

FROM SOMETHING TO DECLARE.

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Picky Eater

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I met my husband in my late thirties, and when we were beginning to date, I was surprised by his preoccupation with food. "Can we go out to dinner?" was, I believe, the second or third sentence out of his mouth. That first date, we ate at a local restaurant, or I should say, he ate and talked, and I talked and picked at my food. "Didn't you like your stir-fry?" he asked me when the waitress removed my half-eaten plate.

"Sure, it was okay," I said, surprised at this non sequitur. We had been talking about India, where he had recently done volunteer surgery. I hadn't given the food a thought—except in ordering it. Being a picky eater, my one criterion for food was, is it something I might eat? Once it met that standard, then it was okay, nothing to think or talk too much about.

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Mostly, if I was eating out, I didn't expect food to taste all that good. This was a carryover from my childhood in a big Dominican family in which the women prided themselves on the fact that nobody could put a meal on the table like they could put a meal on a table. You went out for the social purpose of seeing and being seen by your friends and neighbors, but you never went out to have a good meal. For that, you stayed home or went over to a relative's house, where you could be sure that the food was going to be prepared correctly—that is, hygienically—and taste delicious.

Perhaps this bias had to do with the fact that I grew up in the 1950s in a small underdeveloped country where there were very few tourists and, therefore, few eating establishments that catered to pleasure dining. The common comedores were no-nonsense, one-room eating places for workers, mostly male, who all ate the same "plate of the day," on long tables with small sinks and towels in a corner for washing their hands and toothpicks for cleaning out their teeth when they were done. Little stands on the street sold fried pastelitos or frío-frío in paper cones or chunks of raspadura wrapped in palm leaves, treats I was never allowed to taste.

Eating en la calle was strictly forbidden in my family. We came home from school at noon for the big dinner meal. On long trips into the interior to visit Papi's family, we carried everything we might need on the way, including water. It was dangerous to eat out: you could get very sick and die from eating foods that had gone bad or been fixed by people who had diseases you could catch. In fact, the minute any of us children complained we didn't feel right, the first question asked of our nursemaids was "Did they eat anything on the street?"

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My mother and aunts were extremely careful about food preparation. Had the vegetables been properly peeled and boiled so that no microbes were left lodged in the skins? Was the lettuce washed in filtered water? Since electricity, and therefore refrigeration, were not dependable, was the meat fresh or had it been left to lie around? During certain seasons in the tropics, some kinds of fish carry toxins—so that had to be taken into account as well. Had the milk been pasteurized? Had tarantulas gotten into the sugar or red ants into the cocoa powder? To get a healthy meal on the table seemed to be an enterprise laden with mythic dangers—no wonder a street vendor couldn't be trusted.

In short, I cannot remember ever eating out at a restaurant before coming to live in this country. The one exception was La Cremita, an ice cream shop that had recently opened up near the hospital. On Sundays, after we'd accompanied him on his rounds, my father took my sisters and me to La Cremita, where we picked out one small scoop apiece of our favorite helado. "Don't tell your mother," my father would say. I don't know if he was worried that my mother would accuse him of ruining our appetites before the big Sunday afternoon meal at my grandparents' house or if he was afraid she would fuss at him for exposing us to who knows what microbes the owners might have put into those big vats of pistachio or coconut or mango ice cream.

But even when we ate perfectly good, perfectly healthy food at home, my sisters and I were picky eaters. I remember long postmeal scenes, sitting in front of a plate of cold food, which I had to finish. One "solution" my mother came up with was a disgusting milk drink, which she called engrudo. Whatever my sisters and I left on our plates was

ground up and put in a mixer with milk. This tall glass of greenish brown liquid was then placed before us at the table. We were given a deadline, five minutes, ten minutes. (It seemed hours.) At the end of that time if we had not drunk up our engrudos, we were marched off to our rooms to do time until my father came home.

