

# The Comfort Food Café

'As cosy as a buttered crumpet'

MILLY JOHNSON



Debbie Johnson

# THE COMFORT FOOD CAFÉ

DEBBIE JOHNSON



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*This one is for my wonderful Facebook community – thank you for all your support!*

## STAFF WANTED - MUST BE COMFORTING!

*We are looking for a hard-working and enthusiastic person to join the team at our busy seaside café on the glorious south coast. To put it into food terms, the main ingredients in this recipe are: friendliness, empathy, the ability to both work under pressure and to sit around eating cake, and basic cooking skills (though we won't turn our nose up at advanced cooking skills!). Absolutely essential ingredients are a robust sense of humour, being a good listener, and having a genuine interest in human beings – because at our café, you're just as likely to be listening to somebody's life story as serving them lunch. If you have catering experience, great – but it's not vital. More important is your experience of life. Pay is average, but the job comes with free muffins, and a place in a bustling and supportive community in a beautiful part of the world. The role will initially be offered on a trial of three months to see if we're a good fit, and we can help you with accommodation if you're not local. Family, pets, and personal quirks are all very welcome. If you're interested, send us your heart and soul in email form, telling us why you think you're right for the job.*

*Posted by Laura Hunter-Walker, manager of the Comfort Food Café*

## Chapter One

ear Laura,

First of all, I have to be honest: I'm writing this on behalf of my mum, **D** Maxine (though everyone calls her Max). She has no clue I'm sending this email, and she'd probably kill me if she did, but I'm willing to risk death to do this, because something about your job advert made me think it was perfect for her. You know when something just makes you tingle because it's so right, like all your spider senses have been set off, but in a good way?

I was considering coming up with a dramatic back story to catch your eye—like our father is a gambling addict and lost our family home in a high-stakes poker game at a casino in Montenegro, or Mum has just come out of a decade-long coma after a freak unicycle accident. Something with oomph that would make her stand out from the crowd.

In the end I decided that would be a fib too far. I'm already being shady, sneaking around behind her back, without lying about her as though she's not interesting enough in real life. I think that's already one of her problems: she doesn't think she's interesting anymore, and it won't help if her own daughter fictionalises her as well. She's had a few years of Totally Crap Things happen, and now she seems to have deflated. She's a bit like one of those squashed helium balloons that got stuck on a bush, and it makes me really sad for her.

The other day, we were watching *Dracula*—you know that old version with Keanu Reeves and Gary Oldman in it? Though she told me off for



calling it the 'old version', because apparently 1992 was only five years ago in her head... Anyway, I'm sure you know the one. She said, after it finished, that if she was in a story like that, she wouldn't be Dracula, or Van Helsing, or Mina, or one of the glamorous vampire chicks. She wouldn't even be Renfield, she said—she'd maybe be in with a chance at being the servant who empties Renfield's slop bucket at the asylum. That's how much she sees herself as a background character, and I absolutely hate it. Everyone should be the star of their own story, shouldn't they—or at least the co-star?

That all sounds a bit depressing, I know, but I wanted to explain why I'm doing this. My mum needs a change, badly. She needs to get away from her life and make a fresh start, somewhere new, where she can stop seeing herself as dull and unimportant. She needs to feel useful, not like Renfield's slop bucket slave. At the moment she's forgotten all the good things about herself, like how kind she is, how funny she is, how she's the type of person who keeps a pocketful of pound coins every time she goes into town to give to homeless people. How she always stops and chats to them when everyone else tries to walk as far away as they can.

How she's always the one who gives up her seat on the bus, or helps a mum carry a buggy up the stairs, or offers to pay for someone's shopping if they've forgotten their purse. This stuff used to make me roll my eyes and feel embarrassed when I was younger, but now I see these little things for what they are: the signs that my mum, my lovely mum, is a really decent person who deserves better than what life has given her recently.

