

**The Best Dish**  
**By Mindy Quigley**

One way or the other, I knew this would be our last meal together. I had laid the kitchen table with all our best things—the green flowery tablecloth and the glass candlesticks my mum had given us for our wedding. The walls of our cottage groaned against the January storm outside, but the cottage was built so snug and tight that the candle flames didn't so much as flicker, even as the gale blew.

I looked across at my husband. He cut his food into large chunks using only his fork and rapidly shoveled the pieces into his mouth.

"Are you enjoying your tea?" I asked quietly.

"If you can call it tea." He grunted the words, not looking up from his plate.

There was a brief silence. Even after 18 years of marriage, I was still unsure whether it was better to fill these silences or let them be. To take either course was to place a bet. "It's aubergine parmigiana. I got the aubergine and the wine from the Co-op."

This was no mean feat and he knew it. Our house stands on a wee spit of land near Loch Harport on the Isle of Skye. A single-lane track branches off of the B road—one of those byways that you might pass without even noticing. It runs along for a few miles, losing form and structure as it goes, passing first the big Galbraith farm, then our wee farm. By the time it ends outside the McNairs' house, it has almost entirely leaked away into the surrounding landscape. There is nothing like a proper shop for miles all around. Just gorse and rocks, the sea and the sheep.

Portree is what passes for civilization on Skye, and getting there was always an arduous journey. The previous day, I'd done the four-mile walk to the bus stop, and then spent almost an hour on the bus, rattling through the barren landscape, stopping now and again to pick up harried locals or the few intrepid out-of-season tourists who were willing to brave Skye in the depths of winter. I rarely make the trip in the winter. My husband doesn't like me to drive the car, so it's easier to make do with things from the cupboard or the freezer.

And I couldn't have driven the car even if I'd been allowed. My husband had taken it that morning to drive our teenage son, Donald, back to Inverness for the new term at school. Many of the island's older children boarded on the mainland. The weather made it difficult to do otherwise. Our track became impassable for days sometimes—mud during the warmer spells and frozen mud during the cold. We had seen less and less of Donald over the past few years. Last summer, he stayed with a friend in Aberdeen for the whole of the summer holidays. He would be graduating from secondary school at the end of June. He talked sometimes about taking a job on

the oil rigs, and I wondered how long it would be until even his annual Christmas visits would be stopped altogether. I would be left alone with my husband forever.

My husband took hold of his wine glass, his sinuous fingers curling into a fist around the stem. "You've got a cellar full of root veg and a freezer full of meat, and you take a bloody 4-hour roundtrip to get a fucking aubergine?" As he spat the words at me, a tiny foam of spit formed in the corners of his mouth.

I tried to make my face sweet, my body small. "It's our anniversary. Eighteen years." I kept my eyes cast down, chancing only the briefest glance at his face.

He snorted and his lower lip curled into a smile. "Aye. I should've known you'd be trouble when I married you. Bad luck to get married on a Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>."

I smiled obediently, as if his words were meant as a joke instead of a threat, and filled his glass with the last of the wine. He didn't notice that I had hardly touched my own glass.

After we finished the meal, he settled in next to the wood burner and dispatched one of the other bottles of wine I had brought back from Portree. As I tidied away the dishes into the cupboard, he lumbered into the kitchen, tilting slightly to one side from the effects of the alcohol. He rummaged among the coats and jumpers on the pegs next to the door, readying himself to go out to the barn to feed the pigs and finish up the evening chores. "Where's my waterproof?" he demanded.

The big casserole dish I held slipped from my grasp and crashed heavily into the sink. It cracked into two almost-perfect halves. My best dish, broken into two.

"I haven't quite finished sewing on the new zip." I tried to keep my voice even.

His eyes flashed like a marquee, advertising the malice behind them. He took a step towards me, but stumbled so much that he had to catch himself on the wall. Even a seasoned drinker like him was hampered by having drunk two bottles of wine in less than an hour. I turned back towards the sink, gripping the edge of the porcelain and bracing myself for what might come next. I lowered my head and hunched my shoulders, trying to telescope my body into itself. Outside the window in front of me, the snow was being thrown down with such force it was almost as if the sky wanted to do the flakes some injury.

