

Yes, It's Edible

I walk into the kitchen and hear my mom tell our guests, “Nan is from Scotland. Her family immigrated to the US when she was only three.” While, she doesn't have any trace of a brogue or anything, my grandmother's pride in her roots is fierce. She connects to her ancestry as often as possible, normally through cooking and dance. My mother was raised accordingly.

Mom scurries around the kitchen preparing her standard show-off breakfast, which she only does when she's trying to impress. By the looks of it, she's intent on making a good impression on my future in-laws.

Jason appears to have put last night's awkward introduction behind him and announces, “Everything smells so delicious, I can't wait to dig in.”

Natalie follows suit, “I'm positively famished.” I bet she's wishing she had a few of those pistachio nuts last night after all.

The first thing my mom puts on the table is a plate of shortbread. I look closely and realize she's purchased a new mold. Ethan reaches out to take one and asks, “Is that ET stamped on your cookies?”

Mom, or Maggie, or Mags as her friends call her, beams with pride. “It is! I've never seen a shortbread pan quite like it. I came upon it on eBay one day and I just had to add it to my collection.” Then she confides, “I paid fifty dollars for it, if you can believe it.” Which obviously, Ethan can't.

Natalie finishes up a bite in her mouth and declares, “That's the best shortbread I've ever eaten. What's your secret?”

I challenge my mother with my eyes that she is not to share her secret. She's positively chomping at the bit to do it, though. I shake my head in her direction. There are somethings better left a mystery; one of those things is pig lard.

Her mouth forms a half grimace, half smile as she answers, "Alas, I've vowed to never divulge it." Then with a twinkle in her eye, she adds, "But if you figure it out on your own, I promise to confirm your suspicions if they prove correct."

I exhale in relief. My family is not capable of duplicity as a rule, but this one is truly best kept under lock and key. She pulls her Scotch eggs out of the oven and puts them on the table, before retrieving another pan.

"Is that a loaf of rye bread?" Ethan's mom claps her hands and asks in delight.

I answer for my mom, "No, Natalie, that's a traditional Scottish meat dish." I know I should tell them more, but I'm hoping they'll just eat it without ever needing to know its name.

Jason's eyes brighten as he inhales mightily. "It smells wonderful! I can't wait to try it."

"Serve yourselves while the food is hot." My mom instructs. "The rest of the family ate earlier." I'm guessing that's probably true. She most likely fed them cold cereal before hiding them away. My parents are aware they're different. They know I've kept Ethan from meeting them because I don't know how to explain them. I'm not proud of that and I never wanted to hurt their feelings, but honestly, it's like they're from another planet. A planet where normal, well-thought-out behavior is not tolerated.

My mom cuts into the meat and scoops it on to everyone's plate for them. She announces, "We only serve this on special occasions."

Jason digs in, excitedly. He eats with gusto and praises, "My word, this is something special!" My mom basks in his approval.

Ethan also seems to be enjoying himself, so I make my excuses and head downstairs to check on Nan. I haven't seen her in months, and I want a few private moments alone with her to find out how she's doing.

As I descend the stairs, my nostrils are assailed by the skunky stench any high school student would recognize—marijuana. When I reach the bottom of the staircase, I look across the finished basement and discover Travis and Nan sitting on a sofa sparking up a doobie.

I cross over to them concerned. "Nan, tell me you're not letting my idiot brother corrupt you."

Travis rolls his eyes. "Dude, chill out. They've done some great research that shows pot reduces the symptoms of Tourette syndrome."

I smack the back of his head. "Travis, Nan doesn't have Tourette's. She has damage from strokes which apparently crossed a couple wires in her brain."

My brother blows a plume of smoke in my direction. "Neurological is neurological. If it helps with one, it'll probably help with the other."

I look around at the complete disarray of his living space—piles of clothes scattered about higgledy-piggledy, a garbage can overflowing with beer bottles, and dirty plates strewn about like the fraternity in Animal House. I sarcastically snap, "I'm sorry, all this time I thought you were sucking off our parents like a parasitic tick, but you've been going to medical school the whole time."

Nan exhales a cloud of MaryJane and yells, "Whore!" At my shocked expression, she clarifies, "Not you, dear. I was just thinking about that Dorcas Abernathy."

Nan regularly comments on thoughts running through her head that seem entirely random to anyone she's with. Also, Gramps dated Dorcas in high school and asked her to marry him at

graduation. Dorcas declined his offer and Nan has never gotten over being his second choice. Hence, Mrs. Abernathy is at the heart of a lot of my grandmother's complaints.

"Is the pot helping any, Nan?" I ask. I mean, heck, if it is, it's probably better to have a stoned grandmother than one who talks like sailor on shore leave.

Nan smiles as she inhales and holds the smoke in her lungs to work its magic before blowing it out and answering, "I would say it takes away about half of my outbursts. So, that's pretty good, right?"

"That *is* good," I reply. And if my brother weren't such a cretin, I'd probably apologize to him for doubting his mad skills in prescribing help for our grandmother. Just as I'm about to suggest Nan come upstairs and properly meet my future husband, I hear the afore mentioned yell out, "OH, MY GOD! Why didn't you tell me it was haggis?!"

And while ground sheep's innards are not for everyone, they truly are edible.

