All the Trimmings

by

Taylor Steele
Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2014
All the Trimmings

Essays by Taylor Steele
For my mother and father
Appreciations

A meal is never made by one person, and neither is an essay ever written in solitude, no matter what our myths suggest.

Many thanks are in order:

To Amy, for her humor, patience, and continual suggestions that things were just a little darker than I’d written them. You were right, of course.

To my mother and father, for everything. Not least of which was your permission to write about you however I wanted. Many people have to wait for their parents to be dead to do that.

To my brothers, for being there.

To Julia, for her laughter and a whole lot more.

To Allison, for her unerring help as a designer.

And to Grandma Rose, the best hostess in Manhattan.
Contents

Preface 1
Leo in the Kitchen 3
All the Trimmings 10
No-Thank-You Helpings 30
Cooking with Katie 37
The Shabbos Goy 47
You Are What You Serve 56
"Cooking, they say, uses a different part of your brain and I know which part, the good part, the part that's not wired all screwy with your twelve sorry versions of your personal history and the four jillion second guesses, backward glances, forehead-slapping embarrassments. The cooking part is clean as a cutting board and fitted accurately with close measurements and easy-to-follow instructions, which, you always know, are going to result in something edible and nourishing, over which you could make real conversation with someone, maybe someone you've known since college."

Ron Carlson, “Down the Green River”
It is always a delight to read about cooking, just as it is always a delight to cook. This year, I've read many books about food, and they all have influenced me as I've composed my own thoughts on the subject.

The ones with essays:

Home Cooking and More Home Cooking, by Laurie Colwin

The Art of Eating, by M. F. K. Fisher

Tender at the Bone, by Ruth Reichl

The Tummy Trilogy, by Calvin Trillin

And the ones with recipes:

How to Cook Everything, by Mark Bittman
It is not always a delight to write about cooking, just as it is not always a delight to serve—but both are worthwhile things to do.

When I write about food I think about the ways in which feeding or being fed by others is central to so many of my relationships. I think about how often I hurt the people I feed, and how often they hurt me, even though we all mean well.

Where there is life, something bad can always be found. Where there is food, something good can always be found.

Where there is food, there is life, and vice versa.

So I cook for the people I love, knowing it will bring a little more good into their lives.

Unless I burn it all to a crisp. Then I take them out for milkshakes, and everyone is okay.

Better, even, than if I’d taken them out for milkshakes in the first place.
Leo in the Kitchen

We all have days we’ve parted with gladly, days we’d rather not reflect on, days we shoo quietly but firmly into memory’s dark recesses. My own such days, gastronomically speaking, are my youth. Every day after school from when I was six until I was twelve or thirteen, my two brothers and I would raid the cabinets and the fridge and gorge ourselves on our first culinary delight, yogurt and crackers.

We weren’t picky about the crackers: Wheat Thins, Triscuits, Cheez-Its, Cheese Nips, Toasteds, and, as a last resort, Ritz were all considered acceptable yogurt vehicles. Concerning the yogurt we were adamant: Dannon’s coffee flavor, no deviations. We’d each grab one or two 6-oz. containers of the stuff, set up several boxes of crackers in the middle of the kitchen table, lay claim to our chairs, and bury our noses in our books. For a while there’d be silence except for mushy-
crumbed mastication, fingers absentmindedly slurped free of yogurt smears, and the occasional turning page. When we’d plumbed the depths of our yogurt containers we would scrape the sides with teaspoons we had at the ready, their metallic tinge providing a strange dessert to our strange tradition.

Looking back on it, I’m appalled. No one knows where our predilection for coffee yogurt came from, or why it became one of the few things all three of us agreed upon, or who first dipped a Wheat Thin into his Dannon cup and changed the Steele-household yogurt eating game forever. For a while I was unselfconscious about my habit, but I became ashamed of it before I finally quit. Near the end, whenever someone outside the family dropped by, I’d hide my half-eaten yogurts in the fridge and dump the box of crackers in there as well, if there wasn’t time to dash for the cabinet.

At some point, I went cold turkey, and I haven’t touched coffee yogurt ever since. My younger brother, Graham, carried on until he was a senior in high school, and the sight of those little yogurt cups in the fridge when I came home from Wesleyan brought bile to the back of my throat.

“How can you eat that shit?” I’d say, as he munched obliviously at the kitchen table, his legs sprawled on another chair.

“Mm,” he’d say. (That was all you could get out of him in high school.) Then he’d cross his eyes at me and eat his next cracker in one horrific, crumb-spraying bite.

* * *

4
My mother is a good cook, happy in the kitchen and passionate about food, and when she pulls out all the stops for an occasion I’d even say she is a great cook. But she’s struggled with her weight all her life, and that struggle crept into how she mothered us. She purged the house of all junk food and admonished us to eat well every day.

“Your father sets a terrible example,” she’d say, and it was true. His body doesn’t process fruits or vegetables well, so he survives on carbohydrates, meat, and exercise. My father was a nephrologist when I was young and then became a patent attorney. Both jobs consumed his days. He’d come home late at night and turn half a loaf of bread into hot, buttery toast, and my brothers and I, upstairs in our rooms, would sniff longingly.

When we took turns at the toaster the next morning, my mother would pull her hair out. “I’m going to kill that man,” she’d say, as she unplugged the infernal appliance.

“But Mom,” we’d moan.

“Here,” she’d say. “Have an apple.”

And yet, when it came to yogurt and crackers, my mother bought us as much as we wanted with hardly a complaint for over a decade. She worked full-time as a psychologist, but she took it upon herself to come home every day to cook dinner and make sure she wasn’t raising a bunch of hooligans. But we were three growing boys. Without an after-school snack, we’d be irritable and belligerent and my mother would come home to find the babysitter in tears. After
a long day of listening to people tell her their awful life stories, all my mother wanted in her own house was a little peace and quiet. So she bought us what we wanted and prayed it would pacify us.

(“How about grapes?” she might say, when she made up a shopping list, but she didn’t stake her hopes on it.)

We did have to be careful, though. If she saw us heading for the fridge past about 4:00, she’d get furious. “Don’t you dare eat too much of that crap,” she’d say. “Dinner’s in just a few hours, and that’s what you’re eating tonight.”

When we ignored her warnings and ended up pushing what she’d cooked around on our plates, she made us sit at the table until we’d eaten it all, even if that was long after everyone else had cleared their places and dispersed through the house for the evening. More than once I sat crying over a hill of peas, watching them get prunier by the minute as the butter congealed beneath them. With the candles blown out and the family room empty, the overhead lights were harsh, and their low buzz slowly made the room feel uncanny. But it was about will power and nutrition and family values, and my mother wouldn’t budge no matter how much I wept. At some point I’d stomach the peas, throw the plate in the sink, and dash upstairs to my room, my face burning with the gross unfairness of it all.

We got a little older, and ate our mother’s cooking a little more readily, and helping out around dinnertime became the new battlefront. My mother devised a
system she employed for several years: each week, one of us was assigned to set the table, one to clear the dishes, and one to work as sous chef.

The weeks I sous chefed for my mother were the first I spent in front of a stove, and undoubtedly some of my cooking knowledge is rooted in those experiences. But I was a miserable cook back then. I asked how to do everything she asked me to do, and she'd start out showing me how and end up doing it all herself. I wouldn't touch raw meat, particularly chicken, I hardly knew my way around an onion, and things like properly measuring flour struck me as arcane arts.

Colin, my older brother, loved to torture me about my cooking. “Is this safe to eat?” he’d say, or, “This tastes like a rancid fart!” (“Well, screw you!” I’d say. “You’re not even worth cooking for!” and we’d start fighting there in the kitchen if my parents weren’t near enough to stop us.)

The one thing I liked about being sous chef was that I got a free pass on cleaning the dishes. Sitting around while other people washed and dried was a singular satisfaction, and I still consider it as such, but now only when some kind and understanding angel offers it after I’ve actually cooked a meal.

My favorite book when I was very young was *Leo the Late Bloomer*, by Robert Kraus, which told the story of a young lion who worried his parents no end because he couldn’t talk, couldn’t draw, and didn’t show any interest in any of the things his young animal peers were precociously preoccupied with—“until” (this was the climax of the story), “one day, Leo bloomed!” It was a touching story
with charming illustrations, and I loved it. On a trip to look at colleges, I brought it up with my mother. Perhaps too honestly, she told me she and my father had bought it specifically for me because they “were concerned.”

“Oh,” I said, or something along those lines.

“We wanted you to feel okay about being a late bloomer,” my mother said.

I recovered myself somewhat, and asked if she thought I’d bloomed yet.

That was my junior year of high school. I was still a dreadful cook. But I was learning. My father grilled every weekend, and around then I began to join him outside. He made simple things—hamburgers, hot dogs, flank steaks—over a simple fire, but I loved being out there with him, and I loved bringing food indoors to my family.

When he made burgers, my father showed me what he looked for. “When they don’t stick,” he said, lifting a patty, “see? I flip them. That usually takes four minutes from when I put them on the grill. I give them another three minutes, then add the cheese and cover them for the final minute, so it’ll be nice and gooey.”

I nodded sagely. This was cooking.

