

## Contributors

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# STORY

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## **Daughter Mother Daughter**

### **EGG**

The girl is conceived. Her atmosphere is viscous and close, as intimate as a tongue. As she grows, she eats the egg of her own making, raw and without choice. Her belly streaks fat, her haunches muscle. Her birth is a farmer's breakfast: egg, ham, and bacon, with a wide napkin to sop up the mess.

### **SOY**

Struggling to nurse, the girl's hunger feels prickly as a pear's. She cries a great deal and turns thin. After each feeding, she is sick, half-filled with her mother's milk. The pediatrician suggests a soy-based formula, not cheap. It does the trick. Sucking her new bottles dry, the girl gains weight. Her mom moves the nursing bras to the back of her drawer.

### **HAMBURGER HELPER**

At age four, the girl helps to make dinner. "Be careful," says her mom, planting a stool under her daughter's feet and handing her a spatula. "When hamburger spits, it stings." The hot beef smells like pennies. As her mother boils macaroni and mixes a little envelope of dry orange dust with water, the girl asks, "Why does the red turn brown?" Mom says, matter-of-fact, "The blood cooks up." The girl's eyes grow wide, then wider. What makes the meat bleed? A scraped knee? A cut finger? At dinner, despite her father's explanations about the food chain, the girl refuses to eat a single bite, throwing her fork across the room. The fork carves the air, landing with a clank. Her mom says, "And here I thought you were a big girl," sending her straight to bed with an empty stomach.

### **HOT LUNCH**

His name is Christopher. Watching with a bully's eye, the girl's carrot sticks and crustless cheese sandwiches provoke him as much as her coke-bottle glasses. Every day, Christopher circles her lunch table, making comments about the girl's face or voice or legs, spindly as asparagus. At night before falling asleep, she imagines Christopher as a cow about to be butchered—

how his eyes would roll back while a man with scarred fingers slit his throat. She can almost smell the hot gush of his blood. On hamburger Friday, the circles of meat on other kids' trays are Christopher's carcass, buried in pickle and bun. The girl almost goes through the lunch line to get one, then doesn't.

#### **FRENCH FRIES**

The girl loves French fries, with their warm skins and soft centers, like skinny kids on a beach. To make sure they're crispy and hot, she orders them without salt—then secretly salts them with packets from her pocket. The girl has no idea that the fries are cooked in beef tallow, or that life is often a double-dealing thing.

#### **RED VELVET CAKE**

At twelve, the girl gets her period, her underwear messy as a crime scene. Her mom insists on throwing a Red Party, featuring cherry punch, raspberry chocolates, and a red velvet cake that takes four hours to make. All of her mom's friends show up with a red-wrapped gift, ready to tell a story about getting "The Curse." The women eat and laugh and drink wine the color of raw steak. As she listens, her eyes down, her cheeks raging, the girl knows that she will never, ever forgive this.

#### **SUGAR CEREAL**

In health class, the gym teacher Mrs. Durst shows her students a slide of the Food Pyramid. "Six servings of breads and cereals," she says. "Each and every day. But remember, sugar cereals don't count. They cannot count." Then Mrs. Durst points her finger at the class and says, "Sugar is white death." Most mornings, the girl craves Apple Jacks, willing to risk the grave for their candy-store pinkness. Under the Pyramid's Meat, Poultry, and Fish category are drawings of cartoony chickens and kidney-shaped steaks, but the girl has seen their real colors off her mother's cutting board—their white fat and crimson veins. Her cereal is the color of blushing cheeks. "Apple-cheeks," she likes to say, shaking the box over a bowl.

#### **RAMEN**

The girl's mother is from the Midwest, so she sneaks meat into anything she can: soups, sauces, casseroles, even desserts. "You need protein," she says. "You're stunting your growth." The girl is a teenager and so knows better. She's thumbed through nutrition books on how to make complete proteins with noodles or rice and beans. "Do you know how many people die of E. Coli poisoning each year?" she asks her mom. "Or trichinosis? Well, do you?" Dinner becomes a mother-daughter slaughter. One weekend, the girl buys a garage-sale hotpot and decides to cook in her bedroom,

boiling ramen for two minutes then adding black beans and corn until heated through. That night, ignoring the hard knocks on her door, she eats her dinner slowly, her teenage body wrapped up tight like new corn.

