

John Griffin

A SHORT HISTORY OF LAMINGTONS

1. How to Make Icing for Lamingtons

I always feel a great empathy for the Indian Ocean, said Angus Trilogy.

From the kitchen window of his flat, one street back from the beach in Cottesloe, he could see in the angle between two buildings closer to the beach a bright blue patch of ocean. There was a light breeze coming off the sea.

Because you are Indian yourself, I suppose, said Norma, his lover, who was waiting for him to finish making the chocolate icing he was busy with.

She had watched him pour boiling water over butter, and mix cocoa into that until he had a shining gluey paste and a rim of cocoa powder on the bench around the bowl. Then he added icing sugar from a plastic bag, blending it into the cocoa and butter mixture with a flat-bladed knife until it was of a uniform colour.

The mixture was heavy, and so Angus Trilogy added a little more hot water from the kettle, and then a little more, until the mixture had a consistency like cream. Norma got the desiccated coconut from the cupboard.

I put up with a lot for you, Angus.

I love you for it. You know that I love you for it, he said.

That icing had better not be hot.

Oh, no, the icing sugar removes all the heat. You will find it deliciously warm, that is all, he said, poking a finger into it to test the temperature, just in case.

Norma took off her T-shirt while Angus was cleaning his hands, and then, with his help, dipped first her left breast and then her slightly larger right breast into the runny icing mixture.

It was a recipe straight out of a Women's Weekly cook book Angus had bought at an opportunity shop.

Now he spread a pile of the coconut in a breakfast bowl and allowed Norma to take charge of the business of coating her confectionery breasts with the

coconut. He did not want to get any finger marks on the icing, and watched Norma roll her breasts one way and then the other until they were perfectly covered.

She displayed them to him.

Lovely lovely lamingtons, was all he said, and then they walked carefully, with a little spurt of coconut falling onto the carpet, into the bedroom, where the blankets had already been pulled back and only a sheet covered the bed.

Norma lay down on the bed, again carefully, and allowed Angus Trilogy to remove her skirt and panties before he stepped out of his own clothes and lay down beside her.

They're ready, was all she said, and shut her eyes.

Angus Trilogy knelt beside her, first on her left, then on her right side, while he ate the lamingtons he had made, licking her breasts clean of the icing mixture and the coconut.

It made a mess of him, of her, and of the sheet and pillows.

Angus ignored the mess, enjoyed the sweetness, and kept a clear eye on the geography of Norma's lamington breasts as he licked and swallowed. He saw the nipple distend and grow erect, and watched in wonder as the drying icing cracked around it and fell away. That icing was the sweetest of all to lick and suck.

Now let us do what we men and women are designed by our provident god to do best, and let us do it well, and enjoy it, said Angus to Norma, when he had finished licking and nibbling.

Why don't you Indians say what you mean, instead of using lots of words with no meaning?

It is part of our undoubted charm that we talk like this. And you forget, my dear, that I am not all Indian, as I have explained to you before, and doubtless will have to explain to you again.

2. Lamingtons Make a Mess

When they had made love, they were a mess of chocolate-coloured icing, for what had fallen onto the bed now stuck onto many parts of their bodies. They had a shower immediately afterwards, as was their routine, and then Angus gathered up the sheet and tossed the loose coconut over the balcony, where it fell like snow onto the little patio in front of Mrs Nguyen's ground floor flat and was quickly discovered by the sparrows.

Then they put the sheet and pillowcases into the washing machine and afterwards hung them out to dry.

They wash their sheets nearly every day, said Mrs Nguyen to her husband that night. Two weeks they have lived in that flat, and this is the tenth time they have washed their sheets.

3. The Colour of Lamingtons

Angus Trilogy made a cup of coffee for Norma before she left in the late afternoon for the night shift at a City Beach nursing home. With the coffee, they ate lamingtons which Angus had bought at the local Woolworths supermarket.

I've tasted better, Angus, she said.

Yes, I was thinking that too. I shall make some myself today or tomorrow.

You and lamingtons. I've heard of lots of fetishes in my time, but this is the silliest. Lamingtons!

Well, they do turn us on, don't they, and we always have good sex afterwards. Don't we? You know, Norma, it was a shock to arrive in this country and discover that my illustrious ancestor was known here because a cake had been named after him.

Are you sure he is your ancestor?

If my grandfather's story is true, he was my great great grandfather. Not that anyone knows for sure, but when you are an Anglo-Indian it makes for a better place in a small society if your British ancestor is a governor of Bombay than if he was a Welsh soldier or a clerk in the government post office.

So you don't know for sure?

My grandfather found some papers which his grandmother had, and these certainly lead to the conclusion that Baron Lamington might just have been having some extramarital recreation while he was the governor of Bombay. Getting his trousers off among the natives.

Norma laughed. No one would leave that kind of evidence behind, Angus. You don't document those things.