When he pulled the burgers off the grill, I’d throw the buns on all at once.

“Taylor!” my father would say. “Stop, stop!” We’d laugh together, and he’d scramble to get them off without any burning. We didn’t say much on those evenings, but we didn’t have to.
When I decided I’d go to Wesleyan, I began joking with my parents about starting a barbecue club. “Imagine roasting a leg of lamb next to Usdan,” I’d say. “All those vegetarians wouldn’t know whether to shoot me for it or pay me in secret.”

My parents gave me *Weber’s Way to Grill*, by Jamie Purviance, before my freshman fall. “For Taylor,” they inscribed it, “may this help you start a new and successful venture!” It took me over three years (I’ve got a little Leo left in me, it seems), but this fall CarnivorWes was born. “Your carbon footprint never tasted so good,” is my slogan, and the environmentalists roll their eyes, but they eat my barbecue shoulder to shoulder with the vegetarians.

My cookbook collection has grown, but the original one from my parents has proved indispensable. It’s now tattered and stained, well used and well loved. I’ve shared tips from it with my father (“Look,” I told him, “if you press your thumb into the burgers, they don’t puff up when you grill them!”), and food from it with my family and friends.

CarnivorWes has been successful, and I couldn’t be happier. My mother, just this winter, told me I’ve taught her many things about cooking, and I blushed with pride. But it’s most satisfying when I cook for Colin and he grudgingly admits something’s good.

It’s a little fuck you to the brothers we were, and an act of love for the brothers we are now.
My family has a Thanksgiving tradition, just like everybody else. We go to New York City and spend the day at an apartment on West 76th and Central Park West—the starting line of the parade. The apartment is owned by Larry and Lief Wieman, and the whole Wieman clan shows up, along with several other family friends. A few spouses have come and gone over the years, and some children have been born, but otherwise it’s been the same thirty people at Thanksgiving as long as I can remember.

Larry is the oldest of the Wiemans from my mother’s generation, and he’s known my mother since they went to junior high together in Wantagh, Long Island. My brothers and I grew up calling Larry’s parents Grandmother and Grandfather Wieman. We never asked why.
A dozen years ago, my mother's mother, that is, my actual grandmother—Grandma Rose—sold her house in Wantagh and moved back to the city. She found an apartment high above the Hudson, at West 66th and West End, less than fifteen blocks from Larry and Lief's. She moved in with all her worldly treasures and had the walls painted orange.

Since then we've stayed at her place for Thanksgiving (we used to stay the night at an apartment owned by friends of Larry and Lief), and she's started coming with us to the Wiemans'.

Lief, Larry's wife, loves my grandmother. "It wouldn't be Thanksgiving without Rose," she says, every year.

At the Wiemans' we have two twenty-pound turkeys, trays of roasted Brussels sprouts, three kinds of cranberry relish, all homemade, a creamy celery root purée, pearl onions, a stunning baked stuffing with fine white bread crumbs and pine nuts and enough butter to drown in, and Grandmother Wieman's sweet potato–pecan delight, which is to die for. We stuff ourselves, to contentment or a little further; we stroll through Central Park; we polish off a dozen pies, which guests have made and brought. Year in, year out, it is an altogether lovely day.

The day after Thanksgiving Grandma Rose insists on cooking her own turkey dinner. (Before she moved to Manhattan we'd drive to her house and carry out this part of the tradition in Wantagh.) She makes a butterball turkey with sausage-and-apple stuffing, her own cranberry sauce, roasted yams, buttery peas,
gravy, and raisin-studded muffins with sweet butter. We begin with half a grapefruit each and end with three pies: apple, pumpkin, and mincemeat.

Like the rest of us, my mother is still dyspeptic from the day before, and the last thing she wants to do is cram down another Thanksgiving meal. “I need greenery!” she says. “And light! And fresh air!” But she no longer trusts Grandma Rose—who is robust for an 88-year-old, but still—to cook the whole thing on her own, so she (my mother) ends up cooking most of it herself. She shoos my father and my brothers and me out of the dark apartment. “Go have fun,” she says. “I’ll handle this.”

The real reason my mother hates this second meal is that she sees it as my grandmother’s attempt to pretend our family Thanksgiving has always been like this. It is a fabrication, a fantasy, a lie. It is the patch over my family’s past, bursting at the seams with all it is trying to conceal.

I’m scared to tell this story. My mother wants to write her version someday but she can’t and won’t until my grandmother is dead. But her history is my history, and their past is my present. “This has been my whole fucking life, Taylor,” my mother says, which means the same is true for me. I’ve grown up in the shadow of a divorce, an abduction, and a reconciliation whose contours I never understood. How could this not be my story?

* * *
Rosetta Beekman was born in New York City in 1925. Her mother was an Irish immigrant, her father, a German Jew. She was the second youngest of two boys and five girls, all of whom, besides her, would eventually retire to Florida and die there. She is the only one left.

Her father was a candy maker, until a cousin of his stole money from the company and left him bankrupt and unemployed. “That bastard ruined Papa,” my grandmother says. The Depression hit, and her father remained out of work. But he loved the opera and had a great singing voice, so he’d go to the courtyards in rich neighborhoods and sing up at the windows, and people would throw money down to him. At night he’d come home and plop his cap, full of coins, on the table. “Go buy dinner, Rosie,” he’d say with a wink. “Somebody else is paying.”

So they survived the Depression, and when she was twenty years old Rosetta Beekman became Rosetta Mulqueen when she married my grandfather, Joe. My grandfather was an only child and a diabetic, one of the first with Type 1 to receive successful treatment. He died before I or my brothers were born, but that he lived long enough to become my mother’s father at all was a medical marvel.

Two years after my grandparents were married, my uncle Joseph was born. Four years later my grandmother gave birth to Paul, and two years after that my own mother came along. They moved out from the city and bought a house on Long Island, in Wantagh.
When she was three years old my mother had her first recurring nightmare. In it, her mother was waving goodbye from a red convertible as she drove off with another man. That was the dream, over and over: the car, the man, the wave.

“I knew she was leaving before she knew she was leaving,” my mother says, “and certainly before my father knew it.”

By the time my mother was ten, however, her father and mother and brothers had caught up with her: everybody knew. A year later, my grandmother moved out of that house for good.

It began with screaming fights. My grandmother, I imagine, did most of the screaming. My grandfather, according to my mother, was a mild man who rarely raised his voice. “I hate you!” my grandmother would shout, and my uncle Paul would take my mother upstairs to his room and shelter her. Soon a double bed had turned into two twin beds in my grandparents’ room, and by the end my grandfather was sleeping on the couch.

My mother came home from school one day—she was in fifth grade—and found my grandmother at the kitchen stove, burning family pictures. Not long after that, my grandmother began seeing a psychiatrist. My mother lived in unceasing fear.

One night, when my mother was in sixth grade, my grandfather snapped. My grandmother served only spaghetti for dinner, and my grandfather, who needed protein with every meal because of his diabetes, flung his plate in fury. The
plate broke, the spaghetti splattered across the ceiling, and my grandmother began screaming at my grandfather. He chased her around the dining room, stabbing at her legs with his dinner fork.

When the police arrived, my grandfather explained to them that his wife was psychotic and suggested they talk to her psychiatrist.

But that was not the end. The end came when my grandmother kidnapped my uncle Paul and my mother. My grandmother made a habit of spending Saturdays in the city. After staying at home the whole week, she'd pack a few things into her purse and drive to Manhattan on her own. She never shared those days with my grandfather, but sometimes she brought Joseph or Paul or my mother with her, and they would run around together, going to the opera and museums and 5th Avenue. They would have fun—my grandmother certainly knew how to do that—and those days are some of my mother's happiest memories from that time.

On the day my grandmother kidnapped her own children, she took my mother and Paul into the city, as if everything were normal. At the end of the day, as they were driving home, my mother noticed they were not driving home at all.

"Daddy!" she screamed. "I want Daddy! What are you doing? What are you doing?" They were on the highway, and my grandmother was driving like the maniac she was, but my mother tried to open the door and jump anyway. Paul
grabbed my mother close to him and hushed her, whispering through her hair that he would take care of her.

The week before, my grandmother had enlisted the help of her sister Annabelle, and together they’d rented a summerhouse on Jones Beach for cheap—it was winter when this happened. That was where my grandmother took her children (Joseph had gone off to college that year), with most of her possessions in the trunk.

My grandfather came home that evening to an empty house, his children gone and his wife’s belongings removed. He called every last one of my grandmother’s sisters, knowing at least some of them were probably in on it. None of them would tell him where Rose had gone.

The next day my grandmother sent Paul and my mother to school, to avoid suspicion. But Paul left school and walked the several miles to his real house, to find his father and tell him where my grandmother was keeping them. My grandfather called the school and told them what had happened, and they allowed him to come pick up my mother.

Walking into that school, I imagine, with every adult in the building suddenly knowing what horrible things were going on at the Mulqueen household, must have been the most shameful moment of my grandfather’s life. But he got his children back, and he would not let them go again.

My grandmother showed up at the house when she discovered that Paul and my mother were no longer at school. My grandfather locked the house
against his wife. “These are my children,” he shouted at her, as she pounded on the door. “Do you hear me? We’re done!”

