

Excerpt from The Gastronomical Me
By M.F.K. Fisher

Ora was a spare gray-haired woman, who kept herself to herself in a firm containment. She took her afternoons and Sundays off without incident or comment, and kept her small hot room as neat as her person. The rest of the time she spent in a kind of ecstasy in the kitchen.

She loved to cook, the way some people love to pray, or dance, or fight. She preferred to be let alone, even for the ordering of food, and made it clear that the meals were her business. They were among the best I have ever eaten . . . all the things we had always accepted as food, but presented in ways that baffled and delighted us.

Grandmother hated her. I think it was because Ora was not like the friendly stupid hired girls she thought were proper for middle-class kitchens. And then Ora did things to “plain good food” that made it exciting and new and delightful, which in my poor grandmother’s stern asceticism meant that Ora was wrong.

“Eat what’s set before you, and be thankful for it,” Grandmother said often; or in other words, “Take what God has created and eat it humbly and without sinful pleasure.”

“The girl is ruining you,” she would say to Mother when Monday’s hash appeared in some new delicious camouflage. But the bills were no larger, Mother must confess.

“The children will be bilious before another week,” Grandmother would remark dourly. But we were healthier than ever.

“Their table manners are getting worse,” Grandmother observed between belches. And that was true, if you believed as she and unhappy millions of Anglo-Saxons have been taught to believe, that food should be consumed without comment of any kind but above all without sign of praise or enjoyment.

My little sister Anne and I had come in Ora’s few weeks with us to watch every plate she served, and to speculate with excitement on what it would taste like. “Oh, *Mother*,” we would exclaim in a kind of anguish of delight. “There are little

stars, all made of pie crust! They have seeds on them! Oh, how beautiful! How good!”

Mother grew embarrassed, and finally stern; after all, she had been raised by Grandmother. She talked to us privately, and told us how unseemly it was for little children to make comments about food, especially when the cook could hear them. “You’ve never behaved this way before,” she said, thereby admitting the lack of any reason to, until then.

We contented ourselves with silent glances of mutual bliss and, I really think, an increased consciousness of the possibilities of the table.

I was very young, but I can remember observing, privately of course, that meat hashed with a knife is better than meat mauled in a food-chopper; that freshly minced herbs make almost any good thing better; that chopped celery tastes different from celery in the stalk, just as carrots in thin curls and toast in crescents are infinitely more appetizing than in thick chunks and squares.

There were other less obvious things I decided, about using condiments besides salt and pepper, about the danger of monotony . . . things like that. But it is plain that most of my observations were connected in some way with Ora’s knife.

She did almost everything with it, cut, and carved, and minced, and chopped, and even used it to turn things in the oven, as if it were part of her hand. It was a long one, with a bright curved point. She brought it with her to our house, and called it her French knife. That was one more thing Grandmother disliked about her; it was a wicked affectation to have a “French” knife, and take it everywhere as if it were alive, and spend all the spare time polishing and sharpening it.

We had an old woman named Mrs. Kemp come to the house every Saturday morning, to wash Grandmother’s beautiful white hair and sometimes ours, and she and Grandmother must have talked together about Ora. Mrs. Kemp announced that she would no longer come through the kitchen to keep her appointments. She didn’t like “that girl,” she said. Ora scared her, always sitting so haughty sharpening that wicked knife.

So Mrs. Kemp came in the front door, and Anne and I kept our tongues politely silent and our mouths open like little starved birds at every meal, and

Grandmother belched rebelliously, and I don't remember what Mother and Father did, except eat, of course.

Then, one Sunday, Ora didn't come back with her usual remote severity from her day off. Mother was going to have a baby fairly soon, and Grandmother said, "You see? That girl is way above herself! She simply doesn't want to be in the house with a nurse!"

Grandmother was pleased as Punch, and that night for supper we probably had her favorite dish: steamed soda crackers with hot milk.

The next day, though, we found that Ora, instead of leaving her mother after a quiet pleasant Sunday in which the two elderly women had gone to church and then rested, had cut her into several neat pieces with the French knife.

Then she ripped a tent thoroughly to ribbons. I don't know how the tent came in . . . maybe she and her mother were resting in it. Anyway, it was a good thing to rip.

Then Ora cut her wrists and her own throat, expertly. The police told Father there wasn't a scratch or a nick in the knife.

Mrs. Kemp, and probably Grandmother too, felt righteous. "I just *felt* something," Mrs. Kemp would say, for a long time after Ora left.

I don't know about Father and Mother, but Anne and I were depressed. The way of dying was of only passing interest to us at our ages, but our inevitable return to ordinary sensible plain food was something to regret. We were helpless then, but we both learned from mad Ora, and now we know what to do about it, because of her.

**Excerpt from Trail of Crumbs (Grand Central Publishing, 2008)
By Kim Sunée**

INTRODUCTION

Let me start by saying where I am. I've always thought that knowing this much may help me understand where I was and, if I'm lucky, to better know where it is I'm going. Luck. I know something about it—it got me out of an orphanage in Asia and across the waters, through various port cities, to right here, in France, where I am.

Looking out onto the foothills of the High Alps, in a damp Missoni bathing suit, I'm sitting on a cane-seat chair that once belonged to the father of the man I love. The father is long dead, of cancer, too much alcohol, and not enough tenderness. He's buried in a monastery high in the hills of Ganagobie, just a few kilometers from here. Olivier, my companion of nearly three years, is somewhere on the property. I hear his voice every now and then as he goes from room to room discussing colors with Ariane, the artisan from Carcassonne he has hired to repaint the walls of the entire house before the end of summer.

"Ici, un bleu chaud, pas clair. .. là, du vert foncé. .. à la main. .. Tout." He wants warm, chalky blues, strong greens, and everything rubbed in with bare hands—the reason Ariane charges so much money. Ariane lights a cigarette and, after taking a long, dramatic puff, stops to nod at the appropriate moments.

Tout, I repeat to myself, trying to say it like Olivier, but the o and u together is a sound I still have trouble pronouncing. Tout, not tu. Everything, not you.

After he has finished instructing Ariane, Olivier will busy himself with various tasks: opening bottles of red Bordeaux, negotiating tickets for a performance of *La Bohème* at La Scala, and tasting the mint sauce for a fresh fava bean salad I have chilling in the refrigerator. He'll do this and more while waiting for me.

I have just finished swimming forty laps and am trying to catch my breath before the long evening ahead. It is midsummer, the longest day of the year, perhaps one of the longest years of my life, and I'm barely twenty-five years old. It's almost dusk, the first starlight splinters through the slender leaves of the linden trees. If I open the upstairs window wide enough, I can catch glimpses of Olivier's daughter, Laure, and her best friend, Lulu, the caretakers' daughter, as they chase each other barefoot through the orchards. They have eaten so many wild berries and plums that their small round mouths will be stained for days.

Maybe because they are French children, or because I want them to be like me, I think they enjoy being at the table. But today the girls have so thoroughly stuffed themselves they will not be hungry for dinner. It seems we are always finishing one meal and preparing for the next. This is the way it's been every day, every

season, for the last three years together with Olivier. But tonight's meal seems different somehow. I have taken extra care to tend to all the details.

