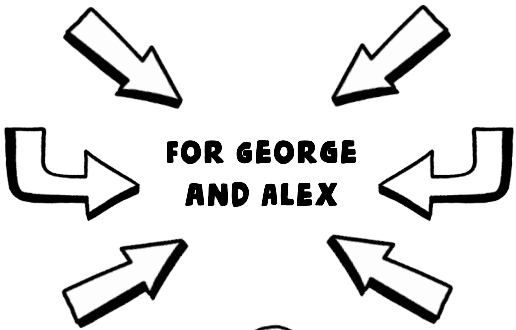


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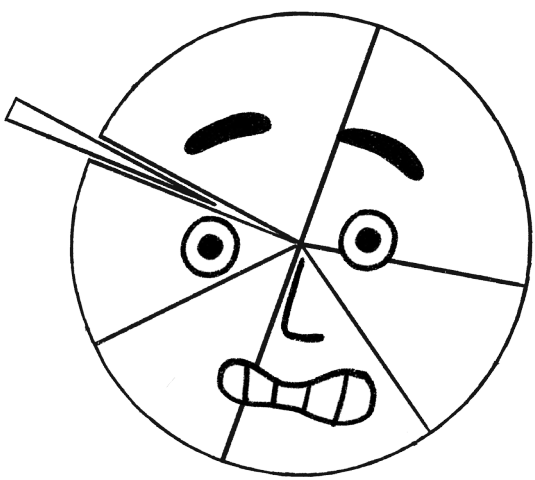
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PLANET STAN

MY LIFE IN PIE CHARTS

(OR THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SURVIVING BROTHERS)



ELAINE WICKSON

PICTURES BY CHRIS JUDGE

OXFORD
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TRICKS-UP-YOUR-SLEEVE

'It's taking me seven whole years to do this homework!' moans Fred.

He's only five.

'Stan, help him out would you?' Mum says.

I've tried to get out of doing my brother's homework before by joining the after school club. But unfortunately I'm not a natural at country dancing, so I fetch my felt tips.

'I've got to draw a stupid healthy meal, with scusting vegetables and everything,' Fred says holding up a paper plate. 'Not even no pudding.'

'Just doodle some green squiggles on it,' I suggest. 'And call it broccoli.'

But instead he picks up a brown felt-tip and

dots the plate in Chocco Pops so furiously that the end of the pen gets wedged inside and yet he still keeps going.

'Fred,' I tut. 'Chocolate isn't one of your five-a-day.'

'Yes it is!' he shouts, standing on his chair and spilling the remnants of his juice all over my carefully drawn solar system homework.

'At least they kind of look like stars,' Mum says, pointing to the flecks of sticky orange strewn throughout the Kuiper Belt. 'Go hang your homework on the washing line, love. It's tea time.'

Family tea. Another hazard in the home where you not only need your wits about you, but some **Tricks-Up-Your-Sleeve**, and if you can get away with it, some biscuits up your sleeve too.

Before sitting down, arm yourself with the following:

- BLU TACK
- WATERPROOF TROUSERS
- BISCUITS UP YOUR SLEEVES

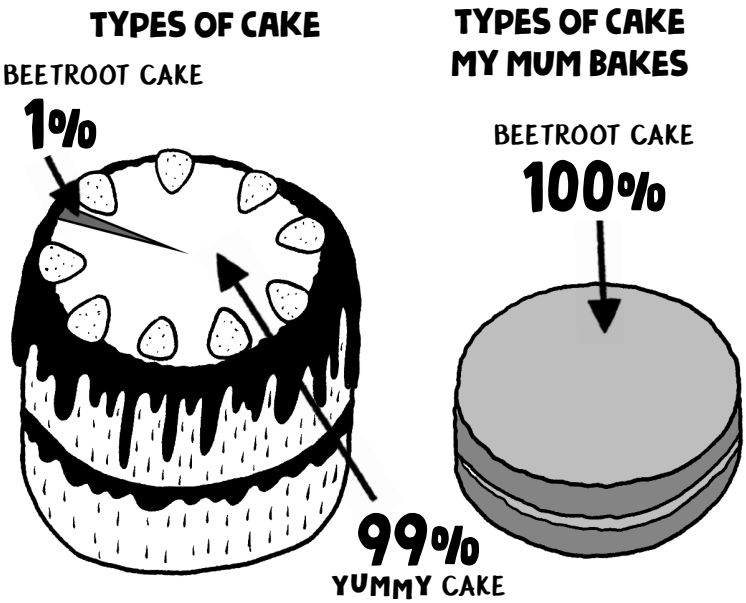
The whole family in a confined space around the kitchen table is a situation waiting to blow. And usually over what gets served up.

