

UNTIL THE MEAT FALLS OFF THE BONE

by

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ABSTRACT

Though this work started as a formal academic cultural study, it stretched and squirmed and became not only an examination of the cultures themselves, but how I came to fit within those cultures. By combining my experiences travelling as a child and young adult as well as learning the craft of professional cooking, the essays in this work are highly centered around food and what food means both to me and to cultures throughout the world.

The structure and tone of these essays varies greatly from one to the other, all at once casual, almost conversational in one, and pedantic and formal in another. This thesis was designed to grant readers a broad scope of my ability as a writer and cook.

The six recipes contained in the collection are meant to move the work along as a meal would, leisurely and savoring moments, but at the same time, there should always be a sense of anticipation about what will appear next.

The characters in this thesis came from near and far – from France to Lima – and each carries a cultural and culinary significance in the work. Each essay ties food to emotion – love, distress, bewilderment, intrigue and zeal. The main themes in this work stem from the ingrained nature of values taught at childhood – whether we like them or not, the role of food in shaping the cultural clash of peoples and the inherent connective nature of food as common ground.

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A LADLE OVER THE LAW

Enter, Food

This is not a “dead grandma story,” but I will start with the assertion that the beginning of the rest of my life started with the death of my last living grandparent.

Our extended family gathered in gray, unforgiving New Jersey in November of 2004 for the viewing and funeral of Maria Milazzo, the matriarch of a well-seasoned Italian family with spurious mafia roots. I took a red-eye flight the night of Thanksgiving Day, after spending an impromptu holiday dinner with the aunt and uncle of my best friend, Ryan.

There’s nothing like spending a family holiday with people you’ve never met.

There had been no solace in the mashed potatoes and gravy, the bastion of what Americans consider true “comfort food.” No happiness found in the chatter of loved ones I didn’t know. Ryan tried to bridge the gaps by filling in my aspirations of going to law school, and performing some monologues we’d written together for our sketch comedy group at BYU. After dinner, he took me to see the SpongeBob Squarepants movie before dropping me off at the airport. I laughed at the bathroom humor, at the depressing little squid wearing a blue hat, at SpongeBob’s ridiculous antics, but nothing seemed to fill the emptiness left by the absence of my family on that holiday quite like taking practice LSAT tests.

Instead of sleeping on that sluggish four-and-a-half-hour flight from Salt Lake City to Newark, I took a practice test. My parents arrived to pick me up in a rented Lincoln Town Car. The only time my parents rent Lincolns is when they’re trying to impress our extended family.

My father missed the announcement that, beginning in the early 90s, Lincoln Town Cars officially ceased to be impressive.

My father told me I looked horrible.

“The flight was hell,” I answered.

I skipped the wake and the subsequent family dinner to squeeze some more points out of my score.

A few weeks after that Thanksgiving, I walked into the testing center at Brigham Young University where I was to spend the next five hours of my life taking the test that would decide my future.

Looking around, I felt like I had the advantage from the get-go. I was one of three women in a room of 300 taking the test that day. My position as a minority was going to boost my score those extra points I needed to get into George Washington. *I'm a woman, and I'm brilliant*, I said to myself. *I'm a sure thing. If Reese Witherspoon can get into Harvard, Holly Kapherr can get into George Washington.*

All the confidence in the world, all the pretty, blonde, 36DD points in the world, couldn't get me into George Washington University, not to mention Emory, Duke, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, or Florida State. When I got my score back in the mail, six to eight weeks later, I slowly realized I probably wouldn't be going to law school.

Everyone, including the LSAT Practice Book I had dog-eared three times, had told me it was the biggest test of my life. They were wrong, though. The biggest test was what would happen after the last thirty-five minute section was over and we'd turned our test booklets in. The biggest test was what would come next.

* * *

While the rest of France is warming up, Paris' fleeting snow begins to melt, and sun-kissed Nice is blooming with springtime tourists, the Northern provinces of France – Normandy and Brittany – remain in winter for another month. Three months after I left Utah, in March of 2006, I was in Normandy doing a whirlwind tour of World War II museums, cemeteries, and invasion beaches when I got the news that two more rejections letters had arrived, completing total rejection from the seven schools I'd sent applications to back in December.

Two friends and I were settling into our hotel room in the town of Bayeux, home of the famous 12th century tapestry. I had seen enough tapestry on this foray into Europe on a study abroad semester. Between the Cluny museum in Paris, overflowing with medieval artifacts designed to either bore or frighten the admirer into religious abeyance, and the Louvre, stuffed with Napoleonic tapestries designed to do the exact opposite, tapestries, I had decided, were my least favorite form of art. They are carpet, but not really. They belong on the floor for me to play Twister on and to lie flat on my back on while meditating over the Adagio from Holst's "Jupiter." They are not to be pored over. Even the rugs my mother brought back from Egypt occupied space on the floor in our Florida home. These carpets smelled just as old as the ones in the museums; they couldn't be any more valuable.



Figure 1: Bayeux Tapestry

The Bayeux tapestry became different to me. Instead of hooked carpeting in furry designs, the tapestry was made from linen-like cloth that has somehow withstood nine centuries of warfare, technology, and cultural change. It depicts the Norman invasion of England in 1066 by William the Conqueror and Harold, Earl of Wessex. The tapestry is seventy meters long and winds through a museum in the heart of the Bayeux township. I spent half of the grey day leading up to my father's phone call studying the Latin inscriptions that accompany the tapestry on its top edge, and wind around the length of it, explaining, in a few words, the great deeds of The Conqueror and his army.

The stitching, reportedly done by Queen Matilda (William's wife) and her ladies-in-waiting, was exquisite, and the theme, cultural clashes and their successes and failures, resonated with me. My whole life had been full of cultural clashes: a childhood spent partly in the Middle East, growing up with Cuban and Puerto Rican families, my mother's upbringing in the South during the Civil Rights movement. When the Normans invaded Britain, they had the chance to instill French culture into the Anglo-Saxon lands. They failed, ultimately. Later, on a trip to London, I'd wished William the Conqueror had done a little more conquering. My stomach hadn't adjusted from fresh French cuisine to the fried fish and fries, or bangers, mash, and green

parsley sauce that looked like it had been strained out of retention pond sludge, and I spent most of the night in the loo, cursing Sirs William and Harold.

My father was on the other line when I picked up the hotel phone back in Bayeux. Florida State and American University had both sent rejections. My LSAT scores weren't to their standards. I leaned against the bathroom tile wall. My roommates were sleeping in the next room, and I didn't want to wake them. I looked at myself in the mirror with the green-gray horror movie fluorescent lighting accentuating every Sisyphean imperfection in my face, tired of pushing that rock up the hill, only to have it come tumbling down again. I slumped slowly onto the floor. I put my forehead on my knees.

“Thanks, Dad. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Goodnight.”

Better think of something else to do with my life.

After leaving Normandy a few days later, I returned to the American Library in Paris on the *rue de Général Camou* to do just that.

The decision to go to culinary school, as the patriarch of my French host family commented at one of our language-immersion dinners, to “throw away my intelligence to slave in the kitchen,” was a completely random one. For them, a career in the culinary world hadn't yet reached the glamour it was attaining in the United States. Some French chefs were rock stars, true, but they were one in a million. There was no Rachael Ray (yet), there was no Food Network in France (yet), and the few temples of haute cuisine were run by old mates of Escoffier, inventor of modern cuisine. The kitchen, to my bourgeois French host family, was no place for a blonde girl who continuously and doggedly attempted to discuss the nuances of French politics with their bourgeois gentlemen company at their smoky parties.

The kitchen wasn't for citizens of Paris' sixteenth arrondissement, who usually had Senegalese women cook their haughty meals and chop their endive and beet-laden bitter salads that tasted more of chewable aspirin than anything else. The wife in our host family, who we titled "Madame," couldn't cook worth a damn. This was confusing for several reasons. Mostly, who was she to criticize my decision to go to cooking school when the noodle omelet she served us for dinner could barely qualify as foodstuff? I decided, by the sixth noodle omelet night, that their opinion wasn't worth a damn. I would make my parents proud, yet. That was the important thing.

"Come to Chicago with Seth and me," Ryan's voice crackled over the phone line. "We're getting out of Salt Lake. We'll get a two-bedroom apartment in Lakeview. It'll be great," he comforted.

Chicago sounded good. Pizza sounded good at that moment. It's tough to find decent pizza in Paris. The McDonalds Royale with Cheese and pommes frites I'd been comforting myself with for the past week since we left Normandy had become mundane. Loaded hot dogs or good Vietnamese food would be the trick, the thing to calm my sleepless nights, something I'd gotten used to living in Orlando. The next day I applied for the loan to go to culinary school at the Le Cordon Bleu in Chicago.

Ryan didn't end up going to Chicago. Seth didn't end up going to Chicago. They broke up two weeks before they were supposed to pack the moving van and drive the 900 miles from Salt Lake to East Lakeview, on the near north side of Chicago. I should have known something like that was going to happen - Ryan has a tendency of not being able to finish anything in his adult life - but I moved anyway, my parents in tow, to what was supposed to be our apartment in

Boystown – gay culture epicenter of Chicago. When I say I’m going to do something, it takes more than for my two best friends to break up to stop me.

During the first week I lived in Chicago, in the blistering heat of the summer of 2005, my mother and I walked from the Red Line stop to the orientation for my new school, where I would spend the next fifteen months of my life learning the difference between a stock, a broth, and a consommé. A chef instructor did a demonstration for the new students – a grape wrapped in a frosting of bleu cheese mousse and rolled in walnuts. I tasted the morsel as the tray was passed around. My mouth exploded with the combination of the sweet, juicy grape, creamy and savory cheese, and the earthy depth of walnuts. This was going to be good.

Attending culinary school was very unlike going to an average college, though mine flaunted its accredited status almost as much as its Le Cordon Bleu corporate insignia. Everyday, someone, some 18-year-old, said the five words I hated the most – “Dude, you must be really smart.” Under the propriety, the mock humility, and the awkward stammers, I only heard one thing hanging above me like a rusty guillotine: You weren’t smart enough for law school.

Once in a while, I would see a twenty-something girl on the bus carrying a saturated book bag full of leather-bound editions with the words “Contract Law,” “Torts,” or “Constitutional Law,” emblazoned on the front cover and spine in gold lettering. When I would see her, this law student, I couldn’t admire her. I just couldn’t bring myself to silently wish her well. I looked at her faded jeans, sweatshirt, messy ponytail, make-up-less face, and Birkenstock clogs and thought, “Good thing I’m not as boring as you.” I wondered what she got on the Logical Reasoning section of the LSAT. I wondered: did she take a test-prep course?

I wondered if she slept with the admissions committee.

I wondered if, like Ryan, the committee couldn't finish anything either, and so tossed my admissions packet in the "No" pile without even a look.

I still wonder if my score got mixed up with the guy sitting next to me with the slicked back hair or the girl with the armpit stains in the front row.

I wonder if, when the committees looked at my application, they guffawed, "SpongeBob Squarepants could have written a better letter! I've seen dairy cows get a higher score on the LSAT!"

Where my life was once full of logic games, reading comprehension exercises, and the longing for those leather-bound books, it became full of apple tarts, beef bourguignon, and scallop ceviche. I stopped garnishing my thoughts with hopes of dazzling a jury with my theatrics; I topped them with minced parsley, tomato rosettes, and julienned red bell pepper. Even then, though, sitting on that Chicago Transit Authority bus in the January cold, sweating through my chef coat and those ridiculous checkered pants, I still silently coveted those books, that ponytail, and those un-mascaraed eyes. I hadn't realized how deeply the food world would affect my life.

* * *

During the Christmas Break while I lived in Chicago, my mother and I walked around the RV park they lived in for the three years prior to moving into their new home in The-Middle-of-Nowhere, Florida. Commenting on the festive lights, the briskness of the Central Florida Christmas Eve, the social mores of the 65-and-older community, and the migration of "snowbirds," my mother slowly turned the topic of conversation to my career and my plans for

the future. This is an inevitable discussion whenever I come to visit. Sometimes, I avoid being alone with either of them for fear that someone will start a paragraph with the phrase, “Holly, I’m concerned about your future.” My mother skipped that and went straight to the rub.

“Your father thinks that you should have studied harder and gone to law school,” my mother says casually. “He thinks you didn’t apply yourself enough.”

I blinked away the tears that had sprung into my eyes. What I had been told about parents trying to live vicariously through their children was true. Neither of my parents had gone to traditional college, let alone to law school. My mother got married at sixteen and eventually earned her A.A. degree in Business thirty years later. My father joined the Navy at fourteen, and until he was an officer, his only education came from being cooped up with ninety guys on the USS Crevalle in 1959. My father had dreamed about attending BYU for his Master’s degree after he and my mother joined the Mormon Church, but when I was adopted, they were required to stay residents of Florida. The “adopt and run” isn’t encouraged.

Growing up, I was always told that I’d go to BYU. I learned the Fight Song when I was seven, and even though I had considered auditioning for the acting program at NYU and had been offered a music scholarship to Wake Forest University, my father told me that if I didn’t go to BYU, he wouldn’t help me financially. I’d never had a job in high school and didn’t know what it was to pay for things with my own money, so I packed up, went to Utah, and graduated three years later.

What my mother said was painful, but I refused to let it get to me. I had fulfilled their dream for me. I graduated *summa cum laude* from the college they had picked for me at birth; I returned to real life with two degrees from that institution (one for my daddy, and one more for

the road, so to speak) and now it was time for me to do something for myself. When I returned to culinary school, I dove in head first without looking for the bottom. Of course I was doing this for myself, I told myself, but what I really wanted was the praise. I wanted my chef instructors to see me as a star rising in the culinary firmament, perhaps not an innovator, but a solid cook, one to count on to produce excellence over and over. I wanted my chef instructors to give me the praise I so desperately wanted from my parents.

Chef Mueller taught everyone's favorite class: American Regional Cuisine. A native Chicagoan, with a full mane of thick black hair, he captured the fancy of not a few of the young female chefs in our class. Molly O'Moran, our token Irish lass, who came to class every Monday morning with her hangover draped in a dark green Guinness Draft t-shirt under her chef whites, developed a crush immediately.

"He's so fucking hot," she said, her thick blue-collar Chicago accent rolling toward me as she turned her head in my direction. "Holly, you like the older guys. You've gotta agree."

I did. Mueller was cute in a snarky way. Once, in a prior class, he saw me sprinkling teaspoons of salt into a ten-quart stock pot full of water rolling for pasta. He grabbed the box of kosher salt, cocked a smile at me, and said, "Chef Holly, do you know how to season pasta water?"

"No, Chef, not entirely. Is there a ratio for that?"

He grinned.

"Yes," he said. I pulled out my spiral notebook from my pocket.

He began pouring the salt in. "A shitload of water and a shitload of salt."

I looked up. He was still grinning, laughing inside at my eagerness. Chef Mueller and I got along fine after that.

In the American Regional Cuisine class, we spent two days cooking classic dishes from each of the nine regions of the United States: New England (which, regardless of my boyfriend's protestations, does include New York), Appalachia, Deep South, Floribbean (encompassing Florida and the Caribbean islands), Cajun/Creole country, Midwest, Southwest, Hawaii, and the Pacific Northwest. The thing about the class that captured everyone's attention was that we got to cook with ingredients we hadn't been trusted with prior to this class: sea urchin, lobster, truffles. Some might scoff and say that lobster is far too rich to be eaten at eleven in the morning, when our production was to be presented to Chef Mueller. I say, lobster makes a fine lunch when placed atop a buttered, mayonnaised hoagie roll and topped with coleslaw.

On the day we prepared the dishes from New England, I found myself in the weeds. At 9:30 A.M., I was juggling a Boston boiled dinner (basically corned beef and cabbage) with horseradish sauce on the stove, stirring a batch of Rhode Island johnnycakes at my prep station, and trying to remember when I put the Pennsylvania Dutch shoofly pie in the oven and what temperature I had set the oven for. Did I add the eggs at the end? I had no idea. I hadn't even started on the baked beans.

Chef Mueller watched me rush around between my station and the stove, on the other side of the kitchen. On one pass, he grabbed me by the back of the chef coat and pulled me back to the table where he and the sous chef were chatting.

“Holly. Calm the hell down. Watching you, you’re going to give Judy and me an aneurism, not to mention yourself.”

“Chef,” I panted and wiped a sweat pearl from my temple. “I can’t. I can’t get all of this done and plated in an hour. It just won’t happen.”

He grinned at me. “Yes you will. You always finish, and you always turn out great stuff. You’re solid. Don’t be afraid of yourself.”

I took a breath and rushed away, giving him a hurried thanks. At the stove, while I melted my horseradish butter and the aroma pinched my olfactory nerve, I felt what he had said.

Molly stirred her sauce next to me. She lifted the corner of her mouth and squinted her eyes in a tiny, cynical smile.

“I fucking hate you,” she said.

* * *

As I became more obsessed with my chef instructor’s view of my cooking, I watched myself become genuinely obsessed with the food. Slowly, at first, and then with bursting speed not unlike a runner’s high. Quality became of utmost importance. I learned what respecting the ingredients means. I learned to trust the oven and the stove as allies, not as potentially ruining my life with a burnt product. After school, I came home, went to the gym for an hour, showered, and headed to Treasure Island, one of Chicago’s oldest specialty food stores. There, I discovered the twenty-five different varieties of olives and mused for long periods of time over the laminated placards that described each one – their brine levels, their region of origin, their perfect pairings. I learned the difference between goat’s milk and sheep’s milk feta, and when to

use them appropriately. I experimented with olives. I preferred the ones with pits; they required more work to reap the full reward.

I headed to the pan-Asian market across the street to look at live seafood: blue crabs wriggling in the brown paper bags set on ice. Live conger eels (the ones I'd seen on *Iron Chef* countless times) writhing and baring their teeth. I wanted to learn to chop their heads off and pull apart their bifurcated bodies the way I'd seen Chen Kenichi do it on the show. That would be impressive at parties. I started to find things impressive that other people would find inhumane and disgusting. Pulling apart a live eel was, all of a sudden, completely awesome.

I picked out strange cuts of meat. Ones that I had never seen before, or ones that I had eaten, but had no earthly clue how to prepare. I just couldn't wait for the Meat and Seafood Fabrication class taught by Chef Levitz, a sad-looking man with droopy eyes who reminded people in his droning, monotone voice, to wash their onions. Instead of talking to the class the way other chefs did with an authoritative bark, Chef Levitz used a wireless microphone that boomed above the din of the hood fans, and which the other chefs called, behind his back, "The Voice of God." I tossed the club-shaped lamb shanks into my basket.

My chronic ambition had led me to Chicago, to a place I had never set foot in before I signed a lease. Now, it was leading me into all kinds of strange grocery store aisles and kiosks and markets that smelled like curry and five-spice powder. If I was going to be good at cooking, I was going to be really good.

At home, a rerun of the Japanese version of *Iron Chef* murmured in the background, "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you what you are." After years of trying to figure out what I was – was I a politician? A lawyer? A veterinarian? – one could look in the tiny cabinets of my studio

apartment kitchen and tell me what I was by what I was cooking. I would peruse my cabinets, through the random sheets of nori seaweed for rolling sushi, the innumerable jars of garam masala - the Indian spice blend ubiquitous in curries and dal, the whole licorice-scented star anise for Chinese stews, and tiny tins of Italian sardines and anchovies. My affinity for ethnic foods was beginning to surface, though they'd been a part of my life for years. I grew up on couscous and lamb, I discovered sushi in high school when my Vietnamese orchestra director took his student assistants out for the stuff once a month, these things were nothing new to my palate, but now I was interested in what made them tick. I was interested in recreating that feeling at home. I was interested in the how and the why and the history behind each memory I had eaten during my childhood and young-adult years. Food stopped being about eating for sustenance, and started being about memory, sense, and understanding.

The shallow, oblong tin of *fileiti di alici* popped open with the same satisfaction as the cork creeping out of a bottle of Bordeaux and finally releasing with a *thloop!*

I placed the lamb in the middle of a bowl I had fashioned from aluminum foil. I dropped in a few slices of carrot, some onion, a whole clove of garlic with the papery, silky skin left on, splashes of red wine and chicken broth, and a few tiny leaves of fresh thyme, before laying on top a few of the salty, oily white anchovies. I wrapped the aluminum foil around the meat, leaving the clean white bone exposed, making sure all of the rich marrow inside would roast and caramelize.

Bone marrow is for the *bon vivant*. Hard core eaters eat the marrow. I sat across the table from my then-boyfriend Cory, a chef from Louisiana mentored by the classic Creole chef John Folse. The tiny Mediterranean bistro was pregnant with bouzouki music and belly dancing.

I had ordered lamb, of course. When lamb is on the menu, I order it. The bulbous shank was presented in a deep dish of couscous, lined with roasted vegetables and fragrant with cumin and cloves. I demolished it while Cory gave me sideways glances as he pulled apart his roast chicken.

I felt like Henry VIII, feasting at his royal table with grease dripping from the fat globules stuck in his beard, his ill-fated Anne trying hard to suppress the gag reflex as he looks at her lustily and grabs his pewter chalice full of claret wine.

I sipped from my goblet. I hoped that the delicate way I imbibed my glass of wine would overshadow my enthusiastic eating style. I picked up the bare remains of the lamb bone, placed the end into my mouth and sucked hard.

This was a new kind of enthusiasm for me. In the past, I had sucked the marrow out of many of my projects of passion, the plays I acted in and managed, practicing Chopin's *Nocturne in E-flat major* until my fingertips were calloused, but I had never felt this way about food.

Being in culinary school was like those language-immersion dinners at my host family's house in Paris, only with better food. Every day, from five in the morning until just after noon, I stood in front of the stove, or in front of a white, fiberglass cutting board, and learned food. I learned the idioms (fish stock is called *nage*, which is French for "swim." Clever.) and the grammar, the colloquialisms ("fire in the hole!") and the classics. Culinary school was food immersion, and the more I was immersed in the culture and language of food, the more comfortable I became with all of its nuances – the dishes you have to eat with a tiny fork became just as important as those you had to eat with your hands.

Cory's eyes widened as he watched intently. Placing the bone back down on my plate, I searched for my knife and began digging out the last of the deep brown marrow with the end of it and popping whatever morsels surfaced into my mouth.

"You're not a dainty eater, that's for damned sure," Cory said.

I laughed. But I still remember it, so it must have hurt a little bit, then. I made an excuse about having grown up with Middle-Eastern people and getting used to their grab-and-stuff eating habits. The truth, however, is that I'm not a dainty eater.

* * *

I pull apart the aluminum foil folds around the lamb bone. Steam rises and I can see the brownish-purple meat falling away and into the reddish sauce, dotted with shiny circles of oil. The thyme leaves imbue the sauce with depth you can't get anywhere else. The anchovies have melted away and eradicate the need for added salt, or added anything.

When I eat lamb, it doesn't matter if it's a Dijon preparation crusted with mustard and herbs, a Sicilian dish braised in red wine and tomato sauce, or a creation offered by the "New American" school, dusted with pink peppercorns, goat cheese, and roasted artichokes. Lamb always recalls the Middle East for me. Sitting on my couch/bed, watching the judgment pass on *Iron Chef*, I still can't place these tastes anywhere but the streets of Cairo that I wandered with my parents years ago. As much as I try to bring the flavor of lamb back home to Chicago, it always ends up somewhere else.

I lived in Chicago for a little over a year (the program is twelve months, with a three-month externship tacked on at the end), and I still don't remember eating deep-dish pizza more than once, or noshing on a loaded hot dog any more than three or four times. I do know, though,

that I traipsed up and down Argyle Street in search of perfect pho. Devon Avenue, with its innumerable curry houses, captivated entire evenings, and I came home from Bahbi's Palace smelling like naan bread and saucy pea-filled samosas. I walked to school some mornings munching on a kabanos sausage, the ancient predecessor of the SlimJim, I had brought home from the Polish deli I frequented on Pulaski Street. The church I went to was on the South Side, and every Sunday I filled up on buttermilk fried chicken, soupy red beans, and turnip greens – not exactly foreign food, but a pretty far cry from the barbeque and Cubs-game-rooftop-fodder in which most Chicagoans indulge.

Even in the most American of cities, my obsession with ethnic food was sprouting from the roots that had been planted long ago, unbeknownst to me, until the two and two I was trying to put together eventually began to make four.

* * *

Chef Roger came over for dinner one night. An assistant chef instructor at the Le Cordon Bleu, and an unabashed admirer of mine, he made it a point to show everyone in class how well I could peel a carrot. He made everyone taste my “perfect” mashed potatoes. I was chosen, by Chef Roger, to demonstrate the appropriate folding technique for raviolini.

As Roger stirred whatever we decided to make for dinner that night, he told me that his dream was to not only own a tattoo parlor, but to design and develop a menu for a Mexican-Asian fusion restaurant. This seemed ridiculous. The Latin American world and the Asian world seemingly had no connection whatsoever. Burritos and sushi? I didn't get it. Maybe if you cut a burrito into one-inch rounds, it would look like sushi. I didn't understand flavor

enough yet. I didn't understand just how intertwined Chinese, Japanese, and Latin foods really were, and how a Mexican-Asian fusion restaurant would probably be absolutely mind-blowing.

The amount that I have learned about food in the four years since that day with Chef Roger, eating whatever we were eating, and talking about whatever we were talking about, is staggering.

Now, I can blind-taste herbs and name them. I can identify beers and alcohols by scent and taste. I can smell a Thai curry and name at least ten ingredients and outline a rough method for its construction.

More recently, I have learned why Japanese and Chinese immigrants came to Latin America as slaves, and eventually created a new style of cooking in Central and South America. All of the pieces were there: similar ingredients (cilantro, coriander, rice, fish), similar flavor layers and combinations (small chunks of meat and vegetables, thick sauces, over rice), but the political and social history had to come together just right.

When Roger first told me about his idea, it never occurred to me that the fusion had already taken place, but the modernization was underway. How could I know that five years later, I would be dating a Peruvian man whose half-Japanese, half-Peruvian grandmother and aunt would completely change my idea of what was Asian cooking and what was Latin cooking. My ideas of these two cuisines were so infantile back in Chicago that their juxtaposition seemed worlds away.

I have learned, among other things, the thing that makes food so transcendent and so intriguing to many people is that there are infinite possibilities. There is the immediate and the removed. Immediate variables such as flavor, texture, and smell are all sensory ways to

understand food and to learn about it. The removed variables are the history: the cultural, the political, and the ethical. While I lived in Chicago during culinary school, through my months working in Paris as a personal chef, and during my time working as Pastry Chef at one of the top-rated restaurants in Florida, I focused on the immediate. I learned to layer flavor and tasted as much and as often as I could to learn food as a sensory experience and to be able to write about it intelligently. Now, as a writer, I am learning about food through its more removed qualities.

When I first entered culinary school, I made it clear to my chef-instructors that I had already earned a degree (most of my classmates had not), and that I did not intend to ever work in a kitchen, restaurant or otherwise. I had come to learn about food preparation in order to write about it. I was concurrently taking writing workshops at Northwestern University in the evenings. After meeting my classmates, I felt that it was necessary that I make it clear that I was a serious person with serious ambition. On the outside, I believed that they saw me differently, perhaps took me more seriously than, say, my classmates Venice and Tonya, the self-proclaimed Fry Queens of Chicago's West Side. As time went on, though, I felt closer to the Fry Queens. Maybe they didn't know much about canapés and terrines (neither did I), but they knew the best batter for sweet-tea marinated fried chicken that I'd ever tasted. The students in class that I had tried to separate myself from, the ones who came to culinary school, some told me because they didn't get into college, who ended up working in kitchens all over Chicago, Las Vegas, and New York, shared many things with me. We shared a growing love for food and a mounting obsession.

I often thought and still do think about how my host family in France, and even my immediate family at home, saw my entrance into the food world as a waste of my intelligence. Not because I feel like I have been a failure in my life, or because the disappointments I have experienced haven't made me a strong person with an even stronger will, but because the short-sightedness of the boomer-generation has given way to a group of people that embrace beauty in more things than money and real estate. There are a few of these people in every generation, but it seems to me that while many of my high school graduating class have become bankers and doctors and, God have mercy, lawyers, there are still a significant number of my peers who work in the arts, who labor with their hands to create something valuable. While my father and mother may place value on their property and their ability to fly to Europe on a moment's notice (though they never do), I place my value on the fact that my intelligence has been put to work – literally – with my hands. Food, I have come to see, is remarkable because it comes from raw ingredients, which may or may not be beautiful, to create something that is much greater than the sum of its parts. Or, at least, the chef hopes it is.

If anything, food has expanded my idea of what intelligence is. Learning food has been more challenging to me than learning statistics in my third year of college. Not only have I learned processes and to read recipes, I have learned the traditions of countries I may never visit in my life. I have had to relearn fractions and metric-standard conversion factors. I have learned to understand food not just by reading about it, although I do, and voraciously. I have learned to understand food through smell, taste, touch, and sight. I have learned to answer the question, “How long does it cook?” with the cryptic-but-completely-intuitive answer, “Until it's done.” Food cooks until you can smell it. Until the crust at the top is golden brown and the cheese

bubbles and drips down the side of the dish. It simmers until the flavors have melded just right, until the meat falls off the bone.

Perhaps, until I write the definitive treatise on “food theory,” which will be so pedantic and incomprehensible to anyone other than the Food Studies faculty at NYU, my family will continue to think that I’ve chosen an “easier” or “less-demanding” course of study. The thing that food has taught me most is that intuition is invaluable. There have been many times when I have taken something out of the oven mere seconds before it would have erupted into flames. My intuition, now, tells me to cook, and to write. Unrelentingly; determinedly.

Every-time Lamb Shanks with Lemony Cauliflower Mash
Serves 2, happily

One of the first cooking shows I remember watching as a teen was *The Naked Chef* with Jamie Oliver. The risqué nomenclature drew in my puberty-laden mind, though I sat on the couch snacking on slathered Miracle Whip on Wonderbread – I didn't know any better. Once I watched Jamie and his naked food, verdant and oh-so-easy, I bought his cookbooks once I got to college and learned every recipe. This is an adaptation of one of my favorites. It's stunning, delicious and perfect every time. It falls off the bone.

Ingredients:

Lamb

2 medium lamb shanks
1 carrot, peeled and sliced
1 leek, chopped
½ fennel bulb, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 Sprigs of fresh thyme
2 Sprigs of fresh rosemary

1/2 cup red wine, Shiraz or Malbec are ideal,
divided
Salt and Pepper

Cauliflower Mash

3 cups fresh cauliflower florets
½ cup mascarpone cheese
Zest of one large lemon
Salt and Pepper

Directions:

1. Preheat a conventional oven to 425° F.
2. Tear off a piece of aluminum foil for each lamb shank, about a foot long. Place lamb shanks in the middle.
3. Add half of the carrot, leek, fennel, a glove of garlic, one sprig each of rosemary and thyme to the middle of each sheet of aluminum foil.
4. Wrap the aluminum foil around the lamb shank, closing the ingredients inside, allowing the bone end to stick out about an inch.
5. Allow a small opening in the foil pouch and pour ¼ cup red wine into the pouch. Seal.
6. Place in oven for 2 hours.
7. For the cauliflower mash, bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil.
8. Add cauliflower florets and blanch 3-4 minutes. Remove from water with a slotted spoon and place florets in a food processor. Add mascarpone cheese, lemon zest and ¼ tsp each of salt and white pepper.
9. Process until smooth. Adjust seasonings to taste.
10. When lamb is finished, remove from the oven and allow to rest 5-10 minutes.
11. Serve cauliflower mash in the middle of the plate. Unwrap lamb shank and stand vertically in the cauliflower. Spoon vegetables and sauce around the plate.
12. Please, for the love of God, don't put another sprig of rosemary on that plate. No one can eat that. It doesn't belong on the plate if you can't eat it.

The Food of Love

“You’re a food critic? Have you ever been to China Hut?” he asked, shifting in his seat.

I told him that I hadn’t.

“It’s amazing. They serve *chifa* food.”

I had no idea what “*chifa*” food was. I was instantly intrigued by him, and flirtatiously leaned in a little further toward him, urging him to continue.

“It’s like a mix of Chinese and Peruvian food. Like, fried rice with different seasonings and lots of different kinds of seafood. That’s my favorite. Tons of rice, and tons of seafood.”

Okay, I had never eaten Peruvian food before. I assumed, like the *Gourmet* magazine columnist, Laura Fraser, that Peruvian food was “like Mexican food, but with more potatoes,” as she writes in the August 2006 column, “Next Stop Lima.” My only idea of what Peru might be like was the colorful wool ponchos and millions of llamas running over the mountains of Cuzco. As my relationship developed and rendered me madly in love with Cliff, the twenty-something kid, who looked like a frat brother and drove a white Mustang and sat across from me at the pizza restaurant we’d chosen for our first date, he taught me about the country, about its people, about the food.

