



2019 Highly Commended

The Joy of Cooking

by

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The Joy of Cooking

When I think about my dad, he is standing in the kitchen, gazing into space. There are all the ingredients for dinner, chopped and ready in neat piles. On the kitchen counter, a cookbook is propped up on the stand. His white hair is combed neatly to the side and he's wearing a brown and white checked shirt, stretched over his round stomach and tucked into a pair of beige, wrinkled chinos. He has ribbed socks on and blue worn slippers, because he hasn't left the house all day, and he's holding a cup of tea which he has reheated three times. He turns to me and says, Hey sweetheart. His eyes look big and sad, magnified by his round glasses, but he smiles slightly. Then he sighs, sits down, picks up his book and waits.

He told me once that he didn't remember his parents ever talking at the dinner table. He grew up in 1950s suburban Ohio, and while he spoke longingly of summer trips to Szlyay's farm for the finest sweet corn, or to Country Maid for their famed butter pecan ice cream, in his own house there was little ceremony over eating together. My grandmother Patty would prepare things like sliced beef with boiled vegetables or spaghetti sauce over bread with iceberg lettuce, and they'd eat over the five o'clock news. Then, even when it was still light out, Patty and the children would go to bed.

If she ever used recipes, maybe for birthday cakes or barbecues, it would have been from *The Joy of Cooking*, an American classic. My dad had his own copy, which still lives on the kitchen shelf at home in Bath, gathering dust between Claudia Roden and Moro. It's a hefty thousand-page book, its once white

cover now stained and tattered, the word 'Joy' standing out in big, red cheerful letters along the spine.

There are hundreds of pages that have never been touched. Recipes and instructions that now seem strange or old fashioned or just completely disgusting: a chapter on dinner party etiquette, a salad with marshmallows, an illustrated 2-page spread on how to skin a squirrel or boil a porcupine. But other pages are splattered from decades of use. Recipes for peanut butter cookies, floating island, the roast ham we always had at Christmas. There are his own additions, symbolic of his new life in England; notes translating Fahrenheit to Celsius, a folded *Guardian* clipping of Felicity Cloake's 'Perfect Pumpkin Pie' from October 2010. Dishes that were not his best or his staples, but brought back America when he missed it. Or gave his British children a taste of their American heritage.

It would have been his first cookbook, but it was not what taught him to love cooking. This he discovered during his second year at Harvard, moving into a thirty-person co-op where each night people took it in turns to cook for the group. A setting where the baby-boomer generation, brought up on TV dinners and *The Joy of Cooking*, found a new kind of eating culture. Here their Ivy League competitiveness met with their world travels and radical politics. Each night they had long, delicious meals, with each new day's cook trying to outdo the last. It was a setting in which my dad thrived, with his buzzing brain, weird sense of humour and newfound flair in the kitchen. I can imagine him at the end of the long table, shouting out something about how Bob's enchiladas tasted salty as Castro's ass. I can see a table full of long-haired spectacled hippies burst into raucous laughter, my dad trying hard to suppress a smile, Bob throwing a loaf of bread at his head.

After Harvard, he moved to London to study at LSE, and then went on to become a lecturer in sociology. He moved to Bath, married, had two children, my older siblings Kimber and Rachel. He became even better at cooking, now with his own family to feed and impress. But then his marriage began to fall apart. He met my mother, who had two children of her own, Emma and Matthew. They fell in love, he left his wife, and they had two more children – me and my sister Pandora. For a while we all lived together in a big mad house. All the while a darkness inside him sprouted, tearing him to opposite poles. Manic, relentless highs. Crushing, suicidal lows. He denied that there was anything wrong, but to dull this pain he turned to drink. And by the time he was 40, he was drinking beer at breakfast.

By 45 he'd tried to kill himself with a car exhaust and been to rehab. The university forced him into early retirement after he started going to work drunk, or not at all. When he drank he was cruel and crazy. His first daughter Rachel wouldn't see him for years. Emma and Matthew escaped to live with their father.