This is where cake comes in handy again. Cake can help explain a multitude of things. You may call it a pie chart, but I call it a cake chart.

Who would choose pie over cake?

Not me.

HERE ARE TWO CAKE CHARTS ABOUT CAKE:



'It's the only way I can get Fred to eat vegetables,' shrugs Mum.

Fred's favourite dinner is 'crisps and rice' and I'm not even joking. Most of my dinners revolve around what he will and won't eat. Never mind what I want to eat (a roast dinner that doesn't involve Pringles and egg fried rice if you're asking).

Mum's obviously feeling brave today by putting something new on the table: spaghetti Bolognese.

'I spy with my little eye . . . someting beginning with scuh . . .' Freddie grumbles. 'Scusting!'

'Life's a journey, not a bus stop,' Mum says. 'So hop on the Bolognese bus before we drive off to destination pudding without you.'

'I can't fit any more food in my tummy,' Fred moans, lifting his top and shoving out his belly.

'You haven't eaten any food yet, sunshine,' Dad lowers his newspaper.

'I ate nine Jammy Dodgers after school,' and then he gasps and covers his mouth.

'I hid that biscuit barrel on top of the cupboard you crafty fox!' Mum exclaims.

TROUBLESHOOTING BISCUITS

Store your biscuit stash in hollowed-out books (don't hollow out your own books—sacrilege!—I've hollowed out Dad's unread football manager biographies that are stacked at the back of the cupboard).

Fred sniffs out biscuits like a pig sniffs out whatever pigs sniff out. Give him any house, in any town, in any country, and he'll find them, even if there's a national biscuit shortage.

'Just put brown sauce on it, Fred,' Dad says, squeezing it all over his spaghetti.

'You don't need sauce on the authentic flavours of Italy!' Mum cries.

'It's not Italy, it's yuck!' Fred pushes his plate so far across the table, it ALMOST knocks my cup over, but I remembered to stick it down with **BLU TACK**.

'Ooh, have you seen this?' Dad folds his newspaper back and turns it around. 'Look

who's in the paper.'

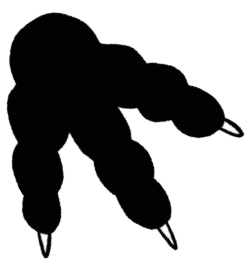
Freddie's eyes pop open as he leans forward to get a better look, putting his elbow in my dinner.

'RORY!' he yells.

'Get your arm out of my Bolognese!' I yell back.

He points, as though that makes up for it. It *IS* Rory, I'll give him that. Along with the large headline:

DINO TO GO



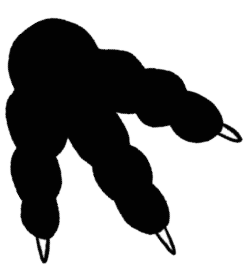
Although I'm more taken by the science fair entry form on the other page and make a mental note to cut it out.

'Let me see.' Freddie climbs forward even more and puts his knee in my spaghetti.

'Mum! Tell Fred to get out of my dinner!'

'Why's Rory in the paper? *Is* he coming back to life?'

'No he's not, Fred,' Dad replies, half reading the article. 'It says they're replacing Rory with an exhibition relevant to



today's pressing issues. What? How to get rid of slugs?'

Fred looks angry-puzzled, as he always does when he doesn't understand something. Like the time I told him he couldn't keep ringing Gran, burping, and putting the phone down.

'They're getting rid of Rory?' Mum says, twirling her spaghetti. 'Gosh. He was even there when I was little.'

'No more Rory?' Freddie frowns heavily.

'I'm sure the new exhibition will be awesome,' I try to say cheerfully. 'There might even be new questions.'

'Nonebody talk to me!' He flips his plate of spaghetti up in the air and on to my lap, then rushes upstairs to our bedroom.

'Oi!' yells Dad. 'I could have eaten that!'

The classic plate flip. Luckily I'm wearing **WATERPROOF TROUSERS**—there's nothing worse than sitting in a pair of spaghetti-soaked jeans. Apart from overheating in spaghetti-soaked waterproof trousers.