I took out my fat, pink notebook and started jotting ideas down. He furrowed his overgrown eyebrows and concentrated on my pen, probably wondering what the hell someone was doing taking notes on a date. My identity as an uptight school-a-holic had already been established during our late-night Instant Message conversations, but he was getting his first taste of my notebook obsession.

“What else do Peruvians – that’s right, right? Peruvians?”

He nodded.

“What else do Peruvians eat? Llama? Lots of potatoes?” I ventured, tapping my droplets of knowledge about the South American country.

“Yeah, but not as much as you’d think. We eat way more rice than potatoes, though in the winter, potatoes are definitely a staple. There are over 400 kinds of potatoes in Peru. There’s even an institute in Lima dedicated to the study and appreciation of the potato. It’s that big a deal,” he smiled a little, more like just turned up the corners of his mouth, and his dark brown eyes glinted as he looked at me. I blushed.

I was hooked. I *had* to go to the Peruvian National Institute for the Study and Appreciation of the Potato. I imagined a huge bronze-cast statue of a potato, with indentations for the sprouting “eyes” and a rough, almost dirty-looking surface.

Cliff casually hinted, averting his eyes bashfully, “We can go sometime if you want. To China Hut – not Peru. Although if you want to go to Peru, I can hook you up with people who know Lima and know where to go.”

We haven’t been to Peru together, yet, but we have been to China Hut many, many times. Cliff is darkly complected, and the Chinese-Peruvians who own China Hut, the tiny store with the words, “Tenemos la comida in el estilo peruano” – we have Peruvian-style food – seat us immediately with the Peruvian menu, full of ceviches, fried rice, and papas a la huancaína – boiled potatoes with spicy yellow cheese sauce. One of my first reviews in the Orlando Weekly was titled, “East Eats West,” and was a raving review of China Hut’s fusion cuisine.

* * *

I can't help it. I love ethnic boys.

M.F.K. Fisher said, "Gastronomy is and always has been connected with its sister art of love." The love stories I have lived, and the one that still thrives, have always had ethnic food as a common thread. And it started where most adult complexes start: Kindergarten.

Angel Martinez was the tiniest boy in school. And the sweetest, according to my mother. Even at six years old, he accompanied his hurried and lightly accented sentences with "sir" or "ma'am," and flashed the bright blue eyes that no one, especially not me, could say no to. Angel was my angel.

When my parents went on a week-long vacation to Cancun one winter, the only vacation I really ever remember them taking that had nothing to do with visiting relatives, I stayed with Angel's mom, Señora Martinez, and his family. Every morning, we had *sopa de ajo*, to keep the chill away and our blood strong. I wasn't sure why my blood needed to be strong – I never had to lift anything with my blood, but as flu season came and went and I didn't get sick, I was converted to the Puerto Rican *sopa de ajo* religion. Looking back, I'm glad I was six instead of puberty-stricken thirteen. If that has been the case, my blood wouldn't have been the only thing made strong by the forty cloves of garlic I was inhaling every morning.

I guess my romantic feelings, or what at seven-years-old could be called romantic feelings, were pretty forward. In first grade, I was cultivating another habit that would follow me into adulthood: an unabashed ability to express my feelings. At lunch, three boys who were bigger than Angel (everyone was bigger than Angel) sauntered over to our spot on the red picnic table under a few live oaks. It was a chilly day, and the sailor flap on my private school uniform's white shirt flapped and slapped in the breeze. Angel and I were talking and sharing a

Fruit Roll-up, smooshed into the one spot on the bench where a ray of sunshine peeked through the dense oak branches and warmed our skin.

Brandon, the biggest boy, and the vice-principal's son, began a rousing chorus of "Angel and Holly, sittin' in a tree," much to Angel's red-faced dismay. Michael A. and Michael R. joined Brandon in accented kissy noises and light pokes on our arms and cheeks. My blood, made strong by my daily morning chowder of garlic and cream, began to boil, and my face felt hot between my pigtails.

"Hey, Angel," Brandon sneered, "I dareya to kiss her."

Angel's blue eyes widened into a horrified stare.

"Stoppit, Brandon," I said. "I'll tell your mom."

Brandon's blonde hair fell over his eyes and he brushed it back proudly. "You wouldn't. She wouldn't believe you."

The truth is she probably would have, but Brandon's sauciness deflated my moment of brave defiance in Angel's defense. The taunting continued. "Kiss her, kiss her, kisser, kissy face..."

Angel turned toward me, the tan skin on his forehead ruffled with consternation. I quickly thought about *The Little Mermaid* and the almost-kiss that Eric and Ariel had in the lagoon with the sea creatures whispering "do it, do it, do it..." in the background. In the movie, Ariel leans in with her pink lips puckered while fish frolic in the lagoon. Brandon and The Michaels were doing the taunting, but the scene was significantly less romantic than the standard of love I'd been taught to expect from my plethora of after-school Disney movies. A lean-in probably wasn't appropriate in this instance.

And then, it happened. I felt Angel's lips on my cheek, and then in a quick second, everything went black and blurry and all I could hear was the booming, boisterous laughter of those detestable boys. Angel and I walked back to our classroom in silence. We barely spoke to each other again – the embarrassment on both sides was just too great. That night, when his mom picked us up from school, and we sat at the dinner table in front of fragrant yucca mofongo, the ultimate Puerto Rican comfort food, neither of us could eat. It was the first time we didn't do impressions of our classmates, our teachers, or end the meal by trying to toss pieces of *tostone* into each other's mouths from across the table. I drew circles in my pile of mashed yucca, steaming with the scent of garlic and topped with fried pork *chicharrones*, I painted my plate with it, pushed it around, while Angel shifted uncomfortably while his father asked what we did at school.

“Just stuff,” Angel replied.

I saw Angel one more time when I was grown-up, or almost grown-up. We ended up in the same high school (along with Michael A., strangely enough) though we never associated in the same circles. He was taller now, of course, but he still had those eyes and the instant bright red cheek blush. I sometimes waved and said hello, but he only nodded and looked at me sideways. He probably had Brandon's grating voice in the back of his head taunting, “Are you guys *lovers*?” Brandon had no idea what that term meant, but it was enough to estrange my first love from me forever.

My pint-sized romance with Angel Martinez was only the first. Travelling from Orlando to Saudi Arabia, to Utah, to Mexico, to France, to Chicago, back to France, and then back to

Orlando has given me a taste for the international man and his international appetite. The important thing was that I did get to taste a lot of revelatory flavors that I wouldn't have been able to otherwise, or would have had a hard time finding, as they were being repeatedly shoved in my face and touted as "the taste of my youth," by a few young men with varying accents trying to win my heart, or at least my virginity.

Everyone's "taste" is different, from what I can tell, but even then, there seems to be some universal attractiveness that 98% of the world agrees upon. These men, widely visible movie stars or athletes, have some quality that I'm not really sure how to classify. My "taste" in men has been colored by my international experience. I prefer the tall, dark, handsome, and a little rough around the edges kind of man. I prefer the man with the natural olive color in his skin as opposed to the blonde kid with the sun-kissed look. I prefer the French-Algerian soccer star Zinedine Zidane to Britain's golden boy David Beckham any day of the week, month, or year.

* * *

I didn't need to go to Paris, my parents reminded me. I could just graduate and call it good. But what "good" would that do me? Go to law school a semester early? Be 20 and graduated from college? With so much more that higher education could offer, like a semester abroad to study French politics, art, and...well, males? Oh, I was going to Paris. And I did.

My father, an ex-submariner with a list of countries he's visited longer than my fifth-grade Christmas list, came around, realizing that this was a perfect time for me to walk around Europe, without a care, and find my way. I was going with Mormons. So what was the harm? Maybe I'd find a nice Mormon French guy and settle down in wine country, so they could come

visit and pick grapes from our vineyard while my red-cheeked, blonde-haired gaggle romped in the sunflowers. Isn't that what all Mormon parents wish for their only daughter?

After a long day of classes at the Mormon church on the *rue de Saint-Merri* in Paris' Marais district, the sky began to darken with September clouds. The Marais is the notorious gathering and housing place for Paris' homosexual population, and it was a complete and utter irony that the Mormon seminary would be located here, across from a restaurant called "Spago Bar" that managed to be both quirky and pretentious in a way that only modern gay men know how to be. The restaurant boomed with Britney Spears and house-beat trance music and served up a mean Bolognese.

A few doors down from the Spago Bar was a sweet, unassuming patisserie called *Le Gay Choc*. The shop was run by a husband-and-husband team of master pastry chefs whose *viennoise chocolat*, a buttery biscuit studded with a thousand dark chocolate morsels, I still dream about. The proprietors of *Le Gay Choc* were not shy, either. Our friend and French instructor, Baptiste Prevôt, a diminutive Lyonnaise with a penchant for pink polo shirts, strode in to purchase morning pastries before class, his wife in tow. The two pastry chefs flirted and offered him as many chocolate croissants as he could carry for half price. Meredith, Baptiste's wife, folded her arms and clapped one hand over her mouth to keep her giggles from escaping. The next day, several chocolate sculptures appeared in the window of the shop. One in white chocolate, standing erect, about 8-inches long, was a shiny, delicious penis. We teased Baptiste for weeks, presuming that he was the inspiration for such a work of erotic art. Surely it would be displayed in the Place Pigalle's famous *Musee de l'Erotisme*.

I'd been in Paris a month, and by blustery September, the April sunshine I'd expected was already being replaced by fall winds and interminable greyness. Luckily, I was used to it.

Three winters in the Utah snow will harden just about any Florida-girl spirit, though I refused to wear galoshes when the snow got slushy and often was found on my backside wearing only one flip-flop, the other one a few feet away from where I had slid, of course, in the middle of one of BYU's massive quads, in front of a chorus of laughter and outstretched hands. That was a good thing about the university, there was never a dearth of hands to help one up after a fall. Unless, of course, you fell while signing up for the Young Democrats club. The winter had also taught me that food was my best friend. Five-dollar pizzas were my one extravagance while I studied diligently for the LSAT and read various sociological texts in preparation for my honors exams.

Walking home from the Jasmin metro station toward the flat I shared with Kelly, another Florida girl on the Study Abroad, which belonged to a tight-lipped old-bourgeois Parisian family, I imagined myself in my tiny bed, a candle my only reading light while I slogged through Zola. I stopped in the small *epicerie* across from the apartment building to pick up some groceries. I wanted, as some women are wont to want in bad weather, something sweet, my pajamas, and some proletariat allegory.

The store was empty, except for the storekeeper, or the young man who appeared to be the storekeeper. I took little notice of him, as the quest for the perfect Swiss chocolate bar was well underway before I had even set foot in the store. He, however, sighted me right away, I have a feeling.

"Aimez-vous le chocolat?" he asked.

I looked up, a little surprised.

“*Oui, monsieur, j’aime beaucoup le chocolat,*” I responded. A response more than a slight smile was a pretty big deal for me. I had become numb to catcalls, the skirt-grabbing, and of course, the occasional nut who would attempt to talk to me while I walked down the street, listening to what Adam Gopnik calls in *Paris to the Moon*, “the veritable soundtrack to the movie of my life,” whether I had earphones in or not. “*Mademoiselle!*” they would call. “*Mademoiselle, vous êtes exquisite!*” Thanks, dude. Put your head back in your Peugeot.

“I do too. I don’t think I can go a day without it,” he said.

This caught me off guard. Generally, men were too busy eyeing my midsection instead of noticing my American accent. But the occasional one, the one who paid attention to what was coming out of my mouth, not out of my shirt, would notice my Yankee pronunciation. By the time I left France, though, men were asking me if I was Belgian, instead of American. I counted that a triumph.

“You speak English very well. Where did you learn?” I asked.

“At home. Everyone in Tunisia learns English from the sixth grade,” the young man said, looking directly into my eyes. Yeah. My face was burning.

It was clear enough, his words were slightly tinted with the rolled “r” of the Arab language. He was obviously very young; he couldn’t be over twenty-five. He was darkly complected, not like Frenchmen. His black hair fell over his equally dark eyes. While his eyes were deep and hooded by thick eyebrows, and hinted at being the kind of dangerous that elicits a blush from young women, his gaze was soft.

I busied myself with the chocolate again. I took deep breaths and recited the flavors of chocolate under my breath, attempting to gain my composure after being flirted with. Mint, no. Orange, blech. Raspberry, blech. What the hell is Anise?

“Are you living around here?” he said, trying to salvage what was left of a conversation.

“Yes. Just down the street. At number 27,” I said. Coconut, no. Who imports coconuts to Switzerland to be masticated and forced into a substance as vile as white chocolate? I wanted to punch that person in the face for forcing a coconut to travel that far against its will.

I wanted to say something to the storekeeper in French to let him know I wasn’t just an ignorant American, but the words were forgotten.

I turned to him and stumbled on the phrase as she attempted to speak, “Comment t’appelle-tu?”

Ugh. That was stupid.

He laughed. If it were at all possible, I felt his gaze soften even more as he smiled at me. “You don’t have to speak French. I understand you perfectly.”

“Yes, but my English isn’t what I’m trying to improve,” I smiled.

“Well, my French isn’t what I’m trying to improve, Mademoiselle,” he shot back.

“Speak to me in English, and if I do not understand, say the same phrase in French. And I will speak to you in French, and if you do not understand, I will speak slower to you in English.”

I laughed. “So we’re speaking two languages to each other?”

“It will be a game.”

It will be hot, I thought.

“It’s a deal.” I extended my hand to him to solidify the contract as binding. Instead, he took my hand gently, turned it over, and kissed it lightly just above my knuckles. While it remained to his lips, he turned his eyes upward to look into my eyes. It was probably the most scripted moment in my life up to that point, the makings of a Nicholas Sparks book where the movie would star Joaquin Phoenix and I’d be played by Reese Witherspoon. But his eyes reminded me of the time my family and I spent in Saudi Arabia. My heart rate slowed, and I grabbed the bar of Lindt, paid for it, and walked out.

That probably should have been the end of it, but like all good romances, it wasn’t. Sami and I spent the next four months together whenever we could. We drank tiny cups of espresso, where I developed the quirk of only putting one sugar cube in the cup and popping the other one in my mouth. We sat at the Trocadero look-out and kissed in front of the Eiffel tower for hours without bothering to care how cliché it was. But we also ate. We ate a lot.

It wasn’t the traditional Paris romance in the gastronomical sense. He would come to the apartment after our family had retired for the night to their upstairs bedroom. They would have died rather than see a Tunisian in their *très Français* household. He and I would run around Belleville until way too late, stopping at halal stands for a spicy and succulent kebab. We would run into shisha bars, puff on a vanilla-scented hookah, say hello to his friends, slurp down a cup of spicy, sludgy, Turkish coffee overflowing with the scent of cardamom pods steeped for hours. Several times we popped in on his cousins, sitting at their table swearing to Allah that one woman made the spiciest harissa and the other woman was cheating on her husband with the harissa-woman’s brother. Belleville, and Paris, by extension, became very small to me, while I

was in love with Sami. Paris started to become home, and I found it much more difficult when I finally had to leave.

I returned, though, two years later, and Sami and I rekindled what we had left off. This time, however, I was not there to study. I was there to work as a chef, and time was scarce for me. Things were as difficult as they had been two years ago for Sami; he had lost jobs, found jobs, been exploited by employers who thought it fair for him to work thirty-six hours straight so he could receive an infinitesimal amount of pay under the table. He has been arrested on charges fabricated by the French *gendarmes* during the 2006 Clichy riots in Paris. But we were still in love.

When the holy month of Ramadan came in October of 2006, I decided to leave Paris, broke and downtrodden by my lack of success there. Sami couldn't see me off; he was having lamb kofta and rice with his cousins in Belleville, and contact with girlfriends is strictly forbidden during Ramadan. I understood, though I still felt abandoned, somehow. I didn't have plans to return to Paris any time soon, to marry him, or to continue trying to have a life together. Instead of feeling angry, though, I turned on the hot plate in my minuscule apartment, and cooked a good-bye feast for myself. A chicken braised for several hours until it fell off the bone, I stirred in a can of white flageolet beans, and reduced the sauce. I toasted Monsieur Eiffel and his monument that I could see from my apartment's one window, twinkling on the hour.

* * *

After I found out that law school was no longer an option, and in between my times in Paris, my best friend and gay-boyfriend/college sweetheart, Ryan, and I planned to move to Chicago. For one reason or another, Ryan ended up in Boston instead and I ended up not in the

spacious three-bedroom flat in yuppie-ridden Lincoln Park we had planned for, but alone in a tiny studio in, ironically, Boystown in East Lakeview, where I could have my pick of gay boyfriends.

I spent most of my days the same way, making few friends, keeping mostly to myself. I attended culinary school in the mornings, between six and eleven in the morning. After a quick nap, I put on my sneakers and ultra-supportive sports bra and headed to our neighborhood gym, appropriately named “The Sweat Shop.” There, I formed relationships with the staff and trainers, the yoga instructors, the girl who taught the Abs Busters class, and that seemed to fill the human contact void for a while. After perspiring an appropriate amount to fulfill the gym’s namesake, I headed back to my 700-square-foot paradise, made dinner, and fell asleep watching reruns Japanese *Iron Chef*. On off nights, I took the Purple Line EL to Evanston for post-baccalaureate classes at Northwestern, where I had convinced myself, and the staff there, that I had enough talent to earn an MFA in writing. My mom, bless her, still thinks I was studying journalism.

My life was calm and predictable until I met Cory on an online dating website for Mormon singles. I was trying to salvage what was left of my dedication to my childhood religion, and he as trying to salvage what was left of his life after a shattering divorce.

The truth, however, came out on our first date. Cory picked me up at my tiny apartment in his 1981 Ford Escort. It was dirty, and smelled like stale fries, cats and newly-acquired bachelorhood. We drove to the Devon Ave corridor of Chicago, a street that exudes Madras curry and lamb. As soon as we turned onto Devon Avenue, a billboard proclaimed, “Welcome to the New New Delhi” and neon signs claimed that the restaurant below is the “Original Patel

Bros.” restaurant blink long after the textile stores have shut their doors and the incense has burned down to nothing.

Cory turned down a tiny street and parked his equally tiny car in front of a dimly lit restaurant with a purple door, Bhabi’s Palace. When we were seated, he explained that this was the place he loved the most in Chicago, and it was an honor for me to be invited. I wasn’t sure if he was kidding, but I laughed anyway. He smiled a little awkwardly, and I wondered if I had laughed too loud. As the night progressed, as creamy samosas were followed by lamb kebabs and plates of steaming, pillowy naan bread and yellow lentil dal, I saw that Cory was still trying out his singlehood, not quite fitting into it, like an oversized blazer. He was swimming in it, like a little boy in his father’s suit.

I brought up the elephant in the room. “How long have you been divorced?” I asked. I thought it was a fair question, considering I might want to have a second date with this guy. I popped the last of my samosa in my mouth and washed it down with a swig of rosewater tinged mango lassi.

He smirked. “About three weeks. It was finalized three weeks ago.”

Yikes.

He cocked his brown tweed paperboy hat over one eyebrow and looked down. “But we’ve been separated for a few months. She cheated on me. With her whole police unit. And everyone knew. Except for me.”

He ordered another plate of samosas and explained that there was one woman back in the kitchen doing all of the cooking for the restaurant. Her family handled all of the managerial and

technical parts of running Bhabi's, but she insisted on doing all of the cooking. If we were lucky, she'd bring us the order herself.

Although the fact that he probably wasn't over his ex-wife was a bit problematic to me, I enjoyed his company all the same. He was a trained chef, mentored by Cajun chef John Folse, during the time he spent with his now ex-wife in Louisiana. He talked incessantly about food, used a few swear words, unusual for a Mormon boy, and had a quirky, Andy Kaufman sense of humor like he was only making jokes for himself to find funny, regardless of what anyone else thought.

We often spent late nights devising new uses for rhubarb, eating at miniscule restaurants that no one but us knew about. He showed me how to make a proper dark roux for gumbo and etouffée. Before dates, he would come over bearing a toy for my new kitten, Reese, a few steaks and a bottle of Polish raspberry syrup. He was eclectic, and knew that food was better than flowers or candy anytime.

It didn't last long. I grew tired of being a rebound. I grew tired of the fact that when I slept over at his house, he preferred to sleep on the couch than to sleep in bed with me.

"I can't sleep next to you, Holly. I'll fuck you," he said, as if being intimate with me would somehow be worse than what his wife did to him.

To him, it probably was, and our relationship went steadily downhill. One night in February, we were trying our hand at a spicy lamb vindaloo, and celebrating my belated birthday. He had bought me a few beautiful silk scarves from one of the sari stores on Devon Avenue, and had sent me flowers on the day of my birthday, since he had to work an overnight shift and couldn't bring them himself. At that moment, Cory was touting the fact that he'd found

the perfect curry leaves at a hole-in-the-wall store off Devon, that sells his favorite brand of mango pickle and several illegal foodstuffs, including the elusive curry leaf. In his job as an agricultural inspector for the Transportation Safety Authority, he ran across all sorts of smuggling, including curry leaves, hidden in 200-pound bags of rice from Mumbai to Shanghai.

As he gently tore the verdant leaves and dropped them into our steaming orange cauldron, I pulled him into an embrace and kissed him long and deep, my arms wrapped around his neck and my hands in his hair. I had been feeling his apathy toward me in the past weeks, and I wanted him to want me. I wanted him to scoop me up and carry me into the bedroom after this kiss, completely forgetting about our fragrant concoction or any religious prohibitions being squawked from the pulpit, both simmering on the back burner. The flavors, however, ended up doing much more melding than Cory and I did that night.

When I pulled back from the embrace, I looked at him, smiled, and said, “What were you thinking just then?”

“When?” he said.

“Just then when I was kissing you, dumbass.”

“Oh. Um.”

“What?”

“I was wondering when you were going to stop.”

I stared at him for a moment, and finally the light came on in my head that told me that what I was being told by everyone in my life was true: Cory wasn't the One. I picked up my coat, hat, gloves, scarf, all of my winter paraphernalia necessary to brave a Chicago February,

and left his apartment. He didn't follow me, but the smell of our simmering feast wafted down the off-white hall and into the elevator with me. I refused to cry over him.

My love of Indian food continued long after my love for Cory ended. I think, now, that one of the only vices Cliff has is that it's the only ethnic food he simply prefers not to eat. Growing up in Queens, he had his share of men and women who reeked of curry and spices, crammed into the 7 train, their brown arms holding the overhead rings, his face smashed into their armpits. He tells me that I just don't understand, every time I bring up the comforting feeling of a thick *korma*. He remembers his mother's mumbling as she sat in the only empty seat on the bus, on their way to Main Street, next to an Indian man, "*Madre de Dios*."

I've learned to live with it, and to make sure that I keep my favorite recipe for curried chicken salad with walnuts and golden raisins to myself, though he can always tell when I've eaten it for hours afterward.

Last Christmas, when Cliff and I visited his parents in their Ft. Lauderdale home, Cliff's father presented us with a holiday feast of braised pork, brilliantly colored *aji de gallina* bejeweled with kalamata olives and hard boiled eggs, and a shipload of rice. Hugo, like most Peruvians, eats rice with everything. If Carmen, Cliff's mother, makes a pot of spaghetti (she often grows tired of the fabulous roasted chicken and fried yucca that shows up on the table often), Hugo asks, "Where is the rice?"

Cliff is the same. On our first trip to China Hut, Cliff ordered his favorite food, a dish I have yet to perfect, *arroz chaufa*, fried rice, Peruvian-style. I had never seen so much rice on a plate for one person before. As I sipped my amethyst-colored chicha morada, the Peruvian drink

made from sugar and purple corn, and enjoyed my fresh plate of ceviche, by far my favorite food, I watched him inhale his manna, overflowing with calamari, shrimp, fish, and scallops.

I couldn't help but love him. I loved his olive skin and clear complexion, his broad shoulders and strong arms, and, of course, his exuberant eating.

Sopa de Ajo
Serves 4 immune systems

I once read about a personal chef in San Diego who preferred soup to cereal as breakfast. Until then, I had forgotten about the many bowls of Sopa de Ajo I'd eaten as a child. Now, when the weather turns cool (in Florida, it's rarely cold enough to be classified as anything but 'cool') I love this soup to warm my insides and fend off the flu season.

Ingredients:

1 tbsp. olive oil
16 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced
2 green onions, chopped
1 small white onion, chopped
1 celery stalk, chopped
1 medium tomato, seeded and chopped
1 tsp. fresh oregano, minced
1 tsp. fresh mint, minced
2 tsp. fresh cilantro, minced
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1 tsp. salt
½ cup dry sherry
3-4 chicken leg pieces, on the bone, without skin
8 cups chicken stock or broth
4 eggs

Directions:

1. Heat olive oil over medium heat in a heavy-bottomed casserole or Dutch oven. If you don't have a Dutch oven, get one.
2. Saute garlic and next 4 ingredients (through tomato) until onions are translucent.
3. Add herbs, salt and pepper and stir until fragrant.
4. Deglaze the pot with dry sherry. The liquid may flame, so now wouldn't be a good time to stick your head over the pot to take a whiff. But don't worry, it's impressive.
5. Scrape the browned bits from the bottom of the pot while the liquid reduces.
6. Add chicken to the pot; submerge in chicken broth, and cover. Simmer for 1 hour.
7. Serve in deep bowls, one piece of chicken per bowl. Serve with poached or fried egg on top.

A MOUTH FULL OF THE SOUTH

Gone With the Pork

Knoxville is cold in November, and the white tent, sheeted in snow in the middle of Market Square, hisses with the sound of skate blades on newly polished ice. Down the street from the vendors selling root vegetables and hollow winter squash is the Tennessee Theater, an old-timey building with a marquee and a lighted vertical sign flashing:

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the letters a combination of a hundred circular light bulbs. The yellow glow illuminates the slick sidewalk, wet with winter drizzle, at odd intervals, as the line of people snakes around the corner onto Clinch Ave. The marquee glows white with black lettering naming today's showing: *Gone with the Wind*. It is Sunday, and over a thousand people have come like parishioners at the altar of the Old South. Ladies in broad church hats line up with their suited husbands to pay their respects to the last universally popular piece of propaganda celebrating the quieted Confederacy.

Knoxville was never a slave town, from what I had discovered. Its position on the gunmetal gray Tennessee River positioned Knoxville as a port town, and a politically moderate safe haven for free blacks and immigrants. Some of the merchants in Knoxville owned slaves, but these slave owners kept to themselves on plantations outside the city, and rarely participated in city life. Instead of a hotbed of strife, Knoxville was a melting pot of Irish, Greek, and African immigrants who lived in a separate-but-equal state fifty years before Dred Scott. It wasn't uncommon for these groups to congregate, but as the 1800s wore on, the free blacks gathered in the east side of the city, the Greeks to the north, and the Irish to the southwest. But while the Greeks opened restaurants and the Irish sat in pubs along Walnut Street, a Knoxville newspaper editor complained about the "poor, raggedy" free blacks who were seen "every day of the week, lounging on street corners" seeking day labor. Only sixteen percent of the city was comprised of blacks in the mid-1860s, less than most Southern cities. After the Civil War, that number grew exponentially, as the status of blacks gradually improved, and many operated in civil service jobs and in government positions.

Still, some citizens of Knoxville feel an attachment toward the time of Sherman and Lee, and the 80-year-old theatre shows *Gone With the Wind* once a month to sold-out crowds. Jack Neely, a writer for the Knoxville alternative weekly *MetroPulse* reminds me over steaming lemon tea at a trendy coffee and chocolate shop: "Cultures often idealize the cultures they defeat." Margaret Mitchell's book, and Victor Fleming's film, full of Ladies Fair and Gentlemen, Cotton Fields and Cavaliers, "a civilization gone with the wind" is the ultimate in idealization, and everyone eats it up. "Look for it not in books," advises the opening credits,

because the boring, real Reconstruction is in there, and it doesn't star Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable.

As I settle into my seat in the grandiosely refurbished auditorium, under the French-style chandelier sparkling with Czechoslovakian crystal, I might as well be back in Paris at the Opéra Garnier, the rococo stylings and lavish gold-leaf cherubs adorning every corner of the room. Spotlights highlight the details; an alternating green and pink glow illuminates murals painted on the domed ceilings, red beams shoot up the sides of the Corinthian columns, blue pinlights line the carpeted aisles. An organist ends his leisurely Chopin *Nocturne*, the one the composer had played at his funeral in E-flat minor, pauses, and begins the jaunty notes of "Dixie." The audience, now filling the balcony, roars to life. The front row claps in time, and pretty soon the hall echoes with the sound of 2,000 hands clapping to the anthem of the South. As the organist tips his derby to the crown and sustains the last chord, he seamlessly transitions into "Tara's Theme," the soundtrack to the opening credits of *Gone With the Wind*. The full house cheers. I'm somehow filled with pride and awe.

I grew up in a household where a Confederate flag was prominently displayed in our always-open garage. I didn't know what it meant until I was eight or nine years old, when my mom explained about the Civil War, and how she was proud that her people had owned black slaves and had treated them like family, leaving land to them in their wills. She sounded like the opening lines of *Gone with the Wind* when she said, "It was a simpler time, you know, baby? When men respected women and when women knew how to cook instead of just taking their kids to McDonalds after school. We used to play outside until dark, and even past then, but you can't do that here, someone libel 'nab you."

My mom stuck her little rebel flag in the space between the pickled beets and the apple butter my grandmother had canned for us last winter. The screen door was open all the time, even in the sopping wet summers, and though I begged my mom to shut the windows and doors and turn on the air conditioning, she said it was healthy to “change the air” once in a while, a practice she learned from her mammy. I went back to my homework, straining to focus on dividing fractions while tears of sweat ran down my back and gathered in my shorts. It was our own Twelve Oaks in the middle of modernized Central Florida. I was proud of it, even in the swelter. I said ya’ll like my mom, and y’uns like my brother-in-law. I practiced my twang on my hamsters, corralling them into a corner to make sure they were properly fed.

“Y’uns hamsters get on over here now, y’hear?” I mimicked.

I was fourteen when I learned what the flag really meant to everyone else. My pride in our corner of Dixie faded. I tried to hide the flag, unsuccessfully. I rolled it up and stuck it behind the peas; behind the tubs full of bulgur and rice my parents had collected for food storage in the case of a nuclear holocaust (not joking). My mother always found it, always replaced it, always stood proud.

“The flag has nothing to do with slavery or hating black people,” she said, “that’s just what they’re teaching you in those liberal-minded schools. Black people have just as much a right to education as Whites do, and that’s that. Don’t let no one tell you otherwise.”

I’d figured all that out, the part about education, but I still wasn’t keen on the flag. I decided to let her keep it. I was running out of hiding places.

The purple velvet curtain, lined with shiny gold tassels parts, and the tiny pipe organ sinks into the floor of the stage as the final arpeggio is sounded and sustained. I take a deep

breath as the screen lights up. Margaret Mitchell's story of the Old South begins, and as it runs, the woman in the broad-brimmed, beflowered church hat sitting next to my best friend, Kristin, murmurs every word and laughs at the muted humor.

Brent and Stuart Tarleton, the twins, bicker back and forth about who will be Scarlett's date to the barbeque at Twelve Oaks the following day, the catalyst from which all else springs in the epic film.

A few minutes later, Scarlett O'Hara's mammy, played by Hattie McDaniels, chases Scarlett around the house with a plate of South Georgia fixin's, collards, grits, and a hefty fried chicken drumstick. Scarlett refuses to eat her breakfast in order to fit into her bosom-bearing dress for the barbeque.

The bonneted woman next to me titters as the Aunt Jemima-esque McDaniels heaves her lumbering figure around Scarlett's four-poster bed.

"I know you don't care what folks says about this family, but I does! I is tol' ya and tol' ya that you can always tell a lady by the way she eats in front of folks like a bird and I ain't aimin' for you to go to Mr. John Wilkes' and eat like a field hand and gobble like a hog!"

That each major plotline in the film springs from one event, a barbeque, shows how deeply entrenched Mitchell saw the act of eating barbeque as a social stronghold, a place where men and women, who were generally separated by duty or act (like the men smoking and talking about war in the drawing room while the women are napping in the bedrooms upstairs) could interact, is direct evidence that the barbeque, the *fête du porc*, brought the South and the Southerners together in something they could all enjoy – eating.

From that barbeque at Twelve Oaks come three major stories around which the entire film revolves. First, Scarlett's ill-fated obsession with the feminine, honorable Ashley Wilkes is introduced in the first few scenes, but comes to the forefront when Scarlett confronts him while the men talk war in the drawing room. Scarlett throws a temper tantrum, which no one is ever surprised at, and in walks the second story of the film: charming, despicable Rhett Butler. All of a sudden, shouts ring out, and the men of the house rush out in a tizzy on the news that the War, the third storyline, has been declared on the Northern states. So much for the ball.