There was a photograph, I tell you, though I have not got a copy of it. My brother Fergus took it to England when he went there, to try to see if the story is true.

And what did Fergus find out?

He said that there was no conclusive evidence one way or the other. He did a great deal of research, he told me when he wrote to me.

In other words it's not true. You Indians. You make up stories to please yourself.

Angus Trilogy looked at his lover, dressed ready for work in her nurse's uniform.

I think that somewhere behind that beautiful white skin of yours, Norma, there is the little black heart of a racist. You are always looking at me like that with your beautiful eyes and saying things like: You Indians this and You Indians that.

Norma knew that Angus was stirring her. He often did, pouncing on little verbal clues to try to take advantage in a relationship which not only had its ups and downs but lots of cocoa-based chocolate icing in it as well.

You know I'm not a racist, Angus. Would I go to bed with you if I was?

Perhaps you are a racist imperialist exploiting me. You go to bed with me because I am the best lover you have ever had and because you cannot resist looking at—

Norma broke in, because this conversation was becoming a ritual between them and it was her time to stir.

—looking at your beautiful black body.

Angus bridled, as she intended him to do.

I am not a black man, I am brown, all over, and I have English blood in me. Every generation for the last three generations we have all been Anglo-Indians and that is not the same as Indians I will have you know. And we are not black. We are most definitely not black.

Norma laughed, and Angus joined in with her.

You sound like an Anglo-Indian racist talking. Admit it. With that, she leaned over to him, with a lamington in her hand, which she pushed into the neck of his shirt and crumbled against his skin.

There, she said. You can lick it off yourself. I'm off to work.

4. Naming the Cake

Baron Lamington, the governor of the colony of Queensland in the last years of the nineteenth century, did not find Queensland to be as congenial as he later found Bombay. It was not only that the people of Queensland were in favour of Federation and he was not, nor that the socialism he detested seemed to him to be gaining a foothold. It was, rather, that he found himself at odds with members of the colonial government when he made clear that he thought that the Aborigines of Queensland were being treated badly by the whites; and when he went on a tour of British New Guinea he reached the same conclusions about the treatment of the Melanesians there.

He said so, and was very unpopular. He was muttered about behind his back, and flattered obsequiously to his face by all who came into his presence, because he was after all the representative of Queen Victoria. The members of the colonial government regretted that they had named the Lamington Plateau for him, and some of them spoke their minds in their consultation with him.

Outside the privacy of the government, not a word of criticism appeared in print, not a satirical cartoon, not a lampoon. Instead, someone named a cake for him, a common little plain cake soaked in thin chocolate icing and dusted with coconut, an invention of a Queensland housewife who was trying to find a way of rejuvenating her family's interest in a large block of plain cake which had dried out in the heat of a November week.

The cake, unnamed, became popular in Brisbane and the nearby districts by the turn of the century. Someone with wit and malice named it after their governor.

Because, they whispered to one another, this man is not a white man. All the white is on the surface, like the coconut, but under that he is a black man.

Queensland laughed, but Governor Lamington and his wife Mary never heard the laughter, or if they did hear it they never knew why the sleeves and the handkerchiefs and fans went up to hide the mocking smiles, but they wrote back to Britain that a plateau, a volcano, and a cake had been named after Her Majesty's representative in Queensland.

Eventually, at the end of the year in which the Queen herself died, the Lamingtons returned to England to await another appointment, and there was, for quite some time, no voice in Queensland to speak for those who were being dispossessed.

5. It Could Have Been Volcanoes

I had never heard of this Baron Lamington, said Norma, two days later as she waited for Angus Trilogy to make the icing mixture. Did you know before you came to Australia that he had been governor of Queensland?

I had only ever heard that he had been governor of Bombay, which of course was a very important position in British India.

Bombay's just another city, isn't it?

Oh no my dear. A very rich city, and of course a city of the Parsees, who are the most noble of all the peoples of India.

But you're not a racist, you tell me.

The Indian part of me is Parsee, my dear, and I am as proud of that as I am of having an English Baron as an ancestor.

If he was.

I want to believe that he was, and I can tell you that when I came to this country and saw fat little cakes in shops with the name of my ancestor on them, I was shocked. Did you know there was a plateau and a national park with his name in Queensland, and a volcano in New Guinea?

A volcano. Then I'm glad it's just the cakes you're obsessed about, and not the volcano. I shudder to think what you would do to me if you had volcanoes on the brain.

Well, my dear, I tell you, I think very little of volcanoes. I prefer to think of these sweet lamingtons we will have in a moment. That is enough for contentment.

No volcanoes, Angus?

Deep inside me, of course, there is lava smouldering always, Norma. I have a fire in my heart.

And the best line of bullshit this side of the Indian Ocean. Have you got that stuff ready yet? I'll be late for work again.

