

THE QUARRY

Rebecca Dawborn

Strawberries in Africa

1. Mix together one cup of flour, three tablespoons of water and half a teaspoon of salt.

I didn't just fall in love, I fell in love in Africa. And not with a man, but with what really was the most extraordinary, homemade, oven baked, hand perfected, glossy, shiny, tasty strawberry pie.

2. Roll the pastry into a ball.

I'm not assertive, and I hate confrontation. But I am - without a doubt - market bipolar. Not to be mistaken for anything real, market bipolar is just my other persona. Market persona, she's a *bitch*. And when you're early morning walking, the last thing you want is a bag of cumquats, sugar cane or a dozen turtle pens, so I say *NO!*, turning abruptly and pursing my lips. I probably look like a codfish, somehow I think

it helps. It was in this way that I met Michael, who – with an armful of strawberries and bearing a sizeable grin with his impossibly white teeth - was the first to laugh at me. I held his gaze a little longer than was culturally appropriate, before turning around and storming off as best I could.

‘Where are you going? I can escort you,’ Michael said, following me closely, ‘this is my city, I am your guide.’

‘No thank you.’

‘Are you going to work perhaps? A strawberry for the road?’ He held one out. It looked delicious.

‘Not today.’

‘Miss, they’re juicy and sweet’ he said, and at this I stopped and faced him.

‘Don’t –’, I said, cod lips at the ready, before he interrupted me.

‘An everyday treat,’ he finished, all smiles.

3. Heat the oven to two-hundred-and-fifty degrees Celsius. Roll out the pastry.

Strawberries, big, red and freshly picked were cheap, and came in boxes and bowls and were handed to you through the car window whenever you stopped. It was the perfect and only time of year for them, warm in the day and cool in the nights. Perfection; in my opinion. Stopping, in general was something you tried to avoid. You’d have crowds instantly surrounding you, pressing hands and noses to the glass, just staring. Wide eyed, slack jawed men. If you dared open the window you’d have vegetables and animals pushed through, a back seat full of maize, in all its variations, quite possibly a goat and a bleating bunch of kids. And as you walked down the streets, you’d be offered these rich, red wonders by busty women in bright colours,

and male vendors of all generations. Their strong, muscly, working arms holding trays of them above their heads, and cradled in their arms. Their hands were working hands. Like Michael, they bargained with you daily.

Strawberries are the only fruits that have their seeds on the outside. Unlike their vendors, unlike Michael, they play an open hand.

4. Lay the pastry in the pie tin. Bake for ten minutes. Cool.

It was out of these strawberries, these beautiful, rich, fresh strawberries that my neighbour, another white and wonderful missionary like myself, made this most incredible pie. Or maybe it was a tart. Or a torte. A torte tart. I was never taught the difference, never taught the tart. Once, I was told I was a tart, and not the sweet kind. But this one was sweet, and the baker was kind.

Strawberries have the most incredible healing qualities, and the Ancient Romans believed them to be the perfect remedy for all sorts of ailments, from liver disease to fevers and infections. And the Ancient Romans bought us toga parties, so my theory is that strawberries – in whatever form - can't possibly be bad for you. Me in a toga these days, however, is an entirely different story. That's bad for everyone, an ailment to all.

When I was younger, we had a dog, but my neighbours had a garden. My dad always told us that it was one or the other, and I loved my dog. And the wood of the fence was wearing and old, a faded green with holes in places. Holes I used to look through, on tip-toes, watching the neighbour woman hang colourful strands of long, silky garments on her washing line. She was Indian and her house, and she, always smelt of spices. They grew all sorts of wonders in their garden, tomatoes that tundeled

over the top of the fence line, and lemon trees in bud with huge and thick-skinned fruits. They would bring us bags of them over the Summer. There were all sorts of flowers, and natives, hibiscus and frangipani and plants that looked like herbs and smelt like onions. And then right in the depths, in the foliage and most often under the rest, sat the little strawberry plants. Green and thin, with tiny little red fruits that went bad, or were eaten by pesky cockatoos, before you even noticed them.