For the next fifteen years, the older siblings came and went, sometimes to visit and sometimes to the rescue, trying to help like the parents they wished ours could be. Together we endured the long steady bouts of depression, when dad slunk around the house like a ghost, saying only hello and goodnight, followed by intense bouts of mania where he couldn't sleep or sit down, making best friends with whoever happened to knock on the door or pass the house.

During this time, he learned to control his drinking to some degree and could stop for months, or even years. When he picked up again, it was always when my mother was away. And as she taught four hours away at Warwick university and was the only one making any money, she was away a lot.

Then there were times when he was normal. When he took his medication and read, or gave us sociology lectures over the dinner table. When it looked like he might never drink or dip again. When we would bask in the promise of how calm and sweet and brilliant he could be.

Whatever his state of mind, on most nights by 6pm, the house would be warm with the smell of slow cooked-onions, or something roasting. There would be a mellow jazz CD in the background. An hour and a half later, the kitchen would be spotless and dinner would be ready on the table.

In a letter, the American poet Robert Lowell described coming down from one of his manic episodes: 'Gracelessly,' he writes. 'Like a standing child trying to sit down, like a cat or a coon coming down a tree, I'm getting down my ladder from the moon. I am part of my family again.'¹ My dad's own ladder from the moon led back down to the kitchen table. However glumly he peeled the potatoes, or manically he banged pots around, it was his way to bring order, to redeem himself, to express the way he felt inside.

During those joyous meals at his Harvard co-op, I don't think he could have ever imagined how important cooking would become in his life. That instead of lectures or academic papers, his life would be held together by shopping lists, school pick ups and meal times. That making dinner for his family would be what got him through the day.

He didn't seem to know how to talk about his feelings, and he died when I was twenty one, before I had the courage to ask. Instead, I know him through the smells and tastes of his many moods.

¹ Robert Lowell, Words in the Air (New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 2010) p. 214.

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In spite of his inner chaos, or perhaps because of it, my dad was a man of strict routine. Each morning he woke up at five. He shaved, he showered, he made a pot of tea. He laid out two small bowls for my sister and me, before starting on our packed lunches, methodically assembling the mayonnaise, ham and lettuce, between two slices of sweet, white bread. Then he sat down in his chair and he read his mystery novel, and when the paper came, he read the whole thing. At seven thirty he turned on the oven, waited ten minutes for it to heat up, put in two chocolate muffin, and called upstairs.

‘Wake up girls!’ he’d yell, his hoarse American voice piercing our sleep. My sister and I would ignore him. Five minutes later, when the muffin was almost ready but not quite, he would poke his head around our bedroom door.

‘Girls,’ he would say, this time gently. ‘Time to get up.’

When we finally emerged, puffy-faced, our eyes still stuck together, the muffins were on plates by the bowls, and the milk was on the counter ready for the cereal.

On a Saturday morning, he’d start thinking about the shopping list. The only time I ever saw him using a computer as a child was to print out that list. It was a two page Word Document, the first laid out in three columns, in order of the aisles in the supermarket and the second with a table running from Monday to Sunday, where he planned the weekly meals.

He’d get out his cookbooks and check the cupboard and the fridge, cross referencing them with the meal plans and the printed list, ticking and crossing off ingredients. The whole routine could take hours. He would start with Fridays

and Saturdays. These were for trying out new recipes. A Claudia Roden tagine. A stew from the River Café cookbook. Or old favourites: Steak with thin, crispy rosemary potatoes and a red wine sauce. Cumberland sausages with winey mushrooms and cheesy mashed potatoes. Sundays were for slow cooked stews or some kind of ragu. Mondays were simple meals. Pasta with peas and ham, or roast beef hash. From Tuesday to Thursday my mum was usually away at the university, and so he cooked something that would last the whole midweek.

Minestrone was the ultimate midweek meal, and so for my sister and I, his lows were defined by it. We hated, hated, minestrone. Not that it tasted bad. Carrots, celery, macaroni pasta, in a beany broth. Parmesan grated on top. My mum hardly got a chance to have it, so it was one of her favourites. A delicious nourishing meal. What was not to like? But for Pandora and I, it was everything depressing about our life without her. It was dinners when my dad didn't speak, and Pandora and I bickered over the table. It was the same meal, the same dull, quiet, evenings over and over, when he went to bed straight after, and I listened out for the rest of the evening for the clink of bottles. It was the way he sat and put the spoon into his mouth, how his head hovered over the bowl and he stared down into the table like he was somewhere else. How he always cooked enough in case by Thursday he couldn't get out of bed at all.

