COOK UNTIL TENDER: A MEMOIR

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ABSTRACT

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What are the foods of your childhood? Who do you remember cooking for you, and how did those dishes influence who you became as you grew up? These are some of the central questions of *Cook Until Tender*, a collection of eight creative nonfiction essays plus an introduction, each of which focuses on a particular family member and my relationship to them via the medium of food. Across all of the essays in *Cook Until Tender*, food is a way into much larger, thornier topics, such as love, grief, death, culture, masculinity, and socio-economic class.

As the child of a restaurateur and chef, I have always had a deep connection to food. In my lifetime alone, my father has owned and operated a restaurant, a grocery store, and a commercial fishing and crabbing business. I am also of Greek and Appalachian heritage, two cultures that take cooking and eating very seriously, from feta cheese to fried bread dough. These lineages appear in the collection in "How to Love Yiayia[’s Meatballs]" and "The Provider" respectively.

On a craft level, most of the essays in *Cook Until Tender* are written in narrative nonfiction style. Most essays are longform (10-15 pages) and written in first person from an "I" of the present day. The narrator recalls past childhood and adolescent events from the perspective of an adult several years removed. She considers family relationships and how they've changed from then to now. In "Like Mom Used to Make," I explore matrilineage: what did my mom inherit from her mom, and what have I inherited from both of them? In "The Dishwasher," I meditate on my young childhood, and how the dynamic I built with my brother has carried into our present adulthoods.

Some essays—such as “Homegrown” and “The Prospect of Never”—incorporate research. “Homegrown” assesses agricultural industry practices related to tomato farming, putting my family’s backyard gardening in a broader context. “The Prospect of Never” cites medical research and science communications about alpha gal syndrome, a set of food allergies I was recently diagnosed with that serves as the focal point of this essay.

Additionally, there are some essays where I experiment with form, tense, and point-of-view. “Papou’s Palate Cleansers” is written in list format, prefaced by a few narrative paragraphs exploring my grandfather as a character. “With Extra Chocolate Chips” alternates between the second-person pronoun “you” and the narrative voice I described previously, that of an adult looking back on past events. In contrast to the rest of the collection, which is mostly written in past tense, “The Prospect of Never” is written entirely in present tense. This decision serves two purposes: one, to more deeply engage the reader in the events that take place, and two, to give the impression that these events and their consequences are still ongoing.

I limited my scope for this project to members of my immediate family (parents and brother) plus grandparents. In addition to the previously mentioned portrait style essays, there are also two pieces that look inward: “Homegrown” and “The Prospect of Never.” “Homegrown” examines how I see myself as a member of my family unit through the lens of gardening and tomatoes. “The Prospect of Never” is a re-evaluation of myself and my worldviews after I’m diagnosed with alpha gal syndrome.

In addition to personal lived experience, a number of books I’ve read over the last several years have influenced my creation of this project. *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner is a contemporary counterpart, especially given that book’s investigations of ethnicity and culture, complicated relationships with one’s parents, and how to cope with grief from the loss of a loved

one to major illness. *Relish: My Life in the Kitchen* by Lucy Knisley is a graphic memoir that also examines relationships with one's parents as well as larger social forces like feminism and sexuality, which have long been major themes in my writing. And even though it's a novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* by Fannie Flagg was a landmark book for me in learning how to use food to tell family and queer stories.

Throughout my time in the MFA, I've taken a number of courses that prepared me for this project. Most obvious would be Creative Nonfiction Workshop with KT Thompson and The History of Life Writing with Laura Gray-Rosendale. These courses were invaluable in shaping my knowledge of creative nonfiction as a craft and as a genre. But looking back, the most central course for this project was Climate Science Writing with Nicole Walker. During this class, I had a revelation that would eventually lead me to write *Cook Until Tender*. I realized that creative nonfiction can be about anything, even the mundane. I used to think that writing about my family or my life would be boring to read. Everyone has a grandma; what makes my grandma unique, really? But as Charles Baxter wrote in an article for Biographile, "You don't have to set a Chevrolet on fire or have someone murdered on the first page to get the reader's attention…The truth about a situation is always big enough to sustain someone's attention." In memoir, the small, everyday moments are what matter, because they can lead into larger truths and bigger questions. This has been my approach with *Cook Until Tender*: begin with something relatable and ordinary—what's more ordinary than something you do roughly three times a day?—and use this as a springboard into something deeper.

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Introduction

If you could have dinner with anyone, living or dead, who would it be and why?

Maybe this is the kind of thing where I should make up an answer to keep the mood light. That's the whole point of icebreakers. I'm supposed to show these new acquaintances how fun and creative I am so we can "bond." It might be cool to have dinner with Frida Kahlo or Carrie Fisher, sure, and my saying so would signal that I admire strong, funny women who swear a lot and who've overcome considerable physical and mental illness to create great art. But if I'm given the opportunity to resurrect the dead, I'd bring back one of my grandmothers without a second thought.

I grew up surrounded by food. I don't mean that in a literal sense; our dining room did not resemble a royal dinner with a stretching table piled high with succulent meats, trays of fresh fruit, and saucers full of jams and jellies. I mean that food was embedded into all aspects of my family's life. My dad owned a restaurant, then a grocery store, when my brother and I were in elementary school. When she picked me up from preschool, my neighbor/third parent Ms. Sue had tidy Tupperware containers filled with sliced apples and Goldfish crackers for me to snack on in my car seat. Food was the means through which my family moved through the world, a belief system that impressed itself upon me at an early age and has stuck with me ever since. Separated from my family since I moved across the country to complete my MFA almost two years ago, I turned to food as a way to hold on to where I came from.

And so, we return to the initial question. Here's who I'd choose.

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We would sit in the old dining room, the one we had before the house was remodeled, with the cushy blue carpet and the long, shiny, dark wood table hidden underneath a red plastic tablecloth. It's fitting that this imaginary scene take place somewhere that no longer exists.

My dad would sit at the head of the table, not only because he's the patriarch, but so he has more room on either side. So he doesn't feel claustrophobic, even among his closest relatives, and so he can get up when the pain in his back starts to flare or he needs a cigarette. Next to his plate would sit his ever-present silver and black Yeti cup, the biggest size they make, full to the brim with ice and Cherry Coke Zero.

My younger brother Chris would sit next to him. Chris would take off his signature Washington Capitals 2018 Stanley Cup Champions baseball cap and rest it on his knee, manners left over from a time much older than us. He would strategize with our dad about his latest business venture or construction project, and they would gripe about expensive building materials and the annoying and bureaucratic county government. Chris and my dad's plates would be almost identical: a little piece of everything, sauce or gravy drizzled over top of a chunk of meat.

When she finally sits down—which will be a good 15 minutes after everyone else has, because she's running back and forth to the kitchen, grabbing forgotten drinks and condiments—my mom would sit next to her parents, my Yiayia and Papou. Papou must be seated a substantial distance from my dad because Papou's sloppy eating turns my dad's stomach. My mom and her parents would engage in a triangle of banter, turning everything into an argument in the way that only Greeks can. Papou will badger Yiayia and my mom throughout the dinner for things like salt, an extra napkin, ketchup, yet another napkin, more bread. He'll finish his dinner by the time my mom sits down, burp, then drum his fingers on the tabletop until everyone else finishes.

Yiayia will harass my mom about how she's raising her children, recommend the latest "treatment" she saw on Dr. Oz for my dad's back pain. My mom will tell her parents, in vain, to get off her back while she nevertheless caters to their whims, cutting up Papou's steak into small pieces.

On the other side of the table would be Ms. Sue and Gregg, healthy and vibrant, early into their retirement years. They'll chatter away about their latest skiing trip, or where they're planning to go scuba diving next summer. Ms. Sue will eat polite but reasonable portions, sipping on an iced tea with lemon that she's sweetened herself with just a dash of Sweet'n Low. Gregg will regale us with a tale from last Monday's sailing session, which he attends every week with fellow "old guys" he used to work with at the NSA.

I would sit somewhere in the middle, next to Chris, if I had my pick (and I do, because I'm the one inventing this scene). My brother and I will joke about memes, and he'll catch me up on the latest hockey trades and rumors. My husband Ryan will sit on the other side of me, mixing new and concerning combinations on his plate like a child blending all the paint colors together. I see a muddy brown concoction, but Ryan swears olives and sweet potatoes taste good together. He will work intently at his plate without much comment, except for occasional quips interjected into Chris and I's conversation. When I inevitably get full and realize I've taken too much food, I will slide the extra onto Ryan's plate, where he will devour these momentary leftovers.

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This is an illusory scene, of course. I've mixed and matched across time to create my Platonic ideal of a family dinner, one where everyone is the best version of themselves: physically healthy, mentally sound. It's wishful thinking at best, delusion and denial at worst.

But isn't that what the game asks of us? To suspend some notions of reality in the name of better understanding our relationships with others? Isn't that what writing is, really?

I've given you the "who" of the dinner party question. The "why" is the basis for the ensuing essay collection. I've left a seat for you at the dining table: here's your plate.

The Dishwasher

My life in the kitchen does not begin until I am almost two, after my brother is born.

Chris and I had two cooking playsets in our youth: one at our parents' house in the downstairs playroom, and one at our neighbor-grandma Ms. Sue's house in what we called the "toy room." The one at home was part of a larger playset given to us by one of our dad's friends. All of the pieces were oak and painted over with a shiny, smooth gloss. There was an oven with stovetop, a fridge, and a counter prep area with upper and lower cabinets. The handles and knobs were bright red, and other details like stovetop burners and temperature gauges were painted on in crisp black lines. Our parents saved boxes from dry goods like cereal and crackers for us to populate our play pantry. We crowded the cabinets with chip cans and empty milk jugs in addition to our plastic food.

The playset at Ms. Sue's was a simple, plastic, one-piece unit with everything attached. It was mostly white with purple counters and range hood. The stovetop sat as the focal point: above it was the microwave, below it was the oven with the buttery-yellow door. Flanking both sides of the stovetop were two prep areas, one with a sink and the other with a toaster. At some point, I stuck a real pretzel into the toaster slot, only to find I couldn't get it out. Any time I used the playset, I stared down into the depths of the plastic chasm, wondering if it was still in there, and it was, a tangible marker of my mistake. Ants found the pretzel and overtook our kitchen, but their reign was brief: Ms. Sue moved the playset outside and dumped hot water into the toaster slot to kill them. I imagined her like a medieval knight, guarding our castle by pouring a vat of boiling liquid onto the invading army.

In these early kitchens, Chris and I worked in tandem. We fried rubbery bacon strips that resembled dog toys and paired them with stiff sunny side up eggs. We cut tomatoes and

eggplants in half at their Velcro centers with flat yellow knives. We placed pre-piled mountains of spaghetti with meat sauce in round white bowls. We often played restaurant and served our stuffed animals and Barbie dolls, but usually, we cooked for each other. Our parents or Ms. Sue would come check on us, and even come to the restaurant as customers on occasion, but for the most part, it was as it always was: just Chris and me. We were chef and sous chef, chef and diner, chef and wait staff, chef and dishwasher, but it was both of us, only and always, a unit, a team.

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My brother and I are only 21 months apart. I might have been the older sibling, but I harbored no resentment or yearning for the time B.C. (Before Chris), a time I never remembered. According to our parents, I was nothing but excited when they told me I was going to be a big sister. Upon meeting my newborn brother, I pushed my face into his, nearly nose to nose, and chirped, "Hi, buddy!" I would echo this refrain throughout our early years, and even into today sometimes, when I'm trying to get his goat.

Maybe our narrow age gap blurred the line between typical older-younger sibling dynamics. I helped Chris with homework, told him which teachers to appease and which to avoid, and he squashed bugs and offered to take my cold medicine for me. I handed him my Game Boy Advance to beat the Pokémon gym leaders I couldn't. We have each held the other as they cried after being yelled at by our father.

We lived in a very small neighborhood—about 30 houses, many of which were second homes and only occupied in the summer. There were a handful of children our age, most of them boys that Chris befriended. I tagged along when I got tired of reading or playing with my dolls. We made friends at school, but we couldn't get to any of their houses on our own: an adult had

to drive us. Our narrow country roads had no shoulders or sidewalks, making biking outside of our neighborhood impossible. My brother was thus my default playmate.

Would I have liked another sibling, or friends that lived closer by? Our mom had a hysterectomy when we were 8 and 10 respectively, so additional children were out of the question at that point. But I remember my parents asking us, before then, if we'd like another brother or sister. Chris gave an enthusiastic "yes," but this idea perturbed me. I insisted, "No, no! I don't want anyone else!"

A girl, J, lived next door to us in our early childhood, when we were about 3 and 5 years old. When I went to play at her house, Chris usually came with me. There were times when he and I traded looks, the kind that only siblings can share when they are at someone else's house, reacting to the strange way other families do things. J and her sister were allowed to eat on the couch; we had to eat at the kitchen table, sitting upright and prim in our hardback wooden chairs. They also did not have mandatory clean up time after playing. These children left their toys out, doll accessories and Lite Brite pegs carpeting the floor (and rife for stepping on, according to our parents). Their house sometimes felt like a foreign country where my brother and I clung to each other in the face of lawlessness.

J moved away after about two years, and I missed her for a time, but soon found other friends after starting school. My opinion on her had soured, anyway, after her dog bit Chris—not hard enough to really wound him, but enough for my trust in her to be questioned. What kind of friend didn't watch out for my little brother the way I did? We were a package deal.

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Our paths diverged in high school, furthering down the roads Chris and I had already paved for ourselves. I focused on academics, taking as many Advanced Placement courses as I could to stave off boredom, and he developed his social connections.

It took Chris half as much time to make twice as many friends as I did in high school. And they were across grade levels, too, not just limited to his class. He always had a gaggle of students clustered around him when I would pass him in the hallway. I didn't know how he did it. It almost made me jealous. How was it so easy to get people to like him while I struggled to hold anyone's attention besides those who wanted to copy my homework? Didn't he know how hard it was for me? I resented his ability to turn his charisma—or as our dad called it, the Hylton Charm—on and off like a light switch. Why couldn't my brother be content with me, his oldest friend? Was I no longer enough?

To my delight and impatience, high school ended and I moved on to where I felt I truly belonged: college. Here I had a much easier time finding friends who genuinely liked me. I no longer felt like an unlovable recluse, my brother's weird sister who stayed home on the weekends and read books rather than going to parties. I got *invited* to parties. I was no longer the simple dishwasher to my brother's remarkable cookery, but rather, a cook in my own right.

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Chris is a tinkerer, an experimenter. I know this is partially due to how boys are socialized in the U.S.—they're given science kits and model cars rather than makeup sets or dolls, told to innovate and experiment rather than imitate or roleplay. But I think it's also just part of Chris' nature to want to try new things. He never suffered from the kind of pickiness I did when it came to food: he ate anything and everything he was given. He drank coffee at age 5, craved double chocolate cake and kimchi in equal measure. By comparison, my usual Subway

order until I was in my teens was ham and Swiss on plain white bread: untoasted, no toppings, no dressings or sauces. My brother had a boldness I lacked. Maybe his gender freed him from a fear of making mistakes, but regardless, I considered him much braver than me. He had a strong desire to see how things worked and try them for himself. When Ms. Sue got a new dishwasher, Chris saved the old one so he could take it apart—which he did, scattering microchips and wire bits across our kitchen floor over the next week.

This proclivity for experimentation also extended into the kitchen. At age 9, Chris taught himself how to make sushi. Armed with Japanese cookbooks and bamboo rolling mats from Ms. Sue, nori paper and sesame seeds from the Asian grocery store, and the determination of a young child with a new niche interest, my brother flourished. I watched in amazement from the other side of the kitchen counter, playing lab assistant by taking dishes to the sink and ripping new sheets of plastic wrap off the roll when he called for them.

Around the same time, Chris grew tired of frozen Ore-Ida crinkle fries and decided instead to make his own, cutting thin slivers from russet potatoes and soaking them in salt water before deep frying. As much as I adored the crinkle cuts, I found myself requesting Chris' fries whenever we had fried chicken or hamburgers. Several years later, he developed a recipe for sweet potato fries as well. In his teens, Chris came home from a fall festival raving about something new he'd tried there: deep fried Oreos. He messed around with a couple of different versions, varying the levels of flour and powdered sugar before settling on a batter he liked and presenting us with the final product. The outer shell was crisp and golden with a softness underneath; the fat and powdered sugar imbued the Oreo with a beautiful balance of savory-sweetness. Even our skeptical father, who raised his eyebrows at "deep fried Oreo" and deigned the treat a "cholesterol clogger," couldn't resist marveling at the taste.

As any scientist will tell you, though, not all experiments yield success. One day when we were quite young, perhaps 4 and 6 years old, Chris and I were left to our own devices while our parents took an afternoon nap. We knew we were not allowed to use the oven or knives without an adult, so we pondered what snack we could make for our parents when they woke up. We developed a concoction consisting of what we found lying around the kitchen: stale popcorn and brown apple skins dusted in a coating of flour. We made our parents try it, which they graciously pretended to eat with fake smiles, claiming how good it was.

I think we knew, even then, that they weren't really eating it. I don't believe Chris and I thought we had engineered some kind of culinary masterpiece. It was more about experimenting, making do with what we had available, seeing what we could create from scraps. Ms. Sue used to call Chris "MacGyver" for this reason; whether mechanically or culinarily, Chris was a pro at sticking things together to see what would happen. He wasn't deterred if something burned or went awry. Failure was just another opportunity to try again.

~

The one area where I excelled and Chris stumbled was language. In an inverse of where we are now, as toddlers, I was the chatterbox and Chris kept quiet, to the point where our parents worried about a speech delay. When Chris was learning how to talk, he would often mumble or speak too quietly for our parents or Ms. Sue to hear him. He would grow frustrated and sulk when adults asked him to repeat himself. I, however, had no issues understanding what my brother was saying, and as such, the adults would often lean on me as a translator. This also meant that Chris and I would babble to each other in our own dialect, our coded conversations keeping out our caregivers. I would often cut them out completely and get whatever Chris

wanted myself—a juicebox, a toy. Here we learned how to rely on each other when our parents failed us.

As Chris and I got older, our roles as foreigner and translator reversed. In my teens and young adult years, I struggled to understand what my parents were thinking, why they made the decisions they did and said the things they said. I think they felt the same way about me. It was now Chris' turn to serve as interpreter. He explained our parents' actions to me in a way that made them more comprehensible, and, in turn, did the same for me to our parents. Mom and Dad bought a fixer-upper vacation rental not because they wanted more work, but because it would bring in passive income that the family needed to stay afloat. Nicole didn't want to take that technical writing job because she wasn't interested in that field, regardless of how much money she might make.

Chris worked as negotiator to solve disagreements or tensions between our parents and me, speaking privately with Mom and Dad to express my concerns and bringing concessions back to my side of the table. When our parents panicked and shamed me for moving in with Ryan before we were married, Chris listened to their concerns—that I'd be wasting money, that I'd be taken advantage of—but told them, "Look, you don't have to be happy about it, but you still need to be supportive. Nicole is an adult and she can do what she wants. You're going to have to deal with it."