Sophie, the caretaker's wife, and I were first at the market this morning, choosing small, ripe melons only from Cavaillon, the fattest white asparagus, and long, fragrant branches of fresh lemon verbena. The best salt-cured ham from Bayonne, fresh pork livers, and juniper berries for a terrine still warm from the oven. Our friend Flora gathered poppy leaves and wild mushrooms to bake with yard eggs and flowering thyme to accompany the lamb. Olivier always roasts the meat and chooses the wines. Laure and Lulu helped shell garden peas, the bright green juice spreading across the prints of their tiny fingers. And they played with pastry, smearing rich butter into the dough and cutting out hearts and stars before helping me to wrap it gently around wild peaches. Zorah, the Moroccan housekeeper, has been baking large golden moons of semolina bread all day.

All this for Olivier's family and our friends who have come from both small surrounding towns and as far away as Marseille and Paris. Some will stay through August and maybe into September. They watch as I begin to cook and then ask me questions about where I'm from. Olivier's friends from deep Provence still think it exotic—an Asian face telling stories in French about la Nouvelle-Orléans, le jazz, la cuisine Créole. Olivier, who loves to be in the kitchen, feels that I am better suited for it—he thinks it is here that I am happiest. And because I'm young, or haven't yet mastered the language of opposition, because I don't quite know what it is that makes me happy, I oblige as they gather for the spectacle: Midas and his Golden Girl.

Later, with full stomachs and slipping, slightly tipsy, between crisp, heavy linen sheets, the visitors will ask one another: What more could she possibly want? If they looked a bit closer, would they notice that despite Olivier's insistence on making me the mistress of the house, I still don't have a clue as to what is expected of me? And that Laure is both fascinated by how different I am and envious of the love her father bestows on me? Her mother, Dominique, a French woman whose beauty has been pinched with bitterness, sends letters filled with threats due to the pending divorce and malicious remarks in reference to the chinoise Olivier has taken up with.

But they do not see any of this, because in the face of gastronomic pursuits, I appear fearless and without age. I am filled with courage as I take on two ovens, three refrigerators, one neglected caretaker's wife, a few sleepy housekeepers who turn about like broken clockwork, and a soon-to-be-official stepdaughter who loves me instinctively but hasn't quite figured out why I am sometimes distant, melancholy.

As always, at some point toward the end of the meal, Olivier will propose a toast, pleased that I can make a daube or soupe d'épeautre like the best of the locals.

Laure will lean into me, her small ear pressed just at the level of my stomach, and she'll whisper to me that it's grumbling, that I must still be hungry. Then her giggle will turn into a deep, rich laughter, like a drunken sailor's. This always makes me smile. Olivier, who's always searching for a sign, will see this and think that I am almost happy. And sometimes I think so, too, believe that I have buried my constant need for departure. I always remind him, though, that this is really not my home, that I am just a small part that completes his world and not the whole of it. Nonsense, he declares.

After years spent expanding his company while ignoring the yearnings of the heart, Olivier tells his friends and family that meeting me has proven that love—despite its elusive market value—is also an enterprise worth investing in. And sometimes I believe him, because being loved by him makes me feel whole, makes me forget sometimes that life was not always like this.

With Olivier, I am the least lonely, and I love the family he has tried to give me, love this country that will never be mine but whose language and markets and produce, flavors and secret recipes, I have come to know and desire as well as any native.

Later, when I tuck the children into bed, Laure, cranky and still smelling of suntan lotion, complains of a bellyache. She holds up her tiny hand to mine, marveling at how close they are in size. *Tu t'es coupée*. You cut yourself, she remarks. And then she shows me her green fingertips, stained from shelling the spring peas, before she and Lulu giggle themselves into a half sleep.

Sometimes, late at night, Laure asks to hear the story about how I met her father, in a cold country, how he rescued me from winter and brought me to be her American *belle-mère*. Then she hugs me with all the love of a ten-year-old stepchild, as she has been doing ever since we met.

Before I turn out the lights, she makes me promise to take her and Lulu along wherever it is I may be going tomorrow. *Mais il faut revenir avant qu'il fasse nuit*. She wants to be back before nightfall. She has been having nightmares lately that she is lost in a forest, and just before dark her father comes to save her. *Mais parfois, j'ai peur. Je ne sais pas quand il reviendra*. Sometimes she's afraid; she never knows when he'll return. *Et toi? And you?* she asks. I hug her one last time, amazed and surprised at how a little human being can already sense so much.

I wait a few minutes more until I hear Laure's breathing slow down, until she finally lets go of my fingers. If I move too quickly, though, she grasps my hand again. *Tu te rappelles la première fois où l'on s'est rencontrés?* Do you remember when we first met? she mumbles. Yes, I nod.

IT WAS SUMMER 1993; she would soon turn eight. Olivier and I picked her up at her mother's in Forcalquier, the nearby village, just about a kilometer from the house here in Pierrerue. I was still expecting boxes to arrive from Stockholm, where I had been living when Olivier and I first met. While waiting for Dominique to move the rest of her stuff from the house, Olivier had rented a huge apartment in Aix-en-Provence for us, but we spent most of the time in the Pierrerue house anyway. He and Dominique had been separated almost a year when we met. She lived part-time with Laure in Forcalquier and the rest of the time in an apartment in Paris. Olivier was paying for both and more, all because this was what Dominique demanded, knowing he would do nothing to jeopardize custody of his daughter.

When Laure and I met, she greeted me with the customary kiss on both cheeks. I remember thinking how much more radiant she was than in the photos Olivier had shown me. A Venetian blonde with violet blue eyes, resembling, she claimed rather proudly, neither her mother nor her father. She ran her tiny hand along my smooth skin before turning to her father to say that she wished her limbs were brown and freckleless like mine.

"My name ees Laure, what ees your name?"

I told her slowly in English, but then she responded in French that she was learning my language in her school this year. Muscular and animated, breathless with questions, she seemed to understand I was the new woman in her father's life. She had never met anyone named Keem. She wanted to know how old I was, where I was from, but twenty-three and New Orleans meant nothing to her.

"Je te montre le jardin?" When we got to the house, she took my hand and showed me through the gardens and the fruit orchard. "Voilà mes arbres." These are my trees. She stood firmly on the ground. Like her father, she knows and loves where she is from. "Cerises. Figues. Mirabelles." She waited, like a patient schoolteacher, for me to repeat after her as she pointed to the cherries, figs, and tiny yellow plums. "Et des pêches de vigne."

Together we stooped to pick up fallen wild peaches. Blood peaches. It was the first time I had ever seen a wild peach. I held one up to the light, broke it in two to study the scarlet veins running through the flesh.

"Do you sleep with Papa?" Laure asked, picking distractedly at a scab above her knee. Her question seemed so natural, so French, but I was still torn between nervous laughter and scolding.

