Contents

1.	Milk	1
2.	Chocolate Doings	11
3.	Caramel	23
4.	Custard Tarts	35
5.	Meat Pies	46
6.	Battenberg	60
7.	Cadbury's Caramel Bunny	77
8.	Hot Cocoa	85
9.	Roast Lamb	97
10.	Fish & Chips	106
11.	Ice Cream	117
12.	Bubble and Squeak	127
13.	Shepherd's pie	137
14.	Sticky Iced Buns	146
15.	Lucozade	156
16.	Toast	168

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 7 08/10/2012 12:05

17. Sweet Tea 181
18. Sticky Toffee Pudding 190
19. Physalis 198
20. Truffles 213
21. Pie & Mash 222
22. Pavlova 233
23. Lemons 244
24. Foie Gras 258
25. Angel Delight 269
26. Tomatoes 278
27. Courgette Flowers 289
28. Poires Belle-Hélèn 298

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 8 08/10/2012 12:05

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life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 9 08/10/2012 12:05

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 10 08/10/2012 12:05

CHAPTER 1

Milk

There's always a brief lull before things kick off. And I usually find there's just me and John Torode when it happens. This time, we were all microphoned up, standing on the ramp near the stage door at London's Earl's Court. Music pumping, crowds of *MasterChef* fans cheering, and, for once, I was completely and utterly lost for words.

This was the first *MasterChef* live show, doing on-stage cooking. It was a sell-out and, despite everything – despite being a greengrocer by trade, being as passionate as ever about food and having already presented telly for the past eight years – nerves caught up with me.

'Thirty seconds to go,' I muttered to John.

I wiped a bead of sweat off my head and looked at my mate, who I'd first met twenty years previously while he worked as a young sous chef as I flogged him fruit and veg.

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 1 08/10/2012 12:05

'It'll be all right,' he muttered softly. 'It will be OK. You'll be OK. OK?'

I nodded, grateful. 'OK.'

Then the cue was given and we marched on, crowds erupting, a sea of faces, some wearing 'Gregg and John' masks, thousands stretching as far as I could see … Show time … And I just thought: Wow!

For the next hour or so I cooked, just as I'd practised, my confidence gathering pace (I'm not a chef like John – it comes less naturally) and we joked and did what we do best: talk … food, food, glorious food. And I couldn't help but think once again: blimey, just how far have I come from the Peckham days. And how had this happened?

Shortly afterwards, I found myself wandering around Earl's Court, alone among the crowds, wearing a 'Gregg Wallace' mask so that nobody knew it was me, and I spotted someone wearing a T-shirt with my name on too. As I smiled wistfully, I wondered what my lovely grandparents would've thought of that.

It was my grandfather, the one who lived in Wimbledon, who'd inspired the name 'Gregg'. He'd worked in the navy for years, from teenage stoker to warrant officer, and at one point he was stationed in the Falklands, where he met a local farmer called Gregg. Anyway, this farmer, Gregg, taught my Grandad W how to ride a horse – something he loved – and it was while out riding one day in the frozen fields, when he dismounted to open a fence, that Grandad W spotted something glittering in the mud and ice. It was a ring, a gold ring, and a perfect fit on his finger. As it was on Gregg's land, he took it to him, and Gregg laughed his head

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 2 08/10/2012 12:05

off when he realised it was one he'd lost ten years earlier.

'You can have it,' he said to Grandad W, who put it on his little finger and never took it off. The pair remained friends for a while and Mum remembers meeting the original (but not the best – sorry!) Gregg a few times. She always liked the name and voilà. It mightn't be one of the strangest stories of how someone's name was chosen but there you go. Years later after Grandad W died, I was given this ring and I still wear it every day. I feel I owe my grandparents on both sides a lot. And my mum. This is their story as much as mine.

When I hear what my poor mother had to go through to have me, my heart bleeds for her, not to mention having a desire to clamp my hands over my ears. This was 1964, Camberwell, London, and, God love nurses and all they do, but back then, there was plenty of tea but sympathy was in short supply. With no painkillers, and no husbands or family allowed to sit and hold your hand, the women were herded into a single room, all in different stages of labour, and left to get on with it.

