

Arguably the most complex character among us, Uncle Cymbeline is, at the same time, probably the least enigmatic. At 71, the man – you can see it as his nose hairs continue their soft susurrations in the back of the van – is a tower of gourmandise. He loves cakes, *adores* cakes – listen to the way he pronounces the word ‘choux’. The man lets the word linger on his lips like a small dab of pastry dough itself. Then he breathes it in and rolls it around his tongue for as long as possible. At last the word is emitted so lovingly, so reluctantly, so dwellingly that by the time it takes form on the airwaves, Uncle Cymbeline has managed to endow the very idea with several syllables.

In fact, Great Uncle Cymbeline adores talking about food generally. His favourite magazine is *I Cook It Monthly*. On publication day, Cymbeline is known to elbow aside his old retainer (of whom, more anon), then scamper along the corridor inside his Edinburgh flat and sit behind the front door (a chair being kept there specially for the purpose). He will sit for an hour or perhaps more. He will keep his hand between the letter box and the cage so that no delay need be incurred between the magazine’s arrival and his devouring of its contents. Should delivery be late – which, heaven forbid – Uncle Cymbeline will go downstairs to his kitchen and avail himself of a hasty egg, then resume his station, yolk all the while marring the perfection of his Publication Day Hardy Amies suit.

Great Uncle Cymbeline is probably six feet two and, in his prime, must have been statuesque. Today his jowls are soft and drawn towards the ground – much like his trousers, much like his nasal hairs. Eyebrows – always of peculiar fascination – on Uncle Cymbeline are somewhat unruly. One goes up, the other down. One grows up, the other out. Small children who meet him for the first time are inclined to think that Uncle Cymbeline has a fierce expression. Sometimes they cry when they see him. Or run away.

In appearance, as you may see for yourself, Great Uncle Cymbeline boasts many peculiarities. From his earliest days, he liked to dress from a second-hand clothes emporium in Edinburgh’s Grassmarket. There he found his favourite cashmere jerseys, twill trousers, tweed suits, his large grey sealskin fedora. There he would go as a tall, angular youth – as yet to discover his skill for eating – and rummage in boxes and drawers for items as singular and well-made as they were esoteric and on most occasions cheap. He loved colour, particularly for some reason mustard. He loved scarves and would buy them if he found them without compunction. A telescopic cigarette holder (at full extension, a good two feet long) with an Amazonian snake on top was one of his favourite possessions. A chitrali topi – one brought back from the heights of the Pakistan mountains by a disenchanted Edinburgh missionary – was another. Clothes were revered in those days by Uncle Cymbeline – brought home as trophies, carried ceremonially over the threshold, laid down gently upon the bed and worshipped.

And it is these same trophies that Great Uncle Cymbeline stretches about his person to this day. The cashmere jerseys – by now somewhat tattered – are almost audible in their

exhaustion. The twill trousers cover the legs well enough but it seems they are less able to do what they did all those years ago higher up. Great Uncle Cymbeline frequently wears string around his middle. Or an old tie. He wears longer (though not newer) jackets and has been known to sport a cardigan tied around his waist. All these measures are designed to keep that crucial central layer of Cymbeline out of the elements. On occasions, these measures are not successful.

Naturally the hats and the cigarette holder and the scarves can sustain the role so lovingly carved out for them back in the days of the height of the emporium. At 71, Great Uncle Cymbeline sports them still. Hats lean on outward growing eyebrows and scarves run over increasingly soiled suit-jackets. All nowadays are alas a little threadbare however and from the inside of the camper van, I Piccalilli would almost venture to say that Uncle Cymbeline smells.

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Aside from his sartorial peculiarities, Great Uncle Cymbeline has two other notable characteristics. These have brought him fame within the terraces of Edinburgh's Newtown and indeed fame beyond. Parish magazines in Midlothian have been known to comment on them. It is rumoured there was once an article on one of these characteristics featured in the leader page of the *Lauder Reminder* (Scottish Borders).