If he'd started drinking, Minestrone was his sour, stale smell and pale glassy eyes. It was my sister and I trying to eat it as quickly as we could, the broth and boiled vegetables burning our tongues, him slurring as he ate, the oily soup glistening around the edges of his mouth. Or it was us eating silently without him. Often, we came home from school to find a whole pot of it on the

cooker, the kitchen clean and two bowls for us ready on the counter, dust motes catching in the last of the sun through the skylight, him already drunk in bed.

I remember coming home from school one time to find the pot on the hob. I remember taking the lid off to study it, the tiny cubes of carrots and celery, a week's worth of food, every part of which he had ticked off on his list, had gone to the supermarket to buy, and so carefully chopped. It smelt sour and cloying. I could already taste it in my mouth, like the memory of old sick. I held it up and slopped the whole thing in the bin.

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Often, my dad's moods would align with the seasons. After a long, glum winter of batch soups and stews, the first warm day of spring sent him reeling. He'd start stomping around, pointing and barking orders, with a great big smile on his face. All around the house you could hear the sound of his chair screeching against the kitchen tiles as he got up, sat down, got up, sat down, over and over.

For these times, there were barbecues. When late spring set in in Ohio, he said, you could smell the smoke and char of hamburger meat and frankfurters up and down the street for months. So on the first bright, warm day of the year my dad wheeled out the barbeque from the shed, and began to rifle through his huge barbecue cookbook, reacquainting himself with the pages most browned and sticky with meaty grease.

There were Mexican barbecues, with spicy pork tacos, tomato salsa and sweet onions. There were American barbecues, with potato salads, and burgers and hot dogs. We spent a lot of summers in Istanbul, where my mother grew up, and her family still lived. Here we had long, balmy barbecues outside, with lamb kebabs, colourful cous cous salads, and all kinds of dips presented in blue

kutahya bowls. As the guests swanned in – journalists, diplomats, historians, or earthquake specialists, friends of my mothers, or people my grandparents had picked up on the way – my dad would be standing at the barbecue, a non-alcoholic beer in one hand, a Super Soaker water pistol in the other, which he would spend the night spraying at stray cats with glee.

There was the one he did in Bath for my mum's 60th Birthday. It was meant to be a last minute surprise but he had bought all the food early, and she had noticed the mounds of burger buns spilling out of the cupboard. He invited a random group, people my mother said should never be in the same room together. It was in the middle of a heat wave. He told them lunch would be served at one o'clock. He spent the morning pacing around, gardening, and cleaning out cupboards. At twelve thirty nothing was done. And then at one, when everyone was arriving, he decided that he needed to mow the grass. He took off his top, and started mowing, while the guests came and sat below, struggling to talk beneath the roar of the mower, their faces pricked with sweat. Pandora, seizing the moment, went inside to start cooking. A while later, when she'd prepared everything but the meat, he emerged from the grass, red and topless, his body steaming with sweat, his hair stuck up in white spikes.

'Oh Frank, this is delicious,' someone said when the food was brought out. A potato salad with celery and mustard. A big Greek salad, reds, greens and purples, layered on top of one another with feta in chunks on top. Herby burgers with cheese and pickles. Kebabs with blackened peppers, onions and aubergine.

He was beaming. Pandora piled herself a big plate of food and ate without a word.

At his last ever barbeque, he had all his children together. All day he had been insufferable, ordering us around, stomping up and down the garden, pulling at things with a cigarette in mouth. But the summer had been good. The best he had been in years. He'd bought new cookbooks, tried out long elaborate recipes. My mother hadn't had to go to the university, so they'd spent long afternoons reading and talking in the garden, sharing long, secret looks.