"Yes," I answered firmly, biting into my first pêche sauvage ever. I had never tasted anything so delicious and forbidden. I almost wanted to cry, not from joy, but from some distant awareness that we would pay dearly one day for such sweetness.

I kiss Laure's ear good night and wish her sweet dreams, and she whispers it back to me. Sweet dreams. It is one of her favorite phrases she has learned in English.

As I walk back downstairs to the remnants of the dinner party, I think of what I will teach her tomorrow and the next day, because soon, in a month, two, a year from now, I may be on a high-speed train back to Paris. On the TGV, men will look at me and see a foreign woman in an expensive dress and sandals, carrying a soft leather bag, and one of them may ask me to spend a moment telling him something it looks as though I should know.

Staring out the train window, though, I'll think of all the things I have yet to learn, and I might catch a fractured glimpse of this same woman and see her for who she really is: a lonesome voyager, with uneven tan lines, knife cuts on her hands, and a heart speeding fast toward the season of fall.

Wild Peaches Poached in Lillet Blanc and Lemon Verbena

We picked pêches de vigne* direct from our trees in Provence. If you don't have access to wild peaches, use ripe yet slightly firm and blemishfree white or yellow peaches. Substitute aromatic Pineau des Charentes Blanc, Monbazillac, or your favorite white wine for the Lillet Blanc. I've experimented cooking these in red wine, and the peaches, although delicious, are not as pretty.

6 medium-size ripe wild peaches*
1 (750-ml) bottle Lillet Blanc
1/3 cup sugar
2 to 3 tablespoons honey
1 (3-inch) piece orange rind
Squeeze of fresh orange juice (from 1 quarter)
4 to 5 fresh lemon verbena sprigs, plus leaves for garnish

Cut an X in blossom end of each peach. Plunge in boiling water, about 30 seconds. Remove and peel peaches. Place peeled peaches in a large, wide, heavy-bottomed pot. Pour Lillet Blanc over. Add sugar, honey, orange rind, and juice. Gently crush lemon verbena leaves with hands to release fragrance and add sprigs to pot. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium, and poach, occasionally turning peaches gently for even cooking, 20 to 30 minutes (depending on ripeness) or until peaches are tender when pierced gently with tip of knife. Carefully remove peaches and place in a large serving bowl. Turn heat to high and cook poaching liquid 6 to 8 minutes or until thick and syrupy. Pour over peaches. Let cool and chill in refrigerator at least 4 hours or overnight. Garnish with more lemon verbena leaves. This is also delicious with a swirl of crème fraîche or soft vanilla ice cream and grated Amaretti di Saronno cookies. Serves 6.

Oysters: A Love Story

[nytimes.com/2017/08/17/magazine/oysters-a-love-story.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/magazine/oysters-a-love-story.html)

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I met a man from Long Island — at a bar, by chance, a year after I moved to New York — and right away I liked him. We walked from the bar to a 24-hour diner in the East Village and got grilled cheese sandwiches and French fries and drank bad room-temperature coffee and talked for hours, until a stranger came over and asked if we would like him to officiate our wedding, right there, in the church of Veselka, at this sticky table by the bathroom.

By then it was light outside. I'd known the man for nine hours, and I was powered by an engine of pure enthusiasm. I said sure, why not, yes. Our waitress rolled her eyes but agreed to be the witness as we smeared an unofficial document with ketchup. Not long after, I learned that the man I'd diner-married had worked for many years opening clams and oysters in bars, and it had left him with a calm, cleareyed appreciation. What I mean is, he didn't get worked up when he talked about oysters, not like some people I knew. And he didn't insist that I try one particular variety, grown off one remote island, with nothing but a squirt of lemon, of course, because anything more would be disrespectful to the oyster.

I liked oysters just fine, but not that much. When I ate them raw, by the dozen, they were occasionally delicious — fat and intact and salty, slipping out of pristine shells. Just as often they were nothing special. Like mouthfuls of bland, brackish jelly, or the sweat off coins from deep pockets, or the fermented milk of a mythical sea creature. Now and then, at a bar with a careless shucker, I got one that had been pried open with a dirty knife. It would be flipped out of shape, hiding grit or sharp, calcified fragments that cut at my tongue. It didn't seem worth the hassle.

But there was something about the way he liked oysters — keenly and quietly, without fetish or hyperbole — that made me reconsider. We carried about 100, along with a jar of chopped shallots in vinegar, to my friend's apartment one New Year's Eve, in part because I wanted to get good at opening them; I could manage only one or two in the time he opened six. Later on, we ate them smoked, on crackers, and hot, in pan roasts and sandwiches, and when we visited friends in New Orleans, roasted in garlic butter, freckled with pulverized anchovies and cayenne pepper. Then we walked down the street with grease stains on our clothes, toward music.

When my parents came to visit the apartment we'd shared for three years, I blitzed butter in a food processor with hot sauce, lemon zest and garlic, until the streaks disappeared and the mixture was a pale peachy pink. Outside, the man sat at the table and talked and opened oysters with them while I lit the charcoal for my tiny travel-size grill. I dropped lumps of cold butter into each shell, crowding them on a piece of crinkled foil, so they didn't tip over. I could hear voices behind me, gossiping about family, gasping at rude things, bursting into what I recognized as a mix of both nervous and real laughter.

It took a few minutes for the butter to start bubbling, to make a tangy, fatty sauce with the oyster liquor, and for the meat to heat through. Then we ate in rounds, with grilled bread to clean out the grooves in the shells, and a big, simple salad of romaine and sliced radishes, putting a dozen or so half shells on the grill every time we ran out.

What my mother wanted to know, after we'd emptied a bottle of wine, was if he and I ever talked about getting married. Not that she minded us living together, no, it wasn't that, and not that it mattered these days, not at all. She wasn't old-fashioned, she insisted, but it would be so nice to know more about my long-term plans. I told her the truth, that I didn't have any long-term plans, but that the oysters on the grill couldn't wait — oysters were like that. I had to go check on them right this second.

Honoring Service with a Free Steak at Sizzler on Veterans Day

Eater.com/2018/11/12/18077552/veterans-day-sizzler-vietnam-war-free-lunch

Erin Clare Brown

‘Can We Honor Your Service with a Steak, a Malibu Chicken, or the Jumbo Crispy Shrimp?’

Over a free Veterans Day lunch at Sizzler, a father and daughter come to terms with the residual trauma of his tours of duty in Vietnam

by [Erin Clare Brown](#) Nov 12, 2018, 10:08am EST

Illustration by [Natalie Nelson](#)

It’s November 11 and I’m standing in front of the menu board at Sizzler with my dad, debating whether to add a mango lemonade to my steak lunch. The woman in front of us is haggling with the hostess taking her order, and she’s just emptied a pocketful of change onto the counter. They’re adding and subtracting toppings and side dishes, trying to get it all to add up. She doesn’t quite have enough for the steak and baked potato, but if she goes for the salad bar she can get a drink.

The hostess is still performing salad bar calculus when my dad reaches over to hand the customer some cash. She looks startled and says, “Thank you.” It’s not the Thank You he came here for, but he’ll take it. She hurries off to a booth, and we step up to the counter. “I understand you have a Veterans Day special?” my father asks the hostess. She smiles broadly.