Just as labour pains kicked off, Mum had been driven to hospital by her parents, my nan and grandad, who lived in Wimbledon. To make this story more complicated, I called both sets of grandparents 'Nan and Grandad', so I'll call these two Nan and Grandad W (for Wimbledon) – OK?

Pregnant with me, Mum had been staying with them for a few days, as they felt it was 'safer', which tells you a lot about what they thought of my dad, Allan, and the rented house Mum was sharing with her in-laws in Peckham.

Poor Mum. She'd married my dad, Allan Wallace, aged seventeen, after only a year of dating him. Quite the middle-class girl, she worked in the accounts offices of Bentalls, a department store in Kingston, and was the daughter of a

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 3 08/10/2012 12:05

naval officer. They'd met on the train on the way to work, where Dad was an electrician working in the building. A couple of years older, he'd quickly spotted this petite, brown-eyed girl with her beehive and mini-dress suit. I guess she fell for Dad's tall, dark good looks and his 'rough diamond' qualities. Anyway, off she trotted down the aisle when he asked her.

Of course she told Dad to ask Grandad W 'for permission' first. I'm sure he had his doubts about this south-east Londoner, a boy from the wrong side of the tracks in Peckham, who lived in a two-up two-down with his mum and dad still and who'd seemingly swept up Mum in some kind of whirlwind (and the problem with those is they tend to crash you back to earth).

'If this is what you want, I won't stand in your way,' Grandad W said, rather ominously.

Mum had a dream wedding in St Mary's Church in Merton with a white meringue dress, plenty of flowers, cake and a knees-up afterwards. The bride and groom were well toasted, everyone happy to see they'd found their 'ever after'. But after that, sadly, the dream ended. Almost as soon as her veil came off, so did Mum's rose-tinted specs about Dad.

Whisked away to begin her new life in Peckham, Mum already knew she'd be staying in a rented house, with her in-laws living in two rooms upstairs. She knew Dad liked a laugh in the pub. She knew life in deepest darkest Peckham compared to doiley-laced Wimbledon would be different. What she didn't know was that there wasn't an inside toilet and she'd be expected to pee in a bucket at night.

Yes, life in Peckham, where if it moved you ate it, if it didn't you nicked it, was going to be very different from the rolling lawns, neat houses and social niceties of Wimbledon. I need, at this point, to clarify what I mean about south

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 4 08/10/2012 12:05

London. I actually mean south-east London. It is so very different to any other part. If people hear a working-class London accent, they think it belongs to an 'Eastender', but actually the accent of the south is different, albeit ever so slightly.

But south-east London is not 'south London': it's older, it's got more history. When London was just a city in the square mile, within the City walls, south-east London was the part people started to build on first. It had the first bridge going across to Southwark and to where Shakespeare's theatre and the like all sprang up. Peckham appears in the Domesday book as 'Pecheham'. It was on the Old Kent Road that produce was brought into the City, it boasted orchards, meadows and markets, and it was the place where farmers stopped to give their cattle a feed before reaching the City. In the eighteenth century it became a site of commerce, as rents were cheaper than in the City. And still today, south-east London is blue-collar-worker land, where the docks all kicked off, where breweries started … all this happening long before things were built and took off in east London. South-east London has history, a sense of working self-respect that goes way, way back, and is something I take pride in today. In short, though, Mum felt like an alien dropped on to another planet. And planet Peckham was a galaxy away from Wimbledon, south-west London, where social climbing and middle-class suburbia were as alive in the 1960s as they are today.

Even the way she spoke was an issue. One of her neighbours, Mrs Dillon, overheard her talking in the garden once to another neighbour.

'Hello, how are yew doing?' Mum asked politely.

'Oi, you're a bit of posh girl, intcha?' Mrs Dillon said.