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Chris assumes the role of head chef at my parents' house when he moves back in after college. Our parents believe renting is the biggest scam on Earth and that we should wait to move until we can buy a house, so Chris lives with them for quite a while. (This is yet another

area in which I disappoint my parents and Chris pleases them simply by doing something he would do regardless. See also: my queerness and his heterosexuality.)

When I visit, Chris and I are the ones to make dinner together. I say "together," but I'm giving myself too much credit. More accurately, Chris will make dinner while I sit in the kitchen and watch. I offer to help multiple times, but he shrugs me away and says there's nothing I can help with. The inability to accept—or, God forbid, *ask for*—help is an inherited trait. But I would feel guilty leaving, so instead I post up on one of the black-topped bar stools in the kitchen, swiveling a quarter-turn at a time to watch my brother move from sink to stove to oven to counter.

We have some of our most honest conversations in the kitchen. Chris says it's easier to talk this way, less daunting than sitting down across a table from someone. In the kitchen, there is movement, obfuscating nervous body language and allowing your focus to broaden, rather than narrow in. There are tasks to be done and work to be completed. It is easier to tell a green pepper that you're upset your cousin didn't live to see you get married, dead instead at 33 from a heroin overdose. The eyes of a potato cannot pin you with an accusatory gaze, one that causes you to slap your lips closed like a cartoon window shade and keep the pain to yourself instead. In the kitchen, you can tell an onion of your guilt, bitterness, resentment, and loneliness, and you permit your brother to overhear.

I came out to my brother in the kitchen. We were both in college—the same college, naturally—and home on break. He was the only member of our family who knew that I was bisexual. I confided in him about how impossible it felt to be around our parents sometimes, being who I was. How I struggled to stay silent while they derided queer people as deviant, as the result of poor upbringing or parents who didn't try hard enough to keep their kids on the

"right" path. How scared I was at the thought of coming out to anyone else, much less our parents. I kept my voice low, afraid of being overheard by our grandfather down the hall.

Chris was silent for a moment. The chop-chop of his knife through a heart of romaine lettuce for a salad had slowed. I could tell he was thinking, planning his next words carefully, something he rarely did. Sliding the cut romaine off the cutting board and into the metal bowl, he reassured me that I never had to come out to Mom and Dad if I didn't want to, that he accepted me regardless.

Something about the act of cooking brings out the things we have trouble saying to anyone but ourselves. In the kitchen, we wash the dirt off of our secrets and lay our anxieties on paper towels to dry.

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My brother may be a great cook, but as my parents have so often observed, he is not so great about cleaning up after himself. His bedroom has always been a mess. Clothes carpet his floor in clumps, sometimes looking like the man wearing them was vaporized on the spot, Obi-Wan Kenobi style. His desk and bedside table are cluttered with all manner of papers and ephemera: a pen he got for free from the bank, half-filled water glasses and plastic bottles, to do lists that have since been outdated by other to do lists.

Unlike my parents, I wouldn't chalk all of Chris' messiness up to laziness. Rather, as I think they often forget, Chris has ADHD, meaning he is easily distracted or bored by repetitive tasks like cleaning or organizing. I leave his room alone because he's very particular about that space, but I do assign myself dish duty. As much as he swears he will get to the dishes the next day, having known him for 25 years, I know better. He'll come home from work and mope about how tired he is, how he just wants to eat and go to bed. He'll retract into the living room recliner

after dinner, scrolling Twitter and reading articles about hockey. My parents tell him he needs to suck it up, that when he moves out and gets his own house, he will be responsible for all the chores. This is just how life is, they say. There is no magic fairy that does all the cooking and cleaning for you.

One fall, after I've moved out, my parents go out of town for a week to do maintenance on the beach rental house. Rebuilding door frames after wild children have ripped them off their hinges, buying a new couch to replace the one destroyed by another tenant's parrot. Normal stuff. I understand it has to be done, but I'm miffed that my parents are leaving Chris by himself to manage our house and the many jobs that entails: feeding and caring for our 84-year-old grandfather, our manic Border Collie Duke, and a dozen chickens we have in the backyard. Additional tasks include keeping these three from killing each other, grocery shopping, cleaning, and general household chores. Chris is working full time at this point, often putting in 10- and 12-hour days managing a yacht club and its attached restaurant. Not wanting to see my brother stressed out of his gourd or my parents' house in complete shambles, I agree to stay over for the week and help out.

Chris cooks spectacular meals. He grills pork chops and pounds out mashed potatoes, leaving little chunks of potato throughout to contrast the sour cream and butter and remind our tongues they are scratch made. He barbecues chicken thighs and bakes his signature cornbread, which I gobble square after square of. The secret is to douse the loaf with honey twice—once before baking, in a straight line through the middle of the batter, and then again right after coming out of the oven, golden spirals whirling out of the bear-shaped squeeze bottle. It's all delicious, heavenly even, but as you'd expect, there is a mountain of dishes afterward.

I know on some level my parents are right, despite their condescending, bootstrap-y tone. As Dorothy once said on *The Golden Girls,* life is full of crappy stuff to do. Even if they aren't here to lecture him about it right now, at some point in the near future, Chris will have to be both chef and dishwasher. But I look at my brother on that recliner, exhaustion pulling down his eyelids from working too much and not sleeping enough, trying to figure out the rhythm of adult life. I remember just a few years ago when I started working full-time, commuting an hour and a half every day. All I wanted to do when I got home was eat and go to bed.

I slip silently to the kitchen and roll my sleeves up to the elbows. About half of the dirty dishes have made it to the sink; the other half sit inert on the stove or countertop, leftover oil and spices pooling at the bottom. I turn the tap on the sink until it reaches optimal temperature, and I douse my sponge in liquid blue soap. Tonight, I'll play the role of dishwasher, a team of one. It's harder to be a sibling these days, living apart. It's harder to feel that bond we forged when we were younger, when our world was so much smaller. I suppose I should be happier now, having my own kitchen, responsible only for the messes I create. I suppose I should feel relieved that I am just visiting, that I don't have to constantly pick up after my brother if I want a clean house.

I hear feet thump down the couple of steps separating the kitchen from the living room.

"I can do those tomorrow," Chris offers.

I shush him, waving a soapy hand. "I'm just going to do them now. It's no big deal."

Chris pauses for a moment, timid for once in his life. He takes off his baseball cap, scratches at his thick brown hair. He plunks the cap back on his head with resolve and settles onto one of the kitchen barstools to watch the dishwasher work.

The Provider

Here are some things I must understand about my father.

For most of his life, my dad has been the family chef. Even though he was the youngest of four, my dad was often the one cooking for his brothers and sister, since his parents both worked full time, sometimes multiple jobs. He remembers being about 7 or 8 years old and standing on top of a kitchen chair to fry chicken for dinner.

When he turned 12, my dad got his first paid job. He worked as a stocker at a grocery store owned by a family friend. It was technically illegal for him to be working at such a young age, so his father and the family friend forged documents that stated he was old enough. My dad worked nights in the back stockrooms to avoid being seen by customers who might ask too many questions. After he finished his shift, he would go home, sleep for a couple of hours, then get up and go to junior high. He'd take a nap when he got home from school, then get back up and do it all over again.

In his almost fifty-year career, my dad has owned and operated several food-related small businesses. In my lifetime alone, he owned a restaurant, a grocery store, and a seafood shop, catching and selling crabs and oysters out of the Chesapeake Bay. He has always preferred to work for himself.

In the early 90s, a drunk driver ran a stop sign and t-boned my dad's car, almost killing him. The accident left him with a permanently broken back and bone spurs jutting into his lumbar muscles that cause him intense chronic pain. Doctors haven't been able to find a good solution to this condition, only treatments to alleviate it. I was born four years after the accident. I have never known a pain-free father.

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I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen my father in the passenger seat of a car. He is the driver; the rest of us are the passengers. He is the chef; the rest of us are the eaters. My dad assumes the role of provider, rather than the one being provided for.

Some of this, I'm sure, comes from my dad's class and political backgrounds. He grew up in a poor Appalachian family that had a lot of pride and very traditional views of masculinity. Even though my grandmother worked outside the home, my grandfather (and subsequently my father) saw men as the providers, especially when it came to food. Even if they weren't the ones cooking, it was the patriarch's responsibility to make sure food made it to the table. My grandfather was an alcoholic who commonly used physical violence to make a point. Although my dad didn't inherit these traits, his father did pass on his brand of masculinity, where men withhold emotional transparency from their families in the name of strength.

As such, my dad does not believe in public displays of affection. When I was younger, I became quite concerned my parents might not like each other because they did not kiss, hug, hold hands, or do other such things very often. He would hug Chris and I, but we had to initiate contact or ask for it. He preferred instead to demonstrate his feelings through actions—namely, the act of cooking.

When I was a kid, my dad's food could make me feel better after a crappy day at school, or help me feel more prepared for a big test. My dad is a firm believer in what cereal commercials call "a complete breakfast," minus the cereal. Silver dollar pancakes, scrambled eggs, breakfast meat, potatoes, fresh fruit, coffee, and orange juice are laid out in a buffet line, even on weekdays when one might be tempted to grab something simpler and get out the door. If he knew my brother or I had a big test that day, our dad would cook our favorite breakfast foods

to make sure we ate enough. For me, this was French toast; for Chris, waffles. A full stomach made it easier for us to focus on hard math problems, or something like that.

On weekends, when he had more time, our dad would make us pancakes in cute shapes: hearts, letters, numbers, and even simple animals like rabbits and cats. He would pour the pancake batter into a squeeze bottle and squeeze his designs onto the griddle. When we were learning how to read, these pancakes served an educational purpose in addition to a nutritional one. On Valentine's Day, he'd spell out "143," our family code word for "I love you," with pancakes and top our plates with bright red sliced strawberries. Valentine's breakfast far surpassed the boxes of assorted chocolates we'd get later in the day. There was no guessing about how it would taste, or whether there'd be anything in it we would like. Our dad's food reminded us how much we were loved, even when we didn't feel like it, or felt like we didn't deserve it.

~

Can you call a place home if you don't remember it? We only owned the Snug Harbor Inn for a couple of years, but my childhood began in my dad's restaurant. Most nights, when my mom got home from her office job in D.C., she would pick me up from our neighbor Ms. Sue's house and bring me to the restaurant. My dad, mom, and I would all sit in a private booth and have dinner. My regular order was chicken tenders, fries, and juice. This was one of the few times of day where all three of us could spend time together. My mom was pregnant with my brother at the time, so I guess you could say he was there too.

I've gleaned all details about the restaurant from my parents' stories. I wasn't even two when my dad sold it, so I don't remember anything. I like to think that I remember some of the feelings associated with that time—the careless joy known by very young children, love for my

parents and their undivided attention—but these might be false memories. I might be projecting my desires as an adult for a seemingly uncomplicated time, a time where all my dad did was cook and all I did was eat.

~

One of my dad's nicknames for me as a child was "Shortcake." I measured inches and pounds smaller than my peers, but my parents treated this with fondness. The kind of fondness one might have for a biscuit or slice of pound cake topped with strawberries and whipped cream, for example.

Strawberry shortcake is one of my dad's favorite desserts. He prefers those tiny round sponge cakes you get premade from the grocery store as the base. He'd halve and core the strawberries, then toss them in a saucepot with a chunk of butter and some sugar. He would cook them down until they were squishy, but not completely melted. I wasn't much for whipped cream, but my dad would make a neat mountain spiraling the can of ReddiWhip round and round over his cake. I was entranced by the hissing noise the can made.

It wasn't until I got older that I realized my size probably had little to do with my nickname. I could have been a foot taller and my dad would have still called me Shortcake. I would have still been, in his eyes, a small, sweet piece of his favorite cake.

~

For Father's Day one year, my brother and I bought our dad an oversized coffee mug that read: "I don't need Google; my dad knows everything." I'm not sure if the mug was intended to be sarcastic, but for us, it represented a genuine sentiment.

Beginning in college, when I am stuck in a situation and don't know what to do, I call my dad. Whether for home or auto repair consultations or minor medical questions, my dad has an

answer, or at the very least, knows how to calm me down. My car once stalled at an intersection, and all I could think to do was put on my hazard lights and call my dad.

The most frequent topic I phone my dad about is food. Sometimes, I'll score a good deal on something in bulk at the grocery store, but I can only think of two recipes that use that ingredient. I call my dad. How do I know when a turkey is done roasting? Call Dad. How can I tell if an avocado is ripe? Call Dad. What's the best cut of beef to use for pot roast? How do I defrost chicken without giving myself food poisoning? Call Dad, call Dad, call Dad.

I know many of these things are easily Googleable. Perhaps it seems strange that a millennial with a smartphone glued to her hand would choose a phone call over the rapid answer and anonymity of the internet. For some things, like meat temperature and exact measurements, I do turn to Google. But I'm keenly aware that I won't always be able to call my dad, that there will be a day when he won't be there to answer. So, I take twenty minutes to talk to him for a two minute answer, because I know there will come a time when I'll miss him ranting about the Democrats and asking me how school is going.

It took some time for us to get to this point, though, this perspective (mostly) of agreeing to disagree with regard to politics. In my teens and twenties, my dad and I clashed over politics time and again, he insisting that I didn't understand the way the "real world" worked. I was naïve and unrealistic, childlike and ignorant.

And yet, at the same time, according to him, I was stuck-up and thought myself superior. Even when I restrained myself from saying anything, or said very little, he'd accuse me of thinking I was better than him because I had a college education and he was a high school dropout. (Never mind that he and my mother framed college as compulsory for my brother and me.) I went to a small liberal arts school that urged us to ask questions, to be critical of the media

we consumed. So when I would come home on break and question why Bill O'Reilly or Sean Hannity promoted certain narratives or stories, I was told I had an attitude.

I eventually realized there wasn't much point in engaging my dad in discussions about these issues, that he wasn't going to come around or even attempt to see things from my perspective. If politics came up, the best strategy was for me to dissociate and let him say his piece, then bring the conversation back around to something else. Like what they were having for dinner or what I could cook my day-old milk into. Questions with easier answers.

~

The most salient arguments I had with my dad throughout my tween and teen years were about control. I didn't answer my phone. I didn't tell my dad what time I needed to be picked up from someone's house or after school art club. I didn't tell him that chorus practice was cancelled, so he drove to school and waited for no reason. One time when Chris was 10 and at a friend's house, he "hung up on" our mom (when really he had just assumed she was done talking). "You're lucky I don't beat your ass," our dad threatened before slamming the door out of the room. Chris broke down sobbing into our mother's arms as soon as he left.

Simple misunderstandings such as these resulted in me being screamed at and lectured on how I had no respect, how inconsiderate and wrong I was, how unfair I was being to the rest of the family. I stood there and took it, and was not allowed to cry. Crying was further evidence of selfishness or trying to draw attention away from the real issue (my disobedience). I never got an apology; Chris and I were expected to move on and act as if nothing had happened.

On par with the actual moment of being screamed at was an impending lecture. My dad was on his way home and was pissed about something I'd done, and I'd hear about it as soon as he got in the door. My best practice in these moments, the anxious anticipation of the rumble of

his diesel truck in the driveway, was to clean the kitchen. Put dishes in the dishwasher, wash any pots or pans, sweep the floor, wipe the counters, put away any schoolbooks or personal belongings of mine or Chris'. A plate left out from breakfast was just another sign of disrespect for him and our house. If the kitchen was clean, that was one less insult that could be flung at me.

~

My brother and I were trained from a young age to help with dinner. I know a lot of parents have this expectation for their children, but as I understand it, kids complete simple tasks like setting the table or measuring out a cup of water. We did these, but Chris and I were also expected to participate in the actual cooking of the meal. I cannot remember a time where we were exempt from this responsibility. Even when we were too young to use knives, we still peeled vegetables, mixed ingredients, and fetched cooking utensils and equipment. We graduated to knives and more complex skills as we got older.

When we were learning how to cook, I would often get an uneasy feeling as my dad supervised me. I felt hot and sweaty under my father's gaze, conscious of every little placement of my hands, every slice and movement. I could see him measuring with his eyes, grading me. I could see him restraining himself from reaching out and doing it himself, correcting my mistakes.

Chris never struggled when learning new cooking skills. This was a kid who taught himself how to roll sushi from a library book, in the days before YouTube tutorials. He was an experimenter in the kitchen. He didn't seem to have the same fear of failure I did. Maybe it was because he better understood our dad, and therefore was better able to intuit his preferences and arbitrary rules about food. Maybe it was because he was the son in the family. Maybe it was all

of these things. I wanted to succeed and be praised like my brother. I wanted to do it perfectly on the first try, to never have an awkward learning phase of acquiring these new skills. But I held myself to a nigh-impossible standard.

Often, I would get so nervous or overwhelmed at simple kitchen tasks—like slicing a tomato or forming burgers into patties—that I would crumple, shoving the ingredients back at my dad, telling him to do it with tears in my eyes. Or, I would make one or two attempts at, say, rolling a dolmata or a spanakopita triangle and pause for a moment, waiting for the inevitable correction of my amateur skills. Feelings of failure and shame would wash over me whenever he took the knife and showed me how it *should* be done. I could never fold or cut *quite* to my dad's standards. He would admit to being a perfectionist, true, but he didn't frame it as a preference. It boiled down to notions of rightness and correctness. This was the *right* way to filet a chicken breast; deviance deserved scorn and judgment. I waited for my father's correction, depended on it, even, so I could be saved from the burning light of the microscope and escape to a safer task, like counting out forks and serving spoons.

Sometimes I feel I must have exaggerated these instances, that my dad wasn't really this critical; it was just my anxiety getting to me. But then I remember the time I made a salad that my dad said he "couldn't eat" because I'd cut the bell peppers too thick. "Too thick" meaning the width of a thumbnail instead of a pinkie nail. If he found a bone in a piece of meat or fish, he'd push his plate away and stop eating. A stray eggshell in a cake or cupcake would elicit the same reaction. My mistakes could render food inedible.

~

When my husband and I first started dating, he didn't always feel comfortable eating with my parents. Ryan cleans his whole plate, even if he starts to feel full before all the food is gone.

Ryan would finish dinner and my dad would encourage him to get seconds. “There’s plenty in there,” my dad would say. Ryan would insist he was full, and my dad would push him at least once or twice more before giving a faux-offended “okay” and dropping the issue.

Ryan would vent his frustrations to me afterward when we were alone. “What does he want me to do, stuff myself?” He couldn’t understand why my dad wouldn’t take him at his word that he didn’t want any more. Ryan didn’t want to make my dad upset, but he also didn’t want to force himself to eat more just to make my dad happy. I tried to reassure Ryan that this was just my dad’s way, but it took him a while to believe me.

