

Before the Rest of It All, There Was a Café

A Butler's Dining Rooms memory

Before the rest of it all, there was a café.

Before the books, before the cancer, before children of my own, before any of the things I would one day try to make sense of on a page, there was Butler's Dining Rooms on Brook Hill in Sheffield.

A proper greasy spoon. Not the artisan kind with a handwritten chalkboard, but the full, magnificent, vanishing kind: famous for pies, famous for portions, famous for making every person who walked through the door feel as though they had come home. Truckers and construction workers and students from the university up the road sat at the same tables without anyone finding that strange, because the woman running the place made sure everyone felt equally welcome and equally full.

That woman was my grandmother. Edna Butler. And she was, without competition or qualification, the most loving person I have ever known.

I spent significant parts of my early childhood at that café. My bedroom, when I stayed, was on the top floor of the building: a place that seemed enormous to a small child, with its basement kitchen, its dedicated laundry, its multiple dining rooms, and its sense of being a world unto itself.

The smells changed with the day. Morning was bacon and rendered grease. Midday was laundry detergent drifting up from below. Evening was pie crust, mushy peas, Henderson's Relish and, beneath all of it, constant and permanent, the smell of two people who enjoyed a good cigar.

My grandparents both did. The smoke settled into everything: the curtains, the walls, the woodwork, the air itself. It should have been unpleasant. It was the opposite. To this day, catch me downwind of a good cigar and I am four years old again, on a counter in Sheffield, and everything is exactly as it should be.

The café Sheffield remembers

Years later, I found other people writing about Butler's as if they had discovered it.

I like that they did. I like that the place escaped us, getting into journalists and food writers and people who came in for lunch and left carrying a story.

Martin Dawes wrote about the Cow Pie. The proper Cow Pie. The great steaming thing in a tin the size of a baby's bath, its pastry golden and domed, its arrival announced by windows clouding over with heat. He wrote about Butler's as one of Sheffield's lost eating places, one of those institutions people kept alive by remembering what they had eaten there.

That mattered. I did not need him to prove Butler's existed. I had climbed into its machinery, slept at the top of it, stolen dog treats in the house above it and ridden in the dumb waiter instead of plates.

That is a strange thing to realise about a childhood place. You think it belongs to you because you know the stairs, the smells and the private names. Then you grow up and find out the city had a version of it too.

Their Butler's had Picasso. Mine had Giuseppe.

Picasso did eat there. That part is important. I do not want to soften it into maybe just because the napkin wandered off into legend. Picasso came to Sheffield, and Butler's became part of that story. He

sat there. He ate there. For a moment, the great outside world came into a Sheffield café and had to deal with the same steam, plates, gravy, noise and pie as everyone else.

He drew a dove on a napkin that day too — that part is fact, not the story it became. What happened to it afterwards is another matter. Did he sign it? Did someone keep it? Did it go missing? Was it folded into a drawer, passed to someone political, hidden, stolen, lost, exaggerated, remembered wrong? I do not know.

In a way, I do not want to know. A found napkin would become an object: measured, authenticated, insured and taken out of Butler's. A missing napkin can stay where it belongs: in the steam, in the telling, in the gap between what happened and what people needed to believe happened.

Behind the counter

There were really two Butler's.

There was the Butler's people ate in: the one with the Cow Pie and the steamed windows. The one where workers, hospital staff, students, drivers, nurses and old regulars came in hungry and left heavier. The one where Picasso ate lunch.

Then there was the Butler's behind Butler's. That was mine.

Behind the counter, in the right-hand corner of the main dining room, the real machinery of the building began. There were about four steps up into the kitchen and corridor area. Turn left and stone stairs took you down to the basement. Wooden stairs took you up to another dining room and the house above. There was also a room off to the back as you went into the corridor: the posh dining room, or the overflow, depending on what was needed.

That layout is still in my head like a child's map, made of smells and warnings and places I was allowed to go and places I went anyway. The café customers knew was only the face of it. Behind it were corridors, stairs, rooms, work, heat, damp, noise and secrets.