Very quickly Mum learned to drop a few vowel sounds

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 5 08/10/2012 12:05

and not pronounce her haitches any more, along with trying to get her head around the rhyming slang and laughing along to the old music hall songs, the lyrics changed to set the most open-minded blushing – she so badly wanted to fit in.

Although how her accent was going down was soon to be the least of Mum's new worries. My nan had expected her to stop working and look after Dad full-time, but she carried on working, actually doing OK for herself: she got trained up on how to use the National Cash registers, the scary-looking machines that preceded computers and wouldn't have looked out of place in *Doctor Who*'s Tardis.

The problems started when she came to realise the 'temporary move' to rent the downstairs part of her in-laws' rented house was looking rather permanent. And then, to add the cherry to the top, she found out he was having an affair. A little Irish lady called Maria a few doors down told her quietly as she picked up some groceries one day.

'Did you know my Albert is out with your Allan every Friday night, trawling for a bit of skirt?' she said. 'And Allan is seein' one bit on the side in particular.'

Mum nearly dropped the loaf and milk she was carrying and ran home in tears.

In desperation, before she got pregnant with me, Mum swallowed her pride and begged Nanny W to let her come home.

'I've made a mistake, Mum,' she sobbed. 'I don't want to be married to this man. It's too hard. I didn't really know him.'

Now these days you live together first and thank God for that. If Mum had moved in with Dad, she'd probably have rented a flat, it wouldn't have worked and she'd have gone home again. Job done.

*

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 6 08/10/2012 12:05

When I think of my own daughter, Libby, who is fourteen, I think that if this was her, now, I wouldn't be able to get her out of there fast enough. But this was 1960, and the scandal of having a daughter who walked out on her husband was too much for Nanny W and her values to bear.

'You made your bed when you said those vows, my girl,' came the stern response. 'Now you go back there and make the best of it, and we'll hear no more about it.'

Nan W never even told Grandad W (who'd have had her out of that house faster than you can say Jack Robinson) of their conversation. So Mum's bed was made, except she had to make it herself on the rickety pull-out sofa next to a bucket, often perilously close to overflowing. Years and years later, when Nan W was an old lady at the end of her life, she brought up all 'that business' and begged for Mum's forgiveness.

'I'm so sorry I made you stay,' she said.

'It was a different era,' Mum said. 'You did what you thought was right.'

Anyway, we've left poor Mum in labour, so let's get back to the story quick.

After arriving in the labour room, where mums-imminently-to-be were quite screaming their heads off in agony, my terrified mum found herself alone, writhing on a bed, joining in. Makes me wince just thinking about it.

The labour lasted for twelve hours and had Mum begging nurses for Nanny W to come and rescue her.

'I want my mum!' she screamed. 'Please!'

'She'll be no use to you now,' a prim nurse said with a shrug, eyeing the clock. 'Just get on with it and it'll soon be over.'

Finally, I arrived, on 17 October 1964, at 4.30 p.m., at St Giles' Hospital in Camberwell, weighing a respectable 6lb 9oz.

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 7 08/10/2012 12:05

And despite the ordeal, Mum says she fell in love with me instantly. I was adorable, apparently.

She'd already chosen my name, and it was just her choice as well, as Dad had had nothing to do with her pregnancy, and had certainly not sat around discussing baby names. Mum had chosen Gregg Allan Wallace, an unusual spelling with a double 'G' now, let alone then in Peckham.

Mum says she was only allowed a few minutes with me before I was taken off by nurses and plonked in a cot with all the other newborns in the nursery. For the next forty-eight hours she was only allowed to hold me at feeding times, which were strictly only every four hours. Nurses would pick up the babies, hand them to the mothers for feeding and burping, and snatch them back to return them to their cots for a sleep, however much they screamed.

Mum says that in between feeds, lots of the mums would press their faces to the glass window of the nursery, to gaze at their new offspring, crying if they were crying, knowing they could only look on helplessly. Rules were rules in those days, though, and hospital rules were not ones to be broken.

As fast as possible, she got herself out of there and back home to Kincaid Road, Peckham. She went straight to bed, and Nanny W came over to care for her.

