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Around the Table

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"Around the Table"

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ABSTRACT

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This collection of nonfiction essays revolves around concepts of food and home. The essays focus on the universalizing nature of food, both from a personal perspective, and from a diasporic Middle Eastern perspective. In these essays I explore how food unifies and creates communities. The essays range from exploring my own upbringing in rural Upper Michigan, and how food creates bonds within my own family and community, to examining how food creates ties and communities within the Arab diaspora. This collective narrative, in focusing on the communal characteristics surrounding the human need for sustenance, seeks to bring everyone to the table.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Doug and Ruthette Mills, who, along with giving much love and support along the way, fostered in me curiosity about the world and passion for the written word.

To my sister, Laurel Mills and my brother Daniel Vogel for circuses, tea parties, forts, picnics and plays.

And to Orson Humphrey, for love and listening.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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Introduction

We gather around the table. Voices of those who have come before me burst from the pages of food-smudged tomes. *Come into the kitchen*, voices whisper in sibilant, papery tones. *Everything you'll ever need to know is here. All the knowledge and history of people and the world. Mythologies of race, religion, war, everything it means to be human and part of a society, everything of this amorphous thing we call "culture", is in the kitchen. Each utensil, ingredient, cooking method, recipe, meal, is not unique to you,* the voices say. *The garlic whose papery skin you peel, whose cloves you mash and chop, the sensual undertone to most every meal you cook, has inhabited human cooking spaces for over 6,000 years, little girl.*

Garlic is the smell on your lover's breath at the end of a meal. Ancient Egyptians worshipped it, taking it with them to the underworld. Garlic is ward and aphrodisiac. Widows, monks, and children were admonished to avoid garlic because of its stimulating qualities. Garlic is medicine.

Garlic is the song that sings long after the meal is over and dishes done. It is the bass note beneath all the other flavors. Garlic is family dinners, whiffs of childhood, a wooden salad bowl laced with lettuce and slicked with olive oil passed from hand to hand around the dinner table.

Listen.

To eat is to make meaning. "Only food—all-necessary, visible, an external object which becomes internal, and which then turns into the very substance of the eater—could give rise to such a clear yet mysterious and effective ritual" (87) says food anthropologist Margaret Visser, her voice lightly inflected in Afrikaans. "Table manners everywhere insist on the rituals of

starting…They represent, both practically and symbolically, an option not to be satisfied with merely assuaging your bodily hunger, but to overlay and control 'nature' in order to enjoy it more" (145). *Every aspect, from the moment you begin planning a meal to doing the dishes, has meaning. Each cooking act is not singular—did not come about in a vacuum, but became a part of mythologies humans perform every day. Each act is a simulacra of millions of other moments just like this one, played out across time.*

Your family holds hands around the table, giving thanks before every meal—a ritual evolved from prayer. Generations on both sides, Germans on one and Scotts on the other, said Grace around the dinner table. The pause before eating. I remember the doxology: "God is great, god is good, and so we thank him for this food." I remember "Amen." I don't remember when god vanished and Amen stayed—when "Our Father" was replaced by breathless moments of thankfulness for food and family. I close my eyes, joining hands before the meal. My left hand in my father's right, permanent callouses the result of growing and harvesting this meal and thousands before it, rough against my palm and fingers. My right hand in my sister's, her fingers squeezing mine. My mother sits across the table, face lit with joy.

To eat is to tell a story. To eat is a way to remember. To eat brings the ghosts of people and places, settles them around the table, makes them immortal. I hear the voice of the displaced calling from the pages, calling out to be remembered.

> "Tell your news the way they tell their stories: slow and tasty…no rushing. Make it delicious like the olives, black and bursting with sweetness and sourness.
> Remember the bottles of olive oil Um Saud gave you, and how you could drink a cup like a shot of whiskey, only without the burn, the white balls of cheese, sour with the bitterness of another land spread on bread so thick you could sleep under it…
> Cross the ocean, Abu Saud whispered, and take with you what you have learned, who you have seen, and the tastes that have nourished you, and please, do not forget us…
> Don't Rush…make it delicious." (Halaby 1-2)

Recipes are stories, a breath out of time, ghosts gathered around the hearth.

Bread. Saturday late-morning baking. Large stainless steel bowl cradled bubbling yeast in its round belly. Yeast swelled, readying to receive its partner, flour. Microbial flora, fermentation, older than written language. Yeast gave humans alcohol and bread; forgetting, pleasure, and sustenance.

Yeast's sour smell wafts over the silver bowl's edge.

Yeast and flour, the timeless match, first monogamy, bringers of bread. Momma makes dust clouds that hang, suspended in sunlight as she pours, two, four, six, eight cups of flour from the measuring cup. Behind this act are millennia's of bakeries, thousands of mills, millions of acres of wheat, and farms for miles, spread across the globe.

Momma mixes, the bowl a slow rotation, clockwise, beneath her hands.

This bread, the loaves she will feed her family and loved ones in weeks to come, she makes her own.

She adds vegetable water, tiny broccoli and green bean bits disappear, become dough as she stirs. The water comes from frozen garden vegetables, steam-thawed and strained before serving. She saves the water that's left. "It's where the nutrients are." She tells you when you ask. "Can't let those go to waste," she says, kissing your forehead.

In Momma's bread is a bit of dad's garden. It is an overlooked smidgen of goodness Momma saves from being lost down the drain, turning it instead into sustenance for her family.

She adds maple syrup. Syrup your father boils every spring from gallons of sap gathered from craggy maple trees that line your gravel road.

She adds wheat berries. Bite-sized grain granules she sprouts on little green plastic lids, green shoot cracking open brown hull. Momma adds sprouted seeds to bread for health, and I like the way they crunch between my teeth.

Momma mixes dough, lets it rise, kneads, flours, and rises again. She separates the sticky mass, resting each wedge into greased baking pans as carefully as she lays my baby sister in her crib.

The baking bread makes the whole house smell warm. Warmth that tugs at something inside me, a hunger ancient as agriculture. Bread is one of humanity's oldest prepared foods. It both defies and defines segregations of race, class, and gender. The French Revolution began with bread riots, brown grain and white grain defined class divisions, and Marie Antoinette declared, "Let them eat cake."

I learned to love Momma's bread as it came to me, hot from the oven. Sometimes she let me brush the golden loaves with butter, the oily brush bestowing a gilded sheen across the loaf's crusty, slitted surface.

When the bread cooled, warm to the touch but not hot, Momma cut off the heel with the long serrated knife. If I was lucky, and close by, the first bite was mine. Where others disdained the bread-end, I craved and coveted it.

I slathered it in butter, creamy spread melting into the grains.

The satisfaction of taste, how the butter was cream and salt, and the bread crusty, chewy, warm, felt like an instinct, something older than me, but a part of me. Margaret Visser says of bread,

> "Because we are human and because, as we shall see, 'cultural' behavior appears in us to be a 'biological' necessity, bread became in addition, and has remained, a deeply significant symbol, a substance honored and sacred. We still remember that breaking bread and sharing it with friends 'means' friendship itself, and also trust, pleasure, and gratitude in the sharing. Bread as a particular symbol, and food in general, becomes, in its sharing, the actual bond which unites us. The Latin word *companion* means literally 'a person with whom we shared bread'; so that every *company*, from actors' guild to Multinational Steel, shares in the significance evoked in breaking bread." (3)

Cooking tells stories of commonality, shared roots, unity undivided by race and religion. Tastes change, plants evolve, recipes travel. Edward Said asks, "How does a mother confirm her intimate recollections of childhood in Palestine to her children, now that the facts, the places, even the names, are no longer allowed to exist?" (622). *Stories hold memories. The foods of home are imbedded in remembrance, fastened to the stories and reminiscences that help preserve a sense of heritage and identity, even in exile.*

Food becomes memory. Home is a taste. Food is woven into our very narratives. "My father looks old. His skin is dark, like fava beans, only more wrinkled, like raisins…The mother's heart broke, but her face stayed smooth, her sadness showing only in the darkness of her blood, in the eggplant color her face became as she folded the sadness into herself, ate it like an almond nowhere near ripe" (Halaby 12,48). *Food defines who we perceive ourselves to be.*

Claudia Roden, Jewish author of Middle Eastern cookbooks says, "I gathered all kinds of dishes—humble peasant food, flamboyant Mediterranean dishes, and very elaborate, sophisticated ones. I detected a certain unity, and there were many that seemed regional variations on a theme…Cooking does not stand still: it evolves. Life is different, and different choices are made to adapt to new circumstances" (6-7).

Cooking transcends politics, race, and religion. The big three mythological entities, human constructs that divide this world are represented in rituals of eating, but have no place in the kitchen.

Edward Said, the sadness of all Palestine in his voice, asks, "But is there any place that fits us, together with our accumulated memories and experiences? Do we exist? What proof do we have?" (632). Is it enough? He seems to ask. What happens after the meal has been eaten, the foods consumed and the reality of displacement reasserts itself?

Hope is in the hearth. The voices say. *Hope is ritual, repetition, ingrained daily necessity, the breaking of bread and sharing of salt. Hope is gathering round the table heavy with foods carrying generations' worth of weight. Hope is learning the history and meaning behind that weight.*

Listen. The voices around the table say. *Food is more than necessity—more than fuel. Food is love: fresh oyster brine, shell hard and opalescent against your lips and heat from your lover's gaze; blackberries bursting-ripe, purple twined fingertips picking; ice cream, velvety, cold and creamy against your tongue; bacon sizzle; aromas of crusty bread, garlic, cheese, wafting across still lake water.*

Aromas, flavors, the very shapes of food are aphrodisiacs, Isabel Allende reminds me in her book, Aphrodite. *Taste.*

> "Appetite and sex are the great motivators of history; they preserve and propagate the species, they provoke wars and songs, they influence religions, law, and art. All of creation is one long uninterrupted cycle of digestion and fertility; everything in life is reduced to a process of organisms devouring one another, reproducing themselves, dying, fertilizing the earth, and being reborn transformed. Blood, semen, sweat, ashes, tears, and the incurable poetic imagination of humanity in search of meaning…" (Allende 199).

Pay attention, the pages rustle like dry leaves in the wind. Voices living and dead clamor for my attention, singing mythologies, reciting recipes, making meaning.

I question my place around this table, question whether I belong. Question what I have to tell the world about food, what impression my words will have, if any. Who will read my recipes?

Mary Francis Kennedy Fisher, voice layered with unshed onion-tears of cooking through a lifetime's worth of joys and hardships, reminds me.

> "People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don't you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do? They ask it accusingly, as if I were somehow gross, unfaithful to the honor of my craft.

> The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to be that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it…and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied…and it is all one.
> I tell about myself, and how I ate bread on a lasting hillside, or drank red wine in a room now blown to bits, and it happens without my willing it that I am telling too about the people with me then, and their other deeper needs for love and happiness.
> There is food in the bowl, and more often than not, because of what honesty I have, there is nourishment in the heart, to feed the wilder, more insistent hungers. We must eat. If, in the face of that dread fact, we can find other nourishment, and tolerance and compassion for it, we'll be no less full of human dignity.
> There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broke and wine drunk.
> And that is my answer, when people ask me: Why do you write about hunger, and not wars or love?" (451-452)

I search around the table, Wendell Berry, Barbara Kingsolver, Laila Halaby, Diana Abu-Jaber, Margaret Visser, Claudia Roden, Michael Pollan, Nigel Slater, Isabelle Allende, Lynne Rosetto Casper. Names and images, clear and shadowy, voices across history, whispering on the page.

My voice is quiet, hesitant. I tell stories of barefoot summer garden running, the clear burst of parsley, fresh bread's first bite. I reincarnate the dead, reimagining bowls of moose stew Shane hands round the hunting camp as the South wind stirs coals to red in the iron stove. Shane glows with health, the aroma of moose stew anchoring my story. I evoke memories of my marriage and its end, book-ended in flavors of stir-fry and jars of fruit, pickles, and tomato sauce canned a lifetime ago. I reimagine tent-city, bread and cheese, blueberries flavored with rain. I conjure Ahmad, Maan, Mohammad, and Ameer, their stories layered and arranged with my own like layers of baklava's phyllo dough. I tell stories of a square table—a mother, father, and two sisters holding hands, building histories.

My narrative recipes, the mythologies that make up who I am.

Preface

If you focus an image, a memory of home, it will, in some way, be tied to the kitchen. The room, warm, voices laughing, and stories told. The kitchen is the space lessons are taught and family mythologies woven and passed on, the meeting of human need and pleasure. The kitchen feeds history, a civilization's worth of knowledge in ingredients and technique. We learn who we are in the kitchen.

Our lives are recipes whose first draft begins in the kitchens of our youth, and the lessons we learn serve as life-long guides. But any good recipe is adaptable, and gains something new with each incarnation.

***

You were twenty-six, married, an adjunct English professor. You began writing these essays four years ago, believing the recipe of your life written, published, and put away on a back shelf. No revisions.

You would get a job at the university. You would have babies by the time you were thirty, you would stay in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for the rest of your life.

When you were twenty-eight, you pulled that recipe book off the shelf, dusted it off, and took eraser and pencil to pages you believed forever unalterable.

You realize, awaking one cold day in early April that the ingredients you were using for your recipes were not the right ones. You can't taste anymore. You can't smell. Even garlic, the scent of your childhood, ever present on your fingertips, fails to stir you.

You think of your parents, happily married for forty-three years. In your youth, you wanted everything they have—it was your model of happiness. Their kitchen was *home*—where you learned to cook, ate together as *family*, told stories, and danced barefoot to Roy Orbison, Lucinda Williams, and Emmylou. In this kitchen, you learned flavor, character, and began your life's narrative recipe.

You think of your husband and your home kitchen, modeled after your parents'—the center of your household, the gathering place, the hearth. Your place of solace and control in a big world you cannot make work for yourself, no matter how much you cook, scrub, clean, and cry.

Wooden beams crisscross the cedar ceiling, hold the house together. You stand beneath them, run your hands over the blond, chop-block countertops, stare into the stocked pantry cupboard, and turn the burner on the gas stove to hear the "tick, tick, hiss" one more time.

You think of your friend Dan's words as he edited your essays: "Your husband isn't in the kitchen with you. You have to find a way to bring him in more. Or take him out.

You reread your essays, your journals, searching. Where did you lose your hunger? Why isn't your husband in the kitchen with you?

You turn to revision.

One May day you close the kitchen door and pull out of the driveway, no plan and nowhere to go, your old brown dog and three dozen baby tomato plants in the back seat.

You sleep on couches, floors, and hotel rooms, housesit, and camp night after night next to a waterfall that you hear like an oral mirage for days.

Between April and September in 2013, you sleep in so many different places you lose count at fifty. One week you sleep in the home of the University President and his wife,

housesitting their dogs. The next you sleep on the beach, staring up at the stars, agates beneath your back and Lake Superior murmuring at your feet.

You are unmoored, floating on a local rip current, treading water along the shoreline, waiting for the current to run its course. Your lifeline—food. You cook in the President's well-stocked kitchen over a gas stove with good olive oil: mussels and risotto accented with your first belly laughs in months. You cook venison shish-kabobs with your lover over an open fire on a grill made of forked sticks, the juices dripping into the flames and scenting the night with roasting meat. You cook in your sister's kitchen, wild leeks, asparagus, and fresh-caught salmon.

You cook, feed loved ones and friends, and find yourself again, even for a few moments.

You move from kitchen to kitchen, and reflect on diasporas—communities of the displaced. You read books about people—Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians, Lebanese, Yemenis, washed up on the shores of Lake Michigan on the outskirts of Detroit. They carry with them the spicy aroma of *za'atar*, the flavors of roasted eggplant, and the cadence of Arabic.

You remember your visits to Dearborn and the stories told around tables of food, Lebanon and Palestine manifest in the emerald green olive oil slicked over creamy hummus.

Before you left home, you could do little but guess what it felt like to be homeless and displaced.

You recollect the longing on Mohamad's face as he described missing his Lebanese mother's cooking. How the lines smoothed as he laughed about being so glad to be back in Lebanon he even ate his mother's *mulukhiyah*—a stew of mallow leaves, chicken, raw onion, and vinegar. You remember how each bite of food from the little deli on the corner where they fed

you steaming salty white cheese and parsley *fatayer* right out of the case, no charge, tasted full of longing for a faraway home of olive trees and uncertain futures.

Your drives down Warren Avenue and Ford Road, every other sign in Arabic, evoke stories of a Palestinian grandmother keeping the memory of her homeland alive in the herb seeds she brought to the United States, tied in a corner of her skirt. A Jordanian father teaches his half-American daughter about being Bedouin as he cooks her the foods of the desert in a New York suburb. A Lebanese man shares the flavors of Lebanon, rooting in his loved one's memories parsley's sharp green bite and roasted eggplant's dark purple, garlicky cream.

You plant tomatoes in your sister's street-side flower pots, your father's orderly rowed garden, the little plot of turned earth in your friend's yard next to her python's grave.

Now, you understand.

***

More than necessity drives us to the dinner table. This table, so loaded with the accumulated weight of human kind's meaning-making, it's a wonder it doesn't collapse.

Humans have elevated eating to more than consuming calories for survival and exercising our omnivorous teeth—we have tied sensuality, pleasure, joy, fulfilment, and even love to the act of eating.

We are all human when we eat—weak, subject to the demands of necessity. The frail body must feed itself to survive, no exceptions.

Human history is food and stories, shared around a campfire. We didn't just creep in for the warmth, but to be together, eat together, find pleasure in an obligatory act as we spin stories that make up the backbone of what it means to be human.

Eating is a time to put the weapon down, put the tool down, put the pulpit down, and come to the table and fill your plate. We listen better when our mouths are full. There are stories to be told, lessons to impart, to pass on.

Take two cultures at odds—the Middle East and the U.S., perhaps. These two societies have found many ways to hate each other—needled differences into being that serve the short-sighted purpose of the few, but cause turmoil in the lives of many.

Make a table, big enough for us all. No table big enough? Even better. We'll sit on the floor. Leave the silver-ware behind too—we'll all be equal eating with our hands, fingers bring food to lips, feel the heat.

Gather around, don't be shy. Heap your plates, there is enough for us all.

What is this, you ask? This is *kofta*, ground, spiced lamb grilled on a skewer. Eat it wrapped in fresh baked pita and dipped in *tziki,* creamy cucumber yogurt dip.

Try the *shawarma*, meat grilled to perfection—eat it while it's hot. Try some *tabouli*, peasant food, working people food.

Eat and listen. Listen to the stories. Eat. Pause and breathe. Aren't the flavors marvelous? The stories delicious?

Remembering Kabobs

The sensual experience of eating is tied to our memories. The act of eating, the smell of food cooking, even the sight of certain foods trigger reminiscences. The scent of bread baking transports me to my childhood kitchen, Momma at the counter. Her floured hands push and knead the dough, her plain golden wedding band shines and her strong knuckles tighten and flex. The taste of fresh carrots carries me back to my father's garden, my bare toes curling in the warm soil as I crunch into a sweet, juicy, orange baby carrot, the feathery green top tickling my arm as I chew.

A meal becomes more than the immediate experience of eating—it is flashes of the past with each taste, and you experience flavors in memory layers.

***

The summer solstice was two days ago, but Michigan's weather is not in sync with the calendar. It is one in the afternoon, and the sky and air seep cold moisture—the thermometer is not expected to rise above 55°F today. 55° felt so warm two months ago, but the damp chill of the house with its cold-holding tile and wood floors, and the woodstove emptied of ashes and hot coals weeks ago mocks my optimism.

Outside the hazy, vapor-misted windows the vegetables in my garden linger, dormant and uncertain their growth slowed by cold. If by will alone I could force the plants to produce, my kitchen would be stocked with fresh garden vegetables, but this early in the season most of the plants are little more than vulnerable seedlings. Upper Michigan winters and springs are long,

and summers short. We are deprived of fresh fruits and vegetables for months on end and then suddenly the harvest begins and the bounty leads to strange dishes that hide vast amounts of tomatoes and zucchini I cannot waste. At the moment, those dishes exist only in my imagination.

My task today is weeding. I will encase my feet in black rubber boots, slide on my gardening gloves, as much for warmth as for protection from dirt, and venture out to the garden to fight the weed battle that gardeners have been fighting since humankind first began to cultivate.

I stand at the demarcation line between garden and lawn—little more than an edge where grass ends and dirt begins. This site is a constant battlefield between me and the long fleshy quack grass roots that reach across the divide, tucking into the rich black tilled soil and slinking beneath defenseless baby plants. Ripping out these roots is strangely satisfying. I pull and pull, fingers and eyes searching for the maggot-white tip that feels like it might end in the center of the earth. When I finally pluck it from the soil, I hold it up in triumph before flinging it into the long field grass at the edge of the yard.

Pulling quack grass will get me no closer to dinner, and the hour is approaching when decisions must be made. Without fresh ingredients I venture to the freezer for a package of chicken breasts I earned in hard labor at The Rock River farm. The Farm is owned by friends Rowan, Shailah, and Erik and is "just down the road" in a country sort of way that could mean anything from a few minutes to a half an hour—in this case about a fifteen minute drive.

I began volunteering on the farm several years ago—working in exchange for fresh food. In early spring I help harvest a rainbow bouquet of bright chard fronds and emerald green sweet spinach, crisp peas and crunchy green beans in June and July, and bright tomato orbs in hues of

orange, red, deep purple, lemon yellow, and even striped green in August and September. Throughout the year I receive packages of frozen meat from a chest freezer only a few yards away from where the animal spent its life under the warmth of a Michigan summer sun. Each vegetable or paper parcel finds its way to the table served with rich memories of the day's harvest that are as present as the plate in front of me. Food's sensual characteristics appeal to us not simply in the moment, but also because of memories we associate with what we're eating. These are not simply our memories, but the collective consciousness of those who came before—across the span of human time, millions of hands cooking and mouths tasting.

The chicken I will cook for dinner tonight is flavored with reminiscences of early spring seed sowing. White meat, garden soil, blue skies and tattered afternoon thunder clouds.

***

I spend the day planting lettuce in rowed sets when the sun is shining, and flowers in the greenhouse when a rogue thunderstorm moves in. The young lettuce looks frail, pale roots naked and dangling as I gently place each plant in the holes Shailah digs, to house each plantlet. She works on her knees just a few feet ahead of me, her deft, blunt fingers punching holes in the dirt. I come behind, tucking dangling white roots into dark soil with dirty palms and fingertips. This plot of land is hardly recognizable weeks later, flourishing into lush purple and green lettuce beds. The colors and varieties meld as red and green deer tongue lettuce leaves grow and merge, the oak leaf merging with crispy heads of butterheart.

The breeze carries with it a white warmth of apple blossoms, cooling the sun's burn against my winter-pale shoulders. After a while, my back begins to ache, and in compromise, I

sit down in the dirt and scoot along on my knees or bottom. I fill every hole with a delicate plantlet, packing the soil around each plant's base in a repetitive, satisfying rhythm.

We finish planting and walk down the gravel road to wash up in the Rock River. Shailah's shock of copper and red curls gleams against the green glisten of new spring growth. Our laughter echoes the stream's burble as it flows over sand bars and around tag-aldered turns. We move off the gravel road and walk along the river bank, squishing through black river mud, dodging stinging nettles and low branches. We marvel at bursting yellow, fuzzy pussywillow buds, fuchsia-red dogwood bushes, and exploding green tag alders.

***

I set the chicken in the sink to thaw, and the kitchen fills with the scent of apple blossoms and streamside spring greenery.

I pour a glass of red wine to guard against the chill creeping through the slightly open window. The house would be warmer if the window were closed, but I refuse to shut it. Windows should be open in summer.

I assemble the ingredients on the smooth blonde wood of the kitchen counter. Tiny heirloom tomatoes look like bright beads from a broken necklace strewn across the countertop, and olives emit the heady tang of salted brine.

I rinse the chicken breasts, rubbery and smooth against my fingertips, and remove the skins. I dice them into cubes for the skewer and place the pieces in a bowl, tossing with a bit of olive oil, salt, pepper, and fresh thyme from the herb garden. The scent of the thyme, which I crush between my palms to release the oils, drifts up and through the kitchen, a sensory ode to

spring and all things green. Thyme is an ancient herb—the Ancient Egyptians used it when they embalmed bodies in preparation for their journey to the next world. Ancient Greeks burned sprigs of thyme in their temples, believing it a source of courage.

Eating kabobs is summer evenings around the wood-fire grill, daddy crisping cubes of venison, lake waves feathering the horizon. It is hot July days in Dearborn at La Pita, thick cuts of lamb piled on buttery rice flecked with slivered almonds. It is a campsite by a waterfall, a little campfire, the aroma of roasting meat mingling with hemlock and humus.

I commence skewering, my fingers and hands fall into a familiar pattern linked to memories that linger at the edge of the moment like a mirage. Each pointed stick contains three pieces of chicken, a half slice rolled bacon, an olive, and a grape tomato. I alternate the ingredient sequence, but keep bacon near chicken ensuring mingling meat juices. The kabobs look like a pre-schooler's art project—bright odds and ends strung together without order or pattern.

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The term, *shish kabob*, is Turkish, but the application of meat to pointed stick was ubiquitous across the Middle East and Mediterranean, and in modern times, around the world.

It is common for societies to claim origination for specific dishes. Food becomes an issue of nationalism. The Scots are fiercely proud of their ability to eat *haggis*—sheep's stomach stuffed with a variety of minced offal and grain. *Chicken Tikka Masala*—a mild yogurt curry—is the national dish of Great Britain, an excellent testament to their imperial legacy and a kind of reverse colonizing as fish and chips is usurped by the flavors of India. Ask a Lebanese man what

Middle Eastern country makes the best *hummus* and watch incredulity transform his face as he explains *how* and *why* the Lebanese have the best *hummus*, *falafel*, *baba ghanouj,* etc. Then he will insist that, as proof, he will make it for you himself.

Food travels—there are very few truly native foods. The potatoes associated with Irish cuisine originated in the terraced fields of Peru. The "All-American" apple, as American as apple pie, came all the way from Kazakhstan. The tomato, Italy's crimson darling, sailed from the Americas with the Spaniards, stolen with gold, corn, and thousands of native souls.

Kebabs: Shish or Doner: lamb, chicken, beef or seafood; peppers, onion, garlic, tomato, pineapple, suit-your-fancy-slide-it-on-a-stick; Mongols and Ottomans; Homer, Aristotle, Aristophanes; Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Greece, India, Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, and Turkey.

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I sprinkle the assembled kabobs with garlic powder, salt, and pepper. I set them, covered, in the fridge, giving time for seasonings to penetrate meat while I assemble the rest of the meal.

The potatoes rest in the cool, lightless sanctuary of a ceramic crock embossed with a deep blue thistle, given to me by Scottish friends in honor of our shared heritage. My fingers brush the round tubers pebbled over with slight-sprouting "eyes". I grasp a handful and haul them into the light, dirtying my hands on their skin. I dump them into the sink where they roll and tumble against each other beneath the spray of water aimed across their dimpled surfaces. Like the chicken, the potatoes too are buttered with backstory.

My Father built himself a cold storage out of an old well house to extend his harvest over the long winter months in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The ladder descends into the cold dark where potatoes, cabbage, and carrots hibernate in their newspaper wrappings, snug beneath the frost line. This buried treasure brings summer to our winter tables, and stores can last well into the next year's spring season, when the new potatoes are not yet even a nubbin beneath the soil.

I prepare the potatoes simply, although it is tempting to take extra time and effort, perhaps roasting with herb butter, or frying golden brown and crunchy, or tossing in olive oil and oven-toasting. There is a reason every culture that has ever come into contact with the potato has adopted it as their own.

I savor the *crunch* of knife cutting into potato, the flesh stark white against the knife's silver blade. I cut and then dice, pieces small enough they won't take all night to cook. A drizzle of olive oil, a sprinkle of more fresh thyme, salt and pepper, and they are ready to go on the grill.

I want a salad to accompany the kabobs, and my refrigerator holds The Farm's earliest greenhouse harvest—a volunteer's reward—baby greens mixed with Asian varieties. The flavors alternate between sweet and spicy. We harvest them with scissors, going down the line, clipping off the tops that will then regenerate for at least another harvest or two before growing too bitter. I eat as I harvest, spicy mazuna and tatsoi breaking across my tongue in bursts of flavor green as spring's new leaves. I return home loaded with bags of greens, salads and stir fries playing through my mind.

The multi-shaped and hued greens fill the yellow wooden salad bowl my parents gave me for my birthday several years ago. Like any reputable salad bowl, this one gives off a strong

aroma of garlic, and I bring it to my nose for a moment, the taste of garlic tingling on the end of my tongue as I inhale.

To the greens I add: chopped kalamata olives, more of the heirloom grape tomatoes, which decorate the green leaves with sharp hints of red, yellow and light green, and crumbled feta cheese. Just before serving, I will toss it with a drizzle of olive oil and balsamic vinegar to keep the flavors simple and complementary to the kabobs.

I have warmed the grill while I prepare the other ingredients. My hands are sure on the black knobs, confident in timing and temperature as I open the silver lid, heat wafting over my face.

The aromas drifting from beneath the grill top evoke other occasions the smell of kebab surrounded me. I stand on the porch, wrapped in the fading sunlight's shifting, golden glow. The setting sun touches each blade of grass, each curl of leaf, each arch of flower petal with an accent of gold.

My consciousness shifts and I am in Dearborn, my Lebanese friend Ahmad across the table. I slide the meat from the skewer, wrap it in warm pita, and top it with a dollop of *toum,* creamy white garlic sauce.

I am recalled to the present by the hiss of grilling meat, a patchwork of individual bird sound, and the soft flutter of wind in new leaves. The morning's early cool is like the memory of cold hands. The porch is dry and warm beneath my bare feet, and daybreak seems like a week ago.

When the kabobs are cooked, the chicken roasted to a tawny finish with faintly charred edges, I leave the enchantment of the evening and move indoors. I rush through the open door to

avoid the mosquitoes that I, like a tourist in my own yard, briefly forgot about while enjoying the evening's beauty. Several itchy raised welts testify to my oversight.

I love that moment when it is time to strip the skewer. Often I move too hastily and push too hard, the item on the end shooting off the tip and sometimes onto the floor. With concentration I ease the pieces to the plate, straight onto the salad that I have piled in leafy mountains. If I slip the first several items off of the skewer first, instead of trying to push the whole line off from the top, the whole process goes smoother. But it takes patience. The dogs watch me expectantly, licking their lips, anticipation mirrored across two sets of eyes. Their heads move, watching my hands as I raise and lower the skewer. They know the odds of my dropping some grilled meat are good, but today they must make do with a dinner of dog food and good smells.

I open the potato foilies carefully, burning fingers flick and snap, hot steam scenting the air with buttery potatoes, garlic, and thyme.

I settle into a chair facing the back yard, the apple trees still shimmering a little in the evening's last golden glow. Before me, the full, steaming plate of food sings with flavor, satisfaction, and millions of past incarnations.

The flavors meld, complementing one another in a fresh way with each bite. First, a succulent mouthful of chicken with the salty pleasure of bacon. Then the briny bite of kalamata olive against a green leaf of lettuce, laced with the rich red of roasted tomato.

I am not alone at the table. Beside me are the recollections of an early summer afternoon, Shailah's red hair, creek swimming, and lettuce planting. Remembrances of Ahmad are so vivid, I can almost hear him, face creased in his natural generous smile, urging me to eat. My new

friends' faces flicker in memory's firelight, Morgan falls murmuring and sighing at the edge of hearing.

I glance out the window as the setting sun etches and silhouettes each spruce needle and leaf. Bird songs multiply and echo across the yard, an evening cacophony in stark contrast to the months of silent snowfall.