Grandad was Steve Butler to other people. To me he was Grandad, and he called me Giuseppe. Not Joe. Not Joseph. Giuseppe. I do not know where that came from. Maybe I asked once. Maybe I never did. Some names arrive in families without explanation and stay because they feel right.

Grandma called me Joe, or sweet, or little one. She was the warmth inside the place. If Grandad was the heavy door, the command, the old Sheffield force of it, Grandma was the light behind him: food, washing, people, rooms, timing, mess and worry all moving around her while she just got on with it.

The house upstairs smelled of cigar smoke and her perfume. Cigar smoke has a way of taking over a place, but her perfume moved through it. Not beating it. Not erasing it. Just there with it. Smoke and perfume. Grandad and Grandma. Hardness and softness. Butler's was full of pairings like that.

A boy instead of plates

The café had a dumb waiter: a wooden platform on a pulley system running from the basement kitchen up to the front, designed to carry food from where it was made to where it was served. Empty plates went back down, though from what I remember there was rarely much food left on them. Butler's did not send much back uneaten. People came hungry and left finished.

Sometimes, in the middle of service, Grandma would open the hatch expecting dinner and find me instead.

I would be sitting on the wooden board. Grinning.

Somehow, in all that heat and work and noise, I had folded myself into the machinery of the café and sent myself up like an offering. Grandma would open it expecting plates, or food, or something useful, and there I would be.

She laughed.

I choose to believe she laughed every time.

There is a kind of childhood triumph in making an adult break from what they are doing, especially an adult like Grandma, who was always keeping the place running. For a second, I interrupted Butler's: ridiculous enough to be loved.

The café had sent her a boy instead of plates.

The top room

My bedroom was at the highest point of the building, or at least that is how I remember it. It took another flight of old wooden stairs to reach it from the main house above the café. I slept above everything: above the dining room, above the kitchen, above the counter, above the plates, above the stories. Like the café had stacked its lives on top of each other and put me at the very top.

The room was huge to me. Maybe an adult would walk into it now and find corners where I remembered continents. But childhood stretches rooms, deepens shadows, lengthens corridors and turns stairs into pilgrimages.

The proper toilet was across the courtyard from the kitchen, an old-school outhouse that seemed designed by someone with a grudge against comfort. To reach it, you had to leave the warmth. That was the first insult. One minute you were in the kitchen, with its heat and smell and noise, and the next you were crossing open air, the cold getting up your sleeves and into your bones.

In winter it froze — not dramatically, not poetically, just practically, while people still had to use it.

But Grandma found a way to soften that for me. She put a camping-style chemical toilet just outside my room, at the top of the stairs, on the little landing. Only for me.

That detail still gets me. A toilet on a landing is not the sort of thing that sounds beautiful until you understand what it meant. It meant she had thought of me. It meant she had imagined me waking in the night, small and cold, and decided I should not have to cross the yard like everyone else.

That was Grandma's kind of love. Not speeches. Solutions. Food. Warmth. A toilet where there had not been one.

Children in the machinery

Laura and I knew that building better than customers ever could.

Laura was Andy's daughter. Andy worked under my grandad and was treated like family: his adopted son, not by paperwork, but by something older and probably more binding. That meant Laura was family too, in the way Butler's made family out of proximity, loyalty, labour and time. Laura and I were the same age. We spent years together there.

The café was our playground, though it was never only a playground. It was too alive for that: adults, work, hot surfaces, sharp corners, heavy objects and stories we only half understood. But children do not need permission to make kingdoms.

It ran the full height of the building, walled off and forgotten, as though someone had sealed away an older spine of Butler's and left it waiting for us. To adults, it might have been an old access route. To us, it was ancient. It felt as if the building had trusted us with something.

At the time, it was adventure. Years later, it became proof that buildings have hidden ways through them. Something can be blocked off and still exist.

The mixing bowl was another world. It was metal, attached to a giant stand mixer, with an arm that reached down into it. It should have been just kitchen equipment, but to me it was a hiding place. A cave. A boat. A trap. During hide and seek, I would climb into it and fold myself down inside the cold curve, listening to people moving around me.

