

The eighth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2020

‘Boiled Egg with Rosie’

by Peter Adamson

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2020...
Stephen Fry & Prue Leith



‘Boiled Egg with Rosie’

No one had ever accused Martin of being a new man. In his forty eight years, he had never changed a nappy, ironed a shirt, or cleaned a loo. Nor had he boiled an egg. Until that Friday in April when he had opened up his laptop to look into black holes, a topic much in the news that week.

For the first few minutes, as Rosie cooked dinner, he wrestled with the gravitational effects of invisible forces. But half a dozen promiscuous clicks on ever-more tenuous links eventually brought him to a YouTube video about how to boil an egg.

Most people, he learned, had no idea how to boil an egg. Or at least not a properly boiled egg. The problem, it appeared, was that the different kinds of protein were in the habit of congealing at different temperatures, making it tricky to cook the yolk to the point of perfect runniness without overcooking the white to the point of imperfect rubberiness. The solution, he gathered, was not to boil the egg at all. Instead, it should be placed in a

small pan with enough cold water to cover it by precisely one millimetre. Then, once brought to the boil, the pan should be removed from the heat and left to stand for exactly six minutes.

Twenty minutes later when Rosie called through from the kitchen to say that dinner was ready, Martin had learnt relatively little about ripples in the fabric of space-time but everything there was to know about boiling an egg.

On the Saturday morning he came downstairs damp and pink from the shower and announced: “I’ll make breakfast, love. Could you fancy a boiled egg?”

Laptop open on the kitchen surface, smartwatch counting down, he began opening kitchen cupboards in search of egg cups.

“This is perfect, love,” said Rosie, dipping a finger of burnt toast into a yolk of perfect viscosity, having already enthused about the firm but delicately translucent white scooped from the top of the egg.

“Would’ve been even better if the eggs had been really fresh,” said Martin, turning his empty egg shell upside down. “Burford Browns would be favourite, but they only lay 180 eggs a year as opposed to 280 for your average free-range, so you can’t always get them.”

Rosie, who shopped once a week on Saturdays, confessed that the eggs in the fridge were a week old and of uncertain lineage.

“What’s for dinner tonight?”

“I just got us a ready meal, moussaka I think.”

That afternoon, seeing her husband stretched out on the sofa, she assumed he was watching football and that the image of the glistening, golden chicken being lifted from the oven must be a half-time commercial.

When Martin volunteered to make the evening meals, first of all at weekends and then every night, Rosie could not have been more appreciative. With both of them out at work all day, the division of domestic chores had long been a rumbling volcano in their relationship; mostly quiescent, sometimes smouldering, and still capable of the occasional violent eruption. Nor was it difficult to enthuse about the results. By meticulously following weights, measures and timings, Martin began producing more-than-acceptable meals almost from the beginning – coq au vin, pork chops with a maple syrup glaze – even if he could not yet cope with the distraction of vegetables.

It was in this first flush of gratitude that she had offered to take over the washing up, a job which up to that point had been Martin’s sole domestic responsibility, albeit one which he had construed as representing fifty percent of the housework. It was just unfortunate that, as Martin’s range and ambition expanded, the kitchen was left looking more and more like a culinary war zone: no pan or bowl unused, no surface spared.

In the same positive spirit, she didn’t really mind that he

totally ignored her tatty but treasured collection of recipes, a repository not only of favourite meals but of fond memories and the nostalgic comfort that familiar dishes can bring to the family table. Instead, it was all ‘Nigel does this’ or ‘Jamie suggests that’ or ‘Lorraine says the other.’ Still, she had to admit that most of the ‘top tips’ gleaned from hours of clicking away on the internet were often an improvement on the way she had always done things: her own repertoire had perhaps been just a little repetitive, her boiled eggs a bit hit and miss, her pasta not always al dente, and her vegetables had sometimes mislaid the odd nutrient along the way.