Then my mum had to go away for a week and my dad relapsed, pulling himself together before she got back. He was quiet for a few days, then he started to point and shout again, and then he decided we were going to have a barbecue. He was going to make steak tacos, with guacamole, spicy charred onions and homemade salsa. He told Rachel and Kimber to come too. He wanted all his children to be there.

Kimber said he had a train to catch at 4pm. But by 3pm there was still no sign of the barbecue, just Dad in the kitchen, banging and swearing and ordering people around. Only Pandora had the patience to help him in the end.

'No you don't slice it like that, you slice it like this!' we heard him say.

'Whaaat!' Pandora said.

'I SAID YOU DON'T SLICE IT LIKE THAT, YOU SLICE IT LIKE THIS!'

'No Dad, I didn't mean what as in a question, I meant 'what' as in 'whaaaaat!' He stormed out to the top of the garden past us to smoke and fix a bird feeder.

'He's completely insane,' Kimber said to my mother.

'He's just been really looking forward this barbecue,' my mother replied.

Kimber put his head in his hands.

The food, in the end, was delicious. But Kimber missed his train. We ate in a tense rush, our fingers clenched around our tacos, and made faces at each other

while he chattered on. But he didn't notice at all. He went on and on, grinning with a mouth full of food. 'All my children together!' he kept saying. 'All my children! For ten years it never happened. Can you imagine? And now you're all here? And you might be a bunch of assholes, but goddamn it I love you. I love you all so so much!'

There's a photo that my mum took at the end. We are sat around the garden table. My dad in the middle, bending behind the umbrella pole, his four children around him. There are empty plates, and our expressions are strained and exhausted, but my dad has a wide, sly smile and is reaching one hand behind Kimber's head, making bunny ears.

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Of all the meals, the one we loved the most, that helped us forgive him the fastest, was sausage pasta. A spicy, creamy ragu, with tomatoes, rosemary, wine, and Cumberland sausages. He had adapted it from a recipe, but now it was his. First he slow cooked onions on a low heat. While the onions cooked, he measured the herbs with teaspoons and laid them out in small piles on a wooden chopping board. A mound of red chilli flakes, a bigger mound of fresh, chopped rosemary, a tiny pile of flaked salt and three whole bay leaves, lying in a straight line side by side. When the onions were ready, he turned up the heat, crumbled in the sausages with the wine and the herbs on a high heat, just enough to brown them slightly. Then he put in four tins of chopped tomatoes and cooked the sauce down for a few hours. Before serving, he melted in a mound of parmesan and double cream.

The pasta was for Sundays or birthdays. It was for after a relapse when he wanted to win us over. Or when any of my brother and sisters came to stay. It

was a meal to say, well done, or don't worry. Welcome back or so long. Sorry or I love you. He always made double and we always ate it all. I would be shocked at the amount my older siblings could consume. Three, four, five extra helpings. We would always finish the last of it with our fingers, hands batting against each other to get that last creamy crumb of sausage and my dad would watch, so pleased.

However frustrating or depressing he had been that day, we were always happy over a bowl of sausage pasta. Friends and family would call up for the recipe. My own friends would invite themselves for dinner if they knew he was making it. It was his one thing that you could rely on. It was his biggest achievement. If his ladder back from the moon led to the kitchen table, it was made from sausage pasta.

It was also the last meal he made me, the night before I left for year in California. It had been my 21st birthday party the night before. I was hungover, sad and scared about the future so I hadn't packed yet. My dad was making goodbye sausage pasta, but it was also sorry, and I love you sausage pasta. Just before my birthday he had relapsed and now I was leaving for a year, and my sister was going to university soon, and my mum would be going back to work. He would be completely alone in the house, and already his hold was slipping.

We sat around the table together and tried to savour it. It felt like an important moment. Like someone would say something meaningful that we all needed to hear, and he would realise what he was living for, and it would change everything. But I was tired and I had a headache. We all hardly spoke, shovelling the pasta in our mouths. The tears started streaming down my face and my dad looked over at me, like he knew too. But through a mouthful of sausage pasta, he said: Sweetheart, why are you crying?

Not long after that the ladder started slipping. He stopped being able to pull himself together. My mum said that it scared him. He was losing grip on the things that had managed to keep him just about floating most of his life.

