

LET THEM EAT CAKE

by Tahira Yaqoob

I never got a wedding cake.

To be fair, a cake was the last thing I was thinking of as my sisters-in-law smeared my arms with turmeric paste – “you have to be fair and pretty for our brother” – and the Auntie-Jis giggled and winked knowingly as they whispered what to expect on my wedding night. It was the day after school finished for the summer and as we girls walked out of St Mary’s Convent School for the very last time, there was plenty of chatter about holidays in the south of France, what A-level results everyone was going to get and what life would be like at university. I stayed silent as they nattered endlessly about what they would do when they were finally free of parents, of teachers, of rules and regulations, of restrictions on skirt lengths, thickness of tights, amount of eyeliner and volume of lipgloss. I kept quiet as I wondered whether freedom meant just that.

“What are you going to do this summer, Aaminah?” said Beth, turning to me.

“I’m getting married,” I said, adjusted my uniform navy blue hijab and kept walking as they gawped and exchanged glances.

“Aren’t you going to uni, then?” one of them finally asked.

It was a fair enough question. I had come top of the class in all term tests in chemistry and physics and never got lower than a C all through school. I was predicted two As and a B. But it had been made clear to me that June 18, the day of our General Studies A-level exam, would be the last day I would set foot in an institution.

“Beta, it is time for you for you to take on your responsibilities as a woman,” said my mother, gently brushing my waist-length hair, then plaiting it as she did every night.

“One day you will have daughters and you’ll understand. We are not like these gorey, going to clubs-shubs and dating boys and wearing short skirts, chi-chi. What must their mothers think? When I see your friend Beth in this – what did she call it? – miniskirt, my heart bleeds for her poor mother.”

“But we’re British, Amma,” I once protested, twisting out of her grasp. “We live in this country. You came here 30 years ago for a better life. Why can’t we do what they do?”

“You want to be like them?” shrilled my mother, jabbing the hairbrush at me. “You want to be white? To go to discos? To burn your hijab and go to parties and have boys looking

at you? Besharam, then go, but don’t set foot in this house again.”

She softened her tone: “Beta, we are Muslims. This is not our way. Allah sent us these tests to challenge us and make us strong.”

It was only Mrs Hodgkinson the home economics teacher who understood. I sought refuge in her kitchens when it all became too much and we would stand side by side in comfortable silence, slowly stirring batter for her cake mixes, carefully measuring out cups of flour for her sponges, walnuts and raisins for her spiced fruit loaves and melting butter and sugar for her butterscotch sauce, the air caramelising and seeming to wrap a warming comfort blanket around us. Outside, at home and in the classroom, there were so many rules and regulations that it was bewildering and overwhelming at times. Do this, don’t do that, don’t dress like this, do pray, don’t show your ankles, do cover your head, don’t do anything bad or you will go to detention, don’t think bad thoughts or you will go to hell. Here, in the test kitchen, life was simple. Follow these instructions, mix this portion of flour with this portion of butter and sugar, cream together, add mashed, ripened bananas and you will always, always end up with a perfect banana loaf.

“Look at that,” I sighed with pleasure, taking out a tray of freshly baked blueberry muffins, burnished mounds of perfection, their moist crevasses spiked with splashes of

purple, and we cooed in appreciation and then juggled them between our hands as they cooled, our fingers glistening as they oozed buttery goodness.

“Don’t ever give up baking will you, Aminah?” she said, more of a question than a statement and it lingered in the air between us.

“I won’t,” I promised. “This is where I feel at home.”

My wedding day was June 20, the start of a long, glorious summer, the kind that made you want to go for leisurely walks in the park and wiggle your bare toes in the grass and wish the hazy days, heavy with honeysuckle, would never end. I did none of these things and spent it in hot, stuffy living rooms packed with staring strangers and furniture covered in plastic and doilies from the pound shop, being paraded before an endless cavalcade of relatives as the latest bargain. “Look! Look what we got! Only a pound and she bakes, too!”

Sasuri-ji would jab me sharply in the ribs and say: “Show them! Make some of your English scones and cakes!”

She would stretch out the word ‘English’ so it sounded like a sneer but I always obliged, trotting off to the kitchen and getting lost in my world of batter, of measurements, of order. The universe could be set to rights with a Victoria sandwich, light and fluffy as a pillow, its symmetrical halves married with thick buttercream and homemade strawberry jam, the chunks of stewed summer fruit still visible. When the relatives weren’t there, my mother-in-law would tut and grumble:

“Wasting my son’s money on all these frivolous ingredients! Why are you buying so much flour and sugar? Do you think we are made of money? Are we supposed to live on cake?”

But Sasuri-ji always polished off whatever I pushed silently in front of her, greedily running a stout henna-stained finger around the rim of the plate and licking off the last crumbs of red velvet sponge, a vanilla buttercream moustache lingering on her upper lip.

