

# Jokes in Lemon Juice

A short story by Lezanne Clannachan

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After he has left the house she stands by the kitchen sink staring out at Autumn's bruised colours, the hopeful green of summer turning to rot. Windfall apples lie in the long grass, turning to pulp beneath still-taut skin. Lils used to eat the fruit straight off the tree when she little. The last time she was home, her daughter scolded her for letting the apples go to waste, those yellow-brown eyes she inherited from her father flaring with righteous ire.

*How can you be so wasteful?*

*They're apples, Lils, she'd replied. Not a human life.*

She'd watched her daughter connect eyes with her father, unspoken commentary passing between them in that silent shorthand of theirs. He hates waste, so Lily does, too. She should pick up the apples.

She walks out into the garden in her bare feet, the hem of her dressing gown harvesting raindrops. The grass holds onto the apples as she gathers them up and she's sorry for the violence of her hands as they tear the green strips. Sometimes he looks at the long strands of her hair in his fingers with the same muddle of remorse and surprise.

Once the apples are in the sink, she checks for wasp burrows, those fine, arterial boreholes that eat through to the core, the way an unkind word finds its way to the heart. An inexperienced eye might miss the puncture in its halo of browned flesh, innocuous as an accidental bruise, but she knows what to look for.

Grass and dead leaves litter the kitchen sink but there's no rush to clear the mess. He'll be out all morning with his old school chums; those rangy tigers with their yellowing teeth and patchy fur, growling and bellyaching over thimbles of liquor. He'll come home twice his size, bulked out on whiskey and bravado.

The apples lose their prettiness once they've been peeled, reduced to pale, naked globes in her dirty sink, no rosy skins to hide the point of impact where they hit the ground. Still sweet-smelling, but no longer a thing to admire. In stripping them, she has made them ugly. She could say sorry, that in her eyes they are still whole and beautiful. But no-one says sorry, so neither will she.

As she slices them into tidy segments, pips scatter across the work surface, black and polished, like fossil tears. They contain cyanide, she read somewhere, and wonders how many pips it would take to fell a bull.

Once the apples have been halved, quartered and their core removed they are unrecognisable. She marvels at how her hands can inflict damage with such gentle precision. But then the keenest wounds don't always come with a fanfare of violence. Sometimes they sneak up like a hand beneath a blanket.

'After the pain, comes the sweetness,' she tells the segments, adding them to a pan of brown sugar and cinnamon. And a single pip, just for the fun of it.

*The magic ingredient*, she and Lils used to call it if a sneaky piece of eggshell made it into the cake mixture.

She looks across at the shelves with her cookery books. Lily's favourite recipe book is still there and for some reason it surprises her. Not that anyone would have taken it but time has a way of stealing things, their loss only discovered when it's far too late to do anything about it.

*Baking from the Heart*. A silly, whimsical title, but one that had intrigued her little girl.

*Why from the heart, not from the kitchen?*

*Because whatever you make from the heart is full of love so it tastes better.*

Lily had nodded, eyes wide and serious, accepting her words as a truth. Those had been her gifts to her daughter, small and homely wisdoms, bedtime kisses, brushed hair, all too easily outgrown. Her father, on the other hand, had offered Lily the whole world and in such a way a young girl could be forgiven the assumption he'd written the manual himself.

She can't resist taking the book off the shelf. The pages are covered in small, cocoa-powder fingerprints and crayon hearts beside the cakes that had turned out best. Victoria sponges, Madeira cakes, banana breads – recipes she knows by heart. How old had Lily been when they'd sabotaged the kitchen's stern lines with puffs of icing sugar and dribbles of melted chocolate on Sunday afternoons? Pressing her fingers into a stop sign, she lines up her hand with her hip bone. The warm crown of her daughter's head materialises beneath her palm, the tips of her fingers curling in muscle memory, to stroke that soft, careless fuzz of hair.

In her distraction, the fruit in the pan has been allowed to soften and lose its shape becoming a featureless stew. Lily had always been suspicious of stews, wise to the sly goodness her mother might have hidden amongst hearty chunks of meat and potato.

*We must eat up,* her father would say with a conspiratorial wink for Lily. *Your mother's been slaving away.*

Lily, ten years old, would hide a smirk as she picked up her fork.

As always, she'd missed the joke. It had been passed under her nose from father to daughter like the secret messages she and her friends used to share, written in lemon juice. She shivers. Even now, so many years on, she can feel the cold and lonely draft that comes with standing on the wrong side of the glass, looking in. Lily and her dad grinning over their mouthfuls, eating the stew to punish her.

That's how it had always been. Except maybe on those Sunday afternoons.

She returns to her pie.

As she spoons the flour into the scales, a new picture steps in to block the memory. Lily, the crown of her head just reaching the kitchen counter top, with an orange spade in her hand. The angle of her mind's eye suggests she is behind Lily, sitting on the kitchen floor. There are crumbs on the black and white tiles. She can see them quite clearly so perhaps she is lying down amongst them. The memory has no sound but she can see his mouth, open and ugly, as he looms over them both like a collapsing tower. Lily's arm, rigid as a metal crane, slams the orange spade against his legs, over and over.