Knox County, Tennessee, where Knoxville is located, was considered one of the most pro-Union counties in the South during the Civil War. Most of the streets in Knoxville are named for Unionists, not Confederates as one might assume. Whites and blacks lived fairly close together, poverty binding them together. Knoxville had one of the lowest percentages of black citizens in the South during the 1860s, somewhere around 16%, compared to the average of between 30-35% for most of the larger towns during that time. "In an industrial city like Knoxville, it mattered little what political party you belonged to, or even the color of your skin," said *MetroPulse* reporter Jack, "as long as the work got done, that was all that mattered during that time. We supplied guns and ammunition to the troops on both sides. If you paid, we played, so to speak." In a countywide referendum, not one attendee voted for secession from the Union, but a large majority of the state did, so Tennessee became part of the Confederacy in June, 1861.

I typed, "barbeque, Knoxville, best of" into the search engine at my desk. I was driving to Knoxville to see Kristin, a graduate student at the University of Tennessee and wanted the best barbeque money could buy.

Kristin and I go about as far back as our memories. The first time we met was at ballet class when we were four years old. Kristin, an awkward, mousy-haired little girl, stood at the barre doing her pliés. When she stood back up from her deep knee bend, her legs twisted into a locked position and her little hips swirled to the left and to the right. Kristin was doing the potty dance. She asked our tight-lipped teacher if she could use the bathroom, but was instantly rejected with a sneer. This woman should not have been teaching little girls. The story ends with Kristin on her hands and knees wiping up her own urine from the hardwood floor. I ran to the bathroom, grabbed some more paper towels, and helped her. It was Parents' Night. Kristin never went back to ballet class, but we were inseparable after that.

Several Top Ten lists appeared on my screen. I didn't want a tourist trap, somewhere that advertised on the website and basically bought their way onto the list. I did some more poking around the search engine, and came up with Dixon's. They had no website, but someone, somewhere told me in the middle of the blogosphere that it was fantastic. The clincher: "Dixon's is only open Thursday through Saturday, and you'd better call ahead: they run out of food early on busy days." There's something about food being finite that plants a burning desire, only to be quenched when the loot is scored. They served something called the "pigburger." Now *that's* what I'm talking about. "Pork" is a euphemism, but it must be special if you're gonna call it what it really is: pig.

Scarlett weathers the storm of the War, writing to her Ashley, even through her widowing and wooing by Charlestonian Rhett Butler. Typical Low Country lowlife, they might say.

Barbeque was everywhere, even in the War. American history classes in grade school teach us that all the Confederate troops had to eat was the biscuit known as hardtack. To the

contrary, Stonewall Jackson's diary relates that he oversaw the smoking of ribs and pork for the troops. Even in the thick of battle, some battalions ate what made the South proud.

"I hate wearing black, and I'm too young to be a widow," says the indomitable Scarlett. She dances the night away, fiddle-dee-dee on mourning your dead husband. After fleeing Atlanta during the invasion by General Sherman, Scarlett returns to her home plantation, Tara, to find her mother dead, her father wasting away with shock and denial, and her sisters trying desperately (and failing) to keep the household together. Mammy, always faithful, is there with a pot of porridge, the only thing left in the house, and Prissy, whining of course, that there's nothing to eat. Nothing to eat in a Southern house is like nothing to eat in a Latino house - it's catastrophic and only possible under the direst of circumstances.

Let's not forget the O'Hara's black manservant, whose name underscores the importance of the culture of barbeque in a quiet, understated way. His name is Pork, and he's always there, ever ready to kill a chicken or a turkey or whatever happens to be alive and around at the moment. "It is said that the slaves could barbeque meats best, and when the whites had barbecues, slaves always did the cooking," writes a former Virginia slave in the *Autobiography of Louis Hughes*. That Margaret Mitchell would use a name like Pork for a lowly manservant does two things: characterizes the nature of the barbeque as a poor-folks food, and demonstrates the absolute necessity and foundation of barbeque in Southern homes and culture. Pork, the man, is black, characterizing the pig and the treatment of the pig as a food of the Black man, the African, the poor man, the servant. That Mitchell did not give the name to a White says volumes: though a slave is named for the food, the rest of the family depends on his presence.

Naming one of the servants after a food item, especially one as important as a pig, also shows how integrated slaves were in the family unit, and especially in the kitchen.

By the end of the first half, Scarlett eats a carrot she finds in the ground. She retches and collapses on the ground. Southern belles are not meant to live by carrots alone. As God as her witness, she'll never go hungry again.

Dixon's is not in a "good" part of Knoxville. It's on the East Side, a sparse street running through a grey town, peppered with warehouses and barred windows off the salted snowy sidewalks. The area used to be much worse, scarier even to the dumb white suburbanite. Jack Neely told me that when he was younger, if he and his friends suddenly got a hankering for Dixon's barbeque or for Chandler's next door with their gloppy sauces and foot long beef ribs, they'd have to funnel several beers just to get up the courage to step foot in East Knoxville. Now, the trees are bare already in September, and the wind whips through the naked branches. Kristin and I listen to her GPS directing us to get off at the likely exit.

"I had a feeling it would be here," she says, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. Kristin grew up in a predominantly white area of town, as I did, and modern and accepting as we are, we can't help but dart our eyes around, completely "aware of our surroundings" as our mothers counseled us, keeping track of every suspicious step someone takes in our hearing.

"Yeah. But, you know, I've eaten at enough shady places that have changed my life," I thought back to the storefront back home, the spray painted windows and wire trash cans saying everything to me but 'come eat here!' Inside, though, were the most succulent, fresh, and authentic tacos I'd eaten outside of my time in Northern Mexico.

"I agree," she said, though unconvinced.

“You have arrived at your destination on the left,” the GPS chimed.

“What?” said Kristin, “Where?”

We circled the area, searching for a gaggle of cars outside a building, a bunch of servers dishing out saucy ribs and smoky pulled pork as fast as their arms would allow to the line of customers shouting orders.

That’s not what Dixon’s turned out to be. A tiny hut on the corner of the road with a hand-painted white sign in red paint scrawled, “DIXON’S.” The whitewash on the outside of the tiny shack peeled and fluttered in the chill. Sitting outside the screen door was a thousand-year-old meat smoker, rusted and creaking with age, having seen and smoked hundreds of pigs and cows in its time, we were sure.

The screen door slammed as we cautiously entered the shack, for that’s what it was. It was a tiny room with a linoleum floor and wood paneling on the walls, stained black from years of smoke billowing in from the kitchen. There was no dining room, as I suspected there might have been after I peeked around the corner past the antiquated Coca-Cola classic machine, the squatty kind with six horizontally placed big buttons. Instead of the run-of-the-joint Coke products, though, the buttons had been replaced with hand-written placards on index cards, taped to the plastic of the original buttons. The choices: Squirt, Fanta Grape Soda, Fresca, MUG Root beer, Coke Classic, and Hawaiian Punch. Nothing says true barbeque quite like grape soda.

A dreadlocked black man stood behind the counter with a goofy grin on his face, watching the Packers trounce the Steelers.

Brett Favre ran up the sideline, dodging tackles and hopping over fallow players to score a touchdown.

“YES! Now *that’s* what I’m talking about,” he said, spinning a half-turn and clapping his hands.

Wayne McCallie tied his hair back to take our order. Wayne, I’d read, was the nephew of Charles Dixon, original owner of the barbeque joint. “What’ll ya’ll be havin’?” he said. He sat back on his heels and raised his chin while tilting his head to the side, as if he was himself pondering what we should order.

Kristin looked skeptical, but I could see her eyeing the caramel covered cake in the dessert case. Oozing with caramel frosting and sprinkled with toasted walnuts, Hurricane Cake (I never have figured out why they call it that); is a buttery delight – heavenly and gooey as a cake should be.

“Are you out of pigburgers?” I said, hoping he would know what I was talking about.

Wayne’s goofy grin returned and the left side of his mouth sparkled with gold. “Nope. How spicy d’you want it?”

“Hot,” I said. “It’s a cold day, I can handle it.”

“I like your style,” said Wayne.

“I’ll have one too, but make mine mild,” Kristin chimed.

As we sat at the only chairs in the place and pretended to understand the nuances of football, Kristin and I glanced at the menu, at the caramel cake, at the vat of sweet tea in the corner, and in the scratched mirror with the Miller Lite logo printed on it.

Wayne returned from the kitchen, only three steps away, and went back to the game.

“How long have you guys been doing this? Barbeque, I mean,” I asked.

“Oh, man,” he said, letting his hair down in locks, “forever. This is all we know how to do.”

I nodded. I always wished I had something that it was the only thing I knew how to do. I’ve often thought that being a “Jack of all trades, master of none” was kind of unfortunate. I wanted to master something, to say I was the best at it. I envied McCallie in his tiny shack, knowing exactly what was going into his food all the time, never skipping a chance to improve a recipe, no other demands, no Microsoft Outlook reminding him that he has a meeting in fifteen minutes that may or may not take the rest of the day. This was the opposite of multitasking, and it was what I wanted in that instant.

My mother claims that she’s a vegetarian. She buys organic vegetables, shops at the farmer’s market on Mondays, and eats an absurd amount of bean curd. She loves coming to visit me in the city because her trip will always include a stop at a Chinese apothecary, where she’ll pick up Goji berries and “energy bars” chock full of sunflower seeds, pistachios, almonds, and held together with some sort of mashed date and prune goo.

There’s one other reason, though, that my mom likes coming to visit. Barbeque. I never understood it, but she claims that barbeque is “her one weakness.” I wasn’t aware that vegetarians could have a meat weakness. I thought that was the whole point of being a vegetarian – shunning the ill-practices of the industrialized food machine that turns out thousands of lifelong caged chickens with severed feet and tiny cows unable to move for the first few months of their lives until they’re processed into veal and stocked in the meat case.

For her, though, it doesn’t matter if the pig has been living in its own shit for the past few years, or if the cow received an electric shock before being sledgehammered in the head on the

killing row, as long as they are dismembered, smoked for 23 hours, and then shredded and tossed with a special sauce, my mom will eat them. A true vegetarian.

It's not for me to judge, of course, because my own hypocrisy bites me over and over during the course of a day. I consider myself a water bottle champion, outfitting my friends with high-quality sports bottles to tote around rather than purchase PET water bottles (polyethylene terephthalate, a virtually non-biodegradable and potentially harmful chemical compound in bottles like Aquafina and Dasani) that end up in landfills and take over 1,000 years to biodegrade. Then, I stop at the gas station on sticky, humid mornings and fill up a plastic cup with iced coffee. I don't reuse it – that would be unsanitary – I throw it away, along with my pride.

Whenever I see my mom noshing on a drippy bun filled with pulled pork, I just have to laugh. The next time I see a grass-fed, organic barbeque joint in the middle of Knoxville, I'll let her know.

You know the story: Scarlett marries Rhett, still loves Ashley, and ends up the wealthiest woman in Atlanta. Then, Reconstruction starts, the blacks start dancing and singing as though all of their troubles have vanished. The carpetbaggers come to collect the Taxes on the plantation, all of a sudden, life is different for blacks in Georgia.

The quiet tittering of Southern ladies is replaced with raucous laughter when the Yankees take over. The streets are no longer peaceful and ordered, there are horses and gambling and the whole timbre of the movie has changed. Buildings are being rebuilt and the streets are abuzz with activity and life of a new nation.

What's absent? Food. Food completely exits the scene from *Gone with the Wind* as the South becomes the United States. The sense of identity is almost stolen from the film, only existing now in the intimacy of the characters' own homes. The only time the Old South comes back is in Melanie's Southern belle manners. She receives Scarlett with open arms at her birthday party for Ashley, after his sister catches him and Scarlett in a clutching embrace. Every time I watch Melanie's reaction, "Oh, Scarlett, what a lovely dress!" read "Oh, Scarlett! You harlot!" I think about my mother, who would never let anyone see her upset, even if it meant staying hurt for years and never resolving issues.

But where did the food go? There are no dinner parties, no barbeques, no ravenous breakfasts before tying a 13-inch waist into Scarlett's corset. As Atlanta grew more affluent, the smokehouses moved out into the country and shantytowns and gourmet Yankee restaurants invaded and, as General Sherman did, took the city by storm. As Bethany Ewald Bultman says in her essay, *An Ode to the Pig*, "As rural poor in the South relied on pork to sustain them, affluent urbanites shunned it." Mitchell best displays the distinctiveness of the South through its food, and once the amalgamation and Restoration has taken to the streets, the smoky, meaty dishes of the Old South disappear – their unique foodways gone with the wind.

Kristin and I peeled back the aluminum foil on our pigburgers, desperate for the first bite. The patty, dripping juices sat wedged between not a hamburger bun but two slices of Wonder white bread, soggy with the clove- and allspice-laden sauce that wafted in long streams of steam from the patty. We inhaled. Well, Kristin inhaled. I stuck my face in the aluminum foil, closing the metal around my nose, funneling as much aroma as possible between my two nostrils. The

scent of smoky pig mingled with the vinegar, ketchup and thousand spices in the sauce; the dried chilies pricking my sinuses with heat.

After reluctantly removing my nose, I took a bite.

The white bread stuck to the roof of my mouth, as white bread is wont to do, and the patty exploded with flavor and juice. My head filled with heat from the sauce, and I removed my wool coat immediately, knowing that in several minutes, I'd be sweating out of it. Pig-shaped fireworks went off behind my eyelids as I fluttered them before letting out a signature groan of utter happiness.

I looked over at Wayne, who was still keeping his eye on Brett Favre as he rearranged slices of plum cake.

"This is amazing," I said. "What parts of the pig are in here?"

"All of it, honey. Whatever we can get," Wayne said.

"It's amazing. You know, I heard of this other place that does a pigburger, but it's just some ribs on a bun. Nothing like this."

"Well, to me, that's not a pigburger," Wayne said.

"Well said," Kristin said between mouthfuls.

I bit into it again; a few sautéed onions pulled out of the sandwich and dangled from my lips. I slurped them back up like a kid eating his first bowl of noodles.

Kristin sat back in her chair, peeling off the plastic wrap enveloping her Hurricane Cake. "Do you think we'll ever find anything better than this?" she asked me, digging into her slice.

Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.

Joe Bob and the Grunt

“Wake up, bitches! We’re goin’ fishin’!” I yelled as I stuck my sunburned nose through the crack in Bryce and Ally’s bedroom door. I would have slid the white French doors open all the way, or busted in through the doors that adjoined the patio, but my worst fear might have been realized: half-naked (or, oh God, *completely* naked) pasty pale white boy Bryce curled around his Filipina girlfriend’s body in fetal position, sheets strewn to the floor, the smell of stale sex and cigarettes permeating the air. That would have been horrible. I would have had to take an aspirin – or a Klonopin – and rock myself back to sleep.

I heard a muffled snort, which I trusted was cranky-Bryce-speak for “okay” and returned to my room to wake up my boyfriend, Cliff, who sleeps like a lion and wakes like a lamb. On most days. Sometimes I have to resort to extremes, like making bacon. Bacon wakes grizzly bears.

But the air was clear of fornications and wafted in from the royal palms outside our condo in Key West, beckoning us from sleep and the promise of soft scrambled eggs and mildly sweet Argentine sausages to the boat we’d be trusting to take us from Summerland Key out into the ocean.

Kyle sat up on the couch, where he’d been sleeping for six nights in a row. He tied grey sinkers to his fishing poles, the tackle spread out on the glass coffee table like poker chips. His droopy eyes, full of sleep and wasted hope from the previous night’s wet T-shirt contest at Sloppy Joe’s, concentrated hard on threading the clear filaments through the holes ascending the rod, attaching a sinker and hook, and tucking the hook into the bottom hole. When Kyle wasn’t

talking about NASCAR, he was talking about fishing. He was our ambassador to the ocean, our boat captain and fish finder. We were putting our dinner in his hands.

Michael Pollan's voice from the book *In Defense of Food* started humming in my ears as I watched Kyle adorn the fishing lines. The main premise of the book is to eat food as naturally as possible. His opening words, "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants," he advises. The more processing a food goes through, the less likely it is to be a decent, nutritious food. Oatmeal: good. Oatmeal granola bars: not so good. I figured Pollan would approve of our catch-and-eat philosophy for this trip, though his "mostly plants" line puts many of us in a corner. Some fish eat plants, though, right? I wasn't sure. Maybe I would take a picture of our acquisitions roasting over the hot coals and send it to him for approval – proof that his thesis worked in theory, that someone was taking his advice.

I thought about trying to learn everything Kyle knew about going fishing to supplement my rudimentary "drop it in and wait" philosophy on angling. After the second hook he tied on, I stopped watching and started loading Coronas (Cliff and me), Coors Light (Kyle) and Yuengling (Bryce) into the Styrofoam cooler. Best stick to what I knew already. I knew beer.

The white French doors slid open and Bryce emerged. Half a wave in my direction and a cigarette between his lips, he crossed the threshold to the patio and lit up. Cigarettes and Bryce go together like beer and...well...Bryce. His old soul matured far before its time, after caring for a cancer-stricken father for most of his high school years and drowning his grief in computer role-playing games and Clint Eastwood movies. Bryce loves songs that most classify as "angry white boy," a combination of the fuck-my-life and the destined-for-failure sentiments. One of

the first times I met the guy, I was playing pool at my boyfriend's house with him and a few of his friends. A song came on the radio that I had been ridiculing for weeks. Snippet of the lyrics:

I hate everything about you/why do I love you?

Please. Really? The first time I heard this particular song on the radio, I rolled my eyes so hard, I almost rolled my car. If you hate everything about someone, you probably shouldn't waste your time loving them. The song was complete bullshit, and I let the boys know what I thought. It was Bryce's favorite song.

Bryce and I have had a love-hate relationship (whatever that means) ever since. More love than hate, though, which makes us excellent travelling companions, since one must hate at least one thing about someone else in order to spend 168 straight hours with them, but must also love them enough to care to remember them in every story that starts, "Remember the time we were in Key West?" I can't hate everything about Bryce, though, and still love him, because then I would have to like that song.

"Where are we going first, Kyle?" I asked, peeking over his shoulder to watch him reassemble his tackle box. I always wanted a tackle box. My tackle boxes are full of pastry tips and half-used jars of food coloring.

"I told the guy we'd be there around one, so we'd probably go there first and make sure they have our boat. Then, we need to get ya'll fishing licenses and grab some bait," Kyle was cheerful. His lilting Florida Cracker accent was quickly drowned out as Cliff turned on the shower in the bathroom next to where we sat.

Excellent. Bait and a fishing license. I gathered my hair into pigtails that sat at the nape of my neck. I was determined to look like I knew what I was doing. In case a policeman on a

boat came by, I would toss my pigtails, flash my fishing license, and coyly ask him to bait my hook.

“What’ll we use for bait?” Cliff asked from the bathroom, toothbrush sticking out the side of his unshaven face. Most men grow facial hair at the rate of one millimeter per day. Cliff, whose status as a barrel-chested, hot-blooded South American man, grows facial hair at the rate of ridiculous. He left the shower water running to warm it up while he brushed his teeth. He did this to make me crazy, I figured. An avid water conservationist, I got nervous whenever I saw someone leave the water on while washing their hands, fill up the bathtub above the drain line, or do dishes in the sink when a dishwasher was available. Cliff is into muscle cars that get eight miles per gallon. Opposites both attract and lovingly annoy.

“Squid,” Kyle said, standing the fishing poles up vertically against the cooler.

“Sweet,” my boyfriend said, spitting the last of his whitening toothpaste into the sink. “So if we don’t catch anything, at least we’ll have calamari for dinner.” The shower water kept running. I watched the steam billow from the curtain. I suppressed the urge to run in, turn it off, and make a speech.

Calamari? I thought it to myself but sighed out loud.

Soapbox: On the list of abominable culinary concoctions that has traipsed across the Atlantic and taken America by storm, calamari is nearing the top of the list. Never in my life has a plate of greasy, tough, over-fried calamari changed my life. The quick-serve appetizer fall-back is usually served on a wilted lettuce leaf (usually not the fault of the lettuce but of the heat lamp the dish sat under between the time the calamari was crispy and palatable until it actually made it to my table), accompanied by a soufflé cup (usually black plastic, sometimes melted by

the heat lamp) full of “marinara” sauce straight from the two-gallon jug that U.S. Foods dropped off with the rest of the order that morning. Gross. But here’s the real tragedy: the most flavorful part of the squid, the part the rest of the world uses when it makes fried calamari, is rarely used. The tiny purple tentacles are the pinnacle of the ocean’s bounty. And no one uses them. Instead, the completely tasteless rings of the squid’s body are chopped into half-inch thickness, dunked in tempura batter (if one is so lucky), and fried until they come out rubbery and tasting like nothing the sea ever produced. To make things worse, drown the poor squid in a condiment. I don’t understand these things.

Here’s how to eat calamari: not fried. Sautéed in butter with garlic and parsley – great. Stuffed with shrimp or sausage and grilled – perfection. If the disgraceful fried version must be ordered, however, and ingested (as it must, and often, by my boyfriend), for the love of God, don’t open that sauce. Squeeze a little lemon on the morsels and pig out.

Since four out of five people were all ready to head out the door and into the Key West sunshine on time, it must follow that one of the five must have a crisis that sets the party back several steps.

Ally, Bryce’s girlfriend, with her hair in curlers (did I mention we were going to be on a boat all day?) and her gold lamé bikini peeking through her brown linen tank top, thrust open the doors to their room and frantically started ransacking the living room. Bryce announced: “Evidently, Ally’s purse has gone missing.”

He was right. We couldn’t find the tiny black clutch anywhere. I tried to remember where she put it as she stumbled up the stairs the night before, running to make it to the bathroom before her vodka-tonics came out her nose.

This is Ally in a nutshell: Ally refuses to admit that her body does not like alcohol. This poses a problem for Bryce, who is bound by his devotion to her to hold her hair and have Alka-Seltzer on hand every night of our vacation. It falls to me, however, to be the concerned girl friend, who stays with Ally until she is done throwing up her cocktails (which on some nights also include a few milligrams each of aspirin and Xanax), whilst the boys enjoy a guys-night-out at whatever Gomorrah they choose to frequent on these hot island evenings. Before these midnight toilet-hugging sessions, Ally can often be seen practicing drunk yoga (downward-facing dog is her favorite pose – it’s a good thing this comes before the purging), dancing wildly with whatever glow sticks make themselves available, and stealing whatever isn’t nailed down. This is hilarious, and on this trip, has often followed our girls-night drag shows on the upper end of Duval Street.

The night before, Ally and I left The Aqualounge after too many Midori Sours and too many Cher and Britney Spears songs, and I held her olive-toned arm while she hugged random people and announced to the world that she was extremely happy to be on vacation instead of in the library at UF, where she studies Spanish-Filipino history. She found the stage where the Miss Hawaiian Tropic contest was just held, and eyed several bottles of water sitting on the edge of the stage.

“Cover me,” she said, quietly in my ear.

I started to laugh. She stumbled as she assumed her secret agent stance, like a kitten, still wobbly on its legs, stalking a lizard on slippery slate stone. She ducked under the stage and stealthily stole three bottles of water. Ally emerged on the sidewalk again, water in tow.

“Run!” she giggled, and zigzagged through the crowd.

“Ally! Honey! No one’s following us!” I called. She stopped, collapsed into laughter. I helped her up, enjoying the moment, and delivered her to Bryce, who already had glow sticks waiting for her in the cacophonous bar.

“Evidently,” he said, “it’s rave night tonight.”

The other issue with these forays into drunkenness, Ally insists on eating expensive meals right after the partying has ended. Bryce pays for them.

On these occasions, Ally’s in the bathroom, doing what she does, chatting with the girl in the stall next to her, who is also throwing up the meal her boyfriend just bought for her. He shakes his head and looks at me as he leans back slightly in the chair of whatever restaurant we’re at.

“Evidently, she’s just going to expel her dinner every night. I really hate paying for food that’s going to provide her no nutritional benefit whatsoever, you know?”

I knew.

I eventually found the clutch, just as the tears were springing to Ally’s eyes. I would have freaked out, too. After I had been sick all night, could remember little to nothing the next day, and just realized that my whole life was missing, crying is probably the mildest form of hysteria that would manifest itself.

Ally heaved a girly, Filipina sigh, the breathy kind with the very soft, high-pitched *hoooooooooooo* floating on top of the breath. She hugged me, grabbed a water bottle, dumped the water out into the sink, opened the freezer, grabbed her bottle of Grey Goose, and filled the bottle with vodka.

I sighed my own kind of sigh.

At the marina, a woman with a thick pahk-the-cah Boston accent greeted us and showed us the two boats we could choose from. It wasn't one o'clock anymore. It was closer to two. We were all anxious as hell to just step foot on the unstable bow of the boat, ready to feel the adventure surging through the engine when Kyle turned the key. Before that, though, Kyle had to be briefed.

The briefing included an enormous map of Summerland Key, some red ink, a black scribbling of "Red Right Return" across the top, and more Xs and circles where the best fishing spots were. The best eating spots. The best picnic areas. The house where the lead singer of the band 311 lived. The ten other ten-million-dollar dream homes. This was all plotted on the map. Kyle listened intently, ever the cautious and careful one, while the rest of us shuffled around kicking the limestone gravel, rearranging the fishing poles leaning against the whitewashed lavatory shack, petting the Ewok-dog with hidden eyes and too much black hair to be comfortable, visions of mahi-mahi and grouper dancing in our heads.

The sun began to burn the tops of our feet, and we weren't even on the boat yet. Sunburns are permissible, even desirable, when floating on the ocean or sitting beside it on a sandy beach. Sunburns are irritating when the only thing one can think of is how much one wants to be doing one of those things, but isn't.

The map was eventually folded. Kyle tried to pull himself away as the woman continued to regale him with stories of pelicans poking holes in the boat's canvas awning.

"You're going fishing, eh?" she said. "You're gonna need licensure. Police come down there and ask and you'll all go to jail."

I checked the clock on my phone. I don't wear a watch because I feel more bohemian, like time means nothing. In actuality, time means everything. We were running out of it, and daylight.

"Chevron station down the road does all that. Bait, tackle, licenses. Shouldn't take you but a minute," she offered, sensing our anticipation and edginess.

That probably would have been fine, but everything we'd done so far was supposed to take us but a minute, and already, the sun was beginning to make its way toward Mallory Square and the Key West Sunset Celebration. We had the boat for four hours. At this rate, we'd only get to three before the marina closed for the night.

I crammed myself in the way-back of Ally's Jeep (the one her parents bought her for Christmas – but I'm not bitter), and my boyfriend slammed the hatchback door. Bryce made a comment about chivalry.

Again, when four people out of five are ready to go, one person has to have a crisis. I forgot my wallet back in our car at the marina. I didn't realize this until we were actually walking into the dregs of what was once a Chevron station. I silently took Ally's keys from Bryce, drove myself the half-mile to the marina, grabbed my wallet, and pretended like I wasn't seething at myself on the inside.

The Chevron station only takes cash.

Bullshit.

We all walked to the bank next door to withdraw money.

"Do you accept the \$3.00 charge for using this ATM?"

“Goddamn,” Bryce breathed. “Evidently, we don’t have a fucking choice.” He punched the green button and rolled his eyes.

We all walked back to the mud and brick Chevron hut, paid for our licenses and a box of chum, which looked like someone dredged Ally’s vomit out of the toilet from last night’s Fat Tuesday soiree, froze it into a solid block, and then charged us ten dollars to have it back.

Ally adjusted her My Fair Lady beach hat, whose black and white striped brim was almost too wide to fit through the driver’s side door. Cliff wedged me into the way back and slammed the door, handing me a free copy of the *Keys Times* that he thought I would like, a fluffy dollop of whipped cream springing from a piece of key lime pie on the cover.

Soapbox: How many possible permutations of key lime pie are there, anyway? According to every back-of-the-bottle recipe I’ve tried, the “authentic” version consists of key lime juice, sweetened condensed milk, and several egg yolks. This is pretty standard. The problem arises in the topping. Meringue or whipped cream? Even The Blonde Giraffe, the official key lime pie company in Key West, which produces over 3,000 key lime pies per day, offers two different variations, meringue being more popular, according to the factory manager I spoke to on a recent visit. Not more authentic, mind you, just more popular.

The issue worsens when a key lime cheesecake comes into play (topped with whipped cream or meringue?!), or key lime crème brûlée (essentially just the filling of the pie with a caramelized sugar crust), or key lime semifreddo (essentially just the filling of the pie, half frozen, tastes like fluffy, whipped frozen yogurt). What about the crust? Is it a crumbly crust or a flaky one? Can it have pulverized pecans in it along with the flour/sugar/butter? Does that compromise the authenticity of the pie? *Is there an authentic key lime pie?* Probably not. I have

no problem with the variation; just don't market them as "authentic" if no one's really sure what the authentic version really is.

Also, if Michael Pollan is only interested in local "whole" foods, does key lime pie disqualify? Do I have to make the sweetened condensed milk myself and churn my own butter for it to be approved by the Pollanites? Key limes are local. Is it just the main ingredient that needs to be local, or is it every ingredient? What qualifies as the processing of food? Baking is a process. Are we allowed to bake? Does the thesis only apply to additives and preservatives? If I add a teaspoon of cream of tartar to a meringue to preserve its stability, am I violating the treatise?

"We'd better catch some fucking fish," I said quietly. At this point, we're all questioning each other's ability to plan anything that is supposed to start before four in the afternoon.

The Ewok-dog greeted us as we piled (I fell) out of the car. My father used to call dogs like this Flea Bag Motels. This dog, I could only imagine, was like a Flea Bag Bellagio. Poor thing.

"Ya'll can have the choice of boats today," said the Bostonienne. "We have two at the dock, and there's another group coming from Key Largo. But since you're here, you might as well pick the one you want."

Kyle sidled up to the dock to inspect the vessels. We pretty much left it up to him, though Cliff and Ally were instantly attracted to the shiny, brand-new white catamaran on the left. It was big, a twenty-six-foot princess of a boat, with a bathroom and small couch and television downstairs. Cliff ran his hand along the fiberglass side, while Ally began adjusting her hat in the reflection she saw in the catamaran's silver banisters. I can't speak for Cliff, but

Ally is attracted to all things that glitter. Last New Year's, at Bryce's house party, we followed her black sequined figure around all night, taunting: "Me so shiny! Me sparkle long time!"

The other boat, docked on the side, bobbing up and down slightly, was less glamorous. The blue canvas had several holes in it (pelican, we guessed), but there was more seating area in the front of the boat, and it seemed less fussy. I appreciated this boat. I could relate to it. Low-maintenance, better fuel economy, more comfort.

Kyle and Bryce, my equals when it comes to fussiness, concurred with my attraction to the boat on the right.

"It just seems more efficient," Kyle said to Cliff, who was eyeballing the vessel suspiciously.

"I'm just saying, if we get stuck out there, which would you rather be on? The old one, or the one with the bathroom?" said Cliff, still unconvinced.

Cliff is generally level-headed, the voice in the back of my head when I'm on the verge of an anxiety attack, always there to hold my hand, stroke my cheek with the back of his hand as though he was soothing a kitten, and reassure me that the amusement park boat ride will start moving in just a second – no need to worry. On the other hand, every day I get asked the same question: "Which car should I buy? A blah blah or a blah blah?" Possible choices so far: BMW 328i, Hyundai Genesis Coupe, Infiniti G35, Nissan 350Z, Mustang Cobra, Corvette ZO6, Chevrolet Camaro. All of these must be purchased with a gun-metal-grey exterior, brushed steel rims, and black leather interior. For him, there is no middle ground when it comes to material things. There is only luxury. This applies to boats as well.

“I’d rather be on the one that still had gas in it. This one. You want my expert opinion? This is it: this boat equals less money we have to shell out to put gas in it,” Kyle started speaking in dollars.

It felt good to have a voice of reason on this trip.

That won Cliff over. Kyle placed his fishing poles in the boat on the right, and Bryce and Cliff dropped the cooler off. I hopped on the boat, happy to be off dry land and ready to catch a big one. The sky was cloudless, and the deliberate sunshine made the water shimmer like a belly-dancer’s costume. That day, the Atlantic posed as the Mediterranean, green and clear. Once the engine was revved and we veered left of the navigational beacons, we made it to the edge of the reef, where fish were sure to be plentiful.

“If we catch enough,” Cliff muttered to me as he draped his arm around my tanned shoulders, “we should take some home to my dad. He’d go crazy!”

“He really would. He’d have, like, an orgasm,” I stopped myself, “...or something. Ugh. I wish I hadn’t said that.” Cliff gave me a confused-and-amused look. He kissed me on the ear while I peeled a Clementine for us to share.