I had my other nan and grandad living upstairs, but let's just say mother-in-law and daughter-in-law didn't see eye to eye. Once, when Mum was ill, Nan made Mum a bowl of soup and then wrote out a bill for it afterwards. That says all you need to know about their relationship. My grandad, though, adored kids and was my hero. More about that lovely man later.

I managed a proper smile aged just three days old – so Nanny W swore. Very quickly I learned to talk, and I was

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 8 08/10/2012 12:05

always a good eater. Nothing much has changed. Mum said I was a bundle of energy: I always wanted to be the first, could never wait, and was desperate to see it all for myself. 'If you wanted to do something, then "bosh", you did it,' she said. This characteristic, though, could turn something like a nice Sunday stroll in the pushchair into a near-death experience within seconds. When I was old enough to walk, Nan W and Mum took me to a ravine on holiday for a breath of fresh air. After we'd arrived I shook Mum's hand off and raced to the water's edge. Blissfully unaware of the danger, I somehow ducked under the barrier like greased lightning, on to the other side where there was a sheer drop into the water around twenty feet below.

Mum said her heart was in her mouth as she started trembling and running towards me, but Nan W pulled her back, hissing, 'Sssshhh, don't shout, we mustn't startle him.'

Carefully edging forwards, Nan W very calmly approached me with all the swift calm movements of a bomb disposal expert. 'Ooh, hello, Gregg, what are you looking at, my love …?' Then she reached out an arm to grab my sleeve before I could panic and drop off the face of the earth.

Mum collapsed on to the grass bank and sobbed with utter relief. I am not surprised Nan W kept her cool and sorted this situation out. I mean, she was that kind of woman. Tall and elegant, she had long slim fingers and even when she was telling me off she'd be smiling. She just emanated warmth. Back in her house in Wimbledon, she was always doing something with her lovely hands – baking, sewing, mending, soothing me if I fell over. A lovely woman.

Soon after the ravine drama, Mum went to see a gypsy palm reader at a fair near Blackheath. She wheeled my pushchair into the small caravan where this gypsy lady was sitting

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 9 08/10/2012 12:05

and paid her a couple of pounds for a reading. Mum can't remember much of what was said about her, except that she suddenly pointed to me, sitting in my buggy.

'That little boy is going to go on and do great things,' she said. 'He's going to make you very proud.'

Mum laughed. It's what every mum wants to hear about their child but it was a story I grew up knowing. Took me a while to believe it was possible, though.

Apparently I always had my own way of doing things. Church and religion didn't feature big in our house, but we always turned up for weddings and funerals. The very first time I visited church as a toddler, to see a family friend get hitched, we were all asked to rise and sing the hymn. Wide-eyed and desperate to join in, I started loudly singing the only song I knew and blessed the whole congregation with a fine rendition of 'Hokey Cokey'.

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 10 08/10/2012 12:05

CHAPTER 2

Chocolate Doings

One of my first memories is of me banging on Grandad's door upstairs. During the week, he was up before Nan, making a cup of tea, but at weekends, he'd have a lie-in. 'Hey now, Gregg,' he said. 'Come here and have a dip in the chocolate doings.'

Grandad, who loved kids, always had a big heavy tin filled with broken chocolate biscuits from the market (and if you were lucky sometimes Penguins) to dish out. He called all chocolate biscuits 'doings', whatever they were.

I'd put my arm up to my elbow in the jar to pick out a few chocolate digestives. Ah, the humble digestive, really not so humble in my opinion. So smooth on top and so satisfying for bite-mark effects.

With a cuppa, I liked to stack them up in a pile of four and wait until I'd drunk almost all my tea before I carefully angled the stack into the liquid. Sometimes I scraped off the edge of

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 11 08/10/2012 12:05

the biscuit in a straight line with my lower teeth or I tried to get the entire biscuit soaked without breaking it. Now that's an art, as you watch the golden-brown wheat darken with tea, but just the right shade, as otherwise it's too much and it falls into a sad mush. It can make biscuits last ages if you eat them this way.