I'm nearly nineteen now, and all my friends still think she's the best and wish she'd adopt them. Everyone always hung out at our house—she was the mum who'd always give us lifts, or provide pizza, and bring the mattresses downstairs so we could have a movie night sleepover in the living room. The 'treat box' was never empty, and she always had a smile on her face. She rarely lost her rag, even when someone had puked Malibu and Coke on the dog (true story). She'd just pull a face and say 'well, we've all been there...'

Stuff like this should be more important, shouldn't it? It should get more respect in the world. I mean, she's never been famous or had a high-flying career, but she's so kind and brilliant and nice, and I think that makes her extraordinary.

If you're wondering why she's going through such a low spell in her life, it's not one big dramatic thing. It's like a cavalcade of crap, a snowball of shit that's built up and up until it's basically squashed her (excuse my language but they're the mildest words I can use). I'll tell you about it, but this isn't in order—it all kind of smushed together anyway.

Her mum, my nana, died about a year and a half ago. It wasn't a tragedy—she was in her late seventies—but Mum had looked after her for years after her dad passed away. So she didn't just lose her mum, which would have been bad enough—I think she lost a bit of her purpose as well. She'd been caring for her for so long and suddenly she was gone, and that left a big nana-shaped hole in her heart and her life.

Then a while ago, she got made redundant from her job in a supermarket. I know it doesn't sound exciting, and honestly, when I was younger, I was a bit embarrassed when she used to turn up at school in her uniform (yes, I seemed to spend a lot of time being embarrassed; I think this is a normal girl thing). I suppose I wanted my mum to be more exotic, like a movie star or a footballer's wife or even just someone who worked in an office and wore high heels.

Thing is, she loved her job—loved all her regulars, and chatting to everyone who popped in, and telling me tales about the 90-year-old man who bought flowers for his wife every Friday, and the woman who was addicted to wine gums but hated the green ones. She used to say all of human life was there, and most of it fancied a four-pack of Carlsberg and a giant bag of Wotsits. She really enjoyed it, especially the old people who used to come in for 'their bits'; she said she could tell sometimes she was the only person they spoke to all day.

Then that thing happened where the supermarket brought in self-service tills instead, and swapped the humans for machines. I mean, I suppose we're all used to that now, but I never use them on principle, because I've seen the other side. Not just my mum losing her job, but my mum getting upset at the thought of all those old people struggling to scan their ready meals for one and trying to chat to a screen. I'd never even thought about the human side of it all before, just thought they were convenient, and if I'm honest, I was

glad I didn't have to stand in a queue behind those old dears and their endless chat to the people on the tills. I'm a bit ashamed of that now.

So, she lost her mum and lost her job, and also my older brother Ben went off to uni in Manchester. This was a bonus for me, because he's an absolute arse and we get on about as well as Will Smith and Chris Rock at the Oscars. For some weird reason, though, she actually likes having him around, and when he left she was really sad. I caught her once sitting on his bed and crying, clutching a pile of dirty socks and soggy towels he'd left on the floor. I don't understand why she misses him—I mean, it's not like it was me who left, the far superior child!—but she does. Must be a mum thing.

This was all bad enough, but even worse was my dad—or as he's also known, The Biggest Twat in the Universe—walking out on her. People, even Mum, keep telling me this is a 'complicated' subject. That marriages are complicated, life is complicated, relationships are complicated. They say this like it excuses literally any kind of behaviour. I know I'm only eighteen and three-quarters, and therefore have less life experience than a garlic naan, but I still think that's bullshit. Like, can you imagine this excuse being used anywhere else? 'Yes, m'lord, my client was indeed found covered in blood, carrying the murder weapon, and wearing a T-shirt that said "Guilty as Charged!" on the front, but in his defence, it was *complicated*.'

