

## Grate Expectations

I know what disappointment looks like. It's written all over the bride's face. She smiles, but the corners of her eyes twitch, and her voice goes up an octave when she says,

'Oh, Aunt Tilly! A fondue set! How lovely!'

Aunt Tilly beams. 'I remembered how much you enjoyed our fondue evening when you visited me in Perth all those years ago.'

'Of course! Such fond memories.'

'Well, now you can have your own party. Invite all of your friends. Make an evening of it.'

'What a fabulous idea! Thank you so much.'

I don't expect I'll ever see the light of day. The bride and groom hadn't listed me in their wedding registry. They were after an air fryer, a Nespresso machine with a built-in frother, and crystal champagne glasses. Not a fondue set. Aunt Tilly went rogue when she spotted me in the clearance bin at TK Maxx and carried me to the till. Even the shop assistant frowned when the octogenarian set me down and asked to have me gift-wrapped. I know my fate. I will be banished to the back of a dark cupboard, where I will remain in my box gathering dust until such time the newlyweds buy their first home and do a clear-out. The next time I'm handled will be when a charity shop volunteer checks that I am a complete set and slaps a hand-written price sticker haphazardly over my original retail value. Oxfam is my penultimate destination, as it has been for all my brothers and sisters. Ultimately, I'll end up in a landfill buried under novelty gumball machines, Roombas, and rusty lawn chairs.

Back in the 60s and 70s when fondue parties were all the rage, my predecessors took pride and place on laminate countertops all over the country. Friends and neighbours gathered on Friday evenings during the cold winter months to drink copious amounts of cheap, boxed wine, make merry, and dip crusty bread, sausages, cubed meat, and new potatoes into pots of bubbling cheese or hot, herb-infused oil. The proud hostess thrived on the compliments she received about her party spread.

But times changed. Perhaps the rising price of imported cheese made fondue parties unaffordable, or maybe people became fearful and wrongly believed communal dining could lead to AIDS or some other unpleasant virus. It's possible society just changed as a whole.

Neighbours no longer frequently called on neighbours; families and couples opted instead to stay in for movie nights and Chinese takeaways. For whatever reason, fondue parties fell out of fashion—like jelly moulds, punch bowls, and paisley-print neckerchiefs.

There was a brief period during the noughties when my kind was taken down from the top shelf of walk-in pantries, dusted off, and used in place of my more sophisticated cousin, the chocolate fountain. What child doesn't love dipping strawberries, apple slices, and sweet biscuits into warm, melted chocolate? Personally, I could think of nothing worse than having my bowl filled to the brim with sticky, unbranded semi-sweet chocolate and having tiny, snot-and-saliva-covered fingers manhandling my every surface. But, hey. At least that generation served a purpose, grim as it was.

I'd underestimated the bride's shrewdness. Upon return from her honeymoon in the Bahamas, she put together a platter of various dipping foods, set the dining table as if she was expecting company, took me out of my box, and snapped a few Insta-worthy photos before carefully returning me and all of my accessories from whence we came.

'What are you doing with that, Brie?' her husband asked when she brought out a pair of scissors, a roll of gift wrap, and some sticky tape.

'Well, I've taken pictures, which I'll send to Aunt Tilly, so I'm re-gifting this to my boss. His birthday is coming up.'

'Elliot? Would he even want that? What would he do with a fondue set?'

'He can give it to charity for all I care. He'll be grateful I even remembered. It's the thought that counts.'

'If you say so.'

Elliot received me with the same phoney enthusiasm as my previous owner.

'Oh, Brie. You shouldn't have! How thoughtful of you!' he said. 'My family will love this.'

He was lying, of course. I sat in the boot of his car for several weeks before the dealership rang him to remind him the car needed servicing.

When he brought me into the house, his wife asked, 'What's in the box?'

'A fondue set. Brie gave it to me for my birthday. I'd completely forgotten about it.'

She scrunched her nose. 'Oh, God. It's just going to clutter the house. Drop it at the charity shop on your way to the garage, will you?'

Which he did.

‘£10.99, I reckon. It’s still brand new,’ the elderly volunteer said to her much younger assistant.

‘Seriously? I wouldn’t pay five quid for it.’

‘£4.99, then. Maybe someone will buy it and use it as a plant pot or something.’

*A plant pot.* How undignified.

I was displayed on an eye-level shelf for one glorious month, but was relegated to the £1 bin on the floor next to the door the moment someone donated a four-slice toaster in perfect nick. I could practically smell the stench of the landfill through my enamel pores.

But then, a miracle. A woman with questionable dress sense breezed into the shop one chilly winter morning and approached the till.

‘You wouldn’t happen to have a fondue set, would you? I’m having a 70s-themed Christmas party this weekend,’ she said.

The young volunteer took her eyes off her phone just long enough to shrug and point to the door. ‘Try the pound bin. I think I might’ve seen one in there.’

The woman’s eyes lit up when she saw me tucked beneath a gaudy Primark Christmas jumper.

‘Perfect! And it’s brand new,’ she exclaimed as she lifted me out of the box. ‘You’re exactly what I wanted!’