Clementines are a brilliant fruit. Not only are they seedless (infinite points for this) but they’re syrupy sweet without being cloying. I have never tasted a Clementine that wasn’t sweet, and if they exist, I don’t want to know about them. I first discovered the Clementine while I lived in France, and had no idea that they even existed in the United States until I started looking for them. While gallivanting through the Italian and French Rivièras with a friend during our study abroad, I would throw several of the tiny citrus into my black messenger bag. Instant breakfast. Peeling a Clementine, sitting on the dock of the Majestique Barrière in Cannes, where

Jennifer Lopez had debarked from her yacht only three months previous, I felt the wind rip through my hair as I tossed the titian shreds into the blue-black winter water. Peeling a Clementine is another one of its small glories. Piercing the top of the fruit with a thumb or forefinger, the peel often comes off in a single ribbon, rather than in sections like a tangerine or tangelo (these have seeds, and are therefore disqualified from being as amazing as a Clementine). Likewise, navel oranges are seedless, but their peels are more difficult to remove, making them an inconvenient fruit. Clementines are the pinnacle of convenience; they are a perfect foil for the Lean Cuisines and Hot Pockets we call “convenience foods.” It’s Occam’s Razor of Food. Sometimes the simplest food is the best food.

Sitting on the bow of the boat with the sea spray fogging my sunglasses, peeling a Clementine with my sweetheart, Nice and Cannes were closer, and so was my happiness.

Kyle was behind the wheel, and we all entrusted him to know where he was going. The week before, two NFL players were lost at sea off Florida’s coast, and we didn’t want to make the same mistake. Kyle had assured us that the reason the boat capsized was because the waves were between five and seven feet that day. On our crystal clear day, the waves splashed over the side of the boat, drenching Ally and her My Fair Lady hat, who insisted (to Bryce’s dismay) on perching herself on the stern of the boat and declaring herself the Queen of the World. Bryce had, after all, paid the forty dollars for Ally to look like Eliza Doolittle at the races.

“She’s not too far off,” I giggled to Cliff. One of our favorite pastimes: teasing Ally about her privileged adult life. At twenty-four years old, she doesn’t pay for much and her surgeon-parents pay for the rest. While Bryce, Cliff, Kyle and I wonder where our next car

payment is going to appear from, Ally swims on the private beach adjoining her parents Jacksonville manor. We love Ally.

For the rest of us, each penny of this trip was saved for over months, and each dollar had to be accounted for at the end of every day. Before we left, I withdrew cash from an ATM. That was all I had budgeted, and when it ran out, my vacation was over. Ally, however, carried a Hello Kitty credit card (I'll refrain from the obvious joke here) bearing her father's name. Lucky girl. I'm not bitter.

The boat stopped. We were all relieved to still see dry land, but knowing that we finally made it out into the ocean before the sun went down was an accomplishment for all of us.

"We'll idle here for a while, just drift, throw the lines in, and see what we can get," Kyle said. I was surprised that his voice had become so authoritative. Kyle's usual response to any suggestion is "It doesn't matter to me," but now his confidence began to percolate. He was in his element, tying hooks, baiting line, and reeling in the catch.

"If he could only be like this at the bar," Cliff said. Kyle is single, and has mastered one single pick-up line: You're hot. If I had met Kyle in high school, I probably would have ended up dating him. In high school, I dated boys who desperately needed fixing.

Somehow, the duty of baiting the hooks was relegated to me. Previous to this, I'd fabricated and cooked well over 1,000 fish in my time as a chef in restaurants, a personal chef for several families, and a girlfriend to a seafood fanatic, so clearly I was the one most qualified to handle the shiny, smelly purple squid. I unsheathed Kyle's filet knife and went to work. I sliced the squid the way I had in the restaurant, the cone into half-inch rings, ready for the tempura batter and a quick flash-fry. Instead of dunking them in hot liquid, I looped the pearly meat

around Ally's hook, my heart beating a little faster at the feel of it between my fingers. The last time I'd felt the cold metal of a fish hook, I was its slave, not its master.

The last time I'd gone fishing, I was with my step-grandfather at his pond in Cocke County, Tennessee, when I was very young. I specify that he was my step-grandfather because there was no possible way that this man could have been related to my mother in any way. My mother is soft-spoken and charming. My step-grandfather embodied her opposite in every way. He married my grandmother later in their lives, after my mother and her three brothers were grown, married, and off to seek their fortunes, so my step-grandfather remained more of an afterthought when it came to family functions. He remains an afterthought in my life: a man who tried to be warm, who tried to care, but fell short.

My eight-year-old self had been pestering him to take me fishing for a long time. It seemed like the perfect granddaddy thing to do – to take his granddaughter fishing – and it took my grandmother to convince him of that. At the time, I wanted to fashion my life around the commercials I saw on television. I wanted a cup of hot Campbell's soup when I came in from the snow (what snow?), I wanted a Golden Retriever puppy to help me vacuum when my mom asked me to, I wanted to stand in front of the oven impatiently and ask my mom over and over when the cookies were going to be done. I wanted to go fishing with my grandpa, talk about life, have him give me wise and caring advice, then maybe have a peanut butter sandwich and a few cookies, take our fish home, and watch as my grandmother turned them into fish sticks.

Cliff recited a joke from the late-comedian Mitch Hedberg as he flicked his rod toward the azure horizon.

“I wish I could go fishing and catch a fish stick. That would be convenient.”

For a moment, I pictured my boyfriend in a yellow slicker like the Gorton's fisherman. I eliminated that possibility from the list of bedroom fantasies immediately.

The red East Tennessee clay was beginning to crack under our feet as Grandpa and I walked the trail down to the pond. The garden had been full of worms, and the dirt from digging them up had lodged under my fingernails and made me feel close to nature. The wind whispered through the birch trees and made ripples on the surface of the muddy water. My grandfather smiled that eerie grin he had, the liver spots on his bald head making his white teeth appear whiter. He looped the worm around the hook on my fishing line, and I watched a small dot of blood trickle down from the earthworm's body to the steel it was attached to.

I wrapped the lavender tentacles of the squid around Bryce's hook. Each time the sun flashed on the steel, I winced.

My step-grandfather held my right hand on the handle, while he grabbed my left wrist (a little too hard) to show me how to cast the line.

"The fish are in the middle. If you can get there, we'll catch something," he said, shortly.

I reeled the pole back, let the line go, and waited.

I felt a small tug and jerked the pole upward like I'd seen the Bass Pro Fishermen do on TV.

"Did you get him? Did you get a bite?" my step-grandfather asked brusquely. He looked disappointed and made a *pssst* sound when I cranked the line back to shore. I was always disappointing him, I thought, because he always made that sound.

As I brought the end of the line up out of the murky, olive green water, the hooked line swung free. All of a sudden, it wasn't moving anymore, and the line was behind me. I felt a

sharp pinch on the back of my leg, like I'd felt a bunch of times before when my best friend and I climbed the big live oak in her back yard only to end up kicking a nest full of virulent wasps who stung us as we scrambled down the rough barked trunk.

I looked behind me. I followed the clear line down to where it was stuck in the back of my leg, right behind the knee. I started to cry; I might have passed out or at least gotten dizzy. The next thing I remember is sitting in a doctor's room with my step-grandfather and my daddy, getting a shot of something bluish, and having the hook cut out of my leg with pliers.

Instead of going fishing again, my step-grandfather and I dug potatoes out from the clay soil in their garden. Pollan would approve.

"I GOT SOMETHING!" Ally's voice stirred me from the memory as I reminded Cliff to grab hold of his line if he wanted me to put more squid on it. His hooked line swung in front of my body and my heart jumped into my throat.

I snapped at Cliff. "If you want me to bait your hook, HOLD THE FUCKING LINE."

He looked taken aback at my sudden anger. "Take a breath, Babe," he said.

I took a breath. I felt better. I apologized.

Bryce ran to his girlfriend, and helped her reel it in. It hadn't been ten minutes since we got out to our fishing spot and Ally had already apprehended a fish. But I wasn't bitter.

She wrestled with it for a minute, and by the way the fish fought her, we all assumed she had caught a four-foot mahi. She pulled it up single-handedly, and we took her picture holding up a seven-inch Lane Snapper. Good eating, if you're not really all that hungry.

"Evidently, it's gonna be a good day," Bryce observed.

I thought so, too. I could already smell the grill being fired, the charcoal settling into the base, glowing red and ready. Maybe I'd invite Michael Pollan. After hearing him speak alongside Dan Barber, chef of Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barn in New York, champion of the farm-to-table movement, I thought he'd be honored to sit at our glass table, adorned with our freshly captured and cleaned Lane Snapper. We were living his dream.

I'd always assumed that trying to "eat local" in Florida (technically defined as only eating food raised or grown within a 150 mile radius) would mean a lot of tomato salads, strawberry jam, and beef. Realistically, there was no way Cliff would go for that. But now, as Kyle deftly removed the fish from its bondage, the reality of local eating was becoming more attainable.

We weren't sure where to put the silver fish, lined with blue and yellow stripes and a slight smile on its fish lips. We hadn't thought to bring extra ice, and there was no way I was going to allow it to sit in a hot, empty cooler and give us all some kind of ocean-borne food illness. I opened our cooler full of beer. Amongst the empty bottles and mountain of limes, there was some ice left, and I rearranged the contents so that the Lane Snapper could be laid to rest amongst our most precious cargo. Kyle took the fish off the line and before he could plop it down in the cooler, the fish writhed violently against his hand.

Kyle sucked in air. "Shit," he said. "The little bastard stuck me." Kyle leant over to show me the trickle of blood down his finger from where the fish's fins had pierced his skin.

"Wash it off in the saltwater. It'll be fine," I reassured. When I got cut or burned in the restaurant, our portly *sous chef* would pour me a shot of whiskey and tell me to walk it off. This is my instant reaction to injury now. I opened a beer for Kyle.

Ally chimed in from across the boat. "Are we going to eat Joe Bob?"

Fuck. She named it. The fish had a name. Now no one would eat it.

“No, honey,” I said. “*You’re* going to eat Joe Bob.” I thought it would be a good lesson in the life cycle of food, in eating whole foods, in working for your sustenance. I am always looking for object lessons, a side effect of my Sunday School upbringing.

In actuality, I really wanted to eat Joe Bob.

Two hours later, we hadn’t caught anything else. We sat and waited. I cooked in the sun, convinced that my fuschia tank top was attracting more birds than fish. Several pelicans floated near our boat, making diving attempts at the bait. Kyle and Bryce shooed them away, but they came back, even if we moved the boat a few miles away.

My fishing line became tangled more than a few times, and Kyle rescued it. Bryce and I somehow got our lines intertwined and created an unsalvageable bird’s nest (I think Cliff was jealous and wanted our lines to be intertwined), so Kyle rehooked our lines and got us back in the water. The fish were sneaky, and bit off our bait, sinkers, and hooks. Kyle diligently worked to reattach the equipment so we wouldn’t skip a beat.

I munched on a bag of Doritos that Ally had brought called, “Spicy Sweet Asian Zing.” She was asking for it.

I looked at her and grinned. “Nacho Cheese, my ass. You had to get the Asian ones, didn’t you?”

She laughed. “Of course! If there are Asian Doritos, I must have them immediately. If there was an Asian Oreo, I’d have to have those, too. Keeping it real for the motherland.”

I tried to imagine an Asian Oreo.

I looked at Bryce and cocked an eyebrow at him and held up a chip, “Do these taste like real Asians?”

He lit a cigarette. “Needs more garlic.”

I figured that if Michael Pollan accepted our dinner invitation, I’d hide the Doritos. Doritos, though made from corn, are about as far from corn as corn gets. Corn: good. Doritos: not so good.

There was a splash.

“I think I got something! My hook is stuck! What’s going on?” Cliff was pulling on his fishing pole frantically, not quite sure which way was up.

Kyle tugged on the line. “You’re probably just stuck on the bottom. Keep reeling it in; see if you can get it to come up.”

Cliff kept reeling. His pole bowed so low I thought he might lose grip on it. His body jerked backward spasmodically at one point, and the pole straightened.

“You must’ve loosened it. Bring it all the way up so we can survey the damage.”

Kyle wasn’t looking forward to, yet again, untangling Cliff’s hook from the mass of seaweed he was sure was on the other end of the pole. While he was our fearless leader on this fishing expedition, Kyle hasn’t fished a minute since we left the dock. I offered my fishing pole to him as he finished casting Cliff’s untangled line back into the water.

“Nah, you go ahead. I want you to have the experience.”

Kyle was moving up on the awesome meter in my book.

At once, Cliff let out what can only be described as a joyous howl. There are howls of pain, howls of misery, and howls of sexual candor. This one was a howl of joy for sure. I

looked to where his line met the water, and a tiny red mouth was flopping on the surface of the water. At 5:30pm, a half hour before we were to return the boat, Cliff caught another fish. The bitterness began to surface like that little red fish mouth.

Kyle looked surprised. No, shocked. After we took a picture of Cliff with his fish, an unattractive grey fish with a high-set forehead called a grunt, Kyle showed me how to unhook the fish from the line. As I watched, the fish began making a noise not unlike a tiny pig. It grunts. That's why it's called a grunt. Naming fish must be the most fun job, ever, after naming kitchen appliances.

The Grunt went into the cooler on top of the now-dead Joe Bob.

The sun had set and we were returning to Key West as the sunburns settled into our skin. Consensus had it that Joe Bob and The Grunt weren't going to be enough to feed five, so a quick stop at the supermarket yielded a higher turn-out than our entire day of fishing. Two pounds of mahi-mahi, a couple of tilapia filets, and a side of salmon would be enough to feed the hungry, discouraged anglers and their Captain Kyle. I decided not to invite Michael Pollan. He'd never believe we'd caught wild salmon in the Atlantic.

Sometimes, Mr. Pollan, eating completely local is absolutely close to impossible. Strawberry jam and tomato salads do not a meal make, though in Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of the Food Life*, she does extol the virtues of eating asparagus for every meal everyday in March. Unlike Kingsolver, whose 25-acre North Carolina farm is a virtual Whole Foods Market in her backyard, if I was supposed to catch my own fish, slaughter my own cows, and grow my own vegetables, I'd starve. After catching two tiny fish, I was exhausted. I couldn't imagine how tiring slaughtering and butchering a 3,000 pound cow

would be. I'll leave that to Dan Barber and his farmhands at Blue Hill at Stone Barns in upstate New York.

In culinary school, no one ever handed me a fish that had not already been properly cleaned. I remembered, as we unloaded the cooler and placed glassy-eyed Joe Bob and the now-quiet Grunt in the sink, tired from the waiting, that I had no idea how to scale and clean a fish.

Kyle stood by the sink with his filet knife, brushing the fish in downward strokes. Clear scales easily came off of Joe Bob, the more cooperative of the two, probably because he had a name. The look of concentration on Kyle's face belied his comfort with the practice. I told him, Cliff, and Bryce a story while he worked and I tried to forget what was supposed to come next.

"When I was like, probably five, my dad took me fishing with one of his buddies, Lyle. Lyle had a summer home on some canal, I can't remember details, but it was a dark house with a dark room outside and a dark dock made from really old wood. I remember sitting on the edge of the dock, watching the emerald green water sway, flashes from my dad's Olympus camera in the corner of my eye – I had gotten really good at posing myself for candid shots – and watching the red and white bobber on the surface."

"I doubt you were that poetic when you were five," said Cliff.

I threw him a shut-the-hell-up look. "It doesn't matter if I was poetic then. I'm trying to make it interesting *now*," I glared at him.

Cliff took the hint and retreated as far as his ego would let him. "You're doing a great job, Baby. Keep going. I want to hear the rest."

"Lyle and my father had been fishing all day, while I danced on the dock and sang songs. They hadn't caught anything, so my dad gave me his fishing pole so I could try it out. This was

my first time fishing, and my dad wanted to capture it all. All of a sudden, I felt a hard jerk on the line. I didn't know what to do. My dad ran to me, but before he could get there, the line pulled so hard that it pulled me right into the water! I couldn't swim, but my dad could reach me, and pulled me out just as fast as I had fallen in. Lyle grabbed the fishing pole and started reeling as quickly as he could. At the end of the line: a four-foot large-mouth freshwater bass. It practically weighed more than I did."

I paused. Kyle had stopped scraping scales to listen.

"We cleaned it and ate most of it. I think we had bass for a week after that. That's the first thing I remember about fishing," I cadenced the story and waited for their reaction.

"That's awesome," Kyle said. Bryce puffed his cigarette in approval.

"You fell in?" Cliff said. Apparently the fact that I had fallen in was a more entertaining detail than the fact that two grown men hadn't caught anything for six hours and the five-year-old catches a whopper. But then again, I'm a sucker for irony. Those kinds of details make stories for me.

"Yeah. In that gross water."

"My poor baby!" Cliff got up and wrapped his arms around me and gave me a tight hug. "My baby was in the yucky lake water, and she couldn't swim! Oh no!"

He gets like this. He's laughing the whole time he says it, and he hugs me so tight that my air passages are well-constricted. Then he pecks my face with mother-hen kisses until I start laughing. I love times like that.

"Okay, Holly. They're clean. Joe Bob was easy. The Grunt was a bitch."

Ally had volunteered to help me clean the fish, but she had retired to her room. Ally was excellent at retiring to her room before there was work to be done. She also volunteered to make breakfast on several occasions, but as eleven o'clock rolled around, and Ally was still retiring in her room, I fired up the gas stove each morning and sighed that sigh again.

“Okay,” I said, giggling myself away from Cliff’s clasp. “Um...I don’t really know how to do this. Just a slit through the belly? Do you have any scissors? That would make things way easier.”

No scissors. I took Kyle’s knife and started poking Joe Bob’s belly. I wondered if I would be able to cut him open, cute little Joe Bob. Dammit, Ally. Stupid name. I picked up The Grunt instead.

“Google it, Cliff. I’m sure there’s something online about cleaning fish.”

I was right. Cleaning fish is probably the second most popular human activity after breathing.

The diagram showed a knife slicing through the fish from the fish’s anus (which I really thought would be much harder to find than it actually was) to the top of the gills (also easy to find). I started cutting through the tough skin. I expected fish poo to come from the incision at the back of the fish. It didn’t. Once I had The Grunt all opened up, the blood came out. I expected to be totally girlishly grossed out by this. Not so. Necessary evil. I hooked my finger around the innards and pulled them all out at one time like a pro. The tiny organs were fun to look at and figure out what was what. The liver was easily identifiable, as were the heart and stomach. The rest was just kind of slimy.

I handed the empty fish to Cliff and showed him how to run the water through the fish's mouth and rinse the gash where everything that had disqualified him from being a foodstuff was five minutes before. Now, The Grunt was clean. He was kitchen fodder.

Kyle handed me Joe Bob, who I sliced open in the same way. Joe Bob didn't bleed when I sliced him open. He was a good little fish. No mess, no hassle. We need more lane snappers in this world. Cliff rinsed Joe Bob.

Both fish got stuffed with lemons, onion, and dill. They were sprinkled with salt and pepper. They went on a grill pan and started roasting. Kyle threw the rest of the lemon down the garbage disposal with the rest of the innards and scales. Preventative maintenance.

I scrunched up my mouth and pursed my lips as I watched Kyle wash the scales down the sink. Good thing it wasn't my kitchen.

When the fish were done, along with the non-local, non-Pollan-approved, prefabricated fish we'd bought (if I'd had Michael Pollan's phone number, I would have intentionally "lost" it out of shame), we inspected the spoils. Two whole fish, grilled. A slab of mahi-mahi, several thick tilapia filets, and a baked side of salmon. It was a smorgasbord of the sea, that was certain, especially paired with the stone crab legs I'd nabbed for a few dollars a pound (Ally had paid thirty dollars per pound at dinner the previous night) and the conch ceviche I bought from the restaurant where we had lunch in Marathon Key on the way down from Fort Lauderdale.

Cliff was beyond happy.

Ally returned from her siesta, excited.

Bryce looked uneasy. Evidently, he'd chosen to opt for hot dogs in place of seafood.

Kyle was proud.

Joe Bob looked complacent.

The Grunt, during grilling, had opened its mouth as wide as possible and now sneered at the rest of us around the table. Ally said the fish was mad that we didn't name it. I was mad at the fish for being so damned hard to clean.

I was satisfied.

The Grunt tasted like the bottom of the ocean. An earthy, briny taste.

Joe Bob tasted fantastic. I would have charged thirty dollars for Joe Bob at my hypothetical restaurant.

The next day, the day we were to leave Key West and return to reality and calendars, Ally and I took a guided food tour of the island. Ally and I are two different kinds of foodies. She argues the merits of filet mignon versus rib-eyes, and I debate the nuances of nachos and whether shredded cheese is a more appropriate choice than processed cheese sauce (it isn't). After the stop we made at Turtle Kraal's, where the smoked fish dip reigns supreme, we walked past the Key West marina where schooners and sloops of all sizes dock to display their catches.

One man in a bright orange shirt, khaki shorts, sunglasses and a visor was hunched over the dock, concentrating hard. As we approached, I saw that he was cleaning six large mahi-mahi, each about three-feet in length, one stretching as long as four and a half feet.

"Look, Ally. Why couldn't you catch something like that?" I hooked my arm through hers.

"Why couldn't you catch *anything*?" she said, grinning. It was a good thing she hadn't said that yesterday. The bitterness would have boiled up and over my emotional stockpot.

I shrugged and conceded the victory to her. While coming home with fifty pounds of fish would have been a true triumph, Joe Bob and the Grunt were still happily sitting in my stomach, doing as much good as any amount of fancy mahi, yellowtail, or grouper would do. More than the fish though, the fact that I'd had a completely serene day, free from the pressures of supermodel Spring Breakers and hard liquor was an even greater satisfaction. That I'd spent that day, from catching to cooking, with my closest friends, made the experience all the more a reward.

Best Grilled Whole Fish

Catch a lot, serve a crowd. Catch a Grunt, serve one.

Whether it's a bumper crop or lean pickins', any amount of fish will do for this back-to-the-source approach to cooking. Organic, local or free-trade, none of these food supertrends can compare to the feeling of eating fish that tastes like the brackish sea mist that brines your tongue and like the sun that stung your skin. As Barbara Kingsolver says in Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, we forget that the food we eat actually lives before it arrives on the supermarket shelf. Whole fish, with a head, with the guts still inside, are visceral reminders of this – that the food we eat was alive, a direct product of the world we live in.

Ingredients:

As many whole fish as you catch, scaled
1 bunch fresh dill
2-3 lemons, sliced
Olive oil
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 red chile, sliced thinly

Directions:

1. Preheat your grill to 400 degrees. A slotted grill pan will make cooking easier, but it's not necessary.
2. Gather up your courage and gut the fish. Do it. You'll feel better. Everyone will be incredibly impressed.
3. If you have a good relationship with your fishmonger, he'll do Step 2 for you. Afterward, congratulate yourself for having a fishmonger.
4. Stuff the fish's cavity (empty, now) with several sprigs of fresh dill, as many lemon slices will fit and a few slices of red chile.
5. Rub the outside of the fish with olive oil, salt and freshly ground black pepper.
6. Place the fish on the grill (or grill pan) and close the lid. Sit on the porch and have a chelada (equal parts bloody mary mix and light beer) or cerveza-style beer.
7. When the flesh is opaque (use two forks to pry the fish apart near the gills, its thickest part), remove from the grill and serve whole over rice.

I DON'T RIDE CAMELS

Ramadan Early-On

Zoulikha had a name none of us could pronounce, so we called her “Zo.”

It would be an amazing study in phonetic linguistics to hear thousands of Americans try to pronounce words if, as some political reactionaries fear, America became overrun with Middle-Eastern people and Arabic became a required language in the States. All of Arabic's guttural, dissonant, harsh-sounding phonemes require the kind of mouth and palate contortion that Americans are all-but capable of. The French language requires people to speak as though they are holding their noses and only saying every other letter. German pronunciation sounds more like the noises my brother made before he precariously hung a spitball over my prostrate face, and during the act of slurping it back up again. Spanish contains the letter “rr” in its alphabet, which is not only made up of two regular letters (and thereby combining their powers to form a Megaletter) but also necessitates the nearly-impossible fluttering of the tongue that results in the rolled “r” sound, so that a person can properly say the name “Ricky Ricardo” as if he were Cuban himself. Arabic, amazingly, in spite of being anthro-linguistically older than all three of these languages, utilizes all of their sounds, and then some.

I became used to those sounds early on, though, when Zo lived as a renter in our house when I was growing up. All of a sudden, places like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, and Morocco – where Zo was from – became much nearer to me than they were as teeny pastel countries on my globe nightlight that I used to sit awake at night and touch to memorize their locations. The

globe was a Fisher Price contraption with a viewfinder that slid up and down on a drooping arm that spanned the full diameter of the blue sphere. The black scope would settle into notched grooves and I would find the white circles where, upon looking through the viewfinder and into the white circle, a scene from the country's culture would appear. I was very young when I first learned that the world is actually very small.

I flippantly spun the globe on its axis, feeling every bit of power in knowing it was I who was making the world go 'round. I settled in sub-Saharan Africa, where the scene showed shiny ebony women carrying baskets of fruit on their heads and boys running in the sand playing stickball, or soccer, I can't remember which.

I spun again. China. A colorful dragon and people slurping noodles with noodley grins on their almond colored faces.

I spun again. Mexico. Natives in brightly-colored wool skirts tended fields of corn alongside their donkeys and tiny children frying tortillas on a hot stone.

It seemed like Fisher-Price had insisted that children learn about other cultures through food, so I did. And when Zo came to live with us in the summer of 1995, I learned another culture through food.

Zo was the twenty-something girlfriend of the fifty-something Saudi Arabian *sheikh*, Eid Al-Haloumi, my father's employer for several years. All of a sudden, we moved from the tiny red house in Maitland to a huge mansion (or so I thought) in an up-and-coming neighborhood near the University of Central Florida that we lived in until I was eighteen. The trees lining the smooth, newly-asphalted streets were tiny saplings then, and bent violently as my father and I bounced down the road in our U-Haul trailer toward prosperity. When Zo moved in, a civil

engineering student at UCF, the house was full of couches with silk slipcovers, a kitchen full of Kenmore appliances, and two cars filling the driveway. When Eid came to visit, he handed me a 100-dollar bill – payment for being cute, I guess. Early on, I equated being Arab with money, and money was okay by me.

Being Arab also meant eating weird things. Like lamb, which we never ate at my house (though all of my friends who I had when I was a little girl still insist that we always ate weird food – like fish – at the Kapherr house) but which now was a staple. Other things – sesame-scented tahini, fiery harissa, couscous (which I found out was as much fun to eat as it was to say), and dates – all somehow made their way into our diet.

Oh, the dates.

Zo would go to Paris to go shopping once every season. I didn't realize the sheer enormity of this until I actually lived in Paris myself and could comprehend just how fabulous the Parisian fashion scene is. After she was finished in Paris, she would fly to Casablanca to see her family, and then fly home to Orlando. Among the boots, coats, slinky tank tops that she preferred to wear without a bra, and multitude of gold bangles she brought back, she always brought home dates. Not the ones you awkwardly kiss goodnight at the end of the evening, the ones you eat.

Rolled in a thin layer of caramel and then pistachios, coconut, almonds, or crunchy toffee, dates became the sole desire of my life. I wanted for nothing as long as I had a date in my mouth that I could slowly suck all of the coating from, then the caramel, and then chew on the sugary sweet flesh until all that was left was the oblong pit, my prize for my patience. Dates were treated as candy in my house, though, and with the revolving menu of bulghur-stuffed bell

peppers, spinach meatballs, and, yes, fish, candy didn't really fit. Several nights, I snuck downstairs, past Zo's room, to steal a date before bed. If I ever end up a kleptomaniac later in life, just know: it started with the dates.

My parents would be watching *Rambo XXVII*, which I, of course, was rightly not allowed to watch. My mother still complains about my father's obsession with warfare, but I still don't see how she doesn't understand after the twenty-three years he spent the U.S. Navy as a submariner, waiting for the next drill to be sounded, sleeping in bunks literally on top of dormant and fallow torpedos. I watched through the wood bars of the balcony to make sure they were either engrossed or asleep. Absently, I gnawed on the banister, the chemical taste of shellac in my mouth and between my teeth. Once the coast had been deemed clear, I sat on the top step, lay back, and wriggled down the stairs like a snake, making myself as flat as possible. At the bottom of the steps, I turned on my belly and crawled behind the couch that my parents were sitting on, the mutilated bodies of Viet Kong terrorists flying through the air on the 45" screen. I was oblivious. My eye on the prize, I could almost taste the sweet syrup that clung to their toppings and left a sticky mess at the bottom of the green, red, and gold box.

From behind the couch, I crawled past the seashell-filled floor lamp and under the piano bench, covered with a cushion of blue velvet that matched the shawl on the Virgin Mary in the nativity scene that my mother arranged one Christmas on top of the piano, and never thought necessary to remove. The figurines were a constant source of worry for me, as both Joseph's eyes, and the eyes of one of the members of the Magi, were facing the corner that I was to stand in whenever I had been sassy to my parents, had been caught in a fib, or refused to eat tofu. With the shiny cardboard box carrying my equivalent of gold, frankincense, and myrrh almost in

sight, it didn't even occur to me that Joseph, the Magi, and baby Jesus were all watching me as I was about break the eighth Commandment.

The kitchen was just steps away. The chill from the white tile floor began drifting across my cheeks as I looked back to make sure my mother wasn't about to get up for another cup of coffee or a cigarette. I slipped around the corner and climbed up onto the counter. The dates were within reach. I picked up the box, cringing when I heard the cellophane wrapper let out a few crinkles. I chose a date. A sticky morsel of dried fruit covered in caramel and rolled in verdant pistachios. As it dissolved and I chewed it slowly, I imagined myself in the desert, being fanned with palm fronds by women wearing the Cleopatra costume my mother donned last Halloween: the stringy straight black wig, the shiny gold snake headband, the white gown with green plastic emeralds. I imagined a man named Sahib who would bring me cool water from the oasis nearby and would serve me dates all day long as workers in the fields plucked them from trees in the courtyard.

As I made my way back upstairs, I thought about my teacher Mrs. Cooper, who told us a story about how she drank a can of Coke before bed one night and awoke to find a cockroach sitting on her tongue. I tiptoed into the bathroom and brushed my teeth with Sparkle Crest until they...well, sparkled.

I learned about Ramadan in January of 1996, when Zo started abstaining from our family breakfasts. Completely baffled, I asked my mom why she would abandon a perfectly good opportunity for some choice breakfast cereal, leave for class early or sit at the table with only a glass of water instead of her normal serving of creamy lebneh cheese, olives, honey, and pita bread. My mom told me that for a month, Zo would be fasting until the sun went down, and that

only after that could she eat with us. I knew what fasting was. Mormon children are subjected to the tradition of “Fast Sunday,” the first Sunday of the month, where those who are physically able will fast for two meals and donate the amount that they would have spent on those meals to the church. Additionally, instead of hearing the normal sermon and prayers on Fast Sunday, each member of the congregation was invited to give their testimony of their religious conversion and convictions. This was an endless source of amusement. It made sense to me why the leaders of the LDS church decided to make Fast Sunday the day where everyone got to talk about themselves and how God helped them find their car keys or pushed the car just a little further into the gas station when the needle on the tank indicator was below E. Instead of worrying about how hungry we were and how much the wet hair of the new mother sitting in the pew in front of us looked like spaghetti, or coveted the Froot Loops that toddlers munched on from Ziploc bags as they wandered the aisles, we could think about more important matters – that each person who stood up and bore testimony was just a little crazier than we were.

I will admit that up until I was 8, the age of accountability for Mormon children, I didn’t fast, although I could if I wanted to. After that, I dutifully put my two-dollar tithe in the grey envelope, and dropped it in our bishop’s office slot. Then, when I was 15 and realized that I wasn’t bound by any law of the Church, but by my own conscience, I abandoned my conscience and my religious sensibility and faked hypoglycemia so I could snack during Church. Plus, my morning and afternoon meals had skyrocketed in price from the bowl of Raisin Bran and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches of my youth to Egg McMuffins and triple lattes of the morning and Chick-Fil-A sandwiches with waffle fries in the afternoon. Two-dollars on Fast Sunday had become almost twenty, and my high-school self didn’t have that kind of money to give to God.

I'm sitting in His house for three hours, doing His work. He should be paying ME, I thought.

He did pay me, eventually, as my childhood metabolism wore off and I was paid in a thicker waistline as a result of my Fast Sunday fast-food binges. I was no stranger to the idea of culinary deprivation. I'd beaten it.