Once, poking my little hands through the fence, I nabbed two. Pitiful things, and blackening at the edges. Almost prune-like, they sat in my hand. I ate one and it was sour, so I buried the other, beside my hermit crab grave, in the childish hopes that it would sprout, and grow something real and wonderful. Every day I would go out there, with a bucket of water and water, in the hopes that it would seep through the earth and beneath the soil, begin to grow a miracle.

‘They’re all together desirable,’ Michael had said, when I bumped into him another time, holding out the strawberries, but looking up at me.

5. Mash six cups of strawberries with one cup of sugar, two tablespoons of cornstarch and half a cup of water.

You could tell who had been in Malawi the longest by their ability to cook despite the cultural differences, and the interesting list of local ingredients, which often upon inspection, would contain all kinds of animal innards, and almost always MSG. But regardless, here we were, at a friend’s long and well deserved farewell evening, and in front of me sat the most incredible, beautiful, glossy perfect strawberry pie I had ever seen, and I was completely and utterly in awe of the thing.

‘Get into my belly!’ I demanded, and minutes later I sat extremely happy and in complete and utter want of more.

6. Heat the strawberry mixture in a saucepan till it boils.

I have a theory. That when I got my large toenail removed, (long story, has to do with fungus) I somehow lost my balance. Yes, like a tangible thing that I had and now misplaced, I had balance, I had poise and then I had an operation. Now, just an uneven surface jumps out at me like unexpected party poppers, causing me to fall.

At home, in sunny, surly Sydney this is never really a problem, except when in heels on a particularly frisky night out with the girls, where we drink *sex on the beach*, and *naked cowboys* to drown out the fact that our feet are red, swollen, blistering – and hurt like hell. We dine cocktails.

The low-land villages in Malawi on the other hand, are an entirely different story. Each little village section, as you meander down and down, trailing eleven children and following your non-English speaking guide, is joined by thin, rotting, ancient logs. The locals, with their bare feet and their practice navigate the ways with ease, often carrying bundles of goods, or sticks, or children on their heads and backs. Knowing that I’m crossing, they love, in fact, to gather around. I’m sure, making bets in their own language, about at which point I’m going to fall, what I will land on, and how long it will take me to right myself. The answer is usually *a very long time*.

My own guide, already on the other side looked over, as in front of me the log lay, ready to roll me off and plunge me into the depths below. Not overly far down, just a couple of meters, but a couple of meters and into the lake. The lake where people wash, bathe, and go to the bathroom. Where the pigs wander, ready to eat you,

and if not – just your poo. I call them the ‘poo pigs’. They disgust me. I stared at the log and I stared at the lake and I looked at the crowds. Kids giggled into their palms and the women, in a huddle, exchanged little glances. They think I am ridiculous. *Well now I have to do it, I thought to myself, if for no other purpose then to simply prove them wrong.*

‘There is a way around,’ I heard from behind me, turning to see Michael, all smiles. I rolled my eyes.

‘It’s you,’ I said, averting my eyes to the log again. In ‘his way’, he was carrying a box of strawberries.

‘My name is Michael, what is yours?’ His English was perfect, which was strange for a village man.

‘Not today’ I said, taking that moment to step out in faith, placing one foot in front of the other and making it, almost the whole way along before a flying something distracted me and tripping over nothing, I managed to not just slip or fall, but launch myself over the edge, face first, hurling my backpack into the lake. My arms hurt, I was soaked through, the kids were in hysterics, the pigs were closing in and Michael looked right down at me, holding out his hand.

‘Did you know,’ he’d tell me later, pointing out a chameleon and handing me a strawberry free of charge, ‘that in my culture, this is like giving you a rose?’

I googled it later, they’re in the same family.

