

Memories of Boxing Day at Farrah Road

We never had a turkey, so the annual Boxing Day walk to my uncle and aunty's house always held the promise of something exotic for me and my brother. I think, perhaps, that our oven was too small, or maybe it was just that my mother was an unadventurous cook who preferred to stick with what she knew: chicken.

The walk took only ten minutes but we rarely, if ever, gathered as a whole family at other times of the year. We were four, and my cousins' house was home to three girls, three adults and two dogs. My uncle Jim and aunty Joy were brother and sister, my wicked uncle Ivan having left Joy with three daughters under the age of six when he disappeared into the post War ether to emerge, thirty years later, as a bigamist living in Australia. Joy was the eager hostess, bustlingly efficient, while Jim sat and sucked at his pipe, warming his pint of Mackeson with a poker heated red-white in the tumbling coals of the fire. The third adult was my old aunty Myfi (Myfannwy) who was ancient; she sat and slept in a high-backed chair, her lazy eye always open, watching us as she dozed, just as she had observed my father and his three siblings many years before.

Cold turkey sandwiches, Jacob's Cream Crackers, Branston Pickle...savoury treats that we just did not eat in my house; and soft white bread with too much thick butter. But the comestible that really stood out for me – and that I can never taste, or even think about without being transported to those earlier years – is the humble silverskin pickled onion. It took me by surprise every time, its sweet soury tang assaulting, then taking over, the dominion that was my seven-year old mouth. Nothing really prepared me for this; the start of a love-hate relationship that has lasted to today was born, the day after Jesus, and repeated every year of my childhood.

I'd like to say that we sang carols around the piano, and so I will: *we sang carols around the piano*. At least I believe we did, but the piano remained unopened, nobody, I think, able to play. Maybe Myfi had played in her earlier years, I don't know, but on these occasions, it sat in the corner, solid but mute. Like Myfi herself.

Then came out the cards. Mainly Whist, a game called Sevens, and then, in desperation at our family's inability to play properly, Snap. Now, Snap I could play, as well as Happy Families.

And to finish the evening it was story-time. We'd heard them all before: how my father, Home Guard officer that he was, challenged then poked a bayonet into a horse in the dark of Bangor Mountain; tales of Ghana and Alexandria where my aunty had met and married the evil South African uncle Ivan before he buggered off into the night; how Uncle Jim had liberated Italy, losing the tip of his finger in the process; of being brought up in a pub, in the hardest part of town.

And then there were the long goodnights, the alarming kisses on both cheeks, the long pull up the hill, and home. To bed, and to cold chicken sandwiches for lunch the following day.