In defense of engrudos, I have to say that my sisters and I were very skinny and not always healthy. One sister had a heart ailment. Another had polio as a young child. I myself lost most of my hair at age three from a mysterious malady. The doctors finally diagnosed it as "stress." (Probably from having to drink engrudos!) My mother worried herself sick (literally, with bad migraines) that her children would not make it through childhood. In a country where the infant mortality rate was shockingly high, this was not an irrational worry. Of course, most of these young deaths tended to be among the poor who lacked proper nutrition and medical care. Still, in my father's own family, only one of his first ten siblings survived into adulthood.

And so childhood meals at home were battlegrounds. And even if you won the dinner battle, refusing to clean your plate or drink your engrudo, you inevitably lost the war. Weekly, my sister and I got "vitamin shots," B12 and liver, which really were for "our own good." But to this day, every time I go to the doctor and have to have blood drawn, I feel a vague sense that I am being punished for not taking better care of myself.

Once we came to this country, the tradition of family meals stopped altogether. We were suddenly too busy to eat together as a family. Breakfasts were catch-as-catch-can before running down the six or seven blocks to school. We

kept forgetting our lunches, so Mami finally gave up and doled out lunch money to buy what we wanted. What we wanted was the "junk food" we had never before been allowed to eat. My sisters and I started putting on weight. I think we all gained five or ten pounds that first year. Suddenly I had leg and thigh and arm muscles I could flex! But what good were they when there were no cousins to show them off to? As for dinner—now that Papi was working so hard and got home late at night, we couldn't have this meal together, either. My sisters and I ate earlier whenever the food was done. When Papi got home, he ate alone in the kitchen, my mother standing by the stove warming up a pot of this or that for him.

In a few years, when my father's practice was doing better, he started coming home in time to join us for dinner. Actually, he had shifted his hours around so that, instead of staying at the office late at night, he opened at five-thirty in the morning. This way, his patients, many of them Latinos with jobs in *factorías*, could see the doctor before going to work on the first shift. Since Papi had to get up at four-thirty, so he could dress, have breakfast, and drive the half hour or so to Brooklyn, we ate dinner the minute he got home. As soon as he finished eating, my father would go upstairs and get ready for bed.

My mother and my sisters and I stayed behind at the table, Mami eating her Hershey bars—she'd pack in two or three a night, but then put Sweet'n Low in her cafecito! Now that her daughters were in the full, feisty bloom of adolescent health, she no longer worried over our eating habits or got insulted if we didn't eat her cooking. She had hired a Dominican maid to do the housework, so she could spend the

day helping Papi out at his oficina. Lunch was take-out from a little bodega down the street. It was safe to eat out now. This was America. People could be put in jail for fixing your food without a hair net or serving you something rotten that made you sick to your stomach.

The family plan had always been to go back home once the dictatorship had been toppled. But after Trujillo's assassination in 1961, politics on the Island remained so unstable that my parents decided to stay "for now." My sisters and I were shipped off to boarding school, where meals again became fraught with performance pressures. We ate at assigned tables, with a teacher, a senior hostess, and six other girls. The point was to practice "conversational skills" while also learning to politely eat the worst food in the world. Everything seemed boiled to bland overdone-ness. And the worst part of it was that, as in childhood, we had to eat a little serving of everything, unless we had a medical excuse. My father, who was still as much of a spoiler as back in his La Cremita days, agreed to let me fill in the infirmary form that asked if we had any special allergies or needs. I put down that I was allergic to mayonnaise, brussels sprouts, and most meats. No one, thank God, challenged me.

In college, at the height of the sixties, I finally achieved liberation from monitored eating. Students had to be on the meal plan, unless they had special dietary needs. A group of my friends applied to cook their own macrobiotic meals in a college house kitchen, and I joined them. I soon discovered vegetarianism was a picky eater's godsend. You could be fussy and high-minded. Most meats were on my inedible list already, and mayonnaise was out for macrobiotics who couldn't eat eggs. As for brussels sprouts, they

were an establishment vegetable like parsnips or cauliflower, something our parents might eat as an accompaniment to their meat.