Having often dealt with food insecurity in his young life, as did his Depression-age parents, my dad never wanted any of us to go hungry. He did this to everyone who came to our house. My best friend Emma, who I’ve known since second grade, got this treatment whenever she came over. He’d ask her if she was hungry practically when she stepped through the front door. Emma and I both drank a lot of milk when we were kids, so my dad made sure we had an extra gallon on hand. Any time Emma would pass through the kitchen, he’d ask her if she wanted more milk. Much as he would later do with Ryan, “You want some more milk?” became my dad’s standard line for Emma.

Emma was also a vegetarian in the early and mid-2000s, when the hottest food trend was bacon. Not eating meat marked a person as un-American and weak, the antithesis of masculinity, especially in conservative circles. Even given this cultural milieu, my dad didn’t try to sway Emma back to eating meat. When she first decided to become vegetarian, my dad’s biggest problem was that he didn’t know what to feed her. There weren’t as many meat substitutes then as we have today with Impossible Burgers. I think my dad felt a little out of his depth.

We had a cookout one night, so Emma brought over a package of veggie burgers for herself. Once he realized these could be cooked on the grill like beef hamburgers, the question of what to feed Emma was answered. From then on, my dad kept a supply of veggie burgers in the freezer for her. No one else in our family ate these. They were for my dad's other daughter, reassurance that there would always be food for her at our table.

~

I made the big move out of my parents' house and in with Ryan when I was 24. Our loft apartment in Annapolis was 40 minutes from my parents, so I spent a number of Saturdays driving down to visit. Mostly, this was to remind my mom I had not, in fact, abandoned her forever to live a life of sin. But I know, even if he didn't say as much out loud, that my dad missed me too.

When I'd visit on those Saturday afternoons, my dad would make us lunch. He'd make the same types of food he used to make for my brother and me 20 years prior: boiled, pale hot dogs, grilled cheese with the right amount of char, or deli meat sandwiches with crunchy potato chips.

My dad could have cooked us just about anything for lunch, given his skillset and personal history. But lunch was his most neglected meal of the day: he'd often skip or forget about it if he was working. Lunch was a temporary holdover until dinner, where he could really go all out. Maybe he kept our lunches simple because we both enjoyed the nostalgia of kid food. It was comforting to know that after all this time, we were both still here, some parts of us drastically different, but other things still the same. I still liked my sandwiches with only meat and cheese, no condiments, and he still liked the gentlest smear of mayonnaise on his. There was reassurance for both of us in cheap Ball Park hot dogs on white buns and bags of Cheetos.

As all of our meals were, these lunches were accompanied by TV. Most often, we would watch paranormal shows, like *Finding Bigfoot*, *A Haunting*, and *Paranormal Caught on Camera*. My dad is more of a believer than me, but neither of us are so firm in our beliefs not to laugh at poor acting or the absurdity of scenarios posed by these shows. It's hard to take people named "Bobo" and "Ernie the Turtleman" seriously, or believe that random lights in the sky are a sure sign of alien visitors.

I know my mom usually joined us, but in my mind, so often it is the two of us, father and daughter at the dining room table, chewing on white bread and watching hillbillies yawp at Bigfoot tracks in the Appalachian woods.

~

When I was 25, I moved across the country from Maryland to Arizona to start my MFA program. Having never moved out of state—not even for college—this would be the furthest I had ever lived from my family. In the weeks leading up to my departure, I tried to squeeze as many meals as I could out of my dad. Not unlike the last meal requests made by death row inmates, I scratched out a list of favorite dishes that I wanted to have before I left.

My dad wasn't cooking as often as he used to. Partly because he didn't need to, since my brother was living at home, and partly because the pain in his back had been getting worse, and long periods of standing tended to aggravate it. But for my requests, he obliged.

My list included barbecue ribs, fried chicken wings, steak and baked potato with sauteed mushrooms, meatloaf, pork chops, and burgers. This list might make me sound like a carnivore, but I couldn't cook these foods at my apartment, since we had no grill, griddle, or deep fryer. When I cooked these dishes in my crappy Farberware pans on my sometimes-functioning stovetop, I'd get frustrated. My pancakes would come out misshapen, burnt on the outside, raw

batter in the middle. What was I doing wrong? Surely I was not this incompetent. Surely no one's pancakes would turn out well under these conditions. But I'm making excuses. Even if I had a restaurant-grade kitchen and industrial tools, they still wouldn't taste the same. Even after all my years of practice, my food was but a poor facsimile of my dad's.

~

On an early January day, after a rare southern Maryland snow, I clambered into my dad's big white truck and we went rumbling down the road. The caterer tasting was only half an hour away, so I wasn't trapped for too long under a barrage of questions. We talked about the snow and the upcoming spring semester. There was wedding talk, of course, but by now, we knew what topics to avoid with each other.

Ryan and I had gotten engaged the previous summer and were now in the throes of wedding planning. Catering had proven most difficult, perhaps because it was also our highest priority. Everything we had tried was mediocre, freezer-to-microwave type stuff. After spinning our wheels for months, Ryan and I concluded that we needed to hand this task over to an expert: my dad.

My dad and I arrived at the quaint restaurant and settled into the wooden booth. It was late afternoon, in between lunch and dinner, so the place was quiet, save for the employees prepping for dinner in the kitchen and a nearby TV tuned to ESPN SportsCenter. The azure walls boasted accolades from local newspapers and sponsorships of little league sports teams, in addition to photo prints of lighthouses, blue crabs, and the Bay Bridge. After a moment, the owner, Mark, and the events coordinator, Samantha, bade us welcome and slid into the bench across from us.

I already knew Samantha from email and phone communications, peppering her with a number of questions before we even set up the tasting. This was my first time meeting Mark, and my dad's first time meeting either of them. Mark could have been a bootleg copy of my dad: they had the same short, stocky build, gruff voice, charm, and humor. The only thing Mark was missing was my dad's trademark black mustache (immune to imitation anyway). As the two chatted while waiting for appetizers, they found they had more in common than just appearance. The family that owned the grocery store where my dad got his first job? Mark had gone to school with one of their sons.

As I crunched into crusty bruschetta and slurped down sauteed green beans, my dad and Mark negotiated. I don't mean "negotiated" in the traditional sense of bartering back and forth about prices. It was more like my dad was my lawyer, scrupulous, discerning, and skeptical of the terms the opposition offered. He and Mark were two prize roosters, puffing out their chests and circling one another.

In the months after my engagement, I struggled with offers of financial assistance for my wedding. As I do with most major life crises, I asked my friend Heather about it. Heather had gotten married about two years before at the public park in the neighborhood where she grew up. She is the type of friend who makes my problems make sense, giving me thoughtful advice I never would have gotten to on my own.

"I don't want my parents to go into debt over my wedding," I told her. I sat at her dining table while she puttered around in the kitchen, prepping dinner. It was about six months before my wedding and I was feeling the brunt of everyone's expectations bearing down on me. "Ryan and I both have jobs; we've saved up enough to be able to pay for it ourselves. This isn't the olden days where the bride's parents are supposed to pay for everything."

Heather nodded and made a noncommittal noise, thinking. She ripped the top off of a bag of fresh green beans before dumping them into the colander in the sink. “I struggled with this too,” she said after a minute. Water ran from the tap over the beans, making a shushing sound. “I felt like people were giving us money because they wanted to be able to, like, mandate what kind of cake we had. Or tell us we had to have our wedding in the Southern Baptist Church.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, leaning forward on my elbows. “Like you owe them or whatever.”

“Right. But,” she continued, turning off the faucet, “then I talked to my mom about it. She explained to me that this was something that she and my dad *wanted* to be able to do for me. It’s one of those things that as a parent, you want to be able to sit back and say, ‘Well, this is done, and I helped Heather get there.’ It’s like—” She paused and thought, searching for the right words. Water dripped from the colander back down the drain. “Like a gift. They want to be able to give this to you. My mom said that as a parent, you want to see your child do well, see them reach those major milestones. Like graduating high school, college, that kind of stuff. Getting married is one of those too. And so, you want to take away obstacles between them and those big steps where you can. You pay for tuition so your kid can focus on homework and passing their classes. And this is a situation where they can pretty easily do that. They can pay for the catering, the cake, whatever, and then they can sit back and feel like they helped you get there, and achieve this major life event. Does that make sense?”

I thought about this conversation as I watched my dad and Mark talk logistics. Who would provide beverages and alcohol? What about the cups? Ice? How many tables would they need for the buffet? I jotted down Mark and Samantha’s answers in my yellow and white wedding planner, feeling like a stenographer to my dad the prosecutor. Why did he have to act so

macho with this man he'd just met? Couldn't he just tell me if he liked the food and whether he thought their quote was a raw deal or not?

But then I thought back to my conversation with Heather, only a few weeks prior to this tasting. My dad was the exact type of parent to want to give everything he could to his kids. Had he not always done so, from the heart-shaped pancakes to the elaborate holiday dinners? The natural evolution of these acts of food service was to find and pay for the best catering services my dad possibly could for my wedding.

~

I have never felt more loved than I did on my wedding day. Not even by my newly-minted husband—although that was part of it—but by all of our family and friends who helped make the event happen. "Helped" doesn't even feel like a strong enough verb to convey the amount of labor, logistics, care, and love they put in over the weekend. It felt like a barn raising. Our family and friends were excited to be able to pitch in. This was something they wanted to give us.

My dad was no exception. After two days of setup—loading and unloading the truck, driving two hours to the venue and back, moving tables and chairs, stocking the bar and setting tables—he was in massive pain, hardly able to sit at the head table with us for dinner. We had to forgo the father-daughter dance, something both of us had been looking forward to, since my dad didn't think he'd be able to stand for that long. I was disappointed, but I understood.

But then, as the night began to wear down and guests took their leave, my dad disappeared. He had been popping in and out for smoke breaks and to take painkillers, but he had now been gone for a while. I asked my mom the next time I saw her in the whirlwind of people.

She shook her head, frowning. “He’s downstairs packing up the bar from cocktail hour. I don’t know why he won’t wait and have Chris help him.”

Sure enough, when I was able to get away for a moment, I poked downstairs to find my dad folding up tables and stacking extra 12 packs on handtrucks. I asked why he was doing this now, why he couldn’t wait until later when most of the guests were gone and Chris and my new brothers-in-law could do the heavy lifting. But as the words left my mouth, I knew there was no point in asking them. I looked my dad in his red face, sweating wet patches into his white collared shirt, suit jacket long since discarded. I looked at my charming, stubborn, petty, reserved, temperamental father, trying to understand. I think I am still trying to understand. What had I done to deserve such a father?

“It all has to get done,” he said. “Might as well start now.”

Homegrown

Much as an archeologist commits their life's work to finding lost Egyptian tombs or precious artifacts, for as long as I can remember, my dad has been in search of the perfect tomato. He claims that the only real tomatoes are what he calls "homegrowns," thick tomatoes the size of your hand that can be eaten on their own, or between two slices of white bread with a little mayonnaise. He's tasted perfection before, but since the tomato is a seasonal fruit, he has to wait through the cold winter months before he can begin the year's search. Dad describes the perfect tomato in Goldilocks terms: juicy yet firm (not too mushy), a little sweet and a little tart. He should be able to cut a slice about an inch thick, and the slice should evenly cover a piece of square sandwich bread.

My family plants a vegetable garden in the backyard every summer under the guise of wanting fresh produce, but really, it is a pretext for more tomatoes. Sure, there are other plants, from the standard bell peppers, jalapeños, and zucchini to more adventurous crops like asparagus, okra, and cantaloupe, but these are only the supporting cast members to the show's main star. We pick several varieties—Better Boys, Big Boys, Early Girls, beefsteak—to increase our chances of success. If it's a busy summer and we won't have much time to dedicate to a full backyard garden, we still invest in a couple of tomato starts from Home Depot. For my dad, tomatoes *are* the garden. It is not summer without tomatoes.

In addition to devoting the backyard to his quest, Dad will also scope out roadside stands. He can sniff out faux farmers with ease; one produce sticker and my dad is out of there. He maintains that the best homegrowns come from a local garden or farm. It is impossible for industrial farms to give the fruits the care they need to reach their full potential.

At the end of the summer last year, my dad just about bought an entire roadside stand. The proprietor was looking to offload excess crops before they spoiled, so he was selling

everything at a deep discount. If there's one thing my dad loves as much as tomatoes, it's a good bargain. I imagine his white pickup truck sagging with the weight of all those tomatoes in the bed. He and my mom came home with Xerox boxes full, most of which they blanched and jarred for later.

Even our chickens love tomatoes. We've caught them perched on the rims of the tomato cages before, trying to swipe a few bites of the fruit without falling off. Dad chases them away from his precious crops with vigor, waving his arms and swearing. Whenever we discover a tomato has rotted or been eaten by bugs, we throw it into the chicken pen and watch the birds fight over it. It sort of reminds me of soccer, except the chickens don't kick the tomato; they pick it up and run with it for a few feet before another bird steals it back. Maybe football is a better comparison.

Unlike the rest of my family, I avoid tomatoes. They're mushy, they're mealy; I can never cut them right and the insides ooze all over my cutting board, making me cognizant of my own failure. No matter how many "homegrowns" I eat, they all taste the same to me. Between the skin sticking in my teeth, the jelly-like interior squishing around, and the flavorless fruit itself, my brain can't find much to like about them. Maybe some primordial part of me is stuck thinking like my European ancestors, who feared the tomato was poisonous because of its relation to nightshade and belladonna.

It was just as hard to like the yearly production of putting together the vegetable garden. Summers in our part of Maryland were in the sweltering 90s with humidity just as high. Our backyard also has very little shade, meaning a wide sun hat or a baseball cap would be wise. I hated hats: they drew attention to my ears, a part of my body that I'm still self-conscious about. There were two options when building the garden: get up early to beat the heat (not ideal for a

kid on summer vacation) or work through the day and pray not to get heatstroke or have an asthma attack.

It didn't help that my dad applied his tyrannical building standards to this project. He could not simply dig some holes and plop the plants in the ground. Measurements had to be taken and calculations made to ensure proper spacing in between plants. Truck beds full of fertilizer and topsoil were purchased, mixed in specified ratios, and spread appropriately. The same shovel was used to dig the holes to ensure consistency of width and depth. I imagined myself a square on a piece of graph paper, my dad dividing everything into orderly boxes, carpenter's pencil slicing down the side of the ruler.

I resented having to spend my summer laboring over his pet project, growing a fruit that I detested and would never eat. I wanted to be inside, whittling away at my summer reading list, but if I expressed such a desire, I'd be labeled selfish and uncaring. Our family pastime is work, and opting out meant I was avoiding family time.

~

My disgust for tomatoes was challenged when I visited Greece on a college study tour. I remember sitting at a taverna and wanting something light for lunch, so I ordered a salad. The waiter brought me a bowl much sparser than what I'd get at an American restaurant: no green leaves, no croutons, not even bell peppers. The salad consisted of cucumber slices, a singular slab of feta cheese, some kalamata olives, and the bright red wedges I loathed.

Back in the States, I'd probably pick around the tomatoes and pawn them off on a more eager relative (like my dad), but here I hadn't made good enough friends for that. I didn't want my peers to think I was childish by refusing to eat such a common food. Plus, if I skipped the

tomatoes, I'd be missing out on a quarter of the salad. With a long day of sightseeing still ahead, I resolved to be a little adventurous for once in my life and eat the damn things.

Instead of the mealy squishiness of American tomatoes, these tomatoes were firm with just the right amount of give. They had flavor that danced across my tongue and actually *tasted* like something instead of the blandness I expected. They had the balance of sweetness and tartness that my dad described: here was the myth made incarnate. I ate the entire salad, tomatoes and all.

The most obvious reason I can find for the marked difference in flavor in this Tale of Two Tomatoes is the American produce industry's single-minded focus on quantity over quality. Or, more accurately, how the U.S. and Greece measure quality when it comes to produce. In the U.S., we have a lot of people to feed (and they need to be fed large, unrealistic portions). According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, tomatoes are the second most-consumed vegetable in the U.S., behind only potatoes. The factory farm system makes efficient work of this, but it's hard to imbue love and care into thousands of acres of crops. There's also pressure to grow all year, rather than wait for summer, which can lead to less-than-optimal growing methods and times. Trying to force produce to grow out of season is often reflected in its flavor.

American consumers are also very concerned with looks. Many would rather buy a spherical, uniformly red tomato than a bumpy, speckled heirloom, regardless of flavor. Companies like Imperfect Foods and Misfits Market have sprung up to cash in on what growers throw out. We hold our produce to the same nigh-impossible beauty standards that we do the rest of our populace.

Greece, meanwhile, operates on a much smaller scale. The average consumer buys their produce from the town market, also called the laiki, a strip of vendors hawking their wares from under tents and the backs of trucks. Vendors cram close together down already narrow streets, bartering and laughing in the always-loud way Greeks do. The produce you buy was grown nearby, often by families who have tended the same fields of oranges or olives or grapes for generations. It's not unlike an American farmers' market, filled with friendly but persuasive farmers and local gossip, but this is where most Greeks do their grocery shopping.

When I returned home from my international trip, I hoped that I'd been mistaken in all my years disliking the fruit. I dug into the side salad my family serves with most dinners, putting scoopful after scoopful on my plate, not picking around the tomatoes like I would before. To my dismay, I found the tomatoes in my salad tasting as bland as they did when I'd left. I wanted to like them. I wanted to be like the rest of my tomato-loving family, wanted not to feel like such a black sheep or self-imposed outcast, but my tongue wouldn't cooperate. Isn't my sense of taste supposed to be genetic? Why couldn't I inherit this trait? Maybe my standards were too high. Maybe, in this way, my dad and I were the same when it came to tomatoes.

~

Is the tomato a fruit or a vegetable? The Oxford English Dictionary defines "fruit" as "The edible product of a plant or tree, consisting of the seed and its envelope, esp. the latter when it is of a juicy pulpy nature." Tomatoes are certainly "of a juicy pulpy nature," so by this definition, a tomato must be a fruit. But colloquially, tomatoes are often considered a vegetable. Back in 1893, this debate made it all the way to the Supreme Court because of a New York tax law: imported vegetables were subject to a 10% tariff but imported fruits were not. Justice Horace Gray penned the following opinion in the Court's decision: "Botanically speaking,

tomatoes are the fruit of a vine, just as are cucumbers, squashes, beans, and peas. But in the common language of the people, whether sellers or consumers of provisions, all these are vegetables." Tomatoes are usually cooked in savory dishes, rather than desserts, also lending credence to this side of the argument.

I feel sorry for the tomato. There's a loneliness in this taxonomic debate; it makes the tomato seem unsettled and lacking a home. Who does it belong to? Who can it claim as family? I understand this feeling, as someone who frequently questions whether she is a "real" member of her family or not. Aren't families all supposed to think the same way, more or less? Shouldn't we share the same values and political ideologies? How did a queer liberal end up in the middle of a bunch of straight Republicans? How did a man who boasts he has only ever read one book father a daughter that gets a master's degree in English? At the very least, shouldn't we all like the same food?