I eat and journey from the present to mirages of the past and back again, the flavors a blend of taste memories and expectations. When I next eat kebobs, this night's meal will be layered in my consciousness, etched in late spring's golden glow, laced with the aroma of grilling meat.

Versatility

I no longer live in the house on Elmer Johnson Rd, around two sharp corners, second to last house from the road's end. I now live an easy five minute drive from the closest grocery store. If I am missing a recipe ingredient, I have the option of hopping in the car and getting it, which often stops me from brainstorming an interesting new recipe to take its place.

Sometimes I look out my kitchen window and pretend. I look at the mixed maple, oak, and hemlock trees and pretend there are no houses on the other side of the ridgeline. I pretend the sound of the highway at the bottom of the driveway is waves crashing on the shore. I imagine endless woods, and the ingredients in my freezer, refrigerator, and cupboards my only recourse for a meal. What am I going to put in this tortilla shell?

Sometimes it is sautéed purple and green cabbage, stir-fried ribbons of color that give the meal a spicy bite; mixed peppers, strips of red, yellow, and green adding a sweet crunch; thin lengths of kale or chard greens, sliced in an elegant chiffonade; pieces of perfectly browned chicken, or ground venison, beef, or turkey; graceful pink shrimp or flaky salmon, seasoned with salt, pepper, cumin, coriander, and a dusting of red cayenne; a squeeze of fresh lime.

I arrange the colors and textures in bowls across the countertop—building new patterns in the familiar patchwork quilt.

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Preparing a meal in a rural setting is considerably different than preparing a meal in an urban setting. There are no quick runs to the store, no last-minute stops just before home, no popping out for the missing ingredient.

I grew up in a grey house on Big Manistique Lake, at the bottom of the hill on county road 413. The closest "convenience store", a red, rough-sided structure named Connie's, is about five miles down the road. Connie's can supply you with general necessities: gas from two pumps, only one of which is reliable; beer, liquor, and a surprisingly eclectic wine selection; bacon; ice cream; chips and dip. When I was younger and Connie herself was still alive and running the store, the items on the shelves, many coated in dust, were much more diverse. It was the kind of establishment that you could enter and walk out with fishing tackle, lottery tickets, a sub sandwich, a movie rental, a coverless Harlequin novel, and Avon face cream.

If you drive another six or seven miles down H-33 and take a right at the blinking light, you'll come to the little town of Curtis, population 1055. When I was little, there used to be a grocery store on Curtis' main street, the IGA. You didn't necessarily want to purchase vegetables there, but the basics could be had within a reasonable eleven miles from our house at the bottom of the hill on County Rd. 413.

About twelve years ago the grocery store closed. The rumors around town blamed black mold in the dairy coolers. The building with its giant red IGA sign perched at a jaunty angle on the roof's trussed peak, sat empty for several years. Then it was purchased and turned into an Ace Hardware. It appears Curtis needs tools more than nourishment.

There are three other establishments on Curtis' main strip that took up the vacancy left when the IGA closed: Lakeside Liquor, whose letter-missing marquis advertises improbable items such as sh mp, h l but, scal ops, and floun er. They must make most of their sales from

liquor, because the median income in Curtis is $27,000, a difficult budget to stretch for frozen scallops. The second is The Store, a nondescript unstained, wooden-sided building tucked between the Ace Hardware and The Trading Post. They carry saran-wrapped iceberg lettuce, potatoes, cheese, and sliced meats, along with boxes of Hamburger Helper, Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and cans of Campbell's Soup. The third establishment to start carrying food items after the IGA closed is Curtis Service, a gas station/convenience store/ so-many-other-things where I worked summer, 2005. Curtis Service, on the corner of H-33 where the blinking light always flickers yellow, is a pillar of the community. The front-end of the business caters to the needs of tourists and locals alike, with a tire shop in the back. When I worked as a cashier, my tasks included: renting movies, taking cabin reservations (the owners of Curtis Service also had several cabins across the street for rent), scooping ice cream, stocking shelves, selling gas, liquor, cigarettes, sodas, lite beer, and when the store was slow, bailing rental boats and hauling firewood.

Other than these three stores, if you wanted groceries you had to drive the twenty-five miles into Newberry, whose population supported two grocery stores, one on each side of town. The other grocery options are Manistique, forty-nine miles from home, or the Upper Peninsula metropolis, Marquette, population 21,500 that supports no less than eight such establishments.

When it was time to cook dinner in the house on country Rd. 413, we worked with what we had. The garden provided fresh ingredients from June through September, and frozen/canned foods extended the harvest through the long winter months. Momma made up pastas and casseroles with whatever she had on hand for our family of four. I loved her hot-summer-night cold tuna fish noodle salad. Black olives were one of my favorite foods, and I made sure to scoop as many as I could onto my plate when my turn came around to be served. When

Momma wasn't home, Dad's go-to improvisational meal for himself and his two young daughters, was the "guaranteed to please open-face cheese sandwich". He simply put thick slices of creamy white Colby jack cheese on pieces of Momma's homemade bread and popped it under the broiler. The bread toasted on the top, but stayed moist and chewy on its pan-side. What made these sandwiches special was the mustard and ketchup smiley faces that Dad always added before they went into the oven. The sandwiches were served with slices of Dad's face-puckering tart dill pickles that I put right on top of my sandwich.

I learned early that the grocery store was far away and if I didn't have an ingredient, I had to make do. Momma taught me about the "substitutions" section at the back of many generic cookbooks. I learned how to make an egg stretch, and why powdered milk is always good to have on hand. I learned how a garden and a good hunt can feed a family for a long Upper Michigan year.

When I was twenty-one I moved into a cedar-sided house on Elmer Johnson Rd. at the edge of the Skandia township line, in a scattered community called Sundell. Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one I had lived in Marquette with its abundance of grocery stores and take-out restaurants. I got used to having food available whenever I wanted or needed it.

The little cedar house on its ten acres is a fifteen minute drive in good weather to the closest grocery store in Chatham. The potential for snow in Sundell exists nine months out of the year. Eben, a few miles west of Chatham on M-94 East, doesn't have a grocery store, just The New Moon bar, The Snack Shop, The Post Office, and The Superior Central Schools. Chatham boasts fairgrounds, a fire hall/library/town hall/carwash, The Chatham Co-op, The Chatham Community Credit Union, The Rock River Café, The Chatham Village Pub, and down the highway just outside of town, A Bride's Choice, bridal shop.

The Chatham Co-op, which doubles as a hardware store, sells everything from lutefisk, to canned coconut milk, to avocados.

Despite its variety, the options on hand at the Co-op were limited, and the fifteen to twenty minute drive, four miles on rough-rutted country roads, didn't make a "quick trip" to the grocery store an easy option. Sometimes, in the winter, it wasn't an option at all because thirty-mile-an-hour winds and blowing snow would drift the road shut in a matter of hours.

Growing up in Curtis and living eight years on Elmer Johnson Rd. taught me the basics of extemporaneous cooking. I learned to combine skills instilled in me by my parents, with new expertise gleaned from experimentation and the limits of my pantry.

Learning how to cook and combine flavors often occurs out of necessity. When you are forced to use what spices, starches, meats, and vegetables that you have on hand, it forces you to think about food in new ways. When you aren't able to follow exactly what the recipe says, that is when real innovation happens—when need compels resourceful and inventive flavor combinations.

Gail Snively, dear family friend and fabulous potter, taught me a great deal about improvisation. Leftovers, daylily buds, or borage flowers, her food always combines compelling flavors. Tuna fish takes on a new aspect when you bite into a sandwich and an orange round of carrot crunches between your teeth. Gail's conch salad, a Bahamian dish she makes when my family comes to visit, has a different incarnation each time I bite into the chewy, spicy, tart lime ceviche. The ingredients depend on what's fresh from the garden or local market, and the pepper spice varies depending on what's in season.

It was Gail who taught me that tacos aren't limited to just lettuce, tomatoes, beans, meat, and tortilla. "Tacos," or whatever moniker you want to place on various fixings wrapped in a tortilla shell, are as versatile a meal as a person could hope for.

The tortillas for sale at the Chatham Coop, and on most other grocery store shelves, are the gluey white-flour variety. Their ingredient list takes up the entire back side of the crinkly colorful plastic wrapper. How do so many ingredients fit into a six inch diameter flour disc?

I learned from my father to make my own tortillas. He developed a passion for the South American masa bread when our family visited Mexico.

I was fifteen as I watched my father watch a compact, unsmiling Mexican woman make tortillas. We were in a tiny village on the drive through the jungles of the Yucatan Peninsula to Chichen Itza. The local village woman, squatting on her heels on the scoured ground, wore a spotless white, flower embroidered, traditional Mayan dress. Lips pursed, she patted and massaged the unleavened dough into flat rounds. Hands mimicking thousands of years of ancestral movements, she placed the tortilla in a hot iron skillet balanced over a cook-fire.

My father scrutinized the Mayan woman rolling and flattening dough balls, his sun-lined face and crisp blue-eyes lit with concentration as he studied each movement of her hands. When it came time to eat the home-made tortillas, my father seemed to meditate, absorbed in picking out the nuances in flavor and texture as he chewed. I noted their flaky consistency, the slightly smoky notes lingering just below the aroma of corn, and their low bass note to the bright flavors of lime, tomato, onion, and meat piled inside the tortilla.

When we returned home to Curtis, my father ordered a tortilla press from the Lehman's catalogue and began perfecting his tortilla recipe, adding, subtracting, and substituting corn and wheat flour, searching for the perfect texture.

The recipe for tortillas my father tweaked and honed in his Northern Michigan kitchen, dates all the way back to 10,000 BC. Named "torta" by the Spanish conquistadors when they began their calamitous colonization of the South Americas, the tortilla was created by the Aztecs and has remained a staple food in the region to the present day.

I purchased a bag of masa flour and began testing tortilla recipes, patting the sticky golden dough, compressing it between the tortilla press' silver disks, laying the tacky circle in a sizzling hot cast iron pan and letting it brown.

The ingredients for tortillas are simple: masa flour, white flour, and water. Simple, good ingredients make delicious food.

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Summers on Elmer Johnson Rd., I needed little invention to cook delicious, improvisational meals. The gardens provided fresh ingredients in the summer and preserved vegetables and frozen meats in the long winter months. By the time I moved away, I had built five gardens in the verdant, swampy yard at the edge of the Laughing Whitefish River watershed. Each spring more white seed packets came in the mail and wider swathes of yard were cultivated. Late June found me in black rubber boots and garden gloves running the little green John Deer rototiller up and down muddy sod rows, churning dirty blades pulling earthworms, roots, and rocks into the sunlight. The raised beds I worked by hand, red blisters swelling on my palms after a day turning the soil.

By late summer, my front and side yard were a veritable farmer's market of produce. The approach of fall and late Augusts' first frosts limited the harvest, making meals more eclectic as fresh ingredients dwindled.

Preparation for a meal began with a trip to my garden, the late evening chill beginning to seep up through the grass, cold against my bare feet. I picked through the few veggies still lurking beneath frost darkened leaves. The night before, I had covered the green bushy tomato plants, preparing for frost. White cotton row cover billowed in the breeze like textured fog.

I gathered the few tomatoes just beginning to blush to ripen on the windowsill indoors. The orbs were cool against my fingertips, absorbing the fall twilight's cold. I plucked plump round Black Prince's, misshapen multi-hued heirlooms, oblong red pastes, and pear-shaped yellow mini tomatoes that taste best popped right into your mouth.

I found a few small zucchini still clinging to the wasted remains of stalks and leaves that drooped like sleeping elephant ears. The little zucchini are my favorite—crispy, seedless, and bright flavored. Zucchini season comes on rapidly, and it's rare to eat them in their young, crunchy stage, as they always seem to double in size overnight. Alligators, my mother calls them, long green lurking shadows.

The broccoli plants were little more than thick, woody green stalks and leaves lacy with trails left by marauding broccoli caterpillars. Scattered between branches and drooping foliage were a smattering of broccoli florets overlooked in favor of big broccoli heads. I snapped these off with satisfying *snicks* of my sharp harvest knife, and dropped them into my basket.

The sun was setting behind the line of hemlock, maple, and cedar west of the house, and the apples on the trees glowed in all their pagan glory. The sunflowers I had carefully planted in spring were now bursting with color. Their orange, yellow, and red heads bobbed in a soft

breeze as mourning doves cooed from power lines. I couldn't get to a grocery store with ease, but there was all of this.

When I could stir myself from admiring the evening, I opened the screen door quickly to let my dogs in and keep the mosquitos out. After I washed the vegetables, I commenced chopping. The repetition of knife-blade on cutting board was soothing after a long day of work, and I lost myself in the rhythm, stopping now and then to drink from my glass of red wine.

I chopped the onions first, getting their sweet bite into the hot pan to melt a while before I added the other ingredients. Then I sliced little zucchini, broccoli, and tomatoes. When onion and butter began to meld, I upped the heat and tossed in zucchini and broccoli with a generous dash of salt and red pepper flakes. The house, illuminated in golden twilight, glowed. The aroma of vegetables frying in oil scented the air, and for a moment, it smelled like Mexico. I added the tomatoes last, as they only needed a few moments in a hot pan to release their sweet, juicy flavor. The finely chopped garlic went in with the tomatoes for the same reason.

The tortillas I had made earlier were warming in the oven, adding the earthy aroma of baking bread as an undertone to the vegetable's piquancy.

I opened the freezer and took out a flat frozen bag of black beans. I made my black beans from scratch. On a Friday night I poured the dried black beans into my stainless steel stockpot—the beans ricocheted off the sides, pinging like hail on a metal roof. I filled the pot ¾ full of water and let them soak overnight. Saturday, I boiled the beans. I stirred the pot frequently, sometimes adding salt, pepper, cumin, and hot pepper flakes. Sometimes just salt and pepper. When the beans broke across my tongue, velvety as warm chocolate, I knew they were done. When they cooled, I spooned them into plastic quart bags and stacked them in the freezer.

The beans steamed as they thawed, filling the kitchen with a deep, earthy aroma. The freezer full of beans ensured that my kitchen always had black beans on hand. Thick, chocolaty beans bubbled in their black pan, and I scraped chopped garlic across the simmering surface. The kitchen filled with the enticing aroma of garlic kissing heat.

The sun, tucked beneath the western skyline, left only a rim of white light on the horizon. I looked out the window often as I worked, anticipating my husband's car in the driveway. The good programing on NPR was over for the evening, so I put on a Bandi Carlile cd and crooned along as I finished the dishes.

When my husband got home and changed out of his flour and pizza sauce encrusted work shirt, we stood in the kitchen for a moment before filling our plates. We leaned against the counters, facing each other, and I watched as the last line of light slipped from the sky. We spoke of our days, the upcoming summer, and details of the week's weather forecast.

I had arranged the counter in a patchwork quilt of toppings to fill a tortilla shell. The sautéed onion, broccoli, zucchini, tomato mixture was warm on the stove, and festive in its burst of green and red. Beans rested, steaming, in their cast iron pan. Next to these were white bowls containing grated cheese, snowy white yogurt, and ribbons of lettuce gleaned from plants that weren't yet frost-damaged.

When I arranged my taco layers, I attempted a strategy. First I spooned on black beans, and then I added a sprinkle of cheese, ensuring that the heat from the beans melted the cheese. Then I added the vegetables, topped with a spoonful of plain yogurt I preferred to the traditional sour cream.

By this point my husband and I were focused on food and relaxing, the conversation tapering off into idle observations and short answers. We turned on a movie and settled into our

customary seats—my husband cross-legged on the floor, back against the couch and plate on the coffee table, and me, knees in the air and plate perched on the arm of the couch, facing the television. The dogs crept into their usual positions on the couch, where they pretended not to beg for the requisite ten minutes before settling down to sleep with deep, groaning sighs.

As usual, I piled my tortilla too high, and the warm floury disk refused to close over the wedges of zucchini and chunks of tomato. Bits and pieces spilled out the end the moment I brought the taco to my mouth, narrowly missing the edge of the plate, inducing the closest dog to open one eye to investigate. I wiped black beans from my chin and watched my husband wrap his tortillas into neat bundles, tucking in the ends, creating a perfect little package.

The flavors blended together beautifully: the green bite of broccoli, still crispy at the core, sweetened by tomatoes, and accented by mild zucchini, brought together by velvety black beans.

It was a combination that wouldn't have occurred cruising store shelves and produce aisles. That day, I didn't have time to read a recipe, make a grocery list, and drive the twenty-five minute round-trip to the Chatham Co-op. I was forced to improvise with what I had in the garden, in the refrigerator, and pantry cupboard. The patchwork quilt of colors and ingredients on my plate came together from organic necessity and imagination.

Coconuts in Winter

Today the temperature is not expected to rise above 5 F°. The wind chill is below zero and this cold makes your body lethargic, even indoors. You crave comfort, warmth, security, and hibernation. Your body craves touch, but you are home alone.

The average temperature for late January in Chatham, Michigan, a pin point dot in the center of the Upper Peninsula, is 25°. The record high is 39°. The record low -15°. Today's temperature hasn't gotten above -5°. All of the schools are closed across The Upper Peninsula of Michigan's 16, 377 square miles of little towns, swathes of wilderness, and cabined lakes. WNMU FM reports the closure of US-2, one of two major highways running east to west across the long rural peninsula. US-2 hugs the shore of Lake Michigan, while M-28 borders the edge of Lake Superior. You grew up in a little town stretched between twin Manistique lakes flanked by these two-lane thoroughfares. Friday night US-2 was closed for an eighty-seven mile stretch while rescue crews called in locals on snowmobiles to assist at a twenty car wreck—flashing lights multiplied by millions of blowing snowflakes.

The locals of the Upper Peninsula vacillate between wishing for snow and cursing it. Days, one after another, temperatures never rising above five degrees, wears away at people. You rejoice at the burst of lake effect snow coating the world in white—anything to break the teeth clenching bite of endless cold.

Your friend told you a story: children from Alabama visiting in January say to their father, "Daddy, this sun is broken. We can see it with our eyes, but it doesn't put out any heat!"

The woodstove radiates heat across the room, and the red glow from its window is hypnotic. The book slips from your hands, and your head begins to nod. Rhythmic snoring from the two large dogs sharing the couch is like a siren song to sleep.

Awake, the tasks you manage to accomplish are the mundane domestic kind: a load of laundry folded and put away, floor swept, and dishes done. A major shelf renovation stands half finished, the boxes of tools and homeless miscellany to be sorted won't take that much time, but the lethargy that creeps in, like the chill leaching around unsealed windows, has taken hold. There is no one but the dogs, feet twitching in sleep chases, to witness your eyes closing—no one to pull you to play in the cold.

Seasonal depression, the medical justification for feelings of irritability, dark thoughts, and anger, stalk the denizens of the North. The weather and its effects are discussed with your therapist, with cashiers over checkout counters, with the teller at the bank, and the bearded boy behind the liquor store counter who sells you peppermint schnapps you take skiing to keep warm.

According to the Mayo Clinic website, seasonal disorder is a real thing: "Seasonal affective disorder (also called SAD) is a type of depression that occurs at the same time every year. If you're like most people with seasonal affective disorder, your symptoms start in the fall and may continue into the winter months, sapping your energy and making you feel moody."

You flip through picture albums, staring with longing and disbelief at photos of your same yard, once verdant with swathes of green grass and nodding purple anemones, now covered in three feet of snow. There are pictures of you swimming at Pictured Rocks, Lake Superior blue as the Caribbean. The last time you drove down M-28 through Munising, the bay was covered in

ice and dotted with ice shanties owned by hearty fishermen, some brave or foolish enough to drive jeeps and trucks right up to their shanty door.

The cold makes you hungry. The amount of food that would normally satisfy your appetite seems just beyond reach, and you return to the kitchen again and again for little snacks in odd combinations: peanut butter dipped in dried cranberries licked from the end of a knife, a carrot dipped in cream cheese, olives with anything.

The forecast for the next week reads lows of -10° for Monday, -5° on Tuesday, 12° on Wednesday, and dropping back down to 0° on Thursday. You are cold and want to be warmed to the core.

You look in the pantry cupboard, eyes losing focus on odds and ends scattered across the shelves. It is color that catches your attention—color in this world of whites and greys—a green labeled can of coconut milk out of place next to the mason jars of tomatoes, peaches, and dilly beans. Coconut milk, rich, creamy, and filling. It is of that other world, a Southern world, a green world, a winter dream: beaches, sun, and the pleasant discomfort of dripping sweat. This world is the base of the food you will make, rooted in warmth and sunshine.

You find the sweet potatoes peering up from the pantry with blunted faces—another culinary traveler from southern climes. Sweet potatoes, orange sugar velvet, melt in your mouth, honeyed with butter and salt.

You bought them on a whim—perhaps nostalgia, perhaps longing, perhaps melancholy. You're the only one in the house who likes them. You bought them anyway.

What made sweet potatoes the child's villain at the American dinner table? They are loved by grandmothers and potluck ladies, but elicit gags and wrinkled noses from children. You've eaten them as a child at Baptist potluck suppers, the dish of sweet potatoes always

appearing next to fluorescent green jello salads laced with cat hair, bright pink "Ambrosia" with its chunks of pineapple and white lumps of cottage cheese, tuna noodle casserole that *schlepps* as you pull the spoon out. Even as a child you were put off by the marshmallows, lightly toasted and squishing into each other atop the whipped orange sweet potatoes. You didn't want those little multi-colored puffs of sugar, food coloring, horse hoofs, and air placed in careful rows, hiding what was good beneath.

Sweet potatoes are Native Americans—records indicate that European explorers found them in the South Americas and brought them back to the continent. The orange *batatas,* as they were originally called, deserve more culinary respect than a marshmallow crown. These tubers that we call potato but are only distantly related, have been cultivated for over 5000 years.

You comb the stack of recipe books that takes up space on two bookshelves. Sweet potatoes are rarely mentioned. Again, you stare into the cupboard and the green can of coconut milk catches your eye. A north wind finds its way through gaps in the molding, snakes across the back of your neck, and rattles the apple tree branches in the yard. *Irritability, anger, dark thoughts.*

You need soup.

You assemble ingredients on the countertop—can of coconut milk, dull orange, knobby sweet potatoes, garlic, ginger—a start.

You reach into the spice cabinet. Red pepper flakes for extra heat—heat to hold back the creeping cold.

A memory emerges like the brush of a fallen eyelash on your cheek. You, a budding eleven, stand near a pool with your younger sister. Chlorine and reflected sunlight sting your eyes. Four Bahamian boys around your age, their skin the darkest your north country-self has

ever seen, try to impress by knocking coconuts from palm trees around the cement sides of the pool. *Teach us*.

Gangly black island boys teach the little white tourist girls from Michigan how to knock coconuts down from the tree with a rock or piece of concrete. Throw it hard onto the pavement. Grasp the husk with both hands, raise your arms at the elbows, grab gravity and push down. You jump so your toes don't get smashed. Ebony muscles on lean-boys' forearms tighten as they pull husk away from nut with a fibrous ripping.

Inside is the round brown globe you've seen in pictures and pyramid piles on produce shelves, the two button eyes and nose looking out at bananas and oranges.

A moment of study and you hold the orb aloft again. You see spots for a moment—circles silhouetted like tiny eclipses against the sun—and then you smash the coconut down onto pool-side pavement, as hard as you can. It bounces and falls open, spinning with the sound of a top. The milky white insides are open to Bahamian-blue sky. The boys pluck the coconut from the ground and hold it aloft like an offering of peace to two foreign girls with sunburns.

You watch as they demonstrate the first bite and follow their lead, using your upper teeth to scrape a big chunk into your mouth. This is not a nasty macaroon or the gritty little flakes hidden in muffins and cakes. This coconut slips, white against white across your tongue, leaving your lips and chin sticky with juice. It is sweetness with a hint of the nutty green pistachios you crack and eat after dinner with Daddy some nights.

You take another bite. It is sweet and filling—like what you want snow to taste like.

You don't buy coconuts in the North. They will never measure up to what you had in the Bahamas as a child. Too long on a truck. Too much handling. Too long since their fall from the tasseled tops of the coconut palm.

Coconut milk is a different thing. White and creamy with a hint of sweet, you scrape the edge of the spatula as you empty the can, and then lick the spatula clean—a cat washing milk from her whiskers.

You set the spatula in the sink and move back to the counter with languid movements, slippered feet *shushing* against worn wood floors. Your blood is thick and sluggish, its circulation slow as it preserves body heat and energy.

You are alone in the kitchen.

The water is cold on your hands as you gently wash the sweet potatoes, careful not to rub off their thin skin. Icy well water runs through your fingers and over the pitted surface of the potato—this potato grown in the southern states, red dirt pushing back as the tuber grew. It was dusted off, boxed, weighed, and put on a truck that sped north through Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and up into Michigan, crossing the mighty Mackinac bridge and alighting in a pile next to the onions, shallots, and garlic at the local food cooperative.

The ingredients are like guests who have traveled far. You recognize the journey as your fingertips trace the pocked skin of the sweet potato—as the razor's edge of the can opener runs across the can's stainless steel rim, revealing the smooth-swirl of coconut milk. From red dirt and balmy ocean breezes to this little house in the deep Northern Michigan woods only seven miles as the crow flies from the frozen shores of Lake Superior.

Water purls into the bottom of the black Dutch oven, with a sound like spring rain pouring off eaves. You bring it to a boil on a back burner, adding bouillon cubes that hit the water's roiling surface with little scalding splatters.

With the slow ebullience of cream rising to the top, the temperature of the house begins to go up. The oven beeps at 375 degrees and you slide the tray holding the six sweet potatoes through the open door, enjoying a moment of warmth on your face.

The sweet potatoes cook with the skin on until the tines of a fork sink through the exterior and into the soft interior—then you know they are done. Juices leak onto the tray, caramelize, and taste like brown sugar.

When the fork tines tell you the potatoes are done you burn your fingertips and tongue as you peel away the skin and pop it in your mouth. You gulp cold water as your taste buds blister. There is no one to watch your mouth twist in pain. No one to offer an ice cube.

When your fingertips have stopped throbbing, you approach the potatoes again. They have cooled enough to touch. You peel away the parchment, paper-like skin and dice the soft, bright orange potato into bite size pieces that you drop with liquid *plops* into the broth.

You blend it all together with a hand blender—a wand with a rotating blade that has saved you many burns. Now the soup stays in the pot as it liquefies. Before, you had to transfer it to the blender, and you were never patient enough to wait for it to cool, leading to geysers of steaming liquid shooting over the cupboard, counter, and your arms.

When it looks like soup, you add a pinch of salt and pepper, and a dash of cloves, cinnamon, and red pepper flakes. These flavors, rich and warm, ward against the cold. Medieval doctors used cinnamon as a cure for coughs and sore throats. Chinese doctors use cloves for the spice's warming properties. Red pepper flakes add heat.

You want warmth inside you—a heated core.

You peel the fresh ginger, the skin sliding of in papery curls, and slice it into thin slivers. Ginger is used to treat everything from an upset stomach to burns. It, along with cloves and

cinnamon, made its way across the silk road into the kitchens of Europe and then across the sea to the Americas. Your soup is a spice caravan.

You chop the garlic and fresh ginger together, the oniony tang of garlic melding with the spicy bite of ginger—aromatic enough to sting your eyes and make your nose twitch.

Over and over the sharp steel knife blade rocks up and down over the white and yellow specks on the cutting board until the colors and flavors melt into each other. Your palm is red where the knife handle pushed into it.

You scrape the cutting board with the edge of the knife blade, sending bits of ginger and garlic tumbling into the melded broth, sweet potato, and spices. The house is beginning to smell like the spice market in New Delhi as cloves, cinnamon, ginger, and garlic meld and waft through the rooms. The slumbering dogs wake, and lift their heads in unison.

You turn up the gas burner, feeling the heat from the open flame. The soup begins to simmer and you sprinkle salt and pepper over the surface. As you stir the white and black flecks swirl into a spiral before disappearing into the orange bubbly liquid.

You close your eyes and lean into the stove, still warm, as if it were a body. The north wind slams into the front of the house, whooshing through cracks in the door, mingling the aromas of spice bazaar with cold pine and snow.

You focus on the soup with a sigh meant for no one.

The open can of coconut milk is poured into the pot, a vortex of orange and creamy white until the movement of your wrist, the turning of the spoon, slowly blends the colors. White absorbed into orange, lightening to the color of a creamsicle.

Your taste buds still feel rubbed by sandpaper and you resist the urge to lick the hot spoon straight from the pot.

Instead, you blow on it for a moment, your mouth puckering around the rush of air that is a tiny mimic of the wind outside the house.

The spoon doesn't radiate heat when you bring it close to your lips and, hesitantly, you take the first bite. It is smooth, savory with spices, with a lingering hot pepper burn, and a hint of Bahamian afternoon.

The cooking is finished and darkness steals in around bare apple branches, through the drifted fields, and across the northwest corner of the sky where another lake effect storm is brewing.

You will need to shovel the roof and then the porch tomorrow, the drifts piling higher and higher, tufted with wave crests of white. The wood pile will need replenishing. You will need to layer two pairs of socks, long underwear, leggings, sweaters, jacket, hat, scarf, and gloves. You dread the heavy loaded sled piled high with split frozen maple and cherry. It takes all your strength to drag it through the drifts, up the porch, and into the house. The woodstove is insatiable.

You settle onto the couch, a dog on each side, and lift your book. The stove ticking, soft-sleep breathing of dogs, and wind are the only sounds. You startle yourself with the clatter of metal spoon against ceramic dish as you scrape the bowl's bottom.

The dogs lift their heads, but the gravity of sleep pulls them back down when they see no food will come of it.

The soup is good, warming your tongue, your throat, your stomach and flowing out from there. The warmth is good. But now, as you take another bite, and another, you realize this was not the heat you craved. There is still cold, lurking beneath your skin. It cannot be warmed by memories, or soup, or nips of peppermint schnapps.

You eat until the spoon comes up clean when scraped across the bowl's bottom.

Ginger, red peppers, garlic, essence of palms and sun-baked red dirt, for this moment, insulate against the cold. For this moment, you are warm.

Carnivorous Influences

Rowan and Shailah's feet clomp on the wooden porch steps. They stomp off the farm mud cemented into the treads of their shoes, and pull open the screen door with its chronic squeak.

"You're here," I say with a smile and a flourish of metal tongs.

Shailah's small frame is misleading—this freckled 5' 2" redhead once hefted a bale of hay over her head in her wedding dress. "Do I smell bacon?" She asks, reaching down to scratch the ears of my geriatric, over-weight beagle, Quincy.

"And garlic," she says, sniffing the air as she crouched on the floor by the dog.

"Of course, and garlic."

I am a recent convert to the joys of bacon that this farmer couple has been savoring their whole lives.

Rowan is a particular fan of bacon. He smiles at the familiar package on the counter as he leans his body into the fridge in search of beer. He is dressed in his customary jeans and white Hanes tee-shirt, wispy blond hair still damp with sweat. Shailah and I have discussed having a tee-shirt made for him that says, "Bacon and…Bacon and… Bacon and…" His love for the salty slabs of pork belly helped inspire this meal.

I ate little meat during my childhood and even less during my adolescence. My best friend and her very cool family were vegetarians, but there were ethics involved too. I have gradually reintroduced meat into my diet: local meat from Rowan and Shailah's farm and venison my father harvests.

Over their six years as farmers, Rowan and Shailah raised and butchered chickens, turkeys, goats, sheep, pigs, and highland cattle with their shaggy red fur and pointed horns. The majority of meat eaten on the farm lived and died on the farm, meat flavored with sweet green grasses and vegetable compost. I've also witnessed Rowan field-dress a deer in fifteen minutes, head and feet piled in the snow, body turning from animal to meat in a matter of moments.

