

STRAWBERRY JAM

JOCELYN-ANNE HARVEY

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I've not taken my coat off before the boss wants something.

'Rose, those cookies went down a real treat yesterday! Can you make a couple more batches then head out the front.'

'No probs, Brian.'

So much for my routine of a green tea and peanut butter sandwich. I tie up my hair and find my apron instead. Outside pink streaks across the sky. And there's already movement on the path from runners and dog walkers getting their exercise before the day begins.

I find all the ingredients and weigh out the dark chocolate. Resting the bowl on top of the saucepan, my thoughts simmer like the rolling water underneath. I stayed up too late again working on the charity grant application. Everything I wrote didn't seem to make sense and I couldn't stop myself hitting delete.

The mixer whirs the sugar and butter together. I've left my phone in my bag along with my breakfast. Kelly's social media stories are full of her craft show stand and how many people love her handmade felt purses. Another reminder of all the steps I still need to take.

I was only meant to work here as a stop gap. The café's open all year and should be entering the pumpkin soup menu stage. But this summer's weather keeps churning like the ice cream machine, enticing customers who linger and talk about everything and nothing over lattes and large slices of carrot cake.

The wind's whipping the incoming tide into stiff peaks and the kite surfers are already taking advantage, slicing through the waves until they leap into the air.

'Better make sure we get more bacon on,' I call out to Brian who's at the hotplate. 'It's going to be busy.'

When I have a chance, I sit on the steps and watch a woman and toddler playing with their puppy on the pebbles. I laugh at the puppy's exuberance chasing them into the sea. We've been coming here since I can remember. Back before the council built the stone flood barrier the seaweed piled up in the height of summer's heat. I scrunch my nose thinking about how I didn't mind wading through all the flies to get to the waves. Nan would keep watch from her deckchair until she called me back to the checked rug spread out over the sand. There'd always be squash and fruitcake Nan kept in a special tin. One evening, I'd crept down the stairs enticed by the strange, sweet smells. That was the first time she let me measure out the spices and stir the batter.

I suddenly notice the queue's built up: everyone's after an ice cream. I'd love one myself in this sticky humidity and lick my salty lips. I brush down my shorts and head back inside.

'I'll have a flake with mine.'

'How's it going, Clara?'

'Fine. You?'

'Deadline's tomorrow.'

Clara pulls a face. 'Have you submitted yet?'

‘Shouldn’t you be at the conference?’

‘That’s next week.’

‘Bottle of water too?’

She nods.

‘I don’t think I’ve got enough socials.’

‘What did I say before? You can spread yourself out too much. Focus on a couple of platforms so you can properly engage. It’s not all about selling; people want to know you. And remember, Rose, you can do anything you want...’

The puppy’s still tumbling about on the beach. They’ll probably head over here soon – maybe buy its first doggie ice cream?

‘What do you think, Rose?’

A couple behind Clara give me a funny look. I don’t want the boss getting antsy.

‘I’d better get going.’

Clara waves goodbye. I didn’t get the chance to say about my idea of sculpting celebrity faces from cake and buttercream. I thought it might show off my skills. Nan had taught me the classics over the school holidays: a Madeira cake with the split down the golden dome; choux she made me pipe over and over again, so they were all the same length on the tray. The queue consumes me as I fill up endless cones and bag up the cookies I’d made earlier.

I dump my bag on the stairs and notice the uneaten sandwich inside. ‘What have you been up to, Nan?’

‘Do you know the capital of Gibraltar?’

I fiddle with the remote buttons for her mobility chair. ‘Isn’t it Gibraltar?’

‘Imagine that; they won £5,000!’

I could. That wasn’t far off the projected costs I’d had to calculate for the grant – a decent stand mixer, plenty of cooling racks, tins, packaging, and labels with my logo on.

‘What was that, dear?’

‘Nothing. You stay there; I’m going to get supper on. Fancy an omelette?’

I search for the eggs then notice the packets in the fridge door. My thoughts start to sift as I find the flour and cube the cold butter chunks. I hum away as I pour in milk and gently knead the mixture into a soft dough.

‘What’s happening here?’ says Nan leaning on her walker. ‘I thought we were having tea?’

I look at the stacks of scones dusted with icing sugar on the worktop. ‘We are.’ I push my hair back. ‘This is it.’

Nan reaches up and rubs a smudge off my cheek. ‘Well, let’s have one then, lass. Have you got any jam?’

I spread on a thick layer and we both take a bite.

‘Not bad,’ says Nan. ‘They’re lovely and light.’

I pull one apart and check the consistency. Nan's right. Though maybe next time I need more salt to balance the sweetness against the intense hit of strawberry from Nan's preserve recipe.

Ignoring the mess, I open my laptop. Words pour out like cream, about my afternoon tea concept, the rose logo and our baking story – I'll keep things simple and start with video content. I read through one more time before clicking 'submit.'

I can't resist posting the selfie of our smiling faces smeared in the sticky mixture. Maybe Clara will see it? I can't wait to hear what she'll say.

Jocelyn-Anne's the author of Not Knowing, But Still Going and has a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Chichester. Jocelyn-Anne's passionate about encouraging people to reach their potential as a mentor, speaker and educator. Coastal walks, coffee and cake are essential ingredients for her creative process.