~

My dad's fondness for tomatoes is not unique. A study comparing different tomato-growing methods published in the academic journal *Scientific Reports* begins with the bold claim, "[The] tomato is the most important horticultural crop in the world." But there's another part of the tomato's story that my dad omits. In terms of production, the fresh tomato is far eclipsed by its sibling, the processed tomato. An article from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences reported that in 2015, only 8% of U.S. tomatoes were sold fresh; the remaining 92% were grown for processing. These unattractive tomatoes are earmarked for products like ketchup, soup, and tomato paste. My family's canning process repeats this structure on a much smaller scale: whatever we can't eat during the summer, we blanch and jar or turn into spaghetti sauce or salsa.

As you might imagine, our kitchen cabinets are full of shiny glass mason jars at the end of the summer, their vivid red contents petrified by pectin. The jarred tomatoes take up at least one entire cabinet, sometimes spilling over into a second. This might sound like a problem to some people—tomatoes taking over their house—but like our black double oven and stainless-steel mega fridge, for our family, the jars have become just another fixture of the kitchen.

You can do a lot of things with processed tomatoes, as evidenced by the agricultural system's emphasis on them. Top of mind for me is fasolakia, Greek stewed green beans with potatoes, onions, and tomatoes. It's a simple side dish that's conveniently vegan and easy to make, so I have brought fasolakia with me to several potlucks and work parties. Most often, I make it for holiday dinners. I use a recipe from one of the Greek cookbooks my family keeps in the kitchen bookcase, but I take some artistic liberties with it. I've made Greek green beans so many times that I no longer need the recipe.

Fasolakia has become a way for me to marry these two halves of myself: the half that wants to be like my tomato-loving family, and the half that wants to be true to myself. I don't have to pretend to like something I hate to avoid conflict; these green beans can be enjoyed by everyone. I can use the tomatoes from our garden and cook them down to not only be palatable, but delicious. My dad requests this dish every time we plan our holiday meal menu. Fasolakia represents a unification, a bringing-togetherness–perfect for the holidays, perfect for a daughter trying to find her place in this kitchen.

~

My husband and I moved to Flagstaff mid-summer so I'd have time to adjust to the new time zone, elevation, and environment before starting my first semester of graduate school. This meant that I missed out on most of my family's annual vegetable garden.

I missed out on a lot of things when I was at grad school, actually. Thanksgiving and Easter, two very big holidays in our Greek, always-eating, always-cooking family, plus other major events like birthdays and funerals. I no longer had the option I did the previous year of popping down to my parents' house when the need arose. Instead, I had to settle for seeing photos afterward and hearing summaries from my mom during our nightly phone calls.

Of course, I also missed out on events I'd rather live without: political arguments with my dad, my mom treating me like a child, my grandfather bossing me around and demanding I drop what I was doing to cater to his requests. I was saved from the suffocating humidity of a Maryland summer spent outside weeding and watering. I avoided the long hours of boiling and jarring for the off-season. But distance tends to make memory omit or obfuscate such details.

I'd been in Flagstaff for about two months when I received a huge package in the mail from my parents. I arrived home after a long day of classes to find the package sitting on our coffee table. It was about the size of your average desktop printer and just as heavy. My husband said he had to sign for it. I had suspicions as to what it might be, but if my guess was correct, I wasn't sure why my parents had gone to such lengths to send it to me. The sticker on the front indicated they had paid $54 in postage. My parents are the type of people that will drive the extra mile down the road if it means saving 10¢ on gas. I retrieved a razor blade and began slicing through the thick layers of packing tape.

I cracked the lid and was greeted with the immediate pungent smell of stale cigarette smoke. For most people, this might be off-putting or headache-inducing, but I find the scent strangely welcoming. My dad has smoked his entire adult life, despite several attempts to quit over the years. I could have a chemical addiction to secondhand smoke I suppose (if such a thing

even exists), but there's part of my reaction that is tied up in nostalgia. The scent reminds me of my parents' house.

I pushed back the lid of the box and my suspicions were confirmed. Inside lay two mason jars of tomatoes, tightly packed in old mattress foam cut to size. Yet another hallmark of my dad. You could have dropped this box from the top of a flight of stairs and the jars wouldn't even crack. The only other thing inside the box was a note. In two different handwritings, the note read:

"Enjoy—

Love

Dad & Mom"

Below their signatures was a drawing of a heart with "143"—our family's code word for "I love you"—written inside. Next to the heart, in my Dad's handwriting, was:

"Hope Everything is going Well Love Dad"

A few months later, at Thanksgiving, I'd use the tomatoes to make fasolakia. I wouldn't be spending Thanksgiving with my family in person, but they'd be here in a way. For now, I'd tuck the jars safely away in my kitchen cupboard, this year's treasure protected behind a glass case like rare and wonderful artifacts.

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Like Mom Used to Make

When asked to describe my mom's food preferences, my dad, only partially joking, once told me, "She likes that shit that comes from a can."

As women are expected to be in white middle-class culture, my mom is the homogenizer in our family. My dad and Chris are both given to bouts of moodiness, and my dad and I have ideological and political differences that cause friction. But my mom is the one who tries to settle everyone down. She is a compromiser, a people-pleaser, a "you both make good points" type of woman. A smoother-over. Maybe it is because she comes from a Greek family, where everyone's default volume is "loud" and goes up from there, where she, her parents, and her brother were constantly shouting at one another, whether they were arguing or joking. I guess I can't blame her for wanting her own husband and children to get along.

My mom's food is also part of this compromiser personality. As opposed to Chris and my dad, who believe in scratch-making everything, even sauces, my mom prefers the kind of cooking that just involves adding water. Mass-manufactured food is meant to please "everyone": its appeal is in its palatability and convenience. There are no strong flavors to turn someone off, so there is little risk of dinner being too spicy or too bitter. Pre-packaged foods are the compromisers of the dinner table.

If you were to pick a random weekday during my childhood and I had to guess what was on the dinner menu, I would say the following: a rotisserie chicken from the supermarket, the kind that sits in a plastic tub under heat lamps, hoping you will choose it from among the other rotisserie chickens. From the same supermarket, a French baguette sleeved in paper that is little more than a glorified loaf of white bread. A pot of instant mashed potatoes—those powdery snowflakes that you add hot water to. And, to make sure we get at least one serving of

vegetables, a can of green beans, warmed in a saucepot on the stove, sprinkled with garlic salt. This meal and variants of it would probably clock in at number one on my family's "most eaten" leaderboard.

Some of this is due to personal preference, sure—to this day, my mom prefers canned green beans over fresh ones—but the top reason for this dinner's regularity was convenience. My mom works for a trade association just outside of Washington, D.C., coordinating their education and training program. Her day-to-day is a lot of clerical work, staring at spreadsheets, running reports, writing emails, and making phone calls. She's held this job for over thirty years now, meaning she's become a fixture within her department and the company at large. Her coworkers frequently tell members and clients to "call Angie" because she's the one with the answers. (For this reason, this constant referral to and reliance on her expertise, my mom has expressed that she would like an enamel pin of a mop and bucket when she retires. Why? "For cleaning up everybody else's messes.")

For her, the job is a means to an end. She tells her coworkers—young professionals eager to prove their worth and stand out to the powers-that-be—"We don't work for the Red Cross. No one is going to die if they don't get this report tonight." The job pays our family's bills, and it's flexible enough for her to find a decent work-life balance. She made time to come to Chris and I's chorus concerts and soccer practices, volunteer with the Music Boosters, and go on field trips to the Air and Space Museum. But to be able to do this, to work full time, commute an hour each way, and still have time to spend with her kids, something had to give. That something was dinner. The rotisserie chicken and the baguette were staples for so long because my mom could swing into the grocery store on her way home from work and have half of dinner already cooked. She could have the green beans and the water for the potatoes warming on the stove while she

changed from business-casual to casual-casual clothes, trading her sweater and khakis for sky blue sweats.

Now that her job is fully remote, and both of her children are adults, you might think my mom would take up cooking from scratch. But the pantry staples still reign supreme. Since she's no longer commuting to the office, there's less incentive to go out and get something. My parents live in a very rural part of Maryland, a small town with one stop light where nothing is within walking distance, much less grocery stores or restaurants. The rotisserie chicken has been replaced with defrosted chicken breast or steak. Bread comes in the form of cute little potato rolls the size of a toddler's fist, or whatever else is in our family's bread drawer, which never truly empties. And of course, canned vegetables, instant potatoes, and Pasta Roni still end up on the table as side dishes. What dinner will consist of is already here; it's a matter of assembly.

~

How did my mom get here, to this dependence on processed food? Her mom, my Yiayia, was a skilled and prolific cook, hosting Thanksgiving every year and cooking everything herself. My mom ended up more like her dad, best friends with the microwave. Yiayia's version of care, what a mother was expected to provide, centered on the act of giving: handing someone a plate of piping hot food was care; teaching them how to make it was work. My grandfather's excuse was that he was born in an era where men were absolved from ever having to learn any kind of domestic skills. Yiayia, meanwhile, was a full-time homemaker. One would think that this would mean Yiayia trained my mom in these arts, preparing her for her gender-assigned duties. And yet, my mom maintains that Yiayia didn't teach her how to cook, that she learned from my dad when they started dating in her senior year of high school.

Perhaps it makes sense, then, that someone raised without cultivating this knowledge would turn to things like frozen meals and "instant" food. Perhaps there was comfort for my mother in being able to cook without having to know what it meant to blanche or braise, with much lower risk of failure. There is comfort for me, now, in a box of Pasta Roni or a can of green beans. It may not be her name on the package, but this is my mother's food. This is the food of utility, of practicality. It is food that realizes its ultimate goal without artifice: to fill a basic need, a hunger.

~

My mom often felt isolated as a teen (ironic, considering she lived in the suburbs of Washington D.C., one of the most densely-populated regions in the country). Her mother was an immigrant, still not entirely attuned to American culture, and her father couldn't be bothered to do much more than occasional homework help and teaching her how to drive. Her brother had an intellectual disability that kept his mental age around 12 years old.

My mom had to look outward for connection, so in junior high and high school she joined the church youth basketball team (despite her shrimpish height), the flag squad, the softball team, and the photography club. Having been held back a year, she got her driver's license earlier than most of her friends, and so spent her teen years as the chauffeur, driving them all to the local mall, department stores, and whatever drive through satisfied their hormonal cravings at the moment. My mom had to be adaptable to succeed within these different social groups: she had her church friends, her neighborhood friends, and her school friends. There was some overlap across these groups, but these Venn diagrams were slim. Here she learned how to people-please, how to be agreeable and keep everyone happy. How else could she succeed?

Yiayia couldn't understand this behavior. Why was her daughter always out with friends? In Greece, families stayed together; your family members *were* your friends. Yiayia even took my mom to therapy, where she accosted the therapist to tell her what was "wrong" with her daughter. The therapist told her my mom was just a "normal" teen, one who valued non-familial social connections, something Yiayia had a hard time grasping. This difficulty could have been due to a cultural gap, a language barrier, or empty nest syndrome, but regardless of the cause, the session made my teenage mother turn the magnifying glass back around. "Why is my mom like that?" she wondered. "Why can't *she* just be normal?" Why did Yiayia fuss over her so much, cooking for her all the time like she was still a child? My mom would often pick fights with her parents in those years, almost begging to be sent to her room. There she could retreat to the semi-quiet, read her Archie comics, and most importantly, dig into her secret stash of snack cakes. She kept boxes of HoHos and Twinkies hidden under her bed, away from the prying eyes of overbearing adults. The softness of their cream fillings smoothed over arguments and reassured her. Someday, she'd be normal.

~

As much as my teenage self would loathe to admit, I inherited a number of things from my mother. I had a similar desire to make friends, which is both a Kokonis and a Hylton trait. No one in our family can resist striking up a conversation with our grocery store cashier or the administrative assistant at the doctor's office. We are the type of people to see someone else buying the same thing and can't stop ourselves from saying, "Good choice!" or "It's a good deal, isn't it?" It's like a kind of curse.

I had a harder time than my mom at making friends in high school. I joined lots of clubs, sure–chorus, art club, model United Nations–even took leadership roles there, but I struggled to

form lasting friendships. No matter how much people-pleasing I tried, nor how many times I let classmates copy my homework, I was not invited to parties, or at least not the kind you see in Hollywood movies from the 1980s. There was the occasional pool party or going over to a friend's house, but we played Wii or watched movies like *Mean Girls* or *The Avengers*. No wild drinking or getting the cops called. I started to think these parties were a conspiracy exaggerated or entirely falsified by the American film industry until my brother came home from such parties himself, laughing about how he and his buddies had gotten away from the cops by jumping off the pier or driving into cornfields. It wasn't so much that I wanted to *go* to these parties—the D.A.R.E. campaign had thoroughly terrified me into an absolute prude. I just wanted to be invited. I wanted my classmates to think of me as someone that made parties fun by being cool and interesting, the type of person people wanted around.

It was in high school that I picked up the habit of baking, for boys I had crushes on or potential friends I was trying to entice. I found recipes online for treats like Nutella brownies and spiced pumpkin cupcakes. I pored over the cookbooks in the kitchen bookshelf and plucked out recipes like chocolate crinkle cookies and blueberry muffins with turbinado sugar. I spent my weekends dusted in flour and sugar, trying to instill care and friendship into the dough as I mixed. I packed my treats into a large Tupperware container and brought them to school on Monday. My classmates gobbled up the treats and gave polite thank-yous, but my social standing remained more or less the same.

I couldn't blame my loneliness on my parents: my brother seemed to be getting along just fine. I don't think it was due to my lack of driver's license, either. So I turned the blame inward, telling myself it was because I was too smart, not pretty enough, too awkward, too annoying. I tried to talk to my mom about this, to ask her what I should do, since she'd had such success at

my age. She told me—as she often did, in those days and now—I was worrying too much. In typical mom advice, she told me my classmates were missing out by passing me over.

"Don't worry what those people think of you," she said. "When you graduate, you'll forget all about them and make real friends. If they aren't interested, they aren't worth your time."

Easy for her to say, I thought. She wasn't in high school *now*. I crunched on a leftover chocolate crinkle cookie as I fumed. The cookie had lost its softness, much to my irritation. Why was I like this? What would it take for me to be normal?

~

My mom subscribes to the "eat to live" philosophy, as opposed to my dad, who believes in the inverse, "live to eat." If scientists invented a pill that contained all the nutrients and taste of a full meal without the cooking, cutting, and chewing, my mom claims she would buy them by the box. My mom is not the type to fuss over plating, to make sure her scrambled eggs are moist and her pork chops aren't dry. Much like my husband, food is more of a means to an end for her. Not to say that she doesn't enjoy good food—she had to if she expected her marriage to my dad to last. There are few indignities greater to my father than someone wolfing down their food, not stopping to savor or taste. These opposing viewpoints, as you might imagine, have caused numerous conflicts when my parents plan and make dinner.

When my dad was managing the grocery store, working long hours from open to close, my mom often ended up with evening kid duty, taking over where our neighbor-grandma Ms. Sue left off. After putting in an eight-hour day at the office, then driving an hour-plus in notoriously soul-sucking D.C. traffic, my mom was already exhausted by the time she got home to my brother and me. She did not have the energy for a pot roast and scalloped potatoes with a

fresh-baked pie. She was a practical woman who knew her three- and five-year-olds would not much care if their dinner came from a box or from the crisper drawer. So, knowing that she didn't need to impress us and wanting to get dinner on the table, my mom would dip into the pantry cabinets for foods popularized in the era she grew up. Typical menu items included the pinnacle of the frozen dinner, Stouffer's lasagna; spaghetti and marinara sauce with garlic toast (sandwich bread browned in the toaster and smeared with butter and garlic salt); and the Holy Grail of kid food, Kraft macaroni and cheese. Even though the hefty sodium content often gives me a migraine, as an adult, I still can't resist cracking open one of those blue boxes. There is magic in watching the orange powder disappear into cheese sauce with each stir around the pot.

To my chef father, who grinds his own breakfast sausage, these were shortcuts. Boxed or frozen food represented a last resort and desperation, not regular nourishment. One evening, my dad came home early from work, for once in time for dinner. The microwave gave its signature "ding!" and I cried out, "Dinner's ready!", rushing over to the small appliance. My father was horrified. Not only that my mom was feeding us microwaved food, but that it had become such an entrenched routine that I, at five years old, recognized this noise as the dinner bell.

As a busy adult myself, my mom's solution seems reasonable and logical to me. I am the main chef in my household, since neither Ryan nor our cat Smeagol can cook to my satisfaction. This becomes a problem when I have evening classes that get out at 6:30, or nights when I work my second job as a babysitter. Ryan and I have tried a number of solutions for nights like these, where I get home too late to cook anything elaborate. Spaghetti and garlic bread with whatever vegetables we have on hand is our go-to, because it doesn't take long and I can still feel like I've put some effort in. We tried HelloFresh for a while, which boasts itself as a time and money saving option, but we found neither to be the case. If I'm getting home especially late, we'll

break out something from the freezer, like a frozen pizza or chicken nuggets. If I am truly exhausted and have handed my life (and therefore, my dinner) over to the forces of entropy and chaos, I will hit the drive through or takeout counter.

I have a kind of sliding scale of guilt that comes with each of these options. The less I am handling the food, the guiltier I feel. I don't know why this is. Maybe I get it from my parents: my mother's obligation to feed the family, my father's desire to nourish them. When it is a frozen pizza night, I can't help but apologize to Ryan for making a "lazy dinner." I so often view food as care, and in outsourcing dinner, I am implicitly sending a message that I do not care, that this meal and the time we spend sharing it are not a priority.

And yet, many of these "lazy dinners" are members of my mom's normal meal rotation: spaghetti, frozen pizza, and chicken tenders. My mom clearly cared for my brother and me, and I never saw these meals as a cop out or an indication that she had other priorities. So why do I hold myself to this standard? Why am I so worried about becoming like my mother in this way?

~

Despite my guilt, I still love fast food. When I moved to Flagstaff, I was delighted to find the strip of highway between my apartment and the university populated with well-known logos and brands. Five minutes roundtrip and I had my pick of McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Arby's, Raising Cane's, Chik-fil-A, Del Taco, Taco Bell, Chipotle, Jack in the Box, Subway, Domino's, Papa John's, and Five Guys. Having grown up in such a rural area, chain restaurants represented civilization. This place had everything.

Fast food became a reward system: after a long day of class, teaching, babysitting, or some combination of the three, I would swing by the drive through on my way home. The hot, greasy bag told me I'd worked hard for it. I deserved a treat. Instant food for instant gratification

and short-term encouragement. It was consumed, it made me feel good in the moment, made me feel like I had earned or accomplished something, then the empty wrappers were discarded and I moved on, leaving nothing behind as tangible evidence of anything having occurred. No dishes, no leftovers, rather like a box of Pasta Roni or Kraft macaroni and cheese.