The Chieftain

After making sure Ethan doesn't throw up his breakfast, I once again reassure him, "Haggis is real food and you're not going to die because you consumed it. In fact"—I recite a favorite tidbit of my dad's— "it's full of vitamin A, D, C, B12, and loaded with minerals—magnesium, selenium, zinc, and copper—just to name a few."

He doesn't look sold and goes upstairs to rest, like his parents have already done. I head outside in search of my father. I know I'll find him in the barn out back. It's where he always goes for his alone time.

Once I asked him, "Why the barn?"

"Because I like the smell," he informed me. "It's so earthy and real. It makes me feel like I'm connected to my ancestral clan." There's no better thing on earth than the ancestral clan as far as Dougal Masterton is concerned. Disneyland wouldn't even be a close second.

I put on a pair of snow shoes sitting by the back door and make my way the hundred yards to his hideaway, which is a huge white structure that would probably fit our house twice over. My parents don't currently have much livestock to speak of. We had cows, goats, horses, sheep, chickens, and pigs while I was growing up, which provided a constant source of meat and

entertainment. But in the last several years, they've been getting rid of most of the animals since they no longer want the responsibility. They're down to six chickens and a donkey named Heather.

Dad has always bemoaned the fact that he wasn't raised in Scotland during the great Jacobite uprising of 1745. He's always felt he was born in the wrong time and has struggled to live in the modern world his whole life. He doesn't watch television, he rarely talks on the phone, and only drives a car because horses aren't practical everyday transportation. And he golfs, a lot.

When I finally spot him, I ask, "Aren't you cold out here, dressed like that?"

"Lass," he says as he stands up modeling his Masterton plaid kilt and bare knees, "Scots don't chill in their native attire."

He wears the plaid more often than he wears pants, although happily he didn't last night. Yes, that's correct. My dad wears his family kilt around town like it's the most normal thing in the world, and to him, it is. Asking him to stop would be akin to asking him to cut his legs off at the knees.

I indicate the old bagpipes next to him. "I see you've been polishing great-grandad's pipes. Any chance you've been practicing?" I ask hopefully.

"No time, I'm getting the boys ready for battle."

I look and see he's fastidiously dressing his assorted taxidermied field mice in the Masterton plaid. From the looks of it, they're fighting the French today. "Want to help?" he asks. *As if.* "No, I just came out to see how you're doing."

He puts down the mouse chieftain in his hand and comes over and wraps his arms around me. "I'm good, honey. How are you?"

I smile. There's nothing like the safe feeling I get wrapped in my father's embrace. My dad is a big hugger and he always makes sure we know how much he loves us by the copious number of them he gives us.

I shrug my shoulders in response. "Doing okay, I guess. Kind of nervous about everyone getting to know Ethan."

"Oh, come on, he's not so bad," he jokes. "A little boring maybe, but I'm sure we'll all like him just fine."

My dad knows I'm more worried about what Ethan will make of them, but he's so confident in his weirdness he easily teases me about it. He asks, "Has he had any conversations with Nan yet?"

I shake my head. "Not yet. She's downstairs getting high with Travis."

My dad tips his head back and forth. "Yeah, that's something new, but it seems to be helping, so we're supportive of her efforts." And why wouldn't they be? A stoned grandmother fits right into their definition of normal.

"What about my idiot brother? Why do you keep supporting him like you do? Don't you think it's time he gets a life and starts taking care of himself?"

"Actually, I do. Your brother has never had your innate confidence, and he seems determined to make his life as difficult as possible." He puts the chieftain down and picks up another mouse. "Your mom and I have talked recently, and we think it's time we kick him out of the nest and force him to take some responsibility for his life. We're giving him until the New Year and then we're going to tell him he needs to find work."

Wow. I did not see that coming. My parents have always seemed quite content to let Travis do his own thing and try to find his own path. They invested in his pipe dream to make his

own microbrew corn beer, thinking it was a good use of the five acres they still use after renting out the rest to a neighboring farmer. Of course, nothing came from it as Travis drank all the beer he ever made.

“Are you going to finally make him use his degree from clown college?” I ask. My parents paid for Travis to go to clown college when he decided it would be lucrative to be the only clown for rent in a hundred-mile radius.

My dad rolls his eyes heavenward. “God, no! That boy drastically overestimated people’s desire to pay money to a creepy man wearing big shoes and makeup to entertain their children at birthday parties.”

“Shirley Shyster was not a moniker that instilled confidence,” I agree. “He was such a normal little kid, too.”

Even though we were three years apart, I still remember a lot of fun times with my brother. While I currently find him as pleasant to be around as a nasty case of bronchitis, I still hold out hope he’ll grow up one day and become a productive member of society.

Time and again my mom and dad have stood by him, but thus far, nothing has gotten Travis off his butt, to ever stick with anything. He always quits before he can gain any momentum. I’m glad they’re finally going to give him the push he so obviously needs.

“So, what are your plans for today?” my dad inquires.

My eye is drawn to a mouse half the size of the others. I can’t for the life of me imagine how someone ever stuffed something so small. I answer, “I’m going to take Ethan and his parents over to Sarah’s farm and show off her growing empire. I know the farm stand is closed this time of year, but she says she keeps the gift shop open and sells herbs from the greenhouse. She’s going to make us lunch.”

He puts a pair of mouse spectacles on the rodent he's working on. "That sounds like fun. Just be back in time for dinner. We have a fantastic surprise for you tonight."