And they were. My grandmother took the car and left. She moved into a basement in Queens and began taking courses at Queens College so she could become a teacher. My mother visited her sometimes but couldn’t stand that little subterranean apartment. My mother fought my grandmother and hated her and was terrified of her, but she never stopped going back to her. “I was too relational,” my mother says, “I couldn’t imagine being without a mother, no matter what she’d done. I couldn’t imagine living so alone in the world.”

My grandfather decided he couldn’t raise his children on his own, and he asked his father to come live with them in the house in Wantagh. My great-grandfather didn’t want to leave the city but he did it for his son, my grandfather. My mother hated having her grandfather around; to her he was a creepy old man who shuffled through the house in his nightshirt, an unwelcome and unhappy specter.

This was when my mother met the Wiemans, who saved her. She and Larry became friends, and soon she was going over to Larry’s house. She discovered she was always welcome there, with Mr. and Mrs. Wieman and their five children. My mother, because she was the only female left at her house, had been forced into a maternal position when she was barely a teenager. She cooked the meals for her father and grandfather and Paul, so at the Wiemans’ she not only
played with Larry and his siblings but also cooked with Mrs. Wieman. My mother learned she loved fresh vegetables, barely cooked—Mrs. Wieman’s way. The snap was a delight to her, having grown up on my grandmother’s mushy vegetables. She learned a lot from Mrs. Wieman, and soon they were sharing recipes. “That sweet potato–pecan dish?” my mother’s said to me, “I made that first. I discovered that. Everyone thinks it’s Grandmother Wieman’s, but I gave her that recipe.”

My mother spent as much time as she could at the Wiemans, and my grandmother was not unaware of it. My mother probably told her mother about it, in the way that it’s hard not to tell your parents when you’ve discovered that your taste in something is different—better—than theirs. “Don’t you forget who your real mother is,” my grandmother would say, and my mother never did. Beth, the Wiemans’ only daughter, has always made sure my mother knows she’s only a Wieman by permission. “Remember, I could get you disinvited at any point,” Beth once said. It hasn’t played out that way over the years—the other Wiemans treat my mother as their sister—but my mother’s doubts remain.

Meanwhile Joseph had dropped out of college and been drafted into the Navy. Paul had graduated from high school but dropped out of college as well. He avoided the draft as a conscientious objector, and was placed in Syracuse.

During those years my grandfather and grandmother managed to make Christmas work somehow, and my grandmother would come out from Queens
and cook dinner at the house in Wantagh. But that was it between them. Otherwise my mother was on her own with her father and grandfather. When my mother was a senior in high school, my grandfather’s job was moved to North Carolina and he moved with it. He left my mother in the care of his father, but my mother hated him and asked her father to kick him out. Eventually, my grandfather agreed and told his father he should go, and my great-grandfather packed up and went back to the city, not unhappily. That whole year my mother lived alone in the house in Wantagh, other than visits every other weekend by her father.

The next year, after her first semester at Northwestern, my mother was excited to return for Christmas and tell both of her parents about her life at college. For once she was the one who’d gone away, the one returning from somewhere else.

“I won’t be there,” my grandmother told her. “I’m going back to Greece to get married.” While she was a student, my grandmother had begun to travel the world during school vacations, and she’d continued to do so once she became a teacher. Over the course of her life she would go to every continent except Antarctica. She brought back trinkets and artwork and other mementos from each place—most of them paid for, some of them stolen. The year before my mother went to college, my grandmother had been on one of Greece’s fabulous beaches (this is how she tells it) when a young man in a sailor’s uniform had come up to her and said, “Madam, may I walk with you?” She’d looked him up and
down, decided he’d do, and now she was going to marry him so he could come back to the States with her.

His name was Angelo Ermidis. He was eighteen years her junior.

For my mother, this was crushing. Her mother always had to trump her, she thought: my grandmother could never let my mother have anything more than her, or anything different, or even simply her own moment to be special. My grandmother always put herself first. And, of course, now there’d be a strange Greek step-father at my grandmother’s house in Queens (she’d moved out of the basement when she’d gotten a job), a step-father closer to my mother than my grandmother in age.

Around this time my uncles began to fade out from the family. There was no definitive moment when one or the other broke it off, and they certainly didn’t leave together, but it wasn’t long before they both were gone. Joseph went first; after he joined the Navy he never came home again. He met his future wife, Nancy, and a few years later they moved. My mother, who cooked and baked and sent her food to her brothers in care packages, discovered he was gone when one of those packages came back marked ADDRESS UNKNOWN. There was no forwarding address, no phone number. Paul and the woman who would become his wife, Barbara, lived in the house in Wantagh for a few years after Paul finished his time in Syracuse. Then they too moved and stopped communicating with my grandfather and grandmother, but Paul did exchange letters with my mother. One time a letter came back, marked ADDRESS UNKNOWN, and that was that.
Paul’s leaving broke my grandmother’s heart. Losing Joseph hadn’t been easy, but he’d always taken more after his father, while Paul had taken after her; Paul had been her little boy. That he would leave in much the same way Joseph had was inconceivable to her. But it was too late. Both her sons were gone.

My grandfather sold the house in Wantagh and moved to New Jersey. As soon as he was out of there, my grandmother bought a different house in Wantagh and moved in with Angelo (she was now Rosetta Ermidis). So my mother continued to return to Wantagh, just as she continued to return to her mother. There was never a moment when she really considered following her brothers, either to find them or simply to fade out on her own, as they had done. She stuck with it, even when she and her mother ended up screaming and crying more often than not with each other. “Being a girl saved me,” my mother says. “I was allowed an emotional expression neither of my brothers were afforded.”

After seven years together, my grandmother and Angelo separated, though my grandmother kept his name. (Angelo still lives in the city, and he and my grandmother remain on good terms, but I’ve never met him. My mother, understandably, won’t let him near our family holidays.)

A period of relative peace followed.

Then, thirty years ago, when he was around sixty, my grandfather died. He left no will and testament, so my mother had to find her brothers and have them
sign the appropriate legal documents. She managed to track down a phone number for each of them, and talked to Joseph and Paul exactly once each. They were still married to Nancy and Barbara, respectively. Neither of my uncles knew anything about the other. Both of them had gotten vasectomies.

That was the last time my mother’s spoken to either of her brothers. Now, she says, with the Internet, once in a while she’ll follow a deep pang and look them up online. They are there to be found. But that is as far as she goes.

My grandmother’s written them out of her will, as much as possible. Her lawyer suggested, so there’d be no concern my mother had strong-armed them out, that my grandmother name Joseph and Paul and leave them each one dollar, and that’s what she’s done. There will be no legal obligation to track them down and give them their inheritance, however. Perhaps my mother will do that, but I doubt it. Perhaps I will? I do not know.

My grandmother continued to teach and continued to travel. She had affairs. She became a grandmother. She retired, after twenty-three years as a New York City public school teacher, with an incredible pension. More recently, after she moved back to Manhattan, she met a lovely old man named Sidney. (We don’t know exactly how old Sidney is, but he’s clearly far closer to her in age than Angelo was.) Sidney lives in Queens, but every weekend he stays with my grandmother in her apartment and they run around together, going to operas and plays and concerts and the Met. He takes her to the movies; she tries to get him to
read more. They've been to France and Germany and Russia together, and they still go to London every year around Christmastime. They're good for each other—they keep each other young—but they'll never get married. Sidney is a widower, and my grandmother says twice already was enough for her. So she calls him her partner, and my mother calls Sidney Grandma Rose's honey.

She hasn't stopped being Rose, however. A few years ago she met a retired philosophy professor at the New School, where she takes classes every semester, and nearly dumped Sidney for him. But my mother got wind of it and squashed it before my grandmother made a move. “Don’t you dare do anything so stupid, Mom,” my mother said. The fact that Sidney regularly checks in on my grandmother helps my mother sleep at night. The fact that my grandmother doesn’t do the same for Sidney is part of who she is.

My mother’s never forgiven my grandmother, and the past between them has never become the past for her. She'll always be the little girl with nightmares about her mother, the ten-year-old who lives every moment in fear, the kidnapped daughter who wishes that she could jump from the car or that her mother would just take her home. But she’s gained some control over my grandmother, and I was the pathway.

My mother remembers running from her mother, being smacked by her mother, cowering in her room while her mother whacked her with a wooden
spoon. These scars go the deepest, as they usually do. They are the terror my mother almost never acknowledges.

When my younger brother, Graham, was a newborn, when I was three, my grandmother came to visit. At some point my mother was upset with me about something I was doing, but she was nursing Graham and couldn’t stop me herself. My grandmother walked over and smacked me on the backside. “Stop that!” she said. (I don’t remember any of this, by the way.)

My mother went berserk. She threw my grandmother out and made her leave for Long Island that very minute.

“It was just a tap!” my grandmother said, as my mother closed the door on her. My mother wouldn’t listen.

“You will never lay a hand on my children again,” she said, “or you won’t be their grandmother anymore, is that clear?”

It was the only time my mother threatened my grandmother that way, but it changed their relationship fundamentally. My grandmother wanted to be a grandmother—she wanted to love my brothers and me as only a grandmother can. She’d found something she wanted enough that she would acquiesce to her daughter for it.