Grandad didn't often have them but I loved choc-chip cookies too. Now they were a revelation, a real chap's biscuit. I didn't like any cream or goo in my biscuits, thank you. I loathed custard creams – stale, cardboard, synthetic-tasting things. And I'd pass on a Jammie Dodger. But I loved Wagon Wheels. Marshmallow, was it, inside? Or just sweet gunge? Who knew, but anything remotely crisp or crunchy that breaks into a bit of a chew is still right up my street.

That evening, I was back up there, squashed up next to Grandad's thigh as Nan hushed me quiet.

'High Why Five's on,' Grandad whispered, meaning *Hawaii Five-O*.

Our house was right in the heart of south-east London. It was pretty basic and we were poor. You don't realise you're poor as a kid; everyone seemed to be in the same boat. I don't want to lay this on too thick – there were a lot of families worse off than we were – but looking back without the benefit of a flat cap and a Yorkshire accent, we were poor.

Looking face on to our Edwardian three-bed terraced house, identical to all the others if you looked left or right, there was a low stone wall. The front door was to the left of a bay window, above which there was another one that matched it. There was a wrought-iron door knocker which you twisted to slide the latch across. In summer Mum put up some plastic strips so you could come in and out but neighbours couldn't see in. Across our road was the imposing Acorn estate. Its

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 12 08/10/2012 12:05

sprawling concrete metropolis always gave me the shivers a little, although Mum's best friend and my godmother, Margo, lived opposite it in another similar block, so I knew inside was nice. Her kitchen was deep orange and dark brown. Very modern. She seemed so much posher than us – she even had a bath in her house. Although everyone seemed posher than us, and to be fair they probably were.

Anything within a ten-minute walk was called 'around the corner' and our corner still had Second World War bomb sites. These were supposedly safely enclosed by fences and corrugated iron, but we boys were like rabbits, always finding a convenient hole or gap overlooked by the council. Running across the craters, shouting and playing with my mates, was fun, and it was even more fun when we spotted that the opening sequence of *The Sweeney* had been filmed on it. 'Round the corner' was also a house with a policeman standing outside it. Those were the days of the Krays' court cases and the whole neighbourhood was buzzing about them. This house with a copper on the doorstep belonged to some of the witnesses.

This was all before the age of The Supermarket, and Ted's corner shop mainly kept us all fed and watered. It was a magical place, full of shiny wrapped sweets for me and ready meals for Mum and our family. Its freezers were packed with Vesta meals, frozen pizzas, sausages, burgers and mince, just like the one in our house.

'Good morning, Gregg,' Ted would say, when I ran inside with a list from Mum.

'Good morning, Ted.' I would nod, in a way my four-year-old self had seen Grandad do.

Ted liked me. I was unusual, being one of the polite ones, and he'd point this out to the other kids.

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 13 08/10/2012 12:05

'If you asked as nicely as Gregg it'd go a long way,' he'd say to any other little people in the vicinity, passing me Mum's Silk Cut and Dad's No. 6 Player's cigs, which I was entrusted to pick up. Once, after carefully stowing the fags, I spied a can of Tango on his shelf. The last one!

'Ted, could you please pass me the Tango too? Thank you very much,' I said, grinning.

I ran all the way home. Unable to wait, I tore off the ring and filled my mouth with the painful but syrupy fizz.

'Mum, look!' I grinned, as she sparked up a fag. 'I had the last Tango in Ted's!'

She fell about laughing.

Step over the Wallace threshold, straight ahead was the stairs. Immediately to your left was Mum and Dad's bedroom-cum-living room, with fold-up sofa bed for night-time. Mum's side was full of Agatha Christies and Dad's sci-fi novels were next to a bucket.

'Don't miss the island!' Grandad would say if I ever needed to use it. Our toilet was in the garden. I'd like to slap the man who invented Izal medicated toilet paper. Have any of you ever, how do I say, sampled it? Actually I don't want the start of this book to be about my bottom, but I just want to point out we were hard up.

