

Eating America

IN THE YEARS JUST after World War II, the Passover seder pressed into service every seat in my aunt and uncle's house, down to the nicked and crayon-stained furniture from my cousins' bedrooms. Included, of course, were the massive, upholstered oak chairs that completed the dining room set, one of the first major purchases that clinched homeownership for this first American generation. The sticky, vinyl-seated chairs from the kitchen dinette were also jammed around the table, and the wheeled office chairs that had to be lugged from the basement—which occasionally took an elder on an unexpected ride into a wall.

The aging immigrants who gathered rarely spoke of their own flight, at the turn of the twentieth century, from Polish anti-Semitism or the Czar's army; nor did they connect their escape from Europe to the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt that they read in stumbling English from the stapled Haggadahs that Maxwell House printed and gave away on grocery store shelves alongside tins of coffee. But these were the backstories of our presence together. My grandmother's single, bitterly recalled memory of her Warsaw childhood evoked that past with particularly stinging emotion: "Every Easter the nuns would come to spit on us." Our retelling of the Passover story redrew in Chicago the same set of lines between "us" and "them," reconfirming an idea of ourselves as tribal, even in the late 1950s, even in this new land.

Together we dipped fresh parsley into water salted with our ancestors' symbolic tears, and spilled drops of wine onto our plates to recall the ten plagues with which God punished the Egyptians on our behalf: the boils and the lice and the hail; the curtain of darkness; the deaths of the first-born that finally broke the Pharaoh. We recalled our people's hasty departure through the miraculously parted waters of the Red Sea, loaded down with the same brittle, barely baked bread that we unpacked now from boxes and laid out in stacks on our seder table.

Thirty years later, when I was exiled myself—a young Jewish woman beached at a teaching job in rural Vermont—I cruised one of the pop-up Passover displays that

Manischewitz ships to remote diaspora grocery stores across the United States. The cashier at the Grand Union gingerly picked the jar of gefilte fish out of my plastic basket and turned it back and forth, letting loose in their murky gel the clumps of fish and the pale sliced carrots as she gawked: "People *eat* this?" Gorging together on delicate matzo balls ladled into rich chicken soup, on beef brisket and roast potatoes, was to honor—with whatever local Jews I could collect—not only our survival but our shared redemption from otherness.

Yet my parents' 1957 move to a Chicago suburb put intentional distance between them and these celebrations, replanting my mother and father far from the modest brick bungalows where they had grown up. Our new block, populated almost entirely by Protestants, lay beyond the frontier of observant Jewish life and its obligations. Deep in the city, embedded in family, my aunts and uncles remained bound to ancient communal laws: the thin web of inheritance separating them from an America that they inhabited warily. But my parents chose to turn their backs on the uneasiness—and the dietary restrictions—of the past; to speak and eat in the present tense.

My grandmother kept her own set of dishes at our suburban house throughout the 1960s, never touching the plates on which milk and meat were allowed to defile one another, on which my mother dared to serve pork and shellfish. At family meals with us my cousins avoided eye contact with their parents, who continued to observe the laws of *kashruth* in their own homes even as they knew that a weekend at our house meant for their children bacon, cheeseburgers, and shrimp. I taught my cousins how to find the pink tails sunk like hidden treasure in chilly jars of brazen red cocktail sauce, how to crack the shells and suck out the sweet forbidden flesh. Food was love, but it was also loyalty—and disloyalty.

My father and mother established their own ceremonies and ceremonial sites, marking special occasions at an old

lakeshore resort hotel a few tree-lined, WASP suburbs north of our house. The winding two-lane road echoed the muscular geology of the glaciers that had, distantly in time, cut Lake Michigan's gigantic bed; now, it deepened our sense of insularity as we drove. When we slowed to a near stop and turned sharply right, the hotel loomed before us in the mist hanging over the lake, another world, just barely visible from the turn-off through thick stands of old trees.