“She always called all the shots,” my mother says. “Now I get to call at least some of them.”

So my mother was very deliberate about how much her mother got to see us. She wanted to protect us from her, she says. Grandma Rose would come for
Christmas and for Easter, and we'd go see her at Thanksgiving, but that was all. My mother never left us alone with Grandma Rose—our grandmother never babysat us, never took us out for a day so my parents could have a break. It wasn't until this spring, when my girlfriend, Julia, and I visited my grandmother, that I spent any time with Grandma Rose without the rest of my family around.

It took me a long time to discover there might be something odd or unusual about all that. Part of it was being a child, not questioning the way things were because they felt eternal, and part of it was that my father's parents were no closer to us. This is not their story, but my father's father was a hard man and his mother, an alcoholic, and while he does talk to his sisters it is barely, and only one of them feels anything like an aunt to me—the other is a recluse in Maine whom we hardly see. I was formed in the crucible of two parents from two broken homes: my nuclear family is tight-knit and relatively functional, but at its fringes lie fear and memory and stories not often told, or not told at all.

"We are a family," was one of my mother's refrains, when we complained about an outing she'd planned for the five of us. "This is what families do." And there was her need, in all its ugliness. Who was she to say what families do? Who would know better what her family should do?

By keeping Grandma Rose in our lives, even as she protected us from her, my mother did something strange and wonderful and utterly brave. She gave us a chance to get to know our grandmother with the closest thing to a blank slate
possible, given the circumstances. Growing up, for me she was the kooky grandmother who laughed even louder than my mother and brought me strange T-shirts from faraway places. (“Grandma Clothes,” my brothers and I used to call her.) She was interesting and entertaining, she told wild stories and often said inappropriate things, and I loved her for it.

But she was also the grandmother my mother clearly hated on some level. My mother sacrificed the chance to tell her story, to turn us against her mother; instead, by remaining quietly hateful, she risked turning us against her more than against our grandmother. She risked our misunderstanding, our resentment, she risked letting us love Grandma Rose more than we loved Mom just so we could love Grandma Rose at all.

Never once, of course, did it cross my mind that Grandma Rose could conceivably leave my brothers and me, that this woman I loved perhaps didn’t care about me nearly as much as I assumed she did. I’d never feared that my mother or father would leave, so I never feared that anyone else in the family would, either. It was so clear my mother cared about me more deeply than I could imagine, even at our bitterest moments; I intuited, in my child’s way, that there was something unshakeable about my mother’s devotion—she would sacrifice everything for me, if it came to it, and I knew that.

But for a young child, and especially for a not-so-young child, that kind of love can be baffling and difficult, almost suffocating. I knew there was some darkness in my mother’s past, a great pain that drove her as an adult and mother.
But I didn’t know the details, other than that she had two brothers she never talked to, so I assumed she was stuck on some smallchildhood trauma, that her need had festered over the years until she could no longer control it.

“Mom,” I would say to her, “I’m not your brothers.” I knew it hurt her to hear me say that, but I needed to differentiate myself from them. They were the shadows in our family fights—often after the yelling was over my mother would mention them, either by name or obliquely, and start crying. I would feel that I didn’t stand a chance, that every petty, normal, mother-and-son fight overwhelmed her with a sense of doom, a sense that her past would somehow repeat itself and tear apart the family she’d worked so hard to knit together.

I wonder how different things would have been if my grandfather had lived longer. I never had the chance to know him, or love him. He is the hole in my life that doesn’t often feel like a hole, the loss that doesn’t feel like a loss. (In some ways, I feel the same about my uncles, but there’s more anger in that for me.) He simply wasn’t there, or anywhere, and that was all there was to it.

But what if he’d lived? What if I’d known him? How would he have told the story? Would he have told it? Perhaps then my mother would have been less careful to foster a relationship between her mother and her sons. Perhaps I would have grown up despising Grandma Rose. One of my mother’s deepest regrets is that her father never got to meet his grandchildren. “He would’ve loved you guys,” she says. “You’re exactly the kind of men he’d have wanted you to be.” (For a long
time I thought this was cheesy, or wistful, and I would say, “Thanks, Mom,” and give her an awkward hug. Now, it brings tears to my eyes.

My grandfather was my mother’s rock, the one person she could depend on. “I knew as long as he was alive I’d never be homeless,” she says. “I never had that with my mother.”

My grandmother tells the story without remorse. I listened to her tell it to Julia, the weekend we visited. She focused on the humor in her story, and left just enough darkness in to make it fascinating.

After that, I asked my mother to tell me the story as fully as she was willing to. I’ve always been the most curious among her children about her past, but I was also cautious; I let her share what she wanted to and didn’t press.

“Mom,” I said this time, “I need to know.”

And she told me, with remarkable frankness. There is more back there, of course, some of which I may never know, but it’s opened up a deep emotional channel between us. She told the story without much of her usual bitterness and fear. She let it speak for itself, and I listened.

I’m the only one of my brothers who knows the story. It’s also no accident, I think, that of the three of us I’m the closest to her. We’ve each inherited an aspect of her fighting spirit: Colin her yelling, Graham her moodiness, and I her insistence upon coming back to the people we hurt, and who hurt us. She and I
have fought often, but we’ve come back to each other every time, and that’s made all the difference.

Knowing my mother’s story, I understand her more fully and love her more deeply. I’m more grateful for the sacrifices she’s made for my brothers and me. She never aspired to live in suburbia, or to be a working stiff and a soccer mom. She yearns for the city and for culture. She yearns for the freedoms her mother refused to give up. But clearly she also yearns for connection and family, and she saw and felt and lived the ramifications of her mother’s actions on those two things. She puts others before her where her mother would not. She is generous in ways my grandmother never was. “We are a family,” she says, and she means it from the depths of her heart.

But I don’t love my grandmother any less, knowing what happened, and I don’t have to forgive her for anything. I get to love her in a way my mother never can. I get to see how my grandmother’s stayed with us, which is not nothing when it comes to her. I get to appreciate that my mother let her be a part of our lives, and that she has been there.

The fact that my mother kept the story from me until now helps me love them both more. The fact that they’ve stuck with each other through it all is part of who each of them is.

It wouldn’t be Thanksgiving without Rose.
No-Thank-You Helpings

When I was a child, my mother would come home from work every night and make dinner for her family while my brothers and I lay about the house at various angles of repose. She had a small stable of regulars, meals that were quick and easy, hearty, and generally well received by the invalids—spaghetti and meatballs, breaded chicken cutlets, that sort of thing. But sometimes she’d get fed up with the routine of it all and something new would appear in our house, glistening on the stovetop with alien menace.

One night, she tried her hand at Rock Cornish game hens. I came home from football practice and caught the scent of something different as I climbed the steps to our backdoor. “Oh shit,” I thought. My mother was at least as dangerous as the food when she did this; the stress of making something new, compounded by the tough crowd she cooked for, meant she’d be preemptively on edge.
I walked into the kitchen. My mother was patiently stuffing the body cavities of strange little birds. Several finished ones sat on a tray, looking like winged softballs.

“What’s that?” I said, trying to keep my voice neutral.

“It’s what’s for dinner,” my mother said.

I backed out of the kitchen.

When my father got home, he stood in the hall for a second, shuffling his feet a little from the cold. “Smells good, honey,” he called out. He walked into the kitchen. The hens were in the oven. My mother was consulting her cookbook. “Thanks,” she said, without looking up.

My father peered at the birds through the oven door, and then he too couldn't help himself. “What’s cooking?” he said.

My mother turned to him. “They’re Cornish game hens,” she said. “Can I serve dinner unmolested please, for once?”

My father apologized and asked if he could help.

“Nope,” my mother said. “But make sure your sons are ready for dinner in twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes later the table was set, my father was in comfortable clothes, and my brothers and I were in the family room, where we ate every night. The hens were still in the oven.
My mother busied herself with the night’s vegetable, green beans. “Dinner’s going to be a bit late,” she announced.

This was not the sort of announcement that invited a response, but Colin groaned. “What the hell’s taking so long?” he said.

“What was that?” my mother snapped. She came around the corner, brandishing her wooden spoon. “It’ll be ready when it’s ready,” she said. “And you’ll goddamn like it.”

Colin’s outburst was unusual. He was the best eater of the three of us—the only one who touched seafood, for instance—and my mother counted on him, as the oldest child, to keep Graham and me in line. Now it was we who tried to warn him that he was in dangerous territory. Cut it out, we gestured, across our necks. He made an ugly face at us but stayed quiet.

The delays kept coming, and Colin began needling my mother again. “How long are they supposed to cook for?” he said. “Haven’t they been in there way longer than that?”

“Yes, but they’re not done yet,” my mother said. Her teeth were clenched, but Graham and I had stopped trying to warn Colin about these things. He was on his own.

At last the hens were back on the stovetop, their skins dry and brown, and my mother was reheating the green beans. We sat down around the table, taking extra care with our chairs (my mother hated when they scraped the floor). My mother put a whole hen on each of our plates, and gave us green beans as well.
Colin tried to refuse the beans. “They look gross,” he said.