I came home from my after-school piano lesson one afternoon and Zo was in the kitchen. The smell from the oven was heavenly, and the several pots that steamed from the stove exuded smells that I have now come to identify as the epitome of home. A lamb curry bubbled while couscous steamed and red peppers and zucchini roasted in the oven, surrounding a large yellow halal chicken, rubbed with butter, red stripes of harissa, and turmeric. Dropping my piano books by the door, I sat at the computer in the kitchen and watched Zo pull her long, wavy black hair into a scrunchie and stir the curry. She danced in her mint green slippers across the tile floor, humming a melody I didn't recognize and that didn't sound like anything I was practicing at my piano lesson.

"Come over here, Holly. I need some help." She motioned for me to come stand beside her at the counter. We wrapped a sticky concoction of pistachios, almonds, and honey in paper-thin slices of phyllo like little cigars. Once in a while, I dipped my finger in the nutty mess and, instead of smearing it on the dough, I stuck it in my mouth, savoring how its rosewater fragrance wafted through my mouth and up into my nose and brain. I looked up at Zo's concentrated face. I felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that she couldn't do the same for a few more hours, but she just continued her work with a serene smile, putting aside her fluid mechanics and transportation formulas to think about Allah and his miracles.

It depended on the day, but as soon as the alarm on the kitchen timer started buzzing, Zo placed the plated food on the table. Every night was a feast. Lamb, chicken, beef, kebabs, hunks of whole meats encased in phyllo and stuffed with dried apricots, dishes of cheeses and olives of all colors, preserved lemons, and a mountain of fluffy, steaming couscous studded with dates and pine nuts and other dried fruits. Fresh pita bread lay next to two shiny pools of green olive oil in the middle of tiny dishes of hummus and baba ganooj.

After dinner, the almond and pistachio cigars we had rolled together, and cookies crusted with chocolate and sesame seeds. I picked the seeds off the cookies meticulously and ate them first, just as I did with my McDonalds hamburgers. Zoulikha poured tall glasses of sweet mint tea. Drinking a hot beverage out of a glass soon became household practice, my mother hiding the ceramic mugs in the house so that our status as an international family would be furthered that much more.

The greatest thing about Ramadan, though, was that I could eat as many dates as I wanted. When we traveled to Saudi Arabia a few years later, I learned firsthand that each voyage on Saudia airlines began with a tray of hot towels followed by an exquisite assortment of dates. These dates were rolled in a million different garnishes – the classic pistachio, almond, and chocolate, but also excruciatingly decadent variations like truffle, curry, and even gold filigree. I only wanted to fly on Saudia from then on. Reclining in my velvet business-class seat, I closed my eyes and imagined being fanned by the women in the Cleopatra costumes again, laying on a chaise longue, this time petting my docile tigress, Sheba.

Years later, when living in France, I catered several dinner parties for repeat customers. Dates have always wheedled their way into my menus, in stuffings and breads, but mostly as

various permutations of the same appetizer: dates stuffed with parmesan cheese and drizzled with syrupy reduction of balsamic vinegar. The most requested variation of this appetizer was one that Zo, or any of my Muslim friends would never touch, but is a great way to make believers out of people who have never had them: dates stuffed with goat cheese or almonds, wrapped in bacon, broiled, and drizzled with maple syrup and aged balsamic vinegar. Served as an *amuse bouche*, I painted the balsamic vinegar reduction onto the white square plates, and placed each bacon-clad date in the upper right hand corner, accompanied by a single shelled pistachio drizzled with a drop of orange blossom honey.

It was Ramadan again, this time ten years later, in October of 2006. There was no Zoulikha humming and dancing in our big house. My parents had ended their relationships with all of their Muslim friends after 9/11, though my mom still drank her tea and coffee from the same tall glasses Zo used to serve mint tea in. Instead of the elaborate dinners my mom would replicate during Ramadan, derogatory terms were used to describe these people who they used to count among their closest friends. We had attended weddings, funerals, birthday parties, and New Years Eve shindigs with lots of Arabs, and they had always been kind and very generous to us, offering their monetary support when we needed it and making sure that we were always well-fed and comfortable in their homes. All of a sudden, the towers fell, and they had become suspicious, untrustworthy, and evil. That kind of thinking never translated to my personal beliefs, but my parents were so angry about 9/11, along with billions of other people, that all of the memorabilia from our travels to the Middle East were put in a box and stored in the attic, perhaps for the day when the Arab nations would redeem themselves in my parents' eyes, and we could light our bakhoor in the brass incense burner, and it would smell like the thirteenth

floor of Eid Al-Haloumi's Cairo apartment after the evening meal where I first tasted the delicious and gamy meat of the pigeon, and musicians would file into the apartment to sing until the morning came.

In Paris, I was dating Sami, a Tunisian guy, who was fasting for the month, not just from food, but from me. That was a condition of Ramadan I had never experienced before.

Connection or interaction between men and women who are not married is strictly forbidden during Ramadan, except in times of emergency. Ramadan seemed like forever, but because I had experienced the spirit of the holiday so early in my life, it was surmountable.

The feeling of misery and loneliness I started to feel during that month was not, however. As I stood assembling the dates for the 6:00 party for forty at the apartment of a well-known Paris socialite, whose home looked more like a microcosm of the Pompidou modern art museum than the 17th-century lavishness of the Louvre. I watched the cheeses on the crystal dish come to room temperature, the triple-crème brie oozing slowly out of its rind. The bacon felt greasy in my hand, and enveloped the dates in its luscious texture. I absently wrapped the soft bacon slices around each date, enjoying its velvety texture against my skin. I thought about Sami, and how he would lecture me if he knew I was serving pork to my clients. He had never tasted it, so he couldn't know its succulent virtues. The sinful qualities of bacon were different to me than they were to him. My mother told me, some time ago, that Zo had asked to try a piece of bacon once, and my mother obliged. Bacon has always been considered an indulgence. The book *Sex and Bacon: Why I Love Things That Are Very, Very Bad For Me*, by former "girl for hire" Sarah Katherine Lewis, details bacon as the one thing from which she can never get enough pleasure, trumping sex in all its seductive properties. Sami would have never have agreed. Sometimes he

was so devout that he would get nervous if I sat on his lap or cuddled him too close during a sex scene in a movie.

I yearned for my Florida home that October, and right before Ramadan was over, I couldn't stay in Paris any longer. I wanted Sami to see me off, to walk me to the early morning Air France bus that picked up passengers at the Champs-Elysees and dropped them off directly at Charles de Gaulle. But Allah wins over love during Ramadan, and I silently forgave Allah that Sami couldn't be there. I did send him a forbidden SMS text though, before my plane left. I figured that the Koran was written before SMS texts, so they probably weren't covered in the list of Ramadan-related sins.

I've had a few Muslim acquaintances from various parts of the Middle East, and whenever Ramadan comes around, I understand better than my other friends why it is so important. While Cliff teases his friends and jokingly pressures them into having a sip of his Corona, I'm on the side of the Muslims, giving him a lecture in the bedroom once the party is on auto-pilot about the importance of fasting during Ramadan

"It's not like having a month-long Christmas," I say. "It's like being in church for thirty days, from sun up until sun down. Every few hours, one faces Mecca and prays. There is extensive Koran reading."

There is, most importantly, extensive eating. Occasionally, I'll find one of these Muslim friends cheating on Ramadan, and I can't help but feel a little snobbish and judgmental, even if my own experience with food deprivation for religious reasons was less than pious, to say the least.

Who am I, one who has forsaken the religion of her youth, to say that these people are not good Muslims for eating an apple during the sunshine hours during Ramadan? What gives me the right to look down my nose at the peanut butter and jelly sandwich they scarf down between classes to keep themselves from drowning in the abyss of apathy and disconnection that accompanies extreme hunger? I suppose the fact that my parents had tapestries made from camel wool in their living room gives me the credence. Or, perhaps, that when I visit their house, I put my feet on the wooden camel saddle that they use in place of an ottoman. Or, maybe it's just because the dates always taste sweeter when you know you're right with Allah.

Though he may not be the one you pray to.

Forbidden Fruits

Serves 12 repentants as an appetizer or amuse bouche

During Ramadan, after hours going without food, these little bites satisfy everything craving – sweet, salty, earthy, tart. Make them Islam-friendly by wrapping the dates in smoked chicken breast or turkey bacon from a good deli.

Ingredients:

24 toothpicks
24 Medjool dates, dried and pitted
24 blanched, skinned almonds, whole
12 thin slices pancetta
Freshly ground black pepper
1 cup balsamic vinegar
2 tbsp. pure maple syrup

Directions:

1. Preheat broiler to high heat. Soak toothpicks in water for one hour.
2. Place one almond in the center of each date and wrap dates with ½ piece of pancetta. Secure ends of pancetta with toothpick. Sprinkle dates with freshly ground black pepper.
3. Place on a shallow baking sheet. Broil for 4-5 minutes.
4. For glaze, mix balsamic vinegar and maple syrup in a sauté pan and reduce over medium heat until syrupy and large bubbles appear. Remove from heat immediately.
5. Remove dates from broiler and transfer to paper towels to drain. Serve warm or at room-temperature, drizzled with balsamic glaze.

Cumin and Camels

I saw my first public execution in Saudi Arabia at the age of eleven. On a dusty morning in February, a restless-but-reverent crowd gathered on terra cotta tile to watch the beheading of a man named Ahmed Dabbous. He was half-Egyptian, half-Saudi – the worst kind, according to my friend Sultan, who was then back in the United States. Sultan was a student at the University of Central Florida who my family sponsored and housed while I was in grade school, for two years prior to our time in the desert. *Egyptians are trouble. Stay away from them if you can*, he had said.

Dabbous had stolen a sword from the home of his uncle and murdered him with it in order to receive his inheritance at an earlier date. All murder is met with murder in The Kingdom. I heard his sentence being pronounced in a language I did not want to understand and looked up at my mother as she stoically observed the goings-on, like a spectator at an aquarium, idly watching the penguins bob up and down in their faux Arctic wonderland. Completely unprepared for what would happen, I watched open-mouthed and wide-eyed (though no one could see through my veil) as the guillotine snapped down. My black-clad mother clapped her hand over my eyeholes just as the deed was done. Though I couldn't see it, I felt as though my innocence were splattered all over the marble floors of the square. I looked down so I would not have to see the mutilated corpse being dragged away by the Saudi police. All I could see at my feet were my black robes, my sandaled toes, and the stains of dried blood from days, weeks, months, or years before – when someone else had lost their life for taking another's. We had just arrived in Saudi Arabia, and this display of murder for murder was our first tourist attraction.

I heard later that Dabbous had gruesomely murdered his wife five years earlier, had friends in the government, and had dodged prison time. The method of murder was the same; the circumstances were the same. The only difference was that he murdered a woman: the lowest form of life in the jurisdiction of the Saudi legal system. *There will always be more women*, Sultan had said. It felt like China, or at least what I had heard about China in my World Cultures class at school – women disappearing, unrecorded, unnoticed, and ignored. But the Saudis, unlike the Chinese, recognize a need for women: the gratification and fulfillment of its men and a paternalistic obsession. One of the families we got to know while we were there consisted of one man, his six wives, and their thirty children. The Saudis have a huge desert to fill with Allah’s people – and they need their women to do that.

I don’t know how my father entangled himself with Eid Al-Haloumi, the benefactor of our trip to Saudi Arabia. My father’s then-vocation as a property manager in Central Florida brought us in contact with many different people, but none changed our lives as much as “Mr. Eid.” When my father took over “acting-managership” of Mr. Eid’s apartment complex in the States, we had no idea that it would lead to a small stake in a lightly corrupt, but very lucrative Saudi Arabian Airlines, and a string of non-corrupt, non-lucrative entrepreneurial ventures. Most importantly however, my father’s relationship with Mr. Eid led to six months in Saudi Arabia, managing his “other” apartment complex (called a “compound” because of its virtual autonomy) just outside of Riyadh while he was away. Mr. Eid was a *sheikh*, which required him to take various trips for unnamed reasons, have a Moroccan girlfriend who was thirty years his junior, and to wear alligator-skin Prada shoes under his robes. To my nine-year-old self, he was

a wonderful man with a luxuriant black moustache, an exotic accent, and a thick billfold of \$100 bills, one of which he presented to me on each of our meetings. He knew the way to my heart.

He also figured out the other path to my heart. On my ninth or tenth birthday, Mr. Eid hosted a party at his house in my honor, or I liked to think so. There were dishes of candy-coated licorice seeds and cashews, Arabic music that sounded neither foreign nor familiar, and lots of black-haired people laughing. My parents and I took seats on the black leather sofa, commenting to each other how wonderful the food smelled, how pretty the gold incense burner was, and how nice it was that we had such interesting people in our lives. I looked across the room to the kitchen, where several darker women with long braided hair worked tirelessly in the kitchen. Amongst the covering of pots and the constant opening and shutting of the oven, none of which these women did quietly or submissively, I could hear the demure shuffling of their feet on the white linoleum. While they were in the kitchen, they chattered loudly, as if they were the only women in existence, but when coming into the carpeted living room where the hosts and guests were gathered, they only spoke to each other, and averted their eyes when one of the people in the living room spoke to them. My mother tried to make friends, but most of them tried to act like they were ignoring her, though I saw a few of them gather up their tan and black robes and sneak a smile in my mother's direction on their way back to the kitchen. I'd never seen such a division, though I'd read about the caste system in India and seen *Gone with the Wind*. My mom called them, "the maids," and over the years, she seemed to get along better with them than she did the Saudi elite, relegating herself to the kitchen to cavort with the lower-class, rather than sip Veuve Cliquot with the high-rollers.

We were called to the table – well, the rug – for the feasting to commence. There were several prayers, and then bowls of wonderfulness came out of the kitchen, carried by the slippered maids. The *pièce de résistance*, carried on a litter by two women, was a whole lamb. Sheep. Lamb. I wasn't sure what the difference was. But there was a whole one. With a head. In the middle of the floor. Staring at my mom.

When I was growing up, we always ate strange food, according to my friends. Fish was no anomaly and my mother roasted whole chickens and stuffed green bell peppers with beef and rice. She'd never put a whole animal on the dining room table, though. I believe this moment was the beginning of her struggle with meat products that has resulted in her current state of vegetarianism. As the guests began eating, I looked for utensils to no avail. I watched. My father watched. My mother watched. We watched the guests pick up a handful of couscous from an earthen bowl with their left hand, mold it deftly into a ball using only that hand, and pop it into their mouths while plucking meat from the lamb (sheep?) with their right hand. Right hand for meat, left hand for everything else. No forks. I tried to roll the ball of couscous in my hand, but ended up showering myself and my dining companions with tiny pebbles of grain. Mr. Eid motioned to one of the maids, who ran to the kitchen to bring us forks. Mr. Eid leaned over to me and said, "Try to get used to it. There won't be any forks in Saudi Arabia." I laughed. When would we ever go to Saudi Arabia? Like, never.

* * *

When I stepped off the 22-hour Saudia Airlines flight from New York's JFK airport to Riyadh, I thought, "If the airport looks like this, I can't imagine the palace." Everything was

different shades of shimmer. My eleven-year-old body was suspended in multiple tiers of opalescent alabaster, lush greens, deep ebony, and – of course – lots of gold.

As a gift, I had received my first black burqa from Sultan for Christmas in the mid 1990s. The ankle-length robes drowned me in a sea of black fabric. They were black, lightly-embellished with black beading and randomly-placed sequins, and irritatingly flowy. When I put mine on, I remember looking like a 4' 11" black ghost with huge glasses sticking awkwardly and unflatteringly out of my veil. My mother wore her burqa with much more dignity, however laced with resentment. Seeing the Saudi Arabian women dressed in their government-enforced garb for the first time, I couldn't help hearing Sultan's reminder before we left for Riyadh, *Cover yourself totally. If you do not, you will be spat on.*

It was December of 1996 when we walked out of the automatic doors and into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There was no searing heat, no stinging wind concentrated with sand, and no camel laden with saddle bags to ferry us through the dunes and back to the compound – our home, and my father's headache, for the next six months. There was no Peter O'Toole or Omar Sharif to greet us. Instead, there was an immense man with leather skin, a beard of Biblical proportions, and billowing blue servant's robes standing in front of a pristine, white Lincoln Continental. He opened his arms in greeting. The massive Saudi said, "I am Ramdan. I am Mr. Eid Al-Haloumi's driver. I will take you to your apartment." He opened the back door and gestured for my mother and me to get in the Lincoln. I heard Sultan again; *Women must sit in the back of the car.* We dutifully climbed in.

I finally noticed myself in the car. I was a mass of black cloth against the black leather of the car's interior. The Saudis believe that women should be neither seen nor heard. I seemed to

disappear, which, of course, was the desired effect. Black plus black equals nothingness. I do remember, however, silently cursing the idiot who decided it would be a good idea to keep a car with black leather interior in the desert, as I felt my burqa starting to stick to the sweat on the back of my thighs.

I looked out the window at Saudi Arabia. It really was just sand and cars. But not even really cars – Fiats, Renaults, Yugos, and Peugeots. And then there was our Lincoln, which qualified as more of a barge than a car. The Rub-Al-Khali desert is approximately 25,000 square kilometers and stretches over much of Saudi Arabia. Literally translated, it means “The Empty Quarter,” and to me, there was nothing more devoid of life, water, color, freedom, and diversity as I experienced what it was like to live in a place where so many lived with nothing while so many others lived with what seemed like everything. As I sat in the backseat of the Continental, I missed my Florida oak forests, wetlands, and front passenger seat.

The Saudi culture is the Muslim culture. Before takeoff and after the landing of our plane, the Captain led the crew and passengers in a prayer to Allah, asked for a safe journey, and then thanked him for the safe arrival of His people at the destination, in this case Jeddah, one of the holy cities of Islam, and finally Riyadh. On a grander scale, every morning we woke to the call-to-prayer from the mosque in our compound. Our apartment was in the shadows of the towering minarets of the local mosque, so we were among the first to hear the booming Arabic summoning Allah’s people to face Jeddah at the crack of the desert dawn.

We were enamored with the novelty of it all at first. Everything seemed so memorable and new. My mother woke up one January morning, two days after we arrived, irritatingly perky as always. She thrust the green tapestry drapes away from the glass and opened the window to

my room, as if Allah himself were to join us for breakfast. “It is so beautiful here,” she said breathily, tossing back her brown hair as if she just took a shower in a fountain of youth. Allah probably likes pancakes and lamb sausage.

It wore off. The call to prayer resounded again through a warm May breeze. From my room on the top floor, I heard my mother, still in bed on the first floor. She screamed at the top of her lungs, “I am SO SICK of that mosque! Allah wants people to sleep!” Allah probably had Froot Loops that morning.

The voice would return a few times throughout the day. Whatever the people were doing – haggling in the market, bowling, sipping mint tea, making love – they stopped, unrolled their prayer rugs, and faced Jeddah for ten minutes of prayer and meditation. The only place this didn’t happen was in our apartment. There we sat, my mother, my father and I, munching on a bag of Doritos in front of CNN International.

The Doritos were an unusual find. Most of the time we popped those amazing candy-coated anise seeds in our mouths when we needed a sugar fix. The first candy I ever remember eating in Saudi Arabia was a stick of gum made from acacia tree sap. It was woody and tasted like turpentine with a coating of brown molasses. My mother learned clay pot tagine cooking in our tiny apartment kitchen, and would bring us earthenware dishes full of the aromas I have come to identify as the sweet smells of home. A pile of lamb shanks, the turmeric-tinted meat practically melted off the bone as the marrow bubbles in its narrow crevasse, sat atop a pile of basmati rice studded with briny green olives. A tangy yogurt cream sauce shone in a tiny green bowl with what had to be the smallest spoon I had ever seen balanced gently on the surface. I learned later, while stirring my sludgy espresso in a Turkish coffee shop in Paris, that the spoon

is called a *demi-tasse* – a half-cup. I spooned the sauce all over my lamb and stirred vigorously, turning my rice and lamb into pale yellow mush that I wolfed down eagerly.

Sometimes I thought about Kristin, at home with her family, probably watching *Family Matters* with avocado-colored square Tupperware dishes laden with the only thing her mother could cook – food that required the microwave and a can opener. On many nights, before we left for the Middle East, I walked the half-block to Kristin’s house just to eat canned corn and dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets. That was real kid food, to me – the kind of food kids needed after long afternoons trying to balance on a pogo stick or building a fort in the woods behind our houses or sneaking into the neighbors’ yard to jump on their trampoline because our fathers wouldn’t buy one for the sheer reason that it was impossible to mow around. I also thought about Heather, the only daughter of Irish parents. Heather was, according to my parents, spoiled rotten, and somehow subsisted on a diet of chocolate milk, green beans slathered in ketchup, and macaroni and cheese. That didn’t seem too bad, when I’d been on the American side of the Atlantic, but sitting in front of my creamy, steamy, butter-hued bowl of heaven in Riyadh, I wouldn’t have traded it for ten T-Rex-shaped fruit snacks or a blue Squeez-It fruit drink.

Everything was, as very stylish people say, over-the-top. The flight on Saudi Arabian Airlines (partially owned by Mr. Eid) was intensely ornate-to-the-point-of-gaudiness. The seats in first class on the Boeing 747 were upholstered in black velvet and embellished with gold cording. Not only did they recline – they lay completely prostrate at full extension. A chair like the ones in first-class would have cost \$493,875 at a La-Z-Boy outlet. Plus tax. The flight attendants wore typical “Arabian Princess” costumes – a far cry from uniforms – which were probably purchased at Party City the day before Saudi Arabian Airlines cut the red ribbon on its

maiden voyage. Food was served in cruise-ship style, around the clock. Each voyage began with a tray of hot towels followed by an exquisite assortment of dates, Saudi Arabia's main agricultural claim-to-fame. Ironically, most of the dates found in Saudi Arabia are imported from Jordan and Lebanon.

However, it seemed as though the luxurious lifestyle came with a price, and I was beginning to see what the price of it was. It was disenfranchisement – or rather complete non-participation – of an entire gender. The luxurious lifestyle of the Saudis was for men and boys – but not for their wives, mothers, sisters, or aunts. At 11, I was being forced to sit in the backseat of a car, wear black, and not ask questions - because I had a uterus.

My mother, in fact, has a uterus, too - a rather prolific one that had borne six children in the 24 years before I arrived. While the toils of childbirth under the Muslim law qualify a woman for exaltation, it still doesn't mean she can walk anywhere she pleases. When we first arrived in Saudi Arabia, Ramdan took us ("us," we later found out, was to mean just my father) to a small café just outside of Riyadh. My mother, not accustomed to being told to "sit in the car and wait for the men to be finished," left the car and followed my father and Ramdan into the café, leaving me in the black leather car to swelter, even with the air conditioning running. I remember looking out the window as she was not four steps out of the car. The men, with their red-and-white-checkered ghutras and white thobes that looked like dress-shirts from the waist up seemed a little shell-shocked at first. Once they realized what was happening, they broke out in shouts and what I can only imagine were things you hear once and never forget – unless you don't speak Arabic. My father whirled around and quickly ushered my mother back to her

position in the rear of the car. Before I opened the car door, I remember only seeing her eyes, bright blue and frightened.

My mother and I, however, were permitted to go to the markets to buy whatever we needed. Ramdan dropped us off unceremoniously at the head of the *souk*, where an interminable number of people were already lined up at their favorite vendors, haggling over who-knows-what. I saw a large man wearing a white cloth over his head yelling at a small, dirty girl, holding her equally dirty brother's hand. The scene from the Disney movie *Aladdin* flashed before my eyes, where Princess Jasmine, dressed as a poor street urchin, "steals" an apple to give to another little girl. The shopkeeper raises a knife to cut off her hand, as punishment for not being able to pay for the apple. I began to imagine myself as an American princess, dressed as a Saudi girl, holding the hand of her mother, looking for people to help out of some sense of duty. I was probably more right than I knew. Every child I saw, whether my age or younger, I smiled shyly at. Even though I was wearing a veil that covered everything but my eyes, as strange as it is, almost every child smiled back at me while my mom paid for couscous or fava beans or fish for the night's supper.

Years after leaving the Middle East, I dug up a picture of us in one of the Egyptian *souks* in Alexandria. In the mid-90s, Egypt was more progressive than many Middle Eastern countries. There was a Pizza Hut across from Mr. Eid's apartment in the heart of Cairo. KFC storefronts, the largest fast-food chain in the world, were plentiful. Egypt and the European Union had entered into strong trade agreements and market openings that made way for Western companies and lifestyles. So, when my family and I visited Egypt, we could revert to our American selves, shedding the yards of fabric and black veils for our Old Navy khakis and Costco brand

tracksuits, which my mother and I wore in the picture of us. The faces we are making are different from the other pictures we have of our trip to Cairo. Instead of the gazes in wonderment and contentment found in those photos, in this one, there is a look of unparalleled disgust. My huge plastic-rimmed glasses can't hide the distaste in my eyes or call attention away from the down-turned corners of my tiny lips. It's no wonder. Behind us hang skinned cows, plucked geese and hens, sides of pigs, and whole lambs, all staring bug-eyed at the dirty ground below them, their mouths open as if bewildered why someone would rope their hind legs together and dangle them, completely naked, precariously in front of patrons and passers-by. I feel sure that my mother sees those animals' glassy stare every time my father asks her to throw a steak on the grill.

The sand dunes rose before us like giant golden waves when we crossed the Red Sea back into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Some were over 100 meters high. On a dusky Saturday in April, my family and I went on an excursion with one of Mr. Eid's good friends, an officer in the Saudi army. He was born in America and immigrated with his parents back to The Kingdom when he was a teenager. When he saw my mother and me in our black burqas, he laughed in an unrestrained, American way that reminded me of home. "Take those ridiculous things off when you're with me! You are Americans, and there are no police out here for miles to tell you otherwise," he bellowed. I fell in love with him right then. Up in the sand dunes, there was nothing for miles. The only thing we could see beside ourselves was a wandering Bedouin camel-herding group just north, over the dune to the left. They were harmless, with no real political or social power in the Kingdom. It was safe to shed my black sheets and reveal my faded Gap overalls and Orange County Science Fair T-shirt. We drove the Jeep over a few of

the dunes and parked next to a small Bedouin farm, where a few tribesmen raised camels, sheep, and a boisterous rooster. While my mom clicked her decade-old Olympus SLR camera and the shutter flashed in the direction of my father petting a camel, I couldn't help but wonder what the camel would look like hanging upside down in that Egyptian shop, staring at the ground, wishing it still had a tail with which to swat the flies that buzzed around its hindquarters.

Later, with my 11-year-old mind, I asked Mr. Eid's friend why he had said the burqas were ridiculous over a plate of thinly-sliced lamb shawerma and rice steaming with saffron and coriander and walnuts, to this day one of my favorite comfort foods. We sat around our American-style dining room table. Every other table in the compound was only six inches above the floor and was surrounded by jewel-toned pillows accented with gold tassels and brocade. Mr. Eid had made special arrangements for our apartment to be as American as possible – including the dining room table. The murmur of the BBC rumbled softly in the background as I slathered creamy yogurt and garlic sauce over my lamb. Every other man in Saudi Arabia felt differently. He looked at me for a moment and pursed his weather-worn lips. “Holly. There will be a day, maybe in your lifetime, when women in the Kingdom are treated as equals. I pray to Allah for that every day.” I started to pray to my Christian God for it, too. I told him to give Allah the message. I figured they at least knew each other.

I returned home from Riyadh in the summer of 1996. I left behind the gold, the oil, the perfumes, the spices (though the smell of cumin remained in my skin for weeks), and the tradition. My parents didn't seem to leave anything behind. In fact, they brought everything with them. For years afterward, our home in Florida morphed into a kind of pseudo-Saudi apartment. My mother nailed prayer rugs to the walls like tapestry. She cooked in a tagine

where she steamed lamb, couscous, and aromatic vegetables. We celebrated Ramadan one year. Instead of an ottoman, we had an atrocious camel saddle in the living room that still sits there today and occasionally spills desert sand from one of its many crevices. I never understood that. Camels weren't even part of the experience. I only rode one in Egypt, and I almost died.

Sultan's voice seemed drowned out by the screams of excited British tourists at Giza, *The guides will want to make the camel run, don't let them. Camels will kill you.*

He, once again, was right. There was nothing quite like passing the Great Pyramid on the back of a camel. My father was on a camel with a dual-saddle with my mother in tow. She was too nervous of the animal to ride her own. A peddler passed us on donkey-back, an ironic red Coleman cooler on the ass's hindquarters full of Coca-Cola and Sprite, selling them for ten Egyptian pounds, then the equivalent of about three American dollars. It seemed wrong that an animal that had probably carried stone from the Egyptian quarries right up to the Cheops pyramid during its construction thousands of years ago, should be carrying symbols of the American way of life. Shouldn't that donkey be carrying, I don't know, mint tea and sesame tahini cookies?

The man leading my camel (I wasn't afraid of camels. I'd ridden them in the camel and elephant paddock at the Knoxville Zoo on a trip to visit my Grandmother, and they were completely harmless from what I could tell) looked up at me with a three-thousand-year-old smile and said, "You want him to run?" I muttered something confusedly as I felt the camel's neck lurch forward into a dead gallop. I felt my insides bouncing around in my body as I watched the desert go by. I snuck a peek back at my parents, jauntily snapping pictures and enjoying the view of one of the Seven Wonders from their camelback. After seeing how quickly

their figures faded into the desert, I refocused my attention forward; I bent down and held onto the reins, the camel's hair, the saddle, the stirrups, the yarn tassels, anything I could grab at for my life. I closed my eyes and could hear the camel's hoofs smack against the cold sand. I nuzzled my face as far as it would go into the coarse hair on its back, desperate to forget where I was, what was happening, waiting at any moment to hear my own body smack against the sand, to wake up and see my parents' faces looking down at me making sure I was okay. How would I get to the hospital? Did the ambulances have sand tires? I sure as hell wouldn't get back on a camel to go to the hospital. That would be absurd. We ran for what felt like an eternity. I was sure we passed the "Welcome to Libya – We're Glad You're Here" sign. I never got on a camel again. Shaking, I descended the beast at the base of the Khefran pyramid, my favorite because its pinnacle was removed thousands of years ago. How can one be afraid of heights when the apex doesn't exist?

It was June when the plush recliners of the 747 first-class cabin again beckoned and seduced me, but I could not give myself over to the luxury any more. The pre-recorded prayer beseeching Allah for another safe journey came from the cockpit. My heart fell to the bottom of my chest. I won't hear the mosque anymore. I won't ride in a Jeep up and down sand dunes again. I swore quietly that I'd never wear black ever again. At eleven, I'd already made up my mind about capital punishment. I looked out the window at the past five months. I was 11. I had lived in a Kingdom.

Eleven years later, I picked up the phone to talk to my parents for the first time in years about our experiences there. Since the world has turned from admiration and wonder at the Middle East to loathing and antipathy, the months we spent there have been suppressed and

censored in our minds. I don't remember any of the Arabic I picked up while we were there; it's been replaced with bad Spanish and good French. The only tangible thing left in our home that calls our minds back is that god-awful tan leather camel saddle, still full of sand if you shake it hard enough. All of our other memorabilia and souvenirs found their way to cold storage or attic space. Their recollections and stories are much different than mine. They remember consumerism and tradition. I remember injustices and discoveries. They remember brown. I remember gold. The gold of the spices. The gold of the curries. The gold of the rice. The gold of the glint in the eyes of those hidden children in the market place. The gold of the sun.

FORGETTING FOIE GRAS

A Pita Full of Paris

During the gray months I lived in Paris in the winter of 2005 and the fall of 2006, I was always afraid of falling into the Seine. It would be romantic, I admitted to a friend one evening, walking along the Boulevard Saint-Michel at three in the morning after late-night Kronenbergs and frites, to be pulled out of the freezing water by a handsome *bateau mouche* captain who would be then forced to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and, upon reviving me, would then have to hold me tightly to keep hypothermia from setting in.

These were the kinds of things I thought about when I had nothing to think about in Paris.

I always thought of the river the way so many other people who have lived and fallen in love in Paris have, ex-pat and native alike: as a friend. The river was a companion who whispers in your ear every time you walk past, every time you glance up at the impossibly tall spires of Notre Dame. It murmurs secrets and advice and counsel every time you traverse one of its *ponts*, its thirty-seven unique bridges from the humble Pont des Arts, where lovers kiss on benches and hipsters spread out blankets laden with *paté de campagne* and cheap bottles of rosé, to the regal Pont de Alexandre III, gilt with gold leaf and bronze statues of naked cherubim as it leads to the Grand Palais on one end and the Eiffel Tower on the other. I'm pretty sure it talks to the artists that line its quays, advising them what hue of ochre to paint the petals of the sunflowers on the canvas. It is the only one who listens to the forlorn mutterings of the black-

aproned waiters serving cassis-colored Kir royales to tourists in the wicker chairs facing the Peugeots and Smart cars that buzz like hummingbirds through the *rues*.

