

# *Sweet*

A short story by  
KJ HUTCHINGS



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The row of digits is written on a torn off piece of the Financial Times and a woman's name sits triumphantly above them. This time it's *Carole*. Yet another unexceptional, insulting name. Searching the rest of his pockets proves fruitless and I sink onto the bed, staring at my hands, the gold band making a mockery of my life.

Revenge, of any kind, as the saying goes, is supposedly very sweet. It reminds me, as I hold the scrap of yet another deception, of sugar cubes, cream, marzipan, glaze cherries and jam, icing and butter. It reminds me of my mother in her kitchen.

"Your father likes cake," she used to say, pummelling another calorific, sticky mix with a wooden spoon. The ingredients included a whole block of butter, a heaped cup of sugar and four, five eggs all stirred into the bowl. "The sweeter, the better," she would smile as I watched her, resting my chin on the kitchen table.

At teatime my mother would allow me to have only a thin slice from each large glorious cake. I savoured every crumb, jealously watching the thick creamy slices disappear into my father's mouth with a gluttonous indelicacy.

"Can't I have some more?" I would whisper to my mother following her into the kitchen with my plate outstretched. When she had first shown an avid interest in baking I had been delighted and gloated to all my friends that I would be eating cake and biscuits every day. I had visions of trays full of angel cakes, heavy slabs of bread pudding and regimented rows of ginger bread men lined up for my delectation. Little did I realise that my father would devour most of what my mother prepared while I was relegated to nibbling the occasional titbit. My mother usually had some excuse or another to deny me what she readily served up to him.

"It'll rot your teeth," she said, her hands clapping little clouds of flour. "And you'll get spots."

"I don't mind," I pleaded. It seemed a small price to pay. I could get false teeth, like my grandparents had.

My mother kissed my cheek as if she was very sorry about something.

"I hate him," I hissed, my face was heavy with childish petulance. 'You love him more than me.' I ran out of the kitchen, past my father's armchair where he sat blinking at the television and bounded up the stairs to my room.

My father was once considered to be a good-looking man and although I vaguely recollect that his face bore the contours and arrangement that created a semblance of attractiveness, I never saw him as handsome. I tended to look on him as a sullen bulk slumped silently in his chair. He had always been well built with the sort of physique that could easily spread to fat and it was not long before his body began to take the shape dictated by his appetite.

My mother brought him beer, sweets and crisps as snacks between his large fried meals and desserts, arranging them carefully on a tray and if he barked for more she would hurry back to the kitchen, reappearing with surprising speed. She said nothing as he ate and scattered crumbs, and remained silent when he went out, as he did most evenings, heaving himself up from his chair, the seat indented with the twin craters from his buttocks. His clothes became tighter and were often patched with sweat; his shirts battled to contain his corpulent stomach and his trousers struggled against splitting.

Despite this my father continued to spend considerable time combing and slicking his hair in readiness for another night out. I resentfully watched him go, old enough to know that this arrangement and routine was a poor state of affairs, noticing my mother's bitten lips and downcast eyes. We were left to wile away our evenings together.

"Where does he go?" I asked one night, resting my head on my mother's lap as we watched television. I knew he often went to pubs but I wanted to try to solicit further information from her. I had sometimes heard the front door open and close in the early hours of the morning, long after the pubs had shut, and heard his slow heavy footsteps on the stairs.

"He visits friends," she finally replied and stroked my hair. Recipes from magazines were strewn at her feet. Sometimes I would hear her cry at night, after I had been tucked up in bed.

I don't remember my father as a demonstrative man, at least not to us, my mother and me. I grew up accustomed to his silence and his disinterest in me, and that rather empty look whenever I happened to cross his line of vision.

Sometimes he had sudden bursts of anger that would jolt me with fear. A wife and child appeared to have been unwanted, perhaps uncalculated, additions to his life. I failed to enchant him in any way or bring forth what may have been a kinder nature coaxed out by passing years. I gained all my sustenance from my mother, while the shadow of his existence forever clipped the periphery of my life with a certain gloom I did not fully understand as a child. I would pull faces behind his back, spit in his tea. I had fantasies of poisoning his food, imagining the satisfaction of knowing he would never awake from his clammy slumber, and then I would whisk my mother away to whatever made her happy. I knew it wasn't him. She never looked happy with him.

A year or two passed. My mother and I continued to meander around the high street shops, leisurely shopping for placatory goodies to offer to my father. He had grown much fatter and most exertions left him red faced and breathless, although the creases in his irritable temper had smoothed out somewhat. My mother went shopping to buy him bigger-sized clothes when he could no longer squeeze himself into his trousers and shirts. The dentist had to extract most of his teeth, which were so rotten they were beyond repair. However, my father was pleased with the shiny false set he was given as a replacement and his jaws would chomp up and down with more vigour than before.