Maybe it was unavoidable that I would love fast food. My mom worked at Wendy's as a teen, and I sometimes wonder if gestating in a body that was routinely exposed to grease gave me a taste for the stuff. This is probably not how it works, but we nevertheless inherit some of our tastes from our parents. How could I have chosen what I inherited from my mother and what from my father? Somehow, I feel like I've inherited both my dad's love of cooking from scratch, of doing it the hard way, and my mom's cravings for deep fried, easy solutions.

~

I picked up a habit of calling my mom every day during the COVID pandemic. I added it to my new regimen of staring at the four walls of my loft apartment and sitting on my couch, refreshing the news on my phone, paralyzed with fear.

Our conversations were nothing extraordinary. They comprised the typical questions about work, what we'd done that day, updates about other family members or friends we'd spoken to. But there was comfort in this routine, especially when my family felt so far away in those early days of lockdown. It grasped at normalcy.

When I moved to Arizona to start my MFA the following year, calling my mom became vital for updates on my family. My brother was the only one on social media, and he posted hockey news and progress pics of his latest garage projects. Because of the time difference, I called my mom when I was making dinner, the rest of my family having just finished eating theirs.

"What's on the menu?" my mom would ask, and I'd tell her black bean tacos, or spaghetti, or chicken kebabs marinated in Italian dressing. If it was something vegetarian, she'd *hmmm*, saying without saying that she worried about me getting enough protein. She'd ask me about Ryan, and Smeagol, and if we were projected to get any snow soon. (If yes, she would promptly follow up by running through a checklist of what was in our pantry. Did we have soup? Pasta? Canned green beans?) I'd ask her about Dad, our dog Duke, and what the temperature was over there. I hassled her about not getting enough sleep, told her to try calming tea and counting backwards from 1000.

It became increasingly clear to me, as I got older and the geographic distance between us widened, why my mom called her mother every day. Even as an adult with children of her own, my mom phoned Yiayia to tell her yes, she had made it home from work; yes, everyone here was fine; yes, we would be coming to visit that Saturday. There was something comforting in calling home and hearing my mom's voice, knowing she was still there even when I wasn't. I worried about being so far away from them, as if my nearby presence would somehow avert calamities like hospital visits.

As both of us get older, I see us transforming, sometimes willingly, sometimes not. I see my mom becoming more like Yiayia—fussing over my brother and I, staying home more and more often. And I see myself becoming more like her—minimizing conflict, looking for solutions that will appease everyone. We both cried the last time we saw each other before I moved to Arizona. I've taken up Yiayia's habits of birdwatching and yelling at my friends for not eating enough. It's like a chain reaction, or the mathematical principle of regression. Eventually, we all become our parents who become our grandparents, and on and on.

But that's not entirely true, either. I still cook dinner from scratch, when I can. I refuse to wear sweatpants, no matter how comfy my mom claims they are. My mom let me move in with a man before we were married, something Yiayia never would have allowed. My mom considers sweeping down the floors once or twice a week sufficient for cleaning, as opposed to Yiayia's constant bleaching of all non-porous surfaces. Yiayia was a full-time homemaker, while my mom and I juggle careers and domestic responsibilities. Maybe I'm wrong: maybe there are parts of my lineage I can choose or reject.

I'm thinking about how I often teased my mother for her reliance on processed foods, for her lackluster cooking. But wasn't our family fed all the same? And didn't we wake up to empty sinks and drying racks full of clean dishes the next day? Who else would have stepped up and done this thankless work? There's something to be said for getting dinner on the table in the busy life of a family of four. There were many nights where my dad's back was too sore to stand and cook. And as she did when my dad was working late at the grocery store, my mom changed out of her blouse and slacks, into her sweats, and started her second shift.

Papou's Palate Cleansers

My mom's father—or Papou, as he's known in Greek—has strong opinions. Some of these include the weather lady wears too much makeup and dogs in animal shelters are shipped in from large breeding centers in Mississippi, not rescued from the local community. Maybe his pessimism and fastidiousness come from being old. Maybe they come from his cultural background. We Greeks are not known to be wishy-washy or reserved with our feelings.

Many of Papou's strongest opinions revolve around food: how it should be cooked, how it should be eaten, and when it tastes best. This is bold coming from someone who boasts about being able to make himself a turkey sandwich. Most often, he'll deliver one of his edicts while my parents, Chris, or I are cooking. It takes us only a glance to recognize his figure: bald, stooped posture, and perpetually sagging black jeans with accompanying ill-fitting belt. Papou will loiter near the fridge, not-so-patiently waiting for his plate, or else peer over the high-top kitchen bar as we stir pots on the stove. He may leave a comment in passing, on one of his jaunts around the kitchen island, which occur every 20 minutes. ("You can't sit for more than 20 minutes," he will remind me as he shuffles down the hallway, his tan pleather sneakers scuffing the hardwood. "It's not good for you. You have to get up and move around." I have never looked for hard evidence to support this, but my husband insists it smacks of veracity.)

Maybe I am too harsh on my grandfather. He comes from a generation where men were never expected to learn to cook; that was what mothers and wives were for. Even though his mother died when he was young, Papou's sister quickly stepped into this role, then his stepmother years later. There was never a societal expectation that he learn how to boil an egg, much less cook Christmas dinner. But all the same, it boggles my mind that he can be so particular about a process he has no involvement in, other than the end result.

The following are some of Papou's axioms regarding food. Think of them, perhaps, as a respite from any heavy meals or essays you've consumed in the course of this collection. If they take you more than 20 minutes to read, well, remember to go for a walk afterward.

~

The Holy Trinity of Condiments consists of lemon juice, ketchup, and parmesan cheese. (The kind of parmesan cheese that comes in a green can and is shelf-stable. Papou affectionately terms this substance "cardboard.") Lemon juice should be used on most meats (except for beef) to enhance its flavor. Ketchup should accompany anything fried. Parmesan cheese makes carbs like mashed potatoes and rice edible.

Some dishes taste better the next day. Not "just as good," but *better*, after they have sat in the fridge, congealed, and been reheated. These dishes include Thanksgiving turkey, lamb, and meatloaf.

Spaghetti is the only acceptable type of pasta. Other types of noodles "move," wiggling like that immortal mystery food, Jell-O. These noodles are not to be trusted.

Most vegetables are also suspect. Canned corn is reliable, but green beans, peas, and carrots all earn a sidelong glance. Lima beans are simply intolerable. No amount of salt or dousing from The Holy Trinity of Condiments could redeem them.

Salad, meanwhile, is a requisite part of any dinner. Lettuce, bell peppers, tomatoes, onions, and cucumbers sliced and chopped into a shiny metal bowl. It's perhaps a half-sibling of

the Greek village salad, which means it should be topped with Greek (or Italian) dressing, crumbled feta cheese, and olives (black or green will do, as long as they aren't spicy, as long as they are dripping in olive oil from the jar).

The smell of seafood cooking is like inhaling toxic fumes. The steam from crab legs boiling on the stove or salmon baking in the oven may as well be mustard gas. The only edible type of seafood is fried shrimp. (The breading makes you forget that you are eating shrimp.)

No one in the South eats collard greens or chitlins. "They play like they do, but nobody really eats that stuff." Like Santa Claus, everyone in the South knows and talks about collard greens and chitlins, but they don't actually like them. This is the real Big Lie.

You can only eat barbecue if you wash off the sauce and cut the meat into small pieces. And, of course, douse in lemon juice. No one wants to eat a campfire.

All snacks ought to come in single-serving bags. "I don't want to eat too much." (Never mind if you end up eating two of them in one sitting.) Failing manufacturer-produced single servings—such as snack size Utz potato chips, plastic cups of pears in sweet syrup, and individually wrapped Neapolitan ice cream sandwiches—you can make single servings yourself. Pour the snack from its larger container into a sandwich-sized Tupperware, or a cereal bowl.

Candy and sweets should also come in small portions because otherwise "it's too much sugar." Scour the nutrition facts on the back of the package for the exact sugar content. "I can

have two of these—" At this point, hold up a fun size Hershey's dark chocolate bar. "—for the same as one of these." In the other hand, hold up a York peppermint patty. Throughout the course of the day, consume both regardless.

Italian food is "ethnic" food, and "real" ethnic food is not actually food, but undesirable animal scraps coated in suspicious sauces and spices. Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Mexican—food from people who don't look like you even though they have been your neighbors for the last fifty years in one of the most diverse counties in the U.S. None of it is to be trusted.

Beef should always be cooked well done. Any redness or juices must be brimming with mad cow disease or E. Coli. Make your son-in-law put it back on the grill until there is no trace of it ever having been alive.

Breakfast is: one bowl consisting of Original Cheerios, a shake of whole almonds, a handful of walnuts, an entire banana sliced with a spoon. A plastic cup of orange juice. Scrambled eggs you eat begrudgingly because your son-in-law harangues you to, chiding that you don't eat enough. Clear the plate of eggs; leave some almonds and Cheerios to float sadly in your bowl after depositing it in the sink.

Lunch is: two slices of wheat bread toasted on low, smeared with yellow mustard, layered with one piece of cheese (American or Swiss) and two slices of deli turkey. A single-serve bag of plain Utz potato chips. A mozzarella string cheese stick. A Diet Caffeine Free Coca-Cola. A thin paper plate fastened to a wicker paper plate holder that sometimes gives you splinters. The dog

will also have a slice of cheese, tossed at him from the counter with a flat slapping sound as the cheese adheres itself to the floor.

Dinner is served promptly at 6 PM. Regardless of what the rest of the family has going on, regardless of what they are eating. Usually, you will have whatever they ate yesterday, since they don't eat until 7. It is a good thing lamb tastes better the next day.

Dessert is: one Neapolitan ice cream sandwich wrapped in white paper and eaten over the kitchen trash can with hands washed right afterwards. If your granddaughter has baked something—like cookies or cupcakes—you may have one of these, but it will replace the ice cream sandwich. Otherwise, it's too much sugar.

Always keep a stick of Classic Juicy Fruit gum on hand. Chewing gum gives you something to do, especially when your nerves are working on you, like at the doctor's office or DMV. Another trick, one you learned from your late wife: chewing a piece of gum can stave off tears. Pop a stick or two in your mouth before a funeral, and share a pack with your daughter at your granddaughter's wedding.

How to Love Yiayia[’s Meatballs]

“My mother made [our small apartment] seem grand and full of life. And she’d do this through cooking – constant, non-stop cooking. For my mother, food was life and life was food. If you were eating, it meant you were alive. Food was a kind of love offering, and she was a high priestess. Her ceremonial robes were a house dress and a food-smeared apron.” - Arianna Huffington, *Meditative Story* podcast, “Life and Love and the Moment”

I did not always adore my Yiayia’s food. Although I consider it a core part of her personality, early on, I used to dread it. When my brother and I were elementary school-age, just about every Saturday, my mom would pack us in the car for the hour drive up to her parents’ house for a visit. Although we did other things while we were there, like sit on the plastic-wrapped couch and play with our designated Batman figures and Barbie dolls, the focal point of the visit was lunch.

Despite all the cooking she did, Yiayia’s kitchen was small—barely enough room to squeeze in a table and chairs, let alone many people. Even with my slight size, I remember feeling crammed when I sat in the corner, my chair bumping up against the wall. The white linoleum table was accompanied by four white chairs with padded vinyl seats. Cracks in the seats were routinely patched with adhesive shelf liners of irregular patterns.

No matter the time of year, the menu remained constant: spaghetti and meatballs. Specifically, cut spaghetti lubricated with margarine and dense turkey meatballs served on flowered Corelle plates. There must have been a time where I enjoyed this food, but it has since been lost to my memory. In my mind, I pushed the spaghetti around with my fork with the squared-off handle, trying to eat as much as I could stomach to make my grandmother happy. I used my plastic Winnie the Pooh cup of milk as a chaser. I prayed to my vinyl Mickey Mouse placemat for fortitude.

If, for whatever reason, Yiayia did not have time to cook, she would make our Papou go out and pick us up McDonald's or Popeyes. To this day, my preference for Popeyes over other fried chicken restaurants is due to their fries, which I remember eating fistfuls of at my grandparents' house. My brother and I welcomed this reprieve from the standard offering.

I feel guilty now, admitting my preference for fast food over my grandmother's own cooking, but children can be selfish. At the time, I didn't understand that Yiayia always made us spaghetti and meatballs because she thought we liked it. I didn't understand that not far into the future, I would come to miss those meatballs, and all of my Yiayia's cooking, that the thing that defined her most would slip away past vacant eyes and into darkness.

The average weekend meals were far surpassed by what Yiayia made for holidays. My father liked to say that this was when Yiayia would make "real" Greek food, with butter and beef instead of margarine and turkey. Yiayia's house served as the gathering place on Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Every square inch of counter space was occupied with trays wrapped in foil and casserole dishes on trivets. Despite having an oven seven inches smaller than standard size, Yiayia never failed to assemble a feast for our extended family: green beans stewed with tomatoes, spanakopita, roasted lamb, pastitsio, dolmates, cheese and olives. For New Year's, she made vasilopita, a sweet bread with a coin tucked inside. (Yiayia wrapped the coin in tin foil for fear of germs.) Tradition stated that whoever got the slice with the coin in it would have good luck in the coming year.

As is often the case with large families, not everyone got along. My cousins squabbled for my grandparents' attention; my aunt and uncle, trapped in an unhappy marriage, shouted at each other; I hid from my great-uncle who liked to pinch my cheeks. In her way, Yiayia tried to smooth everything over with food. She dropped scoopful after scoopful of green beans onto

plates, immune to all protests. If your mouth was full, you wouldn't be able to argue with each other.

We knew something was wrong with Yiayia when she stopped cooking. In my high school years, we had fast food for lunch with increasing frequency, or went to Yiayia's favorite Greek restaurant, the Greek Village. Visits were more like wellness checks, where my mom would inspect and clean the dirty kitchen (another sign something was wrong) and make sure Papou had some food in the fridge. Conversations with Yiayia became cyclical: she repeated herself, asked us the same questions over and over, forgot things, and got angry whenever we pointed out these lapses.

We knew the signs of Alzheimer's from my father's mother, who also had it and lived with us at the time. We had seen firsthand how the disease could ravage your memory and make you forget what you had known for years, known since you were small. But we wanted to believe we were exaggerating, that these were just the signs of regular old age, not the sinister condition we already knew too much about. But doctors noticed what we'd ignored and gave us the diagnosis we didn't want to hear.

It wasn't long after the diagnosis that I realized Yiayia's recipes were gone. As I think is true for many immigrants, my Yiayia never wrote any of her recipes down. She never had a need: she had been cooking these dishes her whole life. When she lived in Greece, her mother would have shown her how to cook from a young age. My great-grandmother would not have written anything down, even if she were literate. Yiayia would have learned to via on-the-job training. Once she was in the firm grips of Alzheimer's, there was no recalling these recipes. They had been swallowed into the black hole along with other precious memories.

During a visit in my mid-teens, before Yiayia developed Alzheimer's, my mom suggested that she, Yiayia, and I make some kourambiedes together. My mom knew how much I liked to bake and thought it might be a good way for the three of us to spend time together. I had never cooked with Yiayia before; I always sat on the eating side of the kitchen counter. I baked a lot in high school to try to make friends and get boys to like me, so I was eager to learn from an expert. Kourambiedes were one of my favorites, too, buttery cookies coated in powdered sugar that melted in your mouth.

I think Yiayia was a little taken aback. There were no major holidays coming up, when these cookies would normally be served, and she was the one who did all of the cooking in the house. It would be rude to ask guests to do so, to make them work. But my mom insisted, and Yiayia relented without much fuss. I tied one of Yiayia's cotton aprons around my waist and waited for instruction.

As was her custom, Yiayia busied herself puttering around the kitchen, mixing this, melting that. She had taken my mom's request to mean, "Could *you* make us some kourambiedes?" rather than, "Could you make some kourambiedes *with us*?" My mom followed her from counter to counter, trying to get Yiayia to explain her process, and Yiayia shrugged her off like a nosy reporter. She would give my mom curt descriptions of what she was doing—"you mix the butter and sugar together"—but she clearly saw us as an intrusive presence.

My mom's weak cooking skills suddenly made sense to me. I was seeing here what had happened forty years ago: Yiayia doing all of the work, refusing to let my mom help, my mom trying to learn what she could via osmosis at arm's length. It occurred to me then that my mom wasn't just trying to save these recipes for me and for future generations. She wanted what had been withheld from her for so long.

In the summer before my senior year of college, I joined a study abroad program that would return me to my ancestral homeland for about a month. We would visit a variety of cities in the southern portion of the country, plus one of its outlying islands, to see archeological findings and marvels of ancient history.

I know travelers to foreign countries often experience "culture shock" when faced with traditions and social norms radically different from their own. I really didn't experience this when I went to Greece. Other than my weakness with the language, I didn't have too many moments where I felt unaware of what to do. The experience was rather like an extended, dialed-up-to-one-hundred visit to my grandparents' house.

When my classmates and I went to the taverna for lunch or dinner, I was the one to explain the cryptic items on the menu to their quizzical American palates. Pastitsio was like lasagna: noodles and ground meat layered with cheese. Souvlaki was a grilled kebab without vegetables. Loukamades were fried donut holes covered in honey. I considered myself to be something of an emissary, a cultural interpreter.

This is not to say that I was familiar with all foods we came across on the trip. As a picky eater, there were foods I refused when I was younger. When we checked in at our hotel in Delphi, the manager offered us a complimentary round of ouzo and orange juice. I hadn't been much for alcohol at that point, still only 20, but I discovered that the licorice and orange flavors blended together like candy. On the beaches of Naufplio, I tried octopus—grilled after it had been dried in the sun on a clothesline outside the restaurant. This rather reminded me of getting to pick your own lobster out of the tank at Red Lobster. I ate saganaki with zeal; surely this form of fried cheese was far superior to the American mozzarella stick.

My trip to Greece gave me the chance to refine and broaden my palate for Greek food. There were frequent opportunities to try foods I had rejected or been denied before, like moussaka and mastic candy. Unlike my American classmates, though, if I began to feel homesick or wanted something familiar, I could tuck into a gyro, meatballs, or a Greek salad. Sometimes all I wanted was feta cheese. It reminded me of Yiayia's house. It reminded me that I was home after all.

By the time I'd made it to Greece, that other home was gone. The house I'd visited so often in childhood had been sold, and Yiayia could no longer remember her own daughter, let alone recipes or how to cook. If she had been able to understand, I know she would have been excited for my trip, that I was going to return to the country our family was from.

But there was one place in Greece where I could still visit my family. Months before my trip, my mom contacted some of our relatives who still lived in Athens. One of Yiayia's brothers, Foti, had stayed in Greece when his siblings emigrated to America. Foti was already in the mountains for the summer, much too far out of the way of my class' travel route, but his wife Eleni remained in Athens to be near her children and grandchildren (my mom's cousins). Eleni's house was only a short train ride away from my Athens hotel, so my mom spoke with her cousins and the professor chaperoning the study tour. They made arrangements for me to visit my relatives on a free day. My mom's cousins came to pick me up at the train station.