“This is a no-thank-you helping,” my mother said. “Eat it.” She looked to my father for support. He nodded at Colin.

“I don’t want them,” Colin said.

“I don’t care,” my mother said. She turned to my father. “Alan—” she said.

“Why can’t I have—” Colin said.

“You son of a bitch!” my mother said. She grabbed the game hen from her plate and threw it at my brother. “And you!” she said, rounding on my father. “How can you just sit there, while your children treat me like this? How can you?”

“Maggie, I—”

“Oh, you fucking males,” my mother said. “You know what? Forget it. Have whatever the fuck you want for dinner—but make it yourself!” She was crying.

My father, my brothers, and I sat there as my mother stomped out of the family room, across the kitchen, through the living room, up the stairs, down the hall, and into her bedroom. She slammed the door behind her, and the windows throughout the house rattled. Bits of stuffing slid down Colin’s hair and fell into his lap.

My father sighed a few times, which was a sign he was in deep emotional stress. Colin was red in the face but still as stone. Graham and I picked at the hens on our plates, not really eating.
Finally, my father told Colin to go upstairs. “I’m very disappointed in you,” my father said. I usually found my father’s disappointment, his woundedness, far more devastating than my mother’s shouting, but it didn’t have the same effect on Colin. To Colin, my father was a weak, despicable man. Colin wanted a father like the ones his friends had, who taught them how to play football and coached their Little League teams, not a father who sat on the sidelines and read *Scientific American*.

Colin went, but he took his time about it. He took the hen from his lap and put it back on my mother’s plate. He dumped his own hen straight into the trash and left his plate next to the sink. He paused in the doorway to the living room and looked back at us. “Why don’t you fucking grow a pair, Dad?” he said. Then he was gone.

My mother shouted at Colin, and he shouted back, and after a while things quieted down. They’d be all right.

Then my mother called for my father. He sighed again. If he’d been a different man, he might have made a face at Graham and me—either to lighten the mood or to say, Your mother’s crazy, but here I go... He barely looked at us. He hunched his thin shoulders and left the table. He was a dutiful and decent man who knew he’d disappointed the woman he loved.

My mother and father's fights would rise and dip in volume several times before they were over. “What the hell were you doing down there, Alan?” Graham
and I heard my mother shout, near the beginning. My father shouted something back at her, which was rare.

When my parents were done fighting that night, my mother came downstairs. Graham had had a bowl of cereal and gone up to bed, but I’d stayed in the family room, reading a book on the couch. The game hens lay on the table, cold and untouched.

“Want some soup?” my mother said to me. Soup always helped her calm down, and the fact that she was offering to cook for me again was a good sign. It didn’t matter that she was just heating the contents of a can. What mattered was the person at the stove.

I sprang up to clear the table, and asked her what I should do with the game hens. She shook her head. “Throw them out,” she said. She hated waste, but it felt viciously good to toss all that food into the trash together.

As we sat and ate our soup, my mother apologized to me for ruining dinner. “But your father,” she said, and she told me about her issues with my father as a parent, not for the first time. It was their old fight. My mother felt my father avoided conflict and left her to be the disciplinarian all the time, so she became the parent we feared and he became the parent who was easy to love. She was right. I felt sorry for her, but I also felt sorry for my father, who would never be the fighter my mother wanted him to be.
For my mother, it was also about being the only woman in a household of men. “I've lived with men all my life,” she said. “I have a real problem with ungrateful males.”

“We’re not always ungrateful, Mom,” I said. “We show our appreciation in different ways.”

She shrugged. “Well whatever they are, they’re pretty lousy fucking ways to show you appreciate somebody,” she said, and we laughed.

But it was the act of cooking, in the end, that brought all that out for her, and it wasn’t until I started cooking seriously for others that I understood that this wonderful, generous act also involves, even requires, vulnerability, and that vulnerability can quickly turn to anger and resentment. I’ve always admired my father’s pacifism, but when I hosted my first dinner party I suddenly knew how easy it’d be to find myself entrée in hand, mid-windup.
Cooking with Katie

I had a high school sweetheart named Katie. We dated for most of our senior year, but agreed to split up before college. On our last night together we watched West Side Story in Katie's basement and lay on the couch and cried. Katie, who was going to study bio-mechanical engineering at the University of Rochester, said we were performing apoptosis, when a cell naturally programs itself to die. “That's the last science-nerdy thing you'll have to hear from me,” she said, then reached for another tissue.

By mid-September of our freshman year I was sure we'd made a terrible mistake, by mid-November I was miserable, and when I saw her at Thanksgiving I said something. She took a few days to think about it, but at last she called me in tears from Rochester to say she couldn't do it. We hung up and if she hadn't fallen
we probably would have moved on and perhaps even have become uncomfortable friends, the way exes sometimes do.

But she was elected president of the sailing club, and she was late for the first meeting she would run, and as she stepped off a snowy pathway into a building she slipped on the slush that’d been tracked in all day and her head slammed against the bottom of the doorframe.

A week later—right before Christmas break—she sent me a message, strewn with typos, on Facebook: “Hey. I fell. Not sure what’s going on but I was in the hospital for a few days. Thought you should know.” I called her but didn’t reach her. A few hours later she texted me. “Sorry,” she said. “Can’t talk.”

She meant it literally.

We didn’t cross paths during the flurry around Christmas, so it wasn’t until early January, about a month after the incident (as she calls it), that I saw her face to face. Katie’s always had a string bean physique—her mother’s a five-foot-tall Japanese woman, her father, six-four and of German descent—but that winter she was emaciated, sallow-skinned, brittle-looking. She could speak again, but barely, and words slipped her mind all the time. It was like a macabre game of Mad Libs.

I forget most of what we said or tried to say to each other that afternoon. Some time later, as Katie was recovering her strength, her doctors told her she’d missed her temple by less than an inch when she fell, and a direct hit could have resulted in permanent deafness or death. She should consider herself lucky, they
said, that she’d escaped with merely a concussion—though it was, they admitted, a rather severe one, the full effects of which only time would tell.

One effect was clear from the beginning, however: her memory had been destroyed.

She had no memory of the actual incident, or the days following it. Over the next few months, she pieced together what had happened: the captain of the swim team had found her and rushed her to the hospital. He’d stayed by her side all night and the next day, and, after she was released from care, taken her out for coffee and declared his love for her. That was their first date.

Her productive short-term memory was also shot. For over a year she had to set alarms reminding herself to go to class, do her laundry, and eat meals.

Her long-term memory of the two years preceding the incident had been wiped clean.

Two years preceding her fall meant all her memories of me—vanished. No one could tell her whether those memories still existed somewhere in her mind, or if she’d ever gain access to them again.

But Katie kept journals, and as she leafed through them and her Facebook account and text messages, she discovered me, her ex.

This is not 50 First Dates, or any other rom-com. This is real and painful and very messy.

*   *   *
Against the advice of her parents and doctors and pretty much everyone who’d known her before her concussion, Katie went back to Rochester that spring. She took a reduced course load, dropped out of sync with her BME major, and found herself struggling to keep up in even the fluffiest of classes.

Meanwhile I mooned away over her from Wesleyan, concocting horridly sappy White Knight fantasies involving fateful kisses and blooming returns of memory and health. I sent her a message on Facebook every Monday, with an uplifting song or cute animal video embedded; I called her often but reminded myself not to smother her; I tried to be there for her, even if there was an eight-hour car ride away.

We each made it through the semester, in our own way, and when summer arrived we both returned to our hometown, Wellesley, MA. Two weeks into break, Katie invited me to spend a weekend with her and her parents at their house in New Hampshire. She and I spent the days reading on the porch, working on a puzzle, playing Ping-Pong in the basement, and watching movies. We flirted with each other and things felt natural and easy between us except for the fact that they obviously were not.

In the midst of all that was food. Katie hadn’t had an appetite or experienced hunger pangs of any sort since the incident, which was part of why she’d become so dangerously thin. Her mother force-fed her plates piled with eggs and sausages and soup bowl-sized parfaits in the mornings—anything that was high in proteins and fats and energy. While Katie choked down her
breakfasts, her father, happy to have another hungry carnivore around for once, dashed into town and returned with bags full of meat. We had half-pound burgers for lunch the first day, followed by baby-back ribs for dinner; the next day we ate sausages with onions and peppers and leftover burgers, and that night we had grilled Cornish game hens. I was compelled, between bites, to tell them about my mother’s own attempt at game hens.

That night we also had asparagus, which to Katie and her parents’ astonishment I’d never tried, and which to my astonishment I enjoyed. To this day, I grill asparagus with great pleasure, dressing it up or following a simple recipe, such as

**MR. LULY’S GRILLED ASPARAGUS SPEARS**

1. For four servings, brush 1 lb. asparagus spears, trimmed, with extra virgin olive oil and season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste.

2. Grill the spears over high heat, turning occasionally, until seared all over, about 5-7 minutes. Serve warm with a dot of Dijon mustard on the side, if desired.

I came home happy but confused, and then Katie avoided me for several weeks. When I confronted her, she confessed that the weekend in New Hampshire had confused her as well.