'Why can't we have just one teatime that doesn't descend into chaos?' moans Mum. 'Stan, go and have a word with your brother.'

'But I'm trying to eat . . .' I look at the squashed mess on my plate, with bits of grass from Fred's grass-stained knees, mud from his mud-stained elbows, and some other green bits I don't want to study too closely. *CAN I GET A BOGEY WITH MY BOLOGNESE?* said no one ever.

Quite often you won't get to finish your tea and this is where **BISCUITS UP YOUR SLEEVES** come in handy to stave off the hunger. Remember—the bigger the jumper, the more biscuits you can stuff up the sleeves.

I reluctantly climb the stairs to find Fred lying on MY bed, having wiped his Bolognese limbs on MY pillow, sobbing snotty tears all over MY pyjamas. Stupid me. I forgot to laminate my whole bed.

'Listen, it'll be fine, Fred, you'll see,' I try to convince



him, reading aloud from the paper. 'There's going to be a *GIANT MODEL EARTH EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE*.'

'Don't care.'

'Which is precisely why we need this exhibition! It's up to your generation to *SAVE THE PLANET* by . . . um . . . *BUILDING A NEWLY EXPANDED COFFEE SHOP WITH DELICIOUS PASTRIES*.'

'Do I like 'licious pastries?' he sniffs, lifting his head.

'It's basically flat cake, so yes,' I go to rub his hair affectionately but remember it smells of wet donkey.

'I want Rory . . .' he looks about to burst into tears again—dangerously near my drawing of a solar eclipse in pastels which I've carelessly left on my bedside table instead of *ON TOP OF THE WARDROBE OUT OF REACH*.

'I'll run you a bath . . . biggest bubbles on the planet . . .' I manage to tempt him away from my masterpiece.

Only Fred decides to make an indoor ocean by splashing water all over the bathroom floor.

'You really should know better than to let him near taps,' Mum sighs. 'You'll have to read his bedtime story while I mop it up.'

'Oh but—'

'Buts are for pants! Mum can't do everything round here, believe me Mum feels like she does everything round here, but it's already half-past Mum o'clock!'



Fair enough.

'What about Dad?'

'I'm cleaning the mess in the kitchen!' Dad yells up, clearly with a mouthful of food. 'It's going to take me a good twenty-minutes-to-half-an-hour to eat all this spaghetti.'

Precisely the time it takes to read Fred's favourite book—Two by Two. It's only eight pages, but he insists on naming every pair of animals lining up to go inside Noah's Ark. And even though I've read it to him 3,581 times, he

always gets the animals wrong.

At least there's no trace of nose debris on his face after the flood. He smells of coconut as he snuggles up beside me, shoving his cold feet under mine inside my slippers.

'Noah has built a wooden ark to sail away to safety. Let's see what animals are coming aboard today . . .' I flip the page.

'Malingos?' Freddie interrupts.

'No.'



One page later and it happens all over again.



'Look, it's quite clearly a meerkat.'

Cut to me squillions of years later and I'm a skeleton surrounded by dust and tarantulas, people are living on MARS, and Fred's still only on page two. Perhaps we should take up Gran's suggestion and take him to the zoo.

Then he stops, and pulls a face so crumpled, I can't see his eyes.

'Why didn't Mr Noah put the T-rexes on his ark?'

'Do you ever listen to a word I say?'

'Nope.'

'Sixty-five million years ago an enormous meteorite crashed to Earth,' I recite. 'It filled the air with so much dust it blocked out the sun. The plants died, then the plant-eaters died, then the meat-eaters died—'

'Then the pudding-eaters died?'

'Something like that. But it wiped out all the dinosaurs, Fred.'

He looks at me for a moment, as though he truly understands the enormity of what I've just told him, the real reason why Rory stands in a museum without his skin. But no.

'He should have eaten crisps and rice,' and he starts jumping up and down on my bed.

'Right. Sleepy times,' I say, lifting him off and handing back the dinosaur toys he brought with him. 'You really should get Mum to wash them, they're covered in dust—'

AAAAAA-CHOOOOOO!

he sneezes all over my bedside table. All over my interpretation of a solar eclipse in pastels. Which now has six more solar flares than it did before. Of all the tricks I keep up my sleeve, why isn't one of them a tissue?