Venison is a staple meat for many in the Upper Peninsula. Before colonization, this jut of land balanced between lakes Michigan and Superior, once covered in white pine forests and unpopulated lakes like reflecting pools was home to several scattered Native groups, but the harsh climate and long winters left the U.P. with few inhabitants.

Mining—mostly copper and iron ore—as well as timber, brought people and towns this far North. The Upper Peninsula became a part of Michigan in 1837 as a settlement in a territory dispute between Michigan and Ohio—Ohio got Toledo and Michigan got the Upper Peninsula.

Because acidic-soiled pine forests limited good foraging, the deer population in the Upper Peninsula was low, but after towering pines were chugged away down train tracks or floated off on rivers, there were more grassy areas for grazing, and the deer population began to rise.

Numbers of human inhabitants in the Upper Peninsula have grown to around 312,000. The deer population has also swelled—to double what it was during pre-white settlement.

The rise in numbers limits foraging ground and is detrimental to the herd. Deer hunting keeps the numbers from exploding, preventing overpopulation, and death due to starvation and disease. And, venison is delicious.

I have watched Rowan butcher deer, sheep, goat, and pig, their limp carcasses hanging from a thick chain dangling from the Bobcat's raised bucket. The knife blade snicks through

hide and flesh, hot blood steams as it meets cooler air. He can turn a pig into ham, loins, chops, and bacon in less time than it takes to eat a meal.

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What is it about bacon that has captivated Americans so completely in the last ten years, elevating the thin slices of fleshy fat to cult status? What is it about bacon that has created a market for bacon flavored toothpaste, perfume, and air freshener?

Bacon has become the everyday American equivalent of "umami," the amorphous element that is said to boost and heighten the flavor of savory foods. Many restaurants and food producers have intensified the craze by inventing and marketing chocolate covered bacon, bacon ice cream, bacon doughnuts, baconaise, and chicken fried bacon. Celebrity chef Bobby Flay endorsed the "Bacon of the Month Club." I recently sampled bacon flavored vodka in a Bloody Mary.

My best friend Hillary, vegetarian for most of her life, and briefly vegan, fell off the veggie train, seduced by the salty lure of crackling fat in a pan and has never looked back.

Camping last summer on a rocky island in Lake Superior, I found that you don't have to eat bacon in order to cook it well. Wiry, curly-haired Italian Mickey "Slick-foot" and his drunk but patient girlfriend Lauren attempted to cook "bacon on a stick" over a campfire. Drunken Mikey, wedged a gob of bacon onto the end of a pointed stick and held it over the flames like a crackling s'more. Inevitably, the stick caught fire, broke, and the bacon plopped into the ashes. Lauren, a vegetarian, peered over her glasses, flicking her head to keep straight hair out of her eyes, and wrapped the bacon around another pointed stick, holding it over the coals. Lauren's

bacon was crispy with smoke and salt—a far cry from the gooey mess Mikey pulled from the ashes and attempted to cook, "disinfecting" it with a dollop of Sangria.

"What? I'm Italian," he said with a loose shrug of his, wiry shoulders.

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The bacon I'm cooking tonight is an ingredient in what I've dubbed, "Almost BLT Pasta": a mix of linguini noodles, fresh tomatoes from the garden, chopped and glistening, thin slivers of emerald green kale cooked in a sheen of left-over bacon grease, and chunks of bacon topped with creamy white lumps of feta.

Paul Simon's "Graceland" decants from the radio and flows through the kitchen. I shake my hips to the beat, sashaying from stove to sink and back again. Kitchen dancing music reminds me of summer nights at home as my mother, father, Sister Laurel, and I sang and danced to Paul's lilting, nonsensical and irresistible songs as we cooked and set the table for dinner.

Bacon was rarely served in my childhood home. My mother was well aware of its fat and cholesterol levels, and she and my father cooked bacon for my sister and me on rare Saturday mornings that felt sporadic as a letter in the mail.

The bacon was cooked in a well-seasoned cast iron pan on Saturday mornings next to pancakes glowing golden and sticky with homemade maple syrup that my mother, father, sister, and I made each spring.

My father often burned the bacon, and served blackened bits beside fluffy yellow scrambled eggs. The eggs came in cardboard cartons from our friends the Guenthers, who

raised Oricana chickens that lay eggs like a child's Easter dream in pastels of green, blue, and purple. The well-done bacon tasted smoky and a bit ashen, but briny and delicious all the same.

My favorite summer meal is my father's homegrown sweetcorn and a BLT: my mother's homemade bread, thick and chewy, tangy lettuce, still wet and crispy from the garden, rich mayonnaise, tart and sweet tomato still smelling of sunshine, and bacon cooked with just enough crunch and chew.

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The aroma of bacon cooking is enticing but thick, and the whir and turning air of the stove hood does little to lessen the "bacon smog" that clings to person, hair, and house.

It is difficult to be clandestine about frying bacon. The odor in the air, a nearly tangible presence just at the edge of smelling, hovers long after the meat has disappeared bite by satisfying bite. Going in public after cooking bacon I sense, the trail of scent drifting around me.

My dogs, at my feet, peer up with eyes round and large as a doll's, their tails affably wagging in unison as if to convince me that it is indeed *my* idea to let a piece of the fried goodness drop to the floor.

With the tip of my finger, I nudge a piece that has broken. I pop the brittle bite into my mouth. I discard the excess grease with a spatula, but leave some behind for cooking collard greens. When the bacon is cool, I chop it into bite size pieces, barely managing to refrain from sneaking another bite.

Rowan reacts with voluble, inarticulate sounds of disgust as the collards make their appearance beneath the stream of sink water. Hip cocked against the counter, chilled Pabst in his hand, he and Shailah watch me prepare the meal.

"You and Shailah with your greens," he says with a mocking grin. "Hides the bacon."

Perhaps the perfect combination, bacon and greens, will unlock some deep-seated desire in those with an aversion to kales, collards, chards, and mustards. There are those who like greens and those who despise them, and those who won't eat them unless someone else does the preparing and serving. Rowan is, for the most part, in the latter category.

I bathe each collard leaf, my fingertips running down the spine and over the leaves, wide and green as a lilypad. I pat them dry with a paper towel. Any water hitting the bacon fat makes popping explosions that burn like embers from a sparkler.

With a sharp paring knife I slice the leaves off thick and fibrous stems, and throw the stems into the compost. The leaves I slice in half and roll into a cigar shape, making it easy to cut into thin slices that will stick to the pasta. The bacon fat yields to the ribbons of collard leaf as I turn the spoon in figure eights around the edge of the pan. Through the screen door the yard seems quilted in tiny squares of green. The air pouring in smells of cut grass and wild chamomile.

As the pasta water begins to boil, I add dashes of salt, approximately two tablespoons, and then the noodles as the water bubbles, angel hair noodles, thin and sinuous, winding around each other, and entangling all of the ingredients. It's a touch of alchemy, the way noodles give up their brittle rigidity, becoming thin golden strands that will soon twist around my fork tines.

Two tablespoons of butter and two dollops of extra virgin olive oil melt and swirl—yellow into green, in the saucepan. The gas burner is on as low as it will go—garlic sizzles in an

aromatic burst as it slides from the cutting board into the oils. The beguiling scent of garlic butter wafts through the kitchen, mingling with bacon aroma, and my stomach grumbles.

The tomatoes I now dice with my silver-edged knife, harvested from ten feet out the front door, dangled like over-sized, out-of-season Christmas orbs on leafy, overgrown vines. I took them into the kitchen still warm from the sun. They'll become a memory of color during the long winter months.

Out of season tomatoes are mealy, the seeds slimy, and the flesh, flavorless. They are trucked to Northern regions from the south, picked green from depleted farmland that has no business growing a tomato. They are like synthetic replicas of tomatoes that people eat for the sake of eating a tomato, flavor or no.

Why are we willing to eat tomatoes that don't taste like tomatoes which, in my home of rural Upper Michigan, have to come from as far away as California or Florida or Mexico, where they were grown in conditions injurious to the soil and workers alike?

A fresh tomato, weeks ripening in the sun, sweet skin that breaks across your tongue like a hot mid-July day, is incomparable. They are joys still more cherished because of their fleeting nature—they are the taste of summer.

The robust, rubicund taste of tomato can be found throughout the long winter in glowing jars of canned tomatoes, packages of chewy dried tomatoes, and round tomato-red glowing in the depths of the freezer.

Sundried tomatoes are first sliced then layered in rows, their gelatinous, seedy interiors drying and toughening, the sugars concentrating, as moisture leaves each piece.

Lazy days, I core tomatoes and tuck them whole into freezer bags. After half a day's time they transform into frozen globes that clack together like pool balls when pulled from the freezer to add to a stew or sauce.

The fleeting nature of fresh tomatoes and summer days makes me thankful for my garden. The tomatoes, oblong orange, red streaked roma, luminous yellow pear, voluptuous rosy brandywine, grow out the front door in a raised bed lined in burgundy brick and filled with rich black soil. Tomatoes in the north have a short season that can be extended by the use of hoop houses and frost covers, but as the season grows colder, the plants will, in their inescapable decline, begin to darken and blacken, and the fruits will grow soft and fall to the ground where their seed will spill onto the hard packed fall soil.

Every spring when it comes time to till the soil for the next generation of seedlings, there, beneath the tines of the tiller, are the tiny tri-leafed fronds of baby tomato plants—volunteers, as they're called.

Their tenacity touches something in me, and every year the neat, planned, orderly rows of the garden are cluttered with the plants that were last year's rotten fruit. Their tomatoes are often the sweetest.

***

Each ingredient in this meal complements the next. Improvisational meals such as this never taste the same, no matter how many incarnations—the variety of tomato changes the sweetness, the type of green alters the texture, the kind of cheese will determine the lingering salty flavor.

I toss together noodles, a splash of pasta water, chopped bacon, the garlic/butter/oil mixture, tomatoes and some fresh thyme, along with a dash of salt and pepper. I wave wand tongs at Rowan and Shailah with an artful flourish and lift and stir the tangled pasta, mixing before shifting noodles to plate.

I catch Rowan picking individual pieces of bacon out of the pasta with the tongs, his plate so covered in bacon bits that everything else is hidden.

For the finishing touch, and an acceptable stand-in for the mayonnaise that is a mainstay of the BLT, I sprinkle crumbled feta liberally over the top of our mounded pasta, capping the peaks in white.

At the table, we point our chairs to face both the window and each other. We pass the sliced baguette and for a moment, all three of us do nothing but butter our bread. When we eat, I will save mine till almost all of my pasta is gone, savoring each buttery bite and using the crust to scrape up any lingering bits of bacon or feta. Rowan and Shailah, who have worked on the farm all day, are hungry as only hot work can make a body. They pile their plates high with pasta and bread, and scoop big forkfuls into their mouths, halting conversation as they chew and swallow, chew and swallow.

Their fingernails are ringed in dirt that no amount of scrubbing will get out. Their knees ache from weeding, inch by inch, the garden rows and paths. Their backs hurt from bending over, fingers flick and snap from dropping green beans, handful by handful, into bushel baskets.

Tomorrow will be more of the same.

But now is time for rest, food, and drink. The beer slides cold and effervescent down my throat. Shailah halts fork to mouth repetition, sighs with content, and picks a bit of bacon fat from her teeth.

Summer days are long, and, at this time of evening light turns golden, illuminating our faces, the food on our plates, and each blade of grass outside the open windows. This light makes the woods behind the house look like part of the landscape with trees sketched over top.

Rowan eats the tender and pliant pasta and green ribbons of collard wrapped in bacon. Tomato, honeyed and sweet from its brief moment in the pan, complements salty feta. Bacon leads the high note as its mysterious briny crunch breaks across other flavors and textures.

We lick our lips and fingers, press the tines of our forks onto last bits of feta and bacon, until there is nothing left on our plates but a few tomato seeds and a golden sheen of oil.

Xenia

My first taste of creamy white *labneh* was in Mexico at a restaurant called "Como No." The establishment was by several Israelis who had fled the mandatory draft, choosing to serve Middle Eastern food on a Caribbean Island over fighting their neighbors.

The olive oil shimmered in the candle light like an exotic jewel, a quivering green. The pita I lifted to my mouth was coated in velvety *labneh*, speckled with *za'atar*, and fragrant with garlic.

Hookah smoke swirled in a breeze that wound from the white sand beach, through cobbled streets redolent with the aroma of grilling meat, fish, and pizza.

Flavor and scent bind memories, making singular what would have faded into the shimmers, blanks, and luminous instants of awareness that make up our remembrances of the past.

The next taste of *labneh* wouldn't come for four years, but the memory of flavor was there, at the edge of consciousness, a mirage with the warmth of a Caribbean night.

***

The sidewalks rippled with heat in front of the Doubletree Hotel, Dearborn.

It was an eight hour drive from my home in the Upper Peninsula, with its swathes of verdant swamp, rippling inland lakes, and tiny towns. The U.P. occupies around 16,400 square miles, stretching like a leaping deer between Lake Superior to the North and Lake Michigan to

the South. Dearborn's population, at about 24.5 square miles, holds around a third of the U.P.'s inhabitants.

Miles of unbroken pine forests, endless lake vistas, minarets on the horizon and blocks of buildings, all exist as "Michigan."

The drive South on I-75, past rows of green-leafed maples, billboards advertising insurance, Polish food, and "PureMichigan," gave my fears time to take root, grow, and blossom. A long car ride, meditative and relaxing, provides far too much time for worry and anxiety to multiply.

For some, it is easy to travel from place to place, meeting new people, making connections, being confident in your job or self or situation. For others, networking is a learned skill that requires forethought and a list of all the reasons you should be confident.

***

Flavors from that night years ago in Mexico, in a tiny restaurant-diaspora, lingered at the periphery of the purpose behind this trip: learning about Arab food. Like Isabel Burton, wife of explorer Richard Burton, I had become enthralled by the flavors of the Middle East—she, through the prospect of adventure, and I, through the melding of sensual tastes, history, and home, familiar to me as a moment of déjà vu.

Before me was a series of interviews and explorations orchestrated to prove my theory: food is and can be the meeting point between cultures. Whatever our differences in beliefs, politics, and religion, we put them aside when we sit down to share bread and salt, an ancient ritual of welcome and a bond of trust.

Ahmad Nasser, a friend of a friend of the family, was to act as my guide during my visit. We had never met.

Ahmad was picking me up in the lobby of the hotel for a brief tour of Arab Dearborn before my interviews the next day.

The artificial fountain in the lobby sprinkled and tinkled watery music. None of the people walking by fit the sketch in my imagination. How to recognize a stranger?

A handsome older man of middle height walked in, clothed in a crisp white dress shirt and uncreased black pants. Confident, his head high, he peered nearsightedly as he strode through the mechanical doors, looking for me.

"Ahmad?"

"Hello, Rachel," he replied in accented English with a smile that changed his face from business casual to kind. "Are you ready for your tour?"

My sweaty hand clutched the handle of my bag. My head nodded of its own volition, accompanied by a smile of intended self-assurance. Side by side we exited the sliding doors of the hotel into the late afternoon's stifling heat.

Ahmad cranked the air conditioning in his black Saturn SUV, and we sped right, onto Ford Road. With surreptitious sideways glances, I attempted to study his profile. His hairline, the smile creases at the corners of his mouth and eyes, and the knowing quirk of his eyebrow led me to guess he was in his late forties. His car was immaculate.

After driving only a quarter of a mile we passed a gas station, a Mexican restaurant advertising halal chicken, a strip club, and then several churches. After the churches came minarets silhouetted against the hazy heat of a Detroit skyline—domed spires hovering like a mirage. We drove through the parking lot of the Islamic Center of Dearborn first—it was closed

this late in the day. It was a revelation to see signs for Christian churches on the streets surrounding the center—The Saint Clement Orthodox Church, St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church, Warrendale Community Church, and even a synagogue. The pervading external opinion is that Dearborn has one faith, Islam, but the buildings of worship on side streets just a few hundred yards from Ford Road and next to the Islamic Center told a different story.

Dearborn is predominately an Arab diasporic community—a population of people from the Middle East that have settled in this pocket of Detroit. A city of immigrants, generations have come from Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and surrounding countries to make a home and a life in Michigan, bringing with them their customs, traditions, and foods.

"The churches, the Center, the synagogue, they all work together," Ahmad said. "The media, they like to hype the discord because that is a sensational story that sells news, but mostly, everyone gets along very well. Last week, that crazy man from Florida, the Koran burner, was up for our multi-cultural festival, protesting in front of our Islamic Center. But the churches, priests, rabbis, parishioners, all came out to denounce him," Ahmad said, smiling sideways at me. "What most people don't know is that many of the Arabs in Dearborn are not Muslim, but Christian. Half of Lebanon, my home country, is Christian or secular." I remembered reading that Beirut was once called the Paris of the Middle East.

We cruised through Dearborn, from the Southfield Freeway onto Michigan Avenue. Ahmad talked, his hand leaving the steering wheel to point out important landmarks. We drove past notable restaurants and Arab-owned businesses, his office, the community center, a local mosque, and many other institutions and edifices central to the Dearborn Arab community.

It felt as though I had traveled thousands of miles from the Upper Peninsula, but this was all Michigan—the state of my birth. Most of the signs were in Arabic, the people walking down

hot streets brown skinned, and many women wore the cloth head cover, called *hijab*. Some chose to dress fully covered in the black *abaya*, the head to toe cloth sometimes worn by Muslim women.

My aunt, uncle, and Grandmother, who live just an hour outside of Dearborn, were mystified by my journey and its objective. My father's younger brother, took me aside before I left, looked into my face with the earnest intensity of the intoxicated, coating me with the scent of stale Pinot Grigio, and said, "Your Dad isn't here, so I'm going to play Dad. You be careful down there. They don't have the same rules." He stopped, flustered. "Just be careful, Ok?"

Grandma, eighty-nine, world traveled and well read, breathed heavily into the phone as she admonished, "You don't want to get involved with *those* people." And later, "You aren't converting to Mohammadism are you? Grandma will put up with a lot but she won't put up with that."

Ahmad pulled the SUV into the parking lot of a red brick building with shiny windows. The elaborate golden sign read "Shatila," and through the big picture window a palm tree glowed, strung with twinkle lights. The sugary scent of honey and rose water wafted on balmy evening air.

"I thought we would get some ice cream."

A lit dessert counter ran twenty curved yards along one wall, filled with pastries glistening with honey, tarts capped with colorful tropical fruits and froths of white whipped cream. Across from the glass fronted case a large ice cream counter with a billboard offered such flavors as almond, pineapple, mango, and coconut.

"Get whatever you would like," Ahmad said, clearly amused at my reaction to the sugary bounty.

Tiers of desserts gleamed and twinkled like a child's dream. Every kind of baklava, green pistachio-flecked and caramel-colored in sheets of crinkly phyllo and in vermicelli-like strings. They had syrupy names like *bassma*, *ballourie*, and *ossmalleya*, topped with mixed nuts, the phyllo folded, rolled and layered. The rest of the case was devoted to pastries and cakes—each more evocative than the next. Fruits, intricately cut and carved white and dark chocolate and puffs of cream topped each confection.

I turned, besieged, toward the ice cream.

"What would you like?" Ahmad asked as we perused the menu board.

"Oh, please, would you choose for me?"

Ahmad picked a combination of pistachio and vanilla bean ice-cream, and as we walked toward our table with our waffle cones, he explained why Arab ice cream is better than conventional American ice cream.

"It's the cream. Americans use skim milk because it is cheaper, but the water in the skim makes ice crystals. It compromises the taste and the texture. Some people like it," he said with a dismissive shrug that I came to associate with many things that did not meet Ahmad's standards. We ate the ice-cream quickly as it began to melt and drip.

Ahmad was open about himself—the death of his first wife, his divorce, his deep joy and pride in his adolescent sons—and he questioned me on my life and university studies. He spoke candidly about life and politics in Arab Dearborn. The coming together of a diasporic Arab community in a post-911 America.

The ice-cream was long gone, but we talked on across the empty table. Children's voices and the laughter of sugar-happy people flowed around us—our conversation enriching the flavor of the melee.

Shatila is an icon of Dearborn, and it was clear that this dessert oasis was just that to much of the community. Most of the clientele were Arab. Many women's heads were covered, but their eyes were lined with black makeup, and their lips were painted red. Groups of young men crowded in, leaning with deliberate nonchalance against the dessert cases. Their faces turned toward one another, and their mouths moved in animated exchange, but their eyes darted around the room, bouncing to each pretty-faced girl. Signs on the wall proclaimed that children must be attended, but despite this, small herds of blissful toddlers swarmed beneath the legs of people and tables alike.

This was a place people could come and eat the sweets associated with their home countries, and in that way it served as a little piece of the Arab world in Dearborn, Michigan. Many of the markets, stores, and delis throughout the city give this impression. If you were to cross the threshold, you could walk out into an afternoon in Amman, Beirut, or Aleppo.

Members of this diasporic community gathered around familiar tastes and smells of a world money, conflict, and politics caused them to flee, seeking in these sensual elements a morsel of home.

The next day the sun came up over smoking stacks of the Ford plants. I showered and put on a black cotton dress, hoping to be both modest and cool in 100 degree heat, and jumped into my car.

Air-conditioning running high, I pulled onto Ford Road and followed Ahmad's hand-drawn map to Michigan Avenue. As an engineer, Ahmad paid acute attention to detail, and his years of working for the Chamber of Commerce gave him an almost uncanny sense of Dearborn's layout. I navigated the turns and lights, passing shoe stores, pastry shops, and

clothing retailers with signs in Arabic, letters dancing across the surface like the etchings of ballet shoes.

My interview was at a restaurant on Michigan Avenue. I parked my car far down the street—intending to walk, studying my surroundings. It is one thing to drive down a street, but the details come into focus at a walking pace. This section of the street was much more Americanized—Starbucks next to a Falafel shop. Across the street from La Pita, the restaurant where the interview was to take place, there was a Dior complete with two stories of window manikins frothed in yards of lace and tulle in white and pastel fabric.

Rows of newly renovated brownstones in this upscale neighborhood ran the length of the street behind Michigan Avenue. Certain sections of Dearborn, like this one, gentrified as new business brought money into the community.

The air conditioner blasted the top of my head at the entrance to La Pita. My legs, neck, and forehead were dewed with sweat from the near 100 degree heat and humidity, the air a damp dish cloth.

The interior of the restaurant was Middle Eastern chic—very "1001 Nights," but mirrors reflected colored wall tiles, making rainbows, and curtained alcoves looked cozy and inviting. It was alluring, if a bit clichéd. The air conditioning was a welcome cool against my skin while I waited for Ahmad to join me, catching bits and pieces of my reflection in the little mirrors that dotted the wall.

Ahmad walked through the doorway, wiping sweat from his brow, and the manager, Mohamad Dbouk, ushered us to a booth.

Mohamad, head freshly shaved, dressed in a dark purple button-down shirt and black pants, leaned at ease in his chair, arm resting comfortably on the tabletop as he answered my questions. He was close in height to my 5'10" and we were eye to eye as we spoke.

The faux marble of the tabletop was attractive, but sticky in the humidity. The bottle of water at the center of the table beaded with condensation, rolling down the textured surface in fat drops and fell, spotting my note paper.

Later, over a dinner of creamy *hummus* and crunchy, lemony *fattoush*, Ahmad would tell me that Mohamad's story was similar to that of many Arab immigrants who came to Dearborn seeking a better life.

Mohamad was born in Lebanon and moved to Dearborn when he was twenty. The Lebanese Civil War, lasting from 1975-1990, displaced over a million Lebanese who scattered to Arab communities across the globe. Warfare in Lebanon continues in sporadic surges, waves of violence that, like an earthquake, are felt throughout the region and seen around the world in images of billowing smoke and burning cars. Mohamad has been here twenty-two years, but has been back to Lebanon only a handful of times since he immigrated.

Dearborn is a city of divided families. His mother and most of his family still live in Lebanon.

"I miss her cooking," he admitted with a rueful smile. "Food is so important in our culture. We eat lunch and thirty minutes later more food is on the table."

When asked about the difference between Arab foods in the U.S. and those in Lebanon he said, "The food was much fresher in Lebanon. Much of it we grew ourselves. People were healthier. Here, there is so much more meat, more sweets—it isn't healthy."

Much of this he attributes to how Americans process their foods—there are more additives and less "whole foods"—grains, fresh vegetables, and fruits. Arabs at home and in the diaspora are turning to more heavily processed foods out of convenience and cost.

"Weight and health were never a concern." He adds, leaning back in his chair, surveying me with dark eyes. "The new generations are not as culturally inclined."

The Ford factory brought people in from the Arab world to work. These workers made connections with family and friends back home, who came for the security of steady employment. The community began to mix and bond because many of the workers shared homes and cars, living in close proximity to each other and their work in the factories. Mohamad's family came from the south of Lebanon.

In 1992 the intervention of U.S. forces in Iraq that led to Desert Storm brought over many Iraqis. As violence across the Middle East escalated, the Dearborn population swelled with Arabic dialects and versions of time-honored dishes like *baba ghanoush*, *naan*, and *hummus*. Individuals and families with a wide range of faiths fled to Dearborn with their traditions, beliefs, and recipes.

Having worked twelve years as a server, I knew that Mohamad had little time to spare. He asked me to wait a moment as I gathered my papers. He went back to the kitchen and returned with a small bowl filled with mixed nuts. With an open smile, he held out his palm for the shell of the pistachio I cracked. The salt sliced across my tongue as my back teeth sunk into the nutty green flesh. The ice-cream of the night before, the pistachios, almonds, and sunflower seeds of this afternoon—everywhere in Dearborn there would be an offer of food.

"Thank you so much for taking the time," I said. Any expression of gratitude felt limited by language. Both Ahmad and Mohamad had given me, a stranger, their time and stories.

His handshake was firm as we said our goodbyes in the entrance of La Pita, and Ahmad held the door as we exited into the blistering afternoon.

Before the meeting at Al-Ameer, the next stop in the lineup of interviews Ahmad had organized through a mystifying network of community connections, he treated me to lunch. We ate *fatayer* at Yasmine's, a bakery/deli well known throughout Dearborn and the nation. Fatayer are savory stuffed pastries: ground meat aromatic with herbs, salty white Syrian cheese dotted with green bits of parsley, or thick bites of spinach. Yasmine's ships their pita all across the country, and even into Canada. The Rubayait, a restaurant in Marquette where I waitressed the year before, had pita overnighted from this very bakery to dip in garlicky feta sauce, wrap around smoky chunks of grilled lamb, and scoop fragrant bites of curry and rice.

As Ahmad and I stood in front of the cases of fatayer, the glass steaming over from warm air escaping from each delicious little pastry, the young man behind the counter reached in and offered me a fresh baked morsel filled with salty cheese, a pinch of fresh parsley, and dusted with toasted sesame seeds. "My favorite," he said, with a full white-toothed smile as I took a bite. It was cheese and bread, but the cheese was everything you want from cheese: creamy and salty at once. And the bread was soft and chewy, like the best pizza dough you've ever had, but lighter. Behind all this flavor, parsley burst through the other tastes, while at the same time bringing them together.

Besides cheese and parsley fatayer, we picked out spinach, spicy ground lamb and tomato, and cheese and broccoli to try. Ahmad paid our bill. He waved away my offer to pay with, "Another time, another time."

As we stood at the counter a different employee approached us with a stuffed pita half in each hand. The pita pockets were overflowing with chopped crunchy romaine lettuce, thin slices of purple onions, juicy red tomato wedges, and the crispy brown edge of fresh falafel.

"One of our new items for you to try," the young man said as he handed one to each of us. I was getting full before we had even begun lunch.

When we finished our lunch and stepped into the baking Detroit afternoon, all I wanted was to take a long nap, but it was time for my appointment at Al-Ameer restaurant, just a few blocks down on Ford Rd.

Despite the heat, many of the women on the streets and in the cars around me wore long pants, long sleeves, and head scarves.

Although it was between lunch and dinner there were a few patrons installed in comfortable booths lining the walls of Al-Ameer—a mix of skin colors and nationalities—a common sight throughout Dearborn. The flowing hijabs and abayas did not appear as exotic and I began to feel less like I was in a foreign country as I became accustomed to the sights, sounds, and smells around me.

Abbas, the owner of Al-Ameer was young—twenty-six as he later told me. He pulled up a chair, making sure to first shake my hand and introduce himself. His hair was cut so close to his head I couldn't tell if this hid a receding hairline, but the affect was not unattractive. His dark eyes turned from serious to humorous when we talked, and the conversation flowed easily between us. He settled his muscular frame into the chair, the discussion opening with an explanation of my writing endeavor.

Abbas has dual degrees in sociology and psychology from University of Michigan. He had recently assumed responsibility for his father's restaurants. "I was going to go to law school when the recession hit," he paused, shaking his head, "but I didn't want to be $400,000 in debt, so I decided to help my father with the restaurants."

There are two Al-Ameers—there used to be seven.

Abbas' father is Lebanese, but he worked in Dubai for the Dubai Hyatt, and in 1984 he came to Dearborn to work in his uncle's restaurant, "Lebanon Restaurant." He was soon able to open his own restaurant, which he did—across the street from the Lebanon. The Lebanon eventually closed down, but Al-Ameer remained popular.

"What are some of your own food memories from childhood?" I asked.

He settled his hands on the table in an age-old storytelling pose, speaking to me with an inward gaze, as he described how the other children in the cafeteria at his elementary school all had bologna or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and he had pita with yogurt and veggies. Sometimes, if he was lucky, he was sent to school with baklava. "I would've done anything for a bologna sandwich, but not now," he said.

There was pride of history and lineage in his voice as Abbas spoke of his family's restaurant, the food they serve, and Arabic cuisine in general. "It is the gathering point," he said. "What you eat sets the tone for the rest of the day." He also spoke of other elements that Americans don't usually consider—seasonal eating in the Middle Eastern diet. "Weather dictates what you eat. Light in midday. Certain foods help keep you cool," he said, gesturing to heat baking off the parking lot outside. His family is from the Baca valley in Lebanon and he told me about a seasonal dish—winter in this case—called *kishik* made from condensed milk in

its powder form, brought to a boil and then meat, onion, and garlic are added. It is then eaten with pita bread. "It keeps you warm."

Abbas pointed to the luminous bottle of olive oil on the table, and all the tables throughout the restaurant. That olive oil, he explained with a lift of his chin, was imported from his family's village in Lebanon. It is stone ground and in the bottom you can see a dark dusting of pumice from the olive itself.

"Sometimes the sediment is mistaken for dirt," Abbas said with a laugh and a shake of his green-shirted shoulders.

"What's your favorite food memory?" I asked.

With the instinct of a natural storyteller, Abbas spoke of a little town tucked into the mountains of Lebanon, surrounded by silvery green olive groves. As he spoke, I fought the impulse to close my eyes. The restaurant around me faded and coalesced in a Lebanese village.

His uncle owned a butcher shop. Blood of lambs caked beneath his fingernails, Abbas said, from teaching his young nephew how to slit the throat of a sheep according to the laws of halal. One shiny late afternoon stood out over others.

"It was evening. We were hungry. So we decided to eat," he said, his eyes far away.

"There was no Pizza Hut, no McDonalds," Abbas said. Instead they gathered around the grill pit and began to cook meat from the butcher shop. Choice pieces spread across the grill, filling the night air with their aroma.

"We ate in the dark. No plates, just pita," he said, his voice trailing off.

The smell of lamb floating from the kitchen conjured mirages of the past.

When the interview came to a close, Abbas and Ahmad shook hands, and Ahmad thanked Abbas for taking time to speak with me.