#### **CHINESE CORN**

Her first day at college, the girl goes to the club fair. She's drawn to the Young Democrats, the SCUBA club, and the Feminists United for Social Equality, but then she sees a table for the Vegucated Society. It's the slogans that get her: "No Meat—No Kidding!"; "Eat like you give a damn!"; "Meat is Murder!" She joins, and the girl starts calling herself a vegetarian, a word that feels definitive. With her new friends, she eats a lot of stir-fry; she can't get enough of those tiny ears of Chinese corn. They drink cheap beer and watch lurid documentaries on industrial agriculture. She buys a T-shirt that says, "Vegetarian: Same Life, Only Better," and begins each week tabling in front of the cafeteria, trying to convince her fellow students to vote for Meatless Mondays, the current campaign. The girl tells them, "You know eating meat is like driving a Hummer to the grocery store." Ninety-nine percent of the time, the other students just roll their eyes and get in line, grabbing their hot dogs and hamburgers.

#### **SALT**

The girl is ravenous for love. At the campus community garden where she spends time between classes, there's a boy she likes, all tousle-haired and anti-water-bottle. But when he shows up one morning in a T-shirt that says "Save a Cow / Eat a Vegetarian," the girl thinks twice. Instead, she goes on a date with a fellow Vegucate—a whip-thin boy named Sandro with a Sicilian smile, who refuses to wear leather and whose hair brushes his shoulders like a curtain. When they have sex for the first time, it's painful, like a thing with claws. Afterward, her heart is salt, but she smiles at Sandro anyway.

#### **SLIMFAST**

Pigging out on cruelty-free Cheetos and Snickers bars, the girl gains more than the freshman fifteen. She loathes the pudding jiggle of her thighs, the muffin top puffing over her jeans. She turns to SlimFast, chocolate and chalk—keeping the cans in her backpack, on her nightstand, in her car. Back home for Christmas vacation, she asks her mother to get some at the store, but Mom says, "Are you kidding? That's more sugar than a candy bar." The girl buys some on the sly. Sleek with the promise of thin, she hides the silver cans under her bed, next to the old hotpot. For two years, she doesn't lose a pound—not until she trades her Slim Fast for cup after cup of strong black coffee.

### **CARROT CAKE**

As she's explained to her mother more than once, the girl and her fiancé Daniel don't want a traditional wedding cake. "Look, Mom. Refined sugar is white death," she says. Her mother's look is cool, more felt than seen. "And don't you know the oppressive history of sugar cane farming?" she asks, quoting a favorite professor. Instead of cake, the couple wants no-bake, vegan-friendly date squares. What the three of them finally settle on, though, is a carrot cake, one made with organic carrots and spelt, sweetened with local honey and thickened with Indonesian coconut. The ceremony is perfect, but when Daniel feeds her a bite of cake at the reception, the girl tastes store-bought sweetness. She suspects her mother but says nothing.

### **TURKEY**

Their first Thanksgiving, the newlyweds must eat two meals, one with the girl's family, one with Daniel's grandmother. An old hippie, Grandma Posie makes a meal that's oil to the soul: rice and beans, olives and cheese, a side salad and whole-wheat bread, ending in a tofu pumpkin pie. Her table glows orange and yellow, and the talk spools easy as ribbons. Yet on the drive between this meal and the next, the girl's soul vinegars. She says, "Mom'll make turkey. She won't think it's Thanksgiving without one." Around her parents' table, bowls steam with mashed potatoes and beans. As the family waits for the main dish, talk is tight and clipped. Finally, Mom steps from the kitchen and sets down a platter with a glossy, nut-brown ball ringed by carrots. The girl shakes her head as if she's not hearing right. "Tofurky," says her mother, winking.