Every November 11, Sizzler is “proud to honor our veterans” with a free steak lunch. Just flash your VA card, and that 6-ounce tri-tip (or Malibu Chicken, or Jumbo Crispy Shrimp) is yours. They’re not alone: [Dozens of chains](#), from big-hitters like Applebee’s and Hooters to smaller operations like the Kolache Factory have holiday specials for veterans and active-duty military. Most are off-menu options or smaller portions of classic dishes. All are designed to get customers in the door.

My father — who enlisted in the Army in November 1967 and flew helicopters in two tours of duty in the Vietnam War in ’69 and ’70 — is not exactly an all-American, all-you-can-eat salad bar kind of guy. He has a regular seat at Salt Lake City’s best sushi bar, where he’s eaten lunch at least twice a week for years. When he sits down, he doesn’t even have to order; by the time he settles in and asks the chef how his kids are, there’s a pile of sashimi in front of him.

And yet, when he heard on local talk radio that Sizzler was offering vets a free steak lunch, he couldn't resist. I didn't quite understand the draw — we hadn't been to Sizzler in over a decade — but I could tell he wanted some company. Plus, I wanted to see if they still had baby corn at the salad bar, so I went along.

The first Sizzler opened in 1958 with the American dream that anyone should be able to have a steak dinner at a price they could afford. The model was proto-fast casual: Though you paid at the counter, your meal was delivered on a heated plate, rather than a plastic tray, by a waiter in a shirt and tie. The low, warm lighting and tufted booths created an atmosphere that was somewhere between clubhouse and holiday table. By 1995 the chain had grown to 900 franchises across the country.

While affordable steaks were at the heart of Sizzler's origin story, its unlimited salad bar was defining, a place of free expression, where you could make yourself a meatball taco or splash cream of chicken soup on your Hawaiian haystack without reproach or shame. Dozens of novelty toppings, from crispy noodles to bacon bits and, of course, the mysteriously briny baby corn I loved as a child, beckoned from their stainless steel bins. Sizzler was one of the first restaurants I remember going to with my family — probably because the salad bar let my parents assemble an incongruous combination of foods that I, their pickiest eater, would willingly consume.

But in the years since my formative salad bar days, competitors like Applebee's and Olive Garden entered the market with fresher menus and updated interiors. Sizzler was knocked off its throne as king of casual dining, and by the time we made it in for Veterans Day, most of the locations in Salt Lake — and around the country — had shuttered.

The hostess beamed as she asked, "Can we honor your service with a steak, a Malibu Chicken, or the Jumbo Crispy Shrimp?" But the questions didn't stop there: *Baked potato, french fries, or rice? Can we make it a combo with some shrimp or lobster? How about a strawberry lemonade? Do you want to try the salad bar, too?* By the time she had finished upselling, my empathy for the previous customer's struggle had grown as rapidly as the bill. Our free meal rung up for just under \$40.

My dad rarely talks about the war, but when he does, it's over lunch. Snippets of his story bubble up over burritos or barbecue, and each time I scribble notes to myself as soon as I get home, keeping track of the little details.

He grew up in an unhappy, working-class family in Salt Lake City. When his father left, his mother waited tables to pay the bills. The summer after high school, he hitchhiked to California to make a life for himself.

By 1967, he was living in San Francisco, working as a morning-show DJ at KFRC and studying aeronautics at a junior college when he decided to enlist. The anti-war protests around the Bay Area infuriated him. He saw the kids at Berkeley as nothing more than punks, hiding behind their privilege and education deferments, unwilling to stick their necks out for anything. Meanwhile, thousands of young men who didn't want to serve, but who couldn't get deferments, were being drafted. He felt for them. So, with his 21-year-old sense of invincibility, my dad walked into a recruitment office and told them he knew how to fly a plane. "Son, we'll make you a helicopter pilot," the recruiter said. Three months later he was shipped off to basic training, and a year later he landed in Chu Lai.

In his first tour of duty he flew transport missions, running supplies and troops into battle and evacuating the wounded. In his second tour, he flew Cobras — attack helicopters loaded with machine guns, grenades, and rockets designed to cut through the brush and destroy anything underneath. Unlike the jets that were running bombing and napalm campaigns, Cobras flew low enough to see what — and who — they were leveling.

One day, halfway through his second tour, my father caught a bullet. His squadron was escorting troop-transport helicopters onto a battlefield when a round came through the left side of his Cobra, and into his helmet. The bullet tore up the front of his face, fracturing his skull and knocking him unconscious. His co-pilot managed to evacuate him to a field hospital before he was flown to Japan to recover. During those months he spent convalescing in Japan, my dad picked up his sushi habit.

It took years for the gravity of Vietnam to fully hit my father. His trauma ran deeper than his head wound, but he didn't know what to make of it. Watching *The Deer Hunter* unsettled him. Before he enlisted, he had viewed war through the Vaseline-slicked lens of movies and TV shows that lionized World War II. Vietnam was nothing like that. The U.S. troops weren't there to hold ground or liberate anyone, they were there to annihilate. Even now, Americans can't agree on what exactly happened in Vietnam, but everyone agrees it was grisly. Almost every conversation my father and I would have about the war would weave back and forth between pride and introspection, conviction and bravado and regret.

Before our Veterans Day lunch, the last time I'd eaten at Sizzler was in December 2004. I was home in Salt Lake after my third semester at Wellesley College, and I had to get out of the house after yet another argument with my dad about the Iraq War. President George W. Bush had just been re-elected, and, despite his "Mission Accomplished" speech on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, the United States was still sustaining some of the highest rates of military casualties the nation would see in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

I despised the war. My father defended it. We would get into shouting matches. He wanted my respect, my diffidence, and I wanted his — but it was a zero-sum game for us. I was cold and unkind, reaching for topics I knew he didn't follow: *If we actually cared about taking*

down dictators, why don't we do something about Charles Taylor and Liberia? Do you even know who Charles Taylor is? He would defend patriotism and protecting our country. I would snidely point out that it wasn't Iraq who attacked us on 9/11.

That night, I stormed out of the house and called a friend to blow off steam. He told me to meet him at Sizzler: He wanted to test the boundaries of the term "unlimited" at their salad bar.

By the time I slid into the vinyl booth across from him, he was on his seventh plate and beginning to slow down. He'd made a fatal error: too many slices of cheese toast too early in the meal, and he wasn't sure if he could get to 10 plates. As he willed his way to double-digits and I picked through my own monstrosity — a pile of baby corn, corn niblets, pineapple, and mozzarella, with no dressing — the conversation moved from Iraq to Vietnam, and I confessed to sometimes feeling like an inadvertent war hawk at Wellesley.

A few days after the election, when emotions were high and irrational fears amplified, a debate began in the dining hall about whether Bush would reinstate the draft. I was shocked to learn that almost all of my friends' fathers had taken active measures to avoid being drafted into Vietnam — paying off doctors to claim they had flat feet, studying abroad in Canada for several years, starting PhDs they had no intention to finish.