In this case, it wasn't that complicated. My dad left my mum—left us all, let's be blunt—and moved in with a woman he'd been seeing behind her back for almost two years. So basically, while she was still looking after, and then grieving for, Nana, and saying goodbye to Ben, and getting shafted by self-service machines, he was sneaking around like love's middle-aged dream with a woman who runs a cocktail bar in town. That was about ten months ago now, and she's still reeling.

He's tried to dodge all of the responsibility for this, to the point where he seems to be blaming everything, from my mum to Guinness to global warming, for the choices he's made. Anything other than admit he's in the wrong. He's taken the things that make my mum special, and used them against her: she was too wrapped up in worrying about the kids, too concerned with other people, too busy caring for Nana. Too preoccupied to pay him enough attention.

Basically he's a giant baby, and doesn't even see how self-obsessed he is. At one point he even muttered the immortal words 'Well, you can't deny you've let yourself go a bit, can you?' Unfortunately for him, I was outside the room and overheard this gem, then walked in and slapped him across the face. He was horrified; Mum was horrified; I suppose even I was. But using the Rule of Grown-Up Life, I can just say 'Well, it's complicated', and get away with it, can't I?

I mean, it *is* complicated. I miss my dad but I also despise him. I love him but I also have no respect for him. Because of him leaving, we had to sell the house I grew up in, and now live in a much smaller place. Our whole lives have been tipped upside down, especially Mum's. She's made the best of it, but the best isn't exactly awesome.

So now he's run off, and Ben's away, and I'm at home seeing her very quietly and very slowly fall apart. She's even doing that in a kind way, as though she doesn't want to inconvenience anyone, and she probably thinks she's fooled me. Anyone who didn't know her as well as I do would think she was fine.

She's one of those people who always says good morning to random strangers, and knows everyone's life story on the dog-walking route, and always has a smile ready. On the surface, she's Little Miss Sunshine—but I know better. I hear her crying in her bedroom late at night, and see her looking at her own body as though she can't believe it's hers. She stays cheerful until she thinks I've left the house, and then sinks into blank-faced misery. I know this because I forgot my headphones once, and came back in without her knowing. It was horrible and I snuck straight back out because I knew she'd be upset if she knew I'd seen her.

She's doing her best to put on a good front, but her confidence has gone. It's one of the reasons she hasn't applied for a new job yet, and is living off her redundancy. It's like she can't see her own value anymore. She's still a great mum. She forgets her own issues as soon as I have one, and sometimes I even make them up to give her something to fix. But I can tell she's completely grey inside, when she used to be rainbow, if that makes sense. It's like she's become the Invisible Woman, and I want her to be seen again. I want her to see herself again.

I know I've gone on a bit—you did say 'heart and soul' to be fair—and some of this has been a bit heavy, and probably all of it is inappropriate. So I also wanted to tell you some of the positives, which might even be relevant. Well, the empathy bit and the good listener bit are definitely covered—those are her defining characteristics. Dad used to wind her up and call her the 'empathy sponge', because she got so involved in the way other people might feel—except he saw it as a bad thing, obviously, because he was like an empathy void instead.

She's a good cook; she's raised a family, and we always ate well. She can bake, and do a mean Sunday roast, and seems to enjoy feeding people. I love cooking too, and sometimes there's a scuffle in the kitchen about who gets to make dinner—so you might even get a BOGOF deal.

My mum is really hard-working, and one of those irritating people who lives that whole 'if a job's worth doing it's worth doing right' ethos. And she's really good at making a home. I don't know how to describe this—she just has a knack for it. She's always up a ladder doing the decorating, and she loved giving our rooms a new look, and her idea of heaven would be taking a blank canvas house and making it into a home.

When we moved into the new house, it was pretty grim. It belonged to an older man and it hadn't been painted since about 1902. Everything was really ugly and grimy and it felt like the place where hope comes to die. She got to work straight away and transformed it—and within a month it didn't feel like that. It didn't feel like somewhere crap we'd been forced into because of Dad's roving penis. It felt like our home, where we'd always lived, clean and fresh and comfy. Not sure that's any use in a café, but it's a really nice thing about her, and something she genuinely loses herself in.