### **ITALIAN SUBS**

At her new job copyediting for an eco-friendly magazine, the girl finds many like-minded coworkers. A vegan. A pescatarian. A clean eater. The girl notes that not a single takeout menu in the break room is for a vegetarian or vegan restaurant, although there are at least two such establishments around the corner from her building. It's all Italian subs and meat-lovers' pizza.

### **MUSHY PEAS**

When the girl is in her early thirties, her mom has a sudden stroke. The meat of her mother's heart contracts, and her brain starts to rot. The only food the nurses can get her to eat are peas, mashed with the back of a fork. The girl has never really liked peas, but when she visits the hospital, she squashes them for her mom, their pop and smear surprisingly satisfying, like bursting bubble wrap. The only thing her mother says that's understandable is "Thanks." The girl nods her head and says, "Sure."

### CASSEROLE

When the call comes, the girl thinks, “All that beef,” and then regrets it. For the funeral, she will make a tribute casserole. The girl chooses Pizza in a Bowl, something she’s never made, but it’s a recipe her mother has marked “easy.” Browning the beef, the girl thinks of her mom’s own muscle, tough as anger, red as love. Now her body is spoiling slowly—womb, gut, and brain zipped into the baggy of her own skin. The girl’s arm stirs; her wrist flips. The kitchen smells of death. It’s only now that she cries.

### CANNIBALISM

After the funeral, the girl puts her mom’s ashes in the back of a closet. Then she plants a kitchen garden, tells Daniel it’s time to get pregnant, and starts exercising at night after work. Wrapped in a reflective hoodie and wearing a runner’s head lamp, the girl power walks through her neighborhood, peering into the small rectangles of light from other houses. One man nibbles his nails while watching TV, another woman chops a tomato, popping a cut finger into her mouth. Two children bite at each other, giggling. Household dust is mostly dead skin cells, she knows. All day long, just breathing, the girl consumes her husband as well as herself. Like a baby eating its mother. Constant cannibalism.

### STEAK

Though all the prenatal books say otherwise, the girl gets pregnant on the very first try. Six weeks of mild morning sickness, nibbling crackers before climbing out of bed, and then she feels great. Her hair grows long and dense, her skin turns smooth as yogurt. And she finds she’s happy—as happy as beanstalks in a breeze, peaches on a tree, a potato planted deep in good dirt. Food tastes like an advertisement of itself. At the start of her second trimester, Daniel takes her to a swanky restaurant. The next booth over, a thick-necked man orders a porterhouse. When the server slides it onto the table, glossy and red, the girl vibrates with want. Is this what her own mother felt? Barely listening to Daniel’s talk about epidurals versus underwater births, the girl forks her pasta primavera and thinks about steak. For the next six months, she takes long lunch breaks and steals over to this restaurant, alone. Sitting far from the windows, she works her way through the whole bloody menu: flatiron, flank, hanger, prime, T-bone, broil. As she chews, the baby kicks and flips and gets the hiccups as if it’s laughing. At her 38-week checkup, her gynecologist Dr. Rudd glances at her chart and nods. “No iron deficiency,” he says. “Glad to see you’re being careful about that.” With a sideways smile, the girl nods back.

**KILL FLOOR**

The girl chooses the epidural. After a hard birth as rank as the kill floor of an animal processing plant, the girl—now a mom—returns to vegetarianism. She considers telling Daniel about all the steak, then doesn't.

**SALAMI**

Her daughter nurses with gusto; the mom's nipples become two raised sores, painful as burns. As her daughter grows, she is hale and happy, eating almost anything, even under-the-couch quarters and the fern's damp dirt. What her daughter hardly touches, though, are the fussy proteins the mom makes with a gourmand's care: cottage cheese with garbanzo beans; carrot and lentil mush; pureed pumpkin from her own garden with garlic and barley, white as pearls. But it's a fistful of peanut butter, or some greasy salami off a potluck plate, that her daughter crams into her passionate mouth.