The melancholy men serve their patrons the bistro fare that is now the stuff of best-selling American cookbooks and entire issues of glossy magazines. They serve *steak au poivre*, never cooked to more than deep red at its center, enveloped by a shimmering black sequin crust of roughly cracked peppercorns, most likely smacked cathartically with the back of a pan by a bitter, grey-haired chef who dreams of moving to the suburbs and raising a goat named after his mother.

They serve *salade niçoise*, even though the dish is out of place so far from the sparkling Mediterranean and belies Paris' monochromatic autumn palette: the sky bemoans its grey, the people dressed in black, the tablecloths glare white. When the plate of green beans and purple kalamata olives and red waxy potatoes, studded with canned tuna glistening with a glaze of oil, hits the table, the waiter counts the days until his August hiatus, when he'll be the one sipping oysters and saffron-scented broth in Marseille, soaking up enough sun to take back to gloomy Paris and the gloomy red-leather banquettes in the bistro.

I learned early that Parisians, at least the ones that are worth interacting with, do not eat this way. They may sit for hours in a *comptoir*, sipping a beer or a tiny cup of sludgy coffee and reading *Le Monde* as though it were their job, but they do not, under any circumstances, eat *salade niçoise* when not in Nice. Locals, real Parisians, rarely eat fussy French food when dining out.

By dining out, I mean sitting down. Not eating on the go, as most Parisians do between the hours of ten in the morning until six in the evening.

Instead, when Parisian locals eat out, they eat things that they either cannot or simply do not make at home. They eat ethnic food. They flock to the couscous houses that dot both the trendy Left Bank neighborhoods and the predominantly Algerian areas of Belleville and Clichy on the other side of the city. Greek restaurants on the Rive Gauche not only boast yard-long kebabs and freshly-sliced thick cranberry-colored slabs of lamb and rotisserie chickens in the windows, they are always packed with young locals, French words dribbling unceremoniously from their mouths in unison with the juices from their souvlaki. Several curry restaurants have been named favorites in a few prominent reader's-choice contests, to the chagrin of the French Ministry of Culture, designed to preserve everything that is and can be called 'French' with militaristic stringency.

The first time I went to Paris, I went as a student with a bunch of other American girls there to study the nuances of the French political climate and history. The second time I ended up there, by mistake almost, I was a working-class local in the late-summer of 2006, as a personal chef for a woman and her son in Montmartre. Then, I had come to Paris with visions of the temples of *haute cuisine* and soufflés for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It didn't end up that way.

I found myself, instead, scrimping change to buy a tiny *crottin* of tangy goat cheese to slather on a baguette, something I knew would never go up in price, since the price of bread is regulated by the French government. I searched all over Paris for the quickest and cheapest eats, starting with the bakery down the street from my apartment that offered half a baguette sandwich boasting only a thin layer of rich French butter and a few slices of ham for only a little over what my goat-cheese and bread concoction cost. The elderly Egyptian man in the shoebox-sized

convenience store in the Place de Clichy at the bottom of the Montmartre hill would watch my gloved hands and pale, round face as I picked out pears and apples in the September chill and, while he weighed them at the counter, would flirtatiously toss a few squares of dark chocolate into my bag while I pretended not to notice. It was because of him, and people like him, that I did not starve in Paris.

My favorite food in France, ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, turned out to be the falafel served by the Jewish boys on the rue des Rosiers, one of the incalculable narrow cobblestone streets in the middle of Paris, which becomes lined with people in the midday sun as L'As de Falafel opens for the day. My feet pulsed with fatigue from walking the underground paths through the Paris Métro, and I was increasingly dejected at being alone in a city where there was always something new to share with someone you loved. But in the chilly winter sunshine that every so often peeks from the thick overcast clouds, there was nothing better for my feet, or for my soul, than to sit in the park that adjoined the Swedish Cultural Center and, in between noshing, watch the steam rise in swirls from my pita stuffed with fried and spiced chickpea patties, thinly sliced red cabbage, tomatoes, white onions, a thick bunch of verdant parsley seasoned with lemon juice, stuffed with – what else? – French fries, and dripping with both *sauce blanche* and *sauce rouge*.

I could never decide which sauce to choose when the time came. The automatic questions that shot from the boys' mouths fired so rapidly that I often ended up flustered and anxious after my order and would have to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down while walking to my park bench. Did I want the white sauce, creamy and blossoming with aromatic roasted garlic? Or did I want the red sauce, piquant and nutty, thickened with walnuts like an

Italian romesco? I finally decided that the two were not meant to be mutually exclusive. After that, I always ordered *le deux*, both.

At night, if I was out with new friends I had made from a random (and looking back, pathetic) request for some company through a discussion board posting, and we got hungry, there was only one answer.

They were all chefs too, and all as poor as I was. Bernadette and I were the kindred spirits, though, being female chefs trying to make it on our own with no money in Paris was both depressing and inspiring to both of us in a kind of Mary Tyler Moore way. We each took shelter in long nights with bottles of three-euro Bordeaux after catering gigs that generally ended up with a drunken walk to an ex-pat bar to watch a soccer game, or, equally as likely, with a wine-flushed Bernadette collapsing into my lap at four-thirty in the morning. Her round Filipino face sobbed and snorted in a mixture of French and English that we dubbed our own version of “Franglais,” that she was soon-to-be thirty and would probably never find love, never have children, never have a dog, and never be happy.

We *were* happy, though we didn’t know it.

When we all went out together, we were usually in the area of Odeón or Saint-Michel people-watching or window-shopping or doing something equally cheap. At two in the morning, the quintessential midnight-snack-time for idle twenty-somethings, the area was just heating up. Thick-browed North Africans stood behind a rotisserie spit skewered with a rotating cylindrical hunk of dripping gyros and thrust out pita after pita at tired homebound couples and drunk teenagers swigging bottles of champagne on the street corner.

We sauntered up to the counter, placed our order and, within seconds, our falafel was produced. One of the men behind the counter would smile at my blonde hair, stuff a few more fries into my wax paper and hand it to me with a cheesy wink, like a grey-haired ice cream man handing out Good Humor bars in the suburbs in the middle of the summer.

Bernadette rolled her eyes and shook her head, smiling. “Sometimes I wish to God I was blonde so I could score a few more fries.”

I tried to be really French, whatever that means now. Then, it meant scarfing falafel and feeding the Seine fish stray fries. I had purchased a chic black coat from a boutique the last time I was in France – everybody had one – and that alone made me blend in like the colors in the Renoirs I pored over at the Louvre. What made it extra-French was the white drip of *sauce blanche* I kept forgetting to scrub off. I have always been famous for dripping food on myself, but this drip of falafel sauce made me authentic. It’s still on my coat, hanging lonely in my Florida closet.

A few steps from the fountain in the middle of Saint-Michel is the Seine. Paris shines on its ripples. We walked down the steps to the river’s edge slowly in single-file, each afraid to misstep and send the person directly in front tumbling down the stone staircase and into the freezing water. I had my *bateau mouche* captain fantasy again as I watched the tourists on their dinner cruises, the flash bulbs of their cameras like sparkling crystal in the glass of the boat cabin. We sat with our faces gazing across the river, our feet dangling over the 20-foot drop to the onyx waves below. The spires of Saint Chapelle cathedral danced like icicles in our irises, and we all looked up at the sky, wanting to see stars, but finding none.

The red and white sauces turned cartwheels on my tongue and fought for my mouth's attention. First the red chilies from the *sauce rouge* would burn my taste buds, and then a swivel of garlic cream from the rich *sauce blanche* would cool everything down, leaving only the same kind of warmth that settles below your breastbone after a vodka shot. The aroma from our falafels wasn't French. It didn't smell like Perigord truffles, or golden chanterelle mushrooms, or foie gras – the things we had come to Paris to eat, to shop for, to cook – it smelled like Morocco, like Lebanon, like Tunisia, like Libya and Egypt. Like places the French people go to in August when they can't afford or tire of the Riviera. *French people are the only ones on earth who tire of the Riviera*, the river whispered.

Eating falafel by the Seine became ritual – not just for the group– but for me when I was alone, which was a lot. When I wanted to impress my weekly crush with my creativity and bohemian spirit, I suggested that we walk from my apartment in Montmartre to the edge of the Right Bank, cross the Île de la Cité where we would talk about the headless statues at Notre Dame, and then go over the next bridge to – where else? – Saint-Michel for a bottle of rosé and falafel on the edge of the Seine. This would not only afford me enough time to make him laugh, but would also make a great memory to tell our grandchildren.

Nick the Greek was one of those lucky men. He was a student from the University of Ohio that I met on that same discussion board who was working as an intern at the United States embassy on the edge of the Champs-Élysées. He was funny, cultured and as obsessed with Jon Stewart as I was, so naturally I thought I could seduce him.

We followed my prescribed path, winding our way past the crêperies and the multitude of typically French restaurants and shops, turning our noses up at the country we were slowly

falling head over heels for. We ordered falafel and settled down on a blanket at the edge of the river, listening to it rustle beneath us, listening to snippets of conversations around us, laughing at the good fortune we had to be in the most beautiful city in Europe, making our lives there, speaking the language more and more each day, but choosing to feast on non-French food. We were renegades.

A few minutes into the conversation between Nick the Greek and I, he mentioned his girlfriend back in Ohio, and the ruse was over. But we still had much in common, including a love of cold pink French wine, which I pulled out of Nick's backpack realizing in that moment that we had forgotten a corkscrew. Nick jaunted up the Seine a few meters and asked a group of French hipsters to borrow their opener. They were also eating falafel and using slang that I didn't recognize until I learned the words months later from a client's eleven-year-old daughter. An invitation was extended to share wine, stories, and opinions on the best falafel houses in Paris. Several agreed with me on the superiority on L'As de Falafel in the Marais, but others had differing opinions, and we promised to visit each other's favorites on another outing.

The rendez-vous never happened, but I basked in the fact that I was eating what every other hip, young Parisian was eating at that exact moment.

Falafel isn't a romantic food in the most classic sense – you can't really lean across the candlelit bistro table, spoon in hand, and delicately wrap your lips around it and roll your eyes back in your head as you experience its sensual lusciousness. It's just not that kind of food. The romance associated with falafel is more hardcore: it's brutal, it's animalistic, and savagely hedonist. The only way to truly eat a falafel in Paris is hungrily. There are no delicate eaters of

falafel – the pita, the cabbage, everything about it is tough and requires vigorous chewing and subsequent vigorous moans of delight.

Perhaps that's why the new generation of Parisians, the ones who forgo the *belle époque* rococo elegance of the Opera Garnier for the jagged architecture and ultra-modern performances of the Opera Bastille, choose curry and gyros over *canard* and *girolles*.

Most young Parisians, anyway. Unless they are trying to impress young American girls.

Claude tried desperately to impress me, to no avail. A Cornell-educated barrister at a large firm in Paris, he took me to an out-of-the-way bistro in the twelfth arrondissement, where he lived his whole life. Classic French, mixed with *nouveau cuisine*, the menu was as dull as the company. While Claude sipped his gin and tonic, I was brought an embarrassingly girly cocktail, bright with Blue Curacao liqueur. It wasn't enough that I felt completely out of my element sipping on a blue daiquiri adorned with not only a tiki umbrella in the middle of winter, but also a skewer of marachino cherries and pineapple, and, the kicker: a glow stick.

I suffered through three courses of caramelized apples with foie gras, lamb brochettes with mashed potatoes and rosemary, and some permutation of *crème brûlée*. I should have enjoyed the meal, but I couldn't. All I wanted to do was sit by the Seine with a bottle of very cheap battery-acid Bordeaux and a half a dozen French hipsters and eat falafel or gyros. Claude was nice enough, but I couldn't help feeling that he was far too French for me. That had been my dream, though, and the dream of so many of my friends and family. At that moment, I realized how far my future lay from that particular life. I rejected Claude's advances as comical, almost a caricature of what I really wanted. As I went to the bank to withdraw some cash for a

cab, my high heel got stuck in the grate where the air from the Metro tunnel expelled from the underground tubes, and I walked right out of my shoe.

Claude turned around and wrestled the heel out of the grate and encouraged me to lean on him while he slipped it back on my foot. This would normally be cause for coquettish cooing and oh-how-sweet-ing. But while it was happening, I just felt ridiculous.

While I'm not sure if I would have liked Claude-Étienne more if he had taken me to a Russian tea room, an Algerian halal stand, or something equally as offbeat, the fact that I was forced to sit in a bistro to be served by those indomitably forlorn and almost condescending waiters became the basis for a French set of relationship deal-breakers. First dates required food that could only be eaten either standing up, walking, or both. Anything more than that was too serious, and far too French.

I walked home that night, feeling a tiny twinge of Christian guilt that I had lied to Claude and told him I needed to cut the evening short. I told him that my employer had to run to the doctor to check on an ailing cousin and needed me to watch her son for a while. I walked across the Seine again.

I called Bernadette as I crossed the Île St. Louis and passed our favorite ice cream shop, the darling of Paris, Berthillion.

“*Coucou, ma belle,*” I said. Where are you, girl?

She was sitting at home, half-drunk, flipping channels between soft-core French erotica and CNN International where Christiane Amanpour was hosting a documentary on British-Indian racism.

“Come to the Île. I need beer and *frites*.”

Fifteen minutes later, she emerged from the Cité metro station and grabbed my hand.

“I’ve been thinking, Holly. It’s not good. This situation. It’s not good,” she stumbled up the stairs grasping both my left hand and the railing she normally shunned due to the multitude of microorganisms and bacteria festering on its chipped glossy green paint.

“What are you talking about? We need food. You’re going to feel like shit in a few hours.”

“Not so, love,” she said, grinning. She pulled the half-empty bottle of wine from her purse. I couldn’t help but burst into giggles as I pushed it back into her bag. This is part of the beauty of living in Paris. Public drinking? A-okay, by the French.

We walked a few steps to a comptoir, inhabited by a couple sipping glasses of cognac, and one grey-haired man in a knit cap and a replica of my French black coat, reading *Le Canard Enchaîné*, the less-reverent French version of the American faux-newspaper, *The Onion*.

The barman, upon seeing an inebriated Filipina and a laughing blonde American, perked up a little and offered us a taste of his specialty for the evening. A new bottle of Montrachet he’d just received from the supplier.

Of course we accepted. Even a tiny taste of a wine neither of us would be able to afford for at least ten years would be worth at least a kiss on the cheek for the barman. He poured us an ounce or two of the Montrachet, its violet hue coating the glass. I swirled. Bernadette swirled. We clinked glasses and blew air kisses to each other, our new favorite ritual.

The wine went down slowly, painting our throats like it had painted the glass with its deep tannins and earthy finish. We smiled at the barman. He leaned in and we both kissed him quickly on the cheeks. We asked for two Amstels and a big plate of French fries.

“Ketchup?” he asked.

“Of course,” we answered. “We’re American.”

Somehow, several hours later, we decided to walk back to her flat in the ninth.

Somewhere between the city hall and the looming Gare de Lyon, where we could hear the trains pulling in and out of the station with loud exhalations of steam, Bernadette broke down.

“Let’s talk about all the things that are wrong with our lives,” she cried and laughed hysterically at the same time.

“Bernadette. It’s the middle of the night. You’re drunk. Everything is going to be wrong with our lives.”

“You know what I think sometimes? I’m thirty years old. I’m a cook in a restaurant. I sometimes lie awake at night and wonder if I’m ever going to have children. I don’t think I ever will,” She laid her head in my lap and sobbed like this for the tenth time in a month.

I sighed as deeply as the commuter train pulling into the station from the suburbs. I stroked her jet hair and rubbed her heaving shoulders. I laughed a little bit, though I didn’t know why. Sometimes, when living in Paris, everything feels like a scene from a movie, and every sound, even the sound of a crying friend, seems staged and cinematic.

Suddenly, she jumped up, ran to the tree, and vomited all the beer, ketchup, French fries, and even that single ounce of Chateau Montrachet we’d imbibed earlier. I got up to hold her hair.

Once she’d exhausted the contents of her stomach, she took a swig of water from my ever-full Nalgene bottle that I carted around Europe for a year before I accidentally left it under my seat on an overnight train to Milan.

“Are you okay?”

She sniffed and nodded. “I’m fine. I smell cumin.” The spice releases an irresistible smoky aroma as it wafts. It’s drunk-girl manna. It’s like barbecue. When I drink too much, after I’ve exhausted my stomach lining, all I can think about is a pulled pork sandwich on a buttered roll. Halal meat is a perfect French substitute.

“The halal stand across the street is open.”

“Let’s go. I’m starving,” she said. We watched the North African man shave meat from the döner spit and fold scrambled eggs and the juicy meat into a pita.

We opened the door to her apartment just as the sun was rising, collapsing on her bed in a tired, girly heap. On the street below, the wrappers from our morning meal fluttered in the cast iron garbage can.

Bernadette offered to take me out to lunch for my last meal before I boarded the Air France bus at the Champs-Elysees on my way back to Florida. She laid my options in front of me – did I want a tiered structure of *fruits de mer*, toppling with cold seafood, or did I want a *choucroute garni*, a hot plate of Alsatian sausages, black and white, on a bed of bubbling sauerkraut at one of the *belle epoque*-style brasseries across from the stark Opera Bastille? How about a picnic in the Tuileries gardens: goat cheese, pâté, baguette, grapes, wine? Our favorite *saladerie* was open on Sunday afternoons, in the square outside the Pompidou center, where we first met, she a struggling chef looking to work for whatever was out there, and me, in about the same situation. We were instant allies.

No, Bern, I said to her. I want falafel.

We sauntered past the *crêperie* at the corner of the rue de Renard and the rue Saint-Merri next to the modern art museum and stumbled down the cobblestone street in our black-heeled boots. Past the be-rainbowed window of Le Gay Choc pastry shop in La Marais, which tried to outdo the others with displays of the symbols of male love. A few hundred yards further to L'As de Falafel.

We sat down on a green bench in one of Paris' miniature playgrounds in the Square Georges Cain. To me, it would be much easier to raise a child in Paris than it would be to raise one in New York or Chicago. Paris seems, somehow, gentler, and the fact that there is always a playground within 500 yards makes handling a child all the more fathomable. If all the walking doesn't wear your kid out, there's always a playground full of kids to do the job for you. This playground was across from the Swedish Cultural Center, whose café served meatballs and lingonberry jam like an IKEA, as well as several kind of fermented and smoked fish spreads on steamed brown bread with baby arugula and lemony cream sauce. That is the kind of food I discovered, and lived on, in Paris.

Bernadette and I gobbled our falafel, forgetting how hot and drippy it was and spilling sauce down the fronts of our wool coats. Chefs have a different sense of decorum while eating. Spilling becomes a given, and laundering becomes a twice weekly affair. Two girl chefs, both buxom, learn even quicker that food landing on the bosom shelf is a normal occurrence. The only white clothes in a busty girl chef's wardrobe are her white uniforms.

My last meal in Paris was a falafel, and nothing seemed more appropriate.

“Are you going to be sad when you leave?” asked Bernadette.

“Yes. I will miss you. And falafel,” I said.

A few steps away inched the Seine, of course, probably wondering if I would miss it as well.

By the time I left Paris, I had forgotten all about the foie gras of my culinary student dreams. I had rediscovered the Middle Eastern flavors I remembered from childhood. Paris ceased to be the center of haute cuisine that it should have been for me. Instead, I sought out the tiny crêperies in the avenues of Saint Michel, the gyro stands near the Cluny museum, and the best falafel I could find.

Black Bean Falafel with Asian Slaw
Serves 4 by the Seine

The rue des Rosiers in Paris overflows with people around lunchtime, and all after falafel. Especially on one of those rare frigid days, when the mist in the air blowing in from Normandy ices over and stings cheeks and noses, the steam rises from the pita, and each bite is simultaneously crunchy, creamy, earthy, and fresh. It sure beats ham and butter on a stale baguette.

Ingredients:

Falafel

1-14.5 oz. can black beans, drained and rinsed
½ white onion, minced
1 large clove garlic
1 jalapeno, seeded
½ cup bread crumbs
2 eggs
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
½ tbsp. cumin
1 cup vegetable or peanut oil

Asian Slaw

½ head red cabbage, thinly sliced
2 carrots, grated
½ daikon radish, grated
½ cup loosely packed cilantro leaves
1 tbsp rice wine vinegar
1 clove garlic, crushed
½ cup mayonnaise
Whole wheat pita

Directions:

1. In a food processor, combine ingredients from black beans through cumin and process until a mealy dough forms. If the dough is too wet (sticks to your hands), add ¼ cup bread crumbs. If the dough is too dry (will not form a ball), add one egg white.
2. Heat vegetable/peanut oil in a heavy skillet until a drop of flour sizzles (about 375 degrees).
3. Shape the dough into patties, 1.5-inches in diameter and ½ inch thick. Fry in oil until golden brown on both sides, about 3-4 minutes per side. Remove from oil with a slotted spatula or spoon. Place on paper towels to drain.
4. In a large bowl, combine ingredients for Asian slaw and toss to combine.
5. Slice the pita in half and open both halves. Put the slaw in the pita first, followed by 3 falafel patties.
6. Serve with fresh oven fries. For a little heat, add a few drops of Sriracha hot sauce (found at Asian markets) before adding the falafel patties.

Quelle Disastre!

At the black Formica table, I agonized over the menu. The table made the kitchen look puny, even by Parisian standards, where just about every apartment, even the ones lining the Champs-Élysées, are approximately the size of an American master bathroom. The tall birches bent dramatically in the September wind, outside the double-paned window, which didn't look out toward the Arc de Triomphe, but instead overlooked the alleyway lined with putrifying garbage. The breeze, however, caught the refuse the other way, and instead sent the new smell of horizontal grey rain through the open panes.

In the back of my mind, I listened to three-year-old Jean-Maxime watching a children's television show in the living room, crashing his toy Smart cars into each other again and again, the plastic rear-view mirrors popping off every once in a while, prompting a pause, a snap and a commencement of the crashing.

I twirled the black Pilot Precise V5 pen around in my fingers (the only pens I approve of), biting off the cap, and then replacing it. I stared at the page, the outline of a meal, hoping that a creative sprout would blossom and would intensify the flavors I was proposing. Madame had requested a Mediterranean-style dinner party, *un grand plat de couscous*, she had said, and had set a date: April 11, 2006. She wanted merguez, a deep red Moroccan sausage, full of fat and lamb and spices, as well as a plate of roasted vegetables. She told me to spend as much as I wanted, and that I'd be repaid double.

Desperately wanting to impress, to extend my stay past the six months I'd allotted for my culinary externship as a personal chef, I scribbled notes in my blank book, one that I carried

around Paris every moment before filling it up entirely with recipes, ideas, new vocabulary words and weekly budgets. I wasn't being paid for my externship; my apartment was my pay, except for whatever cash I picked up catering dinner parties and giving cooking lessons. I quickly learned the verb *vivoter*, meaning "to live from hand to mouth."

Je vivot. I said it to myself often.

Yet, every day when I snapped on my white chef's coat and went downstairs to prepare meals for the pair of psychologists and their two children, I felt undeniably glamorous. The truth, that I was cooking for a powerful family and would be catering a party for their closest friends, negated all of the nights I spread the last, melting sliver of goat cheese on a day-old baguette for dinner, and said good night to Monsieur Eiffel, twinkling just outside my sixth-floor, closet-sized apartment.

I dropped the pen to the blank page and made categories: hors d'oeuvres, salade, plat principal, dessert. I filled in the blanks. Crostini would be easy, and make ahead – I'd top it with a homemade roasted garlic hummus, fan out half a kalamata olive, sprinkle some paprika, and top it with a cilantro leaf. Green on red on purple on tan; that would be beautiful. The sparkle of a glass of cuvéé Champagne would bring it all together.

"Holly!" I heard from the living room.

"*Oui, Jean-Maxime! Je viens!*" I'm coming, little prince.

Jean-Maxime, who remains to this day the only three-year-old I have ever gotten along with, sat in the middle of the Tunisian rug in front of the television, which glowed with the Technicolor hues of the French version of the Teletubbies, *Le Teletubbies*. Nothing lost in translation, there.

I sat on the rug next to Jean-Maxime and stroked his silken blonde hair.

“Will you play the police car?” he asked.

I thought about my open notebook and my scribbling, about the cucumber and tomato salad with lemon and garlic yogurt sauce spooned on top, and imagined the gorgeous hunk of lamb, perched atop couscous, lined with red and yellow peppers and thickly sliced zucchini (its French name so much more beautiful – *courgette*), the oils from the *merguez* collecting around the edges of the hand-painted delft Belgian plate with the fluted edges. How strange that one of the more prominent Parisian society families were asking for Moroccan food to impress their bourgeois dinner guests. And yet, it wasn't so strange.

* * *

There are between three and four million immigrants of Arab-Berber decent currently living in France, over half of which live in Paris proper. After France bitterly conceded independence to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia in the early 1960s, 1.4 million refugees (both Arab and Jewish, funny enough) joined the exodus from Algeria and ended up somewhere in France. The father of the host family I stayed with in Paris during my first visit there had fought in the Algerian War and recounted bitterly the acts of terrorism and guerilla warfare he'd experienced there. France had been humiliated and with it, all her people. If I had told him that I was then involved with a Tunisian man, I might have been expelled from the house.

When I told people, upon returning from France, about the racism I experienced there, no one believed me. When Sami and I walked down the street in the snooty 16th district, holding hands or stealing kisses, French women in pillbox hats and mink coats, walking their *petit chiens* on pink leashes, would immediately turn away, scoff, spit, or glare at me as if to say, “How can

you degrade yourself, so?” A week before I was to arrive in Paris again, in 2005, during culinary school, the Clichy riots erupted over the accidental death of two North African teenagers, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, being pursued by police. They hid in a substation, and were electrocuted while there. The country erupted in all fifteen urban centers in France, from Lille to Marseilles, not to mention in the heart of Paris. President Chirac declared a state of emergency. One protester said, in a column for the left-wing website Democracy Now, “We live in the ghettos. We live in fear.” No one imagines ghettos in Paris. It’s all Sacré Coeur and Moulin Rouge. But the ghettos are there, in the city and around the edges of the City of Lights, and they are riddled with violence and the poverty of Arab immigrants.

In the graffiti-marked Belleville districts in Paris, or in the outskirts to the northwest, where towering tenements flutter with drying clothes and the parks are strewn with dirty toys and dirty children, this racism is tenable. In the touristy places, where Americans stop dead in their tracks in the middle of the street, much to the dismay of those of us living there, who have trains to catch and parties to cater, it goes completely unnoticed.

“Will you take me to Algeria? I really want to go,” I would ask Sami. I had spent hours in *L’Institut du Monde Arabe*, a mosque and museum dedicated to the artifacts of the Arab world I was so enamored with, each one reminding me of my childhood in some mysterious way that I hadn’t put together quite yet.

“Sweetheart, you wouldn’t last five minutes in Algeria. They would take you and sell you for millions of dollars.”

I eventually gave up on Algeria, but there were plenty of other Maghreb countries to visit. Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, or a revisit to Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon, where I know they have other blonde girls.

* * *

“BAAAA-BOM-BAAAAAA-BOM-BAAAA-BOM!” Jean-Maxime yelled, as I pushed the police Smart Car around the rug. It amazed me how French children learn one sound of a police siren, and American children learn something completely different to relate the sound. American children yell, “WEEEEOOOOOWEEEEEEEOOOOWEEEEEEEOOOO!”

“J-Max, I have to go finish something in the kitchen,” I said. I knew this wasn’t going to be an easy sell, but I’d learned a thing or two about children during the four months previous I’d been working in Paris. When I was younger, much younger, the women at church knew not to call me to babysit. I’d say no. I never felt comfortable around kids, especially babies. I could count on one hand the number of diapers I changed. I don’t like having to talk down to someone, or at someone. I even explain things to my cats in plain, adult English. But in Paris, I learned that it’s not about talking down to kids, it’s using your own logic.

“No!”

“I’ll bring you chocolate milk,” I singsonged.

It took him a minute, but he smiled and nodded enthusiastically. I walked down the creaky wood hallway to the kitchen, removed the eggplant quiche from the oven, and shook up a bottle full of Nestle Quik. A few squares of D’aim Bar, and Jean-Maxime was happy and quiet – my favorite kind of child.

I sat back down at the table, while the quiche cooled and deflated, and jotted down a few more ideas. Almond-rosewater macaroons with honey and velvety lebneh cheese, mint tea, mango-mint chutney. It was all available, from the *Arabe* downstairs, the slang used for the convenience stores usually owned by an Algerian proprietor, including the one where I had first met Sami, whose uncle owned the store.

If I was serving French people Moroccan food, I would certainly continue the amalgamation and pair some classic French wines. I took a breath, and turned the page.

* * *

On the day of the dinner, I unpacked the grocery cart I'd wheeled home from the Montparnasse market and set to work on a game plan. First, the cookies, then the hummus, and then the crème for the salad. Those things could chill in the refrigerator while I managed other preparations – roasting the vegetables, making the chutney, toasting the crostini.

I'd enlisted Bernadette's help, she having worked at several fine dining restaurants like Lucques in Napa Valley. She arrived right on time, her black hair up in her army green visored cap, her apron tucked into the pocket of her black pants.

“You ready to do this, girlie?”

I breathed slowly, calming my heartbeat. “Yeah. I guess I am. Piece of cake.”

Catering intimate dinner parties made me feel in control of the kitchen, like I really knew what I was doing, though I'd only been out of school for two or three weeks. I'd planned multiple five and six course meals, some with beautiful (if not completely lucky) results. A few triumphs I still carry around with me in my repertoire – creamy apricot risotto, golden soupe de chanterelles, and a layered timbale of tri-colored vegetables: roasted red peppers, zucchini, and

carrot. These dishes brought me standing ovations at dinner parties, where, in my nascent French, I described the necessary components and urged guests on with an ebullient “Bon appétit!”

This Moroccan dinner – a little roasting, a little slicing, a little simmering – I could do this with my eyes closed, especially with a sous chef. I tied my hair back and fastened it with a black ribbon, which I looped around my head twice and refastened under my ponytail. Slipping my arms through my white chef coat, I looked in the mirror.

It’s like a drug, wearing a chef coat. That moment I look in the mirror and see myself in the mandarin collar, white buttons, and my name embroidered on the lapel is transformative. Where once stood a twenty-something with no clue what direction she was going, now stands a chef with decisions to make, fish to sear, shopping to do, and a purpose – to feed people. Wearing a chef coat pushes my shoulders back and lengthens my stride. I arch my eyebrows and have a slight smile on my lips. The first decision to make as a chef: whether to button the top button or not. If I button the top button, completing two rows of perpendicular buttons, I appear serious and pulled together. If I leave the top left button open, I am more casual, personable; I have fun in the kitchen.

In France, I always button the top button. Women in culinary careers are still not taken as seriously as men, in Paris. The world still belongs to Joel Robuchon, Alain Ducasse, and Alain Passard.

“When I make it big,” I thought to myself, “when I am finally taken seriously, I will probably change my name to Alain.”

Bernadette and I started chopping, sautéing, baking, searing, and other verbs assigned to kitchen concoctions. We joked about the party we'd been to the night before, where Bernadette's crush, her French teacher at the Academie Francaise, had taken too many shots of Pernod and had seductively and drunkenly whispered in her ear how much he loved hearing her recite dialogues with her American accent. The crush was over by the time the lamb went under the broiler.

Madame came in to check on the progress of the meal and as her guests started to arrive, she brought them into the kitchen one by one to be introduced, something I wasn't completely accustomed to. Generally, when catering an event, I remained invisible, the only time I would be seen was my five-second foray into the dining room to set dishes down (from the right hand side, *bien sur*) and to introduce the next dish. Regardless, I shook hands, smiled, and introduced myself and my background.

"The children will eat in here, Holly," Madame said. It wasn't a question. It certainly wasn't convenient for me. The kitchen was a work zone; a separate table should have been set up in another room for the kids. I should have seen to that myself.

Monsieur peeked his head in and quietly assumed a position in the back of the kitchen. As Madame exited the kitchen with Luc from Chicago, a handsome man with angular French features and a mane of chocolate hair, Monsieur called me to the back of the kitchen.

"Holly. This kitchen is completely unpresentable."

I wasn't sure what to say. I'd never been reprimanded by a client before, much less one I was in the middle of cooking for. There were ten things going at one time, my mind only had room for those things, not for a slap on the wrist.