There is a special kind of triumph in being small enough to hide inside the machinery of a café. There is also a special kind of shame in realising you cannot get back out.

The bowl that hid me also held me prisoner. Eventually I would have to call out. Someone would come. I would be lifted out, discovered not because they had found me, but because I had betrayed myself by needing help.

The basement was another country. Damp stone, stored things, dust, old cardboard, old work. Adults went there for practical reasons. Children went there for adventure. Grandad hoarded Stimorol down there. I do not know why. Grandads have habits beyond explanation. Some men collect tools. Some keep screws in jars. My grandad kept chewing gum like treasure.

I stole it whenever I could. The gum was hard at first, then sharp, then sweet, then gone too quickly. It tasted like getting away with something.

The house above had its own temptations. Just after you came through the door on the stairs, outside the bathroom, there was a cabinet. On it were what I thought were little chocolate buttons in a tube. I would pop the plastic lid off, steal as many as I could hold, then run off and hide to eat them.

I used to wonder why they never melted.

It turns out they were not chocolate. They were Scamps. Dog treats. Scamps was the little Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, and I had been stealing the dog's treats and eating them like sweets.

That memory makes perfect sense only in childhood. Of course I thought they were chocolate. Of course I stole them. Of course I kept eating them even though they did not behave like chocolate in any normal way.

The harder stories

I was born in 1985, so the Ripper years were before me. That matters. I was not there for the fear when it was happening. I did not see the women come in from the street. I did not hear the warnings as news. I inherited that part.

Family history comes to you in fragments. Half-sentences. Lowered voices. Something said in the kitchen and then stopped because a child has walked in.

The story, as I understand it, is that while the Ripper was operating, my grandad fed working girls to get them off the street. He gave them food. He gave them somewhere to sit. He brought them inside, or let them know they could come inside, while the world outside was dangerous and judgemental and cold.

There is no plaque for that. No napkin in a museum. No neat photograph of him holding open the door. But I know enough of him, and enough of that building, to believe in the shape of it.

People like to make simple shapes out of the dead. Saints or villains. Heroes or monsters. Grandad was not simple. He could be kind, hard, funny, frightening. He could feed strangers and still fail his own family. He could open a door to women in danger and still misread a child standing in front of him.

The stone stairs carried that story.

My dad, David, was once knocked down them by my grandad for talking back. That is the sort of story that can become almost comic in families if you tell it with the right timing and enough distance. Boy mouths off. Father reacts. Down the stairs he goes.

But the real version is sadder. For once, my dad was not being a smart arse. He was blind, or close enough to it, and he could not see the clock. What my grandad read as attitude was actually a child unable to do what he was being asked to do.

I think about that a lot, not because I want to make Grandad into a villain, but because it would be too easy. The same man who fed women to get them off the street could hurt his own son in a moment of anger. People are rarely only one thing.

So was Butler's. It was never clean enough to be a fairy tale. That is why I trust it.

The map of Britain was pinned between the main dining room and the laundry area. I remember it because part of Wales was missing. Burned off. Someone had taken a cigar and stubbed it into the paper, letting a piece of the country melt away.

There is no reason that should have stayed with me as strongly as it has. But it has. A burned-off piece of Wales on a wall in a Sheffield café: pointless, funny, violent, damaged by boredom or arrogance or mischief. The map remained, with its wound visible, as if Butler's had decided even the walls did not need to pretend everything was intact.

Everyone wanted the dove because the dove made the café famous. But the burned map feels more like us. Funny. Damaged. Unexplained. A little brutal. Somehow still there.

What it left in me

The café's famous food mattered, of course. It had to. Food was the whole language of the place. Pie, bread, bacon, tea, gravy, grease, crust, oil, heat. It was food with a job to do. Food that sat inside you and helped you carry on.

That was Butler's at its best. It fed people.

Workers. Hospital staff. Students. Drivers. Nurses. People with money. People counting coins. People who came in every week. People who came in once and remembered it for the rest of their lives. People who needed breakfast. People who needed warmth. People who needed to be somewhere that did not ask too many questions.