Sunday dinner at the Moraine Hotel was more than appetite: it was an exercise in ambition. Before my sister Anita and I could fling open the doors of the car in the parking lot, my father would turn to us from the front seat with a reminder to wait patiently in the buffet line for others to serve themselves, and not to fill more than one plate at a time. The hotel lobby's dense carpet swallowed errant sound all the way into the dining room, where high windows opened out over the water and every table was set with a white tablecloth and cloth napkins. At one end of the long buffet, an enormous tureen of rich, silky clam chowder stood; at the other end, slices of strawberry-slathered cheesecake, my favorite, were laid out in neat rows. In between lay an array of food that was endlessly replenished in silence: silver trays of iceberg lettuce wedges and crumbled blue cheese; chafing dishes loaded with chicken parmesan or layers of steamed fish in a white sauce; grilled lamb chops. Elegant glass bowls held mint jelly and globes of chilled butter. Dinner rolls were heaped in covered baskets. A uniformed waiter stood with a long knife at a linen-draped pedestal, finely slicing rare roast beef and laying the nearly transparent sheets of meat on warmed china plates.

When the four of us finally sat down to eat, I would unroll the napkin that had been arranged like origami at my place, spread it carefully across my lap, and pause to look at my mother and father for a sign of approval. The pleasure in which my parents basked among gentiles never entirely lost its edge of anxiety, or its texture of newly won distance from the cacophony of meals at the homes of my grandparents and my aunts and uncles in the city. The long, hushed meals at private tables felt softly elevated, special family occasions among other families similarly enjoying one another on Sunday afternoons. But for our family the lush displays of shellfish and pork roasts and meat with cream sauces constituted a liberation from inheritance: a ritual feast of transgressiveness.

After my parents divorced, in 1965, they sold their three-story house, an architect-designed beauty from the 1920s with light-lush sun porches on every floor. In the cramped apartment that my mother rented afterward, everything felt too close, ungenerous, unsettled, *less* than what we had left behind in our

house—as though we were migrating backward. We had to squeeze sideways between sofas meant for more space and the baby grand piano that had graciously occupied a corner of our former living room. I could hear Anita's guinea pig every night just beyond my bedroom door, snuffling for the pellets she had sprinkled among cedar shavings, scratching the metal bars of the cage. On my side of the door, I fed restlessly in my bed from bags of M&Ms and Baby Ruth and Butterfinger candy bars that I stole after school from neighborhood drugstores and hoarded under the covers. In the silent aftermath of loss I jammed the empty wrappers into my desk drawer as though they could remain my secret, as though the sticky clumps of paper and foil—the aroma of milk chocolate still clinging to them—wouldn't, inevitably, be revealed when my sister or my mother came in search of a pencil or an eraser.

On his own in a bachelor apartment rented with silverware settings for two, my father prepared for the Sunday afternoons that had been negotiated as his share of his daughters by scouring the *Chicago* magazine restaurant section—upping the emotional ante on eating out. Sometimes we drove to Chicago's Old Town, an enclave of hipster cool, of head shops and stores selling candles and guitars. At a burger joint there we ate salted peanuts from the bowls on our table and threw empty shells on the pine floor, where they crunched underfoot and left a dusty scent of permissiveness in the air. Other times my father scouted more upscale places, where he steered us toward the à la carte portion of the menus, encouraging us to try new things: calamari, poached salmon, exotic vegetables like eggplant. Though my father pitched these meals to Anita and me as adventures, they actually felt to us like curated conclusions to the museum visits in the Chicago Loop where we had endured stuffy exhibits of colonial paperweights and Shogun-era ceramics.

On restaurant menus, family boundaries were painfully remapped for my sister and me. When we ate out with our mother, she turned us toward the sections of the menu that featured set meals, ticking the laminated plastic with her fingernail over appropriate selections. She often specified a maximum price for us to target. But the mere mention of expense would mean the end of my father's pleasure. The spell would instantly be broken, the fourth wall breached, our allegiance to his taste—to him—sourly called into question. Often still hungry at the end of those emotionally charged meals, when we arrived home my sister and I would ransack the refrigerator for ice cream and chocolate milk.