“I think,” she said, choosing her words with care, “I think when I fell and forgot you I convinced myself that meant I was over you. And I never really let myself think about if that was true or not, because I needed to move forward, I needed to make it through each day. But that weekend...it was like déjà vu or
something. I had no memories of you but I was so comfortable around you, and I knew that’s what it must’ve been like with us.”

“I still love you,” I said.

That’s when she told me about the sailing captain, that she was going out with him and had been ever since the incident. Eventually she found out just how creepy he was, and a while after that she broke up with him, but right then his proximity and puppy-dog attachment to her were what she cared about. “He tells me he loves me every hour,” she said. “It’s comforting, it’s supportive, it’s what I need, Taylor.”

I didn’t say anything.

We saw each other a few more times and then I went off to camp for two months. When I came home Katie was about to leave for Rochester. I invited her over to have dinner with my family before she left.

“I’m happy to have her,” my mother said to me, “but you be careful around that girl.”

“Okay, okay, Mom,” I said. My mother had been worried for months that I was letting Katie jerk me around. “You give yourself so fully,” my mother said at one point. “That’s a wonderful gift, but it makes you so vulnerable. I don’t want to see you get hurt. She’s not in any state to be in a relationship right now, and you need to buck up about that and move on, mister.”
I would argue with her, and part of me believed she was wrong, but I knew that at the very least she had a point.

The morning of the dinner my mother left me money and a note saying she hoped the day went well and that she’d be home in time to help cook. I pored over my cookbooks after breakfast, looking for something suitable. It would be the first time I’d ever cooked for Katie—I hadn’t really started cooking until after our relationship ended—and I wanted to make something so good and filling that it would remind her what it felt like to be hungry and to be satisfied.

I chose Argentine steak kabobs with a chimichurri sauce, which I’d made several times before, grill-roasted ears of corn, and small bowls of ice cream topped with my family’s hot fudge sauce for dessert. Katie came over in the afternoon, after I’d bought the ingredients, and by the time we’d laid everything out on the counter I knew that no matter how good the food was, our dinner would be a disaster.

Katie’s doctors had recently changed her medicines, and she was having what she called a “bad brain day.” She moved as if underwater, her eyes blank and dull, her voice affectless. She talked only when I asked her a question, and most of her answers were monosyllabic. The Katie I’d known, who teased and talked and laughed easily, delighted with the world, seemed to be gone.

When my mother got home I was cubing the meat and Katie was chopping carrots. My mother, who’s always had fun with Katie, often at my expense, made a show of rushing across the kitchen to give Katie a hug. Katie
turned slowly and limply raised her arms. My mother pretended nothing was wrong. She hurried upstairs and changed out of her work clothes, then came back to the kitchen, rolled up her sleeves, and started chopping an onion next to Katie.

“Isn’t he the worst?” she said to Katie. “He never trusts anyone else with the meat.”

“No,” Katie said. She put the carrots in the food processor. “He doesn’t.”

We ate outside at our picnic table, with the drone of an August evening all around. It was terrible. My mother was bright but stiff, my father fumbled along with questions about Rochester and the BME program, and Graham contributed a belch or grunt when the moment inspired him. I made sure Katie ate a good amount of food and tried to enjoy what was on my own plate.

When Katie had given me a brief hug goodbye, I readied myself for whatever I-told-you-so my mother had prepared, but instead she gave me one of her own fierce hugs.

“Oh, Taylor,” she said, and my father patted my shoulder awkwardly. There was nothing to say.

After that Katie and I tried to stay close by baking together—or rather, by her baking and me showing off my ineptitude in the kitchen. “I just grill,” I would say, when she said she thought I was Mr. Chef now over at Wesleyan. “I don’t do this whole oven thing.” It gave us something to do with each other and to laugh over and it was a way for her to be tangibly productive. She didn’t eat most of
what she made—she still had no appetite—but she decorated and displayed and forced her food on other people happily. For me it was painful to be in the same room with her again, to smell the familiar scent of her hair, when she tossed her head unconsciously, to watch her turn her phone facedown on the counter when the current boyfriend texted her, so that I wouldn’t see—but it was what I wanted, a pain I embraced.

Some of her memories began to flit back in at some point, but it remains impossible to tell how much she’s still missing, other than a lot.

My sophomore year at Wesleyan I met Julia, who would become my college sweetheart, when we moved into the Outing Club House together. Julia and I really started dating this fall, but before that there was interest and romance and long-distance communication and rejection. For the past three years, we’ve lived either in the same house or on different continents.

("Will you ever have a normal goddamn relationship?" my mother’s asked me. I have no answer for her yet.)

As Julia and I have fallen in love, Katie and I have drifted apart. We’re almost uncomfortable friends now—the way exes sometimes are. But every once in a while, when we’re together, something clicks in Katie’s mind. “Taylor!” she shouts, and I nearly drop the tray of cookies I’m putting in the oven. “I’m having a memory!” Then we play a joyous sort of MadLibs, like an older couple trying to remember what movie they saw last night.
This winter, Katie remembered going to a Celtics game with me. “Tall people!” she said, hoping I’d fill in the rest. “There were tall people! And they were wearing green!” When I realized what she was talking about, I opened Facebook and pulled up the photo we’d taken at that game, which we’d both used as our profile picture for a time. I watched her live through the memory, nervously anticipating what she would find there: we’d first said I love you to each other at that game.

Katie’s face was scrunched with effort, but her eyes were bright, and every few seconds she smiled. Then she paused, and I knew she’d found it. “Oh,” she said. “Oh.”

She looked at me, but I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She’ll say it again now, I thought, or I will. Julia didn’t matter. Wesleyan and Rochester didn’t matter. Katie had sucked me back into that moment with her.

Neither of us said anything. The intervening years lay between us, no matter how transparent they seemed right then. The Katie I’d known really was gone, and wasn’t coming back.

The timer dinged. The cookies were done. Katie insisted we decorate them. When they’d cooled and we’d frosted them, Katie handed me a cookie and took one for herself. She knocked hers gently against mine.

“Cheers,” she said, and giggled.

“Cheers,” I said.
The Shabbos Goy
Or: How the Jews Are Paying for What No One Else Would

This year for Hanukkah I spent 160 of Sheldon Adelson’s dollars to feed thirty-two pounds of pulled pork to over seventy of my friends at Wesleyan. My mother told me later that her Jewish friends, when they heard the story, were appalled, and if I ever did anything like that again could I please at least make brisket?

So I did.

At midnight on the Friday after Thanksgiving break I fired up the smoker and slapped two twelve-pound briskets on it, which I served, eighteen hours later, to nearly thirty people. Once again, Sheldon paid, and this time everybody was happy.

Sheldon Adelson, one of the worst people in America, has been my saving grace this year. He has solved the problem of funding.
During the first week of the fall semester I met with the chair of the Student Budget Committee to discuss whether they’d consider funding my new student group, CarnivorWes. I outlined several ways the club could work, hoping one would be fundable. Perhaps we’d be a tight-knit club, designing and cooking meals together a few times a month. Or we’d be open and simple and appeal to as many students as possible by serving burgers at the base of Foss Hill on Fridays. Or—

“No,” she said. “No, no, no.” (I’m paraphrasing.) “The SBC doesn’t fund food. We could pay for fuel, but that’s it.”

I told her charcoal was the least of my worries, financially speaking.

“You could pitch it as a cultural tasting,” she said. “But it can’t be a full meal, and good luck convincing the board that barbecue is cultural. It’s usually the Asian and Asian-American clubs that do that—you know, Korean late night, that sort of thing.”

So, no.

For a few weeks, I was naïve enough to think that if I invited a bunch of my friends for a dinner I’d cooked, they’d show up and willingly pay five or ten dollars. I put together a list of forty friends’ email addresses, drafted an invitation, and sent it off.

“Please RSVP,” that first email said.
“Please please please RSVP,” said the second, a week later.

“IF YOU DO NOT RSVP AND PAY I WILL NOT FEED YOU,” said the third.

I lost only sixty or seventy dollars in those three weeks; people did pay, eventually, and enough showed up to cover the bulk of the costs. But I discovered that getting students to open their wallets, even for home-cooked food they oohed and aahed over and stuffed themselves with, was quite a challenge. Getting them to RSVP was Herculean.

Perhaps if I’d invited people I didn’t know as well I would have been stricter and more successful in the whole endeavor, but feeding my friends was important to me—it was a pleasure to bring them all together for a little while, to see them eating my food in my house—I just turned out to be a lousy businessman.

But the hardest part was the uncertainty that lasted from shopping to serving, and which made the whole day irritating—would enough people show up? Would enough of them pay? How many people should I cook for? What the hell could I cook, on only five dollars a head? And why the fuck were people unwilling to pay ten?

I counted heads and dollars as soon as people started showing up. I called more of my friends if only a few were there, but then got worried there wouldn’t be enough for everyone if a wave of people came by unannounced.

It was anxiety-inducing; it was unsustainable; worse, it was costing me money.
Then I had a brief, haleyon hiatus from cooking for my friends: once a weekend for three weeks I was contracted to cater senior thesis film shoots.

Senior film majors who direct theses are each allotted two weekends in the fall to shoot their raw footage in its entirety. This means shooting days are long, often ten to twelve hours, and the thesis-maker is responsible for feeding the cast and crew.