Anyway. That's that, I suppose. Except, full disclosure, it's probably not just her who needs a fresh start. It's me as well. Everything that's gone on has affected me too, plus I split up with my boyfriend and messed up my A-levels. Maybe they were all connected, I don't know, but everything seems to have gone massively wrong. I didn't feel ready to leave Mum and go to uni anyway, and I wasn't even sure what I wanted to do, but it's never nice to fail at things, is it? I might do resits at some point, and my school said they can set me up with some online courses as well, so all is not lost—I could

rediscover my inner genius in Dorset! I just know that maybe a change of scenery will be good for both of us, away from the past, and everything that reminds us of all that stuff that's gone massively wrong.

So, that's it, Laura. If you have any questions—like 'who is this crazy person?'—then feel free to ask! Even if I never hear from you, it felt weirdly good to get all of this written down. Cathartic, to use a fancy English A-level word.

Sophie Connolly xxx

## Chapter Two

My name is Maxine Connolly and I am officially Not a Morning Person.

I used to be, back in the mists of time, when I had an early shift at **M** the shop, or when I needed to get round to my mum's to sort her out for the day. And, even further back, when there were school runs to do—but that's so long ago it feels like a dream sequence now.

I kind of miss the school run era. It felt like a grind of logistics and assemblies and ironing back then, but now I see how magical it was. It didn't seem like it at the time, but having young kids was way easier in some ways than having grown-up ones. When they're little, you can control their world, keep them safe, make them happy. You always know where they are and who they're with, and jumping in a muddy puddle or eating a chocolate Hob Nob can distract them from their woes.

When they're older, when they're teenagers, all that changes. You stop worrying about broken limbs and start worrying about broken hearts. They start lying to you, and they have friends you don't know, and they drink vodka in the park instead of asking you to watch them go down the slide.

The other thing they do, apparently, is apply for jobs you don't want on your behalf, without asking your permission. Or maybe that's just specific to my teenager.

Sophie takes advantage of the fact that I am no longer a morning person to slip that one in, super-casual, leaning against the kitchen counter still wearing her tiger-print onesie. She does it while I'm still staggering around

the kitchen in my dressing gown, my eyes glued together with sleep and desperate for coffee to bring me back to life. I mean, what kind of evil genius tells someone about a major life change before they've even had their coffee? I've let our dog, Gary, out for a wee, and that's about as much as I'm capable of.

'Mum,' she says, looking all awake and young and annoying, 'we're moving to Dorset for a few months, all right? I found you a job. I've had enough of you lazing around the place while I bring home the bacon...'

Sophie has a part-time job in an amusement arcade, where she gives people plastic cups full of coins and makes sure nobody sneaks in with a screwdriver to steal the takings. It's that kind of place. She only does Saturdays, and what she earns she spends on herself, usually via the medium of 'vintage' clothes off the internet or old-school video games for her PlayStation.

'You don't bring home the bacon!' I bleat, waiting for the kettle to boil and then realising I haven't switched it on.

'Sometimes I do. Like the other week, you sent me out specifically to the shop to buy bacon, because you wanted to do a fry-up. So, technically speaking, I brought home the bacon, didn't I?'

'Technically speaking, you're being an arse this morning. I haven't even had my coffee. Why are you expecting my brain to function?'

'I never expect your brain to function,' she replies, deadpan. 'I've given up all hope. I'm not even a hundred per cent sure you've got a brain at all. But what you do have is a super-duper, totally awesome daughter. Who has found you a job.'

I've managed to combine coffee granules and hot water by this stage, but I'm still confused. I mean, I know I'll have to go back to work eventually, but at the moment it's a vague concept, lurking on a distant horizon. A bit like the diet that you always plan to start tomorrow—the one that feels okay in theory, as long as you don't actually have to open a packet of Ryvita and stock up on zero fat cottage cheese.