My mother continued to serve up the bland postwar menus that she always had, one element of our lives untouched by

divorce: broiled chops and chicken parts, a mélange of peas and carrots defrosted from frozen packets and steamed to tastelessness; limp French-cut string beans hacked lengthwise; baked potatoes jacketed in aluminum foil; and casseroles buoyed in cream of mushroom soup. Our refrigerator remained supplied with all the old staples, the Wish-Bone Italian dressing in which my mother marinated fresh vegetables and, always, a plastic container of Cool Whip, the viscous, slightly metallic artificial whipped cream with which she topped the Jell-O desserts that we had eaten for as long as I could remember.

But on weekends I turned away whenever I could from my mother's kitchen, often cooking with my friend Sarah for her family. Although her parents had also recently divorced, Sarah's father was out of work, and her mother was letting him stay in a spare bedroom. The Parkmans must have had their own load of disappointment and shame, and their own losses—Shirley and Arthur were, I see now, fifty years later, both floundering, unable to see separate paths forward out of the clinging tangle of their long love. Perhaps the curiosity that their daughter and I brought to the table was a source of relief for everyone. At the public library, Sarah and I searched after school through the newly published *Time-Life Foods of the World* for exciting recipes, settling finally upon tacos. We blasted Chicago's rock station WLS in the Parkmans' kitchen, shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese, and chopped onions. We'd add heaping tablespoons of specially purchased chili powder to transform the mundane ground beef that our mothers served as hamburger patties or sloppy Joes, filled fried tortillas to leaky excess, and quartered limes to squeeze through our sticky fingers, adding sweetness and bite. For the few haloed hours of each of those lively, sensual meals, we felt freed from the stifling hold of familiar habits of food and family.

Our hunger for those newly awakened tastes sucked us out of the suburbs, back into the city that our parents had left behind. With freshly earned driver's licenses we'd coast the streets just inside the Chicago city limits, crossing the boundary set by our parents, more than a little on the loose. I was a good girl—a reader, a serious student, someone who always completed her homework on time—but I had grown impatient with the limits of home. Steering my parents' car heedlessly on the windy stretch before we hit the city, I would earn my first speeding ticket.

At home, *soup*—chicken noodle, vegetable beef, cream of tomato—was delivered from cans, reconstituted from the spigot at the kitchen sink. But at our first Mandarin restaurant, in a nearby Asian neighborhood, we discovered hot and sour soup: the sweetish pork broth at seductive odds with throat-stinging vinegar and red hot sesame oil; soft ribbons of

scrambled egg and mushrooms floating among chewy black fronds of seaweed. At a Thai restaurant, powerfully layered tom yum soup burned and excited us to tears. Often we ended up on a mostly residential block bookended by a package liquor store and a little Mexican restaurant that served miraculously delicate flautas and brightly colored salsas. Later we would learn that this neighborhood had a name, and a reputation; and when we were older we knew to be fearful of going back there or of parking on a car on those streets.

But—then—I was a sheltered suburban girl who had strayed just a few blocks south of home. The last hard curve of the lakeshore road that entered the city turned between boulder-size rocks thrown up at the edge of the beach, on one side, and a Catholic cemetery on the other. When we were still traveling on foot, my friends and I would scramble over those rocks and discover that some of them were marked with names and dates. The eerie leavings of the monument company that had carved tombstones for the cemetery, those mistakes that must have had to be heaved across the busy road and dumped on the sand by heavy machines. Stretched across the sun-warmed stone, we followed with our fingers the chiseled words and numbers, and the mysterious names spooked us with the sensation that we were somewhere we were not supposed to be. Death was still just an idea—I had never attended a funeral—but I could see from the dents in the guardrail that separated the road from the rocks that anyone who drove carelessly here, even so close to our own neighborhood, was inviting risk.