The first is his quite extraordinary meanness. Even in Scottish terms, Cymbeline ranks very highly indeed. To be invited to tea with Cymbeline is to be invited to share the oxygen in his musty flat, the dust, perhaps the passing glimpse of a fly. To be invited to tea is to be asked first with a huge flourish of promises. Oeufs en gelée, foie gras, toasted pain brioché, petits fours. The French culinary bons mots tumble from his lips like flowers and you – novice invitee that you are – find yourself filled with anticipation, delirious at the prospects. As the days go by and the time of the great tea-moment draws near, however, do not be surprised if Cymbeline begins to row back slightly. Oeufs en gelée? Did I mention that? How very odd. Foie gras – alas, no, it's not the year for it. Petits fours? Well, I suppose we could dig some out. No trouble with the toast however, none at all. Lashings of the stuff. With Marmite.

Then it is three o'clock and you are standing on the auld grey steps of his mansion flat which bestrides the great Newtown square where he has lived since birth. You pull the bell which takes an age to ring and as you do, a cat walks in and out of your trembling legs. Taxi cabs splutter through the cobbled rain, overhead the sky is dark and on the pavement, a flock of bowler hats seems to have gathered. This is Edinburgh. It could be March, it could be July. The haar is here and its cold compress clutches at your unscarfed neck. Oh that toast! How good it will be! Warm and buttery and the perfect foil for the dreech Scottish weather.

At last Cymbeline's old retainer, Mrs Twigg, appears. It is immediately apparent

why it has taken her so long to arrive – for the caliper on her right leg seems to have entangled itself with the one on her left, leaving her to patrol the length of the corridors at something akin to a hop. Mrs Twigpurse must be 92 if she is a day and her hopping is not what it was. Come away through, she says, without breaking into a smile, indeed without giving anything away at all. And off she hops. And you must walk very slowly indeed behind.

You are shown to the front parlour. Cages of moths and boxes of sea shells and unwashed washing-up and old lace and unframed prints and copies and copies of *Timeform* prevent you from sitting on any of the chairs. Un dictionnaire gastronomique lies open at the page on beurre noisette. A bottle of half-drunk bitter lemon, now a little brown, and two Nice biscuits in a chipped cup are the only hint that anything may be prepared or offered.

For a long time, nothing happens. Mrs Twigpurse must have disappeared downstairs and all you can hear is the occasional hiss-purr as a spark emits from the single bar on the bar heater in the hearth. At one point, you are not sure whether the *Timeforms* should not be moved from close range of the bar heater, which seems on the verge of spontaneous combustion. On the other hand, nothing looks as though it has been moved for a long time and perhaps it is safer to leave these things to the expert, Mrs Twigpurse herself.

Then at last something does happen. Great Uncle Cymbeline comes down from the second floor on his lift. The lift makes noises of all kinds – not symphonic exactly, more antiphonic. Cogs, shrill with old age, shriek. The gates hiss as they open. The cage rattles and thunks as the lift disgorges its contents.

Toast? Did I mention toast? How extraordinary.

Cymbeline is standing in front of the bar heater, somewhat distracted. Yesterday was Publication Day of *I Cook It Monthly* and he has only got half way through the Entrées section.

Mrs Twigpurse, Mrs Twigpurse!

Cymbeline bangs the wall with a *Timeform*. Hop-hop and up the stairs she lurches.

My guest has stated a preference for toast. And Marmite. Would you credit it? Any bread?

Mrs Twigpurse does not say anything but hop-hops at lugubrious speed deeper into the room. She stoops forward, picks up the tray, raises herself precariously and proffers the bitter lemon and the Nice biscuits. Politely, regretfully, charmingly, hungrily, taking note of the dog hairs sticking to the Nice biscuits and the dots of micro-organic growth in the bitter lemon, you decline.

See, says Cymbeline triumphantly. Told you she wouldn't appreciate a big tea.