“I’m sorry, Jean-Francois, I’m not sure what to say,” I stammered. The ‘I’m sorry’ came out almost involuntarily. In culinary school, it was driven home repeatedly that the first thing out of the server’s mouth when a patron is unhappy with something is ‘I’m sorry,’ whether it’s the fault of the house or not. This kind of blind abeyance isn’t in my character to begin with – I prefer to reason with people, to see both sides of the issue, or to tell them that they’re completely wrong and have no idea what they’re talking about. If I’m wrong, I’ll admit it. If not, I’ll fight for it to the death. In this case, the kitchen wasn’t meant to be “presented,” it was meant to be completely filled with smells, sights and sounds of cooking and food, and then put back together at the end of the night. Monsieur Jean-Francois didn’t see it that way, and he was the boss.

“We’ll be bringing guests in here, so I expect you to clean this up right away,” he murmured and brusquely swept himself out the door.

Bernadette looked at me sideways, “Is he fucking kidding me?” she said. I loved Bernadette because she had the same kind of realistic cook’s mentality as I. “It is what it is” is a favorite phrase among chefs. I adopted it as soon as the sauté cook next to me on the line at my first restaurant calmed my nerves after running out of beef tenderloin on Valentine’s Day. “It is what it is, Holly. You can’t do anything about it now,” he had said.

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head, getting back in the game. I could do something about it, just to save face in front of my employer. “Just wipe down the counters if you can. I’ll sweep up a bit. Then we can get back to filling those macaroons.”

The doorbell stopped its incessant ringing forty-five minutes later. Madame sauntered in the kitchen as I tossed bell peppers, eggplant, yellow squash and whole cloves of garlic in coarse kosher salt and black pepper, and fragrant olive oil.

* * *

The kind of olive oil we use in the United States is, as the late comedian Mitch Hedberg would have said, Bullshit Olive Oil. The pasteurized, clarified corn-yellow liquid is processed so many times that very little of the olive is left by the time it reaches the supermarket shelf. Even the bottles labeled “extra-virgin” barely exude any aroma. The olive oil in France (or, to avoid the ‘everything’s better in France’ argument, the olive oil in the countries on the other side of the Atlantic) is bright green. It has been filtered but once, and even in some bottles, some *good* bottles, pulp from pressed olives remains at the bottom of the bottle. When opening a new container, the smell of olives permeates the air, and everyone in the house knows that a virgin bottle of extra-virgin has been deflowered.

When Zoulikha lived in our home, she brought back a five-gallon jug of olive oil from her home in Morocco. The stuff was so powerful that it seeped through the flimsy white plastic container and infiltrated the entire pantry with the effusive odor of a grove of olive trees. In one of my first culinary adventures, I found myself in the middle of a boxed-brownie recipe without any vegetable oil. Knowing what I know now, safflower, canola, or even corn oil would have been a viable substitute. But, being 12, that jug of olive oil seemed like a good idea at the time.

Quelle disastre!

The combination of cocoa powder and olive oil was just too pungent for words, and I went to the birthday party empty-handed. A thousand miles away, though, one of the champions of *nouvelle cuisine* was probably serving dark chocolate cake with olive oil ice cream – a classic pairing nowadays. Maybe if I had sold my fruit-scented Duncan Hineses to restaurants Per Se or

Le Bernardin in New York, I would have been heralded as a cooking prodigy and I wouldn't have a fifty-grand student loan.

* * *

“We would like it very much if you two would join us for a glass of champagne in the living room,” Madame chirped. I always believed that her high-pitched, nasal voice was a front for something much deeper and darker going on under the surface, but, spoiler alert – I didn't stick around long enough to find out.

This invitation broke the cardinal rule mentioned before – when catering an event, I preferred to remain invisible. But, of course, it would have been rude to turn down the offer, and those who know me know that I rarely turn down champagne, regardless of the circumstances.

Bernadette and I wiped our hands on the kitchen towels drooping from our apron strings, arranged our errant hair in the black reflection of the microwave glass, and gave each other uneasy glances as we tiptoed down the hall. Our black, steel-toed chef clogs made a racket on the thin hardwood floors even as we trod lightly.

The lighting in the living room was dim and romantic, and the light tittering of pre-drunk Parisians filled the spaces where the children usually played, where Jean-Maxime crashed toy cars and Annabelle, their oldest daughter, pillowfought with her friends. Trays of the hummus crostini I'd assembled lay on the coffee table, being nibbled every so often by a female guest and whorfed down like nigiri sushi by the men. As we entered the room, Madame took me by the arm and led me to the center of the room. She handed me a glass of champagne. I glanced at Bernadette, who raised her eyebrows. I'd told her of Madame's awkward manner, how she treated me like a daughter one moment and like a stranger the next. How one day she trusted me

enough to drive the car through the Etoile (one of the scariest events of my life involving a motor vehicle) where thirteen identical streets combine into one enormous traffic circle with no lanes and no organization. The next day she sent the housekeeper grocery shopping because I had chosen avocados that weren't ripe enough. This display of chumminess, this overt friendliness wasn't strange, though it portended something opposite of its meaning.

"Mes amis, this is Holly. I have told you about her. She is my American."

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. I felt my shoulders tighten. *Her* American? My face grew hot as I heard them over and over in my head. She might as well have said, "This is my darkie, my negro, my slave." That was the kind of connotation her tone had. *Look at Holly. She works for me.* All of a sudden, I was no longer a professional having drinks with a client. I was the slave having a hypocritical glass of champagne with my master while the rest of the audience laughs at the irony.

The humiliation continued. Bernadette and I sequestered ourselves for a few minutes by the side of the couch, discussing what might be happening at that particular moment in the kitchen. The lamb might be burning, the pastry cream might be developing a thick, rubbery skin on top. Luc from Chicago sat down next to us.

"I was told you went to school in Chicago. It seems we have something in common," he said. "I work for Prudential, I am their international liaison in Western Europe. Where did you live?"

"Near North Side, a few blocks from Wrigley Field," I said, relaxing a little.

"And how long have you been in France? Your accent is very good," Luc's eyes twinkled and he brushed a piece of chocolate hair from his eyes.

“I’ve lived here almost a year, now. I also came to France for a few months while I was in college – to study politics.”

“You studied French politics? And you’re a cook? You have some remarkable interests, mademoiselle,” he said.

I blushed. I couldn’t help it. He was adorable.

“You must have a boyfriend here in France, yes?” Luc said. This is how conversations with older men usually went.

“No, actually,” I said. “I’m just concentrating on work right now.” Total lie. The truth, I’d been jilted by a guy I’d been seeing for a while the week before. This was how I said, “my heart is broken.”

I suppose Madame was listening in on our conversation. She swaggered over to where we were talking.

“But, you are interested in politics and you can cook – how is it possible?” French men have a charming way of expressing feigned incredulity.

“Perhaps she’s a lesbian,” Madame offered.

My heart jumped into my throat. I laughed, as everyone else did. I laughed because I wasn’t sure what else to do. I laughed because inside I wanted to punch someone, something, in the face. I laughed because I couldn’t cry.

Quelle disastre.

When we returned to the kitchen, I instantly pushed what had just happened out of my head; I took a few deep breaths, and I started to feel better. Everything seemed to be in order. I wiped off white plates and arranged the cucumber and tomato salad in cascading diagonal slices,

contrasting the mint green and ruby red for ultimate color. I drizzled the dressing, teeming with garlic across the top, allowing it to spill over at precise, yet uncalculated, areas of the vegetables. When I learned to plate, an art in and of itself, my chef instructors asked for accidental elegance – simply food that has been arranged, but doesn't look like it. Sauce should look like it was splashed on the plate haphazardly, but in a strategic way so to create motion on the plate, like a Jackson Pollack painting. I drizzled the yogurt around the plate in circular droplets, dragging the spoon every once in a while, to make some droplets appear smeared, like little mascara tears.

We brought the plates out to the dining room and called in the dinners.

“Mesdames et messieurs, venez-vous à table, s’il vous plaît,” I announced, recovering my confidence from the previous humiliation in the living room. Now they would see what I was worth. That I was not just some snooty French psychologist’s American; that I had talent. That I could cook.

As I poured champagne, I described the dish and exited with an exuberant “bon appétit!”

Fifteen minutes later, Bernadette returned with ten empty dishes.

“Well, that was a success!” she chimed.

“Great,” I said head-down, arranging roasted and wrinkled vegetables sparkling with coarse salt around the large white platter atop which sat a mountain of tission couscous, threads of golden saffron weaved throughout, imparting a deep, sensual aroma.

Bernadette spooned harissa, the spicy Tunisian condiment, into tiny white bowls I’d purchased for the occasion. How elegant, a sprig of fresh cilantro arising from the edge of each half-dollar-sized dish.

I motioned to her to help me lift the enormous lamb shoulder from the roasting pan to the platter. Juices dribbled in an accidentally elegant trail on the table, and I resisted the urge to mop them up with a piece of baguette I'd sliced. Another rule: other than tasting, there would be no eating of the food I served to guests. Not even leftovers.

I carried the platter into the dining room soaking up the "oohs" and "*c'est magnifique*"s I heard as I took the long way around the table. This was what I lived for, better than any paycheck.

Bernadette followed with a plate full of *merguez* sausage and the crystal bowl of sliced baguette.

We smiled as everyone picked up their forks.

Annabelle and Jean-Maxime chatted in the kitchen while we started wiping down, sweeping up and soaking dishes in preparation for dessert. While the din of the children's laughter rang in my ears, and Bernadette ran hot water in the sink, I imagined the looks on the faces of the people eating my food, living my dream, experiencing all that I'd learned. They were probably mesmerized by the combinations of flavors, the brilliant colors so rarely found in classic French dishes like blood-red *bourguignon* and milky white *sauce velouté* that covered the colors of spring vegetables in *navarin printanier*.

I'm not sure where Escoffier got the idea that long-cooked stews and sauces strained ten times were the pinnacle of culinary excellence. To me, and no offense intended to the Slow Foods movement, gathering steam as we speak, long cooked stews and "development" of flavor are highly overrated concepts. I like crunch. I like zest. I like *al dente* vegetables, not the mush my be-dentured dad has to eat. When I bite down on a glazed baby carrot at the peak of spring,

it should still be bright orange and glistening. I shouldn't be able to push the carrot with little to no force through the spaces between my teeth. I enjoy one-pot peasant food, but on a regular basis, mush is not what I want to eat.

Perhaps this explains my proclivity toward Asian cooking. I love stir-frying. I'm into efficiency. Cooking over extremely high heat, very quickly, preserving the stature of the food while binding them together with common flavor profiles (see ginger, garlic, onion) is the way I like to do it. Slice the meat so thin, you can read through it. Caramelize this, Maillard reaction! Brown the strips until they are sweet and crunchy with a dark brown crust. Flare up the stove with a flame to the ceiling! Dump a pile of steaming, saucy, verdant vegetables on my plate. That's cooking.

All of a sudden, Madame came through the kitchen door carrying her plate – without a fork.

It dawned on me that she was not coming in to praise my skill. Nor was she coming to check on her children to make sure I hadn't snuck half a chocolate bar under the table to keep them quiet (which I never, ever, maybe once, did). She strode to the stove and showed me what she was eating.

“Do you know how to cook merguez?” she asked.

“Yes, of course. It's sausage,” I replied. I hadn't meant to sound upset, but my voice quavered slightly. Bernadette's eyes grew wide. I could almost hear her thoughts, “The nerve of this woman!”

“We like our merguez *bien cuit* – well-cooked,” she smiled the half-smile she always put on when talking to “[her] American.” I doubt I saw her genuinely smile once.

Bien-cuit, I know, is not a term referring to the skill of the cook, but more to the term “well done,” as in the temperature of an overcooked and completely destroyed steak, in English. I looked at the center of the sausage she was disdainfully holding up between her thumb and two fingers, inches from my face. It was fat and gleaming with clear, fully-cooked juices, studded with rye seeds.

“Okay,” I said, following her into the dining room, not caring to look around at the people sitting around the table obviously not singing lauds to me. I took the platter back to the kitchen, stood in front of the stove for several minutes while the skin of the sausage crisped and blistered. That had to be enough. If the sausages cooked any further, the tubes of spiced lamb would be dryer than Bob Newhart.

I had Bernadette carry the plate back into the dining room. My confidence slowly left humiliation in its place.

Not five minutes later, Jean-Francois strode into the kitchen with a scowl on his face. He was carrying the tray of *merguez*. My heart dropped through the floor and into the secret tunnels underneath the Paris Metro, where Monsieur Thenardier and his henchmen scoured the sewers for loot amongst the dead in *Les Miserables*.

I continued wiping up the counters while I could hear eleven-year-old Annabelle snickering behind the Formica slab. I’m still not sure what it is about having an eleven-year-old laugh at you that makes you feel like a head lice.

“Move over,” he said to me, heating the induction burner to its highest setting. The scary thing about induction stoves is that no matter how high you turn the dial, the burner will never be hot to the touch. Induction burners use magnetics to heat, and only activate when aluminum,

stainless steel, or copper is put on top. Crank that baby up to the highest setting, boil water, and then take the pot off the circle of heat. The burner will be cool to the touch. French women and Southern Belles are both like this. No matter how mad they become, how you insult them, how ignorant one portends to be, these women won't break a sweat. These are the most dangerous, the most frustrating, and the most conniving women. They are impossible to satisfy or placate.

French men, on the other hand, wear their emotions on their sleeves. Jean-Francois burned those sausages until they were black and crispy, like a campfire marshmallow whose pillowy exterior has been set aflame and left there until it extinguishes itself. I felt uncomfortable and vulnerable. I was able to handle it when I ventured into the living room or dining room and was meant to feel inferior. But the kitchen was supposed to be my safe haven, and now it was being taken away.

Jean-Francois turned to me. "This is how *merguez* should look," he said. The cracked and parched sausages looked nothing like what I'd been eating at the chic restaurants on the rue St. Michel in a rooftop restaurant where the mint tea was served with a flourish, or at the hole in the wall stands in Belleville. He'd annihilated those poor sausages and there was nothing I could do about it. Jean-Francois swept himself into the dining room, where I heard clapping and a few "bravo"s.

I composed myself, while Bernadette wrinkled her eyebrows, turned down the corners of her mouth and looked both astonished and completely offended. She wasn't, though, confused. Bernadette had been through the mill. She knew what to tell me, what to do to save what was left of my spirit.

“Take out the trash, Holly. Don’t let them see that they’ve upset you. Take as much time as you need. I’ll serve dessert,” she squeezed my hand.

I nodded, gathered the garbage, and clomped down the creaky steps to the alleyway.

After I tossed the black sack into the dumpster, I paced for a few minutes. I stopped, faced the stone wall, pressed my cheek against the cold greyness, and closed my eyes.

Three weeks later I was on a plane back to the States.

Quelle grand disastre.

Almond and Rosewater Macaroons
Makes 50 sandwiched cookies

In the French patisseries I frequented in Paris (I spent what little money I had on things that would make me happy, you see), I often found row upon row of brightly colored macaroons – delicate almond cookies with layer of flavored filling sandwiched between two halves. Blood-red strawberry, yellow lemon, creamy beige caramel, green pistachio, they were a confetti of hue in what is, in February, an otherwise dull city. These rosewater macaroons are best served with mint tea and honey, true to the flavors of North Africa and their presence in Paris for the better.

Ingredients:

Macaroons

10 oz. confectioners' sugar
10 oz. almonds, finely ground
5 large egg whites
Pinch of cream of tartar
1/3 cup granulated or superfine bakers sugar
Red food coloring

Filling

9 oz. unsalted butter, softened
5 oz. confectioners' sugar, sifted
2 tsp. finely grated orange zest
1/2 cup raspberries
2 tsp. rosewater (found in Indian/Arabic markets)

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 300° F.
1. Using a fine sieve, sift confectioners' sugar and finely ground almonds. Use a wooden spoon or your hands to help the mixture move along.
2. Using an electric mixer, whisk egg whites until foamy. Add cream of tartar and whisk until soft peaks form. Add sugar, a little at a time, and whisk until dissolved.
3. Fold meringue into almond mixture (mixture will be stiff), being careful not to deflate batter. The more air remains in the batter, the better.
4. Add three drops of red food coloring to the mixture, fold until dye is well incorporated.
5. Spoon 1 mixture into a piping bag fitted with a 1/2-inch plain round tip. Pipe walnut sized rounds onto parchment paper-lined baking sheets, or silicone mats. Set meringues aside, uncovered, on baking sheets for 1 hour
1. Bake macaroons, 2 baking sheets at a time, swapping sheets halfway through cooking, for 20 minutes or until firm to the touch. Remove from oven and cool on baking sheets.
2. Slide a knife under each macaroon to release from paper, then store in an airtight container until ready to fill.
3. Using an electric mixer, beat butter until pale and fluffy, then gradually beat in confectioners' sugar until combined.
4. Add raspberries and rosewater to mixture and, using the electric mixer, beat until well combined.

5. Sandwich cookies with filling between and allow at least one hour for filling to set. Store in an airtight container. Do not chill, unless you want mushy macaroons. *Quelle disastre!*

FRIED RICE WITH A SPANISH ACCENT

East Meets, and Eats, West

The first time I heard a Chinese person speak Spanish, he was a slender, bow-tied, bespectacled waiter with olive-tan skin and neatly trimmed fingernails. My world was completely turned on its head while my new boyfriend watched my expression from across the table. Somehow, in all of my travels, I'd forgotten about South America. After spending part of my life in the Middle East, part of my life in Mexico and some time in Europe, the whole continent of South America had gone as ignored to me as to the Olympic Committee. The idea that there might be a whole new world to this worldly girl seemed anathema. He grinned as the waiter repeated my order to me.

"Tallarines verdes con bistek?" he said.

"Yes," I looked at him as though he had a third ear protruding from his forehead.

"Y para usted, señor?"

Cliff ordered Peruvian *tay pa*, a mixture of chicken, beef, and shrimp in a thick gelatinous sauce, with wonton soup. *This kid is weird*, I thought. Wonton soup and Peruvian food go together like – well – not like a wink and a smile, that's for certain. More like a wink and a vicious snarl.

The first time I met my new boyfriend's beautiful aunt and great-aunt was on a trip to South Florida to visit his parents and brother. Cliff's aunt Patricia and her mother, Elba, had lightly freckled cheeks and half-moon eyes and didn't look anything like the Peruvians I'd met so far, or anything I'd seen on The Travel Channel. They kept cans of straw mushrooms and

lotus root in their pantry and had gilded mahogany woodcarvings of pagodas and Buddha's hanging in their white-walled South Florida living room; I figured some mistake or strange twist of fate had been had. Someone Japanese had met someone Peruvian in Chinatown or in Queens where every other combination of ethnicity comes together.

This isn't right, I thought. They were beautiful, a comfortable mix of the demure Japanese women I'd known before and the outgoing, gregarious Peruvians I was coming to love. I've had a sneaking suspicion, as I bet many new family members have when they're introduced to a new adoptive culture in which they don't feel entirely comfortable, that his family would rather I be Peruvian, too. Carmen, Cliff's tiny mother, introduced me enthusiastically and beamed, "She speaks Spanish!" I know this was supposed to be a compliment – a formal entrance into a circle of trust, so to speak, but it didn't feel like it at the time. It felt a little disconcerting, like any other *gringas* Cliff had brought home were unacceptable because they hadn't spoken Spanish. The heat was on and it was getting hotter.

But when I met Doña Elba and Patricia with their families, they embraced me, called me "*hijita*" and ushered me into the kitchen where Patti pulled out a tray of empanadas and Elba stirred the *aji de gallina*.

I learned the word "coolie" shortly after meeting Cliff's extended family. Over 100,000 indentured servants were brought by the Peruvian government to work in the silver mines and guano pits in Peru from the early 1850s until the late 1870s. Thousands and thousands of Chinese were bought by newly-instituted Brazilian government during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to work on the railroad and in the sugar cane fields. Any servant or slaves brought to do manual labor in the West were called "coolies." The word comes from the Pinyin characters:

苦力, pronounced “kǔlì.” Literally translated, it means “bitterly hard (use of) strength,”

dooming these people to a life of servitude and endless manual labor. These people were *de facto* slaves in every sense of the word. They worked for no money, many of them died on the ships to their destination from malnutrition, disease, or mistreatment. Coolies from Asian countries were sent not only to South America, but also to Australia, South Africa, Trinidad, and Martinique to perform all kinds of manual labor.

An article published in The New York Times on December 29, 1890, reported that coolies were treated horribly on the plantations and properties of their owners, “compelled to work in irons to prevent their running away. They are also locked up at night, and undergo cruel tortures when punishment is exercised.” Even fifty years after the slavery of black Africans and Caribbeans came to an end in the United States, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian slaves were being traded in South America to build railroads, pick cotton, and harvest sugarcane and guano. If the masters couldn’t beat the Black Man, they’d beat the Yellow Man. This didn’t surprise me a bit when I first read it. Slavery is an institution millennia old, and that the Chinese would flee the brutal Brazilians, who play soccer the way they must have treated slaves, for the especially docile and party-prone Peruvians (in sports and in everyday life) is no shock.

In 1893, when the House of Commons in London convened, a Mr. Cropper asked the Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs whether it was true that a “gigantic emigration” of Chinese coolies were to be introduced into Brazil, and whether the Marquis Tseng, the England-based representative of the Chinese government in England, was going to sign the trade deal. The Under Secretary, Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, probably sweating through his wig, denied the claim. The Crown would not participate in an act that had been banned by the Anti-Slavery Act

of 1807. Britain did not actually stop trafficking coolies to Cuba until 1858, but when they stopped the trade to other countries is left to speculation.

Ghandi fought for the abolition of the coolie trade, and the practice was ended formally in the 1920s, after almost 300,000 Asian laborers had immigrated to South America. Many had already escaped Brazil to Peru, where the treatment of coolies was much less harsh and where, according to the article published in *The Times*, “most of the estates in Peru chiefly conspicuous for maltreatment of the Chinese laborers are owned and managed by foreigners.” In Lima, a growing Chinese community began to take root. By this time, the Chinese government had heard of the maltreatment of its workers, and the news spread to Japan and other countries who supplied these indentured servants. The emigration of coolies was prohibited by the governments of these countries in 1899.

Generations after the first seventy-five runaway coolies came to Peru, there is now a name for Chinese-Peruvians who are second-generation born in Peru and on – *tusán*, a word on loan from the Pinyin word for “local born.” Some estimate that the population of people with Asian decent in Peru has reached 15% of the total population of the country, about the same as the percentage of people in the United States with German heritage.

After the War of the Pacific, which arose between Chile and the joint forces of Bolivia and Peru over the mineral-rich areas of Tarapaca and Arica, hundreds of thousands more Chinese and Japanese left Chile for Peru, and specifically Lima, to escape genocide. When the Chinese found a spot in Lima they liked, now called the *barrio chino*, they went to work. Natural-born entrepreneurs, the Chinese ex-slaves set up shop: auto-repair, button and shoe makers, and tons

and tons of restaurants now called *chifas*. There are over 6,000 *chifas* in the *barrio chino*, and Peru has, by far, the most Chinese restaurants in Latin America.

* * *

“Do you like seafood?” Cliff asked on our first date. His coffee-colored eyes shifted.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

It was natural, I suppose, to expect certain things from a culture. He expected that I’d be grossed out by seafood. It smells funny. It tastes like seawater (honey, it’s supposed to). Raw oysters look like snot. They can’t eat something with eyes. There are bones. As he rattled off these high-maintenance grievances to me over our beers, his eyes rolled back in his head ever so slightly and the creases in his tanned, Roman nose wrinkled slightly in disappointment laced with disdain. His tone conveyed his real feeling about those comments. Cliff rightly chalked those reasons up to either ignorance or stupidity. This was a man, I now knew, who felt strongly about fish. And I was starting to feel strongly about him. Food, to me, started to equal love.

“I love seafood. I can’t get enough,” I replied.

“Oh, thank God,” he heaved a melodramatic sigh from his barrel-chest, biological signals bursting in my head instantly categorizing him as capable and strong with high levels of testosterone. The sigh suggested that if my answer had been “no,” he’d probably have gotten up from the table right there, deflated with defeat once again. The reality: cultural expectations are real, but in this relationship, they were about to be shattered completely.

Lima is on the coast, so seafood, something the Chinese and Japanese were more than adept at cooking with for hundreds of years, was always plentiful. The Japanese got right to introducing their sashimi and sushi practices and rituals into their new homeland. Sushi seemed

to take off immediately. The idea of raw or gently cooked seafood in combination with another Lima staple food, rice, seemed the perfect afternoon snack, especially since ceviche, basically just raw fish cooked by the acid in a lemon and lime marinade, was already a culinary mainstay on the Pacific Coast of South America. Asian culture and cuisine became assimilated into Peruvian life easily and quickly.

It didn't quite happen the same way with American food. Many South Americans, especially the older ones, would rather jump off Machu Picchu than eat a double cheeseburger. Chinese food had to change completely to be accepted by the wary Americans. Inventions like General Tso and Beef with Broccoli catered to the American addiction to sweet, salty and fatty, while in Peru, fried rice retains more of its earthy qualities than the soy-sauce stained version Americans know. I've tried making American food for Cliff's family. Sometimes it works, other times, it doesn't. One morning, I woke early to surprise the family with a pile of French toast. They appreciated it enough, but I could tell that they longed for the chorizo and eggs that usually bejeweled the breakfast table.

Chef Nobu Matsuhisa, who owns more than twenty worldwide restaurants, lived in the *barrio chino* for most of his younger years, and incorporates the flavors of Latin America into his über-pricey hotspots' menus whenever possible. He has set forth the notion that ceviche, the raw fish marinated in a mixture of chilies and lemon juice, is the South American version of sashimi. I think the inverse of that is probably true, too. Sashimi is also the Japanese version of ceviche.

In culinary school, we were taught about the "Holy Trinities." In classical French and Italian cooking, the triumvirate of holy vegetables is carrots, onions, and celery. This is what

just about every sauce, stock and entrée starts with. In Cajun/Creole cooking, the threesome contains onions, celery and green bell peppers. In Asian cooking, the three most important foundational vegetables are green onions (scallions), ginger and garlic. Just about every Peruvian dish from saucy, green *seco de carne* to the stir-fried beef in *lomo saltado* starts with those three flavors.

Asian cooking and the traditional flavors of Peru seem made for each other. Coriander, an integral spice in Chinese cooking, was found in the bounty of cilantro growing across the Peruvian landscape and used generally in the native cuisine. The Italians from Argentina had introduced pesto-making to the Argentine and Peruvian population, switching out the basil for exotic cilantro, the plant grown from the seed – coriander. New and different fruits made it into Chinese stir fries as they adjusted to their surroundings and adjusted their food to a new audience. Pineapple found a home in a gooey, tangy red sauce poured over duck and pork. Guava ended up in traditionally-one-note Chinese custards.

* * *

Señora Lin handed Cliff a small rectangle wrapped in bright purple cellophane that crinkled at all times.

“I’ve seen you here before, with your *gringita*,” she smiled as she placed the Doña Pepa brand turrón cake on our table.

Gringita. That would be me.

“She’s American, but she loves Peruvian food,” Cliff responded, dispelling any expectation that I’d be ordering the Sweet and Sour Pork from the English-language menu.

I always get a little defensive when he says this. I know it's just an explanation, but for some reason, part of me feels like I have been around enough internationalism, have traveled to enough countries not to be categorized as simply, "American."

This is always going to be an issue, I know. I will always be the *gringita* in the family. Doña Elba will always announce, as beads of sweat appear on my forehead, prying open the thousandth New Years Eve oyster, that yes, the "white girl shoots oysters like a true Limeña."

Perhaps earlier generations would be proud to tell people that even though they're American, they appreciate the culture and cuisine of lands far away. Now, at least to this writer, that phrase has become the most heinous kind of oxymoron.

I am a citizen of the world.

This changes, however, whenever I have met a man (usually a European one) who, sensing a chance to impress, uses this line on me.

I am a citizen of the world.

No, sir. You are full of shit.

Señora Lin's smile widened and her pixie-cut black hair bristled and shone under the fluorescent lights of her establishment. She owned four restaurants in Lima, but left them all to come to Orlando and open China Hut over twenty years ago. At least that's what Cliff told me from what he could understand. Señora Lin is directly from China, learned Spanish as a little girl, and lived in Peru most of her life. Her rapid Chinese version of Spanish is completely unintelligible to me, and even Cliff can barely understand half of what she says. But we'll willingly eat her food.

Watching her hand Cliff the crinkly purple parcel stamped with the slogan “*Suaveciiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiito!*” a warning about how gooey, ooey, and caramely the enclosed pastry is, the transference of Chinese hospitality to Peruvian tradition. Turrón is one of Cliff’s favorite childhood memories, and he remembers his mother giving him a tiny slice every night before bedtime. He told me once that he remembers looking at his single, tiny slice of the rich dessert and thinking, “one day, I’ll have a turrón of my own, and I’ll eat the whole thing.” I haven’t seen him eat a whole one by himself yet, but I wouldn’t put money down that it will never happen. Sometimes, I can’t help but think: maybe I’m the turrón of his own.

Turrón is decadent, much like many of China and Japan’s far-too-sweet desserts spiked with gelatin and sweetened bean pastes. Layers of caramel are actually sandwiched between almond macaroon layers, topped with more caramel, more sprinkles and non-pareils than should be admissible (the top of the turrón looks kind of like a carnival threw up on top of it). Also, a single prune perches in the center of the top layer. I don’t really understand the prune. Perhaps it’s tradition, or perhaps it’s a bad joke. How many days will it take to digest 3,000 calories of Peruvian sweetness? Just chase it down with this prune and find out.

It takes a while, I’ll just admit. About as long as it takes to rid yourself of the guilt after the glut.

* * *

The Asian presence in Peru has effectively infiltrated the world. While most people aren’t aware of the high concentration of Asians in Peru, the Chinese and Japanese have not been content to stand idly by in the cultural or political world. Alberto Fujimori, a third-generation tusán, became the president of Peru in 1990. He was also indicted on several human rights

charges in April of 2009, and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Regardless, most Peruvians still approve of his presidency. It restored macroeconomic order to a country overrun by guerillas, and in this case, for the Peruvians, it *was* the economy, *estupido*.

* * *

Carmen, Cliff's mother, giggled as the slideshow clicked to the next picture. Cliff and I had just returned from Spring Break with our friends Bryce, Ally and Kyle. He and I stopped in Ft. Lauderdale to spend the night with his parents before continuing back to Orlando and back to reality.

“*La chinita es bonita, no?*” she asked me.

“*Si, mamá.* But Ally is Filipino.”

“Ahhhhh...” she let out an enlightened breath. “*Pero,*” she continued, rhythmically laying out the words in Spanish slowly so my ever-developing third-language skills could hone in on the words. “In Peru, lots of people just call the Asians *chinos*, and then specify where.”

“Like...*chino japonais?* A Japanese Chinese person?”

“Exactamente.”

* * *

To native Peruvians, all Asian immigrants might look the same, eat the same, speak Spanish with similar accents, and contribute to the Peruvian economy in similar ways. The stories of how they came to Peru, however, are as varied as their heritage. Whether arriving as escaped coolies from the cane fields and guano caves or as transients during Japan's overpopulation expulsion in late 1800s - when the population jumped from just under 40 million in 1890 to almost 50 million in 1905 – the *tusán* settled in South American kitchens and started

cooking from what they could find and what they already knew, and the dinner table will never be the same.

Ceviche de Pescado Peruano

Serves 4 as a main dish

If I wasn't already enamored in the whirlwind of new love, this recipe certainly sealed the deal. It's the perfect mid-summer meal, full of fresh ocean flavor.

Carmen, Cliff's mother, fell in love with her husband, Hugo, over this recipe. Peruvians have epic parties, and Carmen found herself in the kitchen at one of them. There he was: a man wearing a leather jacket and ranchero-style cowboy boots, a thick mane of black hair and smiling eyes making her favorite Limeño dish. Hugo stood at the counter, delicately slicing pearly fish and squeezing lemons. A bowl of steaming sweet potatoes fogged his Top Gun glasses.

Cliff asked me to tell his mother when I first met her what food was my favorite.

"Ceviche," I said.

She gasped, "*Ohhh! Mi hijita!*" My little daughter! She wrapped her arms around me in an embrace.

Ingredients:

4 lbs. fresh corvina or any white fleshed fish (flounder, tilapia or snapper)
2 lbs. fresh medium white shrimp, peeled and deveined
10 large lemons, juiced
10 limes, juiced
½ habanero or Scotch Bonnet chile, minced
3 large cloves garlic, minced
¼ cup loosely-packed cilantro leaves, chopped finely
2 red onions, very thinly sliced
4 sweet potatoes, peeled and boiled until tender, cooled
2 ears corn, shucked and boiled, halved

Directions:

1. Slice fish into half-inch slivers, the kind of slices you'd see in sashimi or on top of nigiri sushi.
2. Combine fish, shrimp and next 5 ingredients (through cilantro) in a large bowl. Cover and refrigerate for at least one hour.
3. Rinse red onions under running water to reduce pungency and enhance sweetness.
4. Remove ceviche from the refrigerator and divide into 4 equal portions. Serve ceviche (with ¼ cup of liquid) atop a lettuce leaf with half an ear of corn and a sweet potato. Top with red onions

With The Grain

Steam rose from the mountain. Tiny specks of green and fluffy rivers of yellow flowed from crevices down its uneven face. Purple tendrils jutted out from all sides, alongside curlicues of pink and pearly white orbs. Around the edge of the mountain, red, yellow, and green calligraphy wove in and out of the whiteness and outlined the sand-colored edifice in a decorative ring of fire. The murmur of low-spoken Spanish was suspended in the mist under the bright light.