Half a century later I live in Manhattan, where food from virtually the entire globe is brought astonishingly within reach. My aging body—old friend of hunger—has got to reckon these days with mechanics and chemistry, with acid escaping the stomach and burning through my throat in the night. My doctor has laid out in dark terms the dangers of esophageal cancer: the chest pain and the difficulty of swallowing, the deforming effects of surgery; the discouraging five-year survival statistics.

Yet while I know well the body's corrosive chemistry, I remain drawn to what hurts me. Hunger is what we share with the wild world, and what draws the wild world in. I love being an animal, like the fox that hung two summers ago at the edge of a family campfire in the woods, staring: at once fearsome and seductive. Knowing the fox's power advantage in the dark night, far from other humans, we remained dangerously transfixed, clinging to a rare moment of feral connection.

In my grandmother's kitchen during my childhood, day's end brought thoroughly domesticated pleasures: the egg

noodles that she patiently cut by hand and hung to dry on Friday afternoons before she made the Sabbath soup; the simple diamond-shaped cookies that she sprinkled with colored sugar and let her grandchildren sample warm from the oven. There was, as well, pleasure in the steady dying-down of light before the family meal, the soft quieting that settled in before sundown. But that remained a small world, uneasy with what lay beyond its confines. For me, food has come to offer liberation as much as connection, a source of welcomed newness—honoring nerve and curiosity, a way into an America whose boundlessnesses my immigrant grandparents could not bring themselves to embrace.

Last summer I shared a boat ride out of Manhattan with my visiting cousins, spread now across the country from Maryland to Minnesota. All of us squinted into damp binoculars, hoping to catch sight of a heron on its finely drawn legs among the marshes of Jamaica Bay—so close to airport runways!—as we coasted back toward the city beneath the arched steel underworks of the Verrazano Bridge. Through the mist, the lights of Coney Island glowed deep inside darkness. And then the Statue of Liberty rose into view against the skyline, as it had a hundred years earlier for all the immigrants who had shared the seder tables of our youth.

What would our grandparents make of our clustered presence together on that deck, of our badly appreciated freedom to cross back and forth across this legendary border? As we retraced over the water the final miles of our grandparents' journey from Europe and their entry into America at the Port of New York, the six of us snacked on the fast food for sale on board, on gooey burritos and cheeseburgers, our violation of the prohibition against eating milk with meat no longer even worthy of mention.

When I was a kid, when he and my mother were still together, my father often picked up Sunday dinner at the faded takeout Cantonese place in our suburban downtown. He would unpack the white cartons of egg rolls, chop suey and fried rice, the dripping patties of lobster egg foo young, and set them out across our dining room table. There were aluminum packets of soy sauce and duck sauce and individually wrapped plywood chopsticks for each of us. We would carry our laden plates into the TV room, balance them on our laps, and watch *Bonanza* and *The Ed Sullivan Show* together every week—one of the few home rituals that my parents treated as sacrosanct.

My cousins and I witnessed on TV our country's 1969 flight to the same moon that hung in the nighttime sky over our own backyards—rising straight to the heavens from the Florida coast where Europeans had landed for the first time in the sixteenth century. From outer space, American astronauts transmitted photos of Earth taken from their orbiting capsules—photos in which Asia and North America spun, visibly, on the same sun-illuminated planet.

A lifetime later, my cousins and I walked from the lower Manhattan ferry to Chinatown, where we dodged crabs escaping across the sidewalk from storefront baskets and laughed at the children who screamed and ran from the scrabbling animals while their parents chased them into crowds. At a tiny restaurant we ate with abandon: flounder flash-fried in dried seaweed powder, flat broad beans in garlic sauce, dumpling soup so hot that its noodles and chicken shreds continued to bubble and cook. We ordered more bottles of Tsing Tao beer and emptied them into one another's sloshing glasses. And finally we cracked open fortune cookies and read aloud what lay ahead for us in this no longer new world. 🍪