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The second characteristic for which Great Uncle Cymbeline is known – and for this, we must forgive him – is his lifelong utter utter bone deep passion for ubiquity. Great Uncle

Cymbeline does not know anything about whippets that does not need to be known. His love of whippets is akin to his dedication to parsimony and his love of food and his addiction to gastronomic sweet nothings. Bring me a whippet, he is fond of pronouncing, and I will bring you a galette normande au sarrasin. Quite what this is, no one is too sure. But the way Cymbeline drops the mot into the middle of the conversation – like easing a drop of batter into a smoking pan – gives an instant lie to the depth of his passion.

Whippets, Cymbeline, Cymbeline, whippets. The equation is without equivocation. When you enjoyed your first moments within the front parlour of Cymbeline's flat, you may not have noticed it but besides the copies and copies of *Timeform* and the boxes of fossils and the cryptically enciphered cartons full of semi-precious stones, there were actually many sleeping whippets. Cymbeline prefers beige ones – so much nicer next to my mustard trousers, he alleges – and the beigeness stretches far and wide over his flat. How many there are he cannot tell you. Occasionally – when Cymbeline sits, which you rarely see him do – a patch of beigeness rises from the carpet and presses its head into his already cupped hand. The contrast between the stature and size of the man and the fragility of the beast is hard to miss but it is plain that Cymbeline loves his whippets and they him.

Now and again, when you visit, you may find Cymbeline poring over something that appears to be embroidery.

Embroidery, Cymbeline? you ask deftly.

New coat for the whippet, comes the rejoinder.

And indeed a piece of tartan that is beige onlaid with brown, white and a dark chocolatey kind of chestnut in the perfect form of a very small dog-coat is held up for you to admire. The tartan, says Cymbeline, was created for the All Breeds Dairy Goats Society in New South Wales.

Shame about the Australian connection, he adds, but perfect colouring, don't you think?

Psyche and Scylla, Sappho, Circe and Zephyr. These are the names that Cymbeline confers on his whippets. In order to tell them apart, you need to know when each particular whippet arrived chez Cymbeline. The great man names them with these exact names in this exact cycle, Zephyr always the last. But Cymbeline does not acquire his whippets in batches of five nor do their names and their genders match. Generally speaking, one tries not to call them by name. It seems that Mrs Twigpurse is the only other being who can really be sure which is which, but on the other hand, one cannot be certain.

Perhaps the most poignant time to see Great Uncle Cymbeline with his dogs is at six o'clock every morning and at four-thirty every afternoon. Then, he emerges from his lift and in a most un-Cymbelinean way, utters the word – in a delicate yet stentorian whisper – Outies. Beige patches rise from beige carpets, appear from far-flung empty sculleries, paper-strewn studies, pantries full of copper pans, unused morning rooms. The clickety-clicks of their short long nails on the flagged corridor join up and smash into a persuasive

crescendo. Cymbeline stands beneath his fedora, his hands plunged deep into his tweed pockets. When the clickety-click reaches fever-pitch, at last he nods to Mrs Twigpurse – already stationed by the front-door – and out onto the auld grey pavements they pour, small tartan bodkins bouncing up and down in a sea of beigeness. The man, towering above them, rides the sea like the galleon he is, his tweed sails billowing in the relentless George Street wind. In the Feuars' gardens, the man, having opened the gate, stops still – while the dogs fly. Cats, children, small dogs, old ladies are scattered. The dogs fly like dogs fly when they appear in Greek myths. They gallop round the circle of the path in a breathless dash of beige and tartan. Peerless in their grace, breathtaking in their speed and lightness. Great Uncle Cymbeline allows them to do one lap, two laps, three. Each lap takes around two minutes, during which the gardens stand still and watch. You can feel the birds hold their breath and the plants cease for a moment their ceaseless photosynthesising. In winter, the spectacle is watched by the streetlights and the occasional passing tramp. In summer, the blackbirds fall silent and taxi drivers slow down. After three laps, Cymbeline withdraws his hands from his pockets and claps once. The dogs are exhausted and as dramatically as they broke into a gallop, they now drop to a jog and file back across the square.