'I don't need a job yet,' I mumble, blinking my eyes in the hopes that everything will stop looking blurry.



‘Yeah, you do, Mum. I’m not talking about paying the gas bill here; I’m talking about the fact that you’ve become a recluse. All you do these days is sit around watching telly, and it’s not a good look. I think it’s time you removed your head from your own backside.’

‘Charming. Parenthood is so rewarding,’ I reply, rooting in the bread bin so I can make some toast.

She has a delightful way of expressing herself, my darling child, but she does have a teeny-tiny speck of a point as well. I don’t actually want any toast, but it gives me something to do to mask the fact that her words have stung me. That she might be right.

Financially, there is no burning need for me to go back to work. I have enough money for us to live on for a little while longer, because of my redundancy package and because we’ve sold our four-bedroomed detached for a really good profit. We’d almost had the mortgage paid off, and Ben was away at uni, so it made sense. Even after setting aside a bit for the kids and splitting the rest with Richie, my ex, there was enough for me to invest in a run-down terrace that needed ‘cosmetic improvement throughout’.

It made sense, but I hated selling our house. I hated showing bright young couples around, trying not to point out the flaws: the garden that floods every winter, the damp patch in the extension, the one tile missing from the roof. I wasn’t ready to give up on it or, I suppose, my marriage. I wasn’t ready to leave all those memories behind.

The good ones outweighed the bad ones, even after the last couple of years. It was still the house where we brought Ben and Sophie home from the hospital, small and wrinkled in their baby carriers. Still the house where we’d had happy Christmases and birthdays, and endless family film nights and takeaways and rows and cuddles. Still *our* house, and so much more than bricks and mortar.

But Richie didn’t seem to agree with me on that—he’d either erased those memories or they weren’t as happy as I thought—and it sold way too quickly. All that shared experience, all those years building a life together, were dismantled and packed into moving vans in the space of a day. I still walk past it sometimes, see the new family that’s living there. It always makes me

cry, and I really must stop doing it. It's that kind of behaviour that makes me think Sophie might have a teeny-tiny speck of a point.

So money-wise, I could survive a bit longer being an unemployed layabout, but work isn't just about money, is it? Not for me, anyway. Mentally, I probably need to get back out into the world, to start interacting with the land of the living again. Every day I stay at home, every day I spend watching TV and avoiding real life, it gets harder to escape the clutches of my sofa.

I'm a sociable person, always have been. I like people. I find them endlessly fascinating. I have been known to stay on a bus way past my stop just to carry on an interesting conversation, and I never met a life story yet that I didn't have questions about. Sophie says I'm just nosy, but I prefer the word 'engaged'.

These days, though, I'm neither, and I know it's upsetting her. I know I used to embarrass her when she was a kid, being on first name terms with her teachers and stopping to chat to random strangers on the street, but bizarrely, now I've stopped she seems to miss it. I hate the fact that my daughter is worried about me, at a time in her life when she should be completely carefree.

It's because of that that I actually listen to her when she carries on talking about my 'new job'. All my instincts are screaming at me to tell her to shut up, to leave me alone. Maybe give her some kind of 'I'm-the-grown-up-here' speech, or at the very least skulk off with my coffee. Instead, I just stare at her some more, and wait for her to proceed. I know she will—Sophie is incapable of staying quiet for more than five minutes unless she has a games controller in her hand.

'So,' she says, twisting her long dark hair around her fingers, a sure sign she's actually a bit nervous, 'you'll be working in a café, in Dorset. On a hill. I didn't even know where Dorset was to be fair, but it's the seaside, and you know I love the seaside.'

'Right. Well, what will I allegedly be doing, in this café, on a hill, at the seaside?'

'Cooking and, like, talking to people.'

'Talking to people?'

