

Ethel, the Cook.

During my first two years of college, I lived in the YMCA in Brighton, on the south coast of England. Most of the residents in the “Y” were fellow students, which made it feel somewhat like a normal students’ dorm. My college was so low on the academic scale that it could not attain funding to build their own dorms.

The “Y” was run by a warden, Willy; a tall and very skinny Welshman. His only desire in life was to retire and move back to Wales. But before that, he had to constantly face the main challenge of being warden; trying to extract more budget out of the bishop from the local diocese as they sponsored the “Y”. His meagre budget did not allow him the luxury of employing competent staff. Willy’s most appalling failing in this regard was our cook, Ethel, who sadly stayed in the “Y”’s employment for over a year.

As to what good references Ethel may have had when she applied for the job can only be considered as some crazy musings of a disturbed mind. To say that she was incompetent requires a redefinition of the word “incompetent.”

We, the residents, heard that a new cook had been employed and our hopes rose from the muddy depths where hopes languish, having been dashed by previous manifestations of the role of cook. In no amount of time, our expectations met our young adult hunger and the result was utter disappointment and pleading letters flying home to our parents, begging for more money so that we did not starve.

Once every couple of weeks, on a Saturday morning, Ethel attempted to produce a very traditional English breakfast – boiled eggs and toast. This was the simplest meal that most English parents taught their children, when they thought it was time to teach them the basics of cooking. Nobody, in the entire history of the English people, had ever made a mess of this meal, until Ethel.

Knowing that she had to prepare boiled eggs for about 60 residents who would expect their breakfasts to be ready at 8:00, she arrived for work at 3:00 in the morning. She knocked on the back door to raise Harold, the night watchman. Ethel and Harold quickly shared a hot cup of tea together before she set about her work. For the number of residents and staff, she pulled out 12 dozen eggs and placed a huge caldron of water on to boil. She dropped all of the eggs into the water, once it was boiling. Thus, by about 4:15, the eggs were happily bobbing around in a vat of water that was on a consistent rolling boil.

She then turned her attention to the toast. The “Y” could not afford toasters, but the stove had a grill. She would shove as many slices of bread under the grill as it could possibly handle. Then depending on if she was distracted by something or somebody, she soon extracted bread from the grill that was anywhere from vaguely warm to having been incinerated for a week. She cut each piece in two, on the diagonal, in the hope that they looked and tasted better than they actually would at eight o’clock.

At 7:30, she transferred the eggs from their boiling water to another large vat that she had warmed. Meanwhile, her assistant had arrived and distributed the toast to all the tables in the dining room. Together, they boiled water to make pots of tea that were placed on each table. Ethel was then prepared to receive the bleary eyed residents at the 8:00 start of breakfast. She gave each of them two boiled eggs.

It did not take us long to realize that a standard English boiled egg spoon was no match for an Ethel boiled egg. Dinner forks and knives were necessary to make a dent in the hardened shell. Surprisingly, what lay within the rock hard shell was actually edible, even if it did beg for a new understanding of "hard-boiled." The variability of the toast gave some respite from this bi-weekly form of breakfast torture. But the majority of residents were starving students and, as a result, there were not too many eggs put in the trash. There were a few letters sent home indicating that students needed dental appointments during their next vacation.

During one of these egg encounters, I was sitting with three buddies, John, Dave and Meryck. Dave was just considering tackling his second egg, when he looked up with a smile "Hey, I have an idea. These rocks are so ridiculously hard. Do you think they would break if we threw it up and had it fall on the parking lot?"

Meryck immediately chuckled "Oh. What a splendid idea! But there are cars in the lot and we better not dent one of them."

I added "The parking lot next door at the Education Offices has just been resurfaced."

John swallowed the last of his eggs and joined in "If we climb out of our window, we can easily get over to the Education Offices' roof. Then we can launch it over the parapet."

Our table's sudden excitement was immediately apparent as other students were fighting with their food. In no time, the idea had percolated its way across the entire dining room. Even an ancient spinster who lived at the "Y" permanently had heard of the plan; a small and rare smile crossed her face.

Once we were all finished, a stream of enthusiastic students rushed out of the dining room, past Willy who wondered what could be going on. We all headed up to the fourth floor where John and I shared a room overlooking a large area of gardens. John threw open the window and clambered out. About another 40 fellow residents followed him over onto the Education Offices roof. When we looked down, the recently resurfaced parking lot looked so perfectly black and smooth. Another dozen students had gathered in the lot to see the egg hit.

Dave held the egg aloft "Alright, egg, you are about to take a flight that may change the course of human history or simply prove how bad Ethel's cooking is."

The egg arched out into the air, spinning before plummeting into the parking lot. The roar of us on the roof was quickly replaced by a more amazed "Wow" from those on the

parking lot. There was a stampede back through our room and down the stairs to the front door. Willy watched us from his office, knowing he would hear something later.

The more pointed end of the egg protruded up from the parking lot surface. We could see that half of the egg, which had a slight crack in one side. Dave pulled on the egg and the shell broke in two, right along the surface of the ground. The complete cooked egg came up with the half shell that Dave held and the other half of the shell laid unbroken in a perfect half hemispherical dent in the parking lot.

Ethel's reputation with boiled eggs had been engraved in the annals of cuisine history and the Education Offices car park.

Ethel not only had a reputation regarding eggs, Friday night's fish and chips was another meal that was cause for concern. Both the fish and chips were deep fried in really cheap oil that left a coating, especially on the fish. The fish had also been breaded and battered before being cooked, which caused it to retain more of the oil's heat. Ethel used a serving fork to transfer the fish to our plates as we passed by the serving window. But often the chips had cooled sufficiently that she saw no need to use an implement and we received a handful of chips. This was fine to our starving eyes and stomachs, until one evening. Ethel had a really bad cold. One student, who was just ahead of me in line, was being served and he asked for some more chips. She happily reached down for another handful, but just then she realized her runny nose was about to drip. She wiped a big drip off her nose with her index finger and drove that finger back into the pile of chips to add more to his plate. That poor student simply walked his plate to the trash, dumped it all in and walked to the back of the line in hopes that his memory would have been wiped clean by the time he returned to the window. As I was next to receive my food, I suggested Ethel use the serving fork for both the fish and the chips. I swear that that night's meal did taste a little strange.

The egg may have not changed human history and nobody fell sick due to a lack of hygiene, but our group of English students knew that if we could survive Ethel's cooking then we could face anything that life was going to throw at us.