“Do you know what this little lot cost?” she inquired, forcing a smile as she struggled in through the door one Saturday lunchtime. She still shopped once a week, but now her shopping list was generated by Martin’s new recipe app and sent directly to her phone, though in an order bore little relationship to the layout of the supermarket.

“Well, if you will shop at Waitrose ...”

On the Sunday he had drawn her attention to an advertisement for the new Aldi that had opened twelve miles down the road.

The same concern for economy, she could not help noticing, did not seem to apply to the Wusthof Classic Icon 6-piece knife set on special offer at £357 (“They’ll last thirty years, that’s less than 4p per knife per week?”). Or to the new set of heavy-bottomed, pre-seasoned cast-iron pans which

distributed the heat so much more evenly and would last a lifetime so long as they weren’t put in the dishwasher.

She had already moved the ironing board and drying rack out of the pantry to make space for the Kitchen Aid Artisan mixer and a new set of half-shelves for the jars and packets of many new and interesting items from Persian Saffron to Waitrose Essential Vermicelli Nests. Her phone-charging point and favourite fruit bowl had gone from the kitchen surface to make way for the panini press and the rack of colour-coded chopping boards. There was talk of a sous vide cooker.

It was only a matter of time before Martin discovered that most things, even the humble mashed potato, could be made that “little bit more special” with the addition of a knob of butter or a splash of cream or a good glug of olive oil. And as soon as he had mastered the logistics of cooking a vegetable to coincide with the evening meal, he had discovered that leeks, spinach, and courgettes also responded positively to a little dairy encouragement. If, to head off calorific catastrophe, Rosie suggested smaller portions, then it was “hardly worth the time in the kitchen”. If she proposed fewer carbohydrates, or using less butter and oil, she was “taking the fun out of it”. Within a month her blood sugar levels were all over the place, but whole-wheat rice or pasta were apparently “the work of the devil” and the words ‘glycaemic index’ caused his eyes to glaze over. Using leftovers also cramped his style, as did the thought of dovetailing ingredients over two or three evenings

in order to avoid the half-used packs of chicken livers or cartons of crème fraiche that made it difficult to find anything in the fridge.

The Puritan in Rosie had always thought that eating from a tray in front of the television was a touch slovenly, and she had happily gone along with his suggestion that they should start eating at the dining table. But she had not anticipated that “noticing what we eat” would mean talking of little else. His beef stew (she had been informed that it was no longer thought necessary to brown meat) was indeed out-of-this-world, but might have been more enjoyable without the blow-by-blow account of the subtleties involved in its creation – “it’s the nucleotides in the anchovies that do it. A nucleotide plus a glutamate is basically your savoury explosion”. On occasion it was after ten o’clock by the time they sat down to eat on account of Martin placing too much faith in Jamie’s prep times or insisting on hand-making the sheets of lasagne as well as the authentic Bolognese sauce that had to be cooked slowly and required a few drops of full-fat milk to be added at five minute intervals.

Rosie was not really surprised when Natalie’s first words on arriving home for the vacation were “You’ve put on weight, Mum. Suits you.” Or when, half an hour later, Ben greeted her with “You’re getting fat, Mum” as he lifted her in a bear hug. She had smiled and turned away, but not before both of them had seen that she was suddenly close to tears.

Later that Saturday afternoon, when Martin had gone out, she found herself forced to stop getting their bedrooms ready and made to sit down with a cup of tea. “Right, Mum, what’s up?”

On that first evening at home – pork belly with black pudding, chorizo and butter beans – it was impossible not to comment on their father’s unexpected over lordship of the kitchen, described by Ben as “Dad’s first brush with domestic competence.” But later, when Rosie had said goodnight and left the two of them to catch up on the kind of news that probably wasn’t fit for parental consumption, she had come back downstairs for a glass of water and, though not exactly listening, had caught the words “... like we always did with Mum.” Lingered just a moment longer by the living room door she heard the exasperated tones that Natalie frequently used with her younger brother, “Right, Ben, do you think you can manage anything as simple as that?”

