

Crumble

For the filling: 1lb apples, 2oz brown sugar, 1 tbsp plain flour, 1 pinch of ground cinnamon. In the warm supermarket, I hold my breath through the fresh produce section. I'll get the apples last so I have to smell them for the least amount of time.

My dad used to play with my name - 'Little Eva', 'The Best Eva', 'For Eva in Blue Jeans', 'Love you for Eva'. He would come home from work and sit with his elbows on his knees and say "Come here my best Eva and tell me all about it". And I'd go and tell him that day's stories, making sure he had the right background, so he knew how Susan Mitchell had been so mean to Nicola Priestly all break so, if Nicola left Susan out of French skipping at lunchtime, that was fair and it was no use her going crying to Mrs Farrow.

And he would listen and sometimes I'd lean back with my feet between his, and he'd hold my hands, letting his arms go in and out so I would go backwards and forwards while I was talking. My mother would be at the stove, lifting lids and turning knobs and crouching down to put things into the oven and to take things out. The kitchen windows would steam up and the plates would rattle on the side and then she'd say "Eva take these through, please" and I would take the knives and forks and spoons and put them on the dining room table. Gary would come out of his bedroom and we would sit round. My mother would dish up for everyone and I would try and eat as slowly as I could to make it last longer, even though I was so hungry. If I looked at the half full dish of stew or macaroni cheese or shepherd's pie in the middle of the table after my plate was empty, she'd raise her eyebrows at me and say, "it takes twenty minutes for your brain to tell your stomach it's full. You don't want to turn into a little piggy" and she'd be on her way to the kitchen with the dish and she'd say back over her shoulder "you can have something cold later if you're still hungry", but she and I both knew that wasn't going to happen.

For the crumble: 10½oz plain flour, sieved pinch of salt, 6oz brown sugar, 7oz unsalted butter. So I'm starting in the dairy section for the butter and then to the baking aisle for the sugar because I don't have either at home. And I look into my basket and the handle is digging into my sharp arm even though there are only two things in it. My mother always said "two can live as cheaply as one" but I wouldn't know much about that.

When I'd had supper I would go and have my bath. I'd lie down as flat as I could so just my face was out and I could feel the bubbles bouncing against my cheeks. I remember when I could only touch the ends of the bath by putting my arms up above my head, and then when my head nearly touched by itself if I stretched my toes as far as I could. I would see them sticking out of the water by the taps and the ups and downs of my body in between. The parts out of the water were shiny and round, then. And I started to wonder if, maybe, my boobs were beginning because my nipples were getting pointy, but my mother said, "don't be silly, that's just fat". In the hot water, my skin would get red patterns and my fingers would go wrinkly and I would wonder if that's why Grandma Reid's neck and hands looked like they did, because she had been in her bath too long, too many times. I would lie on her pink bedspread and watch as she turned one way and then the other in front of her 'glass', smoothing her dress over her hips and pushing the skin underneath her chin back with her hand like she was going to choke herself. She would say to me "Eva, you have to suffer to be beautiful" and I would wonder what would happen to me, then, when I got bigger.

I pick up the apples, already bagged so I needn't touch them or smell them and I stand in the queue behind a tall young man in a T-shirt and I can see his smooth arms. I remember another man a little like him. I look over the head of the check-out girl and see the soft square corners of his lovely shoulders against the streetlight coming in the window of my flat, and he stops and puts his forehead against mine and says kindly, "I'm scared I'm going to break you" and I just hold his face in my hands and shake my head, although he can't see me in the dark, which is probably just as well.

After my bath, it was bedtime. Dad would already be in front of the television and I'd stand next to his big chair and he'd say "Sleep tight my Little Eva" and kiss me on my forehead without getting up and I could hear the audience laughing as I went up the stairs. Sometimes when she came into my room to put the clean clothes away, my mother'd say things like "I don't think you should have told Susan what Nicola said at the swings" or "don't just play with Nicola because she gave you that comic. You shouldn't like people for what they do for you." And I would say "OK", even though I wanted to explain that she'd missed some parts of the story. I could see her looking at her reflection in the windows before she closed the curtains. Sometimes, when she thought my eyes were closed, she'd go through my bag looking for chocolate wrappers and crisp packets but I knew better than that.