The shock of that lost memory makes her balance wobble. She steadies herself, resting a tripod of fingers on the hob. The bite of heat takes a moment to register. With a cry, she presses her burnt fingers to her lips, eyes blurring. Instead of running them under cold water, she stays quite still, keeping hold of the memory.

Wild-haired Lils smacking that spade against his thighs.

Her small, brave warrior.

She dials Lily's number even though she knows at ten in the morning her daughter will be in lectures or sleeping but never available.

'It's your mum,' she tells Lily's recorded greeting, 'I wondered if you wanted to come home for the weekend. I'm making apple pie.'

Stupid message. Foolish woman. She can picture the disdainful quirk of her daughter's lips, the light froth of scorn in her voice. *Come home because you've made apple pie?* The same mimicry he always uses to highlight the failure of her small endeavours. It's not Lily's fault. Children are sponges, soaking it all up, even the scenes that play out behind closed doors. Poisonous spores linger in the air for a long time.

Her enthusiasm for the pie is gone. She thinks about scraping her efforts into the bin and decking it over with a bit of old newspaper. But if discovered, it would be worse than having left the apples in the grass.

The crust is the most important feature of the pie, hiding messiness, adding dignity and flourish to the most lacklustre of fillings. She pinches the flour and butter between finger and thumb until it no longer resembles flour and butter. The transformative power of a pinch is never to be underestimated. Even she has to admit there's something quite satisfying about a good pinch.

She almost doesn't register the telephone when it rings.

'Is daddy OK?' Lily doesn't bother with a greeting.

'Yes. Why do you ask?'

'I missed your call.' The unnecessary disturbance has irritated her daughter.

'Your father's fine. I'm making pie.' She gives a light laugh hearing how weak she sounds. 'You told me off for letting the apples in our garden go to waste, remember?'

'Told you off? Christ mum, you're a grown woman.'

A grown woman. Surely a grown woman is like a tree, her branches stretching wide to offer shelter and reaching skywards because she is limitless? But not her. She has spent her life shrinking, growing inwards, as though looking for her roots in the hope of starting over. 'Will you come back for the weekend? Or Sunday lunch?'

But no, Lily hasn't the time.

Before her daughter can hang up, she hears herself say, 'Lils, do you remember your plastic spade? Your favourite one, orange with a picture of a dolphin?'

Silence. Lily will no doubt recount the conversation to her father and they'll shake their heads in mutual disbelief. *Christ, hope your mother's not sliding into early dementia.*

'My favourite spade?'

'I remembered it this morning, out of the blue.' That silence again, weighty with impatience. 'I'd better let you go, darling. Ignore me, early dementia no doubt.'

Lily doesn't laugh, doesn't share the joke. 'Hope not.'

She rolls the pastry into a perfect oval, featureless and complacent. Lays it across the apple stew like a blanket, paring away any stubborn excesses. With the tip of her knife she punctures it three times so the apples can breathe without bursting open the entire pie.

She tries to remember the last cake they made together but another memory is pressing up on it, too impatient to queue. Lily presenting him with a huge slice of Victorian Sandwich cake. As he commented on how delicious it was, she suddenly knew exactly what her daughter was going to say before she said it. She just wasn't fast enough to interrupt.

*That's because it's made from the heart, with love.*

He made himself laugh. *Sounds like something your mother would say.*

For once, this joke wasn't made to fit the two of them. It was his alone and Lily's face went red with shame.

And then she was an adolescent. Hugging her knees in the leather armchair by the fire, hands inside her sleeves, father and daughter setting the world to rights. The way their heads would turn in unison if she interrupted, herd animals disturbed in their grazing. Sometimes it's easier to fix the outside world than the tiny universe between four walls.

She tries to conjure up the reclaimed reel of little warrior-Lil wielding the orange spade but it's thin with age and already falling to pieces.

He calls to say he'll be home for lunch. When the apple pie is ready, she takes it from the oven and cuts a huge piece. Molten apple blisters the inside of her mouth but she doesn't stop eating; forkful after forkful, searing her gullet, stripping away all those dead, unspoken layers. She keeps going until the entire pie is gone.

When the telephone rings once more, she tells herself to leave it. It'll be him again with something he needs, something she's forgotten. After the fourth ring, she answers, because she always has, always will.

'Turns out this weekend's a bit quiet,' Lily says. 'I thought I'd pop home after all.'

She looks at the crumbs on the kitchen counter and the empty ring of pie-crust, then opens the windows to chase out the smell of baking. Having washed the dish and replaced it in the cupboard, she leaves the house for the supermarket. She has an hour to buy provisions for his lunch and new apples for the pie she has promised.

After lunch, whilst he sleeps in his chair, she lays out her ingredients. The supermarket apples had been far superior to those from her garden – shiny, crisp and free of bruises – but she'd walked straight past them. Lily's old recipe book sits unopened by the hob, for company. Her body slots back into the recipe's familiar choreography, elbows rising and dipping as she creams butter and vanilla essence and sugar, making her hips swirl and her perfume rise. She doesn't need to pay attention to her hands or consult words on a page. It comes from a different place. In her head the lost memory plays over and over until the sound comes back.

*Say sorry*, Lily's little warrior voice had shouted as she hit him with the orange spade. *Say sorry to my mummy.*