottle across the room into the sink. An arc of milk sprays out during the journey. I watch it splash to the floor. The cheese follows. Everything that can be has been spoiled. Soon enough, he finds the rebel onion—half finished, sitting towards the back, loosely wrapped in Gladwrap. He holds it up.

'Who put this onion in the fridge without sealing it? Look what it's done. Ruined the bloody lot. We're not leaving here till someone

owns up.'

He walks to me and presses the cold, dry rings of the cut onion up under my nose. I want to draw my head back, but don't dare. My nails dig deeper into the wood.

'Do you like it? Do you like that smell? Do you like onion-flavoured toast, onion-flavoured milk, onion-flavoured tea, onion-flavoured cheese, onion-flavoured everything? Because I don't. I've had a gutful. I work all week for waste. Did you put this in there?'

I can feel the cold of it soaking hard into the gristle between my nostrils. My teeth are tight, so tight and close they might suddenly bust through each other and swap places.

'No,' I say, 'I didn't put it in there.'

There is a congested blurt from Mikey's direction. He is sitting rigid, brave like a soldier, but he is leaking. Large bubbles are forming from his nose, tears from his squinty eyes.

'It was you, you little sissy.' Our father takes him by the ear and jerks him to his feet.

'No! No! It wasn't me! Get out!' the suspended, wriggling Mikey cries. 'It wasn't. It wasn't!'

It is a feat that requires a lot of practise, to dangle a fighting boy by the ear with one hand and free your buckle with the other. He is very good at it. The belt snakes out of the lapels I fixed a few days ago. I can see my stitching, the cotton too pale for the fabric. The belt-holding arm comes back. I lunge forward and swing from it like it's a branch.

'Stop it!' I cry. He lets go of Mikey's ear. Mikey makes a run for it. I am leaking now, choking out that Mikey's only crying 'cos he's scared. And that just because you cry doesn't mean you did it. But still the strap comes. I make a grab at it. His face is red. He looks like a giant. I grind my teeth in this tug o' war. Then he stops, lets go. I fall. My shoulder smacks the cupboard. I close my eyes, waiting for the tinkling sound of me breaking something. But there is silence. I breathe again. Then he speaks. His voice is cold, quiet.

'Get to your rooms, the both of you. Don't come out till I say so. The pair of you make me sick.'

* * *

The fire is settled. It has taken well and its steady light sculpts the faces of my friends. They sniff as hot chocolate thaws their hands, their noses, their insides. Outside, the snow is deep. There is ice on the path. But we are in, and warm and still.

What have they been chattering about? Gazing at the flames, at them, my mind has been living another story. I draw it back into my body. The two feel like oil and water—strangers to each other. This is now, I tell myself, this is good. Listen. I smile, trying to somehow brighten myself. But how do you brighten without being brittle? Someone is telling a story. He is on a sailing boat, a ketch. It is night and he is trying to navigate by the stars. But there is an asteroid display and every star he fixes his sights on drops out of the sky. It was, he says, bloody scary. The others laugh and their amusement eggs him on.

'Yeah, well it's OK for you, all warm and safe! I'm telling you, at the time, it was terrifying. Force 9 gale, boat literally SURFING down 40 foot waves, stars falling out of the night faster than I could blink ... I was in big trouble.'

I watch slices of bread being turned slowly just above the flames and listen to the tale as it winds up. The storm passed, he got home safely. Which we know, because he's here to tell it.

The knife scratches butter and jam across toast. I am impressed that the bread didn't burn, but is gold—just right. As I am handed my plate, I'm told that it's my turn—my turn to tell a story.

I flinch inside. I look around. They are watching. I look down at my hands. My skin is flickering, like I'm alive. I try to be at ease. I breathe deep, sniff my toast, finish a sweet mouthful and begin.

'This is a story about a hiding girl. There was once a girl, a very clumsy girl. People said she was pretty, but very quiet and VERY clumsy. If you built a perfectly straight, smooth path from here to there, she still wouldn't be able to go more than 50 feet without tripping over. It was said that this girl was so clumsy, she didn't need a stick or a rock to catch her foot on—she was perfectly able to stumble over her own shadow. The sad thing was, the harder she tried to be elegant and graceful, the clumsier she became. If you handed her a drink, it was as if the cup was greased and it would slither straight through her grasp. Give her a mug and it would swing around her fingers as soon as they were through the handle. There was no anticipation in her. When something was handed to her, it always looked so easy and light, but suddenly turned to lead as it left the other person. These transformations never failed to surprise her. Her bewilderment at gravity's little tricks was ever fresh, ever genuine. Eventually, the liturgical 'Oh, I'm so sorry!' yielded little forgiveness from others or herself. She began to draw a faint connecting line between lapsful of upended soup, broken china and the fact that all

her jeans had prematurely patched knees. When she gazed at that line, she could not deny that it had become a sketch of someone rather like herself. It's YOU, she said. YOU are the problem. And to solve it, she decided to shrink. The girl deduced that if she could just be very still and very alone, her contribution to the clumsiness in the universe would necessarily decrease.

'And for a while, this seemed to work. When she was silent, she couldn't tangle her words. Unspoken, they had no opportunity to come out wrong-way round with the middles swapped. She did things slowly, unobserved. She would almost listen to her tea and could often drink a whole cup without knocking it over or even spilling one drop.

'Things were going so well, until one day the telephone shrieked while she was holding a glass of water. The glass shattered at her flinch. At this moment, she began to hear an accusing voice, angry with impatience at each new act. 'Klutz!', it hissed when she missed a stair. 'Stupid—tch', came the airy sigh when she walked into a box she was sure she'd moved the day before. Her bruise collection became quite a game to her. She'd monitor their progress from fresh violet to a puce-speckled brown, but still the voice would name her, cutting through her timid attempt at humour with the eternal chant of, 'Clumsy! Clumsy!'

'The fear of what would next befall her, or rather, what she would next fall over, weighed on her like a sandwich board proclaiming her ability in large, primary-coloured gloss letters ... CLUMSY!! She felt the bite and drag of the board's leather straps on her shoulders and became so, so tired.

'One day, the girl realised that the whole problem would go away if only she could stay horizontal. Quiet and alone had been good, but horizontal promised to be even more beneficial.

'Bed became her best friend—they were rarely apart. The soft comfort of the feathered quilt and piled pillows made her feel as if she were in a safe nest and that everything would be alright, so long as she didn't move.'