All through my twenties and thirties as a mostly single woman, my idea of a meal was cheese and crackers or a salad with anything else I had lying around thrown in. I don't think I ever used the oven in my many rentals, except when the heat wasn't working. As for cooking, I could "fix" a meal, that is, wash lettuce, open a can, or melt cheese on something in a frying pan, but that was about the extent of it. The transformations and alchemy recorded in cookbooks were as mysterious to me as a chemistry lab assignment. Besides, once I got a soufflé or a lasagna out of the oven, what was I supposed to do with it? Eat it all by myself? No, I'd rather take a package of crackers and a hunk of cheese with me in my knapsack to work. For an appetizer, why not a cigarette, and for dessert, some gum?

When I had friends over, a meal was never the context. Some other pretext was—listening to music, reading a new poetry book together, drinking a cup of coffee or a bottle of wine, munching on some more cheese and crackers. I'd clear off the dining table, which I had been using as my desk, to hold this feast of bottles and boxes and packages and ash trays.

Had I had a family, I would no doubt have learned how to cook persuasive, tasty meals my children would eat. I would have worried about nutrition. I would have learned to knit the family together with food and talk. But just for myself, I couldn't be bothered. Cooking took time. Food cost money. I was too busy running around, earning a living, moving from job to low-paying job. Sometimes I lived in boarding-

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houses where I didn't even have access to a kitchen. I grew as thin in my twenties and thirties as I had been as a child. My mother began to worry again about my eating. Maybe I had a touch of that anorexia disease American girls were increasingly getting?

"No," I protested, shades of engrudos lurking in my head. I preferred to think of myself as a picky eater. But probably all these bad eating habits and attitudes are "kissing cousins." Eating is dislodged from its nurturing purpose and becomes a metaphor for some struggle or other. My own experience with food had always been fraught with performance or punishment pressures. No wonder I didn't enjoy it, didn't want to deal with it, didn't want to cook it, or even serve it. (My one waitressing job lasted less than a week. I kept forgetting what people had ordered and bringing them the wrong things.)

Of course, there was a way in which my whole apprehensive approach to food fell right in with the American obsession with diets and fear of food additives and weight gain. As a child, I had never heard of diets, except as something that people who were ill were put on. It was true that women sometimes said they were watching their figure, but it was vain and rude to stick to a diet when someone had gone to the trouble of putting some tasty dish on the table before you. The story is still told of my coquettish great-grandmother who was always watching her "little waist." She would resolve to keep a strict diet—only one meal per day, but then, approaching the table, she would invariably be tempted by an appetizing dish. "Well," she'd say, "I'm going to have lunch but I'll skip supper." At supper, she again couldn't resist what was on the table. "Well," she'd say, "I'm

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going to have a little supper, but I'll skip breakfast." By the time she died in her nineties, she owed hundreds upon hundreds of skipped meals.

And so, when at thirty-nine I married a doctor who was very involved with food and food preparation, I seemed to be returning to the scene of earlier emotional traumas to settle some score or exorcise some demon. A divorced father with two teenage daughters, my new husband had learned to cook out of necessity. Since his boyhood on a farm in Nebraska, he had always been involved in growing food, but the responsibility of nurturing his two girls as a single parent had turned him into a chef. Enter: one picky eater.

"What would you like to eat tonight?" my husband would ask me over the phone when he called me at lunch from his office. "I don't know," I'd say. Did I really have to make up my mind now about what I was going to eat in seven or eight hours?

With all this food planning and preparation going on around me, I started to worry that I was not pulling my share. One night, I announced that I thought we should each make dinner every other night. My husband looked worried. The one time I had invited him over to my house for dinner before we were married, I had served him a salad with bottled dressing and a side plate of fried onions and tofu squirted with chili sauce. This is a story my husband likes to tell a lot. I am always aggrieved that he forgets the dinner rolls, which I bought at the Grand Union bakery, something I would normally not do, since I much preferred crackers as "the bread" to have with my dinner.