My luck held. I heard him grunt and turn back towards the door. I glanced over my shoulder and saw him pull on an extra jumper and walk out, leaving the door wide open behind him. I ran across the kitchen to shut and lock it before all the warmth from the house was sucked out into the frigid night. Next, I moved around the ground floor. I opened each window and pulled the heavy wooden storm shutters into place. They were secured from the inside with iron bars that slid between thick iron rings. Though roughly constructed, they had withstood many decades of

fearsome weather. Finally, for good measure, I shoved heavy pieces of furniture in front of both doors. A two-day gale was predicted—the worst of an already bitter winter. Within moments, I had the whole house locked up tight. With only a rhythmic whooshing noise from the wind outside, it felt like being inside a submarine at the bottom of the sea.

I raced upstairs to the window of our bedroom. I left the shutters open in this one room, so I could watch.

I was just in time. The blizzard had made the sky oddly bright outside, although the winter sun had gone down hours before. Illuminated in the powerful spotlight fixed to the wall of the low stone barn, my husband struggled with the huge lock and chain I had placed across the door that afternoon. He rattled it once more and turned around to face the cottage. I could picture it from his perspective. He would see dim light peeking around the edges of the shuttered windows. The white smoke from the chimney being thrown this way this way and that by the powerful winds. Snow piling up in ever-increasing drifts in the small front garden.

He made his way out of sight around to the other entrance to the barn. Although I could no longer see him, I knew that he would find that door locked as well. Almost unconsciously, my hand went to the pocket of my cardigan, where I gripped the keys to both padlocks. These had been another purchase in Portree.

He came back into sight, moving quickly, indeed, almost running back towards the house. The unsteadiness had gone from his steps. When he reached the kitchen door, just below where I was standing, he disappeared from sight again. I could hear him banging at the door, the sound of his fists competing with the force of the storm outside. He screamed my name, his voice sounding thin and high as it was carried away by the wind. He circled the house, and I knew he would try the front door. I ran downstairs. Sure enough, almost in time with the gusts of wind, I could hear the blows of his body as he threw his whole weight against the door. My husband was a slight man, but strong. Strong enough to break four of a woman's ribs with a single blow. Strong enough to throw my lovely son across a room as if he were nothing more than a sack of rubbish. Bracing myself against the wardrobe that I'd pushed in front of the door, I counted the times he threw himself against it, screaming for me to open up. Eighteen times. I wondered if he had counted, too, or if it was just a coincidence. One blow of his body against the door for each of the eighteen years we had been married. Suddenly, it was quiet and still. I imagined him standing on the other side, bent over slightly and panting heavily, the way he sometimes did after his anger was spent.

Although I couldn't see him, I knew what he would see when he turned away from the cottage. He wasn't a clever man, but he would be running through his options. He would first look back towards the locked barn, knowing that inside lay ladders, hammers, a crowbar, an axe—all manner of things with which to gain access to the house. I had made a point of tidying everything up the previous week.

I closed my eyes and imagined the light coming from our nearest neighbors, the McNairs, house, shining like a beacon through the storm. I willed him to look toward the house, which stood on a hill a mile and a half down the road. I prayed that he would walk towards it. I went back upstairs to the darkened bedroom. I approached the window cautiously, as if I might find his face looming there. As if he could magically levitate up to the second floor, smash the glass and grab me by the throat. Whispering a silent prayer, I peered out.

I had guessed right. I could see his receding form heading off down the track to the McNairs'. Their house stood alone on a small spit of land at the end of the track, surrounded on all sides by empty land and rocky beach that fell down into the black ocean. It was just how I'd imagined it that morning when I'd gone over to their house, letting myself in with the spare key Mairi McNair had left for me. They had gone into Inverness a few days before. Mairi's husband was scheduled to have prostate surgery at Inverness Royal Infirmary the following week, and they had decided to leave a few days early to make sure they got there ahead of the storm. I had fed their chickens and watered their plants. I had turned on the outside lights, which I knew were bright enough to be seen from our house, even on a stormy night. I shuttered and barred all their windows, locked their doors and left.

