

Home Sweet Home

This was not how I'd imagined it to be. So much for happy families!

Believe me, I didn't expect it to be easy; setting up a new home with a new husband and a teenage step-daughter. But this was only day one and already I'd fallen at the first hurdle.

Today we moved into our brand new home; me and Joe and his sixteen year old daughter Georgina. It still smells of paint and is full of energy saving devices - apparently it's very important to Georgie that we try to save the planet. It's cold and I fiddle with the controls on the state-of-the-art eco-friendly boiler but I can't make them out.

Joe will be back in a while. He's taking his brother home who's very kindly been helping us lug furniture into place all day. And if I don't sort myself out soon, he'll come home to a freezing cold house, full of unopened boxes and with no food on the table.

Food - and my mention of it - that's when it all started to go wrong. I sit at the kitchen table; the room is cold and bare, gloomy with no curtains yet at the black windows. How on earth would I explain to Joe that I'd already upset his daughter causing her to storm off to goodness knows where? I try to console myself with the knowledge that Georgina knows this part of town like the back of her hand. She'll probably be in the warmth of some friend's house by now – eating something comforting, gobbling it down as if she's starving and hasn't eaten for weeks, the way kids do at other people's houses. And then she'll just breeze in through the front door as though nothing has happened.

Actually, perhaps that's a bit harsh; really Georgina is great. She works hard at school, does her homework with no fuss and loves her dad to bits. She's an only child; an adored daughter and I worried at the beginning how I would fit into their little world.

I met Joe at the Christmas food market in Bramfield – they hold it every weekend from November and I've been going for years. I run a little catering business from home - nothing too ambitious. I've found a niche in the market for people who mostly want to do

their own catering but just need a little bit of help; special birthdays or anniversary parties, christenings, and of course at this time of year when families get together. All except for mine at this moment in time!

I love the Bramfield Christmas market. It's a great place to pick up festive treats; old favourites like decorated gingerbread men and new ones like Christmas pudding muffins. Joe saw me buy a dozen of them last year.

"I'm going to take that as a recommendation," he said. "They must be good. I'll take two please," he said to the stallholder.

"Only two!" I replied cheekily. "Two won't be enough."

"Ah, they're just for me and my daughter," said Joe, looking a little embarrassed as if he didn't really know why he'd said that.

I, in turn, didn't know what to say and so I just smiled, noticing his kind, caring face and warm smile with just a hint of sadness behind his eyes.

"Well, I'm sure you'll both enjoy them and you can always come back and get some more."

Joe smiled and we just stood there for a while, not wanting to leave but unable to think of anything else to say. Joe broke the silence first, grinning at his cheesy remark. "So, do you come here often?"

"Yes, actually, I do," I said eagerly.

"Would you, by chance, be here next Saturday? Perhaps at about eleven o'clock, at this stall, buying Christmas pudding muffins?" he asked.

"I most definitely will," I replied. The following week I got there just a few minutes before Joe and bought two muffins and two teas which we enjoyed as we wandered around the market. We did the same thing every Saturday all the way up until Christmas.

That was almost exactly a year ago and things have moved on pretty swiftly from then.

I started to cook for Joe in my little cottage and he learnt of my passion for food and was more than happy for me to experiment on him. He told me that he'd raised Georgina alone since she was ten years old after her mother died following a short illness.

I remember the first time I met Georgie. She and her dad were due at my place at six o'clock. I was nervous and had spent ages choosing the menu. With some help from Joe as to her likes and dislikes, I decided on chicken soup to start, pasta carbonnara and then white chocolate and raspberry cheesecake as dessert. I needn't have worried – it was a great success. Georgie was thrilled that I'd made such an effort in her honour. She kept saying how posh the table looked, laid properly for all the courses with wine glasses and linen napkins that she said were much too nice to wipe your mouth on.

She was studying Food and Nutrition among her GCSEs and showed an enthusiastic interest in what I'd cooked. At the time I thought it was great that we had a shared interest; I imagined us cooking together, growing close. At this point in time, I wasn't sure that we could get back on track to ever becoming close.

Joe and me married two weeks ago. We decided against a honeymoon, choosing instead to go on a family holiday later in the year. I moved into Joe's place for the few days up until today – the big day when we were all to move into our new home together.

Georgie was very quiet this morning; that in itself should have alerted me that something was wrong. She was dragging her feet and just being generally unhelpful and by the time we actually got to the new house, my patience was wearing thin. I made a last ditch attempt to gee her up.

"Georgie love, why don't you take some of your things up to your room? We'll try to clear some of these boxes shall we, before your dad gets back? Tell you what, we'll work at it for twenty minutes and then stop for tea and chocolate cake, what do you say?"

And that's when she exploded.

"Tea and cake? Is that all you think about? You think that's the answer to everything. But it isn't."