On the second evening – organic chicken thighs in cream and cider – Martin’s presentation of the meal failed to cause even a ripple on the surface of the conversation. With the summer holiday still to be decided, Ben was in full flow about the joys of swimming from your own deck at a lakeside cabin in Finland. Natalie had raised her eyebrows and begun checking her messages under the edge of the table. When, at the first pause, Martin asked “What about this sauce, then, are

you getting the tarragon?” Ben had replied “It’s fine Dad, did you get the link I sent about that place near Raseborg?”

On each succeeding evening – pulled pork with pear gravy, rosemary risotto with crispy sage – the conversation could not be deflected for more than a few seconds from what old school-friends were up to or who was worth following on Twitter. “Marinated overnight. Really amps up the flavour,” said Martin, passing round the pulled pork for seconds. “Great, Dad. “How’s the book club going?”

If Ben or Natalie came into the kitchen it was not to marvel at their father’s presence there but to eat packets of crisps or even bowls of cereal half an hour before dinner. At least twice a week, one or both would call in at the last moment to say they were running late and would be grabbing something to eat with friends. When they were at home for dinner, Ben added salt to everything without tasting and shovelled the food in before rushing out to the pub. Natalie, meanwhile, had persuaded her mother to join her in a diet based on using smaller plates.

As the days went by – duck in marmalade sauce, spiced pork burgers with peach and chilli salsa – it was Rosie who was the weakest link, occasionally lapsing into a compliment. But even she, as she stood to carry the plates to the kitchen, found herself replying with the same phrase she had heard so many times over the years – “Very nice, love.”

On a Saturday morning, half way through the vacation,

Martin was checking the shopping list when Natalie and Ben came downstairs.

“Anything special you kids fancy for dinner tonight?”

Natalie glanced at Ben. “Don’t suppose you could manage that awesome bacon and egg pie Mum used to make?” Bowing to Ben’s seconding, Martin got up from his computer and went in search of the old recipe book.

“Quiche Rosie,” he announced that evening, lowering the bacon and egg flan to the table with some ceremony. “I saw our old head teacher in town today,” said Ben, “Scary as ever.” Natalie shuddered. “I saw Justine Connor. Year above me? I swear to God she was, like, really pregnant?” Rosie ate in silence, amused at the precise arrangement of the tomato slices and trying not to be pleased that the egg mix was a little solid, the flan base a little soggy.

Next day, finding Martin with the family recipe book open on his knee, Ben put in a request for sausage and mash. Wanting to go with the flow, Martin picked up a dozen award-winning sausages from the local farmers’ market and, after spending the afternoon consolidating the wisdom of the web, set about producing his own version of ‘the perfect sausage and mash’, deploying the new potato ricer and gently warming the cream.

“Great mash, Dad,” said Ben, reaching for the salt. “No wonder you’ve put on all that weight.” Martin, who still prided himself on his youthful figure, pulled in his stomach as he removed the full length blue and white striped butcher’s apron.

On the Sunday, Ben suggested going out for a McDonald's – "It's got to be said, no-one does fries like McDonald's." That night over the washing up, Rosie overheard Natalie whispering to Ben "not to go overdoing it."

The two of them always felt a little bereft when Natalie and Ben went back to college; the house a little empty, life a little flat.

"Shall we just have a ready meal tonight?" said Rosie as she came down from stripping the beds.

"Fine," said Martin. "Maybe watch a film."

Next evening he asked if there was anything in the freezer.

"There's some cod fillets that need eating."

"Fine."

"I'll do it," said Rosie. "It'll only take ten minutes. We can watch the second half of that movie."

Afterwards, Martin washed up the two plates, a pan, and the oven tray while Rosie made coffee. On the Tuesday they had a frozen pizza. Wednesday a take-away. Thursday saw them eating leftovers, Friday a lamb chop with peas.

"I was thinking," said Rosie on the Saturday morning, "maybe you could do one of your special meals when Mum and Dad come over on Sunday?"

"Mmm," said Martin, brightening, "I suppose I could do my arista di maiale al latte".