By now, my husband would be starting to shiver. His wet jumper would be pierced by each fresh gust of wind. It would take him at least 20 minutes to get to the McNairs' in this weather, another 20, to try to force his way into their house once he found it locked and barred. I had to pray that their house, too, would resist his attempts to get in. If he couldn't get in at theirs, I knew he would come back. That would buy me 20 more minutes.

I raced downstairs, grabbed the shovel that I had stowed in the hall cupboard, ran outside and unlocked the car. When he got back, if he got back, he might have grown desperate. He didn't have keys with him—I had taken them from their usual peg by the back door so that he would not unconsciously grab them on his way out the door—but he might smash a car window with a rock and take shelter inside. It might afford just enough shelter. I rolled down one of the car windows. Then I frantically began to fill the interior with snow. I shoveled and shoveled until the whole passenger cabin was packed solid. Carefully, I opened the car door. I rolled up the window, locked the door and forced it closed.

When I was finished, I ran back inside and locked the door. With shaking hands, I made myself a cup of tea. I brought it upstairs, taking the stairs one at a time, trying to soothe myself by walking slowly. How many times had I limped up these stairs? How many times had he dragged me down them? I had never counted them before, and I almost laughed when I discovered that there were eighteen of them. Eighteen must be my lucky number. I sat down by the window to wait.

I watched the minute hand drag around the clock as if it were moving through treacle. I rehearsed again what I would do in the morning. I would unlock everything, open everything, shovel the snow out of the car. I would call 999 and say that I'd gone to bed early, not feeling well. That I'd woken up to find him gone. When I couldn't find him around our house, I'd walked along the road and there he was—frozen, blue, hard as granite. That I had no idea why he would have ventured out in such bad weather. Sometimes he did strange things when he had been drinking.

Then I would call Donald and tell him to come home. That he should finish school and then come home to stay with me forever.

More than an hour had passed. I looked anxiously outside, but there was nothing. Only the lonely tree at the edge of the track, its bare branches reaching out to rake the sky like cold fingers. I began to despair. I had bet everything, everything I had, on this hand. Perhaps he had found shelter at the McNairs after all. I had never done anything to provoke him before. Would he come home in the morning, thundering and cursing me? Or would he wait a few days, letting me sweat and worry, before meting out my punishment? There were so many thousands of ways to upset him. I seemed to stumble upon new ones without even trying. I set out each day seeking peace, but found only trouble.

Just when I had given up all hope, he came into view. He was walking slowly, zombie-like, his body convulsing with shivers.

As I'd expected, he made his way over to the car. It was parked next to the barn, and the whole scene was lit by the spotlight on the barn wall. He paused when he saw what I had done and rested his hands on the boot to steady himself. As I surveyed the scene, I realized with horror that the shovel I had used to fill the car was lying on the ground near the front of the car. It was almost covered with snow, but I could still make out the sharp, metal blade, poking up out of the drift. I had forgotten it! That blade might pry open the storm shutters. He could use it to break the car windows and dig out a storm shelter for himself. He could use it to smash my skull.

He began to walk back toward the house, his path taking him right past the shovel. As he came around the front of the car, a terrible gust of wind blew up from the west, driving a thick barrage of snowflakes into his eyes. He threw his arm across his face to shield it and walked right past the shovel. It was so close to his feet that he nearly tripped over it. But he didn't look down, and he didn't turn around. He hadn't seen it, and within minutes, it would be buried under the snow.

And then I knew that luck was on my side. He would try again to get into our cottage. He was weakened by the cold, his thoughts addled. His strength gone, he might try persuasion, using the cloying, apologetic voice he sometimes used if he felt like he had gone too far the previous night. He would try to get in, but he would fail. I didn't know how far he would stagger in the other direction, towards the Galbraith farm. I didn't know if he would simply grow tired and disorientated, lay down by the

side of the road and slip into unconsciousness, or if he would succumb to the strange urges of hypothermia—the feelings of being on fire that caused people to strip off their clothes and die naked in the snow.

What I did know, as I climbed into bed, clutching the hot water bottle to my chest, is that they speak the truth when they say that revenge is a dish best served cold.