Then she would put the light out and I'd feel the ache start in my stomach where the sudden supper food had hit it, just a tiny feeling. I'd lie curled round myself, asking the darkness to let it go away but I knew, as soon as I felt that little beginning of an ache, that it was going to come and all I could do was rock and breath and wait for the waves of cramp to get worse, then better and eventually go away enough for me to sleep.

The next morning my dad would be up so early I would only half hear him downstairs. I could tell he was trying to be quiet as he moved backwards and forwards in the kitchen, which was underneath my bedroom. There were the sounds of him going to the fridge and putting his plate and knife on the draining board. I would hear the front door close and then nothing. My mother would still be in bed and sometimes I could hear the radio and my stomach would rumble and my heart would sink and I'd put the pillow over my face.

I'd get dressed and go down. She would be at the table with the apples peeled and cut into bits in front of her. I wouldn't sit and eat, but pick up the pieces and walk around with them, chewing and getting my stuff and neither of us would really look at the other one. And I would put my lunchbox in my bag and feel the two apples rolling inside – sometimes there were three if they

were small - fuzzy green balls under the frosty clear of the lid. And later, at break and lunchtime, kids would say “why do you only bring apples?” and I would shrug and carry on eating until not even the cores were left so I could forget that’s all I’d been given. And later, a teacher would say “Eva, concentrate!” and I would lean over and put my head on the desk, and then sit up with the classroom spinning and say “I’m all right, ma’am” and she’d say “I didn’t ask you how you were”.

Peel, core and slice the apples and place them in a large bowl. Sprinkle over the sugar, flour and cinnamon. Stir well, but don’t break up the fruit.

I try not to touch the wet flesh of the fruit as I peel. I breathe through my mouth, leaning my forehead against the cool wood of the cupboard.

Afterwards I use the washing up brush and scrub my hands with Dettol.

Sometimes we had apple crumble for pudding. And my mother would say ‘Eva?’ and I would say, “not for me thank you” and feel like I was nearly crying. And Dad would frown and say “Really Eva? It’s delicious and you’re a growing girl”. And I would shake my head and say, “really Dad, I’m full up to here”. And my mother would say, “If she doesn’t want any, Derek, don’t force her. That’s when problems start.” And she would give a full bowl to Gary and he would finish it before Dad had even got half way through his and he’d say “can I have some more, Mum?” and she would put down her spoon that she was hardly using anyway, and take his bowl and fill it up nearly as much again and I would wonder what happened to the ‘twenty minutes for your brain to tell your stomach’. And Dad would say “maybe she could have some cold later” and my mother would nod. And though I got black spots in front of my eyes in gym, I couldn’t have eaten a mouthful. And sometimes I wondered if Dad would notice and sometimes I nearly told him, but then I thought he might be angry with her about it and he might go away, and it would be my fault because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. So I just carried on, but he went anyway.

Taking a few cubes of butter at a time, rub into the flour mixture. Keep rubbing until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs. And I hold my breath, now, so I can't smell the apples. Did my mother hold her breath, too, while she cooked, turning the knobs and putting things in and taking things out of the oven, Grandma Reid's words in her ears? I spoon the fruit into the bottom of the bowl then sprinkle the crumble mixture on top. Bake in the oven for 40 minutes until the crumble is browned and the fruit mixture bubbling. Serve.

I'm on her doorstep. It's cold but I don't ring the bell straight away. Through my gloves I can feel the dish still warm. I hold it against me so I can free one hand to push the white button with the little light behind it. The chime sounds somewhere in the small, new house. Through the frosted glass, I can see her blurred shape moving towards me. She opens the door and, even though I never grew much, now she looks up at me, her shoulders hunched. For the first second, there is not one trace of recognition in her eyes but then she comes back into focus. I say, "Hello Mum", and lean down to kiss her dry cheek "I brought you an apple crumble." She sees what I'm holding, pulls back her chin and shakes her head, "That's nice of you, but I'm watching my figure" and she smooths the loose fabric of her dress over her hips. She says, "Come in" and turns away and, as I follow her inside, I say, "Don't worry, then. We can have it cold later".