“Georgie love, whatever’s wrong?”

But it was too late, she’d already grabbed her coat and was out the door.

Now, admittedly, I am of the philosophy that a nice hot cup of tea and a piece of cake will help to comfort most people. But in my heart of hearts, I didn’t really think Georgie was angry with me for this.

Something was seriously wrong. I could see that now. I’d been stupidly blind to anything other than organising the packing up of two houses and making sure everything was sorted. I hadn’t given a thought to a bewildered sixteen year old who was leaving the only home she had ever known, full of memories of her mum. How could I have been so thoughtless?

I dig into a nearby box and take out a few random items; a kitchen clock, a stack of tea towels, and a Home Sweet Home plaque I’d bought in a garden centre especially for our new home. I smile, a little sad, and place it back in the box. It was no good, I couldn’t concentrate and decide to go for a walk to clear my head.

I walk to the end of the lane, leaving my new home behind me. The Christmas market is off to my left and on the basis that it has always been a happy place for me and lucky too, I head in that direction. I stop at a small park where a group of teenagers are piled up on a bench, all vying for a little space so as not to be left out. I casually glance over but can see instantly that Georgie isn’t there.

What would I do if I saw her – right now? More importantly what would be the right thing to do? Should I be angry and warn her off ever storming out like this again? That just didn’t feel right. Even though I’d never been a parent, I knew I wanted to give her the biggest hug and reassure her that everything would be alright.

I arrive at the market and it’s just getting dark. The lights are on; long lines of multi-coloured light bulbs up high and twinkly fairy lights high-lighting each festively decorated stall. The food sellers would be doing a great trade; mince pies, roasted chestnuts, jacket

potatoes and hot spicy cider. This would be a lovely place to come as a family – one day I hope.

I wander around the market for a while looking at the delicious treats on offer. I half-heartedly buy a few items and then wearily, I decide to head back home. I dread facing Joe. What a terrible start to our new life together. I walk to the edge of the market and smile wryly as I find myself right next to my favourite stall – the one with the lovely bakery smells, that sells the gorgeous Christmas pudding muffins. I decide to buy some, still a little hopeful that the day will end on a happy note. My heart sinks into the depths of my boots as I see the empty tray. It feels like a bad sign. The stall-holder recognises me with a warm smile and sees the direction of my disappointed gaze.

“Sorry love, I sold the last few a while ago. Do you want some mince pies instead?”

“No thanks.” I shake my head. I have my own special recipe for mince pies. I walk home and I can see our house in the distance now. As I unlock the door and step inside, the first thing I notice is the glorious warmth that envelops me. I’m puzzled by this because Joe can’t be home yet – his van isn’t parked on the drive. But as I walk through to the kitchen, I see Georgie fiddling with the boiler controls.

“Ah, you fixed it, that’s great,” I say, relief flooding through me to have her back home.

She turned to face me, smiling tentatively, looking relieved. “Yeah, it’s nice and warm now.” I walk towards her and see that she’s unpacked some boxes and laid the table ready for supper later. She’d done a grand job; everything neat and perfectly placed, even with the napkins folded into fan shapes as I’d taught her.

“This is lovely,” I say. “Thank-you.”

“And best of all,” she says, grabbing a bag off the kitchen worktop and taking out a cake box. She opens the lid to reveal three Christmas pudding muffins. “I got the last three,” she says, looking utterly pleased with herself.

I can't stop myself from laughing but then stop abruptly as she abandons the cake box on the table and runs into my arms, giving me a tight hug. I'm speechless and overwhelmed with emotion.

"I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean it. I was just, you know, a bit sad about leaving."

"You've nothing to be sorry for." I stroke her hair and hold her close. "It's ok to be sad, of course it is. I should have thought more about your feelings."

Georgie looks up into my face. "I'm glad we're all here," she whispers.

"Me too, and I hope this will be a happy home for all of us."

She smiles and at the same time the front door bursts open and Joe rushes in.

"Wow, it's getting cold out there," he calls out. "Nice and warm in here though," he says, coming into the kitchen. "Hey, what's this? A group hug?" Joe is smiling happily as he washes his hands in the sink. "I see we're all set for supper. The table looks great."

Georgie beams as I tell her dad that it was all her own work.

"Well done love. And I see we have our very favourite Christmas pud muffins. Shall I put the kettle on and make us all a nice cup of tea?"

Georgie and me exchange a smile. "That sounds like a lovely idea. Georgie, do you want to help me clear some of these boxes out of the way?"

She dives into a nearby box, almost disappearing inside it. "Yeah, we've got so much stuff to put away." She lifts out the Home Sweet Home plaque. "Where shall we put this?"

"You decide." I'm intrigued as to what her answer will be.

"It should go right next to the front door. I reckon that with all your home baking and cake making, this will always be our Home very Sweet Home."