"Anything for you," Abbas said with a deep nod of his head.

Anything for you.

The ancient Greeks originated the word *xenia*, the word for hospitality that signifies the obligation to treat guests well and generously. This was a life and death matter in a time when travelers relied upon their hosts to provide food and shelter. It evolved into an unspoken custom of goodwill and behavior patterns between host and guest that are often difficult to find in today's society, but persevere in enclaves of goodness throughout the world.

From Lebanon, to Dearborn, to the Upper Peninsula, each ingredient connected to a network of individuals, families, recipes, and regions of a homeland far away—amended and adapted in a new home both hospitable and hostile, new and familiar, daunting and hopeful.

Winter Night, Accidental Salad

In my family, salads are not just a side dish—they are a legacy. When I was little, I had no appreciation for garden-fresh salads, piled in bowls brimming with dew speckled lettuce. Salads were a nightly staple in my parents' household, but the sharp garlicky flavor, and the addition of the oh-so-heinous blue cheese made me turn up my nose. My father, patient with his daughters' maturing taste buds, fixed my sister and me little individual salads in our own miniature wooden salad bowls. The salads usually consisted of lettuce, tomato, an orange dusting of grated carrot, and a few green half-moons of chopped celery. We experimented with making our own dressings—turns out ketchup and mayonnaise whipped together taste kind of like French dressing.

As an adult, my hatred of blue cheese has come back to haunt me. The transition from disliking blue cheese and craving it was so sudden it felt as if I woke up one morning and my taste buds had matured. I went to the restaurant where I worked the next day and made myself a salad loaded with blue cheese.

Now, I buy it in blocks and crumble it myself, the creamy texture and biting undertones silky against my tongue. The blocks I break up with a fork, lifting errant, spilled crumbles from the countertop, and licking them off my fingers.

The creamy, blue-veined cheese has character—proper cheeses under the classification "blue cheese" are aged in caves—a true character builder. They also carry the interesting distinction of producing the same bacterium that causes foot and body odor in humans, *Brevibacterium linens.*

My mother ordered blue cheese in bulk from her local food cooperative. It arrived in five pound blocks wrapped in shiny silver foil, which she crumbled and distributed amongst empty yogurt containers, and then stacked in the big chest freezer.

She broke up the cheese in her biggest stainless steel bread bowl, working her hands into the moist chunks of white cheese, as the whole house filled with that unique funk: part pasture, part damp dark cave, and part cream.

My childish complaints were vociferous and many, and often accompanied by dramatic gagging sounds.

On summer evenings my father, a fourth grade teacher during the school year, arrived indoors from his work day in the garden, toting a basket overflowing with fresh produce. Each step he took, lettuce fronds waved over the wicker basket edge. Dressed in cutoff jeans, frayed chambray shirt and black rubber boots—his summer gardening uniform—my father harvested the delicate leaf lettuces, red tomato orbs, crispy carrots, and green oblong cucumbers that made up our salads. Watching him, working beside him, you could feel the contentment roll off his body like puffs of pipe smoke that drifted around his bearded face. This was the life he had imagined when he moved eight hours north, across the mighty Mackinac Bridge, and into the north woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula: working the land, gathering the fruits of his hard earned labor, his beautiful wife and children by his side.

My father wasn't a hippie, although he grew up in that generation, had a beard and long hair he refused to cut, and protested the Vietnam War. He liked blue jeans so much he continued to patch them until they were too worn, and then they were reincarnated as cut-offs. However, he did embody some of the hippie movement ideals of living off the land and eating what you produce.

My father cultivates a huge garden that expands ever year, beginning around February 1st, when the first batch of seed catalogues arrives. The colorful catalogues pile up beside his reading chair, his seat at the breakfast table, his desk, and on the window-seat that acts as a catch-all for catalogues. He buys graph paper and carries around a clipboard and pencil, making notes, erasing, adjusting, and calculating. The crops rotate seasonally throughout the tilled garden space to ensure soil health, and the plans are a Rubix cube of colors, sun exposure, drainage, and spacing.

Ever year the garden morphs, changes shape, and makes room for a new variety or experimental crop. One year it was artichokes, the next chickpeas, and once even melons that grew to the size of softballs before cold Upper Michigan, late-August nights cut short their growth.

No matter how many incarnations the garden has, lettuce is always a staple. It is planted early, late, and often to keep up with the household's salad demands.

My father has cultivated his own garden for over forty years. Like the rest of the garden, the salad-patch also saw new varieties and increasing diversity. The first gardening years, he planted simple rows of red and green leaf lettuce, but now thanks to the influence of his daughters and expanded seed catalogue variety, head lettuces are joined by spicy mustard greens, fibrous and hardy kales, and rainbow hued chard.

My father, nose spotted with freckles and red bandana around his sweat soaked brow, reserved harvesting the lettuce until he came in for dinner, keeping the fragile leaves from wilting in the summer heat.

Making the evening's dinner salad might fall to my father, mother, sister, or me—whoever was available and so-inclined. The ingredients varied by season, but the basic formula remains the same. While the recipe itself is still a secret, our salad preparation begins with the big wooden salad bowl that, until the growth spurt in our teens, my sister and I had to have help getting off the shelf. It is never washed, only wiped clean and the scent of garlic lingers in the air and on our fingertips as we heft it from shelf, to countertop. Despite being almost six feet tall, I still boost myself onto the countertop to get down the salad bowl.

The wood is variegated and lathed smooth to the touch, leaving a faint sheen of olive oil on your hands when you run your fingertips along the inside edges. Like a seasoned cast iron pan this bowl is part of the secret to making a dish that will stand out in memory—a salad that, even in the howling cold of February, tastes like green-scented summer evenings in August.

I am working to season my own salad bowl to the garlicky perfection of my parents'.

Last winter I had a family friend, Dorothy, visit for the weekend. She drove five hours down from Montreal River Harbor, Canada on a snowy Friday in February, braving the roads to be with me. It was the first time she had visited my home, and I wanted to make a meal worthy of her visit. Despite the fact that she is old enough to be my mother, Dorothy and I speak outside the constraints of age, and her visit meant a great deal to me.

Dorothy, tattooed knuckles and hennaed hair, smells faintly of cedar and patchouli every time I hug her. For many years she worked the fishing nets with her husband Shane, their deep-bowed red and blue boat dipping into Lake Superior's troughs and swells, hauling lines festooned with shiny-scaled Whitefish.

They lived in a log cabin built by hand along Highway 17 North—the only road running the 440 miles from Sault Ste. Marie all the way to Thunder Bay. To supplement their income

Shane worked winter nights on the road crew piloting giant-bladed trucks through blizzards on steep roads with high cliffs and hair-pin curves. Dorothy worked a trap line, skinning, curing, and tanning the soft brown martin, shiny deep-downed beaver, and dusky wolf furs that I liked to nap on as a little girl before they went to market.

Soft-spoken Dorothy calls me by my nick-name—Rosebud—one of the last people who still do. I visited Dorothy every summer. She washed my hair in rain water, combing the tangles out of the fine blond strands as watery sunshine made maple leaf patterns across my upturned face.

She cooked partridge fingers, dipping the just-plucked white breast meat tasting of juniper berries the bird ate an hour before, in milk, crushed cracker crumbs, and egg. The partridge, fried in oil until golden brown, was one of the best things I've ever eaten, crunchy-fried and woods flavored.

In her honor, I made a glorious baked mac and cheese dish complete with fancy gruyere and cheddar cheeses, and topped with buttered cracker crumbs that created a crispy, buttery topping. But I needed a green accompaniment to balance the cheesy goodness.

I had lettuce in the fridge, but my other salad options were limited. My home was twenty minutes from the closest store—a rural co-op that also served as the hardware store. Their produce section was limited to wrinkled lemons, sprouting onions, and green peppers wrapped in plastic.

Other than half a head of purple cabbage, my vegetable crisper was empty. After many years in the rural backwoods I've learned you can create many meals, anything from stir fry to coleslaw, if you have cabbage—purple or green. Cabbage's versatile, spicy undertone is

especially welcome during the winter months when color, for both the body and the plate, is much needed.

My father grows green and purple cabbage, strung like beads in a necklace across his garden rows. With his root cellar, he is able to keep his family supplied with the sweet and zesty globes all year. Winter weekends he brings me vegetables from the cold-storage, wrapped like presents in old newspaper. My movements reverent, I unpeel the outer leaves. Slowly, the cabbage's deep wine hues reveal themselves to my color-famished eyes.

I have learned to grow the colorful, curvaceous brassica, but without proper storage I am unable to squirrel them away as long as my father can. My limited storage capabilities make me twice as thankful for my father's winter gifts.

The most recent incarnation of my father's comestible gift was in its whole form next to a bag of green leaf lettuce on my kitchen counter, and all I had to work with for the night's vegetable option.

"This is what we're going to do," I said to the German Shorthair who looked expectantly up at me from his cropped-tail tripod next to the counter. His eyes followed my hands with an attentiveness that only the prospect of food can provoke.

One thing that I loved on my trips to Europe was how, in lieu of a dessert option, a fruit and cheese plate were often served. The flavors of a good cheddar combined with apples or pears is a deceptively simple blend of tastes—the tart fruit arches across the tongue, and then is anchored by creamy cheese, leaving you intrigued and wanting more after each bite.

The memory of the fruit and cheese that I ate in Florence, Italy inspired me. I began to gather salad ingredients, daylight fading around the edges of the house.

Dorothy, I learned after cooking several meals that did not receive the complement of second helpings, is something of a meat-and-potatoes lady. She enjoys vegetables, and grows a garden, but prefers simple flavors. She ate the wheat berry risotto with roasted beets and wilted greens I cooked for her once, but she didn't ask for seconds.

In her household I've eaten moose burgers, venison roasts that melted across my tongue, and fried fish so fresh that the crows hadn't gotten to the fish carcasses next to the filet table yet.

I wanted her to remember this dinner—her first visit to my home.

I picked up a Pink Lady apple from the fruit bowl, its round heaviness, firm skin, and bright smell redolent of fall. The bright sticker next to the stem said the apple was grown in Washington, almost 2000 miles away.

Apple clutched in my hand, I proceeded to the pantry cupboard and pulled the heavy door open with a *squeak*, finding dried cranberries in their etched mason jar on the shelf at eye level. I set the jar of puckered crimson berries next to the apple and cabbage head on the counter. My hands were winter-white against the deep plum purple of the outer cabbage leaves that I peeled away to get at the better layers beneath.

I washed the lettuce gently, careful not to bruise the leaves, smoothing flecks of dirt away from light green ribs beneath running water. I dried the lettuce with the loud white salad spinner that I still use, despite the damaged strainer, which my sister set too close to a burner on the stove, changing its shape irrevocably.

I dried the lettuce and shredded it with my hands, creating a less battered final product than chopping with a knife.

Once the lettuce was prepped, I thinly chopped a medium yellow onion, careful of my fingertips as the knife blade *thunked* against the cutting board in its reassuring rhythm. The cut

onions went into a cast iron fry pan with about two tablespoons of olive oil, sautéing on a low heat until melted.

The sound and smell of onions simmering is a sure sign of good food to come. Like a prophecy of forthcoming delicious tastes and fulfilment, the tangy scent inhabits the kitchen, accompanied by the sibilant hiss of onion frying in butter.

While the cabbage and onions were melting into one another in the sauté pan, I added a little less than a quarter cup of dried cranberries, a pinch of salt and a dash of pepper. I let this cook down until it was soft but still a little crunchy, and then I turned off the heat.

The sun was almost at the horizon's edge, heralding February's early-evening darkness. I flipped on the porch lights and scanned the empty road for Dorothy's truck before turning back to the salad.

This salad demanded its own signature vinaigrette. Salad dressings are easy to make, but in the moment it seems simpler to buy the expensive, nondescript, and conventional versions from the supermarket. I wanted to create a dressing that would harmonize the salad's disparate ingredients—bring them together, but allow each flavor to stand on its own.

I purled a dollop of yellow Dijon mustard in a bowl, and then added four tablespoons of red wine vinaigrette. The dressing needed to be on the sweeter side, as well as tangy, so I added a little more than a tablespoon of maple syrup.

Like our salads, maple syrup is another family legacy. My father has tapped his own trees and boiled down his own sap, the clear sugared liquid from the sugar maple that boils down to become syrup. When we were too little to really help, my sister and I tagged along after him

as he hauled the brown garden-way cart up the hill. The dirt road was lined on one side with ancient, craggy maple trees that opened their veins for us every spring.

My sister Laurel, and I, barely able to walk in our bundled snowsuits and boots, struggled through the deep March snow to the buckets attached by a small metal "S" hook to the tap protruding from crumbly tree bark. Some buckets were so full we could crouch in front of the bucket and sip sweet water. Two little wood nymphs in felted hats and mittens, we were careful not to touch our lips to the cold metal for fear of getting stuck.

When he had collected enough for a productive boil—100 gallons of sap at the least—our father boiled the sap over his brick outdoor wood cooker, the square cast iron pan heating the liquid to steaming, cooking off the water and leaving only sweet sugars behind. To my little girl mind Daddy looked like a wizard, pipe tucked in the corner of his grey bearded mouth, sugary steam swirling mysteriously around his wool-coated form.

He helped us carefully dip our spoons into the bubbling liquid, and we slurped the half syrup until it ran, sticky down our chins.

The syrup that is the final product of my father's alchemy is more precious than the gold it resembles, and we cherish every jar. Using the small amount in the salad dressing added a sweet, smoky note like a hint of sugary steam on a sunny March day.

I whisked the dressing components together and then slowly began to pour in a cup of good olive oil, my wrist whipping the whisk in rapid circles to emulsify the oil and vinegar.

The frothy, tangy dressing went into a lidded mason jar that I shook just before adding it to the salad.

The porch light cast a glowing circle into the darkness, and through the window stars were poking through the black sky blanket, winking bright in the chill night air. Dorothy's truck would be pulling into the driveway any minute.

I put the lettuce into my wooden salad bowl, so reminiscent of my parents' but without the years of seasoning. Cabbage, caramelized onions and dried cranberries, which I had left to cool while assembling the dressing, I sprinkled over the lettuce.

When it was almost time to eat, I sliced the crimson-skinned Pink Lady apple from Washington into half inch pieces, and sprinkled the pink and white bits over the salad.

Excitement, like goose bump prickles, raised across my skin as I put the finishing touches on the meal. In a small pan, I toasted slivered almonds. When the nuts became fragrant and popped a little in the pan, they were ready for the salad.

I glanced at the driveway as I nibbled on a nut. Head lights cut through the darkness and shone into the kitchen. The dogs, roused from their wood-stove-heat slumber, remembered their breed and barked, their noses pressed to the smeared window.

Dorothy walked through the door in a burst of cold air. We hugged, my arms wrapping around her small frame, the familiar scent of wood smoke, patchouli, and pot tugging me into the past and a thousand other hugs. Hugs that began when I was a newborn on Dorothy's lap, looking up into her loving hazel eyes, her long braid tickling my face as she bounced me on her knee and called me, "My Rosebud." Because of Dorothy, I thought Rosebud was my real name until I was four.

I looked up from tossing the salad—a blur of green, pink, purple, and creamy blue cheese—and felt breathless with tenderness as I studied the face of my loved one. Her husband, Shane, had passed away the year before, and her face was etched in new lines. Her eyelids

drooped in a fatigue that ran deeper than a long drive on snowy roads. I picked up her hand where it rested on the kitchen counter, giving it a squeeze. As we spoke, the oven warmed the wood floors and the cheesy macaroni wafted its creamy aroma through the room. After a few minutes her cheeks began to color and her eyes regained some of their shine.

After slipping the macaroni and cheese into the oven to toast the butter-drenched cracker topping, I tossed the salad. I sprinkled crumbled blue cheese over lettuce and shook on my homemade vinaigrette, tossing carefully, making sure the heavier bits didn't sink to the bottom.

Between tasks I sipped my wine and talked with Dorothy, solving the problems of the world, catching up on our personal lives, and indulging in good laughter that felt like fine scotch in my mouth.

The kitchen was performing its magic, each sensual element a reminder of the immediate moment's joy.

In Greek myth, the hearth becomes representative of the home as a whole, which makes sense, because it is where the household gathers, where the food is prepared, and where the warmth comes from.

I watched my friend fill her plate, trying not to dance from foot to foot as I waited my turn. A fire was going in the woodstove, the table was lit with candles, and the house was cozy, warmed by the camaraderie around the table as much as wood heat.

The dogs peered at our dinners, chins resting on the couch-back, but limiting their begging to licking lips and sniffing air, heat from the wood stove inducing laziness. Before we lifted forks to mouths the dogs had slid from begging into sleep, their heads sinking onto the couch cushions with contented sighs.

Dorothy and I raised our glasses for a toast, taking time to look into one another's eyes. Dorothy's eyes held happiness at arm's length, knowing the fleeting nature of such times, the recent loss of her husband etched just behind this moment's pleasure.

We clinked our mason jar wine glasses, making a pleasing, reverberating ring in the air for an instant, prolonging the moment before eating.

When I took my first bites, I knew. When something is that delicious, there is an answering echo deep within us having nothing to do with our stomachs. It is a profound satisfaction on a wholly mental level that causes us to smile and shake our heads as we chew in readiness for the next bite.

Tart apple crunch melded with creamy cheddar. Dried cranberry—sweet, crimson, and tangy fused with velvety blue cheese. Buttery toasted cracker crumbs dusting cheesy noodles. Dorothy mumbled, "Delicious," between bites.

Eating good food has less to do with "gourmet" and more to do with fulfillment and gratification— meeting a need you didn't even know you had. The stomach is only a small part of it. When we eat, really *eat*, we satisfy, for just a few brief moments, that ethereal element of life that always seems to hang suspended, just out of reach. When we close our eyes, sometimes humming a little in bliss, we are wholly present—the act of eating a kind of meditation.

The flavors were so wonderful I found myself taking a fork full of both macaroni and salad before bringing it to my mouth. The combination of tastes was something of my European memory, something of the purple cabbage dreams of my father's summer garden, and joy in this moment, sharing food with loved ones.

Every Other Sunday

The first time I help butcher chickens at Rock River Farm, it takes everything in me not to vomit. The smell is intense—blood, and cloying tang of dead chicken. The steaming kettle used to loosen stubborn feathers adds a miasma of hot chicken funk to the air.

I'm dressed in rubber boots and cutoff shorts, latex gloves stretched tight over my hands, packing rubbery dead chickens into plastic bags, and passing them down the assembly line to the person whose job it is to vacuum seal the bags and stack them in the chest freezer.

I am a part of a two-team assembly line beneath a greenhouse structure intended to minimize flies, but instead traps hundreds of pulsing, black-winged bodies beneath the domed roof. The plastic ceiling forces them down where they become stuck in congealing blood pools, their death throes blissful and macabre. After an hour, they stop bothering me.

Behind me is the "butcher table" where five people stand over a stainless steel tabletop, bloody, viscera-filled buckets at their feet. They hold sharp knives in one hand, chicken in the other, a look of engrossed/grossed concentration on their faces that later becomes known as the "chicken-butcher face." Beneath the table, Lupin, adorable black lab puppy, munches happily on a chicken foot, oblivious to all but her rubbery orange chew toy.

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Three years later I'm a chicken butcher veteran. Over the past three years I've learned that Bailey's and coffee makes early summer mornings a little easier. I figured out the hard way to eat the donuts Erik brought from the local Glenn's right away because it's impossible to

guarantee someone didn't forget to wash their hands before reaching into the box. Now, I put a cover over my Pabst—Mason jar lids work well—otherwise you risk drinking a fly. I abide by the oft repeated "Universal Rule of Chicken Butcher": don't lick your lips.

I've established my place on the disassembly line—the sink. By the time the chickens reach the sink they look like something ready to bake in the oven. It's satisfying to receive the chicken from the butchers, gently rid the skin of any clinging feathers with a ball of steel wool, insert hose into cavity and clean out any lingering bits of viscera, check the bird over with a practiced and critical eye, and hand it down the line to the packers who bag, weigh, label, and freeze the birds.

After three years I have seniority, and sometimes get sassy with the butchers when they move too quickly and miss certain integral steps that make your job take longer: "I've got a neck here! Can I get a neckectomy please!" Or when they forget to cut the nasty yellow glands from the chicken's tail: "I have a Pope's nose! Could someone hand me a sharp knife?" Or when they get sloppy with the gutting, "There are lungs and an esophagus here—that's not my job, guys. I'm the washer—you pull guts." Or the hand-off of tools, "Can I get some pliers over here, please? The water might not be hot enough, cause I've got a lot of pin feathers."

Over the years I have become a part in a finely honed system, something for Rock River Farm—a small operation of three, supplemented by intermittent volunteer help—to be proud of. Rowan, Shailah, and Erik own the farm, but it takes a lot of people to run an efficient chicken butcher. In three years I've watched them raise a barn, build a certified farm kitchen, and till acre after acre of new land for planting.

The farm kitchen is equipped with a walk-in cooler, three bin stainless steel sink, and stainless steel work tables, a far cry from the open-at-both-ends greenhouse where I first

participated in chicken butcher. Summer is gardening, swimming, and chicken butcher, every other Sunday.

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I turn right off of Rock River road into the farm's driveway and park behind a line of cars, next to the rock garden filled with leafy greened hostas that I helped Abbey and Shailah transplant last summer.

There is already a crowd gathered in front of the farm-kitchen door and steam rising from the large square pan used to dip chicken carcasses to loosen the feathers before they go in the Wiz-Bang Plucker. Rowan is holding court over this group of mostly men. They are dressed in their butcher clothes, Rowan included: stained white Hanes t-shirts, ripped and soiled Carhartt pants and/or jeans. Rowan continues working while the others talk, coffee cups in hand. His motions are methodical—the result of long practice. He walks to the trailer containing the clucking white chickens, chooses the closest to hand, the others flapping and fluttering in agitation. He approaches the block, the bird dangling upside down from his hand. It ceases struggling and he lays its head between the two nails on the well-bloodied stump functioning as the butcher block.

Once, I watched Rowan hypnotize a chicken. He laid the restless bird on the ground and slowly ran his hand over its head—once, twice, three times, before slowly standing up and stepping away. The chicken remained prone on the ground, winking stupidly, until Rowan picked it up gently and set it on the block.

Rowan's plastic apron that extends from his neck to his ankles is already spattered with blood and feathers. By day's end, his blue eyes will be the only clean part of him. We suggested a face mask, but the notion was brushed aside without a second thought. Even his thinning, wispy blonde hair has feathers in it already.

The chicken squawks only once before the honed cleaver comes down, *Whack*, on its neck, parting head from body. I thought this part would bother me more, but the act is natural and oddly numbing. I've witnessed this phenomenon in countless people volunteering to experience a chicken butcher. Watched them transform from nervous, anticipating nausea, to joking and laughing in less than an hour. I've noticed a thoughtfulness in people who participate in butcher days, whether guests or regulars, that I attribute to human beings falling back on something that comes natural to them—killing and disassembling animals for food. Perhaps, buried deep within us, there is an instinctual understanding that surrounds killing, preparing, and consuming meat.

Once the chicken's body and head have been separated, the head is left blinking on the ground while the bleeding body is quickly thrust into a cone to drain. It is important for the sake of both hygiene and flavor to get as much blood out of the bird as quickly as possible.

When the bird has drained, Rowan grasps yellow feet and swings bedraggled and dripping chicken from cone to cauldron. A giant pan of water is left to boil next to the butcher station all day—a potent brew. Rowan carefully dips chicken into water, swishing the bird around a few times. The chicken cannot be immersed too long, and the water shouldn't be too hot or too cold. If it is too hot the chicken will begin to cook and the skin itself will loosen and fall off, rather than just the feathers. If it is too cold, the feathers will refuse to loosen, causing issues down the line when the butchers and washers like you are stuck taking extra time using

pliers to pull out the feathers. Time is of the essence in this process, as it is imperative to get the chickens from butcher block to freezer as quickly as possible.

After their dunking, Rowan thrusts the chickens into the plucker. When I first started helping, Rowan did the plucking by hand. This is a crazy method, taking an astronomical amount of time compared to an automated plucker. One such incarnation is a wheel with a bunch of black rubber "fingers." Rowan holds the bird against the spinning fingers, which pluck the chicken. This is very messy—the feathers fly everywhere, including into Rowan's face.

The current plucker is called the "Wiz Bang" plucker. It is a barrel equipped with rubber plucking fingers on the inside that spin and pluck two chickens at a time while Rowan is on to the next chicken.

It is still early in the butcher-day and Rowan is still on his first birds, meaning no carcasses on the butchers' boards, and I have a few minutes to acclimate to a kitchen full of people and the bloody afternoon ahead.

I walk through the creaking, heavy screen door and into the kitchen, greeting friends and acquaintances outfitted in all manner of "butcher clothes": ripped jeans, coveralls, bandanas, t-shirts, tank tops, shorts, rubber boots, and tennis shoes old enough to bloody.

Abbey, long legs leaning against the sink, blond hair loose and curling in big ringlets along her jaw-line, pushes her glasses up with one finger, nodding at something that her dark haired Irish boyfriend, O'Malley, is saying.

Behind them is Bunce, Rowan's father. He is chuckling at something Kathryn, in her as-yet-unstained rubber apron, has said, laughter moving his belly in its tie-dyed t-shirt, up and down. His wife, Alyce is scrubbing at a stain on the sink, curly gray hair pulled away from her face in her signature yellow bandana.

I head right for the thermos of coffee and bottle of Baileys. My ceramic mug steams as I add a large dollop of liqueur to the black liquid, watching it swirl in chocolaty eddies before taking a careful sip. The donut box is next to the coffee and I peruse the items on offer before choosing a plain donut.

The kitchen hums with low conversation and sudden bursts of laughter. Shailah is at the packing table readying bags, clean cloths, and wiping down the stainless steel countertop. The shining cords of her thick red hair peeps from behind a flowered kerchief that she has knotted over her head, and her oversized button down work shirt hangs low over stained jeans. Her freckled face lights in a smile at something lovely, dark-haired Nora is saying. Nora inclines her hourglass figure against the table, getting in Shailah's way and teasing her about something I cannot hear from my perch by the coffee station.

The dynamics of the room are interesting and strangely captivating: beautiful women lined up around the kitchen, immersed in various stages of the butcher process. Bloody aprons, bloodied knives, bits of viscera spotting young women, beautiful as nymphs.

The task ahead of the assembled crew today is to butcher around 150 Cornish game hens—a fancy name for small chickens that have a shorter growth period than regular chickens. I prefer the weight of full-grown birds, but the game hens are faster to process.

Music piped in over speakers attached to an ipod suddenly gets louder—the signal it is time to take up stations.

Beck's hip voice reverberates through the kitchen as I add another dollop of Bailey's to my coffee and head for the sink.

I test the water, assemble my tools—steel wool, green scrubby, pliers, sharp knife, gloves—and cover my coffee to keep the flies out as the first chickens hit the butcher's cutting boards. The ribald and ghoulish conversation begins, amidst shouts of laughter.

"What are you doing to that chicken, Phil? That looks more like a sex face than a chicken butcher face."

"Look! It's a hand-puppet. I feel like that chef from The Muppets: 'Skewer da chicken—put da chicken in da pot.'"

"Don't forget to cut off wing-tips." Shailah pipes in with a voice of authority, keeping tabs on quality control.

The conversations range from philosophical to outrageous. The kitchen is full of volunteers from every age range and walk of life: from computer geniuses, to botanists; from English majors with multiple degrees, to river guides and farmers who could tell you more about politics, the economy, and history than most college graduates.

As the afternoon wears on, I switch from coffee to beer—the person with the cleanest hands making the cooler run, popping Pabst tops for anyone who needs a cold one.

The cold bubbly liquid slides down my throat, and, this moment, tastes better than water. Erik grins over the wall separating sink from butcher table and we raise our beers for a "Cheers". Erik leaves bloody fingerprints across the Pabst label when he sets his beer down.

By the end of the afternoon, the chickens are all dead. We work together to cleanse the evidence of blood and viscera from the kitchen, hosing, mopping, and sanitizing, scrubbing everything thoroughly with bleach spray. When all is spotless and gleaming, all signs of blood expunged, we traipse as a group toward the "farmhouse" trailer to eat the chili Shailah prepared

to feed the hungry multitudes, who want nothing to do with eating chicken for at least a day or two.

We are ravenous, and take our places around the picnic table outside. Around the picnic table and spread across the lawn are a dozen tired workers, clutching bowls of steaming chili topped with generous spoonfuls of sour cream, handfuls of grated orange cheese, and yellow Frito chips.

Conversations soften, interspersed with moments of silence as mouths fill, chewing around scorched lips in the hurry of hunger. I am wet around the edges, sleeves damp from scrubbing my hands and arms up to the elbows.

Katherine has a splotch of blood across her chest, but she is as oblivious as Rowan is to the feathers in his hair. They care only about the food in front of them, eating with primal determination, every calorie from the morning's donuts long gone and in need of replacing.

I linger around the picnic table after I'm done eating, the conversation waning as the food settles and exhaustion descends. I spend long moments staring off into the fields and trees, contemplative and satisfied.

I stand with effort, making the rounds of goodbye hugs and assurances of seeing one another soon. I walk, wobbly-legged to my car, climbing into the driver's seat with a sigh and groan, releasing my knees and thighs from the strain of standing at a sink all day. In the seat next to me sits a cooler containing two Cornish game hens—payments for an afternoon's hard work.

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When I talk about butchering my own meat, many people turn away in disgust, reacting with a shiver of revulsion and disbelief. "I couldn't do that," they say with curled lips, "It sounds so gross."

Americans lost touch with their food within the last seventy or so years. Big corporate farms distance consumer from product, making invisible the graphic, necessary processes to eating meat. We love to eat meat, but only with no prior knowledge how it appeared, shrink-wrapped in a Styrofoam container in the meat aisle at the supermarket. We don't want to know about the actual animal, how it died, and the handling that took place to get it into our refrigerator.

A huge degree of separation exists between the animal—pig, cow, chicken—and meat sizzling in a pan. This disconnect is at the heart of mass farming's horrors. We don't want to know where and how the animal lived and died, and the owners of meat corporations are happy to keep us in the dark—to the detriment of our health, the environment, and the animals themselves.

I came to know the chickens butchered today as fluffy little chicks in the barn under their heat lamp, the sound of their cheeping so loud it was difficult to talk. I watched their pinfeathers grow in. Watched them get bigger—and uglier—and move out into the pasture where they lived on bugs and grass until it came their time to die. Meat birds live ten to twelve weeks.

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A month later, I open the chest freezer's rectangular white lid and stare into the depths swirling with cold air meeting warm. The chickens I helped butcher, are nestled amongst packages of frozen blackberries from last summer, thick green chunks of broccoli, and orange carrot rounds dusted with a light frost of freezer burn.

I preheated the oven, placing the thawed game hen in the sink, running my hands over its stubbly skin in a parody of the movements I made on the day it died.

I prepare the rice, pondering whether it is fear of death that makes us so uncomfortable and disgusted about processing our own meat. Most people don't want to see it, let alone take part in the act.

Many early civilizations had rituals surrounding the killing of an animal, and some native cultures continue to maintain these practices. Most customs revolved around acknowledging the animal's death and giving some form of thanks for its life. There is an inherent understanding that another life was given to sustain our lives. What are the consequences of wilfully forgetting such an important fact?

I pay homage to the little chicken becoming dinner, rubbing its skin with a mixture of garlic, butter, olive oil, salt, pepper, and fresh garden thyme. The kitchen smells of herbs, garlic, and butter melting. The slick mixture feels good on my hands as I knead my palms together.