When I mentioned that my dad had enlisted, the conversation ground to a halt. A friend asked, "You mean he *elected* to serve in a futile war that targeted civilians?" A pang of shame shot through me, but it was quickly followed by a wave of the same bitterness my dad felt watching the Berkeley protests. I knew Vietnam had been a dark and brutal catastrophe, not just from textbooks or a Ken Burns documentary, but from living with a man who had survived it, hearing his stories, and watching him work through what had happened there. How could my classmates know? While my father was bleeding on a stretcher, somewhere in the jungle, their fathers were lounging on the quad at Harvard or Yale.

Suddenly, there I was, defending my father's service in a war even he felt ambivalent about.

Our Veterans Day steaks arrived, somehow simultaneously overcooked and cold. As I sawed off bites and dragged them through a puddle of A1, I realized that going to Sizzler that afternoon wasn't really about the scrawny free steak. It was an increasingly rare moment when my dad could hand his VA card to someone and they would say, without question or hesitation: "Thank you for your service!" It felt good, even if that gratitude came in the same breath as, "Would you like to upgrade your fountain drink to one of our specialty lemonades for only \$3.79?"

I don't think I've ever told my dad, "Thank you for your service." It seemed weird. The outcome of Vietnam hadn't altered the course of my life or the freedoms I enjoy. But his service shaped him, and in turn, he shaped me. We are so alike, my dad and I: impetuous,

headstrong, full of piss and vinegar, but also romantics, poets, storytellers. I should have said it then, but I'll say it now, instead. Thank you, Dad, for your service. Next time, the steaks are on me.

E

Excerpt from [The Cooking Gene](#), by Michael Twitty

The Old South is a place where people use food to tell themselves who they are, to tell others who they are and to tell stories about where they've been. The Old South is a place of groaning tables across the tracks from want. It's a place where arguments over how barbecue is prepared or chicken is served or whether sugar is used to sweeten cornbread can function as culinary shibboleths. It is a place in the mind where we dare not talk about which came first, the African cook or the European mistress, the Native American woman or the white woodsman. We just know that somehow the table aches from the weight of so much.....that we prop it up with our knees and excuses to keep it from falling.

The Old South is where people are far more likely to be related to one another than not. It is where everybody has a Cherokee, a Creek, a Chickasaw, a Seminole or a Choctaw lurking in their maternal bloodlines but nobody knows where the broad noses or big asses come from. It is a place where dark gums and curly hair get chalked up to lost Turks and meandering mystics but Nigeria and Gambia are long forgotten, unlike everything else that is perpetually and unremittingly remembered. Proud bloodlines of Normandy and Westphalia and County Armagh and Kent endure here, and like it or not, it is often in the bodies who bear no resemblance to those in whom those genes first arrived, bodies like mine.

The Old South is where I had to return.

In 2011, I remembered that I had started to forget where I came from. I became aware of my own apathy and amnesia. I had a responsibility to study the generations before me and use that to move forward. So I worked with my then partner to craft a crowdfunding campaign called "The Southern Discomfort Tour." My goal was for us to travel the South looking for sites of cultural and culinary memory while researching my family history and seeing the food culture of the region as it stood in the early 21st century.

There are giant peaches on top of towers and statues of boll weevils, giant mammies and country stores that sell pig parts a plenty and have coolers that can keep a deer carcass or a mess of largemouth bass cold for three days. Nothing can prepare you for the sea of green cane or rice or tobacco or the way cotton looks when it's young and bushy and putting out mallow-like blossoms. The road signs are clear—three crosses on a hill, "Get Right with God," signs for cans of field peas and succotash, buffet style halls and meat and threes off the highway and nondescript adult entertainment centers. Old plantations lend their name to actual historical sites on the brown landmark signs as

well as apartment complexes and resorts and battlefields are everywhere. In some town centers the auction blocks are remembered. From the town I live in in Maryland to Oxford, Mississippi the Confederate soldier stands guard near the old courthouse, and people will point out to you where the hanging tree stood—or stands.

There is a lot of beautiful and a lot of ugly mashed together. Pecan trees are my favorite thing and they stand guard over my Grandfather's home in South Carolina. Nothing matches light filtering through Spanish moss in the latest part of the day. The elders talked about how beautiful this place was, and if you are lucky, you will learn why they left it and what that first taste of Northern cold was like and the realization some things were no better no matter where you lived. In the words of my maternal grandmother, "The day I learned up North wasn't streets paved with gold and that white people there could be just as bad was the way I learned that sometimes the grass is greener because there's more shit to deal with." But she missed the crepe myrtles and my grandfather missed the taste of ripe cane nabbed from a neighbor's yard; I had come to see it all for myself.

The Old South was introduced to me in movies and magazines as the bizarre place we Black Americans owed our identity. Untanned ageless white ladies in pastel crinolines...Carolina blue, pale jessamine yellow, dogwood blossom pink, mint julep Green...bedazzled with stars and bars and frills a plenty. Parasols and fat Black crones called mammies and crusting, crooning, near senile ex-bucks fondly called Uncles. Everybody and everything was satisfactual, and in their right place. White men and white columns and bow ties on white suits, the kind you'd never dream of getting chicken gravy or whip blood on. Blemish-less and benign, a patriarchy overlooking a peaceable racial hierarchy ordained by a Creator with a permanent beef with Cain and Ham and then Joshua butted in:

"Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God." (9:23)

"Hewers of wood and drawers of water." The Oprah Winfrey Show, 1987. Oprah goes to Forsyth, Georgia where no Black person had "been allowed to live" in 75 years. She had been on air five months. Confederate battle flags were on display, a people un-reconstructed came out in force to show America's future richest Black person where she stood. What seemed like the entire town showed up to justify their whiteopia.

No racial description whatsoever appears in the Scripture for Cain or Canaan, son of Ham and the verse from the Book of Joshua has nothing to do with anyone living in America, and yet a man had his Bible open, ready in 1987 to justify a permanent and

seemingly ancient division that did not exist in the British mind before the late 16th to mid-17th centuries. My Alabama born and raised Grandmother, a refugee of Bombing-ham, is folding clothes, under her breath is a constant stream of “God damn them.” Her breath slowed to a seethe and her eyes became fixed into what seemed like a cut from which she would never return. I was 10 and I was barely taught that in school that my own area---the Washington metropollex---slavery and racism had defined the economy, politics and social order; seeing this made me dread my own country, and presumably, my own ancestral homeland—the Old South.

“The lazy, laughing South/with blood on its mouth/...And I am who Black, would love her,” wrote Langston Hughes, a refugee of Joplin, Missouri, the poet laureate of Black America. The poems I was bid to remember frequently referenced a place that was caught up in a weird braid of nostalgia, lament, romance, horror and fear. Forsyth, Georgia, is no longer the same place it was nearly 30 years ago and Black people have long since moved in. And yet across the region, flashpoints continue, the shootings, the draggings, the overreach of police authority, the obstruction of the vote, inequalities and inequities and silent and sturdy boundaries between white and Black. For some, “we” are the South, but “they” are Dixie, and yet we and they all know the old hanging trees and the strange fruit they once bore.