And, according to the story I inherited, women from the street during a time when the street was dangerous in ways most people preferred not to understand.

I keep coming back to that because it feels like the heart of it: the rough compassion of a place that did not call itself kind, but put a plate down and said eat.

Maybe that is what I inherited most from Butler's: a belief that people need feeding before they need judging.

After they left Butler's, she and Grandad eventually moved to Barnsley to be closer to me. That is how love often looked in our family. Movement. Proximity. Turning love into logistics.

She died there, at home, some years before him in 1996. Heart failure. That phrase still feels too small. As if her heart failed, when really it had done more than most hearts are ever asked to do.

Grandad died later, in hospital, of cancer. Around 2003, I think. Cancer is another word that changes the temperature of a room.

When it came for him, it made him smaller. That is one of the cruellest things illness does. Grandad had been part of the structure of things: a man like a counter, a doorway, a command. Then suddenly he was in a bed, under hospital light.

Years later, cancer came for me too. I do not want to make that too neat. Life is not that neat. Cancer is not a literary device, even when writers get hold of it. It does not arrive to complete a circle. It arrives to break things.

But when I was dismantled, Butler's was still in me. Not as nostalgia, because the old days were not always good. They were cold toilets, stone stairs, burned maps, hard men, misunderstandings, smoke, grief and work.

But they were also warmth: Grandma's perfume upstairs, Grandad calling me Giuseppe, Laura and me finding the hidden staircase, stolen Stimorol, stolen dog treats, bread in the morning, pie crust, laundry in the middle of the day, and Grandma laughing when the dumb waiter delivered me instead of food.

Maybe that is the part that matters most. No one survives alone, no matter how heroic they sound afterwards. I did not get out of the mixing bowl by myself. I did not get through cancer by myself either.

When I picture Butler's now, I do not see it from outside. I see it from within. I stand near the counter in my memory and know where everything goes: the four steps, the corridor, the stone stairs down, the wooden stairs up, the house smelling of cigar smoke and perfume, the basement with gum, the cabinet with dog treats pretending to be chocolate, the courtyard toilet waiting in winter.

I know Laura is nearby. I know Grandma is getting on with what needs doing. I know Grandad is somewhere in the room, difficult and loved. I know my dad, David, is there too, young and misunderstood on the stone stairs. I know Andy is part of it, family by the older rules of work and loyalty and being taken in.

I know the women from before my time are there in the story, coming in from the street because someone has opened a door. I know Picasso is there too. He can have a table. He is not the centre anymore.

The napkin was never the proof Butler's mattered. The proof was the feeding. The proof was the people. The proof was that decades later, after the café had gone and my grandparents had died, I could still close my eyes and find my way through it.

I could still see Wales burned off the map. I could still feel the rim of the mixing bowl under my hands.

Not all of me. Not cleanly. Not gently. It built me with smoke and pie crust, family loyalty and family damage, freezing toilets and secret stairs, a grandmother's perfume and a grandfather's temper, humour, hunger, work, and the belief that when someone comes in cold, you feed them.

That is what I want to honour: not a perfect place, not perfect people, but a real place and real people. A café full of stories, some true, some half true, some improved by repetition, some softened because the original still hurt.

A way through. A way up. A way back.

And somewhere above it all, if the story wants its dove, it can have one. Not clean and white on a missing napkin. A Sheffield dove, made of steam on the windows, cigar smoke, laundry heat, Edna's perfume, Steve's hands, stolen chewing gum, burned paper, winter breath, gravy, dog treats, and the stubborn old kindness of a door that opened when the street outside was cold.

If you look closely, I think it is still rising.

“Before Any of the Rest of It, There Was a Café” grew from the memories of Butler’s Dining Rooms on Brook Hill in Sheffield — the café run by my family, and one of the places that sits underneath much of what I write about family, memory and where we come from. This piece also forms part of the wider story behind Dismantled.

Read more at joebutlerauthor.co.uk

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