I slide the bird into the oven and set the timer for forty-five minutes. While the little chicken cooks, I make up a green salad, topping it with every vegetable in the fridge: red and purple cabbage, carrots, green onion, tomato, finishing it off with a sprinkle of blue cheese.

I chop veggies as alchemy takes place in the oven. The cycle: fuzzy chick, becomes a chicken; dies on the chopping block; butchered as I watch; minutes later I wash the bird in a

stainless steel sink; Shailah packages and tucks it away in the freezer; I bring the chicken home frozen, for another few weeks, a month, or more until the day I hunger for chicken; thaw the bird, and introduce it to thyme, garlic, and butter; put it in the oven and now, finally, the chicken becomes a meal.

I make a quick risotto with zucchini from the garden, stirring until the rice is creamy and refuses to absorb any more chicken broth. By now the house smells wonderful, and the crackling sound from the oven tells me the chicken is almost done.

The timer sounds its staccato "beep beep." I reach into the hot oven with mitted hands, pulling the pan out, juices sizzling and popping as they shift.

My best friend Alice is sharing this meal with me, and she watches, anticipation in her round dark brown eyes, as I rest the chicken-pan on the counter. She reaches up with a signature hand flip, tossing thick curls away from her forehead, and exclaims, "Yum," with a smile and quick lick of her full lips.

The meal is assembled. We take a moment, enjoying the sight of the feast and its memory accompaniment before it begins its next incarnation from plate to fork to mouth. A cooked chicken, ready to be sliced and consumed, glistening with juices and wafting enticing smells, satisfies. It makes you hungry—hungry and proud.

We eat, smiles glistening on both our faces. The meat is tender, juicy, and tastes delicious with both risotto and salad. I giggle as Alice lifts a chicken leg to her mouth, tearing into it with mock barbarity, copying her simulated savagery as I bite into a chicken wing.

We lick our fingers and push away our empty-but-for-bones plate.

I sit back in my chair with a sigh, remembering family dinners growing up. Recalling how, before every dinner, me, my mother, father, and sister, held hands, taking a moment before eating to express thanks.

Many times, I opened my eyes and looked around the table, chest so full of love and gratitude for the food and loved ones, I almost couldn't breathe.

My father squeezed my hand, as if he understood unspoken emotions, and said the familiar words, "Thank you for this food, and the hands that prepared it."

Harb's Imports

As I crossed the Mackinac Bridge that separates Upper from Lower Michigan I was already planning the meals to be made with the bounty filling the back of my car, packed in unmarked white plastic bags: stacks of browned and freckled pita bread, oily containers of black and green olives, pink jars of crunchy pickled turnips, silky pints of tahini, and vibrant bags of mixed dried fruit and nuts.

The opposite of *xenia*, the Ancient Greek word for hospitality, is *xenophobia*: a fear or hatred of foreigners. In America, if you aren't of Native American descent, your people settled in this country as foreign immigrants. How do people forget their history so quickly? From coast to coast anti-immigration sentiments flare: the Chinese and Indians are taking our jobs, build a wall to keep Mexicans out, all Arabs are terrorists. Elections are won and lost over a politician's stance on immigration—*are you tough enough?*

What does it mean to be a terrorist? The news media uses the term so often that it has become branded on the minds of Americans—a loaded word, weighted with racism and misconceptions.

When I asked the 70 students—college freshman to seniors—who make up my Good Books class, what the word terrorist means, many of them volunteered that the first image in their minds was of an Arab man with a beard and turban.

If the terrorist image is ingrained in the minds of so many young Americans, it is a safe assumption that this stigma is applied to Arabs living across the United States.

Why are we afraid of our neighbors? Why do we other anyone who is different from us? What connections are lost?

Dearborn, Michigan, only 460 miles from my home in Marquette, has one of the highest Arab diasporic populations in the U.S. In terms of cultural understanding, however, it might as well be Mars.

One day, about four years ago, I checked out from the library, a novel set in the Middle East. When I finished this book, I read another, similar novel. Each narrative, whether based in the Middle East, or Middle Eastern diasporic communities, carried a distinct culinary thread. Food became the spoken language of displaced people longing for home. It was the connecting point between families, communities, and whole countries.

Judging from everything in the books I read, the diverse peoples that make up this massive culture we call The Middle East, know how to eat.

The descriptions were sensual, the act of eating about something more than injecting fuel into the body via the mouth. They were symbolic, carrying the traditions of generations in recipes and cooking techniques. They were familial stories and recipes passed down from generation to generation, carried in the hearts of immigrants and cooked in a new world.

Who are these people who talk about a meal as though they are reciting poetry? Why don't Americans eat this way—with all of their senses? Why don't we eat together? Is it the nature of our fast food industries—single serving guilt foods? Is it our perception of time spent cooking and eating as "wasted" time, time that wasn't spent being productive? Why do we eat the fast food burgers, the Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and drink soda by the quart if we know how unhealthy they are?

Eating, like breathing, is a human necessity we all share, but peoples across the world consume food in countless diverse ways. There is so much we can learn about and from each other by taking time to share a meal.

Could food be a point of understanding and a means of coming together between Americans and Middle Easterners? It is not the eyes that are windows to the soul, but the stomach.

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When I opened the door to Harb's Imports in Dearborn, I knew I was in the right place. My friend Ahmad, who gave me directions to this little market on Warren Avenue, recommended it highly.

"The owners name is Ali," Ahmad said. "He will help you with whatever you need."

This was my last day in Dearborn, and I wanted to take back to the Upper Peninsula as many different foods as I could afford. When I got home there would be roasted goat wrapped in pita, dripping with hummus and flecked with parsley from the tabouli, briny olives, golden-green Lebanese olive oil, and the intoxicating aroma of rosewater.

The store is dim and smells of brine, spices, and a hint of orange water. The narrow aisles lead between five towering shelves packed with products from floor to ceiling. Some of the items are familiar, like peanut butter and baking soda; others, I study with wide eyes: jars of wrinkled eggplants stuffed with walnuts, bins of mixed nut snacks, and white cheeses twisted, blocked, and balled in oil.

I recognize Ali right away—his air of assurance and poise interacting with head-scarfed women, toothless old men, and giggling children cluttering the aisles. They converse in a mix of

Arabic and English I can't decipher. He takes time with each person as though the only individual in the store, eyes serious and patient as he listens, answers questions, and laughs with the familiarity of a man at home in these surroundings. I take a few moments to look around the store, waiting for a free instant of Ali's attention.

Ali, tall handsome and likely in his fifties, has a salt and pepper beard cut close to his face, and his dark eyes sparkle as he talks with a tiny woman in a flowered headscarf. She smiles up at him with dimpled cheeks and missing teeth, her face merry and trusting.

When the door closes behind the black sweatered back of the old woman, Ali turns his kind face in my direction. "Can I help you?" he asks in a soft, accented voice.

"I want to bring back food to cook for my friends in the Upper Peninsula, but I'm not sure what all of this is. Could you help me?" I ask.

As we make our rounds of shelves, coolers, and bulk bins, I explain to Ali where I'm from and my culinary impetus for visiting Dearborn. He pulls items off of shelves, describing the salty, velvety taste of *labneh* in oil, notes the wrinkled black olives are imported from Syria, and he urges me to taste a bite of bright green dried kiwi.

His eyes light up when I tell him I'm from the Upper Peninsula, and we discuss his long ago forays into the Northern wilderness when he first came to America. He visited the Soo and toured the Locks, and boarded a boat in Munising to see the colorful limestone cliffs of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

"That's right near where I live," I exclaim. "I grew up an hour's drive from Sault Ste. Marie, and Munising."

He raises his multi-hued eyebrows and splits his beard with a smile as he enquires about my life in the U.P.

"How do you live up there so far away from everything?"

This was a common element I found with many people in Dearborn; the U.P. is a foreign land they can hardly imagine.

As we talk, I juggle three plastic containers of *labneh*, three kinds of cheeses: mild *ackawi*, chewy *halloumi*, and rich *baladi*. My hands clutch clear glass bottles of orange and rose water; a bag of mixed sugary dried fruit with strawberries, kiwi, and starfruit; three packets of still-warm-from-the-bakery pita; a small baggy of tart, purple sumac; and three containers of olives, black and green. We relieve my full arms and stack the bounty on the counter, as I describe more about my hopes of finding ways to connect cultures through food.

Ali speaks openly of his own family—three generations moving back and forth from Lebanon to the United States over the years. He, his father, and grandfather were all born in Lebanon, but all ended up living here at one time or another. Sporadic warfare in the home country and the necessity of a steady paycheck led many to move from the Middle East to Detroit. The lure of home is strong, and many people moved back and forth over the years, finding untenable elements in either country.

He speaks of his own eating routines living in the U.S.—country of convenience food, saying, "I don't like to eat alone. I go ten, sometimes twelve hours. I wait to share the meal with others."

"I could live here just for the food," I reply, "but I wouldn't like being in the city. I love the solitude of the North."

"We should have an exchange program," he says, the lines at the corners of his eyes turning up as he smiles. "People can come down from the North for our food, and we can go up for peace."

"Sounds perfect," I say as he loads my groceries into unlabeled white plastic bags. He finishes ringing up my purchases in an ancient cash register and hands me a white receipt with tiny $49.63 at the bottom. I doubt the accuracy of the receipt: it seems far too little for all of my purchases. I retrieve the cash from my purse as Ali slips around the counter and loads a large container of figs, and one of dates into another plastic bag, topping it with a crinkly package of *Sim Sim*—crunchy sesame cookies. After I pay, he slides the bag across the counter to me.

"To take home for you and your friends to enjoy," he says.

My voice is held hostage by emotion.

"Oh, thank you." I manage.

He hands me two business cards and says that if I have any questions or ever need anything to be sure to call. I write down my name and address on the back of a business card, entreating him to please come to the Upper Peninsula and visit—we will be the first to take part in our exchange program.

I gather the bags, and he insists on carrying my groceries to the car. I can't remember the last time someone offered to carry my groceries. Warren Avenue is quiet for a moment as we cross the street to where I'm parked. Heat wavers in late afternoon light, and blinking neon signs sizzle. I open the car's back door, and we lift in bags of olives, spices, and dried fruits. The *labneh* and cheese go into the waiting cooler.

We stand and smile at one another, prolonging goodbye. Ali, turning to go says, "It was a pleasure to meet you, Rachel, and good luck on your project." We reach out to shake hands, and instinctively I take both of his hands in mine and give them a gentle squeeze, a gesture meant to impart so much.

I thank him again, my eyes wet as I watch from the driver's seat as Ali disappears back into his store.

A familiar sense of well-being comes over me when I point the car north, the yeasty aroma of pita wafting up from the back seat, the feeling of home.

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One year later I return to Dearborn. The streets are familiar, and I turn down Warren Avenue with a confidence I didn't have a year ago. Most of the signs and advertisements are in Arabic, the script elegant and indecipherable.

Traffic is light as I park on the side street next to Harb's Imports. The sign on the building attached to the Arabic grocery store reads, in large blue letters, "All Nation Immigration Services", and the maroon awning over the store in front of the brick building says, in curling Italics, "*Dallas Hair Salon."*

I cross the street and walk through the door of Harb's Imports, a jar of raspberry jam clutched in my hand. The scent of rosewater, roasted nuts, olive brine, and the fusion of a dozen spices coloring the air in a spice bazaar's aromas engulfs my senses, and I pause on the threshold.

Memories change in the telling of stories. In the year since I last visited Dearborn and Harb's Imports I evoked the tall, bearded, kind Ali and his bountiful little corner store in many stories. I conjured memories of Ali and his store as I studied recipes and learned how to serve *labneh*, what to pair with *ackawi* cheese, and the proper amount of sumac to sprinkle across the

top of *hummus* for a lemony zing. I spoke of his generosity to the twelve guests gathered for dinner around folding tables on my lawn as we ate food purchased from his store.

We raised a toast in thanks to Ali, passing from hand to hand the boxes of dates and figs, and the package of crispy sesame cookies Ali had given me as a gift to share. Tea candles nestled in the bottom of mason jars flickered in a late-June breeze and I looked around the table at my loved ones nibbling on soft, sweet fruit, a delicacy, given by a Lebanese friend. He was a friend of one meeting, but when I left his store with the gift of food in my hand, I knew a connection had been made.

A year later, just as I did the first time, I lick my lips, tasting the air.

There are few other customers, and I sling a wire-handled green plastic basket over my arm and begin wandering down the first crowded aisle. I glance up and around often as I peruse the shelves, hoping for a glimpse of Ali. The jar of raspberry jam rolls around the bottom of the basket as I rise from reaching to retrieve a bottle of rose water from a low shelf.

The basket sags with a jar's weight of *makdous*, plump walnut stuffed eggplants floating in thick olive oil. A braid of white Syrian cheese settles next to a jar of creamy *labneh* balls in peppery oil, and a solid block of chewy *haloumi* cheese.

"Excuse me," I say to the young, pretty, dark haired twenty-something behind the raised counter. "May I pile a few things here? My basket is getting too full," I raise the heavy basket to illustrate my dilemma.

She smiles, her cheeks dimpling, and gestures to the empty counter space, "Of course—help yourself." Her English is accented, but the Arabic lingers only on the periphery.

I pile three containers of olives, oily green, salty wrinkled Syrian black, and big-pitted black olives, dense fleshed and juicy, next to a bag of mixed candied fruit and a jar of tahini.

"Is Ali here?" I ask, turning from my pile of provisions.

"He went home for the day," she says with an apologetic shrug of her shoulders.

I bite my lip in disappointment, but approach the counter, setting the jar of blushing-red raspberry jam on the worn laminate surface.

"I picked these raspberries myself. This summer," I say by way of explanation. "Ali was really kind to me the last time I was here, and I wanted to thank him. So I brought this," I gesture at the glowing jar. "Could you make sure he gets it?"

"He loves jams," she says with a warm smile. "He'll be here first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," I say, and return to my shopping, adding six packages of fresh pita from Yasmin's bakery to the growing heap of food items exotic to stores in Northern Michigan.

I pile the unmarked white plastic bags in the back of my car and head north, the miles clicking by as I-75 takes me speeding past exits for West Branch, Grayling, Gaylord, Indian River, Petoskey, and then the last stop before the bridge, Mackinac City.

I cross the bridge, the water below shattering with glances of sunlight hitting waves in the mixing of waters where lakes Huron and Michigan meet.

I go through the toll booth, handing the gaunt, smiling woman with the deep smoker's voice eight dollars instead of the required four.

"Could you use this for someone who looks like they might need it?" I ask.

"Of course honey, I get 'em all the time," she says with a raspy laugh and her eyes crinkle into a dozen smile lines.

My parent's home, my destination, is an hour and a half west and a little bit north of St. Ignace. I point my car to the west. The plastic grocery bags crinkle in the breeze from my open window.

I pull into their driveway—"The last driveway on your right-can't-miss-it-or-you'll-go-in-the-lake"—as we tell visitors. The air smells like lake, a hint of fish, a touch of seaweed, and the deep tang of water. I rustle through the bags, pulling out a container of creamy hummus from The FreshMarket on Michigan Ave., where a young girl in a fluttery white headscarf told me, "I don't like Arab food," when I asked her which of the unfamiliar deli items I should take home to try. I stack the containers of olives for easy lifting and continue to search for the stack of pita packages. They aren't there.

I search again.

They still aren't there. I sag against the side of the car for a moment. How are we going to eat the hummus without pita?

I calculate the cost in my head, pursing my lips in frustration and disappointment as I gather the food, minus pita, and walk toward the house. The caliber of pita from Yasmeen's bakery is unmatched by any of the pre-packaged, dry, days or weeks old bread disks carried by any local grocery store.

"Hello," I say in a hesitant voice, "I'm calling about some pita I left on the counter. It was all paid for."

"Yes," the female voice on the other end of the line says, "We've got your pita. Wait. Hang on just a minute. Ali wants to talk to you."

"Hello Rachel," Ali's soft deep voice hums through the phone. "We have the pita you forgot. And thank you so much for the jam. It was delicious."

"I'm so glad you liked it. I picked the raspberries myself," I pause, not sure how to broach the subject. "Is it possible for you to ship the pita? I will give you my credit card number for the shipping, and…"

Ali interrupts, "No, no. Don't worry about it. I'll get the pita to you. No problem."

"Please, I can't let you. It was my mistake. My fault I forgot the bag on the counter."

"No, no. Now, what is your address?"

I give him my address and we hang up, ending the conversation with my promise to visit next time I am in Dearborn.

The next day the mailman knocks on my door, a worn and taped cardboard box from Dearborn in his hands. The box is surprisingly heavy, and I lay it on the counter, my mind already racing with the recipes I will make with the pita.

I carefully slide a sharp, small-bladed knife through the clear tape and the last strand parts the cardboard flaps with a *pop*. Nestled on the top of the box, amongst the six bags of pita, is a package of sesame cookies, their sugary golden brown tops dusted with toasted sesame seeds.

On top of the package is a small, hand-written note: "Hope you enjoy! –Ali".

I have met Ali once, twenty minutes of conversation and the reciprocal gift of food generating a connection between a twenty-seven year old English major who has never lived anywhere but the Upper Peninsula and a middle aged Lebanese grocer from Dearborn, who has crossed the ocean between homes his entire adult life.

I tell the story of the cookies and pita to the group of friends gathered around the table as we tear chewy bread into bite sized pieces, dredging it through the creamy white *labneh*, golden with olive oil and speckled with lemony red sumac. The temperature is balmy for a June evening, and mosquitoes mercifully hold off dining on us as we dine. Each person eats just a bit

different than their neighbor: a bite of grilled lamb-wrapped pita dipped in hummus, a forkful of green tablouli topped with creamy feta, fried cauliflower dunked in baba ghanouj.

The conversation ebbs around bites of food—food with its roots in Ali's corner store, in the diaspora of Dearborn, in the homeland of Lebanon.

Summer's Leftovers

You start with garlic—always start with garlic. That's what Gail taught you in her parked silver bullet Air-stream trailer, sunflower field to the south and raspberry patch to the north. Gail, a potter, hands so strong tickling hurt, instilled lessons about flavor. She combined tastes that seemed to have no business together. But what did you know? You were only ten.

The first night Gail and her daughters, Hillary and Kalyn, came over for dinner, your Momma cooked venison stew.

You'll eat whatever these people feed you. Gail had told her daughters. *They're the only people who've asked us to dinner since we moved here.* They moved to Curtis, Michigan from Andros Island, Bahamas, and before that, Florida. Curtis, tiny town sandwiched between South and Big Manistique lakes, populated mostly in the summer by tourists. The three were fleeing a father, a former husband caught in the chaos of drugs, booze, and control. They sought refuge in Gail's grandmother's property, in an Air-stream trailer parked out back by where the gardens used to be.

The girls had never seen snow, never gone sledding, never eaten venison—they were vegetarian. You and your sister Laurel, of an age with Kalyn and Hillary, had never heard of a vegetarian.

When we cleared the dinner plates that night, we puzzled over hidden piles of tender venison stew meat tucked behind white bowls at the edge of all three plates.

Dinners with Gail, Kalyn, and Hillary, you watch Gail pull vegetables out of the little white refrigerator tucked into the wall of the airstream. It is tinier than a normal fridge, and therefore, more intriguing. She piles containers of leftovers next to the vegetables on the

counter. The sleek, panther-faced kitty Edmore, jumps up on the couch and kneads your leg, purring with ecstasy and butting your hand, begging for pets of his regal head. Hillary sits beside you. We scratch our mosquito bites in tandem, hold up our arms to compare raspberry scratches, and point out new freckles on each other's noses. John Prine croons from the black tape recorder on the foldout table. From out in the field, grass taller than their heads, Laurel and Kalyn hoot with laughter.

You marvel, now, as an adult attempting to put good meals on the table, at Gail's generosity. How did she afford to feed four hungry, growing girls who stomped the woods and creeks all day, making forts in the long grass by the ancient beech tree, coming in fast and hungry from play? Gail taught you about flavor, and how to combine ingredients. You learned how to make a meal, a good and tasty meal, from what's on hand; from leftovers; from odds and ends; from sprouting onions skulking in the dark and rubbery celery abiding in the crisper bottom; from cans of tuna fish and anything else on hand.

Gail's knuckles stick up, sharp and bony as she chops the garlic. Your fingers twine around the black cat's tail. Her hands are still stained with clay. This is not her day's end—she will make dinner for four girls, tuck you into bed where she knows you'll giggle for hours, and return to the pottery studio where she'll listen to NPR, more John Prine, and The Four Non-Blondes, throwing pots until 2 o'clock in the morning, often returning to her studio by six.

The trailer fills with the aroma of raw garlic, sharp and biting. At ten, you still aren't sure about garlic, but when it's dinner at Gail's, you don't have a choice. And her food is *good*.

After she chops the garlic, Gail opens various containers of leftovers, inspects the contents, then pauses a moment to sip her Budweiser and stare across the field's waving dried grass, dotted with bursts of bright orange tiger lilies. The force of her sigh ruffles dusty cobwebs

woven through the window screen. She blinks, swallows, and sets the metal wok on the stove's small gas burner, which springs to life in a burst of blue flame.

She turns it down low and adds a measure of silky olive oil. You peer at her over the edge of your book, the story of Alanna, warrior-princess, forgotten. She is younger than most mommas, her skin tight and tan, motley-hued blond hair pulled up in a careless ponytail you ache to emulate. Her faded blue jeans are stained with daubs and smears of clay, and the tight worn t-shirt reveals her shapely figure. The sun-browned skin on her forearm bulges into a muscle as she moves the knife up and down over the red pepper on the cutting board. You want to be like her, want to be near her, want her to do your hair, want her to notice you.

You return to the page, but look up again at the *hiss* and *sizzle* as chopped onion, pepper, cabbage, and carrot hit hot oil in the wok. The tiny rounded room with its aluminum sides, fills with aromas of vegetables searing in hot oil. Hillary is lost in her book, the black cat sprawled belly-up on her lap.

Laurel and Kalyn stumble up the steps into the trailer, startling the cat who runs, a black streak, through their feet and out the door where he sits, just out of reach, licking the indignation from his hind flank. The little kitchen is suddenly full, their seven-year old, summer-tanned brown limbs flailing as they attempt to out-do one another describing their afternoon at play.

Gail laughs and calls them, *knuckleheads,* as she up-ends several containers of leftovers into the sizzling wok. Later, while we eat, we will discover mung bean sprouts, a few stray noodles from the previous week's spaghetti, and a crunchy nibble of falafel, in our stir fry. You take note of the apparent disharmony of ingredients, but also notice, it tastes good. You comprehend, in that moment, even if you don't really know it then, how complex flavors are. These notions penetrate memory—standards, customs, traditions, relating to flavors—rules that

you're not supposed to break, but dare breaking, just to see what the results taste like. You will taste this realization, again and again, in the cooking years to come.

Five girls eat around the picnic table as the sun sets behind the line of maples to the west, bathing the clearing in golden light accented by glowing twinkle lights looped and twisted around the trailer. We eat until full, slapping at biting mosquitoes and chattering with the other three girls, not noticing how little Gail eats. The large amount of garlic leaves your mouth burning, but the lingering burn is pleasant—fixed in your memory. When dinner is over, you and Hillary argue with Laurel and Kalyn about who gets to sleep in the tent and who gets to sleep in the trailer. You don't actually care because both are a novelty, but Laurel wants the trailer, obliging some sort of necessary sisterly protest. At what feels like the middle of the night you unzip the tent to pee. The grass is wet with dew against bare feet, the stars piercing in the dark sky. You still taste a bit of garlicky bite in the back of your throat, and can't remember if you remembered to brush your teeth. A rectangular beam of light splashes into the night from the open door of Gail's pottery shop. As you pull the sleeping bag over sun-burned shoulders, eyes shutting with fatigue, you fall asleep to the pottery wheel's distant hum.

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Nineteen years later, you've cooked many stir fries. Stir fry was the first thing prepared for your husband in the first tenuous weeks of dating: venison stir fry in the tiny kitchen without any countertops in the house you lived in with four other girls and whoever was sleeping on the floor or couch that night. Reid said it was some of the best food he'd ever eaten, and you felt

proud, and nervous, and scared and loved him some right then, in that moment, because he was handsome, and sweet, and liked your cooking.

You made stir fry at Rowan and Shailah's farm, the countertop so loaded with vegetables in need of cooking, all but disappearing the scuffed wooden surface. It was lunch time on the farm and that day, you were the cook. The white plastic cutting board filled with chopped and diced yellow crook-necked squash, zucchini, finger-staining purple onions, peppers, and green, yellow, and spotted dragon-tongue beans. The wok was filled to the brim, and you stirred in splashes and dashes of whatever seemed right: hoisin sauce, fish sauce, soy sauce, rice wine vinegar, and a generous red sprinkling of Sriracha. The food was ready just in time as farmers and volunteers drifted through the sliding glass door, their faces covered in dirt and sweat. Weary farmers and friends ate lunch sprawled beneath the giant maple in the front yard, delighting in the flavor of vegetables grown twenty yards from where we sat in the unmown grass.

You made stir-fry for easy weeknight dinners when you had to be up the next day at 4a.m. in the frigid February dark. The freezer was full of vegetables frozen the fall before, and as rainbow chard stems, broccoli, and snap peas thawed, the kitchen filled with scents of summer.

Each time oil sizzles in the wok, you think of Gail standing over the little stove in her airstream trailer, trying to feed four hungry girls. Sometimes it isn't stir fry that makes you remember; sometimes it's the aroma of frying garlic, sometimes it's the melding of diverse flavors, and sometimes it's a song.

Gail carted four adolescent girls around from place to place in her big white van that smelled of dog, shampoo, and a chalky hint of clay dust. We learned her version of songs by

heart: “The Wreck of the Ol’ 97,” “Frankie and Johnny,” and, “The Billboard Song” whose lyrics we can’t get enough of for their wondrous absurdity:

> *Smoke Coca-Cola cigarettes, chew Wrigley's Spearmint beer,*
> *Ken-L Ration Dog Food keeps your wife's complexion clear.*
> *Simonize your baby with a Hershey's candy bar*
> *And Texaco's the beauty cream that's used by all the stars.*
>
> Your sister knows all the lyrics too.

***

You often cook with, Laurel. She learned about flavors, as you did, from garlic searing in a wok, from father’s garden, from mother’s baking bread.

We seek out the flavors of our childhood together, returning to our parents’ home in spring to forage in the woods along the Big Manistique shoreline. The high ground, logged long ago, is thick with growing maples and papery-barked birch. The low ground, close to the lakeshore, is mixed birch, maple, poplar, cedar, and hemlock, branches lacing in the canopy overhead.

We hunt for fiddle heads and wild leeks, slipping soft-footed through last fall’s tumbled foliage, we bend our backs to snip curlicued fern heads. We dig our finger-tips into dark black and loamy forest soil, pulling up glowing white leek heads, their green foliage bright against black-dirt crusted hands. Mourning doves coo in maple tree tops, and a pileated woodpecker knocks a beat into an old cedar drooping with the weight of time and many winters.

Wild leeks, or ramps as they are called in some parts of the country, are found in woods from South Carolina to Quebec. They are delicious pickled, sautéed, or in soups, but rival garlic for their odiferous qualities when eaten raw. We pick leeks with abandon, knowing and not

caring that the smell would stay beneath our fingernails for days. We lift fingers to noses and inhale deeply, dirt and garlic melding in a bouquet unique to this spring moment. These smells, for years to come, bring you back to today—conjure Laurel's sweet face as she digs beside you.

Laurel's boots rustle in the leaves—she has moved farther up the hill, and your voice lifts to sing, "The Wreck of the Ol' 97." Laurel soon picks up the song, as you knew she would, and our voices wind around baby leaves, long maple limbs, and the twining vines of wild grape.

Well they gave him his orders in, Monroe, Virginia
Steve, you're way behind time, this is not 48, this is old 97,
and you must put her in Dansville on tiiiiime.

We draw out the last line in macabre amusement, just as Gail did on those car rides when we were kids:

Cauusssee he waasss,
scalded to deathhhh by theee
steeeeeaammmmmmm.

If you were lucky enough to have called the front seat you braced as the notes crescendoed, because sometimes Gail would reach out her strong potter's hand and squeeze the top of your knee until the song ended with a gasping wail on *steam*, your squeal of tickle-pain almost harmonizing with the last held word.

We sing, shifting without missing a beat from "'Ol 97" to the only words we can remember of "Frankie and Johnny." We sing and bend, sing and bend, the motions sending delicious aches through our backs and knees.

When we return home, baskets overflowing with green, tongue-shaped leek leaves and baby fern spirals, we set to work readying our yield for dinner. Fiddleheads, the tightly curled head of the ostrich fern, are prepped by sloughing off the papery light-brown exterior. You've

heard warnings not to eat fiddleheads raw and even cooked, because some have claimed to suffer nausea, vomiting, cramps, headaches, and diarrhea from eating the baby ferns. No one in your family experienced anything but a bit of minor gas from eating this seasonal delicacy. The little spirals taste green, like asparagus, like a spring morning.

You and Laurel chat across the countertop, preparing the meal together. Standing near the sink, a full 360° turn shows a different item of Gail's pottery from each angle. The bowls and cups are curved and feminine, colored in blues and greens of the Great Lakes and sun-kissed Caribbean. She moved back to Florida many years ago, but still spends summers in the small town of Curtis, inhabiting the Air-stream trailer for the warmest months of a Michigan year. You sense her there in the kitchen as you prepare each green fiddlehead curlicue and wash the soil from each white leek head. The leeks are aromatic and garlicky, coated in black loamy dirt that clings to their luminous bulbs before the force of water washes it down the drain and away.

We toss leeks, fiddleheads, thin slivers of red pepper and chopped button mushrooms with olive oil, dried smoky chili peppers, and sea salt. You scoop oil-shiny vegetables into a pan, blasting your face with heat when the oven door opens.

Dad comes in from puttering outside, and Momma walks upstairs from working at her desk. For a moment, Momma, Dad, you, and Laurel gather around the counter, pouring wine into tall stemmed clear glasses and sniffing leek-scented air.

Laurel slices buttery German potatoes into thin French fry shapes, soaks them for thirty minutes in salt water, and tosses the wedges with sea salt, olive oil, garlic, and more smoky dried chilies. The potatoes bake in the oven with the vegetables, and soon the kitchen windows fog over with aromatic steam.

We stack plates on the counter, a chore as ingrained in our psyches as the grooves in the wood floor. Laurel puts the fork on top of a folded napkin on the plate's left side, and the knife and spoon hug the plate's right. You signal the meal is ready by lighting the candles at the table's center and turning off overhead lights.

The conversation lowers to a quiet simmer as we line up to load empty white plates. The sauce got lost in the moment and, remembering, you load your arms with containers from the refrigerator. The kitchen fills with murmurs of appreciation and the clink of spoon on bowl and plate as you whip the Greek yogurt, diced garlic, and crumbled feta in a bowl Gail gave the family many years ago. The rim has a little chip. The bowl feels warm in your hands.

We sit around the square table—the same table where seven sat nineteen years ago. You've never cooked this meal before, and the way the various flavors will combine, is still to be determined. The vegetable textures and flavors melt together, baking in the oven. The crusty, bakery bread will toast just right to soak up the vegetable juices and feta sauce without becoming too soggy. The potatoes will be crispy, and the left-over feta sauce will taste delicious dipping a crunchy golden oven-fry into the velvety-white depths.

We take a moment to appreciate our full plates before taking the first bite, admiring the combination of tastes, and textures, pleasure in each step, from harvest to this moment of feasting. We raise our wine glasses in a toast, taking a second to touch rims, make eye contact, smile. Around the table, open-faced roasted vegetable sandwiches perch on fingertips, feta sauce dripping down toasted crust onto raised palms as lips stretch to take the next bite.