I dare to believe all Southerners are a family. We are not merely Native, European and African. We are Middle Eastern and South Asian and East Asian and Latin American, now. We are a dysfunctional family, but we are a family. We are unwitting inheritors of a story with many sins that bears the fruit of the possibility of ten times the redemption. One way is through reconnection with the culinary culture of the enslaved, our common ancestors, and restoring their names on the roots of the Southern tree and the table those roots support.

The Old South is where I cook. The Old South is a place where food tells me where I am. The Old South is a place where food tells me who I am. The Old South is where food tells me where we have been. The Old South is where the story of our food might just tell America where it's going.

The Old South/with soul food in its mouth/and I who am African American/must know her.

Crying in H Mart

 [newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/crying-in-h-mart](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/crying-in-h-mart)

Michelle Zauner

Ever since my mom died, I cry in H Mart. For those of you who don't know, H Mart is a supermarket chain that specializes in Asian food. The "H" stands for *han ah reum*, a Korean phrase that roughly translates to "one arm full of groceries." H Mart is where parachute kids go to get the exact brand of instant noodles that reminds them of home. It's where Korean families buy rice cakes to make *tteokguk*, a beef soup that brings in the new year. It's the only place where you can find a giant vat of peeled garlic, because it's the only place that truly understands how much garlic you'll need for the kind of food your people eat. H Mart is freedom from the single-aisle "ethnic" section in regular grocery stores. They don't prop Goya beans next to bottles of sriracha here. Instead, you'll likely find me crying by the *banchan* refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom's soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup. Or in the freezer section, holding a stack of dumpling skins, thinking of all the hours that Mom and I spent at the kitchen table folding minced pork and chives into the thin dough. Sobbing near the dry goods, asking myself, "Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?"

When I was growing up, with a Caucasian father and a Korean mother, my mom was my access point for our Korean heritage. While she never actually taught me how to cook (Korean people tend to disavow measurements and supply only cryptic instructions along the lines of "add sesame oil until it tastes like Mom's"), she did raise me with a distinctly Korean appetite. This meant an over-the-top appreciation of good food and emotional eating. We were particular about everything: kimchi had to be perfectly sour, *samgyupsal* perfectly crisped; hot food had to be served piping hot or it might as well be inedible. The concept of prepping meals for the week was a ludicrous affront to our life style. We chased our cravings daily. If we wanted the same kimchi stew for three weeks straight, we relished it until a new craving emerged. We ate in accordance with the seasons and holidays. On my birthday, she'd make seaweed soup: a traditional dish for celebrating one's mother that is also what women typically eat after giving birth. When spring arrived and the weather turned, we'd bring our camp stove outdoors and fry up strips of fresh pork belly on the deck. In many ways, food was how my mother expressed her love. No matter how critical or cruel she seemed—constantly pushing me to be what she felt was the best version of myself—I could always feel her affection radiating from the lunches she packed and the meals she prepared for me just the way I liked them.

I can hardly speak Korean, but in H Mart I feel like I'm fluent. I fondle the produce and say the words aloud—*chamoe* melon, *danmuji*. I fill my shopping cart with every snack that has glossy packaging decorated with a familiar cartoon. I think about the time Mom showed me how to fold the little plastic card that came inside bags of Jolly Pong, how to use it as a

spoon to shovel caramel puff rice into my mouth, and how it inevitably fell down my shirt and spread all over the car. I remember the snacks Mom told me she ate when she was a kid and how I tried to imagine her at my age. I wanted to like all the things she did, to embody her completely.

My grief comes in waves and is usually triggered by something arbitrary. I can tell you with a straight face what it was like watching my mom's hair fall out in the bathtub, or about the five weeks I spent sleeping in hospitals, but catch me at H Mart when some kid runs up double-fisting plastic sleeves of *ppeong-twigi* and I'll just lose it. Those little rice-cake Frisbees were my childhood: a happier time, when Mom was there and we'd crunch away on the Styrofoam-like disks after school. Eating them was like splitting a packing peanut that dissolved like sugar on your tongue.

I'll cry when I see a Korean grandmother eating seafood noodles in the food court, discarding shrimp heads and mussel shells onto the lid of her daughter's tin rice bowl. Her gray hair frizzy, cheekbones protruding like the tops of two peaches, tattooed eyebrows rusting as the ink fades out. I'll wonder what my Mom would have looked like in her seventies—if she would have the same perm that every Korean grandma gets as though it were a part of our race's evolution. I'll imagine our arms linked, her tiny frame leaning against mine as we take the escalator up to the food court. The two of us in all black, "New York style," she'd say, her image of New York still rooted in the era of "Breakfast at Tiffany's." She would carry the quilted-leather Chanel purse that she'd wanted her whole life, instead of the fake ones that she bought on the back streets of Itaewon. Her hands and face would be slightly sticky from QVC anti-aging creams. She'd wear some strange, ultra-high-top sneaker wedges that I'd disagree with. "Michelle, in Korea, every celebrity wears this one." She'd pluck the lint off my coat and pick on me—how my shoulders slumped, how I needed new shoes, how I should really start using that argan-oil treatment she bought me—but we'd be together.

If I'm being honest, there's a lot of anger. I'm angry at this old Korean woman I don't know, that she gets to live and my mother does not, like somehow this stranger's survival is at all related to my loss. Why is she here slurping up spicy *jjamppong* noodles and my mom isn't? Other people must feel this way. Life is unfair, and sometimes it helps to irrationally blame someone for it.

Sometimes my grief feels as though I've been left alone in a room with no doors. Every time I remember that my mother is dead, it feels like I'm colliding into a wall that won't give. There's no escape, just a hard wall that I keep ramming into over and over, a reminder of the immutable reality that I will never see her again.

H Marts are usually situated far from a city's center. When I lived in Brooklyn, it was an hour-long drive in traffic to Flushing. In Philly, it's about the same to Upper Darby or Elkins Park. H Marts often serve as the center of larger complexes of Asian storefronts, and are surrounded by Asian restaurants that are always better than the ones found closer to town. We're talking

Korean restaurants that pack the table so full of *banchan* side dishes that you're forced to play a never-ending game of horizontal Jenga with twenty-plus plates of tiny anchovies, stuffed cucumbers, and pickled everything. This isn't like the sad Asian-fusion joint by your work, where they serve bell peppers in their bibimbap and give you the stink eye when you ask for another round of wilted bean sprouts; this is the real deal.

You'll know that you're headed the right way because there will be signs to mark your path. As you go farther into your pilgrimage, the lettering on the awnings slowly begins to turn into symbols that you may or may not be able to read. This is when my elementary-grade Korean skills are put to the test—how fast can I sound out the vowels while in traffic? I spent more than ten years going to *hangul hakkyo* every Friday, and this is all I have to show for it: I can read the signs for churches in different Asian texts, for an optometrist's office, a bank. A couple more blocks in, and we're in the heart of it. Suddenly, it's like another country. Everyone is Asian, a swarm of different dialects crisscross like invisible telephone wires, the only English words are "HOT POT" and "LIQUORS," and they're all buried beneath a handful of different characters, with an anime tiger or hot dog dancing next to them.