One of my friends who was shooting a thesis approached me about being an extra in his film and then, after he’d eaten a few times at my place, about catering one of the meals on each of his two weekends.

Finally, I was dealing with one person who could pay me directly and fully and tell me reliably how many people would be there and which of them, if any, had food allergies or aversions.

It was bliss.

I gave Sam an estimated budget, which he okayed. I went shopping and nailed the estimate, and I cooked without worrying how many would show up—I had a captive audience.

Sam’s shoots were overnight and outside in late October, and the space-heater he’d rented from Home Depot was temperamental at best and a danger to everyone’s well-being at worst. After shivering through shooting from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. on a Friday night, I hurried home through the morning fog, crawled into bed, and was up at 7 to prep the pork. That day I made hickory- and apple-smoked
pulled-pork sandwiches with crunchy coleslaw and a Carolina red sauce, cherry-smoked pulled-chicken sandwiches with an Alabama white sauce, grilled Portobello sandwiches with a balsamic aioli, rustic cornbread with Cheddar and jalapeños, a simple salad with herbed croutons, and chocolate covered strawberries.

I delivered all this in covered tin-foil trays around 8 p.m., when the cast and crew had already been at work for a few hours. I set up in one of the crewmembers’ apartment, and when Sam gave the word everyone ran over from the set. They stood in the cramped kitchen rubbing life back into their hands and taking deep, excited breaths of the warm and fragrant steam curling up from the trays.

I unveiled it and they demolished it, and they were the most appreciative group of people I've ever fed. Sam's lead actress, a dark-haired, fragilely beautiful woman living and struggling to make it in New York, looked at me above her pulled-pork sandwich, which she held away from her body so she wouldn't stain her dress.

"Whoever you marry is going to love you," she said.

"That's the idea," I said with a laugh.

The next week Sam had a smaller group, and I reined it in accordingly. I made pita pockets with beef köfta or falafel, cucumber salad, and tahini sauce, twice-fried Cajun-spiced French fries, and sea-salt fudge with a bottle of port
wine for a celebratory dessert. People were no less cold and no less appreciative, and Sam’s cinematographer, who was shooting his own thesis the next weekend, pulled me aside to ask if I’d cater for him.

I agreed, and the next Saturday afternoon I delivered pepper-crusted, hickory-smoked beef tenderloins prepared in a ginger–whiskey–soy sauce marinade, buttery mushrooms (which cost me my one and only fire alarm of the year), two trays of salad with feta, walnuts, and grill-roasted peppers and onions, warm focaccia bread brushed with sea salt and olive oil, and two cranberry-ginger crumbles to a house on Home Avenue. Most of the cast and crew ate there, while some of the food was driven to the crewmembers already on set. Reportedly, the young woman entrusted with the tray of salad picked it clean en route.

After all that though the catering opportunities dried up and I was back to square one. That’s when Sheldon stepped in and saved the day, via Birthright and my good friend Randy Linder.

During the catering hoopla some of the people I’d fed earlier in the semester, the same people who’d bitched and moaned about having to pay five dollars for my cooking, began to bitch and moan that I wasn’t feeding them, and I bitched and moaned right back that I’d start cooking for them again as soon as I could count on them to RSVP and pay up.

“Oh,” many of them said. Or, “Well have you thought of this—”
Randy put the kibosh on all that when he told me about NEXT Shabbat dinners. Like many of my friends at Wesleyan, Randy had gone on a Birthright trip to Israel, but he’d discovered a perk no one else I knew had. For anyone from the U.S. who participates in Birthright, there’s an auxiliary program that funds Shabbat dinners as a way of fostering community. The only real rules are that each ex-Birthrighter is entitled to a maximum of six meals and that meals hosted by the same person must be spaced at least one month from each other. The food doesn’t have to be kosher, guests don’t have to be Jewish, and no receipts are necessary. A picture of the meal’s attendees, with at least some of the food served visible, suffices. NEXT Shabbat reimburses on a per-head basis, for up to sixteen people: ten dollars a head on high holidays, fourteen a head anytime else. And Randy—as well as many of my other friends, it turned out—was happy to set up a NEXT Shabbat meal and eat it, but had no desire to cook for sixteen-plus people. I, of course, did, and so I became the Shabbos Goy.

The tone of my emails changed immediately: all I had to say was that the food was free, it was first come, first served, and that we simply needed sixteen people and a camera in one place at one time to pay for it all. Friends and acquaintances came out in droves—for chili, turkey, pork tenderloins, beef tenderloins, fish wraps, beer-can chicken, and, of course, pulled pork and brisket. Several more of my friends went to Israel this winter break, so I have a new rotation set up for the spring, when the weather will be nice and the seniors,
sentimental—for what better way is there to bond with each other than over a nice, free, Shabbat meal in the Fountain backyards?

At first I felt no twinges of guilt or failed responsibility when I served non-kosher food to non-kosher folks on Sheldon’s dime. He didn’t require it, and my meals were often bringing together far more than sixteen people—it all seemed in the spirit of the program. But as I continued to fund dinners through the Birthright program, one of my friends threatened to boycott them.

“You know Adelson’s a fascist trying to destroy American democracy, right?” he wrote in response to one of my invitations. “And he’s not just a nutcase—he’s a dangerous nutcase.”

“It’s not like I’m giving him money or voting for his puppets,” I wrote back. “I’m cooking dinner.”

“What about making one meal kosher, then?” he replied.

Ah, I thought. That’s interesting. But I agreed; his emails had left me a little unsettled about the whole affair...not unsettled enough to refuse Sheldon’s money—I’m a college student, after all—but still.

So, in honor of my concerned friend and for anyone who’d like to make kosher barbecue, here are some ideas:

MANISCHEWITZ BURGERS

1. Cook 2 c. Manischewitz wine with 1 Tbs. brown sugar over medium heat until reduced to ½ c., 20-25 minutes. Let cool to room temperature.
2. Combine \( \frac{1}{4} \) c. of the wine reduction with 1½ lbs. ground chuck. Season with kosher salt and black pepper. Form the meat into four patties.

3. Grill the burgers over high heat, brushing every few minutes with the reserved glaze, until they reach your desired doneness.

4. Lightly toast challah hamburger buns on the grill. At the same time, grill 8 tomato slices, brushed with olive oil and kosher salt, for a few minutes, until charred and tender.

5. Assemble the burgers with the grilled tomatoes, a bed of arugula, and a slice of turkey bacon. Serve warm.

**GEFILTE FISH TACOS**

1. Buy or make your own gefilte fish. 1 lb. makes four servings.

2. Grill the gefilte fish over high heat, 4 minutes for the first side and 1 minute for the second. Use a sheet of tin foil to prevent sticking.

3. Remove the fish from the grill. Briefly toast 8 tortillas.

4. Flake the fish with a fork, divide among the tortillas, and garnish with salsa, hot sauce, sliced red onion, sliced cabbage, lime juice, cilantro, or your favorite kosher taco toppings.

**LOTSA MATZAH MEATLOAF**

1. Combine 2½ lbs. ground chuck, 2 c. matzah crumbs, 1 c. chopped onion, 1 egg, and 1 tsp. each Worcestershire sauce, granulated garlic, dried tarragon, kosher salt, and black pepper, and form the mixture into two loaves.

2. Grill the loaves over indirect medium-low heat until they reach 155 degrees, about 50-60 minutes. Let the loaves rest for 10-15 minutes. Enjoy warm on rye bread with horseradish sauce.
“God is dead,” said Nietzsche, but asceticism lingers on...

These days, dietary ascetics are everywhere. Invite a healthy group for dinner and someone will be vegetarian, another will have forgotten his Lactaid but be saved by his neighbor, who’s brought extra, and now especially someone will eye each dish you serve and ask, as if you’re trying to poison her, “Is there any gluten in that?”

Of course she just discovered her gluten sensitivity last week, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t expect you to know that and cook the whole meal accordingly. Meanwhile the vegan is clamoring about hidden animal products in your cooking, such as the charred bones that make sugar so unnaturally white, the pescetarian who claimed to be vegetarian is asking for seconds on the salmon, which is totally screwing up your portions, and the one person you counted on to...
be omnivorous is turning up his nose at a dish you served him just a month ago, because he’s gone paleo.

As you bustle about, you glance with beatific grace toward the table in the corner where you’ve sat your friend with the deadly tree-nut allergy next to the two nice young women with celiac disease and the gentleman with Crohn’s. In your head you’ve begun referring to them as the Table of Honor, and you gladly cater to their needs because they are actually needs.

If you’re as kind as Laurie Colwin, you’ll no doubt want to develop dishes that offend none of your guests and even please quite a few of them.

I am not as kind as Laurie Colwin.

If I’m going to the trouble of cooking a meal for many people, I damn well deserve to get some pleasure out of it, and serving piles of raw vegetables and other inoffensive dishes (if they exist anymore) is not my idea of pleasing the cook. So I channel my mother, from when she fed three fussy boys every night: I tell people if they don’t like something they don’t have to eat it, and if they don’t like any of it they can go hungry at my house, or not show up at all.

