

# Sink Full Of Dishes

It is early evening after dinner, and I stare into the kitchen sink. I gently draw patterns with the bubbles that remain from the washing up. I herd them into the centre of the sink and I turn the tap on and let the water trickle slowly, washing the bubbles down the plug hole. I admire my clean sink and sigh. Memories come flooding back, overwhelming me from a time that was.

I didn't always enjoy the peace of a sink full of bubbles. There was a time when my life was controlled by rules. Not mine, someone else's. He had rules about just these kinds of bubbles. The sink had to be clean. There could be no bubbles left. If I forgot or became distracted which was often the case, I would wear the consequences of those bubbles for days or weeks thereafter. So on nights when I remembered, I would stand at the sink with cold running water gently herding the bubbles into the plug hole. I knew that though it was possibly the stupidest most pointless rule in the universe, it was a rule no less.

It's not that I don't respect rules. I appreciate and recognise that some are implicit like manners handed down through families over generations, such as the ones my mother imparted to us:

'Don't speak with your mouth full'; 'Give up your seat on a bus to someone older, pregnant or someone who may need it more.'

She taught us, 'Do unto others as you would have done to you;' 'Don't disrespect your elders'; 'No elbows on the table....'. Through these rules, I learned how to be part of a civilised society.

Rules have their place in the world – imagine the chaos if we didn't have rules about how to walk on the left-hand side to ensure the flow of pedestrian traffic, how to stand respectfully in a queue and not push in and how to merge into traffic one car at a time.

But then, inexplicably you encounter a rule that makes no sense. When I first met him as an enamoured teenager, I couldn't see beyond his long hair and rock-star looks. He was four years older and he had chosen me out of all the girls in the small town in which we lived.

One day I was waiting patiently for him at his home like the lovelorn girlfriend I was. His parents invited me in and let me wait in his bedroom. Next to his bed I found a neatly stacked tower of black and red fruit pastilles. Perhaps he doesn't like them, I reasoned. And so I helped myself to a few.

Little did I know I had broken one of his golden rules: you never touch his lollies. When he came home and saw what I had done, he exploded in rage.

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I had trembled and hung my head, suitably chastened. I didn't understand – they were only lollies. He had obviously never learnt the rule about sharing.

Despite this, I went on to marry him and from then on I learnt a new set of rules, ones I had never heard of nor been taught. Sometimes without my knowledge, the rules changed but I wouldn't be given notice of the alteration. I would wear the consequences later. The consequences could also change. One day a simple backhander across the face, another day a beating, and some days a strange silence and an awful sense of foreboding. Some rules were so ridiculous that I took evil pleasure in breaking them despite the consequences.

He was obsessive about food routines. Every Sunday he demanded a full English roast. But no undercooked vegetables or meat. The potatoes had to be crunchy and God help me if there were lumps in the gravy. Every Saturday he demanded a full stew pot with veggies cooked with OXO cubes. It was revolting but he loved it.

Eventually, I got tired of his rules.

One day, many years later, I grabbed my children while he was at work and escaped with nothing but a suitcase and a few possessions.

It took time, but in my freedom and in my own space, I created my own gentler rules and routines: no TV in the morning for the kids till everyone was dressed and ready for school. Dinner had to be eaten at the table. And when the theme song for Neighbours came to a close it was bedtime.

There were times when I allowed the children to break the rules as a treat. On these special occasions, they were allowed to eat fish and chips in front of the TV; or spend the weekend in pyjamas lounging around free from household chores. Some days as a special rule breaker there would be no school just a lazy day spent together. What joy I got from making – and breaking – my own precious rules.

And so it comes to be that thirty-five years later I still feel the pleasure of consciously leaving those bubbles in the sink. I smile at them and run my fingers through them as I make patterns in the foam. They remind me that in this house, there are no consequences for breaking the rules. They stay there, causing no harm to anyone, until I choose to let them go.

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