Yes.

The vegetables, wild-woods flavors melding with bread, heightened by garlic and salty-creamy feta—*yes.*

Your fingernails are still rimmed with tiny half-moons of dirt from digging wild leeks beneath silver-barked beech trees with Laurel, who kicks your foot with glee beneath the table as she takes another bite.

Beneath your hands is the ceramic white of the plate, the green fiddlehead spirals wound with ribbons of red pepper and translucent-layers of wild leek bulbs. The flavor of garlic.

Caviar Criollo

With a sound like a rainstick, black beans pour into the empty stock pot. When you run your fingers through their loose rattle, your eyes close, and it feels like touching pearls.

Human beings have been cultivating and eating these hard black gems for 7,000 years—generations turning earth, planting seeds, weeding, watering, caretaking, picking, drying, storing, soaking, boiling, and eating. Black beans are the flavor of human history, and the leafy tendrils of their vibrant green stems have woven a place in my family history—every time I cook black beans, I think of my father.

My family began visiting Mexico when I was fifteen. We stayed on a little island off the coast of Cancun called Isla Mujeres—Island of Women—lying like a jeweled necklace off the coast of Mexico. The ancient Mayan gods prayed to on her beaches thousands of years ago still hold sway among the crucifixes and plastic madonnas. The island speaks to her visitors, but it is those few that taste her food—really taste the melding of Mayan and Spanish, field and seashore, jungle and beach, that remain under her spell forever, always searching for flavors they first experienced on this narrow spit of land floating in shimmering Caribbean waters.

We first tasted black beans at La Lomita's, an unassuming open-aired restaurant at the top of a hill on a cobbled side street. It is a street where the moped exhaust hanging in the air comes from locals clutching babies, groceries, a chicken, as they ride by, instead of gaping and sunburned half-naked tourists parading the rest of Isla's streets. A street where old men pull chairs up to the narrow curb on cool evenings and talk around the few teeth they have left, their shirts starched crisp by wives watching telenovas inside.

The tablecloths were plastic and dotted with cartoonish sliced kiwi—giant green rounds black-seed flecked. The plastic deck chairs were red, with swirly letters spelling *Sol*, in white at the top.

Our family of four—my mother, father, little sister Laurel, and I—pulled out our chairs and picked up sticky menus that described various offerings in broken Spanglish.

My mother looked around nervously at the dirty oscillating fan in the corner that pushed stagnant air out the open front, at the clear view through the kitchen doorway, where a worker in a dirty apron was washing something in a blue dish pan, and at the dark step down through the narrow blue door that read in peeling paint, *Banjo.* She had gone to great lengths to protect her family from marauding bacteria that lurked around every corner in this foreign land—special fruit and vegetable wash, bottled waters in every room of the house, and constant application of hand sanitizer from the little bottle with its convenient purse-strap attachment for easy access.

At first glance, this restaurant appeared to be everything the guide books and our paranoid family friend whose house we were staying in had warned us about. But it was only a couple of blocks from "The Casa", and we were ravenous after a day of sightseeing, lying on the beach, and shopping in the open air market.

The waiter, a rotund man with a sharp Mayan nose and cheekbones, walked out of the kitchen and into the dining room. He wore a stained white t-shirt and dirtied apron tied around his thick waist. He threw a smile and nod in our direction as he toddled toward the open doorway, a bag of something clutched in his right hand.

He stood in the doorway facing a dark alley across the street. Only the alley's mouth was illuminated by the flickering streetlight.

"Chillllaaaayyyyy," he called in a high, loud, and inflected voice. "Come to Papi, Chilay."

Five sets of eyes peered into the entrance to the dark alley.

A black snout appeared, followed by a fat waggling dog body, ending in a tail that shivered and beat from side to side in excitement.

The rotund mutt emerged from the shadowy passageway as the waiter upended a bag of scraps onto the narrow sidewalk. In his glory, the dog inhaled, smacking its lips happily as the waiter looked on, hands on his large hips and wearing a satisfied smile.

He turned to our table, the smile still playing over his face, and asked in accented English, "What can I getchyou?"

We ordered—roasted whole fish, fried squid, fried conch, and drinks—beer for my parents and bottled water for Laurel and me.

Ten minutes after our order was placed the waiter came to our table, arms stacked with four white steaming bowls containing brown lumpy liquid that he set in front of each of us along with folded paper napkins and large mismatched spoons.

We looked at each other in confusion—*we didn't order this*. But it seemed impolite to refuse, so we picked up our spoons, dipped into the chocolaty soup and took our first bites.

The soup *sang*. It was earthy and salty and dark. We looked at each other with raised eyebrows and dipped in for our next bites. Again and again. Woven throughout the soup were green swathes of vegetable leaf—spinach.

We ate until our spoons scraped roads through the brown bottomed bowls, and then peered at each other in awe. Those were beans?

The stout waiter, who said little, delivered the rest of the meal with brisk efficiency. His face broke into a wide, white-toothed grin every time we smiled or attempted a “Gracias”.

The seafood was fresh, and edged with a hint of salt beneath the crispy batter that complemented each bite rather than overpowering the delicate white meat. We squeezed bright green fleshed limes over everything, a trick my mother firmly believed would help keep us from getting a tummy upset. The sharp bite of lime accented every morsel.

The soap opera on the dusty television blinking in the corner hummed in sibilant Spanish. We paid the bill and walked into the humid ocean-scented night, overlaid with sewage, taking in frying tortillas and peppers roasting. Even now, remembering black bean soup.

We had many other meals during our week on the island, but none compared to the little restaurant with kiwi-printed tablecloths.

When we returned to the twelve inches of snow and three more months of winter in our Upper Michigan home, my father began to dog-ear new pages in his many seed catalogues that perched in bright piles next to every chair he claimed.

The seeds had names like, Black Valentine, Calypso, and Midnight Black Turtle.

When they grew, they looked like any other green bean, and I crunched a bite as I wandered by on my way to the cucumbers one afternoon—it tasted like a regular green bean too. But when we harvested the other green beans for steaming, snacking, and stir frying, these thin pods stayed on the bushes as the days shortened and the little legumes began to turn brown.

We picked them before the first frost and they continued to dry in the garage and sauna on mesh trays, as the pods became crispier and the black pearls pushed through the thin exterior, their profiles a shadow.

When they were dry enough to rattle like tiny maracas each time the pods were shaken, my father dumped the loaded trays into a bushel basket.

By this time, snow had begun to fall, the days shortening into more darkness than daylight, and there was little to do for my retired teacher/outdoorsman father but wait for the weather to improve so that he could start putting seeds into dirt again.

The bushel basket of dried bean pods, topped with another basket for discarded pods, and a stainless steel kitchen bowl for the dried beans, went downstairs to the TV room with my father, where he sat watching how-to trapping videos, *Zulu*, and John Stewart to pass the long dark winter hours. The beans *pinged* into the metal bowl and the basket of stripped-off shells rustled like dry cornstalks in an October wind every time the basket was moved from place to place.

When it came to cooking the dried beans, we had to look up a recipe. While my father flipped page after page, I reached into the pot, into the beans that pooled in my palms and trickled through my spread fingers, digging into the mound of black gems at the bottom of the stock pot.

My father peered at the recipe book over half-glasses that perched on the end of his nose. His silver-grey hair, curled against his neck and over his shoulder, separated into individual ringlets big enough for my mother to run her fingers through. He plucked glass bottle after bottle from the spice shelf: cayenne, cumin, coriander, salt, pepper, oregano and a green crumbly herb called epazote that made me sneeze when I uncorked the bottle and sniffed.

We soaked the beans overnight. In the morning when my father lifted the lid off the pot, we saw the swollen beans, fat with absorbed water.

We rinsed the beans, as per the directions in the recipe, and placed them back over the flickering orange flame of the gas stove. They boiled all day, filling the house with an earthy, redolent steam. As they simmered, we added spices and a few chunky slabs of bacon to heighten the flavor.

My father was an alchemist—shaking herbs and spices from glass bottles into the stock pot, the fragrant vapor rising around his head in twirling tendrils. He stirred with a long handled wooden spoon, his arm mesmerizing as it made one figure eight after another, softly scraping the bottom of the pan. His patience was infinite as he tapped the spoon on the pot's lip, and then covered it with a lid.

My mother, sister, and I were busy washing and chopping vegetables: peppers, onions, tomatoes, avocado, garlic, and onion—the necessary counterpoints to the thick pot of black beans.

My father was back at work in his own station of the kitchen, mixing flour, salt, and water. Kneading the dough. Patting it into tan flat rounds. Heating the black cast iron pan to a sizzle when a water droplet shattered and hissed on the hot surface.

The tortillas hit the pan, and began to brown, floury aroma melding with beans, and suddenly I was back at La Lomita's on Isla Mujeres. My ears strained for the rocking *shush* of ocean as my eyes closed. I listened for the murmur of waves just out of earshot, like a shell held a bit too far away from my head.

Food is a portal—it is the connecting point of memory that allows us to cross back and forth between time and space. It connects cultures, societies, and individuals in ways that we go our entire lives without realizing. These beans, the genetic offspring of the first tiny black seeds, placed in the soil 7000 years ago by people who discovered that slowly boiling this hard little

pebble produced a soft sultry flavor, made to be cradled in the warm folds of a corn tortilla. And here we were, in our kitchen in rural Upper Michigan, cooking and eating the same beans.

When onions, peppers, and garlic had melted into each other in a heated sauté pan. When avocado and tomato gleamed green and red in white bowls. When tortillas were warm beneath a dish towel. When beans had simmered down to a thick pudding—then we prepared to eat.

We piled our plates, Emmylou Harris crooning in the background as the windows steamed over, blocking our view of the snow beginning to swirl.

We sat at the table—four plates, hands held for a moment of thanks.

As we bowed our heads, I once again sensed the sound of the ocean and a hot Mexican wind, just there, at the edge of memory.

Mixing

Warm fall sunshine heats my face and arm as I drive down curling country roads. Tall trees arch over the car, casting leaf shadows that dart, leap, and disappear. I am lost. My stomach growls, anticipating the foods awaiting my arrival at Maan and Sybil's lamb roast, but I have to find it first.

The map I studied before leaving the Londons', the home of family friends where I am staying, seemed straight forward enough, but I took a wrong turn somewhere between Chelsea and Manchester, country communities just outside the metropolis of Ann Arbor. I scan each green sign at the head of each dirt road, searching for "Noggles".

With relief I catch sight of the double "g" in Noggles and swing my steering wheel to the right. After a few miles I spot an assembly of cars along the edge of the dirt road and park, taking a moment in the driver's seat to still the nervous beating of my heart. I haven't seen Maan and Sybil since I was a child, and most of the rest of the guests will be strangers. The air, redolent with good food aromas, overrides my anxiousness with hunger.

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My memories of Maan and Sybil are blurry. When I was a child they visited my family's summer neighbors, the London's, and cooked a full Lebanese meal for both families. We ate at the picnic table on a grassy bluff edge overlooking Big Manistique Lake. Middle Eastern food beneath an August, Upper Michigan sky.

Memories of Maan's face blur with flavors and aromas—the sharp green hint of parsley, the slick sheen of good olive oil, the salty cream of fine cheese. And the bread.

From the Arab markets in Dearborn, eight hours south, they brought us Lebanese flat bread called *saj*, or as we called it, "table cloth bread." Thinner than a pita, nearly transparent in some places, and twice as chewy, this bread could be unfolded into a square large enough to cover a table top. I wrapped it around pieces of salty cheese, wandering into the fields to eat my prize, bread flavors mingling with the peppery purple scent of lupins and sun-warmed grass.

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Maan, Sybil, and the Londons—a loving couple who own a summer home across the road from the house I grew up in—invited me down to participate in the yearly Lamb Roast. This is the Lamb Roast's twenty-eighth year, scheduled to coincide with the last full moon in September—the harvest moon. In my naivety, I expected an elaborate Middle Eastern ritual—a diasporic ceremony passed down from the Lebanese homeland. The Londons kindly dissuaded me from this fantasy, explaining that the lamb roast began as a pig roast put on by Sybil's father as a means to bring together various business associates and their families. The tradition passed on to Maan and Sybil, with some tweaking—mainly in the form of which meat was being roasted. The pig roast associations are particularly humorous, as in much of the Middle East no pork is served because it is taboo in Muslim culture. Maan is not a practicing Muslim, so this does not present a problem, but the pig to lamb progression is still funny.

The invitation to partake in the Lamb Roast is an honor. Hearing about my interest in Middle Eastern food from the Londons, Maan and Sybil, generously encouraged me to come—not just as a guest, but also as a participant in the preparation.

My boots clack against chunks of rock and gravel hidden in the grass proliferating Maan and Sybil's steep driveway. Rounding the corner I see Ahmad, a recent friend introduced to me by the Londons, who guided me on my summer travels and food research through Arab Dearborn. Ahmad stands in front of an enormous black iron rotisserie grill belching delicious meaty smoke into the clear, late-September afternoon. He is peering over his steamed glasses at the grill thermometer, tapping it with a short-nailed forefinger, concentration creasing his sweaty brow.

He looks up at the sound of my footsteps and says with a smile, "You're late."

"I…well I was," I don't want to admit I got lost. "Well hello to you too," I finally manage, returning Ahmad's smile.

He hugs me one-handed, opening the black maw of the grill with the other hand hidden in a sooty leather glove. When the steam clears, he gestures with pride at the juicy, crackling meat turning slowly on its rotisserie. I can clearly make out the lines of backbone, ribs, and substantial meaty leg and thigh.

"Beautiful. Looks delicious," I say as Ahmad closes the lid and returns to the task at hand, which involves more meat and a large cleaver.

Before I can say more, Sybil bursts out the screen kitchen door, a sweaty hostess whirlwind. An acclaimed biologist and environmentalist, she is dressed in khaki shorts and plain frayed t-shirt, short gray hair sweaty and standing on end. Sybil squeezes me in a quick, one-

armed hug and whisks me into the kitchen, where Maan, dressed in a red t-shirt and blue athletic shorts that are making a break for his knees, is busy chopping vast amounts of parsley.

"Hello! Hello!" he says in his high squeaky voice. "So good to see you, Rachel. Are you ready, hmm?"

Maan is from Lebanon, as is Ahmad. Both have lived in the U.S. for many years, and both married white American women, although Ahmad was widowed after eleven years. Maan is best friends with Ahmad's older brother, and when they were younger, they worked in Saudi Arabia together. When Maan moved to the U.S. he then helped Ahmad come over as well, so that he could obtain his Master's Degree. This is a common story among many people I met during my visits to Dearborn's Middle Eastern diaspora—numerous individuals come to the U.S., and then help friends and family settle here, where there is the hope and expectation life and work will be easier than in the Middle East.

Ahmad is average height, with grey receding hair, his skin colored the honey tones of many people from Lebanon and the surrounding regions. He peers out at the world from dark eyes behind glasses that fail to hide his many smile lines. Effortlessly generous, he waves away protestations with his hand, a smile, and brief, "No no, it is nothing."

Maan is short, with a round head and hair that appears tonsured. He walks with a little stomp on squat, muscular legs from all of the volleyball he plays—a fact which initially surprised me, but as I got to know Maan a little better, seemed to come with the territory.

Walking through the door into Maan and Sybil's house, the first room I enter is the kitchen, which immediately makes me at ease. I understand the varied components that make up a kitchen: *thwak* of knife on cutting board, heat of a warming oven, warm light of an open refrigerator door. This environment is far more comfortable than a living room couch.

"I'm ready. Put these hands to work," I say, surveying the lovely tiled kitchen countertops covered in packages of pita, bowls of creamy hummus topped with an emerald gloss of olive oil, and various knives and cutting boards.

Sybil reaches into the refrigerator and comes out with her arms full of bags, which she dumps onto the counter.

"Just- do what you can with this," she says, running wet hands through short grey hair, dark with sweat. "My other helpers haven't showed up yet, and I haven't even showered!" She exhales, rushing from the kitchen.

"So Rachel," Maan says, turning from the cutting board, his knife flecked with parsley bits, "you like to cook?" When he says my name the "ch" comes out like a "sh" and I become, Rashel.

We converse casually, catching up on the last fifteen years as our knives move up and down over parsley, carrots, red radish orbs, and celery crunch.

Maan shows me how to untwist the white Syrian cheese braided tightly around itself, our hands pulling together to separate the united strands, which I lay carefully on a plate. There is too much white, and I pluck a radish from the bag, carefully wash it, enjoying its smooth roundness in my hand, and slice it into a shape loosely resembling a flower. I pop the leftover bits into my mouth. My hands are still salty from the cheese, delightful against the spicy bite of radish.

Ahmad has resumed his post by the grill, and we stand for a moment, admiring the slowly turning hunk of lamb sending off meaty aromas, making my mouth water.

"So, what is your technique? What spices did you use for the rub? What is the secret to this lamb?" My questions are rapid-fire in mock interrogation.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Ahmad says in accented English. "You won't get my secrets that easily," he grins sideways, lowering the heavy grill lid.

Beautiful September afternoons in good company, the time flies by and before I realize it, the party is in full swing. People arrive, walking up the steep driveway, plates of food in hand, which they place on long tables under a blue and white striped tent. The average turn-out for these gatherings is over 200—this year is projected to be a little smaller, at around 150.

I marvel at the faces appearing over the hill's crest: white, black, and tanned Arab brown—a contrast to the uniformity of the predominantly Scandinavian Upper Peninsula I am used to. If my parents hadn't traveled with my sister and me when we were little, our exposure to other nationalities and cultures would have been almost nonexistent. The U.P. has 29% of Michigan's total landmass, but only 3% of the population. The population of 311,000 is largely European descent with a sizable Native American population, but little other cultural diversity.

Manette and David London's familiar faces appear in the driveway, and we walk to the heaping food table, "oohing" and "ahhing" over the various items on display. My nervousness and reservations have disappeared with the afternoon's clouds, and I move confidently between crowds and kitchen, serving food, introducing myself, and nibbling.

Hospitality in the Middle East is as much a part of the culture as olive oil, or goat. After centuries of giving—providing food and shelter to guests—it is ingrained in the people, from the streets of Beirut and Baghdad, to the avenues of Dearborn, to the woods of Manchester.

As we toured Dearborn earlier in the year, Ahmad told me that *hummus* is a staple in Lebanese households because it is thought of as "emergency guest food," for when unexpected guests drop in. He explained that it lasts a long time, and always tastes good. These are a people who anticipate guests, finding joy in hosting, giving, sharing what they have.

I observe Maan and Sybil's hospitality in every facet of this harvest moon gathering. It is present in flashing smiles and dancing hands, animated conversation signifying a happy crowd. It is obvious in mouths moving, satisfied sounds murmuring between bites. It exists in each hug and hand shake, the passing of plates, heads thrown back in laughter as the big fall moon peeks above the treeline.

Throughout the afternoon and blueing evening I heard talk of "the mixing of the tabouli". Tabouli, believed to have originated around Lebanon and Syria, has many variations across the Middle East. It is made with a mix of edible herbs, called *qatb*. It was a useful meal in lean times, because the addition of bulgur wheat often took the place of meat in filling hungry bellies. Recipes vary as to the amount of bulgur, and in this you can see the transition to more meat dependent meals across the Middle East and into the diaspora.

Every year the honor of mixing this salad is given to a new guest. Of course I hope to be the chosen one, but I'm surrounded in plenty of other culinary diversions, and distracted from my aspiration by the sight of grilled lamb being pulled from the spit. Ahmad plucks a piece of meat in his gloved hand, and passes it to me. It steams, outside charred, and inside glistening. The flavor is like no other lamb I've ever eaten. It is tender, lightly flavored and missing the often gamey taste sometimes associated with lamb. The flavor begins with a hint of spices, but nothing to overpower the experience of the meat itself, which is, quite simply, delicious. I chew and smile my appreciation to the grill master, who nods his head at the silent compliment.

"Rashel!" sings out from the open kitchen doorway. "You want to mix tabouli?" Maan asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, yes. Of course," I sputter, "but wasn't there supposed to be someone else who was doing it?"

"What, you don't want to?" Maan says, raising his eyebrow to an impossible angle and quirking the corner of his mouth in disbelief.

I enter the kitchen, which is bright against the coming darkness. People mill about, but I am entranced by the giant stainless steel bowl overflowing with chopped parsley resting in the center of the marble countertop.

I smile nervously at Maan, Sybil, and others gathered around to witness the mixing.

"Ok, ok," Maan says, "We are hungry. First, salt, oil, and lemon juice before mixing."

He points to the large container of salt, jug of olive oil, and mason jar of lemon juice he must have spent the whole morning squeezing.

"You'll have to tell me when," I say, bravely grasping the olive oil bottle and pouring it over the bowl's contents.

I pour slowly at first, but Maan urges me to go faster with a, "You're wasting time, come on come on!"

I glug in the lemon juice, sprinkle a palm-full of salt and then look to Maan for permission before sliding my hands down through chopped parsley leaf layers; down through savory mint; down through green onion rounds, down through soft mounds of crushed garlic; down through ripe red tomatoes, which yield to my fingertips; down through supple pebbles of bulgur wheat; down to the bottom of the bowl, and back up again. I mix as the camera flashes in my face. People talk, laugh and comment around me, and the party goes on outside. I see nothing but the spinning bowl of green, red, brown, and stainless steel. The textures against my fingertips and palms of my hands, new and familiar. The smell, green, garlic, and sweet summer tomato.

Maan reaches in for a taste, as does Sybil.

"More salt," he says, peering over his glasses.

"No!" Sybil exclaims. "No more salt, Maan. And no more oil," she adds as an afterthought in a finger-wagging voice.

Maan stares at her for a second before pouring an inconsequential glug of oil, and a further negligible sprinkle of salt into the bowl.

Sybil throws her hands in the air and with the well-rehearsed exasperation of the long-married goes out the screen door, her, "I can't watch, I can't watch," parting shot causing general hilarity amongst those gathered around the tabouli bowl.

When it is mixed to the *general* satisfaction of those present, I raise my hands in front of my face. Two green gloves confront me, and, as everyone's attention is elsewhere, I pretend to wash them over the sink. Instead, I give in to instinct, running my tongue over my palm and up splayed fingers. They are covered in parsley flecks that burst green against my mouth, followed closely by the sharp tang of lemon.

I smile and smile, passing my tongue over my teeth to dislodge any lingering green bits. The kitchen window provides a perfect view of the party outside, and tables filled with food and eaters beneath the blue and white tent. The food heaped on platters is a mix of Middle Eastern: hummus, lamb, tabouli, baba ganouj, grape leaves, labneh. And American: chips, layered dips, and salads. People laugh, chew, and talk with bits of pita clutched in their fingertips, moving food to mouths.

I finish rinsing my hands and go from the kitchen's orange glow into the last of the evening light where the harvest moon is just beginning to show its face. Ahmad looks up from the table where he is finishing cutting up the lamb, and hands me a plate.

Pomme de Amour

Tomatoes were called love apples, *pomme de amours*, when they were brought from South America to Europe. They were a succulent, alluring, scarlet fruit skirting the line between sex and death—some believed they were an aphrodisiac while others swore that, as a member of the nightshade family, they were deadly poisonous. They didn't catch on in European society until the 1820's.

You are thankful that their sex appeal overrode the instinctual fear of poison as the tomato skin, still warm from the sun, breaks sweet against your lips, giving way to a rush of seeds and juice. Your bare toes curl into the rich soil that produced this succulent ripe tomato. Your big toe scrapes against a rock. This soil also generated the piles of rocks filling heavy buckets you dump in the tall grass at the garden's edge. Every year the pile grows, becoming a wall. Frost pushes up a new batch each spring. Gardeners along the Upper Michigan glacial ridgeline that runs for miles through the central Upper Peninsula, pick more rocks than vegetables.

You lick your lips, lusting after a fresh tomato. It is the twenty-third of March. The frost beneath the frozen ground and three feet of accumulated snow is in the process of pushing up more rocks. In the silence broken only by the woodstove ticking, you can almost hear a soft push and scrape of rocks thrusting through frozen nodules of soil.

Watery sunlight reaches through the window, glancing off rows of clear glass Ball jars with etched lines and silver lids. Summer's tomatoes are in limbo between garden and dinner on the pantry shelf—a savory crimson testament that the snow outside will melt, and there will be green grass and growing things again. The cold won't last forever.

It is hard to get tomatoes to grow at 46.3471661 latitude—a scant fifteen miles from icy blasts off Lake Superior.

You put off filling the wood box for a little longer, and reach for a seed catalogue. There may be three feet of snow on the ground, but gardening this far north begins early—indoors.

Through the winter months you pour over the seed catalogue, Fedco, an anti-Monsanto, seed-saving black and white behemoth that comes in the mail in late December. It has read-aloud enticing descriptions. Your husband suffers through lengthy read-aloud sessions detailing the various alluring characteristics of certain vegetables: "8–12 oz. globes at the beginning of August when tomato craving is at its peak. Even in cold summers, it will produce dependably by mid-August. What makes Cosmonaut so special is its juice: sweet, rich and full-bodied. Volkov was the Russian explorer who fell through space. From Dnepropetrovsk in the Ukraine, brought to America by the Seed Savers Exchange."

The novel descriptions make narrowing down your order to a few different varieties, difficult, but you decide on a sweet-as-candy orange Sungold, a hardy paste variety, and a few heirloom oddballs chosen almost solely because they have fabulous names like, Green Zebra, Black Prince, and Yellow Brandywine.

The seeds arrive in a taped manila envelope in the black mailbox capped with a jaunty, crooked top of snow. Real mail in this time of computer and phone communication feels almost like a birthday present. You open the package reverently and with a bit of ceremony, careful not to cut into the individual white labeled packets on the inside with their tiny, precious cargo.

You lay each white paper sachet, stamped with the Fedco logo, black lettered plant description, and growing directions, out on the blue countertop. They are organized into specific piles—those to be started indoors and those able to grow from seed, despite cold nights and

rocky soil. Cucumbers, squash, and pumpkins can be direct seeded, but their growing season is lengthened when started indoors. Radishes, mustard greens, lettuce, green beans, and carrot seeds go right into the dirt. Tomatoes, cabbage, and broccoli begin their lives tucked into small black pots beneath fluorescent lights in warm potting soil.

Each plant makes its way into the world by pushing its green shoot, often still crowned with its seed hull, through the thin covering of soil and toward the light.

They are watered with care, sung to, and when they grow tall enough, buffeted by soft fan breezes that help strengthen stems in preparation for the day they are transplanted outside.

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You lose yourself in tomato names and descriptions from the seed catalogue, planting at least seven different varieties in little black plastic pots that you cram, rim to rim, on the foldout white table next to south facing windows.

When you separate from your husband, the sixty or so baby tomato plants are only five inches tall. It isn't his responsibility to water your plants. You load thin-stemmed seedlings into the hatch-back of your Ford explorer, packing them cheek by jowl into the small space. You call them "the orphans" and they travel from house to house with you, parked in driveways and street-side as you couch-surf. Future generations of these tomatoes will be self-seeded across Michigan's Upper Peninsula as you beg space for these fragile little lives in other people's gardens.

***

Your father taught you how to transplant young tomato plants from pots into the garden; taught you to dig a trench deep and wide. You lay the long stems and roots sideways, burying the trunk up to the first set of leaves. Planting the seedling this way strengthens the plant's stem against stiff north and west winds howling across fields and through wild cherry trees to shake and bend the plantlets, often snapping them off, especially when their limbs become heavy with fruit.

Sometimes, if you're not careful about hardening them off—giving them a few hours a day outside before transplanting—they can become sunburned, their leaves crinkling brown and transparent, stunting the plant's growth.

Your father teaches you how to build a cover for the tomatoes—a cover to protect them from both wind and sun, and keep the day's heat in when the night grows chill.

On a hot June day, your hair piled in a messy bun, wearing a bathing suit to ensure a tan, you set to work. You cut sections of black plastic plumbing pipe, bending it to fit over the top of green garden stakes you push into the soil. From the eastern fields, the Sandhill Cranes call to each other in prehistoric voices, the singing of pterodactyls. The sun is so hot you can feel freckles forming across your bare shoulders.

You cover the half hoops with ghostly white floating frost cover, tucking the hanging edges into the dirt to hold it down. The ends you gather and stake, making it possible to water and let a breeze through on rare northern Michigan days when the sun gets too hot.

You plant the baby tomatoes, water, and wait.

Tomato fruit takes a long time to develop in growing Zone 3, where temperatures have been recorded as low as negative forty in the winter and can drop into the high thirties/low forties even in late July.

Many late summer nights you listen, anxious, to the weather report and the likelihood of frost warnings.

On those nights black rubber boots are cold against your bare feet and ankles as you run, bare-armed into the chilly night, pulling aside the sliding shed door with its hanging, giant painted red flower. The frost cover is like a shroud in your arms, or thick strands of cotton spider web that floats through the air behind you, mirroring the wisps of cold mist caught in the bouncing flashlight beam.

A sharp, tangy, grassy scent wafts through the night as a thin tomato branch snaps in your struggle with the frost cover. You fold and pat the material into place like a mother tucking in a child on a cold night. It takes at least seventy-five days for a tomato to ripen, and a great deal of patience, waiting for the plant to develop from seed, to producing fruit. One night of frost can negate many months' worth of work and waiting.

***

You taught yourself to can tomatoes, the homey, luscious sauces you poured over steaming bowls of pasta reminders of your rocky-soiled garden that you miss like a person, a dull ache in your throat.

You pack jars of tomato sauce from last year's harvest into paper bags that travel from place to place with you. Glass vessels clack and rattle as you bounce over rutted roads, a sing-song accompaniment to the carousal wheel of your thoughts.

The tomatoes will be useful—a ready-made meal will feed you and your hosts when the time comes.

The hosts are your parents, two weeks later. You've moved into your childhood bedroom—the arrangement, indefinite. Your parents' bedroom is on the other side of the wall, and nights when the wind doesn't blow, you can hear your mother and father snoring. You are twenty-eight, headed for divorce, and last night, your father threatened to take away the car—his way of asserting control in an uncontrollable situation.

To fall asleep, you plan meals, adding and subtracting ingredients like counting sheep. From your bed, you can see a box of kitchen things from your old house: a bag of lentils, chopsticks peaking like antennas, a ceramic dish set, graduation present from a family friend. The aluminum lid from a jar of tomato sauce glints in the moonlight. You decide to make spaghetti sauce, tomorrow? Today? You lay back against the pillow, your mind already simmering onions, chopping garlic, and bruising basil leaves between your palms.

Your parent's kitchen, the kitchen where you learned to cook standing on a stool by your mother's left hand, delights you. It's been over a month since you've had a stable place to cook. The world's worries disappear when you cook, a solace that even sleep doesn't offer these days.

The radio is tuned to PBS, 103.9 FM out of Midland, from Central Michigan University. Garrison Keilor's voice, familiar as your own parents', murmurs from the speakers, his tales of Lake Woebegone sweeping you away. The garlic you chop anchors you in place.

You pour the Ball jar of sauce into a silver pan with a black handle, scraping the last smudges from the corners with a spatula. The gas stove ticks as you turn the nob to "Light". The sound reminds you of the gas stove at your old home. You push the thought, and the tear it brings to your eye, away.

When the flame caresses the bottom of the pan, you scrape chopped garlic into the sauce, the aroma as familiar in this kitchen as steam from the tea kettle. You learned about the wonders

of garlic in this kitchen, the aroma permanently trapped beneath your mother's fingernails, your father's fingernails, your sister's fingernails, your fingernails.