**BACON**

By age twelve, it seems like what her daughter mostly eats is bacon. That summer, the daughter begs and begs for her parents to buy some, and finally her father relents. "It's cruelty-free," he tells the mom. "Crazy expensive." But because the mom refuses to touch it, the daughter starts making it for herself, crackling the meat in the only pan she's allowed to use. As her daughter fries the pork, her skin sizzles too, tan and electric, her body leaning over the rich, hot fat. She is beautiful, and the mom wonders if this is what she looked like as a teen—golden and taut. But the mom doesn't say any of this—instead she says, "This smell is killing me," fanning her nose like a Victorian in a too-tight corset. Her daughter doesn't look up from the pan, says nothing. Afterwards the mom airs out her kitchen, but the smell remains.

**SALAD**

Daniel turns fifty, resisting decrepitude by training for a half marathon and eating lots of salad. An experimental cook, the mom pulls what's up in her garden and throws it together with whatever else is around. She tries a fava bean asparagus salad, a buttercrunch and couscous salad, and even one she dubs "The Three P's": a pomegranate, persimmon, and pistachio concoction. Daniel says she should go the way of celebrity chefs and publish a cookbook. "You could call it Salad Days," he says, smiling at his own joke. But the mom has no interest—she doesn't use recipes, doesn't write anything down. Each dish is her transitory heart's desire. Her teenager avoids them all. When the mom asks if she wants some, her daughter laughs a hard laugh, shakes her head. The mom says, "You're starving your body. It's crying for vegetables," but her daughter just heats up a meaty microwave dinner and makes a snide comment about having to deal with a couple of middle-aged roommates.



## **COOKIES**

While her daughter is away at college, the mom sends care packages instead of text messages. They're mostly silly, full of stickers and gum and bobbleheads, but she always includes a tin of fresh-baked cookies. Although she mails all kinds of cookies—zucchini molasses, applesauce peanut butter, oatmeal cranberry—her daughter only mentions the chocolate chip. When she comes home for fall break, she asks, "Can I get that recipe, Mom? For the chocolate-chip cookies?" The mom isn't sure of the exact ingredients, or in what amounts, so she hunts down the Tollhouse version, a sure thing. But instead of printing it or sending it off in an email, she writes it out on an index card, her handwriting looping and old-fashioned. She titles it, "Mom's World-Famous Chocolate-Chip Cookies." This makes her daughter laugh, but in a good way.

## **PIZZA**

One weekend the mom goes on a spur-of-the-moment road trip to visit her daughter, now living in her first apartment after landing a decent job. Answering the door, her daughter's eyes show surprise, but all she says is, "Hey, Mom. I'm making dinner. Come on in." Dinner is a pepperoni pizza. "But I'm using pesto for the sauce," her daughter says. "Made it myself." Now it's the mom who's surprised. The kitchen is chaotic—crusty dishes in the sink, green slime in the Cuisinart, cans and bottles all over the counter. The mom could roll up her sleeves and start cleaning, but doesn't. When her daughter pulls the pizza from the oven, she says, "You don't have to eat it if you don't want to." But the mom is a mom and so knows better. Picking up a slice, she takes one bite and then another, filling her mouth. "It's good," she says, winking. And it is.

## **ASH**

Digging for an old pair of boots in the back of the closet, the mom finds her own mother's box. "All this time," she says. Picking it up, she decides to take it out to the garden, its weight surprisingly light. It's an early spring day, sweetheart weather. Standing over her newly planted peas, the mom reaches into the box, scattering some of the ashes, and then grasping the dust in her hand. She brings it to her face, sniffing it, then putting the tip of her tongue to its powdery grayness. The exact look of her mother's face is vague, as is the precise twist of her wrist, the particular bend of her knees. Tipping the handful of dust into her mouth, she dry swallows it before showering the rest over everything else. Bugs and roots will feed on the ash and salt, she knows. Maybe they'll taste a life beyond this life. Maybe that's the dirt beneath her own tongue.