

An Ideal Home

From 'Telling Tales' by Alan Bennett

It is a cause of pain to me as a boy that the house we moved to in Headingley in 1946 has no hallway and that you step from the outside directly into the kitchen-cum-living room.

This absence of a hallway and indeed of a front room isn't evidence of poverty particularly; it's simply that, with my father being a butcher, we live over the shop, and there's a shortage of rooms.

Were our house more shabby, it would sort better with the dripping, boiling and spitting down below. But my mother has transformed her ordinary little kitchen into a crude version of rooms she has seen pictured in tasteful magazines like *Ideal Home*. She's fixed a pelmet of flowered cretonne across the top of the black-leaded kitchen range, hung some horse brasses up one side and put her two battered Staffordshire dogs in the hearth. On the ex-gramophone cabinet, bought when they were first married, is a green glass doorstop and a lustre cup and saucer. There is a Staffordshire greyhound without its tail, a sheep minus an ear, and all bathed in the soft light from a battered majolica vase Mam has turned into a lampholder. It's a nice cosy room and I am deeply ashamed of it, and never more so than when the stench of fat drifts up from the cellar to cling to the gathered cretonne and mist the polished brass, my father's bloody smock hanging behind the door amid these battered emblems of gentility.

Mam's agglomeration of bric-a-brac had begun back in 1943 with a workbox, though it isn't strictly speaking a workbox at all but an early nineteenth-century tea-caddy. She had spotted it in the dustbin of my father's wholly unlamented stepmother, thrown out after her death. Mam salvaged it and I have it still, used as it always has been as a workbox for needles and cotton. Seeing this covered walnut-veneered box on my own dresser, sixty years after she rescued it from the bin, I still find it shocking to think that anyone could ever have thought to throw it out.

My mother, for example, is convinced that every family in the country except us sits down to a cooked breakfast much as they do in her magazines. Even as a boy, I know this is nonsense, while at the same time managing myself to entertain assumptions even more foolish.

There is in our house, for instance, as I imagine there is in most houses lived in by couples who have gone through a wedding ceremony and the orgy of not always well-chosen present-giving that accompanies it, a quantity of crockery, table-linen and general household - *materiel* would be the word - that is surplus to requirements - table-napkins that are seldom used, tray cloths similarly; an embarrassment of cake-knives and even cake-forks. Here are a set of coffee spoons for the coffee we never drink; sugar tongs for the sugar lumps we never use, and a cheese knife that remains a stranger to cheddar.

Instead of regarding these items as a household's inevitable redundancies, as a boy I see all these disparate and unused utensils as evidence of failure. The fish slice, still pristine in its original box, is, it seems to me, a relic of a way of life we have not managed to keep up just as Dad has not kept up his fretwork or Mam her rug-making. Social standards must have slipped else why is the cake stand never put on the table or the serviette rings either? All these accumulated and outmoded objects seem to me as a child an indictment of us as family, a dossier of our social unsuccess. In a truly ideal home there would be fish for high tea served slice by slice at places with side-plates, each with its own napkin. If there is jam, it will be out of the chromium jampot holder, the spoon with the arms of Southport. There will be a slice for the cake, too, the crumbs swept up afterwards with a tray and brush like they have in the better class of boardinghouse. Tea once cleared, there will be fretwork again for Dad and rug-making for Mam, and gathered round the table we will look like a family pictured on the cover of *John Bull* or featured in the tales of Enid Blyton.

This proper way of going on, I see as extending to the bedroom too, with my mother in front of the

dressing-table mirror brushing her hair with the silver-backed brush that always lies there, dusty and unused, even powdering her face with the ancient powder puff that occupies one of the cut-glass vessels provided for the purpose, all components of the dressing-table set with which marriage has endowed her. She might even take off her rings and place them on the dish with a glass prong that is another of the dressing-table's unused features but which always mystifies me as a child. This is partly because my mother has no rings other than her wedding ring, which she never takes off, but it is also confused in my mind with another mysterious glass object in the kitchen cupboard, a fluted pyramid surrounded by a circle of glass teeth which I am told is used to make orange juice. Since this is during the war and there are no oranges, the process can never be demonstrated and so like the unused ring-prong it retains its mystery. Both objects turn up regularly now in village halls at sales of collectables.

As a child I root in the dressing-table drawers or squeeze the scrotum of the scent spray, cased in its tight silk net, thrusting it up my nose to catch a whiff of long dead 4711, scent in our house another thing that is just for show.

Years later I am going for the first time to France and ask Mam if there is anything I can bring her back.

‘What’s Chanel No.7?’

‘Scent. Why?’

‘There’s often adverts for it. You could fetch me a bottle of that as a present. If it’s too expensive you could get me Chanel No. 4.’

So on that first visit to France I buy a little bottle, which she never actually uses but joins the other redundant accoutrements of the dressing—table, and is still there, forty years later, when she dies.

Every family has a secret and the secret is that it is not like other families. If only people knew what we were really like, my mother thought — her not getting up until ten in the morning and none of us sitting down to a proper breakfast — they’d have nothing to do with us. We pretend we’re normal but it’s only a matter of time before folks find out what we’re like.

‘Find out what?’ I ask her grave.

Find out, I suppose, that Dad sleeps in his shirt and Mam in his old pyjama jacket, find out that most meals end with a piece of cake, find out that Mam keeps her teeth in a cup without a handle and Dad doesn’t keep his in anything at all. Such creatures are not fit for polite society. Who could imagine such people? Who would want to know them?

In the sixth form one of my friends is a gentle, slightly older boy, John Totterdill, devout as I am and with whom I share an interest in architecture. He lives in West Park, one of the smarter suburbs of Leeds, the houses big and detached, his father, I think, a bank manager. One day John asks me back to tea. The sitting-room is vast and kitted out with all the uncomfortable appurtenances of middle-class living, including a nest of tables. Mrs Totterdill puts them out ready for our tea and, even though they are patently unsteady, I take them to be stools rather than tables and so momentarily perch on one. A look of alarm crosses her face as she sees this lumpen boy bearing down on its delicate Edwardian legs and I instantly realise my mistake, then, of course, have to pretend that I have perched there only because I am so much at my ease, and pass off this faux pas as the product of a nonchalance I certainly do not feel. John Totterdill is dead, and his mother too, so the only person who remembers this incident is me and yet the embarrassment of it lives on.

My parents like John and he them, but with my misgivings about our living conditions, it is only on one occasion that he comes round to our house. Happily Dad isn’t rendering dripping but I see to my shame that he has brought a pan to the table and left it there. I never ask John again. The depths of my triviality are discovered to me now fifty years later and there is no one left from whom to ask forgiveness.