7. Once cool, spread the strawberry mixture over the pie crust.

The thing about HIV medication is that often times, it keeps you alive at the cost of causing you a hundred thousand other ills. The side effects are as aggressive as

the virus itself, and can range from burning legs to skin disease, lesions, headaches, insomnia, numbness, pustules, lumps and heart palpitations. This is why, unlike my midnight dreams of glitter shoes and dancing, they take a myriad of pills and call it a cocktail. You take a pill for the virus, and another to counteract the effects of the pill, and the cycle thus continues, and you can't stop in the fear of resistance. And you can't stop, and it can't stop it. Not really. *Whether now or eventually*, one old man once told me, *people with HIV, they will always die of AIDS*. He died of AIDS. And we bring such pills to our patients on our home visits, and it was on such an occasion that I met Michael once again.

I almost turned right back around, as I ducked my head under the concrete slab and walked into his house, seeing him there on the floor, a huge smile on his face, clinically thinner, amidst a pile of maize husks.

'You really need to stop following me,' he said, 'it's borderline suspicious.' As I observed, the nurse asked him questions.

'I have something for you,' he said, ignoring her, pulling a double strawberry from the basket by his side. 'If we share this,' he continued, 'you'll absolutely fall in love with me.'

'Not today, thank you,' I said, picking up my stethoscope and leaving out the door.

8. Refrigerate until set.

In Australia, I used to speak in high schools. Standing before a couple of hundred teenagers, as they passed notes between one another, judged me, and in

question time accused me of *forcing my views upon them*. To ‘get down to their level’ I would play the Black Eyed Peas, wear Cotton On and talk about ninjas.

If your body is a martial arts school, then your immune system is like your disease fighting ninjas, I would say. *HIV slowly kills your ninjas, leaving the school what?* And I would hope for the answer, ‘*open to attack*’.

I would leave, and forever be in their minds, ‘that religious girl who said something about ninjas, shouldn’t wear a tube top and sweat quite a bunch’. All of which were true. What I failed to mention was the herpes. The weight loss, mouth cancers, brains tumors, the slowing of speech, the weakness of the limbs, the migraines, fever, vomiting, nausea, dizziness, leprosy, severe scabies, body aches and ulcers that the loss of these *ninjas* results in. That the human immunodeficiency virus hijacks lymphocytes, and like a honeymoon nest; multiplies within them. Leaving the very old and the very young – a void working, parenting, contributing generation, destroying not only T-cells and individuals, but families, villagers, communities, generations and entire nations, like Malawi. A fact that takes on a different face when it is just that, a face. A mother and child, a man in a suit, a mini bus driver, a father, an uncle, a teacher, a student, a barefoot grandma, the sweet newborn. The laughing, the driving, the serving you at the counter, the smiling, the begging, the crossing the street. Michael.

I’d never mention that being ‘open to attack’ left your heart completely vulnerable, and in each and every way just that; open to attack.

9. Share.

This strawberry pie, in all its glory, both on the plate and in my stomach really was a huge blessing and completely unparalleled. It beat my daily ritual of sausage substitute and fresh lettuce by the handful, as I tried to be healthy and support both *fruit* and *vegetable* ladies, when they came to my front door.

And it was over this pie that I was quickly pulled aside.

‘Hailey, did you hear that Michael went home?’ There was a moments pause, as she placed her hand on my shoulder, ‘to be with his family,’ she added, trying to gauge my level of comprehension.

Strawberries are good for you, filled with all sorts of nutrients and healing beneficiaries. They must be picked by hand, and each one has over 200 seeds. They are beautiful, rich, healing, but all together fragile, and their season is too short.

‘Hailey,’ she said, ‘he’s gone *home*’.

I wept bitterly, by myself and in the kitchen. My grandmother told me once that she listened to the human heart through only one means, tears when you’re alone. There’s too much pressure, when others are around, to be first too dramatic in want of sympathy and attention, or rather, to be silent and still and tough and hard and strong. But when alone, with nobody to impress, and nobody to care, tears are deep and powerful codes; the embodiment of something deeper. Richer. Sweeter. Like a homemade, oven baked, hand perfected, glossy, shiny, tasty strawberry pie.