The door of the toilet was about a foot off the ground, so come wind, rain, hail or snow, your knees bore the brunt. I loved sitting in there pretending it was an elevator, plunging downwards to the centre of the earth. It had a corrugated roof and years later I'd learn I could climb out of Nan and Grandad's window upstairs and leap on to it, driving Mum mental with worry.

Then there was my bedroom. It was very small: just a bed, wardrobe, walls of the inevitable chipboard wallpaper, and

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 14 08/10/2012 12:05

buckets and buckets of plastic cast green toy soldiers. Grandad loved spoiling me and bought me loads of them.

One day Mum decorated my room by replacing the yellowing chipboard wallpaper with more slightly less yellowy chipboard wallpaper. Grandad, who worked all his life as a handyman, taught her how to unfurl the rolls, line them up and slosh the paste on. They got on well, Mum and Grandad. She always said, 'He's a lovely man,' and he was.

At least a few times a year I'd be woken at night by the feel of tiny little claws flitting across my face.

'Muuuuuum!' I would scream, leaping from my bed, shaking the covers, as mice scattered on to the carpet.

No. 22 had more of these little critters in it than your average haystack. However many traps Mum laid out, the buggers still thought they ruled the place, scurrying around, climbing into food cupboards and nibbling away at packets of rice and flour or Angel Delight. Mum used to give the push-along Hoover a kick before she used it, as once she found one squashed between the rollers.

Once, slap bang in the middle of the hallway, slap bang in the middle of the day, a dirty great big brown rat waltzed in as if he owned the joint. I'd just got up from the TV to get a glass of Coca-Cola from the kitchen when we both froze, boy to rat, beady eye to frightened one, before I opened my gob again and screamed for Mum. I'd never seen anything move so fast. That included my poor mum, who echoed my scream as she ran towards it with a broom like a woman possessed. She chased it off.

Now the cupboard under the stairs was the 'food tin' cupboard and was also teeming with mice. From floor to the ceiling it was rammed. When it came to tins in shops Nan and Grandad were magnets to iron filings, quick to spot a bargain

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 15 08/10/2012 12:05

to add to the pile. Tins were never from Ted's corner shop, though. 'It's so dear in there,' Nan would tut.

The cupboard became a veritable teetering tower of metal-encased apricots, peaches, beans, rice pudding, custard, corned beef, sardines, mince, carrots, peas, pease pudding … A safety net of food, as much part of our house as the furniture. 'Just in case,' said Nan, although 'just in case' of what, who knew? Another war? A nuclear explosion? Armageddon? Or, more likely, it was just a simple insurance policy for two old people who knew what it was like to be hungry. Really, really hungry. I only ever got snippets of what life had been like in the 1930s, but once Grandad told me he'd watched fights at the East India Docks between men so desperate for a day's work they'd have a punch-up rather than see their families starve.

Next to the food cupboard you had the electric and gas meter, also always hungry – for shilling coins. That would've messed a soufflé up, wouldn't it: the gas oven switching off halfway through? Although this of course was a good few years before anyone in Peckham knew what a soufflé was.

Mum often found herself plunged into darkness watching *The Forsyte Saga* or Richard Dimbleby (her favourite) of an evening. And if she'd run out of change she'd have to sit in the dark and wait till Dad got back from the pub with some money to pop in. Often Grandad would nip downstairs and drop another coin in and pad back upstairs without saying a word.

Out the back was the parlour, complete with a fire, an armchair and a second-hand dining table of sorts. Later on, Mum got her hands on a chest freezer, as the tiny one above the fridge was always chock-a-block with her standby meals. Then there was the galley kitchen, which led to the back door to the garden. Ikea kitchen units would've looked Space Age

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 16 08/10/2012 12:05

in our sort of place. Masquerading as cabinets were shelves with a sheet of plastic on a wire, which you moved backwards and forwards until it tore. The kitchen, on the little table, was where Mum and I ate.

On the whole, food in our house was something to be ripped from a packet, heated up and slapped on the plate. Poor Mum was run ragged at work and never had much time. She often ate later than me, so I'd bolt down my re-heated food so that I could go upstairs to see Grandad or outside to play.

