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MASTERING THE ART OF FRENCH COOKING

I have no photograph of my mother cooking, but when I recall my childhood this is how I picture her: standing in the kitchen of our suburban ranch house, a blue-and-white-checked terrycloth apron tied at her waist, her lovely head bent over a recipe, a hiss of frying butter, a smell of onions and broth, and open like a hymnal on the counter beside her, a copy of Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

The book's cover is delicately patterned like wallpaper—white with miniature red fleurs-de-lis and tiny teal stars—the title and authors' names modestly scripted in a rectangular frame no larger than a recipe card: a model of feminine self-effacement.

This unassuming book was my mother's most reliable companion throughout my childhood, and from the table laid with a blue cotton cloth, not yet set with flatware and plates and glasses of ice water, not yet laid with bowls of broccoli spears, *boeuf bourguignon*, potatoes sautéed in butter, I observed her as she sought in its pages an elusive balance between the bitter and sweet.

It is a scene less remembered than invoked, an amalgam of the many evenings when I sat and watched my mother cook at the copper gas stove whose handles glowed a soft burnished too human pink. Tall and remote as statuary, dressed stylishly in cashmere and pumps, a chestnut bouffant framing her face and its high cheekbones, her pale-blue eyes cast down, my mother consulted her recipes night after night. It is a scene suffused in memory with a diffuse golden light and a sense of enormous safety and an awareness that beyond that radiant kitchen lay the shadow-draped lawn, the cold, starry night of another Midwestern autumn.

My mother had few pleasures when I was growing up. She liked to read. She liked to play the piano. She liked to cook. Of these, she did a good deal of the first, very little of the second, and a great deal of the third. She was of that generation of women caught in the sexual crossfire of women's liberation, who knew enough to probe for their desires, but not enough to practice them.

Born into the permissive Sixties, raised in the disillusioned Seventies, the third of three children, I came of age in a world where few rules were trusted, few applied. Of those that did, the rules contained in my mother's cookbooks were paramount.



The foods of my childhood were romantic. *Boeuf bourguignon*. *Vichyssoise*. *Salade Niçoise*. *Bouillabaisse*. *Béarnaise*. *Mousseline au Chocolat*. Years before I could spell these foods, I learned their names from my mother's lips, their smells by heart.

At the time I took no notice of the gustatory schizophrenia that governed our meals. The extravagant French cuisine prepared on the nights my father dined with us; the Swanson TV dinners on the nights we ate alone, we three kids and my mother, nights that came more frequently as the Sixties ebbed into the Seventies. On those nights we ate our dinners in silence

and watched the Vietnam war on television, and I took a childish proprietary delight in having a dinner of my own, served in its aluminum tray, with each portion precisely fitted to its geometrical place. These dinners were heated under thin tin foil and served on plates, and we ate directly from the metal trays our meals of soft whipped potatoes, brown gravy, sliced turkey, cubed carrots and military-green peas.

Had I noticed these culinary cycles, I doubt that I would have recognized them for the strategic maneuvers they seem to me in retrospect. Precisely what my parents were warring over I'm not sure, but it seems clear to me now that in the intricate territorial maneuvers that for years defined their marriage, cooking was my mother's principal weapon. Proof of her superiority. My father might not feel tenderness, but he would have to admire her. My mother cooked with a vengeance in those years, or perhaps I should say she cooked for revenge. In her hands, cuisine became a martial art.



My mother spent herself in cooking. Whipping egg whites by hand with her muscular forearm, rubbing down a turkey with garlic and butter and rosemary and thyme, she sublimated her enormous unfeminine ambition in extravagant hubristic cuisine. Disdainful of the Sisyphean chores of house cleaning, she threw herself into the task of feeding us in style. If we were what we ate, she was hell bent on making her brood singular, Continental, and I knew throughout my childhood that I would disappoint her.

In the kitchen, my mother could invent for herself a coterie of scent and flavor, a retinue of exquisite associates, even though she would later have to eat them. What she craved in those years was a companion, not children, but my father was often gone, and I was ill suited to the role.

I lacked utterly the romance my mother craved. Indifferent to books, unsociable, I could not master French. Though I would study the language for five years in high school I would never get beyond the rudiments of ordering in restaurants and asking directions to the municipal pool (*Je voudrais un bifteck, s'il vous plaît. Où est la piscine?*). In the face of my mother's yearning, I became a spectator of desire, passive, watchful, wary. Well into my twenties I remained innocent of my tastes, caught up in observing my mother's passions and fearful too that I might betray her, call into question her unswerving desires with desires of my own.