Inside an H Mart complex, there will be some kind of food court, an appliance shop, and a pharmacy. Usually, there's a beauty counter where you can buy Korean makeup and skin-care products with snail mucin or caviar oil, or a face mask that proudly and vaguely advertises "PLACENTA." (Whose placenta? Who knows?) There will usually be a pseudo-French bakery with weak coffee, bubble tea, and an array of glowing pastries that always look much better than they taste.

Lately, my local H Mart is in Cheltenham, a town northeast of Philadelphia. My routine is to drive in for lunch on the weekends, stock up on groceries for the week, and cook something for dinner with whatever fresh bounty inspired me. The H Mart in Cheltenham has two stories; the grocery is on the first floor and the food court is above it. Upstairs, there is an array of stalls for different kinds of food. One is dedicated to sushi, one is strictly Chinese, and another is for traditional Korean *jjigaes*, bubbling soups served in traditional stone pots called *dolsots*, which act as mini cauldrons to insure that your soup is still bubbling a good ten minutes past arrival. There's a stall for Korean street food, which serves up Korean ramen (which basically just means Shin Cup Noodles with an egg cracked in them); giant steamed dumplings full of pork and glass noodles, housed in a thick, cake-like dough; and *tteokbokki*, chewy, bite-sized cylindrical rice cakes boiled in a stock with fishcakes, red pepper, and *gochujang*, a sweet-and-spicy paste that's one of the three mother sauces used in pretty much all Korean dishes. Last, there's my personal favorite: Korean-Chinese fusion, which serves *tangsuyuk*—a glossy, sweet-and-sour orange pork—seafood noodle soup, fried rice, and *jajangmyeon*.

The food court is the perfect place to people-watch while sucking down salty, fatty, black-bean noodles. I think about my family who lived in Korea, before most of them died, and how Korean-Chinese food was always the first thing we'd eat when my mom and I arrived in

Seoul after a fourteen-hour flight from America. Twenty minutes after my aunt would phone in our order, the apartment ringer would buzz “Für Elise” in *MIDI*, and up would come a helmeted man, fresh off his motorcycle, with a giant steel box. He’d slide open the metal door and deliver heaping bowls of noodles and deep-fried battered pork with its rich sauce on the side. The Saran wrap on top would be concave and sweating. We’d peel it off and dribble black, chunky goodness all over the noodles and pour the shiny, sticky, translucent orange sauce over the pork. We’d sit cross-legged on the cool marble floor, slurping and reaching over one another. My aunts and mom and grandmother would jabber on in Korean, and I would eat and listen, unable to comprehend, bothering my mom every so often to translate.

I wonder how many people at H Mart miss their families. How many are thinking of them as they bring their trays back from the different stalls. Whether they’re eating to feel connected, to celebrate these people through food. Which ones weren’t able to fly back home this year, or for the past ten years? Which ones are like me, missing the people who are gone from their lives forever?

At one table is a group of young Chinese students, alone without family at schools in America. They have banded together to take the bus forty-five minutes outside the city, into the suburbs of a foreign country, for soup dumplings. At another table, there are three generations of Korean women eating three types of stews: daughter, mom, and grandmother dipping their spoons into each other’s *dolsots*, reaching over one another’s trays, arms in one another’s faces, pinching at their different *banchan* with chopsticks. None of them pay any notice or give second thought to the concept of personal space.

There is a young white man and his family. They giggle together as they butcher the pronunciation of the menu. The son explains to his parents the different dishes they’ve ordered. Maybe he was stationed in Seoul for military service or taught English abroad. Maybe he’s the only one in his family with a passport. Maybe this will be the moment his family decides it’s time to travel and discover these things themselves.

There is an Asian guy blowing his girlfriend’s mind, introducing her to a whole new world of flavors and textures. He shows her how to eat *mul naengmyeon*, a cold noodle soup that tastes better if you add vinegar and hot mustard first. He tells her about how his parents came to this country, how he’d watch his mom make this dish. When she made it, she didn’t add zucchini; she subbed radishes instead. An old man hobbles over to a neighboring table to order the chicken-and-ginseng porridge that he probably eats here every day. Bells go off for people to collect their orders. Women in visors work behind the counters without stopping.

It’s a beautiful, holy place. A cafeteria full of people from all over the world who have been displaced in a foreign country, each with a different history. Where did they come from and how far did they travel? Why are they all here? To find the *galangal* no American

supermarket stocks to make the Indonesian curry that their father loves? To buy the rice cakes to celebrate Jesa and honor the anniversary of their loved one's passing? To satisfy a craving for *tteokbokki* on a rainy day? Were they moved by a memory of some drunken, late-night snack under a *pojangmacha* tent in Incheon?

We don't talk about it. There's never so much as a knowing look. We sit here in silence, eating our lunch. But I know we are all here for the same reason. We're all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves. We look for a taste of it in the food we order and the ingredients we buy. Then we separate. We bring the haul back to our dorm rooms or suburban kitchens, and we re-create a dish that couldn't be made without that journey, because what we're looking for isn't accessible at a Trader Joe's. H Mart is where you can find your people under one odorous roof, where you can have faith that you'll find something you can't find anywhere else.

In the H Mart food court, I find myself again, searching for the first chapter of the story that I want to tell about my mother. I am sitting next to a Korean mother and her son, who have unknowingly taken the table next to ol' waterworks over here. The kid dutifully gets their silverware from the counter and places it on paper napkins for the both of them. He's eating fried rice and his mom has *seolleongtang*, ox-bone soup. He must be in his early twenties, but his mother is still instructing him on how to eat, just like my mom used to. "Dip the onion in the paste." "Don't add too much *gochujang* or it'll be too salty." "Why aren't you eating the mung beans?" Some days, the constant nagging would annoy me. Woman, let me eat in peace! But, most days, I knew it was the ultimate display of a Korean woman's tenderness, and I cherished that love.

The boy's mom places pieces of beef from her spoon onto his spoon. He is quiet and looks tired and doesn't talk to her much. I want to tell him how much I miss my mother. How he should be kind to his mom, remember that life is fragile and she could be gone at any moment. Tell her to go to the doctor and make sure there isn't a small tumor growing inside her.

Within the past five years, I lost both my aunt and mother to cancer. So, when I go to H Mart, I'm not just on the hunt for cuttlefish and three bunches of scallions for a buck; I'm searching for their memory. I'm collecting the evidence that the Korean half of my identity didn't die when they did. In moments like this, H Mart is the bridge that guides me away from the memories that haunt me, of chemo head and skeletal bodies and logging milligrams of hydrocodone. It reminds me of who they were before: beautiful and full of life, wiggling Chang Gu honey-cracker rings on all ten of their fingers, showing me how to suck a Korean grape from its skin and spit out the seeds.