My Great Aunt Eleni reminded me so much of Yiayia. Even though they weren't blood-related, they had a similar physical stature: short and solid with curly hair and kind eyes. They had the same aggressively friendly and familial attitude, ushering me into the house in a bone-crushing hug, pushing me to the table to eat something, eat something.

The lunch Eleni made for my visit was the best meal I ate in Greece. Eleni made tiropites in the shapes of beautiful twisted rings, baked lemon potatoes, fresh bread, and Greek salad. I can easily bring the texture of those tiropites back to my tongue: the paper-thin phyllo dough was baked to crisp perfection with just the right amount of butter. Biting into one, the dough fragmented and shattered in my mouth like an elegant breaking of glass.

Every time I caught Eleni's eye over the table, she would break out into a huge grin, making a bright little exclamation that needed no translation. My family was happy to have me home.

Once I got back to the States, there was one other place I could go to feel Greek. Every summer, our church held a Greek festival with live music, dancing, and, of course, food. I had never been much for church, despite my mom's best attempts, but I made time to attend.

There wasn't much to do at the Greek Festival, other than dancing (which I was self-conscious about) or shopping at the couple of vendor booths for jewelry or t-shirts. The real appeal was food. You would stand in line for about 10 minutes until you got up to the counter, where a volunteer would heap your plate with whatever you wanted: lamb shanks, roasted chicken, stewed green beans, orzo. Inevitably, the plate got too heavy and would sag in the middle, in the way that disposable plates ought to at a church event.

Sometimes, the food was precooked to cut costs. My father could not conceal his disappointment when he bit into a dolmata from a can. But the cumulative experience of eating with your family and other members of your community in the church gymnasium with speakers blaring made up for it.

I suppose that if I did go to church, I would recognize more people at the Greek Festival. Papou usually ran into someone he knew, either from church or other community events. But I

was content to go and be surrounded by strangers that reminded me of my family. It was comforting, to have this opportunity to interact with the culture, especially as Yiayia's Alzheimer's progressed.

The one familiar face I sought out at the event was my middle school social studies teacher, Mrs. Lardis. Mrs. Lardis was short and broad, with olive skin, glasses, and light brown hair made frizzy from frequent perms. Every time I went to the Greek Festival, I'd make sure to stop by the dessert counter where she volunteered. She'd tell me about her kids and grandkids and how she liked retirement. I'd give her a brief summary of what I was up to, but only because I felt obligated. I kept details about myself vague because I didn't want her to feel bad if she couldn't remember me. Even as the years progressed and further separated me from middle school, I sought her out for a quick hello. It was something of a compulsion. I needed to know she was still there, still ambulatory and cognizant. If she wasn't at the dessert table, or if I didn't at least check, she might no longer exist. She might disappear.

My Yiayia died in hospice the day after my 21st birthday, about five months after I'd returned from Greece. My mom sat with her until the end, even when she was unresponsive or sleeping. She showed Yiayia a photo of me and my then boyfriend (now husband) out for my birthday dinner, a photo that still hangs on my parents' refrigerator.

The funeral was just before Thanksgiving, so my brother and I were able to come home from college to attend. It seemed fitting she died so close to a holiday centered around food, especially after the elaborate Thanksgiving dinners she used to cook.

I remember my brother heating up leftover Chinese food on the stovetop and suddenly breaking down into tears. When my mom asked him what was wrong, he cried into her shoulder

that he had been thinking Yiayia was sitting in her usual spot at the kitchen island, watching him cook.

I inherited the silverware set from Yiayia's kitchen, along with some of her kitchen knives, decorative plates, and toaster oven. I packed these away in boxes under the stairs at my parents' house, saving them for when I'd have my own kitchen.

I wrote a eulogy for Yiayia's funeral, but I couldn't deliver it myself because I was crying too much. A family friend read it instead, to those who came to the post-funeral dinner at the Greek Village. I wrote:

She's probably already cooked for everyone [in Heaven] too, because we know she wouldn't want anyone to go hungry. That's probably what she's doing right now: up there cooking meatballs and pastitso for Jesus and all of the angels. God's probably asking for seconds. He's probably put her in charge of cooking Thanksgiving dinner for everyone up there: let's hope Elvis likes lamb.

A few weeks after Yiayia's passing was my mom's birthday. My mom wasn't in much of a mood to celebrate, still so emotionally close to her mother's death. As a way of cheering her up, my dad endeavored to recreate one of Yiayia's recipes. When my mom was a child, Yiayia used to bake her "pink cake" for her birthday.

To my knowledge, pink cake has no Greek origins. Rather, much like her turkey meatballs, I think the dish emerged from Yiayia's experiences as an immigrant in an American kitchen. Pink cake is a box of yellow cake mix, prepared as normal, other than adding a few drops of red food coloring to the batter. The cake is then iced with pink frosting—again, white icing from a can with red food coloring mixed in—and topped with shredded coconut, my

mom's favorite. The cake very much resembled the all-pink bathroom at Yiayia's house: very 1970s.

After her lavish birthday dinner—also prepared by my dad—we presented my mom with the pink cake. Like any good wife or mother would, she was appreciative and thankful, but we could tell from her expression that it was not the same. Even with boxed cake mix, Yiayia had made food her own.

When I moved out of my parents' house and in with Ryan, I became the de facto head chef. It's a pretty even division of labor: I like to cook, Ryan doesn't mind cleaning, and Ryan's method of cooking sometimes frightens me.

Ryan is not a bad cook; he just doesn't put the same care or attention to detail into food that I do. He'd rather just eat it. An example: I came home late from work one night, so Ryan offered to make dinner. He made penne pasta and poured a can of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup over it as a sauce. His logic was that it was "basically the same" as alfredo sauce. I have since learned to be extremely specific when I ask him to cook, and to keep an "emergency pizza" in the freezer.

But adjusting to each other's tastes wasn't all bad. Ryan is not much for ground beef, and given the high prices of red meat, I was happy to switch to ground poultry. One week, I had scored a good deal on a value pack of ground turkey and was wondering what to do with it. As I often do when I have a kitchen conundrum, I called my father for advice. He suggested a couple of things, but meatballs sounded most appealing.

It's a wonder that I didn't think of Yiayia the entire time I minced onions and rolled globs of ground turkey between my hands. Maybe it was because I had never made her meatballs before, or even seen her make them. In my memory, the meatballs are already cooked and

waiting on the stove, the little gray clumps like blobs of clay. The meatballs existed in a perpetual state, constant like the forces of gravity. My childhood self did not comprehend the labor involved.

When I pulled the tray out of the oven, the smell caught my attention. It struck at something that felt far back in my brain, hidden away behind the old piano and dusty boxes in the attic of my mind. I piled meatballs on top of my spaghetti mountain and sat down at the dinner table.

You know that scene in *Ratatouille* where the stern food critic bites into Remy's version of the titular dish and it sends him hurtling back to his childhood? These meatballs weren't exactly the same as Yiayia's, but they were the closest thing I had tasted in all the years since. The soft and chewy flesh gave way easily under my teeth. They had the darker brown highlights where they'd stuck to the pan, like rouge accenting a round cheek. I could taste the subtle seasoning of Italian breadcrumbs, parsley, and onion embedded in the savory meat. I thought about all of those Saturday afternoons spent at that white table at my grandparents' house; all the spaghetti and meatballs I could ever eat but didn't want at the time. The Corelle plates with green flowers on the rim. The Winnie the Pooh plastic cups and Mickey Mouse placemats. The forks with the squared-off handles. The fork I was holding now, again, at age 24. The same fork.

More than five years after Yiayia's passing, I had my bridal shower, where relatives and friends I hadn't seen in years brought me rolling pins and cutting boards. We played silly games that asked questions like who the better cook in the relationship was. We ate pasta salad with feta cheese, sandwiches on potato rolls, and cupcakes with glitter in the frosting. I felt so loved, but at such a feminine event, I also felt my grandmothers' absence.

Later in the evening, after my father and brother had gone to bed, my mom and I were in my room sorting out the gifts and décor from the party. My mom left for a moment, then came back with a box. “You have to promise you won’t start crying on me,” she said. I told her I would try my best, unsure what was in the box.

“I have some gifts for you from Grandma and Yiayia,” she continued. I tried to steel myself from what I was sure would be a tide of emotions.

First, she pulled out a beautiful green vase from Grandma. My mom said this was one of Grandma’s favorite pieces, purchased on an antiquing trip some years ago. I nodded and agreed that it seemed very much like Grandma’s style.

Next, my mom gave me a small jewelry box, about the size for a necklace or a bracelet. I pulled out a delicate cotton handkerchief with tiny blue and yellow flowers patterned on the edges. Blue and yellow were my wedding colors. My mom said this was one of Yiayia’s handkerchiefs, and she thought I might be able to incorporate it into my wedding bouquet. I felt tears welling under my eyelids, but I agreed to try to find a home for it on the wedding day.

“I found this when I was going through some stuff,” my mom said before she presented me with the last item. She handed me what I thought was one of our family cookbooks, the *Krinos Greek Gourmet Cookbook*. We consulted this manual on holidays to make sure we didn’t overcook the lamb or forget any crucial ingredients in stewed green beans. I was wondering why she was giving me something that was such a staple of our kitchen when I opened it and realized this was not my parents’ cookbook.

In her slanted, English-nightschool, all-caps handwriting, on the inside cover:

ATHENA KOKONIS

12200 GALWAY DR

S.S. MD

FEB 26 1986

"This was Yiayia's copy," my mom explained. I swallowed, hard, and blinked back the tears threatening to break my promise.

The book looked almost new, despite being over 35 years old. The cover was weak around the stapled binding, but the pages were clean and free of stains. I held the book in wobbly hands, staring at the signature. I had reclaimed something from the void. My mom had looked into the black hole and ripped our memories back before they disintegrated into subatomic matter.

And yet, despite the reverence I felt in that moment, on a subconscious level, I knew that these were not truly my Yiayia's recipes. Some of them *had* been lost to the black hole. It was clear from the cookbook's condition that Yiayia had rarely used it, maybe only to check things like temperature or cooking time. Her actual methods were gone, and this cookbook was the closest my mom and I were ever going to get.

But nevertheless, I kept looking for them. Maybe it was because of my inability to accept this loss that I kept looking for traces of my late grandmother. Any time I sat in a Popeyes dining room or ate with her former utensils, I thought of her, trying to keep her from being completely erased.

I wrote the first draft of this essay in my musty, former dorm room of an office on campus. I had the window open, trying to let in some fresh spring air. As I typed, I caught a whiff of some familiar herbs: mint, thyme, and rosemary. These are common seasonings in Greek cooking, in dishes like roasted lamb and chicken. I was alone, and my office mate hadn't been in all day. There is no kitchen in my building, not even a communal microwave or

breakroom. Plus, my office is on the third floor. The buildings nearest mine were all academic buildings and offices: the nearest dining hall was at least two blocks. I could not think of a logical explanation for the smell.

I texted my mom about it, telling her I thought Yiayia was trying to say hello. My mom responded, “I’m sure she is.” I realized then that I was not the only one still looking.

With Extra Chocolate Chips

If you are the child home from school, you will enter through the front door. Technically, according to the post office and state zoning maps, it is the back door, because it does not face the street, but to you, it is the front door. It is the front door because it is where you set up your jack-o-lanterns in the fall, your painted rocks in the summer.

You enter and slip off your sneakers, leaning on the back of one of the dining chairs to your right for balance. You slide your backpack from your shoulders and walk straight ahead to the fridge, where you grab an apple juice box and plunge the plastic straw through the foil-covered hole.

If you are the adult, you are standing in the kitchen, gazing into the dining room. The child enters from outside, home from school, her backpack weighed down with as many books as the librarian will allow her to check out. You crunch on a pretzel rod, salty, thick as a cigar. You should get her a rolling backpack, you think. That is easier to negotiate than fewer books.

There is a threshold, here, between the kitchen and the dining room. It is an old house, where inhabitants have added rooms and expansions across decades, never at the same time. No two rooms in this house are level. There is a step up from the dining room to the kitchen, about four inches high, from dark brown carpet to glossy white tile.

In the kitchen, you make snacks while the child does her homework, papers spread wide across the dining table. You cut up apple slices for her, peeling off the skins—dreadful, nutritious things. Yesterday you made her favorite, chocolate chip brownies with extra chocolate chips, so today you will give her a different, healthier type of sugar. You crunch on your own stick of salt as you slice.

In the dining room, you copy the week's vocabulary words onto a sheet of looseleaf paper. At your elbow is your most steadfast companion in this and many other assignments, the paperback dictionary, bright orange in color, his cover creased through with innumerable white lines. You and he will look up what the words mean later, arranged in their tidy columns. Copying is the easy part. Tomorrow, Mrs. Mills will assign you to write 10 sentences, each of which uses one of these new words. That assignment excites you much more than the current one. It tickles an itch in your brain, setting up these new words like dolls in a scene, acting out your whims.

You notice a plate of apple slices has appeared in the middle of the table. The slices have been arranged neatly on a ceramic white plate with blue flowers on the rim. You also notice the sky outside has started to turn golden, the late afternoon brightness glinting through the terracotta-colored blinds. How long have you been here?

You hear her telling you that you should eat something, and so—for her—you take a bite.

~

My parents met Ms. Sue and Gregg when they moved to our private neighborhood in rural southern Maryland. Ms. Sue and Gregg lived next to the community pier. Ms. Sue had recently retired from working on Capitol Hill, and Gregg was still working for the NSA, a few years out from retirement himself. My mom was pregnant with me, but had to go back to work not long after giving birth, and so I—and later, my brother Chris—stayed at Ms. Sue's house during the day, whiling away the afternoons. When we started school, Ms. Sue would pick us up from the bus stop and we'd walk back to her house to do homework and play games until our parents came home from work.

To say Ms. Sue spoiled us would be an understatement. Maybe this is because she had no biological relation to us, or because she took on the role of a third grandmother: both of these characteristics gave her leverage and some exemption from the rules. If we got off the school bus with red and puffy eyes, Ms. Sue would find out who had wronged us and rectify the matter. She had no qualms about yelling at teachers or going straight to the principal. When I was in first grade, a boy pushed me down on the playground, resulting in a scraped knee. Ms. Sue marched to the administrative office the next day and demanded this boy apologize. He came to me crying, a sniveling mess of a child, and I awkwardly accepted his apology, feeling sorry for the wrath he had unknowingly inflicted on himself. Ms. Sue was a tough woman, a breast cancer survivor, the granddaughter of Polish immigrants. She had grown up in inner city Philadelphia in the 1960s and been robbed at gunpoint before. She would not be intimidated.

~

Who is standing in the kitchen, and who is sitting at the dining table? It depends on when you ask. Twenty years ago, Ms. Sue would be in the kitchen, and I would be at the table. Three years ago, the reverse would be true. Now, both would be empty, Gregg floating from room to room like a ghost in his own house. If you asked about the version of this house that exists in my memory, who is to say I am not both sitting and standing, inside and outside of, in both rooms, in no rooms? Which version of me occupies this space?

~

Ms. Sue and Gregg lived in an old beach cottage, originally built in 1928 for vacationers looking to get away from bustling Washington, D.C. The interior was dark wood, exposed beams crossing the ceiling, floor-length windows facing the Chesapeake Bay. The carpet was an even darker brown with closely-packed fibers, making it easy to “draw” on. Chris or I would lie down

and Ms. Sue would trace our outline with her finger, as one does on a smaller scale with their hand to make one of those Thanksgiving turkey drawings. Chris and I played tic-tac-toe in this way, our fingers running through the carpet threads like the bristles of a soft brush.

When we got home from school, we got to watch cartoons for about an hour before starting our homework. Chris and I rolled around on the floor of the TV room, me imitating the sparkly feminine power of my idol Sailor Moon, he recreating superhero poses from the animated boy mutant Ben 10. Ms. Sue would bring us snacks to "munch on" while we watched. I think the idea was to give us some transition time, a break from the long school day before swinging into more schoolwork, time where we could unwind and be children.

I know we ate plenty of fruits and vegetables at her house, but what first comes to mind when I think of snack time are specific packaged foods: Milano cookies, pretzel rods, Pillsbury premade sugar cookie dough, SpaghettiOs with meatballs. Hot dogs cooked in the microwave in a rolled-up paper towel, alfredo pasta packs made with too much butter, "roasted" marshmallows torched by her cigarette lighter.

Our favorite treat, though, was chocolate chip brownies. Ms. Sue bought the premade kind that came in a refrigerated block, a thick sheet of rich chocolate. The chocolate chips were already embedded into the dough, but Chris and I still asked for extra chocolate chips, which Ms. Sue was happy to oblige. Even though the dough was premade, cooking the brownies was a collaborative process. Chris and I pulled the yellow Nestlé Toll House package out of the fridge, cut it open, and pressed the dough into the square glass pan. Ms. Sue gave us the bag of chocolate chips and let us add as many as we liked. Children rarely have this kind of power and control over their own food.

I know Nestlé engineers them to be delicious, and memory and nostalgia tend to warp the senses, but I am hard-pressed to find brownies that taste like these in my adult life. The dense, fudgy texture that nevertheless retains enough cakelike quality to provide some springiness, some bedrock to keep your teeth from gluing together. The glossy, crinkly skin on top that would flake off like sweet sunburn or fish food. The chocolate chips, softened by the oven, yielding easily to your teeth, not quite oozing, but melted like a Hershey's Kiss left in your pocket a bit too long. Chris and I would fill our little white plates with the blue flowers on the rim with as many decadent squares as we could.

My dad cites these brownies as a contributing factor in Chris' childhood pudginess, never mind that most of our family is obese or overweight, never mind that I ate just as many and my rail-thin frame never gained a pound. Even if this were the case, I don't think it would have changed our behavior. How could my brother and I refuse such chocolate kindness? Ms. Sue was the one adult in our lives who gave endlessly, with no expectation of reciprocity. Even our parents, with their insistence on honor roll and heteronormativity, could not claim so much as that.

~

You are in the dining room. You are copying the vocabulary words ten times each onto a sheet of looseleaf paper to turn in to Mrs. Mills tomorrow. You are writing these words, the same words, repeating them over and over. Your friend the paperback dictionary is nowhere to be seen. You are simply copying, drawing lines to form letters to form words, the same words, without gaining any sense of their meaning. Are you the child, completing her homework, or are you the adult, trying to make sense of something?

The dictionary would be no help to you anyway: there is no definition for this type of family. White American culture places a hyper-focus on blood relations, so someone who isn't biologically related to you has no obligation for showing such care. Their love is truly just that: unconditional. Perhaps their love is even more so, even purer, immune from the responsibilities of a blood relative. Which only arouses the question: why you?

~

The dining room was our main hub in Ms. Sue and Gregg's house. Chris and I made arts and crafts like bead jewelry and collages of magazine scraps. We colored Sailor Moon and Pokémon coloring sheets printed from the internet, painted pictures of our Neopets. We puzzled out pre-Algebra equations and practiced our cursive. We played with Playdoh on the plastic tablecloth, our McDonald's playset stamping out dozens of clay burgers, lettuce leaves, and tomato slices. We ate dinner here on nights when our parents would be coming home late or were out of town for work and couldn't bring us along.