After I left for California, my mother and Pandora had to go to Istanbul as my Grandma had fallen over and was in a coma. My dad drank the whole time they were away. Then, the day they were coming back, he called my mother, and told her that he had cleaned up, that he was sorry, that he was making sausage pasta.

When they came back the house was silent and dark. There was a bag of pasta on the counter, a chopping board with all the spices piled on top, the pot on the stove, the sauce half cooked. Cold pale onions and crumbled sausages, still half raw in the tomato sauce. He must have got to the part where you added the wine and drunk it instead. He must have stood there drinking it, while he put in the chopped tomatoes. And then he must have turned off the hob, taken the cooking wine with him, and whatever else he could find, and gone upstairs to hide.

Things were never the same after that. My sister went to university and he started drinking more, even when my mother was around. On Halloween, she came back from work to find another half-finished pot of sausage pasta sauce on the hob, and a full bowl of sweets for Halloween by the door. For the next week, he hid and snuck around and kept drinking. When Obama won the election, he stumbled down to kitchen at five in the morning and turned on the radio. He was wearing only boxers, his sallow face covered in stubble, his white hair stuck down around his head.

She was on her way out the door, off to Istanbul again for ten days because her mother was dying. 'I hope to hell you pull yourself together now because you're on your own,' she told him.

It was the last thing she said to him. When she came back, she found the final unfinished pasta and him collapsed, with soaked boxers and a bad head injury, empty bottles strewn across the floor. She called an ambulance, and they told her he'd had a stroke. He fell into a coma, and then a few days later he died.

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Because I couldn't stand to be in the kitchen with him, I never learned how to make any of these recipes. If I ever tried to cook he would stand over me and tell me I was doing it wrong, start putting things I was still using away and wiping surfaces, or would just start making it himself.

'For fuck's sake, Dad,' I'd say, 'Let me do it.'

'Don't you talk to me like that!' he'd bark.

'Stop getting in my way!'

'You're doing it wrong!'

Finally I would scream, throw something and storm out of the kitchen.

But my sister was patient. She stood by in silence while he taught her to make the classics.

After he died, we never had minestrone or barbecues again. Now when I go home, the fridge is full of posh ready meals and mouldy vegetables. The counters look sticky, crumbs and tea stains over the wood. There is a faint smell of cat food, even though the cat went missing years ago. And my mother never makes a shopping list, or checks the fridge before she goes. It is her little rebellion. There

is still a whole shelf of glass jars. Jams and pickles, capers, and things like that. Things I know that my mum would never have bought. That no one will ever use now, but no one can bring themselves to throw away.

Perhaps the biggest change is that now my mum has a wine subscription. Every month, she gets a new case of wine. 'What can I get you?' she asks as soon as we arrive. 'A Prosecco maybe? A glass of Malbec?' Sometimes I question how quickly she gets through the box, but then I remember how before she wouldn't dream of having more than one bottle in the house. How even then she would often have to hide it in the bathroom cupboard under a pile of towels.

Still, the legacy of sausage pasta lives on. Pandora makes it on birthdays, or Sundays, or whenever we are all together. We put on the same kind of jazz he always played, and the kitchen fills with smells of rosemary, garlic and red wine. Pandora ensures that all the counters are clean and tidy before serving, while the rest of us sit at the table, drinking wine, or stealing from the salad. Then when everything is ready, she puts the pot on the table, opens the lid, and if home can be found in a moment or a feeling, then that is it.

The dish itself is not quite as good as my dad's, but she's getting there. When I tell her that the pasta to sauce ratio is all wrong, and she tells me to shut up, slamming my plate down on the table, it is like he is there with us too.

My mother pours out the remainder of the wine and we clink our glasses. Then, feeling angry and sad and full of joy, we eat.

About the Author

Helen Longstreth is a writer currently living in London. She studied previously at the University of Manchester, The University of California, and recently completed the MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths where she was awarded runner up for the 2019 Pat Kavanagh award. She has worked as the assistant editor for the online magazines *POSTmatter* and *Motherland*, and is now working on a novel.