Julia Child was the only reliable companion my mother had in those years, other than the woman who came once a week to clean the house. Across the street the Segals had a “live-in girl,” a local college student who came in to watch the children in the afternoons, while Mrs. Segal nursed a nervous breakdown. Each year these live-in girls changed: now blond, now brunette, with names like Stacy and Joanne. They taught us how to shoot hoops, how to ride bikes, how to appreciate soap operas. In our house there was no “live-in girl,” there was only Mrs. Williams, the “cleaning lady.”

I was quiet on the days when Mrs. William came to clean, embarrassed that we needed someone to help us keep our lives in order, embarrassed too by the fact that she was black and we were white. On the afternoons she came to clean I could not help but see my family as White People, part of a pattern of white folks who hired black folks to pick up after them. I felt ashamed when I saw my mother and Mrs. Williams chatting over coffee at our kitchen table. I saw their silhouettes against history and they made an ugly broken line. I read in it patronage, condescension, exploitation, thwarted rage.

I thought at the time that it was misapplied gentility that prompted my mother to sit with Mrs. Williams, while she ate lunch. Their conversations seemed to me a matter of polite routine. They spoke generally. Of the latest space launch, Watergate, the price of oil. The conversation was not intimate. But they shared it. Later, when Mrs. Williams was dying of breast cancer, she told my mother that my mother had been her best friend. Her *best* friend. My mother told me this with wonder, as if she were amazed that anyone had ever considered her a friend. Now I wonder if the declaration moved her too because she understood its corollary: that Mrs. Williams had been her best, perhaps her only, friend.



Cooking was not the only medium in which my mother excelled. She organized birthday parties on an epic scale—fashioning piñatas out of crepe paper and papier-mâché, organizing haunted houses, and games of smell and memory—and she made us prize-winning costumes well beyond the point at which we should rightly have given up masquerading.

I was 15 when I won the final prize in a series of prizes won for her costumes, for a banana suit she'd made me, a full-length, four-paneled yellow cotton shift worn over a conical cardboard cap to shape the crown, and yellow tights. My mother had ingeniously designed the suit with a triangular front panel that could be secured with Velcro to the crown or “peeled” down to reveal—through a round hole in the cloth—my face.

The prize for this costume, my father reminds me, was a radio designed to look like a box of frozen niblet corn—a square, yellow-plastic radio with an authentic Green Giant label. This was the late Seventies and in America you could buy a lot of things that looked like food but weren't. You could buy a scented candle in the shape of a chocolate sundae, sculpted in a tulip

glass with piles of frothy false whipped cream and a perfect wax cherry. You could buy a soda glass tipped on its side out of which a carbonated cola-colored liquid spilled into a puddle of clear plastic. There was shampoo that smelled of herbs or lemons; tiny soaps in the shape of peaches and green apples; paperweights shaped like giant aspirin, four inches in diameter, cast in plaster; the plastic simulacrum of a slice of pineapple or a fried egg dangling at the end of a key chain.

It was an era of food impersonation. A cultural critic might dismiss this as conspicuous consumption: possessed of abundance, we could mock necessity. Food, for us, could be a plaything—revenge for all those childhood admonitions not to play with your food. But I think that there was in this as well a sign of political disaffection—an ironic commentary on the unreliability of appearances in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam (in South Africa such objects were also popular at the time, a Fulbright scholar from Zimbabwe will tell me years later)—and a measure of spiritual dislocation. As if, glutted with comfort and suspicious of appearances, we had lost touch with what sustains us and had relinquished faith in even the most elementary source of life. Food.



Mixed marriage. The phrase itself recalls cuisine: mixed greens, mixed vegetables, “mix carefully two cups sifted flour with....” As if marriage were a form of sentimental cookery, a blending of disparate ingredients—man and woman—to produce a new and delectable whole. “She’s my honey bun, my sweet pea, my cookie, sugar”; “You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.”

English is spiced with phrases that attest to our enduring attachment to food as metaphor, and point to our abiding faith in affection’s ability to sustain us as vitally as food. But the phrase

mixed marriage suggests as well the limits of love, its inability to transform difference, and is a warning. In the mythic goulash of American culture, the melting pot is supposed to inspire amity, not love. One should melt, it seems, not mix. Marriage, of the kind my parents ventured to embrace—between gentile and Jew—went, according to the conventions of the time, too far.

It was in part because of their differences that my mother married my father. He must have seemed to her exotic, with his dark skin, jet eyes, his full sensuous mouth; at 70 he will look like Rosanno Brazzi, but at age 31, when my parents meet at the University of Minnesota on the stairs of Eddy Hall as my beautiful mother descends from a library in the tower where she has finished her day's research and my father ascends to his office where he is a young professor of psychology, he is more handsome even than a movie star—I can see this in photos from the time—because his face is radiant with expectation for his future.