But he liked doing the nightly cooking, he explained. It was his way to relax after a day at the office. Why not just

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help him out? I could do the shopping, which he didn't like to do. It turned out that he had to be very specific about what he put on the list or I would get "the wrong thing": baking powder instead of baking soda, margarine instead of butter. "You're so picky!" I would say, not always immediately aware of the irony. One stick of yellow grease was very much like another.

I also helped with making dinner, though he gave me so little to do, beyond washing the lettuce and keeping him company while he did the rest, that I began to suspect he didn't trust me even to help. Finally, we settled that I would be in charge of making the desserts. For months we had brownies, which were really quite good when I remembered to put the sugar in.

Meals, which had been something I did while doing something else, now took up big blocks of time, especially on Sundays, when Bill's parents came over for dinner. First, we had soup, and then when we were done with the soup, several platters made the rounds, and then there was dessert. Then, coffee. During all these courses there was much talk about what we were eating and other memorable variations of what was on the table. If you were to take one of those pie statisticians use to show percentages and were to cut out a serving that would represent how much of the time we talked about food, I would say you'd have to cut yourself at least half the pie, and probably a second serving before the night was over. It took so long to eat!

True, when I was a young girl, the weekly dinners in my grandparents' house were long, lingering family affairs, but that was true only for the adults. Once we children got through the chore of finishing what was on our plates, we

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would be excused to go play in the garden while the grown-ups droned on over their everlasting courses and cafecitos. (No engrudos when we ate at somebody else's house!)

But now, I was one of those adults at the table of a family that was obviously bound together, not at the hip, but the belly. Traditionally, my husband's people have been farmers, intimately connected with food—growing it, serving it, preserving it, preparing it. As we lingered at the table, I listened, not understanding at first what the fuss was about. What was the difference between a Sun Gold tomato and a Big Boy? Why was sweet corn better than regular corn? What was the difference between a Yukon Gold and a baking potato? What did it mean when they said raspberries were setting on? And how come the second crop was always bigger, juicier?

Eventually, I realized that if I ate slowly and kept my ears opened, I could learn a lot. I also started to taste the food, instead of swallowing it, and slowly I developed new criteria—not just, would I eat it or not? Did the flavors work together? Was the polenta bland or the bread chewy enough? As my own cooking repertoire expanded beyond brownies, I discovered the wonderful pleasure of transforming a pile of ingredients into a recipe that nurtured and sometimes delighted the people I love. It was akin to writing a poem, after all.

Now, eight years into sharing our table, my husband and I have developed a fair and equitable cooking arrangement. I am in charge of certain recipes—and not just desserts. I've even learned to cook certain meats for him and his parents, though I still don't eat them. For holidays, when the house is humming with beaters, hissing with steamers, beeping with

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oven timers, I feel the pulse of happiness whose center is the kitchen.

But I admit that years of picky eating don't vanish overnight. I still worry when we go out if there will be anything in the category of things-I-eat. There are still times when I walk back from the kitchen and spy my husband and his family gathered at the table, talking away about the difference between this week's crust and last week's crust or how you can get the peak in those whipped potatoes or individual grains in the rice, and I wonder if I belong here. Will I ever stop feeling as if I've wandered into one of those Norman Rockwell scenes of a family sitting around a table laden with platters and pies? But each time I've put down what I had in my hands—my contribution to the feast—and looked around, I've found a place set for me at the table.

Briefly, a Gardener

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~~From my study window I watch my husband out on his tractor plowing under the row of sweet corn that has done so well for him this summer. Despite his medical training, farming is his first love. May through September he comes home from the office with a gleam in his eye, kisses me a quick hello, races upstairs to change into his work clothes, and goes to catch the last few hours of light, to plow or harvest or carry water in the bucket loader from tree to tree when there's a drought.~~

~~I've tried to share his passion with him, just as he has tried to share mine. Many a weekend morning, he has sat before a new manuscript with strict instructions to be "critical," to tell me exactly what he doesn't like. Often the manuscript comes back to me with a few spelling errors corrected~~