All I Want Are Some Potato Skins

seriouseats.com/comfort-food-diaries-potato-skins

Keith Pandolfi



We are at a bar somewhere near our office north of Times Square, and all I want are some potato skins, but all they have on the menu are mozzarella sticks and chicken wings and nachos, which are terrible if you ask me, at least compared to potato skins. Potato skins have everything you could ever hope for in a bar food—the crunch of the skin, the pull of the cheddar, the stink of the green onion, the chew of the bacon bits. A plate of potato skins and a pint of cold lager is the best pairing American cuisine has to offer. I mean that. I really do.

The bar is one of those fake Irish pubs that are ubiquitous in Midtown Manhattan. Let's call it Magnus O'Malley O'Sullivan's. It's the kind of place that smells of stale beer, cleaning products, and lacquer. It has no history. It has no lore. There are no regulars. The bartender can't pour a Guinness to save his life. In one of the basement bathrooms, a tourist from Indiana is likely throwing up after one too many Long Island Iced Teas. As a Korn song plays from an iPod, we get two orders of wings and two orders of mozzarella sticks. I can't keep my eyes off the plasma TVs.

We gather here once or twice a week to complain about our jobs. We work at a home improvement magazine, where I serve as an associate editor. I dislike my boss immensely, and he dislikes me just the same. It's the middle of the recession, and we keep having layoffs, but for some reason he never fires me. After each purge, we gather at this bar with our fallen ex-colleagues, and at some point one of them inevitably looks at me and says something like, "I can't believe you made it through." As I said, I dislike my boss immensely, and he dislikes me. Everyone knows he does.

I am in my late thirties, and I am anxious all the time. I take pills for it, but they don't work. I'm convinced I am dying of several diseases, because I have been a hypochondriac ever since I was a freshman in college and mistook two salivary glands under my tongue for cancerous tumors, and I didn't go to the doctor because I was terrified he would tell me I wasn't mistaken at all. I stand outside my office each day, chain-smoking cigarettes and worrying about my health. Creditors keep calling me because I'm tens of thousands of dollars in debt; I can't pay the rent on my Brooklyn apartment anymore. My girlfriend moved out. After work, all I want is a cold lager and some potato skins, because I am convinced they will fix everything. No, they won't pay the rent, but they have their own special powers.

Potato skins remind me that I don't need New York. That I'd be perfectly happy back home among the commercial strips and fast-food joints of suburban Cincinnati, where I grew up. I'd be fine hanging out with my old friends each night in the bar at Uno's or Applebee's or Chili's, drinking Michelob Amber Bocks. Those places would all have potato skins, and they would be good. In Uno's case, they would be pizza skins, which are even better.

When the wings and mozzarella sticks arrive at our table, everyone digs into them, saying how good they are, even though they're not good at all. I bite into a mozzarella stick and taste nothing but the marinara sauce in which it's dipped. Mozzarella sticks are bullshit.

A memory: My mother and I are sitting at a booth at the T.G.I Friday's on Beechmont Avenue in Cincinnati. It's 1990, and I'm home from Ohio State for the weekend, and she's taken me to the mall to buy a new clock radio, some oxford shirts, a winter coat, and a pair of Florsheim shoes. After squeezing the shopping bags from Elder-Beerman, Lazarus, and Radio Shack into our booth, we settle in and open our oversize glossy menus, and it's like I've won the lottery. For the past few months in Columbus, I've been surviving on bad pizza and the Wendy's dollar menu. But Mom is paying now. I can order whatever I want. I get six loaded potato skins, a chef's salad with blue cheese dressing, a bacon cheeseburger, and a Sam Adams on the side. I am as comfortable as I will ever be. The hypochondria washes away, and I stop probing those little glands in my mouth with the tip of my tongue. I ask Mom if she wants one of my skins and I am relieved when she says no.

Later that year in Columbus, I find out there's a bar and grill down the street from my house that serves potato skins, and I start going there with my girlfriend as much as I can. I start doing a lot of things that year. I start doing a lot of drugs. I start getting high every day. I start

skipping lectures to go on acid trips instead. This is par for the course for a lot of college students. They survive these things unharmed. But I am already a nervous kid. I don't have the temperament for such mind alterations. My general state of being becomes one of anxiety and detachment, and it never, ever goes away. I develop OCD. I start pressing my palms on the corners of every square table or banister or church pew I find, because I have to. I've lost hold of myself. But the potato skins at that bar; somehow they always seem to tether me to some vague sense of security.

Another memory: When I was a teenager, my father and I made a point of watching *St. Elsewhere* together each Wednesday night. It was after my parents' divorce, and we were living in a rented two-story town house. After years of tumult, things had finally started to settle down, and I was happy just to spend time with him. We had two floral-patterned love seats that used to be part of a formal living room set, but since Mom got full custody of the family room sofa, they now served as our primary seating. There were rips in the arms, and one of the legs had snapped off. We had each claimed one of our own, mine on the right side of the living room, his on the left. Before the show came on at 10 p.m., I would go into the cupboard to fetch a bag of Tato Skins, a concave chip that looked sort of like a tongue and was supposed to taste just like potato skins, and did. Then I would go into the refrigerator to retrieve a tin of Frito-Lay cheddar cheese dip and bring it into the living room, where Dad and I would split the entire bag, watching a medical drama that, in the series finale, was revealed to be little more than a young boy's dream.

I leave the fake Irish pub and walk by a T.G.I Friday's on 46th Street. It's about 10 p.m., and the place is filled with tourists. I stand outside watching throngs of people from Ohio and Michigan and everywhere else but New York pass me by. I admire the fact that sometime, in the next day or two, they'll all pack their bags in their Marriott hotel rooms and fly back to places that are so much more familiar to me than this one is.

There's a woman I have a crush on, and I fumble with my cellphone, scrolling for her number. I want to see if she'll meet me here. I want to call her and say: "Hey, wanna meet me at Fridays for some potato skins?" But then I realize how affected this will sound. She'll think I'm asking her to eat potato skins at Friday's because it's ironic, but it's not ironic at all. It's sacred.

I put my phone back into my pocket and totter toward the subway. This isn't the time for potato skins, I think to myself. But will there ever be a time again? Maybe potato skins are best left alone as a childhood memory. Yes, they are my favorite comfort food, but if I eat them, they'll just remind me how uncomfortable I am. In my city. In my middle age. In my life.

A final memory: I am sitting at a barstool next to my father at a neighborhood pub. It's the early 1980s, and I am around 12 years old. My father is ordering endless rounds of Chivas Regal as I scan the pub's menu, looking for something to eat. At this point, I am unaware that his drinking will undo our family; that there are small salivary glands beneath my tongue; that

the girlfriend I will eat with at that bar and grill in Columbus will cheat on me with the drummer of a local cover band. I am just here. Completely here. There is something on the menu called potato skins, and I've never had them before. I order six of them, and they taste like they were invented just for me. The crunch of the skin. The pull of the cheddar....From that point on, they're all that I want. Even though I never get them anymore. Even though I haven't tasted one in years.