

GRAPEFRUIT MOON
by COLIN WATTS

To lose your sense of smell in a punch-up, hints of tragedy. When it happens, as it did to Jamie McCullough, following an argument with a customer in your own restaurant, it tips over into farce. Alice, his long-term girlfriend and love of his life, likened his swollen nose to an over-ripe aubergine.

‘I did warn you,’ she said. ‘The Pheasant Plucker,’ she said, pulling a po-face, trying not to laugh. ‘Not a good choice.’

‘Snod fuddy,’ said Jamie.

Unsurprisingly, Jamie’s sense of smell was severely curtailed by the ‘accident’. Unfortunately it remained so, even when the swelling went down. In fact it disappeared altogether. Consultant ENT surgeons and eminent nasal specialists all said basically the same thing: ‘Jamie, your polyps are knackered and you will never smell again’. But Jamie was stubborn; you don’t get to join the Young British Culinarians (or Fine Young Cannibals, as they were known) without some inner steel. Jamie hired a food taster called Nick, whom he called Nicolai, after Ceausescu.

‘Ceausescu had food tasters’, Jamie explained, ‘as did Hitler and George W Bush. For different reasons, obviously.’

Nick was good, but Jamie missed the sensual contact with the food he was cooking. Now he knew his bacon was burning only when flames raged out from under the grill. Now he knew his curries contained subtle combinations of cumin, turmeric, cardamom, garlic, chilli or panch phoran only because of what it said on the tin. Everything he tasted was sweet or sour, bitter or salt, with occasional wafts of umami.

First he became angry, then depressed. But he was in his mid-thirties; he was strong and healthy and had the love of his life. Alice stood by him, never telling him to ‘pull himself together’, or ‘get over it’. Nevertheless, being the woman she was, she couldn’t resist a piss-take.

‘You need to think about a career change,’ she said. ‘What about a sewer rat? Sorry, effluent control operative. Now that you’re nasally challenged.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my nose. It’s just what’s gone wrong inside it.’

‘Sorry, Jamie, I do love your nose really. With all its twists and turns. You could boldly go into the far reaches of gut-wrenching Victorian pipework. Digging out the rotting bodies of missing persons. Single-handedly shovelling piles of the shittiest shit. You could save the country from impending cholera. You might get a knighthood: Sir James McCullough.’

‘And you could be Lady Muck. I think I’ll stick with what I’ve got for now, thank you very much.’

Which he did. But then something strange happened. Forgetting himself one day when he was putting together a fruit salad for one of his favourite customers, he took a quick taste and thought he heard *Grapefruit Moon*.

‘Nice one, Nick,’ he said, ‘I never knew you were such a good mimic.’

‘Shit, Jamie, I know you’ve lost your smell, but now you’re losing your marbles. I never opened my mouth.’

‘That is so weird. I swear I heard it. Here.’

He took up the salad and smelled it. Nothing. He spooned up some juice and took a sip. There it was again, in the background. He sucked up the whole spoonful, rolled it round his tongue. The familiar rasping voice crashed onto his eardrums as if coming from giant quadrophonic speakers.

‘Nicolai, man, you must have heard that.’

Nick shook his head.

‘Tom Waits? Grapefruit Moon? ...*one star shining*...?’

Nick looked even more worried and shook his head harder.

Back home, he told Alice.

‘Stress,’ she said, ‘definitely stress. Stress-induced food music is a well-established psychological condition.’

She Googled anosmia and found it to be associated with clinical depression. She got Jamie to sign up for yoga and mindfulness. He meditated. He felt fitter. Their love-making improved. There was no more food music. But Jamie began to rely more and more on Nick. He got depressed again and the songs returned, though confining themselves initially to the fruit salad: *Strawberry Fields Forever*, *Blueberry Hill*, *I Am a Tangerine*.

Jamie went home in tears.

‘Maybe it’s just a blip, said Alice.’