Abdulrazak was not a cake man when I met him on our wedding day, which surprised me, because his rotund, sweaty red countenance reminded me of a laddoo, the sickly sweet, ghee-saturated confections everyone gives out at Eid. His body resembled one too, pudgy flesh spilling over his waistband like an overfilled pastry case. They brought me out to meet him, this overgrown toddler with a taste for petrol station Eccles cakes and Haribo sweets, and as we stared at each other in our wedding regalia, two children playing at grown-ups, I thought of all the turmeric basting I had undergone, the plucking, waxing and threading, the henna painting and the corseting. I thought of how I had stood in my Marks and Spencer’s knickers with my arms in the air as they lowered a heavy green lengha laden with spun gold over my head, thrust gold bangles onto my wrists, weighed me down with trinkets and baubles on my ears, my neck, my feet, my hair parting, skewered an embroidered dupatta to my head with pins that seemed to plough into my skull and then painted vivid shades

on my face in random colours and formations, like a child's first attempt at icing – I thought of all those things and then I thought how it would feel to bake the Lillie Langtry gâteau I had seen once in a cookbook, an ornate triple-tiered affair with chocolate sponge, coffee cream and chocolate curls - imagined spending hours assembling it and then discovering the cream had curdled and soured. It was only as we lay rigid and unmoving on opposite sides of our double bed that night that it occurred to me: there had been no wedding cake.

No, Abdulrazak was not a cake man but I knew he had a sweet tooth from the Indian sweets his mother stuffed him with. They had their own special shelf in the fridge. The two of them would sit on the sofa, a plate perched between them and munch their way though, crumbs spraying from their mouths as they brayed at the television. I sat on my stool in the kitchen, leafing through my collection of baking cookbooks and dreaming of chocolate cloud cake, lavender-scented scones and cream-filled eclairs.

“Have you even started dinner yet?” screeched Sasuri-ji, who had suddenly appeared without warning and brought me to my senses with a painful jab in my back.

“How did I end up with such a useless daughter-in-law? Less daydreaming and more housework!”

“Yes Sasuri-ji,” I stammered, leaping to my feet. “I’ll get started straight away. But here –“ I opened the oven door and a waft of toasty deliciousness floated out – “macadamia

and white chocolate cookies in the meantime. I made them specially for you.”

She harumphed and eyed them suspiciously but snatched the plate I proffered and waddled back to the lounge. When I went in 40 minutes later, there were only a few crumbs left.

There is nothing like a cup of tea – and isn't chai something we share in common too? – to solve all the problems of the world. And, I discovered, there are English muffins smeared with butter and raspberry jam to soothe Sasuri-ji when someone queue-jumps at the supermarket; coffee and walnut cake for when she thinks I'm being lazy or disobedient; peanut butter-topped cupcakes studded with Smarties for when the house is full of guests who keep me up around the clock, until I drop exhausted into bed next to my snoring husband; and chocolate cake smothered with cascades of hot fudge and caramel sauce when she demands to know why the ingrate who married her son hasn't given her grandchildren yet. I have no words, only a moist Battenburg, whose marzipan blanket is the only thing I need to wrap around the bittersweet taste of my troubled soul.

Abdulrazak was tougher but I experimented over the years and found ways to satisfy his cravings for mathai. He is addicted to my gulab jamun cheesecake, rose-infused syrupy globes set in lashings of creamy cheese. I studded my apple crumbles with cardamom, made my ginger loaf extra spicy, added a sprinkle of chilli to my pineapple upside down cake,

a little kick to my gingerbread. I straddle two worlds, you see, one foot in each. Most of the time it's a case of walking along a narrow balancing beam. I'm getting better at it.

And you should see my latest creation. I'm sending you pictures of it but oh! If only you could see it in all its fondant glory. Even I have to marvel at it. It took me days to make, of sneaking in ingredients furtively, swapping items on the shopping list for the basic supermarket version so I could afford the rose petals to scatter on top, the real vanilla pods, the cutters for the fondant flowers and butterflies I decorated it with, making them one by one and hiding them in the pantry in old biscuit tins. It's five tiers high and each tier has a different flavour. Coconut on the base, then orange and almond, vanilla buttercream, lemon drizzle and on the very top – well, that's my favourite. It's the traditional fruit wedding cake I never had. It took me ages to drape each layer in rolled-out fondant and ice the letters on just right, one on each layer so you have to read from the top down: 'stick this in your cakehole'. I left it on the kitchen table so they'll have seen it by now.

Because that's the thing, judges of the Great British Bakefest. I'm a good girl. I embrace all the traditions in my life. I pray regularly, I believe in God and an afterlife, in respect for your elders, the sanctity of marriage and treating others as you would be treated yourself. I spent years being told those things set me apart, that they made me not belong,

that I wasn't British. But I firmly believe those are the values at the very heart of British society and that makes me as British as they come.

Just because I am not a stereotypical British person does not mean I am not into bunting, cake and tea. I am and that's why I want you to consider me as an entrant for your TV show. I'm never going to put boundaries on myself again. I'm never going to say I can't do it. I'm never going to say maybe. I'm never going to say I don't think I can. I can and I will. And if you agree with me, it means I can have my cake and eat it, too.