You peruse the herb shelf, each glass bottle labeled in your father's crooked and striking left-handed writing. The mint is from the garden at your old home. You planted it at the edge, and for the first two years, it refused to grow more than a few little plants with straggly green leaves. The third year it took over the garden, and every year after you pulled it like a weed from ordered rows where it popped out of the soil, attached to long root systems running like quack grass beneath the dirt. What will the garden look like after a year without your care?

You shake a few mint flakes onto the tip of your finger and lick them with your tongue, letting them soften and release their sharp tang across the roof of your mouth as you inhale. In that taste is afternoon sunshine laced by cricket song beneath the crab apple tree that dropped its last few pink petals onto the mint plants below. You remember a misty morning, on your hands and knees, harvesting with kitchen scissors, how the ground shook. You looked around, but could see nothing in the swirling fog. But you felt them, the herd of horses running in the field across the street. You felt them draw closer to the fence line, felt the throb and pound move from the earth, up your feet and legs and straight to your heart, the smell of mint fresh on your fingertips.

You think of the book you read, about a Palestinian grandmother fleeing violence in her home country, tying tiny sachets of seeds into the hem of her skirt. The seeds boarded a boat that crossed the ocean, landing in New York City, where trains and buses took her to her son's home in a crowded suburb of Detroit. The seeds were planted in pots on a south-facing windowsill, below the window where the grandmother stared at the sun. She marveled at how that same sun could shine on her garden in Palestine, and tried to visualize which plants were

getting sun at that exact moment in time. You think of mint growing—growing here, in the garden you left behind, in the suburbs of Detroit, and a kitchen-garden in Palestine.

As the mint dissolves on your tongue, you remember how the grandmother cooked in her new home with herbs planted and grown with seeds from her homeland thousands of miles away. When the grandmother sat down at the table to eat with her family, she closed her eyes and the flavors, the laughter of loved ones, and the wonderful aromas, *were* Palestine.

You hold fresh basil leaves between your palms, rub them together, releasing oils onto your skin. You close your eyes and inhale. The reminiscences are blurred and overlapping—this home and your old home; summer harvests, the minty-sweet zest of basil beneath your fingernails as you pinch leaves from the stem.

With the basil you add rosemary, thyme, and sweeping dashes of salt and pepper across the tomato sauces' simmer and bubble. The aroma of oregano heightens your awareness of both home spaces. Oregano, hardy and prolific, has taken over the lawn here and at your old home, scenting the air with its bold, spicy bouquet when the mower blade cuts through leaves and stems. It reminds you of pizza.

Your father comes in from the garden with a handful of fresh-picked, deep green kale leaves, their stippled surface still wet with morning dew. Neither of your parents know what to say to you—their daughter, refugee from married life—a decision neither understand. You don't really understand either, just that you had to go.

Your eyes tear as you cut a yellow onion in half, peel off the papery outer skin, and slice it into thin crescent moons, transparent against the light.

The Ancient Egyptians worshipped the onion. Archeologists discovered onions depicted in pyramidal art, onions in mummies, and onions on the altars of the gods. It was a symbol of eternity.

You heat olive oil in a cast iron pan over a flickering gas flame. When the oil shimmers, you toss in the onions.

The sensual aroma of onions melting intensifies when the dollop of butter you added dissolves and caramelizes. In your food research you learned that onions were prescribed as a cure for infertility in women, dogs, cats, and cattle. Later research revealed that onions are toxic to cats and dogs. Certain Buddhist sects counsel against eating onions, believing that the cooked onion can heighten desire—if eaten raw they are believed to insight anger.

You aim for emotionally neutral onions as you stir, adding a little water from the kettle to keep the onions from browning.

While you were immersed in onions, your father washed the kale, which you roll into a cigar shape and slice into ribbons with a chef's knife. A delicate chiffonade. You add kale strips to onions, along with another splash of water, several minced cloves of garlic, salt, and pepper. The smell intensifies and abates as you settle the lid over the pan and turn the burner to a low simmer.

***

You grew kale for the first time three years ago. Lacinato kale, the same variety cooking in the cast iron pan. The seed catalogue listed all of its names, and you loved it for those

names—ordered two packages instead of one: Black Kale, Flat Black Cabbage, Cavolo Nero, Italian Kale, Tuscan kale, Tuscan cabbage, Dinosaur Kale, Palm Tree Kale.

The little green plants grow in fits and starts, as though unsure about wanting to commit to life in the shaded corner of the garden, covered by a cluster of maple trees. Kale is reputed to be exceptionally hardy, but you are skeptical.

One late July afternoon you harvest greens for a salad, cutting away at the edges of red and green head lettuce, purple mustard green fronds, and colorful stems of baby rainbow chard. You reach to harvest a handful of young, tender kale leaves and notice the telltale chew-holes of the Broccoli Caterpillar. Kale is in the broccoli's brassica family, and the caterpillars do not discriminate. You hate killing bugs, but knock the wriggling, fat green creature onto the ground without hesitation, smashing it with the bottom of your flip-flop.

The salad you create for dinner is delicious. You, your husband, and four friends lean, elbows on the table to keep overloaded brats from dropping bits onto your laps. You savor the bite of juicy bratwurst, accented with your father's homemade sauerkraut. You were vegetarian from age eleven to twenty, and the salty, succulent flavor of meat is heightened by a hint of the forbidden.

This group of six—the core crew—eats everything from Johnsonville Brats to Thomas Keller's recipe for fried chicken. Between the six of you there are cheesecakes, lamb roasts, comfits, canned lemons, stuffed Cornish game hens, *injera*, and *fatayer*.

Several strains of conversation escalate, culminating in bursts of laughter around the rowdy table.

These moments are some of the happiest of your life.

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The noodle water is boiling, and you add a palm full of salt that fizzes and disappears into the churning water.

You toss in a package of organic fusilli noodles. There is something about spirals—you aren't sure what—that makes pasta taste better than regular spaghetti noodles.

Warm air rushes in through the screen door, straight off the lake, tinged with fish, seaweed, and sunshine. The aroma of tomato sauce wafts over you, carried on the south breeze. The past few months' pent-up emotions abate on an exhaled breath.

"Dinner's ready," you say. Your mother gives the black cat one last pat and comes in from the porch, her brown hair curly and wind-blown. Your father carries a salad entirely of his gardens' ingredients to the table. His cheeks glow from a day spent gardening in the sun and his hair is pulled back in a ponytail still dripping with lake water.

You fill your plates and settle around the table. After a moment's awkward hesitation you join hands—a triangle, heads bowed. Squeeze with first your left hand, and then your right, your mother's hand and then your father's.

You eat with real hunger, the first in weeks. The salad is crisp with sweet young vegetables, the pasta savory with tomato and herbs. You pile melted kale and onions on top of pasta, relishing the flavor combination.

You are thankful for taste, and for the moment, that is enough.

Winter

My father sits in the stillness of a below-zero night. The trees creak and crack with cold. His deer blind, twenty feet in the air, looks out across snow-silent fields and maple forests. His fingers flex against crossbow hilt, the creak of leather shooting gloves deafening in the windless cold. Two deer creep on snow-muffled feet toward the pile of rotten apples at the blind's base. The big doe's nose twitches, but the deer don't spook. Walking with delicate dancer steps they advance towards where my father waits.

He raises the bow, a breath, and the string twangs, steel bolt thumps through hair, hide, sinew, blood, and muscle. Meat. A deer's last breath condenses and disappears into night.

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The bacon wrapped venison tenderloin awaited grilling. Even raw and covered in a wisp of wax paper it was a tempting, tasty promise. A fleshy bacon ribbon peeked from beneath its paper covering, sending hunger pangs snaking through my belly. Potatoes and carrots sang with rosemary and butter as the black gas oven warmed the kitchen. It was the second Sunday in December and twelve degrees, moon bright against the snow. The frozen lake facing the house shifted and crooned like distant whales calling.

My father, layered in jackets, coveralls, hat, hood, and mittens, walked through the door with a rush of cold air, his silver beard coated in brittle layers of ice, matching curls stealing from beneath his orange hunter's hat.

He hung his crossbow on the rack mounted to the wall and reached for his red hanky to wipe the snot icicle molded to the end of his nose. His cold reddened face tightened with the blow's force, ending on a resounding honk.

"Well, I hit one," he said, wiping his nostrils.

Momma and I looked at each other, then at the table laid with plates and silverware and lit by candles.

"I'll go Momma," I said. And to Dad, "How far did it run?"

"Not far," he said with a last nose swipe before tucking the hanky back into the brown Carhartt coverall pocket. "There's not too much snow, so we'll drive down the lane and walk in from there." Taking the truck would take off at least a mile's worth of walking.

The aromas wafting from the oven were tantalizing. The vent next to the glowing, ornamented balsam Christmas tree blew hot air onto my feet. Between dinner and me were layers of clothing, a cold truck ride, thorn trees, blood, viscera, and the unique sounds the guts of a deer make on a cold winter night as they slide onto the snow.

The last time my father and I tracked a deer, it was daylight and the weather wasn't too cold—in the high twenties. We slogged through the woods for hours on snowshoes, shuffling along the blood trail until sweat slithered between my shoulder blades. The snow-covered woods were contoured in dozens of tracks, but the set we followed came with crimson drops every few meters. I was winded from the walk, and worried about my sixty-six year old father. The aching pain of sore joints wouldn't come until later—as he walked my father's stolid, bundled figure showed no strain, despite last fall's complaints about heart palpitations.

When I was little, the thought of my parents' mortality was such a terrifying prospect that it induced my own young heart palpitations and anxiety I quickly quashed and forced out of my

mind. Introduced to mortality at an early age—my first memories were the death and burial of our black lab, Sally, leaving me terrified of death. It was a black hole that disappeared animals and people that I loved. Even at three, I knew it was only Sally's body beneath the plaid blanket in the back of the Jeep, and that *Sally* wasn't really there, and I missed her already. My mother, father, and I stood in our dark kitchen, grief-stricken, wrapped in a three-way embrace, and I knew I'd never see Sally again.

After a brief debate with my adolescent self that lacked any real angst or serious turmoil, I reconciled my lack of faith in, at the very least a Christian deity and afterlife, and the possibility that this life was all there was. A close observer of the natural world at an early age, it made sense to me that we, as humans, really weren't that much more special than the perch I caught in the lake, or the deer we hunted in the fall. My body was frail too, and had so much in common with the other creatures around me, even the black lab, Lily, we picked from a litter of wriggling puppies to replace Sally a year after she died. We were a part of the natural world, and when people or animals died, they were gone, and that was that. My only problem with this equation was that I couldn't fathom not seeing my family again. My consciousness refused to accept an existence, on whatever plain, that didn't include the two, and then three when my sister was born, integral people in my life. Their existence defined me. Any show of physical weakness on their parts sent shivers of panic through me, tightening my chest until I couldn't breathe. Luckily for us all, their health, other than the occasional cold, continued impeccable.

Other than sporadic sinus infections, my Dad was never sick. Weekends and vacation hours not teaching 4th grade he spent active and out of doors. Winters, smoke twined into the gray Northern Michigan sky from the thin black chimney protruding from the mossy shed roof. Icy afternoons, he bent over the scarred work bench, tanning muskrat, mink, and coyote pelts he

had trapped in the fall. Summers, he spent in the garden, his back bent over rows of vegetables, the bushel basket of weeds slowly filling, late afternoon sunlight staining sweat rings along his cutoff denim shirt.

No matter the season, his 1 o'clock lunch is pretzel sticks and peanut butter. While he eats, he peruses seed catalogues, or Cabela's or reads Time Magazine or a Civil War history book. He is left-handed, a condition they couldn't break him of in elementary school. At large gatherings, the family adjusts seating to accommodate my father's elbows.

My father taught himself how to hunt, fish, and trap. His father, who died of Parkinson disease when I was six, was more interested in baseball and basketball than the out of doors. My grandmother took my father to buy his first gun.

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The doe my father and I prepared to track was his fourth deer of the season, and I anticipated a freezer full of good meat for my parents, my sister, and me. The years were not always this bountiful—good meat is an expense my teacher's salary renders a luxury, and eating anything but venison, in our house, is a rarity. In Upper Michigan, a freezer full of venison makes a long winter's worth of food rations endurable.

I layer: two pairs of leggings, two sets of wool socks, my mother's gingerbread-man-brown-Carhartt-coveralls, tasseled blue hat, thick mittens, and her green, felt lined winter boots so thick, warm, and stiff I walked like a zombie.

Relief and worry showed on my mother's face as Dad and I walked out the door. With both daughters living two hours away, my parents normally worked as a team to gut and haul in

the deer. Hard work in the cold and dark for two people in their sixties. Momma helped with the deer because she worried about my father, but she did not relish it. She hated waiting, anxious and alone at home, preferring to face the darkness together.

My father and I drove the quarter mile down the lane. We gestured with our gloved hands, commenting on churned ground beneath apple trees where deer had struck at the snow with sharp cloven hooves to eat fallen apples, wrinkled and frozen to the ground. It had been an early and cold winter already, and the deer were hungry. The cold could last as long as May, nights dropping below freezing.

My father put the truck in park and turned it off. We geared ourselves in the dark—moonlight reflecting off snow illuminating our work. My father shouldered his timeworn red canvas hunting bag and grasped the sled and rope to haul the deer. I clicked on the flashlight, brightening our path, and we headed west through the snow. The broad back filling my vision bent forward, as though shouldering a burden. My throat tightened at the perceived change I had only begun noticing the last few years.

This side of the lane was covered in a thicket of apple trees and everything sharp: barbed blackberry bushes, hooked wild rose hips, and perilously sharp hawthorns, whose thorns were three inches long and pointed enough to puncture car tires. The hawthorn is not native to America and is often described as an invasive weed because it can proliferate so quickly. Besides thorns it has bursts of white flowers in spring and clusters of red berries in late summer, but the thorns are its most noticeable characteristic.

I flexed cold fingers inside my mittens to increase circulation. The chill was always the worst right out of the car. The walk through calf deep snow would soon get my blood flowing, but at the moment, my thumb and forefinger were numb.

The trail was difficult to pick out amidst the maze of tracks in the thicket, but my father knew what he was looking for. He needed reading glasses, but for the most part, his eyesight was excellent. My flashlight beam soon found spots of blood, crimson on white. The dots were indented where the warmth had melted through the snow's top layer.

"Here she is," Dad said, relieved. It's never a guarantee that the deer will die close to where it is hit. Even mortally wounded, they run for miles.

The large doe was two feet down a small indent in the ground that created a natural clearing surrounded in rose hips and hawthorn trees. The sound of our breathing and crunch of boots punching through crusted snow was accented by the rip and tug of thorns pulling at the top layers of our jackets and snow pants.

We wove and ducked through the sharp branches. The big doe's prone body took up most of the little clearing. Her eyes were open and reflected shiny green in the light from the flashlight, the snow around her black cloven feet churned and bloody.

The first deer I helped my father butcher looked much like this one when we first came upon it. That night too, was cold, and the snow deep. I was eight or nine, aware as I was with Sally that before me was the body of the deer, but that whatever made this deer its distinctive self, wasn't there anymore.

Despite spending my childhood playing with the dead ducks my father shot in the fall, the stiff bodies of trapped muskrats, and helping fillet the perch pulled from ice fishing holes, this was the first large animal I had ever seen dismembered. I could turn off my reaction to the sight of the deer's blood spilling into the snow, the smell of guts touched off a flare of nausea, but it was the *sound* of my father's knife sliding through the deer's chest cavity and the occasional grate off bone that did me in. I slid to my knees in the snow a few feet away, facing into the

darkness, retching dryly. After a moment I clenched my jaw and struggled to my feet in the deep snow, weighed down by layers and my own child's body. I wiped my running eyes and nose with the back of a mittened hand and reached for the flashlight my father clenched between his teeth to free up his hands for work when I dropped it to stumble off.

"You all right?" My father asked, a note of compassion in his cold-thickened voice.

"Yep, I'm ok Daddy. It's just pretty gross," I added after a small pause.

"Uh, huh," my father said with a grunt as his small bone-knife sawed through the deer's pelvis. "It is."

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My father set to work with quick efficiency, opening his backpack and removing blue rubber gloves, the small orange-handled bone saw, his razor-sharp wooden-handled gutting knife, and the plastic plug made for easier removal of the deer's anus.

I worried about his bare hands. They shook under normal circumstances, but the temperature outside was dangerously cold, around six degrees.

The shaking in my father's hands made me afraid. My only memories of my grandfather were hazy—his cheeks scratchy, mouth slack, eyes vacant behind thick-rimmed black glasses, his hands on the wheelchair's arms shaking too hard to hold me on his lap.

My Momma. My Dad. The lenses through which I viewed the world—my living guides and models for navigating the convoluted labyrinth of adult life. That same chest-tightening panic I experienced as a child grew a little every year. Perhaps my dad's hands were unsteady my whole life, but when the shaking first caught my attention, I felt my foundation, crack.

I was watching my father lift his glass to his lips—a hand-crafted clay cup, tree bark brown and grooved, cold with vodka from the freezer. His lips made a sound as he sipped, a hesitant slurping. His shaking hand steadying cup to mouth. A weakness in the man who hadn't been hospitalized since age ten. My father's hands were one of the strongest things I could imagine.

I kept the flashlight beam trained on my father's hands as he unpacked the necessaries: knife, paper towel, plastic gloves, gut hook, and the "Butt Out." Our breath made clouds over the deer's dead body.

The "Butt Out" began the process. It is crucial not to taint the meat with a wrong cut to the stomach, bladder or intestines. Removing the anus first is surety against one mishap.

My father grunted with effort between words as he pulled down on the corkscrew-shaped tool, attempting to cleanly pull out the rectum and anus.

"This. Tool. Makes things. Much. Easier."

His breath came in whitened puffs, reminding me of his forty-plus years of smoking. With a sucking, tearing sound the deer's insides pulled free. He flung the white curl of entrails into the bush where they tangled amongst the hawthorns.

We rolled the doe onto her side, and with careful swipes of the razor-sharp knife, my father cut across her throat, through the hair and skin to the white fatty layer, the pelt splitting open beneath his honed blade.

He peeled the skin back with deft flicks of the blade and opened up the chest cavity, grunting with effort. From there it was short work to empty kidneys, heart, intestine, stomach—a beautiful tapestry of textured reds and purples, onto the churned snow.

Blood is often depicted as lurid, but its miracle workings are a marvel, especially spread before you in the beam of a flashlight.

My father finished quickly from there, wiping the blade of his knife on a rag that had once been a hand towel.

The silvered darkness beneath thorny bare branches of hawthorn and rosehip reverberated with our labored breath. We lifted the big doe onto the orange sled.

I grasped the forelegs and my father the hind quarters, hoisting the big doe, her sagging weight, onto the sled. He tied her down well, no doubt mindful of the last deer he and my mother dragged out of the woods.

My mother insisted that he tie the deer down tighter to the sled—that it was going to fall off. He asserted that it was fine. He knew best. Moments into the walk, the carcass tumbled from the sled and into a deep-drifted ditch. The effort to pull the dead deer out of the snow left little pleasure in being right, but after forty-three years of marriage, she knew her man.

My father and I lurched through the snow, pulling in tandem where we could. In the thicker brush, I forged ahead, holding back branches where thorns grew too thick as he took the weight of the sled. When we reached the truck, we hefted her into the truck bed, head dangling, tongue lolling.

My frozen cheeks and fingers tingled as heat blasted through slitted air vents. The majority of our time in the woods, my father's hands were bare. He flexed them, one hand at a time, the knuckles turning white and red, clenching and unclenching. He put his pipe between his chapped lips, and the hand holding lit match to light glowing tobacco, shook, the flame dancing.

When we reached home, I opened the garage door as my father backed in the truck. We attached the deer to a pulley system rigged to the rafters and ratcheted the carcass, head up, until the legs were almost a foot off the cement floor. The meat needed to drain for a few days—the less blood in the meat, the better the flavor.

The glow from the kitchen windows, ringed in yellow Christmas lights, illuminated the snow in a glowing rectangle.

My father washed his hands, but kept on his winter layers. The gas grill waited to receive the bacon-wrapped venison chops.

When my dad brought the bacon-wrapped steaks in from the grill, the house filled with the aroma of roasting meat. It was a pleasant surprise to peek beneath the foil and find the meat not burned. Vegetables, steaks, duck breast, brats, it didn't matter, when my father grilled, he liked it all carbony-crisp on the outside. He insisted on grilling over an open fire, even though flames make temperature difficult to regulate. The new gas grill made a vast difference in carbon content.

We ate in candlelight around the dining room table, the square conspicuously incomplete without my sister to inhabit the fourth side. It was never the same, when one of the four was missing.

The meal was delicious—the venison a perfect medium-medium rare and the bacon a salty side note. I didn't allow myself to think on the sudden, hot, irony tang of blood spilling into cold night air. This was where meat comes from.

My father's shoulders slumped with fatigue, and the hand raising the fork to his mouth, shook.

"I'm thinking about applying to schools in Montana, or maybe North Carolina," I mentioned with as much casual nonchalance as I could muster.

"Your mother and I aren't getting any younger, you know," my Dad said around a mouthful of tenderloin. "Our thoughts were to sell the house and move to Marquette, but if you and your sister aren't there…" He let the thought hang in the air.

I swallowed my mouthful of potatoes and guilt.

Do all children turn into parents? What signals the shift when the child begins to see their parent as someone who needs caretaking, rather than just the caretaker? How much responsibility to assume for the bend in those shoulders?

All year long my father tended the garden, cut and hauled wood, hunted, and fished—hard work to keep his girls warm and fed. Every winter of my life my father sat in the dark and chilling cold, waiting out his prey, breath freezing in mustache and beard.

Successful hunting nights, after the waiting, after the twanging arrow, sharp steel, sinew, adrenaline bursting flight, after deer death, after searching and walking, I knelt in the snow with my father. Before knife, before bone saw and "Butt Out", before rubber gloves and shaking cold hands, we knelt beside the deer's body.

"Thank you," my father said, barehanded, softly touching the deer's head. The night air, so quiet the cold echoed in my head, our breath the only sound.

Blessings from Strangers

Breathing in the terminal feels like sucking air through a scarf. My legs are encased in fleece lined leggings, and I've been traveling for over twenty-four hours straight. There are seven or so hours to go until Delhi, where my friend and mentor, Jaspal, a fellow instructor at Northern Michigan University who spent her childhood in Delhi, is living for a year on a Fulbright scholarship. She will bundle me into taxis, rickshaws, planes, and trains, to see what we can of India in ten short days.

The passengers in the waiting area of the airport in Amman, Jordan, are diverse and distracting. Chinese families chase bobble-headed toddlers through tangles of legs and luggage, serious-faced men in business suits study smartphones as if psychics reading palms, Indian women in saris *shush* silkily along the tiled floor, and Middle Eastern men huddle in groups of two or three, their turbans, cloth monoliths, perched on dusky brows.

Where is home for all these people?

We listen for the "all clear" through security to board the planes that wait to whisk us to our disparate compass points. For these brief moments the waiting people of the Amman airport have that in common—this interlude between "here" and "there." Like most airports it is a place between home and destination, a country within a country. It is a no-man's land with its own government, economy, and languages. Can you say you have visited a place if you have only been in the airport?

For this interval we are a diverse nation—a jumbled medley of strangers observing one another in our contrasting clothing styles and colors, listening to snatches of conversation

flowing in varied, songs, clicks, and guttural rasps. Our government is airport security, and we make our temporary homes in the orange plastic seats.

Stomach pains course through me at sight of the cone of *shawarma*—thin slices of layered lamb and/or beef, draped over a skewer behind the glass windows of one of the only restaurants in the airport. Shimmering grill heat, simmers thin slices of meat tiered in a cone-shaped stack over a foot tall. It is pierced and held upright by a metal stake through the center of the slow-cooking meat, and, as it roasts, juices drip down and through, moist and sizzling. The restaurant is closed—the kitchen and eating area lights are off and the brightness from the walkway illuminates the shawarma, making it glow.

What time is it in Michigan? It must be near a meal-time. The water I clutch in my sweaty hand cost me six American dollars. I uncap the plastic lid and take a drink. My stomach is unimpressed.

My foot moves and bumps my over-stuffed backpack, knocking it into the aisle crowded with feet, rolling suitcases, and carry-on luggage. The young woman sitting next to me leans over to right the pack, and we smile into each other's eyes as I thank her—blue into brown. She is dressed in a tailored tan suit, with makeup and dyed reddish brown hair that curls around her pointed chin. Her face is pretty and she looks me right in the eye as she speaks, her voice strong and sure of itself. She is alone, and I am alone, and we have that in common, too.

"Are you going to Dubai?" she asks in heavily accented English.

"No, Delhi."

She—I'll call her Leyla—tells me that she was born in Iraq, but is living in Tucson so that she can complete medical school and get her MD.

"And what do you do?" asks Leyla.

"I'm a food writer—working on my MFA in Creative Nonfiction at Northern Michigan University. Way up North in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan—close to Canada and Lake Superior."

Leyla's upturned smile urges me to continue, and the airport narrows down to this moment. I no longer hear the electric voice on the loudspeaker. The hum of voices and languages around me quiets. The roar of distant departing aircraft dwindles as I continue.

"I read a lot of novels by Middle Eastern authors. They describe food in luscious detail, and they show how food represents home when you're far away. It reminded me of my own writing and feelings about home and cooking. My sister and I learned about food from our parents, who taught us to garden and cook," I said.

"I learned how to cook from my parents too," Leyla says, nodding her head.

"I traveled to Arab Dearborn a few times in the last year and talked with Lebanese friends and restaurant owners about food and cooking." The wafting aroma of shawarma meat seasons the air between us. The sidewalks of Dearborn smelled like that. "I believe the universal necessity of eating could be that hopeful thing to help bring understanding between cultures. Bring us all to the table, so to speak," I smile at Leyla, hesitant, knowing how utopian this idea sounds, but pleased with the concept nonetheless.

Leyla smooths her manicured hands over her pressed pant legs before leaning towards me, and her penetrating hazel eyes widen as she says, "Oh yes! Cooking is so important to my family. It isn't just eating the food together—it is the preparation—everything that goes into the meal. My family, we do things together. It is good ingredients—fresh is so important. Living in America is so hard. It isn't healthy to eat alone, but mostly, I don't have a choice."

Leyla's face glows. She speaks about the importance of food and family in the Middle East. Her manicured hands flutter as she tells me about the intricate recipes and culinary traditions of her loved ones.

"Even in the Middle East these traditions are becoming more difficult to maintain—economics and jobs push women out of the household and into the work world." Her mouth turns down, bird hands, feathered grace, as they land in her lap. She voices sorrow at her family's absence in her diasporic life.

Leyla is open with me—a stranger—as she talks of her family's displacement from their homeland, and, despite her years in America, it is evident that the pain of separation has not lessened. Her narrative has the feel of a story that she has told before, and the emotion is veiled behind the rote of her words: "We fled the violence and war in Iraq, but we are all scattered now. Many of my family are in Dubai, and now I am in America."

It is a struggle to grasp such a distance of years and miles from loved ones. My parents live only two hours away from me and we talk on the phone daily. My sister lives in the same town and we see one another every other day.

"I love my family, we are very close," Leyla says. The deep affection in her voice compelling empathy as tears gather in her kohl-lined eyes. "I haven't seen them in seven years."

The byzantine and confounding bureaucratic system of visas and passports for an Iraqi living in post-911 America is a nightmare that has kept her from leaving the country until now.

"My sister, who I am very close to, had a baby while I've been gone and I haven't even met her."

I shake my head, unable to offer any solace but my presence.

"Flights to Delhi, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi please approach security check," crackles over the intercom. The Asian families gather reluctant toddlers into arms filled with luggage and shopping bags, and businessmen tap one last message onto the screen of their smartphones before tucking them carefully into suit-breast pockets. Sari-ed women sling brightly colored cloth over their shoulders, bunch trailing skirts in fists, and sway into the security line.

"Can I help you with your bag?" Leyla asks, and, without waiting for an answer, helps me heft it off of the floor.

As we wait in line at the security check we speak of little things—the pleasantries of close strangers. After adjusting her blazer jacket and situating her carry-on bag over her shoulder, Leyla waits patiently for me to recombobulate after being forced to strip off boots, scarf, purse, and bag.

Our gates are at opposite ends of the airport, and we part ways with a heartfelt, "It was nice to meet you," clasping hands in a tight, two-handed embrace.

She walks in confident strides, high heels clicking, down the tiled hallway toward the plane that will take her to her family in Dubai. I turn my face toward my Delhi journey, but my mind is still on the last hour.

What is home to someone like Leyla?

I bump down the aisles with my laden backpack, and find my seat without trouble. My shoulders shrug, and I oscillate my neck from side to side in an attempt to prepare for another long flight: *Is it possible to get wine on a flight out of a Middle Eastern country, and would it look desperate if I request it, at 10 a.m. Jordan time?*

My bag is settled into the overhead compartment, and the seatbelt buckled loosely around my lap. Looking up from the belt's reassuring "snap," I make eye contact with the flight attendant whose seat is near mine. He looks to be in his mid-thirties, with slicked back black hair and a kind smile.

We converse in the lingo of strangers: "where are you going, where are you from, ever been to… etc."

I tell him of my interest in Middle Eastern food and background in food writing, and bait him a little, saying, "So, my Lebanese friends in Dearborn tell me that the Lebanese make the best hummus."

With finality he pronounces the familiar, "Jordan has the best food in the Middle East." I've heard this refrain from Turks, Egyptians, Lebanese, and Palestinians.

"Jordanians know how to make hummus the right way," he says, with a reassuring nod of his head.

"Jordan is a wonderful country—you must come and visit sometime. All other countries in the Middle East are full of conflict, but Jordan is safe to visit." His image, snappy black eyes, unlined tan face, and every hair combed and aligned, exudes sincerity and reassurance. Though I am a stranger, I believe him.

"But I don't like driving by the American Embassy," he says with a headshake that dislodges a gelled lock of hair onto his forehead. "It is one of the largest in the world, but why so many guns? Guns and tanks pointed right out at the street." He shakes his head again with an insistent chin thrust as he finishes speaking.

"I'm sorry, what was your name?"

"Muammar," he says with an experienced shrug. "Like the former Libyan dictator." I chuckle, as he seems to expect me to.

"Food is so important in the Middle East," Muammar continues, "It determines most aspects of our every day. It is what brings us together as families and communities. There is so much conflict all over this region—food and eating together is one stable thing we all have. It is tied in with everything, including our religious practices."

Muammar admits that he is somewhat lax in his religious observances. "But," he says, "You should try fasting for Ramadan."

The idea of not eating for a whole day sounds unpleasant. Fasting has become a trendy diet and cleansing ritual in the present day. The act of abstaining from food has been used across centuries and cultures as a means of cleansing, both literal and spiritual. Hunger is a powerful force.

"Try not eating a morning or afternoon meal," he urges, "and when you do eat, be conscious as you prepare and eat the evening meal 'after prayer' or whatever." Muammar makes a dismissive gesture with his hand to make clear that it is not the prayer that is important here, but the act of mindfully waiting to eat. The most important part of this ritual, Muammar stresses, is the act of eating with someone, preferably *someones*, so that the food is shared.

Throughout my travels, the significance of eating together has proved constant within Middle Eastern communities and their diasporic populations.

The people on the plane are engrossed in their solitary activities. Few converse with their seat-mates, but remain absorbed in personal electronic devices. When the meal cart comes around, we dissemble our individually wrapped silverware, tins of meat and vegetables, and Saran-wrapped rolls and set to our meals without glancing up from the tray table. It is plain

plane food, but perhaps it wouldn't taste quite so bad if there were some way to make it a less solitary eating experience.