For my father, son of Russian and Lithuanian immigrants, marrying my mother must have seemed like marrying America itself. Her ancestors had come over in 1620 on that first and famous boat and though my mother's family was of modest means, her speech and gestures bespeak gentility. Her English is precise, peppered with Latinate words and French phrases, her pronunciations are distinctive and slightly Anglicized (not cer-EE-bral, she corrects me, CER-eh-bral). She possesses all the Victorian virtues: widely read, she is an accomplished pianist and a gifted painter; she speaks French and Czech, is knowledgeable in art and history, physics, physiology, and philosophy. Although she is a passionate conversationalist, she has a habit of concluding her sentences on a slight descending note as if she has discovered part way through speech that it were too wearying to converse after all, and so has given up. My mother's verbal inflections are the telltale signs of class in classless America and marrying her, my father crossed

the tracks. He could not know how he would resent the crossing; she could not know how she would resent the role of wife.

My mother's enormous ambitions were channeled by her marriage into a narrow course—like a great roaring river forced against its nature to straighten and be dammed, resulting in floods, lost canyons—and her desires became more powerful for having been restrained. It seemed to me only a matter of time before she'd reassert her claim to wilder, broader terrain. Throughout my childhood, I waited for my mother to leave.



Given the centrality of culinary concerns in my childhood, it is unsurprising perhaps that my first act on leaving home was to codify my eating. My first term at college, I eschewed the freshman ritual of room decoration—the requisite Manet prints, the tacky O'Keeffe's—in favor of regulations: I tacked a single notice to the bulletin board beside my desk specifying what I could and could not eat. My schema was simple: 1,000 calories each day, plus, if absolutely necessary, a pack of sugarless gum and as much as a pound of carrots (my skin, in certain photos from the period, is tinted orange from excess carotene). I swam my meals off each morning with a two-mile swim at dawn, and a cold shower.

My saporous palette was unimaginative and highly unaesthetic and varied little from an essentially white and brown motif: poached white fish, bran cereal, skim milk, egg whites, with the occasional splash out into carrots. I practiced a sort of secular asceticism, in which repression of desire was for its own sake deemed a virtue.

In time, I grew thin, then I grew fat. My senior year, by an inverse of my earlier illogic, I ate almost without cessation: lacking authentic desire to guide me, I consumed indiscriminately. Unpracticed in the exercise of tastes, I lumbered insensibly from one meal to the next. I often ate

dinner twice, followed up by a pound bag of M & Ms or a slice of pizza. The pop psychology of the day informed me that my eating habits were an effort to “stuff rage,” but it seemed to me that I was after ballast. Something to weight me to the world, as love was said to do. Despite my heft, I felt insubstantial as steam, airy and faint as an echo.

Therapy was merely insulting. One waif-like counselor, who had herself been anorectic and spoke in a breathy, childlike voice, insisted earnestly and frequently, whenever I confessed to a thought, “*that* it is your bulimia speaking.” She said this irrespective of my statements, like a spiritualist warning of demons in the ether. I raged, I wept, I reasoned. But it was not me, she averred, but my bulimia—*speaking*. She made it sound as if I had a troll living inside me. And I knew it was a lie. I told her I thought this whole thing, my eating and all was about desire, about being attracted to women. But she set me straight.

In the space of two years I would pass through half a dozen women's hands (none of them a lover's)—therapists, social workers, Ph.D. candidates, even a stern Irish psychiatrist, who looked unnervingly like the actress Colleen Dewhurst—and all of them in short order would assure me that I was not desirous of women. As if it were unthinkable, a thing scripted on the body at birth, a thing you could read in the face, the hands; as if sexual desire were not after all an acquired taste.

I was twenty five before I went to bed with a woman and when I did I found that all along I had been right. Though it strains credulity, the following morning I woke and found that I had lost ten pounds in the night and had recovered my sense of taste. I never again had trouble with food, though my tastes surprised me. Things I never knew I liked suddenly glowed on the gustatory horizon like beacons. Plump oily avocados. The dainty lavender-sheathed teeth of garlic. Ginger. Tonic and Tanqueray gin. Green olives. Blood oranges. Pungent Italian cheese.

If education is ultimately the fashioning of a self through the cultivation of discernment and taste, this was my education, and with it came an acute craving for books and music and film. I discovered in that summer the writings of Virginia Woolf and the films of Ingmar Bergman, the paintings of Jasper Johns and Gertrude Stein's prose and John Cage's symphonies, Italian wines and sex. And I began, tentatively, fearfully, to write (though even the effort to keep a journal was an ordeal; I was tortured by doubt: How could I know what was worthy of recording, what I liked enough, what mattered enough to note and keep?).



“Do you love him?” I once asked my mother, when I was 13 and still young enough to think that was a simple question, a thing one had or didn't have, the thing that mattered; when I did not yet understand all the other painful, difficult things that bind people more surely than love ever will.