The kitchen was Ms. Sue's domain. When our family came over for Christmas Eve dinner, the countertops were filled with hot plates, crockpots, and casserole dishes. As much as I looked forward to my Christmas presents, this holiday meal was equally anticipated. We had meatballs, stuffed shells, sweet Italian sausage, and thick slices of Texas toast garlic bread. Everything was covered in homemade marinara sauce, crafted from huge yellow cans of San Marzano tomatoes. Ms. Sue would make veggie trays with cherry tomatoes, baby carrots, and cucumber slices with notched edges, a trick she must have learned from the Food Network.

It was during this beloved holiday meal when we first noticed something off with Ms. Sue. On Christmas Eve 2019, Chris and I were fixing our plates on the buffet line, as was custom. We were 22 and 24 years old respectively, Chris a new college graduate and I a few

years removed, working full time but still living at home. We sat down at the dining table and asked Ms. Sue if she was going to get a plate.

"Maybe in a bit," she said. She wrinkled her nose. "I've been cooking all day and the smell is getting to me. Upsets my stomach." Chris and I looked at each other, perplexed. The food smelled delicious; how could rich marinara inspire a reaction other than a desire to dive in?

"But you go ahead and eat," Ms. Sue continued, perhaps sensing our hesitation. "Don't wait for me; I'll get something later." Our brows remained wrinkled, but after one last glance at each other and a shrug, we picked up our forks.

This pattern snowballed over the next year, this reticence and suspicion of food. Both Ms. Sue and Gregg were in and out of the hospital in the first half of 2020 for malnutrition and dehydration. They went to rehab and physical therapy, and they were back on track by next Christmas, for the most part. Ms. Sue moved slowly, but steadily. She made stuffed shells and actually ate them. But by Christmas Eve 2021, Ms. Sue couldn't walk without getting dizzy. Her hands shook; her face sunk. Her skin was cracked and dry. There were no stuffed shells, no hand-rolled meatballs, but instead premade, frozen food delivered by Schwan's in aluminum tins. It felt deeply wrong.

~

Food has always been the way you solve problems. Friend stressed out trying to keep up with schoolwork and keeps forgetting to eat? Bring her a blueberry muffin from your Starbucks run. Family friend's mother passes away? Drop off a cheesy casserole with a side of tight hugs. Girl in gym class says you have big ears? Bake a pan of chocolate chip brownies with extra chocolate chips and eat as many as you can stomach.

So what happens when food *is* the problem? What happens when the cornerstone of your logic cracks clean through the middle? How do you solve a riddle you can't cook your way out of?

~

When someone is sick, and especially if they are old, it has been my family's policy to let them eat pretty much whatever they want. We have never been a family of force feeding, of chaining children to the table until they finish their vegetables. When we were caring for my grandmothers with Alzheimer's, some days they just wanted sweets. Who were we to tell them they couldn't have an extra slice of lemon meringue pie or scoop of chocolate ice cream? They had each made it to 80, and they had a terminal neurological disease. If that was what they felt like eating, well, at least they were eating.

This was our approach with Ms. Sue after her first several hospitalizations in 2020, even though she wasn't yet 70. I had just moved out of my parents' house and into my first apartment with Ryan, my now-husband. Our family knew she was sick, even if we would not admit it to ourselves or out loud. Eating disorders were teen girls counting calories and vomiting after binging on tubs of ice cream, not Medicare-age women claiming they weren't hungry. If she wanted a bag of jellybeans or a can of potato sticks, we were not about to deny her. We would give her whatever she felt she could stomach. It was torturous to see her reject food, she who had fed us over so many years.

We tried everything. Anything Ms. Sue happened to mention as sounding good or having a positive association with, we ran out and purchased, cooked and boxed into Tupperware so fast the lid steamed up. Italian, Chinese, ham and bean soup, fried bologna. We would eat with her, at the dining table or in front of the TV, hoping the social cues of sharing a meal with others would

kick in and she'd eat more. We'd deliver tubs and takeout containers and wait with bated breath, hoping for recognition to click into place, the connection between her brain and her stomach restored. She'd awaken from that hazy dream she'd been living in for months, realize how hungry she was, dig in with gusto. She'd gain all the weight back, her face would fill back out, and she wouldn't feel like a glass skeleton when we hugged her.

But you know, don't you? This would never happen. That she would take only a few bites, claim she was full, push it away, change the subject of conversation. That you would visit a few days later and see the fridge full of your Tupperware, untouched, what you brought her last week starting to smell and molder. You know, as I could never understand or accept, and perhaps still can't, that she wasn't going to get better.

~

My husband brings me a warm bag of McDonalds when he tells me Ms. Sue has been put into hospice. We are sitting at our coffee table in Flagstaff, our pseudo-dining room where we eat dinner in front of the TV. The TV is off. The McNugget I'm chewing suddenly tastes like old grease. It catches the sides of my throat on the way down, as if it is too big to swallow.

I cry so much in those two days. I have short interims of not crying, where I go to teach class or drive. I wear sunglasses on the bus in case I start to tear up again (which I do, several times). If my students notice the redness in my eyes, I hope they think I've been smoking weed.

When Gregg calls me, I am expecting it is so that he can put the phone to Ms. Sue's ear so I can talk to her, tell her how much I love her, tell her goodbye. It is too late.

I soak my husband's shirt with tears. "Tears" feels like such a mild word. I am sobbing. There is pain so deeply in me and my body is trying to wrench it out by force. It is like vomiting. My body continues to force it up and out, up and out, trying to rid myself of it. I can feel my sobs

coming from below my stomach. I cough and choke on my own saliva, but I still can't stop. This is a poison that cannot be forced out, a poison that will live in me for the rest of my life in some degree. I cannot evacuate it into the toilet and flush it away like I can with bad Chinese food.

I want to take an ice cream scoop to my insides, run a tract through the smooth, even middle of my grief, and fling the round, cold ball over the neighbor's fence, where it will melt and disappear out of my sight. I forget that I am already hollow, that my chest is an empty carton and there is a sign on the glass display case that says "all out."

~

Her mark on my house is indelible. As the saying goes, you couldn't spit without hitting something Ms. Sue gave me as a gift. There is the cherry red vacuum cleaner she gave Ryan and me as housewarming present when we first moved in together. There is the ceramic nativity scene I put up every December, even though neither Ryan nor I is particularly religious.

But by far, my kitchen houses the most items from her. The green and white flowered recipe box, with her recipes for pizza dip and stuffed shells tucked inside. ("A recipe box," she chuckled to her sister Marlene at Christmas Eve that year as I unwrapped the gift. "What teenager asks for a recipe box?") Silicone donut pans, delivered to my house a couple of days after I mentioned to her on the phone that I was trying to make apple cider donuts with a cupcake pan. I did not ask for donut pans, to be clear; I should have known that expressing any kind of difficulty to her that could be remedied by Amazon's Add to Cart button *would* be remedied.

Most pervasive are her plates: white with blue flowers on the rim, the same plates Chris and I ate off of as children. Dark blue watercolor flowers with yellow centers dance alongside emerald leaves. I acquired these plates about a year before I moved out of my parents' house, before Ms. Sue had begun exhibiting symptoms of the disorder that would eventually claim her

life. Ms. Sue had been cleaning out her closets again, a seasonal activity that occurred about twice a year, when the new items purchased from the Home Shopping Network crowded out the old ones. She called me one afternoon, telling me she had bought new plates and was planning to get rid of her old ones.

"Do you want them?" she asked. "Do you think your parents might want them for the beach house?"

Our family's rental property on the beach already had a fully-stocked kitchen, but I told her yes anyway, already mentally leapfrogging over that suggestion. I retrieved the plates as well as the matching bowls and coffee cups and brought them back home. I briefly mentioned them to my family, that Ms. Sue was getting rid of them and I said I would take them. I never mentioned her original suggestion of using them at the beach house. Instead, I took them for myself, my semi-secret treasure hoarded for me and me alone. I squirreled the dishware away in boxes in the crawlspace under our stairs, where they waited until I had my own kitchen for them to live in. I would keep them and protect them, covet them, even, these childhood artifacts. They came with me when I moved out of my parents' house, then again when Ryan and I moved to Flagstaff.

A few months after Ms. Sue died, Ryan noticed one of the dinner plates had a large crack in it. The crack ran all the way from one side of the plate to the other, irreparable, barely holding together as it was. We looked at each other, knowing that the sensible thing to do was throw it away before it broke and we'd risk cutting ourselves on the shards. But instead, he put it on the dining table, and we said we would figure out something else to do with it. The plate is still sitting on the dining table, several more months later, and I pass by it daily on my walks to the kitchen, still trying to think of what to do with it.

~

The first major holiday without Ms. Sue was Halloween, one of her favorites. She came trick or treating with me, Chris, and our parents and made Gregg stay home to hand out candy. She helped us make costumes, brought cupcakes to our elementary school Halloween parties, protected me from any skeletons or animatronic lawn décor that scared me. For years, she displayed a photo of Chris and me at the local pumpkin patch on her refrigerator. We were about 3 and 4 years old, respectively, peeking out of the windows of a massive "pumpkin" house, cheesing for the camera.

I think any holiday would have been hard without her. This was a woman who still gave Chris and me Easter baskets every year, even after we both graduated college. She sent us cards on Valentine's Day, regardless of our relationship status. But Halloween was especially hard because of all of the traditions we'd built around it together.

I decided to try to make something positive out of my grief. It was the middle of the semester and I had no idea what else to do with it. It would not leave. It hardly abated. It sat in my stomach like a lump of congealed fat. Maybe continuing one of our traditions would help.

The most memorable Halloween tradition I could think of were spider pops, lollipops dressed up to look like spiders. I'm sure spider lollipops originated from a source like Good Housekeeping or Food Network, but maybe not knowing their origin added to their magic. In mid-October, I went to Walmart and bought a large bag of Tootsie Pops, two packs of black paper napkins, and a bundle of black pipe cleaners.

I twisted out three dozen spider pops at my coffee table one Saturday afternoon, simultaneously trying to think and not think of the previous times I had made these—*we* had made these. Adhering to routine is comforting in the face of tragedy. I had been thinking, over those two months, who I would be in the face of this. Who would I be without the source of the

most unconditional love I had ever received? What was the way back to feeling full again, or at least not echoingly empty?

I brought the spider pops to class on Halloween for my students. They were grateful; some of them shyly asked if they could take an extra for a partner or friend, to which I said of course. They grinned wide and bounced away, excited to share the sweetness of the season with loved ones. Maybe *this* was the way back.

~

If food is an act of care, then the caregiver belongs in the kitchen, and the care receiver in the dining room. This is what you told yourself before, when you were just a child doing her homework and chewing on apple slices. But as you got older, you crossed that threshold between those two rooms more and more often. As you both aged, who gave and who received care, especially in the form of food, morphed and changed. You never wanted it to; you wanted to stay the child at the dining table as long as you could. But this is only possible in a manufactured memory, not the real world.

~

For perhaps the first time in my life, I got the birthday blues a few weeks before I turned 27. I could not understand why. When I was little, I relished the attention I got on my birthday, loved chocolate cake and my sparkly pink birthday tiara. As I got older, I liked having a reason to throw a party. 27 is also my favorite number. Logically, this should have been my best birthday, in Flagstaff with my cool MFA friends and newly married to my loving husband. But in the preceding weeks, I nevertheless found myself sobbing on my bathroom floor.

It took me some time to realize the reason for this reaction. Perhaps it was a problem of not being able to see the forest for the trees, that I was so surrounded and consumed by my grief

that I no longer recognized it. The year and the place I occupied were irrelevant; I rejected my 27th birthday because it would be the first one without Ms. Sue. I would not be getting a "happy birthday" text from her that morning, the woman who had bought me a birthday gift and card for every one of my prior 26 years. I did not feel like celebrating because my main celebrator, my perpetual cheerleader, would not be able to come.

It took some time, but Ryan and other friends coaxed me out of it. They reassured me we could do something small and intimate, like going out to dinner or painting our nails. I agreed to these, and gradually warmed up to the idea of celebrating. The thought of a birthday passing by as a normal day, unremarked and average, depressed me just as much, and so I threw myself into it. That weekend I threw myself a birthday party and invited all of my grad school friends over for pizza and board games. I baked my own birthday cake, something I'd done every year since college, as it was the only way, in my mind, to ensure I got what I wanted. Crowded into my tiny apartment, my friends oooed and ahhhed when I cut into the three-layer confetti cake and M&Ms and rainbow sprinkles poured out from the hidden cavity in the middle.

I made another birthday dessert for myself as well, this one less about showmanship and more about taste. In her James Beard Foundation Award-winning cookbook *Bravetart*, Stella Parks prefaces her recipe for Glossy Fudge Brownies with the following: "I'm obsessed with that fragile, crinkly, paper-thin brownie crust. It's the sign of a well-balanced recipe, and a solid indicator of the goodness to come." I tend to agree with Parks; many brownie recipes I've tried lack this veneer, yet boxed mixes seem to have the formula on lock. I used her recipe when making my birthday brownies, which called for browned butter and espresso powder rather than the simple egg, water, and oil of Duncan Hines, or the press-and-bake of Nestlé Toll House. I made one adjustment, though, that Parks did not include: extra chocolate chips.

When the brownies came out of the oven—crinkly-topped, as promised—I cut them into squares and hollered for Ryan so we could sample the first bites together. I opened the cabinet and, without hesitating, pulled out two of the blue flowered plates. I stood in my Flagstaff kitchen, staring at a near-mirror image from 20 years ago and 2,000 miles away. I heard her telling me to eat, and so, for her, the woman in the kitchen and the girl in the dining room, I took a bite.

The Prospect of Never

On my six-year dating anniversary with my husband, I get the sickest I have been in a decade. We have been married only three weeks and have just returned to Flagstaff from Maryland, where our ceremony was held. I begin feeling queasy in the early evening, sourness setting into my stomach. My husband asks if I'm coming to a friend's house for board game night and I tell him no—a rarity, since I love board games. It seems prescient now, but really, I just felt ill and wanted to stay home.

I start vomiting about half an hour after we've gone to bed. I never truly fall asleep that night. I doze for about an hour, wake up, and stumble to our attached bathroom.

I keep Ryan up, too, and he never complains, offering me sips of water and Gatorade, a new trash bag. I cry that my new husband has to see me like this—on the toilet, undignified, a complete mess. "You're sick," he says, the logical man that he is. "It's my job to take care of you. You shouldn't feel guilty; it's not like you got sick on purpose." All the same, this degree of illness makes me feel like an attention-seeker.

The next morning, bleary-eyed and exhausted, we retrace what I ate to look for a cause. I'd had our leftover Chinese takeout, lo mein noodles and pork fried rice, then simple buttered pasta for dinner, when I was already feeling nauseous. We decide it must have been the Chinese food. Since Ryan ate the same thing and felt fine, we assume his iron stomach saved him from sharing my fate. (This is a man that sometimes eats raw pasta, after all.) We move on with our lives, writing off the incident as a case of bad food poisoning, unaware of what's to come.

~

The rest of the summer is a kind of personal hell for me. I never vomit, but I think this is through willpower alone. I develop a moderate emetophobia after that initial illness, and I fear vomiting again because my body tells me it will be just as bad as last time. I continue to get

horrible nausea, chills, diarrhea, and stomach cramps, usually in the middle of the night, giving me the added bonus of being tired all the time. I'm forced to call out of my summer job, babysitting, because I'm so exhausted. I worry I might drop the baby or fall over trying to pick him up. I'm too tired to make progress on my summer reading list; I start nodding off as my eyes move over the page.

The mysterious illness teaches me to be wary of food. It is different from my childhood days as a picky eater: this is a fear of food, not a simple distaste. I begin to approach food cautiously, wondering if it will keep me up again later that night. I resign myself to a world of blandness and simple carbohydrates: plain white rice, lightly buttered pasta, dry crackers. It is boring, but I rationalize that it keeps me safe.

I start keeping a food diary, hoping it will crystallize and make obvious the root cause of all of this. I write down every single thing I eat every day and note if I have any symptoms. If I have symptoms, I note which ones, what time, and how severe. I feel manic, scribbling all of these details down into my little black book. I hate how suspicious I feel about my body, how I am analyzing every little gurgle and twinge in my stomach, looking for answers. I worry there is no connection, that it is "just stress," as my dad says, that I am imagining it. I know that keeping a food diary is also a fast track to an eating disorder, but my eating is not exactly orderly at this point anyway.

The sickness is like a jungle cat: it tracks you by movement. If you lie still, clutching at your stomach, trying not so much as to even turn your head, it can't catch you. This is what I tell myself as the cramps roll through me early one morning in September when I wake with stomach pain so violent I can hardly walk.

From bed, I email my students—my beloved Intro to Fiction students, who eagerly participate in class discussion and laugh at my stupid jokes—to cancel class. I then open the Campus Health Portal in a new tab and make an appointment for later that day. I am furious that my body is taking the joys of my life away from me: food and school, my two lifelong loves.

~

The doctors at Campus Health order a complete blood count, with tests for the "big seven" food allergies plus Celiac disease; all come back negative. They send me to an allergist and a gastroenterologist in the Phoenix area, two and a half hours from Flagstaff. Both of these specialists also order a number of tests: an ultrasound of my abdomen, a breath test to measure gut bacteria, and, at my insistence, a test for something called alpha gal syndrome.

Alpha gal syndrome (AGS) is an allergic reaction to a sugar molecule found in mammals. Reactions occur after eating or being exposed to mammal meat or by-products such as dairy or gelatin. Like Lyme disease, you contract AGS via tick bites. My parents live in a woodsy, rural area, and no matter how much I try to avoid tall grass and wear long pants, the ticks find me any time I walk the dog.

My parents' next-door neighbors, M and F, had been diagnosed with AGS a few years ago, and I only knew about the condition vaguely through what my parents reported back to me: they couldn't eat anything that gave a live birth. I didn't even know what it was called, just that they couldn't eat burgers or steaks anymore. That's why it's nicknamed "red meat allergy." At that time, the idea of not being able to eat beef or pork was hard to wrap my head around. How did my neighbors cope? A juicy hamburger was one of life's greatest pleasures to me; my idea of luxury was a rare, bloody cut of filet mignon.

~

Two days before Christmas, Ryan and I are visiting my friend Heather and her family while we're in Florida for our honeymoon when I finally get a call from my allergist's office.

When my phone rings, Ryan and I are making pizzelles, those thin, waffle cone type cookies that taste best fresh off the iron. It's a family Christmas tradition among Heather's in-laws that we've graciously been invited to. I excuse myself to the backyard to take the call, the sliding glass door squealing shut behind me. Straight ahead is the in-ground pool, wrapped for the winter in a big gray tarp. Heather's mother-in-law has a vegetable garden growing in the side yard: tomatoes, zucchini, various herbs and spices. It is late in the afternoon, so the sun is beginning to wane. We've come to Florida during a rare cold snap—the temperature is in the 50s and overcast. I wrap my free arm across my chest while the other holds the phone to my ear.