But it wasn’t. It spread from dessert to main to starters to condiments, featuring only, for some reason, the Beatles. *Strawberry Fields* was joined by *Wild Honey Pie*, *Glass Onion* and *Mean Mr Mustard*. Then appeared McCartney’s *Flaming Pie*, followed by Harrison’s *Apple Scruffs* and *Thanks for the Peperoni*, leading on to Lennon’s *Beef Jerky* and *Cold Turkey*.

Life in the small flat Jamie shared with Alice was good and their food never sang to him there. But Alice knew things were not right. One day she made some soup and said to Jamie: ‘This is a new recipe, see what you think.’

As he took a sip. Alice stood up and said: ‘I’ve had enough, Jamie; I’m moving out.’

Jamie spat out the mouthful and heard *Pumpkin Soup* by Kate Nash crashing around the room. From the look on his face, Alice knew it. She grabbed his hand.

‘I’m sorry, Jamie, I had to do it. Of course I didn’t mean it. I could never leave you. I just needed to make sure that it happens only when you’re stressed. That means it has bad associations for you. Maybe, if you could give it good ones, you could start to enjoy it, maybe even put it to good use.’

Jamie looked doubtful.

‘You’ve got nothing to lose.’

‘My sanity? My restaurant? The love of my life?’

‘You lost your sanity way back, when you shackled up with me. For life. As for the business—’

‘There’s always the effluent disposal option.’

‘Exactly.’

‘You know what; I’m going to go for it.’

‘Oh Jamie, you’d hate it. All that shit.’

‘I mean, what you said – good vibrations. All that.’

‘Wow, maybe you could teach me to get it too. Teach Nick. Teach the staff. Get them to teach the customers. Pass it on to the world. You’ve seen it as an affliction. If you could see it as a gift...’

‘The world could be my oyster?’

‘Precisely.’

Alice seemed to know what to do. ‘We hold hands across the table,’ she said, ‘then we each sip our soup at the same time. You will still have bad vibes as the song kicks in, but I will counter with good ones and they’ll kick yours out.’

To begin with nothing happened, but Alice kept them at it and one day, looking up from a shared aubergine moussaka, fingers locked across the table, she heard something.

‘Jamie,’ she said, ‘you should be ashamed. All that healthy eating and you come up with *Cheeseburger in Paradise*. “Not zucchini, fettuccini, or bulgur wheat, but a big warm bun and a huge hunk of meat.” ’

‘I didn’t come up with it; it came up with me.’

‘I heard it. I heard it. We’ve cracked it.’

‘The world is my cheeseburger.’

‘Jamie, you’re not...’

‘Sometimes you just know when you have to bite the biscuit.’

‘But burgers!’

‘Organic beef, homemade cheese, granary rolls, home-grown seasonal salads...’

Before long Alice could get a song out of a teabag. Nicolai and the rest of the staff learned fast. The Pheasant Plucker became The Grapefruit Moon. For starters there was *Pumpkin Soup* or *Thanks for the Peperoni*, followed by *Cheeseburger in Paradise*, or *Cold Turkey* with *Mean Mr Mustard*. For dessert you could have *Apple Scruffs* with *A Taste of Honey*, or *Cherry Pie* with *Black Ice Cream*. *Strawberry Fields* was forever on the menu. *Big Cheese* and *My Darling Clementine* to finish off with, accompanied by *Clouds in My Coffee*, or *Tea for Two*.

The Grapefruit Moon went from strength to strength. To Jamie’s great fortune The Gift, as it came to be called, restricted itself to the premises. Parties ate and swayed in unison; lovers mouthed the words of their shared songs in ecstatic oblivion. Lonely old men became less so for a few precious moments of their lives, coming back time and again. Jamie shared the business with Nicolai and the other

staff and set up the Snod Fuddy Foundation for the Relief of Anosmia, with Molly Birnbaum and Jamie Oliver as Patrons. He and Alice moved into a house of their own and produced three children, Rosemary, Basil and Ginger. Each of them could smell perfectly well. Not one of them went into catering. *SLQ*

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