“I like your father,” she said. “That is more important.”

I do not misremember this. It remains with me like a recipe I follow scrupulously, an old family recipe. And when in my first-year of graduate school my lover asks me if I love her, I try to form an answer as precise as my mother's before me; I say “I am very fond of you, I like and respect you,” and watch as pain rises in her face like a leavening loaf. I have learned from my mother and Julia Child how to master French cooking, but I have no mastery when it comes to love. It will take me a long time to get the hang of this; it will take practice.



In my second year of graduate school, I enroll in an introductory French class. The instructor is a handsome man from Haiti, and the whole class is a little in love with him. In Minneapolis, the home of the sartorially challenged, where a prominent Uptown billboard

exhorts passersby to “Dress like you’re not from around here,” he is a fashion oasis. An anomaly in these rooms of unmodulated beige, he is dressed this drear January morning in a black turtleneck, chinos, belt, heavy gold chain, ring, watch. He looks like he might go straight from this 11:15 am class to a nightclub—or as if he has just come from one.

Born thirty miles east of Cap-Haitien, the second largest city in Haiti, he is an unlikely figure in these rooms filled with privileged white kids from the suburbs. His own education, he recalls, was “sketchy,” snatched from stints in *lycée* (the equivalent of an American public school) in Cap-Haitien. His parents did not live together and life under Duvalier was difficult; he did, he says, what was necessary to survive.

All my adult life I have sought out people like this, people who I sense can instruct me in how to live in the world. Who know how to survive, to hustle. How to make it from one day to the next. The things my mother and father couldn’t teach me or never knew. I will spend my twenties and early thirties seeking out people like this, like a junkie; I can’t get enough of certitude or attitude.

The questions you ask in an introductory language class are always the important ones, the original ones that the raw fact of language inspires, the ones we ask as children then forget when we grow up. On the first day of class I dutifully copy into my notebook the questions the instructor has written on the board: *Qui suis-je? Qui êtes-vous?* It is only later, while scanning the pages of this notebook, that I am startled to see the questions I have scribbled there, demanding an answer: Who am I? Who are you?



I had been in junior high or high school when I first began to imagine that my parents would separate as soon as their children left home. I had come to expect this, so that when my

siblings and I did leave I was genuinely shocked, even disappointed, that my parents stayed together. I didn't understand that they were, after all those years, if not fond of one another, at least established, that they were afraid of loneliness, that approaching 60, approaching 70, they were too tired to fight and so perhaps could make room as they hadn't previously for tenderness. I didn't understand that it is not that time heals all, but that in time the simple fact of having survived together can come to outweigh other concerns, that if you're not careful, you can forget that you ever hoped for something more than sustenance.

"Your parents seem so comfortable," a friend of mine commented after we had dined with my parents in New York City a few years back, when my folks were visiting me. "Yes," I said, with something like regret, recognizing in that moment for the first time their surrender in a long-waged battle. "I think they are." These days my mother orders in Thanksgiving dinner from a restaurant in St. Paul. She orders unlikely foods: in place of the traditional turkey with trimmings, there is a large, squat, hat-box-shaped vegetable torte with marinara sauce, green salad, cranberries from the can. At dinner, she presides from the head of the table, opposite my father, smiling. Sedate as a pudding.



In college, I met a young woman who had corresponded throughout her childhood with Julia Child. It was from her that I first heard that Child had been an alcoholic and often was drunk on the set. My mother, if she recognized drunkenness for what it was, nevertheless cast the story differently: she laughed about how Child, having dropped a chicken on the floor during a taping, had had the aplomb to pick it up and cooked it anyhow. This delighted my mother, this imperturbability, the ability in the face of disappointment to carry on.



I have asked my mother if she regrets her marriage, her choices; and she has told me it is pointless to regret. That she did what she could do. What more can we ask of ourselves? I want to tell her, but do not, that we must ask for so much more, for everything, for love and tenderness and decency and courage. That we must be much more than comfortable, that we must be better than we think we can be, so that if in some foreign tongue we are confronted with those childhood questions—“*Qui êtes-vous?*” “*Qui suis-je?*”—we will not be afraid to answer.



A few weeks ago, I came across a copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in a second-hand shop, unused, for \$7.49. I bought it and took it home. Fingering its rough pulpy pages, consulting its index for names that conjure my long-ago abandoned childhood, I scanned its pages as if they could provide an explanation, as if it were a secret record of my mother’s thwarted passion. I held it in my lap, hesitant to read it, as if it were after all a private matter, a diary of those bygone days when it still seemed possible in this country, in our lives, to bring together disparate elements and mix them—artfully, beautifully—and make of them some new and marvelous whole. ❖