‘Yeah. That’s kind of part of the job description, and why I thought you’d be good at it. It’s called the Comfort Food Café, and it looks gorgeous. They have an Instagram account you could look at. Lovely cakes and dogs and views of the beach. And men, actually—all the men on the pics are really hot. Maybe they hired models? Who knows? Anyway. That’s where your new job is.’

‘I see,’ I say, leaning back against the counter, feeling an ache in my back from yet another restless night’s sleep. ‘And did they headhunt me? Narrow me down from a list of candidates passed on to them from NASA? Find me after an extensive search of boring loser chicks in the UK?’

‘You’re not boring, and you’re not a loser—but you are really irritating! I applied for you, and obviously I did an extremely good job of it.’

‘Did you pretend to be me when you filled in the form?’ I ask, feeling horrified. I dread to think what she put down as my hobbies and interests—naked bungee jumping, cage fighting, sex clubs. I wouldn’t put it past her. She once told her sixth-form English teacher that her dad and I had split up because I decided to be a bride of Christ, change my name to Maria von Trapp and move to a convent in Austria. The teacher knew us too well to believe her, but apparently she shared this revelation with the earnest delivery of an MP swearing they had no idea a party during lockdown was breaking the rules.

‘No, there wasn’t a form,’ she says, stealing my toast as soon as it pops up and slathering it with butter. ‘It was all a bit weird really. I had to send them an email, and pour heart and soul into it. And before you ask, no, I didn’t tell any huge lies—not even a small one, Mum! I can show it to you if you like, but I’d rather not. I’m actually nice about you in it, and it might fracture our fun Spongebob versus Squidward vibe.’

We pause at that point, and both of us say, at exactly the same time: ‘I’m Spongebob!’ I mean, nobody wants to be Squidward, do they?

I am curious about what she’s said about me, of course, but something about the set of her face puts me off insisting she tells me. I’m guessing she put a lot more heart and soul into her email than she’s currently comfortable sharing with me.

Again, I'm aware of how hard things have been for her as well recently: her dad leaving, the move, the split with Jack, bombing her A-levels, Ben being away (much as she pretends to hate him, I know she misses the constant combat). Even as she explains her insane plan, she looks nervous, jittery, and maybe underneath that even a bit sad. I can tell that she desperately wants me to listen, to believe, to at least give it all a chance. She's trying so hard to come off as a confident grown-up that she seems even more like a little girl, which always melts me.

Maybe, I think, as I sip scalding hot coffee and watch her perform her obviously rehearsed big sell, I've underestimated how bad things have been for her. Or maybe I've underestimated how much she's noticed about me. Us mums like to think we're superheroes, don't we? Putting on a brave face, always convincing our kids that everything is fine. Like that scene in *Titanic* when the mum puts her babies to sleep and reads them a bedtime story, even as the ship sinks.

It's a lot easier when they're little, when they believe every word that comes out of your fibbing mouth. They even believe that a magical fat man in a red suit climbs down every chimney in the world with sacks full of toys. That's probably the first whopper we tell our kids, and we carry on doing it.

But if Sophie thinks I'm so down I need a pick-me-up in the form of a relocation package and a new career, I've obviously not done that good a job of hiding quite how low I've sunk. That makes me cringe inside, but it also makes me listen.

'Why,' I eventually ask, 'were you looking for jobs for me in Dorset anyway? It's hours away!'

'I know. And to start with, I wasn't looking for jobs for you; I was looking for me. Just browsing. Then I accidentally got sucked into one of those internet rabbit holes, you know? Where you keep clicking buttons and your brain keeps expanding to take in all the new crap you've just discovered?'

'I am familiar with that, yes. But Dorset?'

'I thought it was Cornwall, not gonna lie. And I know you like Cornwall. And I decided you should get a job and this one seemed just about random enough and weird enough that it might work. I was kind of surprised when it did. Anyway. None of that matters now. You've got a video call with Laura,