I always had to sit nicely to eat, holding my knife and fork properly, even if it was to eat something from the discounted frozen section. Mum can knock up good dishes now but when I was little, food was fuel in our house.

One of her specialities was chicken and rabbit stew. Salty, wet and rich in gravy, it was something you could eat quickly with a spoon, careful not to burn your tongue.

'Are the soft bits the rabbit's ears?' I'd enquire, poking my spoon around.

I was actually scared rigid of rabbits – nasty hoppy things. Mum always bought them from a tiny shop on Towerbridge Road. The window was filled with dead grey furry things on hooks. It was a popular place and I was happy to see them in the window. But in real life forget it. I think it started when I watched a horror film on a Saturday night and saw a giant rabbit as one of the monsters. Then I saw a wildlife programme about how a mummy rabbit eats her babies if a predator discovers their nest. Talk about reverse survival instincts – made me shudder! It confirmed my idea of a rabbit as the demon pet. Rabbit stew was the one of the few dishes Mum cooked from scratch. Boiled bacon and pease pudding heated from a can was another good standby. Fray Bentos pies,

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 17 08/10/2012 12:05

instant mash and tinned veg were standard fare. Meat pies and meat puddings were other stalwarts, straight from the butcher to be heated up. While the meat pies' pastry was always flaccid, soggy but somehow tasty, the puddings glistened in their creamy cloak of beef suet. Mum's curries and her chilli con carnes were exactly the same – mince, chillies, no sauce and boiled rice – except the con carnes had tinned kidney beans chucked in. I pointed it out once and she just laughed her head off.

Once I went to a second-hand shop with Mum to get our 'new sofa suite'. It was a second-hand job, of course, frayed, and the cushions sank a little lower than expected every time you sat in them, but their black-with-orange-and-green funky zigzag design had us all marvelling over them for weeks.

One day Grandad came home with a squashy orange cushion taken from a skip for a grey sofa he had upstairs in his room, to 'bolster' his own. It looked ridiculous, but there was no place for vanity in this house.

We washed at the kitchen sink: a strip wash a few times a week, a lick and a promise the other days. As for proper bathing, I don't remember what we did – sorry, Mum. I know I hated soap on my face. Mum coming towards me with a soggy flannel and bit of carbolic felt like a form of psychological torture when I was little.

Across the beige patterned carpet, you could walk back up the stairs, to where Nan and Grandad lived in two rooms with a tiny kitchen.

The first thing I always spotted was Grandad's big round smiling face. He'd be sitting on his cushion, always welcoming me in.

Now I can't wait to tell you about him, so here we go. Sidney James Wallace was a bald, short, squat man, with an open

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 18 08/10/2012 12:05

moon face and a big wide smile to match his waist. He called his nose 'my Wallace hook'. He was deaf as a post but wouldn't wear a hearing aid, as he thought it made him look stupid. But Grandad was anything but stupid.

Every day he wore the same outfit: a pair of trousers right up to his chest, a wide belt, a shirt and heavy brogue shoes with little bits of metal on the sole at the heel and toe. He often wore a tie, but you'd never see much of that, or for that matter his shirt, as his trousers covered most of his torso. He'd wear braces and a thick leather belt. It seemed to be the norm for men his age; maybe they all lived in dread that their trousers would fall down. He'd no reason to be scared, though. He wore long johns all year round. In winter he wore a cloth cap and an overcoat with a fly front covering the buttons and which ended below the knee.

This was the uniform of every man over the age of thirty-five in our area. The men'd walk almost in unison, in long lines – hats on, coats buttoned, all in the same style but maybe in slightly different shades of black, grey or beige, faces down against the wind or rain, like Lowry figures, to go and see Millwall play.