The nurse on the line says, "So we got your test results back, and it looks like you tested positive for alpha gal syndrome."

Time freezes for a moment. I stare at the covered-up pool and surrounding concrete patio, as if my glaring will make the nurse's words make sense. I recall the previous evening, when Ryan and I visited Heather and her husband Lucas' house. The four of us were sitting on the carpet, playing with their almost-one-year-old boy Alex and their excitable pitbull Paco. Heather asked if turkey burgers were okay for dinner, and I joked that I might have to get used to them.

"What do you mean?" she said, brow furrowing. I then recounted the events of the last several months, ending with a description of AGS and concluding that I wasn't sure if this was what I had or not.

"I almost don't want to know," I confessed, rubbing Paco's belly. "It would be nice to have confirmation, you know? That I haven't been making it up this whole time and to know exactly what's wrong." I paused for a moment as Paco covered my hand in sloppy kisses, his

wagging tail shaking his whole body. “But then I won’t be able to deny it,” I continued. “I won’t be able to pretend like it’s nothing. I’ll have to actually deal with it.”

A breeze whooshes through the backyard, making me shiver a little. I remember I’m on the phone in Heather’s backyard, still staring at the pool cover, watching butterflies land and take off of the vegetable plants. I ask the nurse what this means, what I’m supposed to do now.

She tells me to avoid eating red meat, like beef and pork, and continue to monitor my symptoms, as if I don’t already know this. If I want to talk to the doctor, I have to make another appointment. Defeated, I sigh and thank her (for what, I’m unsure), then hang up. I clench and unclench my fists a couple of times, shoot out a steady stream of air out of my mouth like a tea kettle. I stare at the concrete beneath my feet, trying to imbue its sturdiness into me, but it has little effect.

When I come back inside, Ryan asks me what the doctor had to say. My tone is bitter, bordering on shrill. “I have it!” I scoff. “I knew I had it. I knew I wasn’t fucking crazy.”

The pizzelle production line halts. Heather’s eyes go wide. Her sisters and mother-in-law tilt their heads, unsure what it is I have.

An expert at reading the room, Heather raises a hand before anyone can barrage me with questions and asks me directly, “How do you feel?”

I try to busy myself at the kitchen counter, scraping dried pizzelle batter off the side of the waffle iron with a knife. “I’m fine,” I say, trying to shrug, but feeling tears welling at the corners of my eyes. “There’s nothing I can do about it anyway. I was right the whole time. At least I know I’m not crazy.” I set the knife down on the counter and shove my hands in my pockets, balling them into fists.

Heather gives me a hug, not believing that I am fine, and so does Ryan. We then explain to Heather's quizzical family what alpha gal is and what this means for me. They make noises of sympathy and understanding, and after a minute, we go back to making pizzelles.

But I can't let it go. Conversation moves on to Christmas presents and upcoming holiday functions, but I keep bringing it up, thinking aloud about what I won't be able to eat, feeling sorry for myself. I'm trying to figure out who I am now and how I'm supposed to move forward, but all I can do is circle, like a buzzard over rotting carrion.

~

I tell Chris first. Ryan and I get stuck in a snafu of flight delays and cancellations on our way back to Flagstaff from our honeymoon, and compounded with the diagnosis, things feel like they keep going from bad to worse. From our cheap hotel room in who-knows-where Florida, I call my brother to rant. He's at work, but he's just in the back office sending emails, and he knows I need to let off steam. After fuming about our travel issues, the frustration in my voice dies down for a moment.

I say, "I finally got my test results back from the allergist, too, by the way."

"Oh?" Chris says.

"Yeah. It came back positive, so…" I trail off, unsure what else to say.

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah," I say. There's a pause as my statement hangs there, both of us staring at it, trying to figure out what is next. "So, no more steak for me, I guess."

"Damn, dude. That sucks." Chris pauses again, thinking. Slowly, the questions start rolling out: not an interrogation, but an investigation. Really, no more beef or pork? Did the

doctor say when I got it? Is there any chance it could go away? Like me, my brother is trying to understand, trying to feel out the borders of this new fence that's gone up around me.

I wait until after Christmas to tell my parents. They have a habit of doing the same thing to me, waiting until a "good time" to tell me bad news, so it seems only fair. Living so far apart, it's easy to keep some parts of my life to myself, like going to Pride events or getting published in queer journals. They only know what I share with them.

Since I call home every day anyway, I work the news into a typical check-in. After I've talked to my mom about their Christmas, I tell her to put the phone on speaker so I can talk to her and my dad at the same time. I've done this before, although usually with good news, so I don't have to repeat myself. This time, I am not telling them about another publication or job offer.

I say essentially the same thing I said to Chris. They have a similar reaction; there's a pause, and my dad says, "No shit." They ask a few questions, similar to the ones Chris did—did the doctor say how I got it; is there any chance it will go away—but the call is mostly silent. I find myself stepping in to blunt the news: I haven't been eating much beef lately anyway; we'll save money this way; at least I know what's been making me sick. I worry that this is painful for them, and I rush to protect them from it.

A few months later, in March, I get a text from Chris:

Chris: *What are some recipes we wanna make when you move back to MD?*

Me: *Oh boy, so many!*

Chris: *I was thinking we could try cooking a chicken in the smoker*

Me: *Oh, that sounds tasty!*

Me: *I'm in class but I'll think it over and try to make a list*

Initially, I'm excited. It's been close to a year since my brother and I last cooked together. There are so many family recipes I've missed that I'm eager to eat again. I think back to the list of "last meals" I made for my dad before I moved. Barbecue ribs, steak with baked potato and sour cream, pork chops, hamburgers… I quickly realize I can't eat any of these foods anymore. It takes me hours to text my brother back; I struggle to come up with dishes that don't involve mammal meat. All I can come up with are biscuits and apple pie. It feels so hollow, this list of two.

The question becomes like a thought experiment: what *will* I eat the next time I'm at my parents' house? Will they grill me a chicken breast while they all dig into New York strips? I have a hard time imagining my dad cooking turkey tacos, since he sneered at them before they were my only option. Maybe we will all eat chicken, in solidarity with my new diet. I wonder if my parents will resent me for it, for making them cater to my needs. I resent myself, regardless.

~

The most radical change I've ever made to my diet in my 27 years is avoiding dairy when I have a cold. I have never tried veganism or vegetarianism because I am not in the business of denying myself the small pleasures in my limited time on Earth. I've never had any allergies, food, medical, or otherwise. The most violent reaction I have to something is a sneezing fit and itchy eyes when my parents cut the grass. When doctors ask me if I have any allergies, I usually tell them, "None that I know of," adding, "but today could be the day." Most medical professionals do not find this joke as funny as I do.

Being diagnosed with alpha gal, then, causes drastic changes. The condition upends my sense of self: I am a baker, but I can't use butter. I love breakfast food, except now I can't eat bacon, sausage, or buttered toast. I use food as a way of making friends and expressing care, but

now I don't even know what I can cook for myself. How *can* I care for myself now, when the normal way I would do it has been unsettled? Food is the way I understand the world, my reference point. How am I supposed to understand the world now?

~

At my follow-up, the allergist tells me to go dairy-free for a month, then gradually reintroduce it back into my diet and "see how you feel." He calls it a "cleanse," a term I'm skeptical of because it's used by too many shady health influencers as a cure-all. Since this recommendation is coming from a doctor, not a conventionally-attractive twentysomething on TikTok, I give it a little more credence. I picture the cells in my body pressure-washing my insides of dairy particles, like the characters from *Osmosis Jones*.

I don't *want* to do it: adding yet another restriction to my already-restricted diet seems like playing Expert mode on a video game I've only played once or twice on Normal. I see my options shrinking before me, portions of the food pyramid graying out like characters that didn't survive the previous round of digital zombies. But at the same time, I still want to know. This is the last task standing between me and knowledge of what I truly can eat, the final boss to battle in my quest for regaining autonomy over my own body. I start No Dairy February a few weeks later, choosing this month because it is the shortest and it has a nice ring to it.

For 28 days, I am constantly thinking about what I can and cannot eat. It is better than the food diary; I at least know what to avoid now, instead of stringing together evidence like a conspiracy theorist. But there is a price to this knowledge: FOMO. There's a sadness in reading a menu and realizing you can't eat 90% of what's on it, a sense of betrayal at buying something, reading the label, and realizing you can't eat it. I visit some friends in Tucson and they take me

to an Italian restaurant where they all order pasta with meatballs and parmesan cheese on top. I feel like a rabbit with my sad little pile of leaves.

I quickly find that the American dairy industry has a much tighter grip on our food system than I previously thought. Milk is in everything, it seems; not only the obvious foods like yogurt and pizza, but innocuous treats like cereal bars and ramen noodle packets. The diet forces me to eat more raw fruits and vegetables, which is ultimately better for me, I'm sure. Ryan and I get creative when planning dinners, subbing in "plant butter" (gentrified margarine), olive oil, and almond or oat milk where possible. I become someone who has to check the label on everything, and even if it doesn't say "contains milk," it seems impossible to be certain. Dairy becomes a little worm, sneaking its way into everything, trying to get me sick, trying to throw off the results of this experiment.

The diet is most challenging when I go out to eat, especially when I'm out with friends. Question marks loom over me as I try to puzzle out components of menu items. What exactly am I eating?

Being a cook is an asset: I know that a lot of chicken tenders are breaded using buttermilk, and my beloved blueberry muffins usually contain sour cream or yogurt. I prefer chain restaurants during No Dairy February, simply because most national chains have a menu online that lists all potential allergens. The local mom and pop soup shop probably doesn't, or if they do, they're more likely to have tags for gluten-free or vegetarian dishes, not my bizarre, "mostly vegan but eggs, fish, and poultry are okay" restrictions.

I feel guilty asking servers to check with the chef, even though I know it is part of their job. It singles me out in front of my friends, makes me look difficult, demanding, a Karen or an annoying vegan at the dinner table. It calls attention to not only my inability to eat "normal"

food, but also the gaps in my expertise in food composition. Aren't people with allergies supposed to *know* what they can't eat? Shouldn't they already have a good understanding of what foods they're allergic to? I keep looking for the worm, even in places where it logically shouldn't be. If I don't want to call attention to myself, I will just order a salad with oil and vinegar and keep quiet, pretending I like squishy cherry tomatoes and bitter mixed greens. Or, I'll order the vegan option, since it is guaranteed not to have any of my allergens in it. My friend Anahi goes vegan in February, so we share many meals in solidarity, watching woefully as our other friends dig into pizza and nachos. My other friends say they admire my resolve, that they wouldn't be able to resist a warm pizza right in front of them. I flash back to that night last summer, when my body felt like it pressed the "self-destruct" button you see in cartoons, when I felt my stomach turning me inside out.

"I don't have much of a choice," is all I can say.

~

Post-diagnosis, I spend a lot of time on alphagalinformation.org, a website assembled by other patients with alpha gal as a resource for the newly diagnosed. It is a kind of doomscrolling. I read all the articles and subpages on the website, looking for the one that will tell me when I'll be allowed to go back to my regular life.

Eventually, I find it: "If you avoid additional tick bites, with time, your reactions may become less severe or even go into remission, but there is no guarantee of this." I cling to this sentence like plastic wrap. I tell my family what I've read, trying to reassure them, reassure all of us, that there may be an end to this, that "normal" is still within reach.

I ask my allergist if this is true, that I could go into remission. He says it's unclear. A lot of the research on this condition is unclear, because it's still relatively new and science takes a

while to research and vet everything. “Plan on dealing with this the next couple of years,” he tells me.

I wonder if the filet mignon I ate on my honeymoon will be the last steak I ever eat. The finality of this, the prospect of *never*, terrifies me.

~

The rational part of me feels like this condition is forcing my hand, in a good way. Beef—and meat in general—contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, so really, it’s like I’m being forced to make more environmentally-friendly decisions. Even before I was diagnosed with alpha gal, Ryan and I were already cutting back on meat. Eating a couple of vegetarian meals a week was an easy way to save money and convince ourselves we were doing something in the face of overwhelming climate change. Ever since I took a Climate Science Writing class last spring, we’ve been trying to make more sustainable choices. We swapped our plastic grocery bags for fabric totes and bought silicone sandwich bags to replace single-use Ziplocks. I sought out toilet paper and paper towels made from recycled paper and switched to reusable period products. We made small sacrifices to try to do our part.

But the American in me hates being told no. There’s a difference between choosing not to do something and being unable to. When I was an undergrad, there was a movement at our college to have Meatless Mondays. The student government was eventually able to get the dining hall—the only major cafeteria on campus—not to serve meat one day a week. This only lasted for a few months before the Young Libertarians threw a fit about individual freedom and Meatless Mondays were rescinded. I wonder, now, what the difference is between us. Have I become like them?

~

I used to pride myself on consuming consciously, thinking about where my food was grown and harvested, trying to buy local instead of eating produce shipped from Central and South America. But alpha gal makes me question whether I've really been paying attention.

Ryan, ever the supportive spouse, buys some turkey kielbasa for us to have with dinner. Having read alphagalinformation.org cover-to-virtual-cover, I know this sausage may not be what it appears. Sure enough, I flip it over to read the ingredients and Hillshire Farm tells me, "Made with Beef Collagen Casing"—meaning I still can't eat it. My well-meaning husband's face falls when I point this out to him. He spends the afternoon cutting the skin off of all four packs of sausages, but the point still stands: food is not made for people like me.

This is just one example of the paranoia and detective skills required for someone with alpha gal. Humans have lived side-by-side with livestock for centuries, so perhaps it's only natural that so many animal by-products have found their way into ordinary places. There's gelatin in gelcap pills, and french fries are often cooked in beef fat for a richer flavor. Whey, a by-product of cheesemaking, is a common ingredient in pre-prepared baked goods like protein bars, crackers, muffins, and bread; salad dressings; and pasta. I'm grateful that my allergy is relatively mild—some people with alpha gal can have life-threatening reactions like anaphylaxis and need to carry an EpiPen.

But food manufacturers haven't given much reason for confidence lately anyway. It seems every year or so, investigative journalists publish reports on what we're "really" eating. There was "wood" in our shaker cans of parmesan cheese (more accurately, cellulose from wood pulp, another by-product) in 2016. At the end of 2022, heavy metals like lead and cadmium were discovered in dark chocolate. Even companies that market themselves as healthy or independent from big food conglomerates are not without scandal: in the summer of 2022, home delivery

meal kit Daily Harvest recalled lentil "crumbles" after widespread consumer complaints of food poisoning. Stories like these remind me that at the end of the day, I am at the mercy of a system that has interests in profit over all else. I am being asked to trust multi-billion-dollar corporations with what I put in my body, even after they've repeatedly violated that trust.

So what now? How can I go back to eating without fear or suspicion? How does food become comforting again?

~

Before I start the dairy cleanse, I reach out to one of my best friends and old college roommate, Julia. Outside of my family, Julia is my food expert. She worked at a chocolate factory after we graduated college, and she is a marvelous cook and baker. Like me, she's also an extensive food scholar, having written and given lectures about the interrelationships between food and society. Julia was vegan and gluten-free the entire time we lived together, so she's also my expert in "non-traditional" cooking. She has a serious dairy allergy, too, so her insider knowledge is invaluable while I'm on a dairy-free diet. For all these reasons—and because she is one of the kindest people I know—I text Julia frequent, random questions throughout No Dairy February.

<u>January 26, 7:29 PM</u>

Me: *this is a really stupid question but anything that has dairy in it will say "contains milk" on the label right*

Julia: *90% of the time yes! Sometimes with like protein powders or super processed stuff it won't say contains milk but there will be some sort of dairy byproduct in the ingredients list*

Julia: *Like whey*

February 11, 9:57 PM

Me: *O chocolate goddess, I seek your wisdom*

Me: *What is a good brand/type of nondairy chocolate for someone who does not like super dark chocolate*

Julia: *There's an allergy free brand called enjoy life that makes sweet chocolate chips, they have darker chocolate chips but their normal ones are just like nestle level of sweetness*

Julia: *there's vegan bars out there that aren't dark! Just have to find the fancy boutique brands*

It's also a humbling experience. I'm only doing this for a month, and she's had to avoid dairy most of her life. What right do I have to complain about this diet? I feel especially stupid when I think back to times we went out to eat in college. I was not as inclusive as I could have been (or thought I was being) about her diet. Times where I dragged her along to fried chicken restaurants and steak houses, where she'd try to order green beans and they'd have bacon mixed in, or she'd pay $7 for a Dole fruit cup.

February 3, 5:27 PM

Julia: *How's that dairy free diet treating ya*

Me: *I ate at a restaurant yesterday and it was challenging*

Me: *It was like. Your options are salad and roasted potatoes*

Me: *I'm so sorry for every time I made you go to a restaurant where those were your only options*

Julia: *Lol it is ok*

Julia: *I am sorry and I understand*

She never once judges me, although she has every right to. She could easily tell me she's not my doctor, my silly little experiment isn't her problem, and she has other things she'd rather do with her day than answer questions I could easily Google. But Julia has never been that kind of person. A few years after graduation, Julia and I worked together at a cybersecurity start-up as technical writers. It was the most fun I'd had at a job, getting to work with my best friend every day. When I applied for MFA programs, Julia edited my personal statement even though my acceptance would mean a cross-country move and an end to our time working together. She never told a soul at work during the months-long application process. She brought me a Tupperware full of fresh brownies after I received my first acceptance letter. Attached to the lid was a note that I still keep pinned above my desk, for when I need encouragement: "Congrats on all your achievements!!! You are amazing and I'm so proud of you <3 XOXO, Julia".

Before I knew any vegans, I fell for the stereotype that they're "annoying": making their friends feel guilty for eating animal products, forcing their views upon anyone they meet, and generally being in your face about their lifestyle. But Julia has never been that type of person. I asked her, once, how she did it. How could she watch me eat a bucket of chicken wings or a plate of ribs and not hate me? How could she suspend her ethical objections to animal products and withhold judgment?

"I know how much it means to people," she said simply. "Food is so incredibly personal, and people have their own reasons for eating the way that they do. It's not my place to judge them. I know how happy fried chicken makes you, and the memories you have associated with it.

I don’t want to take that away from you, or anyone. Seeing you happy and enjoying your favorite food makes me happy.”

I remember this sentiment now, as I try to think about how to live with a condition that deprives me of some of those former favorite foods. I watch my husband bite into a hamburger, and rather than resent him for what I can’t have, I recall happy memories instead: summertime cookouts, the sliders on potato rolls my dad would make for hockey games. I watch Ryan relish his Five Guys double bacon cheeseburger with mayo, lettuce, tomatoes, mushrooms, and grilled onions, and because he’s happy, I’m happy. That’s what food is supposed to do.