There is no way he's going to eat all that rice, I thought to myself.

Cliff's eyes lit up the moment our waiter settled the mountainous plate of *arroz chaufa de mariscos* in front of him. Golden grains of rice stained with soy sauce studded with peas and corn overflowed the plate and spilled onto the white butcher paper below.

Cliff had told me about China Hut on our first date, but this was the first time, a few months after we met, that we'd visited. I had no idea what to expect from a place where Chinese people spoke fluent Spanish and where there was a separate menu where the moo goo gai pan and lo mein were nowhere to be found, written in a combination of Chinese characters with Spanish subtitles. It was the kind of juxtaposition that makes you reel a little bit, not sure where up is, trying to fight against the current dragging you out to a sea of cultural expectations that, you've been taught all your life, really shouldn't mix.

* * *

When we first met, stumbling through the awkward pauses and the questions that seemed to lead nowhere, he casually mentioned that he had an aunt that was half-Japanese and half-

Peruvian. I couldn't bring myself to admit that I had no idea what Peruvian food was like (was I absent from culinary school that day?), but I'd eaten my share of sushi and sweet potato tempura and knew what Japanese food tasted like. I couldn't imagine that the delicate flavors of the cuisine of Japan would be able to compete with the bold grilling and heavy spices I knew were involved in, at least, Brazilian cooking, which couldn't be all too far from Peruvian, I mused.

He assumed that because I was a chef I had eaten pretty much everything that the culinary world had to offer. I felt like I had assumed the same thing, but as soon as I heard the words "asian" and "latino" in the same sentence in reference to food, I had a feeling a new world was about to open up.

As Cliff munched on his pizza and gazed at me while I shyly sipped my Blue Moon (with extra orange slice), he asked if I'd ever been to China Hut. I said that I hadn't, and followed it with the obligatory "where's it at?" question.

"It's in a strip mall. It's not much to look at, but the food is amazing. Every time my parents come to Orlando to visit, we go there. My mom loves it."

"What do they serve there?"

Cliff began to open up. Until that point, it had been a struggle to get the conversation going. We'd talked online for two weeks straight, every night until three or four in the morning, never pausing to get a drink of water or a sandwich – we were completely engrossed in reading whatever the other would type next. On this first meeting though, expectations were high. We'd wondered, though our written conversations had been interesting, sexy, and engaging, if the sound of one another's voices would be a disappointment, or if there would be some glaring deformity. But we, after it all, loved the sound of one another's voices.

As soon as we started talking about food, as most of my conversations seem to go, the words just came pouring out after forty-five minutes of trying to decide whether another forty-five minutes was worth it.

China Hut sounded a little suspicious. I didn't, and still don't, consider myself a "food snob." I've had the opportunity to eat in some of the world's best restaurants, thanks to my fortuitous freelance work as a reviewer, and I appreciate the skill and artistry of professional chefs from my culinary training, but I'm more of a chowhound. A chowhound, in food circles, is someone who craves unrefined street food, basks in the freedom of open-air eating, and yearns for authentic food made simply, without fanfare. Over any stuffy temple of *haute cuisine*, I pick the taco stand, the Chinese steamed bun lady, the steel-can-barbeque or the kebab cart any day. The Puerto Rican woman with the toothy grin in Central Park that dishes out pillowy empanadas stuffed with shredded chicken has elicited more sighs of bliss from my lips than any four-course showcase.

Several of my eating habits totally disqualify me from being a "foodie," a pretentious term I despise, anyway. I enjoy the occasional tomatoey bowl of Chef-Boyardee Beefaroni as much as the next twenty-something who grew up in suburbia during the 80s.

I've eaten at some shady places where, afterward, I regretted that peek I stole at the back kitchen. Like the Mexican place on a side street where the storefront was so covered in graffiti that the name of the restaurant was unreadable. But the *barbacoa* tacos sent me dizzy and reeling from gustatory ecstasy.

But China Hut? In a strip mall on a street where no self-respecting young lady would find herself after dark? If this was a place to rave about, its description belied the quality of its

product. I'm into irony, so I wrote down the information for the restaurant in my tiny, fat notebook that held all of the other ironies I'd picked up along the way.

* * *

The mention of the restaurant was soon forgotten in the whirlwind of new love. We were more interested in finding ourselves in the shower at 6:30 a.m., not having slept more than twenty minutes at a time the night before, but having run the ultimate marathon. We made dinner; then we made love.

The first time I made dinner for Cliff, I made tilapia. It's not really a fish I eat on my own, since I find it tasteless and bland, but he loves it, and that's what mattered. I arrived at the glowing grocery store and made my way through the aisles, keeping my focus on the goal, trying not to get distracted by such exotics as Morbier in the cheese case, jalapeno pepper jelly (which, spread on fresh biscuits, tastes like heaven) and pickled okra (another abomination that belies my snobby title). I bagged a pineapple, a few multi-colored bell peppers, a can of corn and black beans, and a habañero chili.

'You bought all that?'" Cliff asked.

"Well, yeah. You want me to cook, don't you?" I said.

I sautéed the tilapia until it turned from opal to pearl and diced the vegetables, tossing them together with a little cilantro and lime juice, the seductive tropical aroma wafting in and out of the air as I arranged the mountain of salsa on top of the steaming fish. By cooking for him, I said as much as I could without opening my mouth. I said that I cared about him, that I wanted to feed him and that I wanted him to ask for more – outside of the bedroom.

Sleep, sex, sleep, sex, sleep, sex, shower. For days that turned into months, that was our relationship. We somehow focused on learning each other's bodies before learning each other's souls. I learned how his hairline curved around the nape of his neck as I peppered it with kisses. I learned the shape of his fingernails as I clutched his hands like an unclaimed prize. I memorized the flecks of golden blonde in his sideburns when I pressed my cheek to his and opened my eyes.

The usual after-class sex and subsequent nap would inevitably find us waking at 9 or 10 o'clock, far too late to go to the store or to eat anywhere of value or real nutrition in East Orlando, where college bars and chain restaurants dot the six-lane boulevards and where anywhere that serves fresh vegetables and unbagged salads closes right after sundown. In today's slang, the "walk of shame" according to the Urban Dictionary website is "when you leave someone's house with the same clothes you had on the night before, usually after a booty call." If there was a food equivalent to the walk of shame, these late-night forays to the Whataburger down the street would have been the "meal of shame."

One evening, we forewent the meal of shame and drove to South Orlando, to the strip mall on a shady street, so I could experience my first Chinese-Peruvian meal, my first *chifa*.

* * *

In Shintoism, the animistic religion predominant in Japan, the belief that one or many spirits are present in almost everything – humans, plants, animals, and many inanimate things – is a main tenet. Japanese folk tradition says that there are seven spirits that inhabit every grain of rice. A main staple in Asian countries, rice is especially sacred, and is often stated in the context of being a part of the Buddha. Many chefs in Japan call rice *shari*, which is literally translated to

mean the bones of Buddha, the foundation of his being, that which holds him together. Rice, for the Asian cultures, is the lifeblood of their belief system and their nutritional well-being.

A bowl of rice contains all the basic protein and starch that a human needs to survive. Never mind that its lack of vitamins and some key minerals (specifically the essential vitamin B1, or thiamine), has been known to cause specific ailments linked to the overconsumption of rice and the underconsumption of other vitamin-rich foods. Beriberi, a disease linked with thiamine deficiency, is one such disorder, specifically affecting people whose main diet staple is white, unpolished rice, like the kind found in most Asian and Latin American countries. In Trevor Corson's sushi treatise, *The Story of Sushi: an Unlikely Saga of Raw Fish and Rice*, he says, a "person who weighs 150 pounds would have to eat five or six small bowls of rice three times a day in order to survive on rice alone." A lot of rice, to be sure, but the point, to the Japanese, and perhaps to the world, is that it is possible to exist on only rice, bragging rights that only a select few foods can claim.

I often wonder whether Cliff's consumption of rice set the standard for that statistic.

For Central and South American countries, rice holds the same kind of importance. Cliff told me once that his mother used to tell him that if he stopped eating rice, his hair would fall out. She would point at her husband, Hugo, who has a thick (but surprisingly soft and fine) mane of jet black hair. "That's why your father looks like that." Genetics, bah. It's the rice. Carmen affectionately calls her husband "Cholo," a term that applies to people of mixed Latin American Indian and Black heritage who have come to identify themselves with Anglo-Saxon culture. More than once, since I began my relationship with Cliff, have I seen Hugo eat an entire rice-cooker full of rice, sharing only here and there with the other diners at the table. As Carmen

places a tray of stuffed conchiglioni – enormous shell-shaped pasta stuffed with a mix of creamy mascarpone and grainy ricotta cheese and baked with homemade tomato ragú and mozzarella – in front of her husband at dinnertime, I have heard him ask her, “Where is the rice?” When Cliff and I moved in together, the only appliance he owned, the only appliance his parents sent him to college with, was a rice cooker.

The intersection between the two cultures, from equatorial South America to archipelagic Japan and mainland China, with 10,000 miles between them, starts with rice. Never mind the undeniable similarity in seafood preparation, the conspicuous lack of dairy in both culture’s foodways, and the complex sauce-making tradition that accompanies both Latin American and Asian cuisines, rice is the foremost in foundation and fortitude. The presence of or lack of rice is the most recognizable similarity between the two cultures, and the quintessential example of the merge between the Asian and the Latino is *arroz chaufa*.

* * *

Before I went to culinary school, before the idea of creating complex flavor combinations and food preparations was even a glimmer in my eye, I couldn’t even put rice on my list of things-Holly-can-cook. Rice just seemed so temperamental and finicky. If you don’t get the water right, rice ends up soggy or crunchy – not “fluffy” like it says on the back of the Uncle Ben’s box.

I wonder if Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima ever had a thing going.

Rice was just never the opportune starch. Potatoes were easier, mashed or roasted. Pasta was ideal. I didn’t know there were Rice Rules: two cups of liquid for every cup of rice, wash the grains off first to eliminate excess starch and prevent the rice from becoming sticky, boil

quickly and then steam for 13 minutes, only make rice in a container with a tight fitting lid so no steam escapes. The last important rule: ruined rice is unsalvageable. You get 13 minutes to make rice. If you fail, you fail. There is no turning back, no advancing to go, no get out of rice jail free cards and absolutely no collecting of \$200. If your rice isn't fluffy and dry after 13 minutes, all you are left with is a pile of shitty, inedible rice. That's just how it is.

The rules get exponentially stringent and potentially upsetting when the shift from white to brown rice is made. Don't even get me started on wild rice.

All of these rules were completely lost on me somehow, and I don't remember ever eating rice as a child. My mother opted for pasta or potatoes or corn or whole grains like oats and barley from the 50-pound paint cans scattered around our house filled with such food-storage staples. Rice was a rarity, so I never learned to make it properly.

I lived with my then-best friend and her family the summer after my sophomore year of college. I worked during the day at their smoothie café in return for free room and board at their house. One night, I decided that in return for their hospitality and generosity, I would make dinner for the family: my best friend, her parents, and her younger brother. I decided on roast chicken, steamed broccoli, and rice.

I'm not sure what possessed me to make rice - I couldn't. Quartered, roasted red potatoes tossed with savory rosemary, fragrant olive oil, coarse kosher salt, and black pepper would have been a smarter choice. The rice ended up crunchy and somehow soggy at the same time. My best friend told me I should have known I couldn't do rice. I cried in the kitchen. My best friend's mother hugged me and told me she liked crunchy, soggy rice. I knew she was lying. Nobody likes crunchy, soggy rice.

Now, fifty-thousand dollars later, I can make rice. I've finally learned the fool-proof rice-making secrets (my favorite: if you don't have a lid that properly fits your pot or that has a vent hole at the top, cover the pot with plastic cling wrap and then put the lid on. The heat of the steam will seal the plastic wrap to the pot making an airtight seal (the kind of seal ideal for rice-making). After working the sauté station at one of Florida's best restaurants with rice on the menu every day, I learned how to instantly know, without measuring, how much water is the right amount for any volume of rice.

* * *

Ironically, though rice is completely unable to be saved if improperly cooked during that narrow 13-minute window, rice that has been properly cooked and has been denatured in the refrigerator can then be used to make fried rice, or *arroz chaufa*. As Cliff and I sat in China Hut, waiters rushing around in a flurry of Chinese-inflected Spanish, I examined the soy-stained mountain on his plate.

China Hut is a *chifa*, the name given to Chinese restaurants in Peru, owned by Chinese-Peruvians and that serve Peruvian versions of classic Chinese street food. Fried rice in America has become a take-out staple, full of MSG, perfectly delicious to the human palate. When Cliff ordered the *arroz chaufa de mariscos*, fried rice with seafood, a China Hut specialty, I expected a bowl of rice with some frozen vegetable mix, dark brown with soy sauce, reeking of Chinese-American kitsch, with a few anemic miniature pre-cooked shrimp, the kind fast-food seafood chains (the biggest, scariest oxymoron) bread, deep fry, and market as 'popcorn shrimp.' What was set before him, though, was quite different than my expectation. The *arroz chaufa* at China Hut was more than plentifully stocked with seafood: seared bay scallops, juicy-looking Florida

shrimp, chunks of mild white fish, and not only the squid rings that most restaurants fry into oblivion and pass off as calamari, but the pretty purple tentacles, full of ocean flavor and brine. The rice was golden, but not brown. There was no cloying scent of the caramel-colored salty water most Americans think of as soy sauce. The aroma was delicate and complex, unlike the fried rice that usually came in the cardboard take-out containers and whose grease stained the brown paper bag and the car seat underneath.

Cliff offered me a bite while I waited for my order. A completely new fried rice experience filled my head as I savored it. There were spices and additions here that I hadn't tasted before. The distinct flavor of ginger and scallions, usually present but muted in most American fried rice, wafted into my nose through my mouth. I almost wished there was an *arroz chaufa*-scented Yankee candle. I tasted a different kind of savory than I'd previously known – perhaps the earthy essence of *umami*, the fifth taste sensation. Cliff told me about the Japanese addition of *ajinomoto*, a kind of MSG produced in Peru and used in all *chifa* cooking. Ajinomoto is made in Japan and several other spots in Eurasia, but the biggest production plant is in Peru, where it is most widely used.

Chinese and Japanese tradition teaches respect for food and for single ingredients used in cooking, probably related to the Shinto spiritual teachings. The fact that *chifa* cooking uses soy sauce more sparingly than American versions of Chinese food is most likely directly related to that respect for ingredients that Asian countries embrace, but that most Americans seem to have missed along the way.

For most Americans, condiments are king. French fries are doused with ketchup or barbeque sauce, perfectly good steaks get dunked in some concoction called steak sauce and

plump hot dogs are ripe for a squirt of bright yellow mustard. I can't say that I'm blameless in this. I remember hearing about a celebrity chef who denied a diner additional salt or pepper because he insisted that his food was perfectly seasoned and needed no additions whatsoever. I feel the same way about my food, sneering slightly when Cliff asks for A-1 for a steak or ketchup for a perfect over-easy egg, but at the same time, palates are different, and what might taste perfect to a well-trained French chef may taste bland and asinine to your average eater. The ketchup thing, I still subscribe to. Ketchup is useless. There's the snobbery.

In reality, the soy sauce that Americans have come to know is nothing but salt, caramel color, and MSG. Real soy sauce, the kind you find in hole-in-the-wall dim sum palaces, is made from fermented soybeans, and is far more complex than the packets the take-out counter throws in the paper bag. At China Hut, there is no soy sauce on the tables. The flavor of the soy sauce can only enhance the dish so much before the salt takes over and masks the flavor of the food. As far as *arroz chaufa* goes, there is a remarkable lack of soy sauce, and additional condiments, additional additions, are completely moot. This is respect for food and flavor, true understanding of where the balance is.

* * *

It is said that a Japanese man doesn't feel as though he has eaten dinner until he has eaten rice. I have a feeling that Cliff feels the same way. Often, he comes home with a depressed look on his face, which can only mean that he feels as though he has broken 200 pounds. He will pull me aside to tell me that he feels fat. He will ask me to only make meat and vegetables for dinner for the next two weeks. I resolve to and "pinky-swear" that I'll do everything in my power to make sure he doesn't gain another pound. This lasts about three days.

“I’ve never seen someone eat so much rice in my life,” I said into the phone.

“He’s not fat, though,” my reformed Atkins-ist father mused.

“No, but he used to be a little bigger – forty pounds bigger, actually. He used to eat a lot of pasta with his last girlfriend. I guess that was all she knew how to make.” I said the last sentence with as much disdain as possible, though it wasn’t long ago that the only thing I could make was pasta – and tuna salad. “He also ate a lot of rice. When he came home from school, the only thing he would eat was a bowl of rice and some canned beans or soy sauce or something equally vile.”

“What have you been cooking for him?” my mother asked. Evidently I was being grilled on a conference call.

“Lots of vegetables. He loves them. He loves anything I put in front of him – except eggplant parmigiana. Though, he ate seconds of that, too. He just asked me afterward not to make it again. He’s funny like that.”

“How did he lose the weight?” my father said.

“He told me that he cut out rice and pasta completely. It was really hard for him, I guess. His favorite food is fried rice with fish, scallops, shrimp, calamari--”

“What’s calamara?” my mom said. She still enjoys mispronouncing words because she knows it irritates me if I have to correct her.

I gritted my teeth as I washed off the talcum-covered grains of polished white rice.

“Calamari, mom. With an I. It’s squid.”

My dad made a gagging noise, which didn’t bother me. I don’t expect much culinary prowess from someone whose culinary claim-to-fame bears the moniker “Oodles of Noodles.”

“It’s good, Daddy. It’s Italian. You’d love it.”

“It’s fried, right?” said my mom. She’s proud that she knows what calamari is.

“Right. Anyway, he loves seafood, and he loves fried rice. It’s kind of weird, but apparently they eat it a lot in Peru. Not that he would know first-hand; he’s never been.”

“But fried rice is Chinese,” my father chimed in. He’s also proud of himself.

“Yeah, Dad, but apparently there’s a lot of Asian people in Peru. Kind of random, but also interesting. I’ll have to find out more. He says his aunt is half-Japanese and half-Peruvian.”

“Ahhh…” my mother’s bell-curve inflection conveyed her interest. She’s a genealogy buff, spending hours in front of Family Tree Maker software and searching for her relatives from the Dark Ages online. Sometimes she jokes that it’s too bad they didn’t have Classmates-dot-com back then. I think she’s joking, anyway.

“Anyway, I have to go. I need two hands to finish dinner. Love you guys.”

We hung up, and I finished washing the rice. A quick boil, and then the temperature goes to extra-low for 13 minutes. I’m making beef with broccoli – not exactly *chifa* food, but it accompanies rice, and Cliff’s intramural soccer game is in a few hours. He needs the carbohydrates; I don’t care what his body is telling him. It will be easier to tell him he looks gorgeous (and if he’s gained a few pounds that I still think he’s sexy) than to drag him off the soccer pitch by his shirt-collar after his body expends the calories in the lean sirloin and steamed broccoli he ate *without* rice.

* * *

Chifa Konakai is in a strip mall off Broward Boulevard in Plantation, Florida. It has twenty seats and the perpetual soccer game on the fifty-inch big screen television on the wall.

The lights are moderate, and the windowed walls make the place look much bigger than the keyhole it really is. A small counter displays Peruvian sweets as well as a few Japanese bags of Haribo gummi candy and a tray of *alfajores*, dulce de leche sandwiched between two butter cookies and dusted with powdered sugar. When Cliff's father's father died, I sent him a batch of homemade *alfajores*. His mother cried when she tasted them.

After that, Cliff's father called him and asked, "Are you really serious about this girl? If not, you need to end it. Women who send homemade *alfajores* as condolence are not to be played with."

Konakai is one of many *chifas* in Ft. Lauderdale, where almost every country – not just Latin American country – has a restaurant representing its cuisine. The darkly complected Chinese-Peruvians behind the counter wear the short paper chef hats that sushi chefs sometimes wear. There is usually a group of Peruvians sitting in the back right corner, laughing about something in an accent I can barely make out.

My Spanish has gotten better, but I still have a hard time with the dropped syllables and the rapid conjugations of Peruvian Spanish. At least I no longer answer in French questions posed to me in Spanish. That was beyond embarrassing. I remember sitting in my first French class at BYU, itching to get to France, to move there, even. My instructor asked me a yes or no question - a *oui* or *non* question, actually – and I answered with a confident and resounding "¡Si!" I invented the Spenish language – half French, half Spanish. I still don't understand what most Peruvians are saying, let alone in between laughter, inside jokes, and Limeño slang.

I order a *chicha morada*, the fragrant purple corn drink whose aroma rises from the narrow bottle neck as soon as it's opened. It smells like flowers and cornfields. If corn

flowered before it blossomed into corn, that's what *chicha morada* smells like. Cliff's mother often complains that the drink in the States is a bastardization of real *chicha*. I don't really care. It's different than anything I've ever tasted. Cliff's electric yellow Inca Kola fizzes in his glass. Sometimes I wonder if the Incas were still around, what they would think of the ultra-sweet soft drink named after their million-year-old civilization.

Cliff and his father order a large bowl of *arroz chaufa de mariscos*. Like father, like son, I suppose, though Cliff ordered the small plate at China Hut. I can't imagine what the large is going to look like at Konakai. Carmen and I order *ceviche mixto*, our favorite food, by far. Like mother, like daughter. Carmen makes a big deal out of the fact that I can order in Spanish and that my accent is so un-American. She asks me to read the menu out loud to her so she can laugh happily and clap her hands with joy that I read in Spanish, too. I am earning points as I read.

The bowl of *arroz chaufa* arrives, and overflows with more seafood and vegetables than the one at China Hut. Slivers of fresh carrot garnish the bowl; juicy, perfect sugar snap peas glisten under the fluorescent light; slices of thick sea scallop replace the tiny, sweet bay scallops in the other *chaufa*. There is something distinctly different in this version of fried rice with seafood. Cliff's father, Hugo, tells me that it's because they add the savory Peruvian aji pepper for a little spice and a new flavor dimension.

I'm not sure it's the aji, but I'm willing to take this suggestion. Hugo has been eating Peruvian food for half a century, and this is only my second time.

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD, BUT NOT THE KNIFE

“Provocation we must have...This is why we need bold, brash essayists. Ours today are too cute, too modest, and too afraid to presume.”

Christina Nehring, “Our Essays, Ourselves,” Harper’s, 2003

When I enrolled in culinary school in 2005, I had no intention of working in a restaurant kitchen. The idea of sweating behind a stove never appealed to me, and I didn’t grow up with the notion that I wanted to own a restaurant or be a culinary superstar. I just wanted to write; I just wanted to know what I was writing about. I needed to know what kinds of smells wafted from the kitchen. I needed to know proper restaurant decorum and how fine dining should be. I wanted to learn to cook, not from Julia Child’s books like any other blogger or home chef, but from people who cooked for ambassadors and kings.

Though I always assumed that going to culinary school would inform my writing greatly, I had no idea that instead of only writing about food, I would end up writing about cooking. That the act, the actual fabrication of a dish, is one of the main themes throughout my writing, and shows that food is no longer an object to be admired and then eaten outright. Food has taken on an entirely new meaning for me throughout the writing process – it has become an experience that I live for.

While my transcripts from BYU awaited revision by the school, I took a course called College Success. Being an accredited institution, the Le Cordon Bleu requires its students to take general education credits, most of which I had already taken at the university level. That I had already graduated from a four-year university was a characteristic only shared with one other

student in my class. Yet, there we were; we sat in the classroom with twenty-eight other students taking a class we both considered moot: College Success. We'd obviously already been successful in college, but, as we listened to our instructor ask each student why they came to culinary school, we were humbled.

"Cooking is the only thing I know how to do right," said one student. "My Grandmama taught my Mama, and my Mama taught me."

"I worked as a cook in the Marines - best time of my life," said another.

"My mom said I either go to school or I'm out on the street."

Several students said they wanted to be the next Emeril Lagasse. As much as the man makes me cringe (BAM!), what he did for food is legendary. He made people care about cooking. He made food exciting and captivated audiences just by sautéing garlic.

"I didn't get into community college," said another. I empathized. I didn't get into law school. That kind of rejection can scar you for good. I admired the guy for picking himself up and limping to the finish line with the same kind of broken ego I was nursing.

One girl, Venice (not like Italy's City of Water, more like vuh-NEECE) broke into tears and the room, once full of almost-quiet tittering, fell silent like death.

"Katrina ruined my dreams," she started.

It was August 31, 2005, two days after the hurricane ripped through New Orleans like General Sherman ripped through Atlanta.

"I ain't got nothin' left," she said, wiping a tear with the back of her chef jacket, staining it black with mascara. "I came to culinary school to go to Louisiana and reinvent Cajun food into somethin' beautiful. Now, there ain't nothing beautiful left in New Orlin's."

None of us were sure what to say. Our instructor didn't really know what to say. Then, in 2005, none of us knew if New Orleans would ever be the same. We didn't know if the waters would recede Biblically, and Noah and the animals would walk out on dry land one day. No one knew if Chef Tory McPhail would fill the buckets with water and bail out Commander's Palace, the city's most renowned and acclaimed restaurant. No one knew.

It was my turn. I sputtered something about wanting to be a food writer, though at the time, I really had no idea what that meant. If I had known then what I know now, four years later and having read countless books of and on food writing, I would have been more eloquent. I would have expressed my desire to tell the stories behind the food, to put faces to farmers – the ones who put the food we eat on the table. I would have harnessed my untapped love for not-for-profit causes to champion the Immokalee tomato pickers in my home state of Florida, who work for pennies, live in shanty towns and live chained together for hours on end in the unforgiving heat that everyone else comes to Florida to worship. If I had known better, I would have believed in what I said.

Instead, I gave our teacher an opportunity to lighten the mood by brainstorming a list of food publications and talking about how each has a different audience and a different perspective of the culinary arts. *Cook's Illustrated* is for the scientist-cook; *Gourmet* is for the Francophile-cook; *Bon Appétit* is for the entertainer-cook; *Saveur* is for the writer-cook. An academic conversation, to be sure, but it didn't mean anything. No one's dreams were on the line for a food magazine – at least not then.

While I dripped sweat behind the stove in culinary school, I enrolled at Northwestern University in post-baccalaureate courses in the M.A. Creative Writing program. Before then, I'd

never taken a formal writing class in my life. My first writing workshop was absolutely terrifying. Ten other students read my work and ripped it to pieces. My first formal essay, my first creative work more than two crayoned pages tied together with lavender ribbon and which my parents called a book, was a complete disaster. From then, I wrote whenever I could. I read voraciously, mostly food books – the *Best Food Writing* compilations by Holly Hughes, Ruth Reichl’s memoirs, essays by *Vogue* food critic Jeffrey Steingarten, all of which taught me that food could be funny, touching and memorable. I lived to watch the *Food Network* (and have since learned better) and memorized recipes for the five “mother sauces” before I fell asleep. In my dreams, I made béchamel, Hollandaise, velouté, a meaty espagnole and smooth tomato purée.

I graduated from culinary school in early 2006 and left Chicago for Paris, where I worked two jobs for no pay as a personal chef. I didn’t have time to write. I didn’t have time to breathe. But any chance I got, I left my tiny *chambre de bonne*, the apartment on the top floor of the building (which is not considered glamorous living space), down the stairs to the Metro, two stops west to the Musée du Louvre on Tuesday nights when it was free to students. I wandered its grand halls aimlessly, with no agenda other than to find inspiration and to write in my journal. My favorite areas housed the furnishings of Napoleon II, grand chandeliers and four-poster beds that must have been built for Napoleon’s complex, certainly not his physical size. I pictured myself in a long, white chiffon gown, adorned with crystals and a glimmering tiara, being lead down the red velvet stairs by a tuxedoed Frenchman with slicked black hair and dark eyes. I sat on a stone bench, pulled out my journal, the one with Picasso’s guitar player printed on the front, and began to write freely. I designed plates and recipes. I read Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, Adam Gopnik’s *Paris to the Moon* and Suzy Gershman’s *C’est La Vie*.

Clinging to my graying issues of *Gourmet* and the French version, *Sauveurs*, I studied recipes and started to write. By reading, I learned what food writing should be and what it should not be. I learned that there should not always be an adjective before a food, as in “verdant green beans” or “crusty bread” or “creamy cheese.” I learned that I had something new to bring to the table, literally. In college, I wrote sketches for a comedy group and had a knack for it. There were food articles in *Gourmet* that read on and on almost interminably and others that rolled like a river, freely and easily. I yearned to write funny, rollicking essays with poignant messages, delicious recipes and casual tones.

Upon being admitted to the MFA program, I decided that I would find a voice. My writing, up to that point, was a direct reflection of what I was reading at the time. If I read Hemingway, my essays rarely reached eight or nine pages. If I read Thomas Hardy, I wrote in long, comma-heavy sentences often reaching a paragraph in length. I got home from France, tired and broke, and I found David Sedaris. I not only read his essays, I listened to him read them to me in the car and found that he wrote the same way he spoke. This became my new objective.

During the course of my thesis, I tried on many different voices. I found many to be labor-intensive, like *East Meets, and Eats, West*. Others were immediately gratifying, like *Gone With the Pork*. I wrote *Joe Bob and the Grunt* near the end of my thesis and out of any of the essays contained in the work, this one sounds the most like me. Riddled with one-liners and foul language, the essay is truly a product of a writer’s work in the restaurant life. In the hot kitchens that feel like steamy dungeons in the Florida July, there is no waiting. While the oil in the pan comes to a smoke, the cook does a thousand other things. Short shouts of “behind you!” and

“coming down the line!” replace elegant conversation once service has started. Until the last customer has left, it’s *go, go, go*, and *push, push and push harder* until the last plate leaves the window. *Joe Bob and the Grunt* feels like the restaurant, pushing just far enough to get to the breaking point, and then a quick break for a frustrated rant or a moment of reflection.

From the beginning, I decided I wanted to include recipes. Reading the book *Domesticity*, by Bob Shacochis, confirmed it. The book is full of recipes written as prose, and while I’m sure many of them produce delicious food, most of them are just plain good reading. I used this book as a model for the recipes I wanted to write. I later read *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo* by Ntozake Shange, a book that begs to be eaten as much as read. In *Black Hunger*, by Doris Witt, she cites the book as a perfect example of how soul food has entered literature. She says, “*Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo* requires not simply to be read or spoken (or even viewed in a theater); it demands instead that we perform and consume it – that we cook and eat its recipes as an integral part of our experience of the work.” This is exactly what I wanted my thesis to be.

While graduate school has taken the bulk of my time for the past two years, I’ve also taken on the role of restaurant reviewer and food writer for *Orlando Weekly* and *Orlando Style* magazine. I took an internship at *Cooking Light* magazine, where I wrote about food and cooked as much as I could. It feels as though I haven’t stopped since I started writing about food. All at once joyful, cathartic, stressful and exciting, food is an ultimate pleasure. Writing about it has forced me to form opinions (though that’s never been a problem) about food - really *think* about what I’m putting in my mouth and the aromas that travel up my nose and to find meaning in the smallest of details. My descriptive writing has developed during this process, and, though some passages may seem gratuitous to some, each holds meaning. I learned to use descriptive writing

to my advantage, pulling every strand of every physical sense to create a complete picture. In creative writing, I've found, even the best writers forget about the one sense that nourishes our health and our well-being – taste.

As I write this now, late in 2009, I feel what that girl in my culinary school College Success class felt that day when we, stupid we, asked her to tell us her dreams of New Orleans. In the midst of the economic downturn, the oldest food magazine in America has closed its production: *Gourmet* will be no more. Chronically ambitious, it was no secret that my two life goals were to be the *New York Times*' food critic and the editor-in-chief of *Gourmet*, a publication that directly inspired my career and the careers of so many other food writers, chefs and home cooks. The winds of the recession have blown over my dream and sent it floating in pieces into the Gulf. Like I thought once in *Enter, Food*, maybe I'd better think of something else to do with my life. I'm hopeful that as my dreams change, so will the world, more cognizant of its neighbor's flavors and more willing to pick up that fork (or those chopsticks) and eat.

Whatever I do, I'll be in the kitchen.

APPENDIX: BOOK LIST

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