As summer turned to autumn Grandad always said to Nan, 'Winter drawers on, Mum.' I never knew if this was an observation or instruction but it made her laugh. He cleaned his teeth with a piece of rag dipped in salt and he told me and Mum you shouldn't wash too much and 'do away with your natural oils'. He only washed once a week, on a Friday. He never smoked, or drank, or gambled. Suffering so much in the 1930s had seen to that: they were unnecessary luxuries. Grandad lived for his family, for me, for football. I'd watch him most mornings shaving at his tiny sink upstairs, singing silly songs which neither made sense nor probably ever

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 19 08/10/2012 12:05

existed, and looking at me out of the corner of his eye to see if I was giggling, which I usually was.

They almost worked; they almost had a tune.

> 'If you were the one
> Then you would be just yooooooou and meeeeeee
> We'd be the twoooooooo
> Forever yooooooooooou . . .'

There were variations on this theme but you get the picture.

He often said, 'Money speaks all languages, boy.' Something he knew not much about. As a man without a trade to his name his whole life, Grandad knew of real hardship. Although he worked at the Strand Palace Hotel (SPH) for twenty-odd years, it was pure chance he got the job in the first place. As a consequence he nagged his son, my dad, to 'find a trade' and was thrilled when he found an apprenticeship as an electrician.

Grandad's family were from Stornoway and moved down when he was a kid, looking for work. He'd had no formal education, my grandad. I don't know much of what he did before the hotel – just factory work of a sort. I don't know why he didn't go to war either; perhaps it was something to do with being deaf. He played his part, though, in the fire service, fighting fires, sometimes for three days at a time.

He was there when the Woolwich Arsenal went up in 1940, the site of munition factories. Grandad helped battle against the blaze. He told Mum how he spotted an orphanage nearby. 'I'd so badly wanted to go and pick up all those kids and put them in my pocket and take them home,' he remembered. 'They must've been petrified.'

Anyway pre-war London had very few jobs for men like him

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 20 08/10/2012 12:05

and Grandad'd heard of an interview for a general dogsbody, so he queued with all the other men, and there were plenty. This was 1930s, the Great Depression, and work was scarce.

As he shuffled along the queue, a man emerged with a loud voice.

'Sorry, fellahs, go home, time to go. Positions filled.'

Poor Grandad was in despair. He sank down on the steps and put his head in his hands. It was all he could do to stop himself from sobbing. He had a family to support.

Then another fella poked him in the ribs. 'No good sitting here, mate,' he said. 'You need to pull yourself together. Whatcha think you're doing?'

Sympathy in those times for working men was in short supply.

Grandad quickly got up, put his cap back on and brushed himself down. Always a proud man, he'd just forgotten himself for a minute.

'Yep, I'm gone,' he said.

'Where you heading?' the man asked.

'Peckham,' he said.

'Same here. Let's grab the tram together, eh?'

The two of them went off, and got chatting. Turned out this fella was the foreman for the SPH and he took a real shine to my grandad, who after a five-minute chat with anyone could charm the birds out of the trees.

As he jumped off at his stop this foreman yelled to him, 'Come back to the hotel tomorrow, Sidney.' He did and the foreman gave him his much wanted job.

Grandad spent the rest of his working life at SPH, only leaving briefly to help during the war as a fireman. Everything in our house had SPH written on it: bars of soap, coat hangers, bed sheets. Grandad was no villain, but he was a bit of a tea

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 21 08/10/2012 12:05

leaf, according to Mum. If he saw something nobody would miss he'd take it. 'It's just a bit of bunce. Goes with the job, innit,' he'd say with a wink.

Nan was a different kettle of fish. She'd worked in a factory before she got married and then like most women of her generation immediately gave up work. I don't know what she did. I do know her sister Daisy used to clean railway carriages for a living, but we rarely saw her. But Nan didn't see herself as much of a housewife either.

I mean, she did the cooking, but mainly out of tins, and she did the washing and ironing. But she expected Grandad to keep her company at all times. He took her shopping every Saturday. He took her to the launderette. He'd make her cups of tea and wash up afterwards. But he'd married her and a marriage was for life, however bad it got. And that, in Kincaid Road, was the mantra of our house.

life on a plate 234x153 rev.indd 22 08/10/2012 12:05