Muammar and I continue to chat through the flight, mostly about food. We are often interrupted by his attendance on other passengers as the call bell dings from one end of the cabin to another.

"Have you ever tried the salad, *tabbouleh*?" he asks.

"I love *tabbouleh*."

I flash to last fall when I helped prepare *tabbouleh* for 150 people at a Lebanese friend's lamb roast. Muammar moves to serve the next passenger.

"What about *ful*?" Muammar asks, free from his duties for another few moments.

Ful is the Middle Eastern fava bean dip with Egyptian origins often eaten as a breakfast food. I had it once in Dearborn and I've never forgotten its distinct flavor. The beans, thick and filling, are drizzled with an emerald sheen of olive oil, and topped with bright wedges of tomato and thick chunks of pink pickled turnips—pickling them with a beet gives them their signature color.

Muammar's dark eyes light up as he describes his favorite recipe for *ful*: canned fava beans mashed with salt, garlic, and lemon, topped with olive oil and scooped up by hand with good bread.

My stomach growls, still angry at not having gotten *shawarma*, and I'm glad that the plane's resonant hum covers the noise.

How remarkable it is to be 12,000 feet in the air, somewhere over the Middle East, talking with a Jordanian flight attendant about a meal I had in Dearborn, Michigan. What else but food could draw out such commonalities, create such intimate exchanges between strangers?

As though he can read my mind, Muamar tells me that the red wine served on the flight is made in Jordan. "So now you can drink the same wine Jesus drank," he says with a wink.

He speaks of family, his words full with the delight of a new father and happy husband. Muammar is clearly infatuated with being a parent and seeing the world through the eyes of his three year old. His wife is half Romanian and half Circassian.

"This family line is from Kafka's Russia."

Muammar is soon handing out headphones, pushing the drink and food carts up and down the aisles, and attending to the various requests of a plane full of needy individuals with little ability to help themselves.

The plane is dim—blinds down and the only illumination comes from running track lights along carpeted aisles. Some people have thrown their heads back in sleep, mouths open in exhausted abandon. Others slump forward, their heads bobbing up and down and side to side with the slight shift and sway of flight. Faces flicker in the light of the TV screen placed conveniently in the seatback in front of them, the world tuned out with headphones.

I pull out my notebook and try to capture the people, the conversations, the experience, but soon find my own head nodding in sleep dance.

As the flight lands and I ready myself to disembark, craning my neck for the first peek at Delhi, Muammar is at my side once more.

"Good luck on your trip, and do think about coming to Jordan someday."

"Oh, I will," I say wanting to thank him for his thoughtfulness, but having only words. "It was so good to meet you and speak with you. And thank you. Thank you for all of your kindness."

"May you have good luck in all that you do, through all of your life, Rachel," he affirms as he shakes my hand. "That is a blessing from a stranger. Not a thing to take lightly."

I look into his eyes and nod, and then step out into the fog of Delhi—a city of twelve million strangers.

Cardamom

Cardamom smells like my sister leaving. I put a sprinkle into my coffee the morning she moved to California.

The night before she moved, I made *halwa*, carrot sweet and coconut milk creamy. The spice had been left out on the counter in a little clear plastic bag. I sprinkled in a little with a dollop of Irish Cream, the aroma wafting across the kitchen on a breeze from the open door.

My sister, Laurel, and I stood in the driveway, hugging goodbye. I pulled away, the flavor of cardamom on my breath, my chest so tight, even tears couldn't loosen the ache. Laurel and I have never been apart for more than a month in all her twenty-six years. Three years ago she lived in Italy for a month. Our first Skype conversation felt like a prison sentence reprieve—such relief and joy as I watched her face light with laughter.

We were raised in a house hand-built over the years by our father and various carpenter and carpenter-ish friends. Laurel and I maintain that no one truly knows who we are until they share a meal with the Mills family. Most of our memories revolve around meals shared with family and friends—meals around the picnic table in summer, and around the claw-foot dinner table in cold weather. Meals cooked by hand from ingredients harvested out of the garden, touched, at one culinary moment or another, by every member of our family. When the Mills family gathered to cook and eat, every act, from preparation to eating, resonated, gratitude, consciousness, and love in every bite.

Where we lived at the bottom of the hill on County Rd. 413, the closest house was a quarter mile away, and exactly five children our age lived within a two mile radius. Three years

apart in age, my sister and I became our own cohort, erecting forts, playing dress-ups, and having picnics.

Our parents often participated in our picnics, both real and imagined, but as we grew older, our autonomy expanded, and more often we disappeared on our own. It was around this time that we also began to make our own meals, which we tucked carefully into Momma's woven, long-handled basket. The basket, which hung from a rafter in the kitchen, had a double-sided bottom that strongly resembled a butt. We thought this basket both hilarious, and practical.

When the weather was warm enough, and the snow had receded sufficiently, we planned our first picnics of the season. Laurel, head of curly, tangled ringlets; gold-framed glasses perpetually smudged; brown eyes alight and brows knit in concentration, sliced a tomato. Eight years old, she had only just been allowed to use the sharp knife. I watched her out of the corner of my eye, a big sister's readiness to offer helpful corrections and suggestions on the edge of my tongue. I paid such close attention to Laurel's tomato-knife skills, that every slice of bread I cut came out crooked, but this was likely to happen whether I was paying attention or not.

I popped the misshapen bread into the toaster and got the cream cheese out of the refrigerator. The clouds to the east were grey, but the sky was lightening a bit to the south. It was a chilly Saturday afternoon in early May. The snow had only just melted, and patches of the woods were still streaked in white. Last fall's grass lay dead in the fields, crushed by a winter's weight of snow. Little green shoots were beginning to poke up amongst the fallen stems, and buds were bursting on branches, turning the dead-limbed canopy hazy red.

Our picnic was planned for a sunny spot in the neighbor's field. The Smiths and McKinneys, cousins by blood, owned the acreage across the gravel road, but visited brief weeks in the summer months. Friends of ten years and counting, Laurel and I had the run of their fields

and maple forests. We swung from the branches of their apple orchard, and ate the tart/sweet Macintosh in the fall. We built forts in their woods as our father harvested a winter's worth of firewood, the smell of sawdust and chainsaw fuel borne indoors on our skin as we clattered into the house for dinner. In chilly wet springs, Laurel and I harvested wild leeks from dark, loamy maple and birch woods soil, the aroma of onions beneath our fingernails for days.

Our plan was to picnic at the bluff's border running along the lake-side edge of the neighbor's property. A terror for our parents, at ages eleven and eight, this bluff was irresistible to Laurel and me. We promised to set up our table cloth well away from the bank—near the big flagstones set into the lawn, by the birch tree clump, and the south side of the stone house where the lavender, sage, and baby's breath grew.

The toaster popped and I spread the uneven bread slices with cream cheese, hoping to disguise their misshapenness.

"You shoulda let mom cut the bread," Laurel observed, peering around my elbow. "You always cut it uneven."

"Get-out-of-here," I said with a thrust of my hip into her side. "Go get the fruit or do something else helpful."

"Maybe next time I'll cut the bread," Laurel replied, turning toward a bowl of plums. Her auburn ringlets were already tangled, and her pants pockets bulged with misshapen lumps I knew were the rocks she picked up on our walk yesterday.

I finished slathering the bread with cream cheese and added a squirt of yellow mustard. With the tip of a butter knife I blended the creamy spread. Concentrating, I arranged tomato slices onto cream cheese. I was just becoming aware of how food became more appealing if it looked good, and now that the warped bread was disguised, I attempted to create a picture-

perfect sandwich. This was one of the first times Laurel and I were making the sandwiches for a picnic ourselves, and the knowledge showed in both of our picnic provisioning.

"Momma, can I make the picnic this time?" I had asked over my breakfast of homemade cornbread soaked with maple syrup. I poured the syrup from a glass Ball jar filled with amber liquid our father boiled into being every spring. This batch was so fresh I could still taste smoke from the wood fire that burned beneath the giant, galvanized sap boiling pan.

"Of course, sweetie," Momma had said with a note of surprise in her voice as I licked syrup from sticky fingers. "What's your plan?"

"I've got an idea for a sandwich," I said, picking up a mouthful of cornbread crumbs by pressing my fork tines down onto the plate and squishing them around in the syrup. I looked over and Laurel watched me intently, fork poised.

"Ok. Just tell me what you need," Momma said, plopping my vitamins onto the woven placemat, next to my orange juice.

"And me too," Laurel said around a mouth full of half-chewed cornbread." I'm-gunna help."

Laurel tucked napkins into the picnic basket as I added the finishing dash of salt and pepper to the glistening tomato slices. The addition of salt and pepper came about as a result of my recent observation of adult behavior at the dinner table—most adults added a dash of each to everything but dessert. It must taste good, I reasoned, so I began experimenting with pepper and salt. Momma taught me to put the salt in the palm of my hand, to help measure so I didn't get too much, and a family friend taught me to throw the rest over my left shoulder for good luck.

I placed the sandwich "lid" carefully on top of the tomato and pressed down gently. Momma had two squares of tin foil ready on the counter. I wrapped the sandwiches in neat square packages, and set them in the basket with the folded blue-checked tablecloth.

Laurel finished washing and drying the plums, and with a serious expression, arranged them in the basket.

"What else can we take, Momma?" Laurel asked, "This isn't enough."

Momma went to the pantry and returned with an organic Blue Sky root beer—a rare soda treat in our household. From the top cupboard, where we couldn't reach, she retrieved the bag of leftover Easter chocolate—the few malted and chocolate eggs that didn't fit in our Easter baskets. She filled a little baggie with an equal amount of candy for both of us so we didn't fight over who had more, and set it in the basket.

Laurel, much happier with these additions, began to pull on her black rubber boots and winter jacket. I triple-checked our picnic preparation and pulled on my own boots. The sun was still deciding about coming out or not, and I donned my winter coat with reluctant practicality. At eleven, I was just starting to feel too cool for coats, but the full-on teen apathy had yet to set in.

I hung the basket over my right arm, Laurel retrieved her walking stick from the front door, and we set out.

The path led down the hill from our house. The hill was the demarcation line between house-territory and lake-territory. Until we reached a certain responsible age, we weren't allowed in lake-territory without the supervision of an adult, lest we drown. The responsibility of my age relative to my sister's hung, a serious and superior burden on my shoulders. Despite my elevated status and full basket, I started running down the hill when Laurel did—running

down the hill was tradition. My obviously superior maturity elevated me above such childish activities, but a tradition must be observed.

From the bottom of the hill we crossed the lawn in front of the lake, with a brief detour to inspect odd bits washed up on the shoreline overnight. I was careful to make sure that Laurel didn't stray into the water beyond the top of her booted feet—she was my responsibility to protect.

One bobber, and one creepy blue crab claw richer, we made our way along the bit of rocky beach, ducked beneath the needle-sharp hawthorn branches, walked below bent and fragrant cedar boughs, and up the steep bluff path toward the empty old stone house.

It always made us a little sad, to see the house devoid of our friends, curtains pulled over windows liked closed eyelids. But there was also something satisfying about taking ownership.

Laurel and I spread our tablecloth in a patch of lush green grass, not too close to the bluff's edge, but where we could see the lake shimmering through barely budding branches. The lake's surface sparkled blue beneath us, heralding the sun's appearance from behind ominous gray clouds. It appeared suddenly, bursting over where we sat in a wave of warmth as we unpacked our picnic.

We unloaded the picnic, organizing the components across the picnic blanket like we had seen tables organized for tea in British movies. I unwrapped the sandwiches as Laurel and I talked of the fairies that live in tangled tree roots at the bluff's edge not twenty feet from where we sat. We hadn't seen them yet, but both felt sure of their presence as the sun on our round cheeks.

The sandwiches were delicious. Momma's fresh bread, tomatoes, and cheese all kind of melded together, and we smacked our lips with pleasure as we chewed and chatted.

Laurel sat still long enough to eat her sandwich, but by the time she got to eating her plum, other curiosities had caught her attention. She squatted, plum in one hand, juice running down her chin, and stared at the surface of one of the flagstones. "Do you think there are fossils in here? I'm going to find some," she said without waiting for an answer.

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Seldom has a month gone by in twenty-six years that I haven't shared a meal with my sister. We cook and eat together, making meals for a crowd, or just ourselves. Joy and laughter fill our cooking, and we work together as a team, improvising recipes and creating flavors only our minds together could produce.

The last meal I cooked with my sister before she moved to California, turned into a weekend of meals—the necessity of planning and eating a way to prolong goodbye. Saturday night we cooked Indian, at her request.

"I want venison vindaloo," she said on the phone.

There was a miscommunication about who was cooking the curry, and when she arrived at our parent's house, flustered from packing her life into her Toyota van, it was already past our father's usual dinner hour.

"Oh no!" she wailed. "I totally thought you said you were making the venison."

"No worries, sister," I replied with cheerful efficiency as I helped her unload the contents of two coolers into our parents' already overstuffed refrigerator. "I'm on it. Because of time, we're going to improvise."

Orson, my boyfriend, helped me slice onions and chop venison, which we browned with a couple tablespoons of red curry powder and many chopped garlic cloves. The house smelled divine, and as the aromas drifted through the kitchen, everyone relaxed. Our parents showed pictures of their recent trip, and our boyfriends discussed their common interest in knives. Tim, Laurel's boyfriend, was on a hot-shot crew in California, where he worked six months out of the year. Laurel spent the previous two summers without Tim, and decided she couldn't spend another summer missing him. The best thing she could do for her jewelry career is move somewhere other than our small rural Upper Michigan town, but I was going to miss her in ways I hadn't even thought of yet.

I pushed these thoughts away—morning would come soon enough.
Laurel threw together a kale salad, and we talked over the counter about the merits of massaging kale, about the wine, about the crappy weather, about anything but her impending move.

We lit the candles and gathered, six, around the table. Scattered amongst our blue glass plates, were Momma's homemade honey-wheat crescent rolls, emerald green kale salad in the garlicky old wooden salad bowl, velvety coconut rice, flavorful venison curry, and yogurt cucumber salad sprinkled with toasted black sesame seeds.

We raised our glasses in a toast and I felt my chest squeeze.

"To many more such meals with such company," my father said, raising his wine glass, tears shining in his blue eyes. "Cheers," we replied in unison, clinking glasses and smiling into

one another's eyes. Laurel looked at me through the slightly smudged lenses of her glasses, the weight of her early morning departure between us.

"I love you sissy," she said, tears on her cheeks.

I watched her take her first bites.

"Mmmhhh, yummy sister-lady. Good job," she said, smiling around a mouthful of cucumber salad, and there was the little girl with the auburn ringlets playing in the field, poking at rocks.

We pile our plates high on the first helping, layering cucumber salad, creamy basmati rice, and spicy red curry on our forks. Interruptions occur only to pass around another bowl, or to remark, once more, on the delicious food our combined efforts created. The flavors meld and swirl: venison my father hunted, killed, and butchered, velvety coconut rice my sister and Tim assembled, our mother's warm flavorful rolls, the ingredients chopped and prepped by Orson, and the flavors I helped pull together to create a meal Laurel would remember. A meal she could carry west.

For dessert, and in honor of Laurel's lactose intolerance, I made *halwa*, substituting coconut milk for the cream the recipe called for. I stirred grated carrots, sugar, coconut milk, ghee, dried cranberries, and toasted almonds in the large black pan. The sugary-spiced steam rose up and wafted through the kitchen.

Orson and I scooped *halwa* and passed out steaming bowls to everyone around the table. We ate, licking our spoons clean, the breathy bite of cardamom lingering with sweet orange carrot and crispy almonds. We remained around the table, staying longer than usual, savoring each moment until the candles began to gutter out. When we hugged goodnight, I smelled cardamom in Laurel's long brown hair.

Tagliatelle Verdi

The spicy scent of green leaf crushed between my palms, smelled like spring. Perhaps this is why parsley is linked to Persephone, daughter of Demeter, who commences spring's sunny green burst when she escapes to the sunlit surface after spending a third of the year in the underworld with Hades.

The Ancient Greeks believed Demeter's emotions controlled the seasons—believed the planting and harvesting of crops was manipulated by the changing reactions of a goddess' grief and joy as her daughter left and returned in a cyclical succession.

The parsley plants in my first herb garden sprouted into tiny green leaves shaped like bird tracks, hovering just above the dark, moist soil. The shoots grew into leafy bushes that blocked out the sun around the plant's base, top branches heavy and drooping. Slugs made their slow journeys in the moist dimness below the foliage, leaving iridescent trails to mark where they had been.

If you lay on the ground—chin pressed nearly to the soil so that each breath rustles the leaves of grass just beyond the end of your nose, a slug transforms from the repellent voracious pest that demolishes gardens bite by bite overnight, into a being. You see the brushstroke striations of brown along the slug's back and sides. As the creature raises up its "head" in reaction to another consciousness crossing its radar, its antennas twitch from side to side, responding to your presence.

How fascinating it is that humans place such different levels of importance on one life over another—a sprig of parsley weighs more heavily than a slug.

When a parsley leaf is plucked and eaten, still warm from the sun's heat, it tastes fresh, but with a hint of spice. When ground with olive oil, walnuts, salt, pepper, and garlic to a creamy consistency it becomes *pesto*—named after the mortar and pestle originally used to pound the ingredients into velvety paste. Traditional pesto is made with basil, as opposed to parsley, but my mother improvised with what was in the garden.

My mother's pesto was modernized—the blender substituted for the customary mortar and pestle. When I was little I remember peering into the whirling mixer at the vortex of green, mesmerized by the metamorphosis of food textures that smelled like a Friday in August when dinner was late and laughter ricocheted like loon calls.

Pesto, like most foods that immigrated to the New World with waves of settlers establishing new lives in America, has changed and evolved. First came the addition of cheese. Pesto appeared on bread, pizza, scrabbled into eggs, and slathered on everything from salmon to burgers. Pesto became trendy and experimental. This versatility evidences parsley's culinary evolution. The Ancient Greeks connected the herb with death—to such an extent that they wouldn't eat it or put it near their tables for fear of its link to oblivion through the body of young Persephone.

***

The sun held high until the dinner hour in the blackberry scented summer afternoons of my adolescence. Lake waves murmured, the sound reaching up the hill, across the lawn and through the branches of the apple orchard.

My legs were long, tan, and muscular from hours of swimming. Teenage summers, drinking on pontoon boats with boys; midnight curfews, "can I take the car?" and evenings with

family and friends around campfires. Those nights, as lake wind ruffled waves and swelled campfire flames, I felt charged, as if, when I opened my mouth, a million fireflies would burst into the night.

August evenings the heat made you want to lay, languid as a wilted flower, across porch railings and deck chairs. These were pesto evenings—vibrant green noodles winding round one another in a blue bowl at the center of the picnic table. Food to cool.

As dinner time approached, my mother sent me to the garden with a silver colander and red handled kitchen scissors. The back porch door groaned shut behind me and my sunburn itched as I walked barefoot into my father's garden. The turned earth felt warm beneath my toes and the rows of vegetables glowed in hues of green, orange, and yellow.

I walked past bushes of beans, red tomato orbs, and quivering carrot top fronds. The parsley grew in the garden's southwest corner, in a thick emerald hedge. Hardy, persistent, and with a tenacious green even in the face of drought, parsley was a landmark in my father's garden late into the Upper Michigan growing season. Durable, parsley, can be picked even after the snow has fallen—a memory of summer on nights when the ground begins to freeze. In late August, those snowy days were only a few months away. Too soon I would have to brush away a cold, thin white crust to find branches of greenery beneath.

***

The garden peaks in late summer—lush plants drooping with fruit, the result of toil and hard work—work that began in a potting shed on cold March days when the soil outside was still frozen six inches below the surface and coated with three inches of snow above ground. To put

seeds into soil when the daily temperatures still hover around freezing requires a combination of determination and optimism that skirts foolishness.

The act of planting makes a seer of a gardener—we peer into the future, almanacs in one hand, seed packets in the other, hopeful in the face of uncertain weather, attack by unknown pests, and those variables that can ruin a crop and negate hundreds of hours of work. We stare at ten-day weather forecasts like seekers of the oracle at Delphi, desperate for a glimpse of the future, and knowing that, like our fates, weather is impossible to change.

Despite all of this, gardeners the world over continue to gamble against the many unknowns of growing our own food. We pour through seed catalogues during the winter months, and prep potting soil as the days begin to lengthen. When the pots and dirt are ready, we tuck seeds into earth, and then we wait, manipulating light, water, and nutrients. We feel a sense of omnipotence as we create this artificial universe and nurture plant life that will, in turn, sustain our life and the lives of others.

What instinct, need, longing, or predisposition urges humans to plant a garden? For much of human history, callouses on the hands and half-moons of dirt beneath fingernails were indicators of a person of lower class—growing food for yourself and others was a lowly occupation, a condition which has changed little over time. Quietly defiant individuals like my father till the soil every spring, plant, care, and cultivate produce which he and my mother freeze and can to sustain our family over the winter.

My father harvests broccoli, green beans, and carrots by the bushel basket. My mother stands at the kitchen sink facing the neighbor's apple orchard, her hands brushing flecks of dirt away as she washes the vegetables. When they are washed she will cut, blanch, bag, and freeze the produce—every floret and carrot stem we eat will pass through her hands.

***

The parsley packet read, “annual”, but I kept letting the plant go to seed, and it kept seeding itself, year after year. Each spring I went to the garden after the snow receded, pulling emerging quack grass and planning where I would plant basil, rosemary, and sage.

Parsley sprouts grew amongst tiny blades of grass, so small their existence and growth seemed an incomprehensible miracle in a hazy future. How could something so fragile and insubstantial grow into the plant that would feed me and my loved ones, and carry the weight of meaning-making placed on it hundreds of years ago by the Ancient Greeks?

The summer my husband and I separated, the parsley grew without me. When I returned to the house to collect clothing, bins of papers, the chopsticks my father carved, and my grandmother’s white mixing bowl, the parsley had already gone to seed. The large flower heads bobbed in the breeze, stems reaching, seeds bursting from pollinated pistils.

A month after our divorce, on a mid-October, orange-leafed afternoon, I made pesto from bags of basil and parsley plucked from the freezer. The year before I had harvested, washed, and carefully tucked into freezer bags each green leaf of basil, each feathered parsley frond. The aroma filling the kitchen as I parted the Ziploc’s plastic edges transported me back to that afternoon—how the sun felt on the back of my neck, tickle of ant feet across my ankle, heavy-headed sunflowers casting bobbing shadows across where I knelt in the garden.

The rotation of the sun around the earth—a calendar year—and I was in my new home, in an unfamiliar kitchen, with ingredients harvested and frozen a marriage ago.

The herbs pulsed in the blender with the other pesto ingredients. Voices from the dining room, raised in conversation and laughter, buzzed behind me. My heart hiccupped in a moment of joy as I urged my guests—friends I hadn't known a year before—to fill their plates.

The room quieted as we began to eat, reduced to the sounds of fork against plate, contented chewing, and murmurs of thankfulness.

***

Summer evenings of my adolescence, my family gathered in the kitchen to cook. First conjuring the meal, harvesting, washing, preparing ingredients, singly, in pairs, and together as four, we worked.

"Did you wash that?"

"Taste this."

"Please pass the salt."

"I'm glad you're home with us."

"Garlic, the smell of my childhood."

Every year my father planted the parsley along the garden's southern edge. My sister and I harvested the parsley, clipping woody branches from greenery and making piles in the orange handled basket that I slung over my forearm, where it swung lazily from side to side as the greens piled higher. We soaked the parsley in clean cold water, lifting it out carefully to avoid disturbing the soil settled in the sink bottom.

When the greens were clean, my mother assembled the pesto ingredients on the blond wood of the kitchen counter, feeding them one at a time into the blender's whirling blade, reducing the garlic, parsley, olive oil, salt, pepper, and nuts to a garlicky green swirl.

My mother poured the emerald sauce from the blender, onto the steaming tangle of linguini noodles. She scooped noodles and sauce together, swirling the spoon, mixing. The aroma of garlic and grassy hint of parsley wafted through the kitchen on a breeze from the open window.

We filled our plates and sat, one by one, at the table. Two daughters, a father, a mother—white plates nested with noodles, green pesto.

The Kitchen Dance

Kitchens breathe life into the home. I run my hands over the chop block countertops, the blonde wood smooth beneath my fingertips. The black and silver gas stove ticks and hisses before bursting into orange-tipped, blue flames beneath a well-seasoned cast iron pan, glazed with a golden sheen of olive oil. The house fills with the intoxicating aroma of onions and garlic and the sizzle sound that starts so many meals.

The kitchen is a sacred place filled with vessels, utensils, and ingredients that unite to nourish our spirits, as well as our bodies. These elements come together, sometimes in the orchestrated choreography of a recipe, and other times in a free form swirl of inspiration and ideas.

This is the Kitchen Dance; it brings people, food, and all the trappings together, creating memories that glow in our minds like the warm light of candles.

Cupboard doors bump open and closed, tap water whooshes on and off, pans clang, and my knife thumps against the cutting board. A rhythm evolves, and I tap my toes as my hips keep the beat. The radio drones the news in the background, but I am lost to the sounds and songs of cooking.

My kitchen has many spirits whose energy moves around and through me as I dance, chop, and flip the vegetables in a fry pan with a flick of my wrist. My mother's gentle guidance first instilled my love of cooking and joy in good food.

My first attempt at baking chocolate chip cookies, I read down the list of ingredients and piled the flour, eggs, and chocolate, together into the bowl. Moments after, my cooking glow faded as I read the printed directions *below* the ingredient list. My eyes welled with tears at the

thought of failure, but Momma soon came to the rescue. She patiently separated the items in the bowl and helped me blend and bake them to a successful cookie conclusion.

An album holds a picture of my mother and me, framed in the kitchen window. Both sets of hands, little and big, disappear into a stainless steel bowl, as we mix something on the countertop. I must have been three or four, and my mother is beautiful with her long brown hair tied back in a red handkerchief. We are smiling at each other, she looking down, me looking up, with such mutual adoration that even now it takes my breath away. That moment, as well as thousands of other moments with my mother, guides me in my own kitchen.

Danny, my friend, my heart, is with me as I cook. When we were young, we moved beyond macaroni and cheese with cut-up hot dogs that his mother made us, to experimenting with fancy foods like coddled eggs. Inspired by beautiful china egg coddlers, we cracked in the egg and filled the top with generous helpings of garlic salt, pepper, and cheese. Little egg cups danced happily in boiling water as the house filled with aromas of garlic and cheese. The first bites, eggy, salty, and creamy, were bliss. We sang as we cooked, and as I dance from stove to sink in my kitchen, I hum the tune to "Candy Hearts and Paper Flowers", Danny's presence so near, despite being thousands of miles away in Florida. I can almost feel him dancing beside me.

My former boss, friend, and mentor, Sherri, is also often in my thoughts as I cook. While at work, I watched in awe as she moved confidently through the cramped restaurant kitchen, her beautiful dark hair pulled back from her face, dusky eyes snapping with humor, mischief, and joy. Many times I've watched her combine spices in a fry pan beneath a blue flame, filling the kitchen and restaurant with sharp scents of cumin layered with the sweetness of cardamom. I close my eyes. The aromas, so evocative, transport me to a Middle Eastern market.

I weave and step around my own kitchen, and I can almost see Sherri beside me, a smile lighting her lovely face, a spoon in her outstretched hand as she urges me to taste something new and delicious.

I stand at the sink for a moment, staring into the darkness of trees and remember my first meal with my partner, Orson. We were in the woods, maple trees straight as matchsticks reaching toward a sky so blue it hurt. It was Blissfest, and there was music everywhere, the main stage's thumping bass boom, distant drums, and soft-strummed guitar song flitting like dragonflies through the forest.

We were in his camp, a loose circle smattering of tents, camp chairs, and tree-strung hammocks. We had only met the day before. All day and night walked, barefoot, rooted dirt paths as the sun set and neon glowing lights lit the canopy like a scattered shattering of Northern Lights.

When Orson asked if I was hungry, I wondered what a man, almost thirty, brings to a music festival to eat. He opened the red cooler, handing me a still-crispy baguette, which I tucked under my arm in order to juggle three emerald avocados. He carried cheese in one hand and his pocket knife, enclosed in its black leather sheath, in the other.

We worked together, cutting buttery wedges of Brie, carving chunks of bread, and slicing velvety green half-moons of avocado. We shared the cooler as a seat, his thigh pressed against mine, dirty bare feet stretched, toes burrowing in dead leaves. The bread was chewy and soft on the inside, the crust flaking onto my lap as I took my first bite. Avocado and brie blended, green and buttery against bread.

This meal became our staple—tent-city food. Bread, brie and sausage; baguette, Havarti, and prosciutto; pita, hummus, olives, and feta; peanut butter, dried cranberries, and flatbread.

Sometimes, fruit, a burst of fresh blueberries. We traveled with a bucket of new-picked blueberries for days, gathered with my father and sister in the blueberry grounds south of Grand Marais. I picked until my fingers turned blue and distant thunder brought warm summer rain showers. When we ate the blueberries, naked, in the tent beneath the spruce trees, I tasted rain.

Now, as I stare into the darkened forest, memories conjure blue and sweet on the edge of my lips.

Cooking is a dance made up of many ingredients: food and its journey; the hands each ingredient passes through to get to our kitchen; instruments that harmonize kitchen music, pots, pans, lids, plates, spatulas, and whisks, shaping our culinary creations. The kitchen space itself: countertop workspace for both our mistakes and masterpieces, the stove that transforms our food, and the sink that washes our fruits, vegetables, and dishes.

Most importantly, spirits guide our steps through the dance: the gentle guiding hand of a parent, laughter of friends, flavors of love move through us as we dance in the kitchen.

Glossary of Terms:

Labneh: Soft, creamy, and cheese-like, labneh is made by straining the whey out of yogurt.

Hummus: A thick, creamy paste made from pureed garbanzo beans, tahini (sesame paste), olive oil, lemon, and garlic. Very versatile and mixable with anything from pesto to pureed red pepper.

Baba Ghanouj: A thick spread made from mashed roasted eggplant, tahini, olive oil, lemon, and garlic.

Pita: A hollow, unleavened bread.

Shawarma: Roasted meat, most often roasted on a revolving spit—the meat is shaved off for serving.

Akkawi Cheese: Can be made from cow, sheep, or goat milk, akkawi cheese is a brined cheese that is named for its origins around the city of Acre.

Halloumi Cheese: A dense, unbrined cheese that can be made from cow, sheep, or goat milk. Halloumi has a high melting point, and so it is popular in recipes that call for fried or grilled cheese. Originated on the island of Cyprus.

Ful Medames: A thick, creamy soup/dip (breakfast in Egypt) made from crushed fava beans, olive oil, lemon juice, and garlic. Egyptian in origin.

Tabbouleh: A Middle Eastern salad made of cracked bulgur wheat, parsley, lemon juice, garlic, chopped tomato, and mint.

Baladi Cheese: A dense, creamy, unripened cheese with a salty/sweet flavor. Made from cow, goat, or sheep. Originated in the area that is now modern day Lebanon.

Sumac: The lemony ground fruit of the sumac tree. Reddish in appearance, sumac has a lemony flavor and is used as both a garnish and a tart spice in Middle Eastern cuisine.

Rose water: Water scented with rose petals. Used in Middle Eastern cuisine and as a perfume.

Orange flower water: Water scented by distilling the flowers of orange trees. Used in Middle Eastern cuisine—particularly desserts, and as a perfume.

Makdous: Small eggplants stuffed with walnuts, red peppers, garlic, and olive oil. Often sold brined in a jar.

Tahini: Ground, sesame paste.

Saj: or Markouk, is a Lavash bread—unleavened bread made by flattening out the dough and laying it on a clay oven.

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