If you’re like me, you’ll make what you want to, and that will have meat and bread and vegetables and possibly dessert, with enough differentiation between the dishes, if you’re in the mood for it, that ascetics of all sorts can find at least one thing which satisfies them.
The more often you do this, the more you'll notice the desires that bubble below the dietary surfaces in people all around you, and the more you notice them the more you'll want to coax them forth and set them free, those repressed appetites.

For that I suggest barbecue.

There really are no substitutes for pulled pork or smoked brisket in the whole culinary world, and most people know or at least sense that. When you make it well and serve it steaming, big, meaty barbecue is something people drool over, and the diet breaker par excellence. I've seen my best friend take her first bite of red meat in years (a chateaubriand—a worthy choice), I've had someone say to me, as he wiped brisket juice from his chin, "You know, I'm really a vegetarian," and I've even weaned a few of my friends off vegetarianism entirely.

The nicer part of me considers this a positive, constructive hobby: when a vegetarian delights in my barbecue, I have, quite literally, given him more to eat. The darker side of me loves to play the tempter, the seducer, the tester of wills. I don't shove meat into vegan/vegetarian faces, nor bread into gluten-sensitive ones, but by putting it all on the table I challenge them, and when they break and join the carnivores jostling at the front of the line I know it's my cooking that has broken them; they've transgressed their own codes for me.

If you, too, like to play devil-in-the-toque, and want to go all-out about it, there's nothing better than pork shoulder, freshly pulled and made into
sandwiches. Soft white buns piled high with meat, doused in homemade barbecue sauce and topped with tangy coleslaw, will, in one fell swoop, destroy for a meal every vegan, vegetarian, pescatarian, gluten-sensitive, Kosher-, and Hallal-observant person in the area. (Lactose-intolerant folks, damn them, are unworried by this, so make some irresistible corn bread as a side dish.)

If you're willing to put in the work, here is how you can make

DIABOLICAL PULLED-PORK SANDWICHES

1. Whisk together 2 c. unsweetened apple juice, 1 c. water, ½ c. salt, and¼ c. each light brown sugar and Worcestershire sauce. Using a kitchen syringe, inject the liquid into four boneless pork shoulders (each approximately 8 lbs.).

2. Combine 4 Tbs. light brown sugar, 8 tsp. each paprika and kosher salt, and 4 tsp. each chili powder, granulated garlic, mustard powder, and black pepper in a bowl. Dust the pork shoulders with this rub evenly.

3. Prepare a smoker, using hickory or apple wood, or a combination.

4. Transfer the pork shoulders, fat side up, to the smoker, and barbecue for 5 hours. When the internal temperature of the shoulders has reached 160 degrees, wrap them in heavy-duty tinfoil and return them to the smoker for another 3-5 hours, until they reach 190 degrees.

5. Remove from the smoker and let rest 1 hour, still wrapped in foil.

6. While the shoulders rest, whisk together 6 c. ketchup, 3 c. each unsweetened apple juice and apple cider vinegar, ¾ c. each light brown sugar and tomato paste, ¼ c. molasses, ¼ c. Worcestershire sauce (or more, to taste), 2 Tbs. mustard powder, 1 Tbs. each hot sauce and kosher salt, and 2 tsp. black pepper in a large pot. Simmer over medium heat and cook 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the sauce reaches your desired thickness.
7. At any point in the day, combine 24 c. shredded cabbage, 4 halved and thinly cut English cucumbers, 8 c. each shredded carrots and thinly sliced sweet onion, and 4 c. each thinly sliced red- and green bell peppers in a large foil pan. (A food processor is a godsend for this.) Whisk together 1 ⅓ c. each cider vinegar, canola oil, and granulated sugar, 4 Tbs. kosher salt, 2 Tbs. celery seed, and 2 tsp. black pepper, and cover the vegetables with this dressing. Drain in a colander before serving. (The earlier you make this, the more the vegetables will wilt in the marinade. If you like your slaw tender, make it early, but I recommend preparing it only an hour or two in advance.)

8. Return to the pork shoulders, unwrap them, and shred them by hand or with two forks, discarding any lumps of fat or gristle. Minimize waste by finding friends who happily eat warm strings of fat, but keep your eyes on the pork shoulder.

9. For maximum diabolicalness, prepare each sandwich with all the fixings before serving. A few tips: don’t get fancy with the buns, and go heavy on the sauce, light on the meat. If you do so, this recipe can serve a hundred.

At the end of the day you’ll be exhausted but sated, and have had the unusual pleasure of feeding an entire neighborhood food most of them have sworn off in some form or fashion.

Best of all, they won’t hate you for it, in fact they’ll thank you. They may hate themselves, for a little while, but that is not really your problem.

So it’s fun to tempt your friends who have quirky restrictions, but in the end they’re your friends and if they don’t eat your cooking there’s no harm done on
either side. But sometimes you don’t get to choose the people you cook for. Sometimes you have to serve someone who pisses you off—and what then?

If it’s family, grin and bear it, grit your teeth, tough it out. (The Germans have a wonderful word for this, of course: durchbeissen—literally, to bite through something.) Cooking when there is no competition—at the holidays, for example—gives you great power over your guests, and you should wield that power carefully.

Sometimes, though, someone you’re not related to goes too far, and then you’re allowed a transgression of your own code.

Kingswood Camp, where I work in the summers, has a small, close community: the directors are loved, the counselors and kitchen staff are loved, the campers are loved. And then there is Jay. Jay’s hung around for years because he was friendly with the director’s son, when they were younger, but thinks he’s been around so long due to his own merits, and consequently has begun to think he runs the place.

A few years ago he began complaining that there weren’t enough quality vegetarian options available at every meal for him and his wife. The kitchen staff rolled their eyes but did the right thing and threw some roasted vegetables his way.

But this past year, Jay deeply insulted Delia, the woman who’s cooked most of Jay’s meals since he started whining. At an administrative meeting Jay cut
off Delia as she was trying to say something, and afterward he remarked that Delia shouldn’t be at those meetings because she “couldn’t speak English.”

Delia does have a thick Spanish accent, but her English is just fine. She also makes cakes for the campers who have summer birthdays, and is the kind of woman who, on a day off, runs away with the prize at a bar-night popsicle eating contest while her husband enjoys himself in the audience; she is everybody’s favorite. So what Jay said quickly got back to Delia, and that night she cried furiously in the kitchen.

Later that summer she and I went to a bar together, and when we’d had a few drinks Delia gleefully told me how she’d given Jay what he deserved, in spades, every day, and without him knowing it.

No one I’ve fed has merited this yet, but if by some chance you must cook for a vegetarian who has truly hurt you, I recommend you whip up a plate of DELIA’S REVENGE

1. Fry tofu, any style, in bacon grease. This one’s best served hot.

But when you’re not trying to feed a crowd or take revenge on someone—when you’re cooking for a small group of friends, some of whom have true food allergies—it’s pleasant to be accommodating.

Sometimes it’s more than pleasant—sometimes it is grand.

This spring, my friend Em’s Crohn’s flared up, and she was placed on the SCD, or Specific Carbohydrate Diet, which targets and starves the
gastrointestinal bacteria that cause inflammation. It’s a bizarre and totalitarian diet. (As an example: apple juice is not allowed, but apple cider is.)

She’s responded to her personal hardships by becoming warm and wonderful and a delight to be around. She has a great wide smile and an endearingly ear-splitting laugh (trust me), and she bustles through life with youthful maternalism. She seemed undeterred, even in the face of this latest flare-up, but was at a loss about what to cook for herself.

She asked me to cook for her, and I was happy to oblige. We combed through my cookbooks, searching for recipes that met her restrictions or easily could be modified to do so. For the entrée we settled on a whole barbecued chicken, which I rubbed and stuffed with lemon and garlic, seasoned with salt, pepper, and paprika, and smoked on the grill over hickory and cherry wood chips. We discovered that a 3-lb. butternut squash, roasted until tender, puréed, and then heated in a saucepan with \( \frac{1}{2} \) stick of butter, 2 Tbs. honey, \( \frac{1}{2} \) tsp. each salt and cardamom, and \( \frac{1}{4} \) tsp. each ground cloves and black pepper, is bright and rich and like cotton candy for adults. Add to that carrots parboiled until fork-tender and then grilled in a nutmeg-butter glaze, and you’ll have made a monochromatic but Crohn’s-friendly meal.

Em and I invited two of our mutual friends, and the four of us had an intimate feast on Wesleyan’s quiet campus. We followed dinner with Bananas Foster, substituting honey for brown sugar, and lounged about on the couches for several hours, cheerfully moaning about our swollen stomachs.
Em stuck around to help with the dishes after the others had left. “This diet’s been really hard,” she said, in a quiet moment. There was no end date and no clear purpose for it yet; her doctors just wanted her to try it for a while before they decided how to proceed. “I might need more surgery,” she said, “or I might not, but then I’d be on this for years. I’m not sure which’d be worse.” She managed to laugh and I smiled, knowing she didn’t want pity.

She hugged me tightly at the door. “This was the best meal I’ve had since the flare-up,” she said. “The only meal, really. I can’t tell you how happy it’s made me.”

“Likewise,” I said.

There are few moments when I’ve felt better about myself as a person.