Food continued to comfort him; each slice of cake symbolizing our acknowledgement that he had a reason to be aggrieved, a reason to be petted and soothed with gateau, cream and chocolate, sugary tea and biscuits. His dinner was placed on the table before ours; his tea, beer and newspapers were by his chair, his favourite programmes on the television.

The larger he became, the more placid he was, dozing in his armchair at night. He rarely went out anymore other than to go to his job at a hardware store a short walk from our house. All of this lifted my mother's spirits.

"Don't you think your father is more contented these days?" she asked as we struggled home from the supermarket laden with carrier bags that cut into my fingers.

"He's really fat now." I wrinkled my face up. "And he smells. Can't I have some sweets and crisps?" I whined, resentful of the continuation of her blatant favouritism for *him*. I would nurse my self-pity every time my mother made me eat my greens while the maddening aroma of a baking cake pervaded the house.

"No," she said firmly.

I sulked and swung the bag containing the eggs dangerously close to a wall.

"It's not fair," I mumbled.

"Nothing ever is," my mother sighed. "Don't do that."

I likened it to feeding a dormant ogre who might easily become foul tempered again if he was not fed on demand. The skin on his grey face had plumped out making him look oddly younger, like an obese baby. His fingers reminded me of the bulging sausages he ate for his breakfast and his eyes were dark and beady like two raisins pressed into dough. His body seemed no longer to be his own; instead it became a fixture of the room, like an arrangement of over-blown cushions, and my mother would busily vacuum, wash and wipe around him. Sometimes I caught her watching him as he dropped food into his mouth or struggled up the stairs and it was a look I could not fathom. I began to watch too, as if witnessing a progressing experiment, although I was never sure what outcome I was waiting for.

One afternoon my mother met me from school. I immediately knew something had happened. Her expression was one of sad resignation as she calmly explained that my father had suffered a heart attack at work, and died.

No one seemed particularly surprised. His love of food had turned his blood

to treacle, clogging and blocking, the years of cake and sugar and beer taking its final and fatal toll one morning while he sat at his desk in the back office. Food had killed him with an insidious patience, rotting my father from the inside out.

After the funeral my mother threw out the cake mixes and baking trays and cookery books and appeared to quickly settle herself into widowhood. She never remarried and I did not miss the father I never had.

My mother seemed content with her life, but one night as we sat watching television she turned to me and said quietly, "I know I have lived such a little life and understood even less, and I have done things I shouldn't have done. Please don't be like me, despite everything I've taught you."

"What do you mean? What things?" I asked, alarmed, imagining my mother to be incapable of any notable or serious wrongdoing. "Why wouldn't I want to be like you? I don't want to be like anyone else."

"It doesn't matter now," she replied, patting my hand. "What's done is done."

It was only when I was much older and married myself that I discovered that my father's other life, his nocturnal existence, took place in other rooms in streets not so far from our house, in the company of the "friends" my mother once referred to. Perhaps she had performed the same ritual as I have countless times and found slips of paper in coat pockets, telltale smudges on a white shirt, the smell of an unfamiliar perfume. I wonder, feeling rather sick at the thought, as to whether my mother had noted the scent of other women as my father climbed back into the marital bed at some godforsaken hour.

In their private moments, out of my sight and earshot, had there ever been genuine love or was it simply a matter of obligation, like an entrapment? When did my mother decide on the means of her release? She had never said a word to me about it, taking all the information, like a vital secret ingredient, to her grave. Such things were not spoken about then, not like they are today; nowadays all and sundry open their hearts to see who has the deepest wounds, the most broken pieces, the greatest blood loss.



Isn't the way to a man's heart through his stomach? Doesn't it sometimes bring a wandering husband back to his rightful place? The stomach is an honest organ in one sense, since what you feed it affects the rest of the body, especially a fickle heart.

My father should have been nicer, kinder. Men that rely on their wives to bake their daily bread, or cake, should always be good to them. It is easy, after all, to measure out a dose of rat poison to an unsuspecting ravenous mate, whose greedy appetite has led him to put his feet under other women's tables. There are lots of things the seemingly passive and powerless can do.

My husband, collector of telephone numbers and ill-kept secrets, does not have a sweet tooth, but I know there are other means to an end. It reminds me of another saying about revenge; I am sure there are many. A Chinese proverb warns that those who wish to pursue revenge to the bitter end must first be prepared to dig two graves, one of which will be their own.

I look down at the winking wedding ring and tell myself these soft woman's hands, usually the bearers of such sweetness and love, are capable of anything.

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