

Cooking Outside the Lines:

Memoir of a College Epicure

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Prologue: The Possibilities of An Empty Plate

It's 2006, and I start college in a month.

More importantly: I own plates.

They're nestled in a series of cardboard boxes in my closet: four dinner plates and four saucers, white with a border of cheery colored rectangles. There are also four white bowls with blue rims, a full set of silverware, a can opener, a mixing bowl, four tumblers in various colors, and four ceramic mugs.

The last time I had my own dishes, they were toys, tiny plastic things meant for tea parties. Although I suppose there will be nothing stopping me from hosting tea parties in Ann Arbor.

There are so many firsts ahead of me that thinking about it makes me kind of nauseous. The future is getting closer all the time, but I still can't see it: who I'll live with, how I'll pass my time and my classes, who my friends will be. How I will somehow, for the first time in my life, make a home that is not where my parents are.

I still can't quite believe that I've graduated high school, that I don't have to go back, but these plates and bowls are proof that I'm at the edge of something new. I hold a saucer to my cheek, thinking that wherever I'm going in the years to come, the dishes are going with me. I will be eating off these plates in my dorm room, in my first apartment—I could even still have them when I get married, when and if that might be. The plates and bowls are cool to the touch, surprisingly lightweight, but they feel sturdy in my hands. I have been told they will not break.

I. Childhood: Carob-Spelt Cake and Veggie Club Sandwiches

In a way, I never had a choice; my life was always going to be shaped by food. We all have our own personal mythologies. They are the stories we find ourselves listening to and telling again and again, because we believe they explain something about who we are, how we see the world, and how things got to be that way.

When I was about three, I started getting suddenly and mysteriously sick two or three times a week. There was no predicting when it would happen. I would be fine for days, with no symptoms whatsoever—playing, singing, eating a snack—but the next night would find me sniffing and coughing, almost too congested to breathe, until finally, inevitably, I started throwing up. It happened so often that we kept a bucket by my bed at all times, and one of my earliest memories is staring into its dingy yellow depths, smelling burnt rubber and feeling my stomach about to unhinge. No medicine helped.

“She’s allergic to dust,” the doctors would say, or “Maybe the feathers in her pillow are giving her a reaction,” and so my mom would wipe down my room, bag up my stuffed toys, clean the furniture, buy air filters, and replace all my bedding, only to discover me hunched over the bucket again, heaving.

“Nothing seems to be working,” my mom would tell them. She wasn’t convinced dust was the problem, and anyway, wasn’t it kind of weird that every time I drank milk, I’d get a red welt wherever it had touched my skin?

They insisted that it was coincidence.

Did they have any advice on how to stop all the 3 a.m. vomiting?

“Look,” they told her, “sometimes these allergic kids, they just get sick all the time. There’s really nothing you can do about it.”

But there *was* something she could do: she changed doctors. Then she changed doctors again. Finally, she ended up in the office of physician number three: Doctor Hrdlicka, a man of few vowels, and many cutting-edge notions about the human immune system. Doctor Hrdlicka, renegade allergist.

She started by relating my symptoms, the measures she’d gone to in order to dust-proof the house, and ended with the nagging doubt that had persisted despite being shrugged off by two separate medical professionals.

“I just keep thinking maybe she shouldn’t be drinking milk,” she told him. “I mean, if it’s irritating her skin, I feel like maybe—I don’t know—it’s not good for her insides?”

These days, Mom kind of laughs when she tells this part of the story.

“He just looked at me like I was God’s own fool. And he said ‘*of course* she shouldn’t be drinking milk! What’s wrong with you?’”

The verdict was in: I had food allergies.

In this enlightened age, MedineNet.com reports that roughly 1% of adults and 3% of children have at least one diagnosed food allergy. A rough understanding of the concept has seeped into our culture. Tell a waiter or a chef that you “can’t have” a particular ingredient, and they will understand that you aren’t being picky or difficult, but simply trying to avoid an evening of congestion and vomiting. However, this was back in 1990, when nobody had heard of such a thing, and even people with medical degrees

were confused by the concept of foods—nourishing foods, like milk and peanuts—actually making someone sick.

Here's what they didn't understand, in a nutshell: all healthy people have mast cells in their body tissue—especially the nose, throat, lungs, skin, and intestinal tract—as well as an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE for short) circulating through their blood. When functioning correctly, the IgE antibody identifies foreign substances and alerts the mast cells, which release the appropriate defensive chemicals. The problem is, sometimes, whether through heredity or random mechanism, some immune systems end up producing IgE antibodies against the proteins in foods. Peanuts or shellfish are tagged as a foreign invader, and suddenly a simple crabcake sends the body into a paranoid frenzy, triggering nausea, diarrhea, hives, breathing problems, or of course, vomiting.

In rare cases, the reaction can be even worse. We've all heard the horror stories of the kid who got an asthma attack from being in the same room as a peanut butter sandwich, or the lady who died because the chef at a restaurant accidentally served her salad using a fork that had been contaminated with shrimp. In cases of extreme sensitivity, it can be tricky to even diagnose a food allergy, since any contact with the suspected culprit could produce a deadly reaction.

There are a number of ways to identify food allergies, from blood tests to simple deduction. One common—and relatively safe—method is a skin test, where a tiny drop of the essence of a particular food is placed on the skin, which is then scratched with a needle. If the scratch puffs up and turns red, then it becomes clear that IgE antibodies are at work, and the patient is allergic to the given food. It was through a skin test that we learned the extent of my allergies, back in 1990.

I had tested positive to eggs, milk, wheat, yeast, corn, soy, and sunflower seeds.

When I tell the tale to friends, they tend to interrupt me here.

“Wait, say that again?”

I recite the list once more, with the ease of someone who spent years relaying this information to various teachers, waiters, and classmates. It was an old refrain, familiar and almost comforting, like a nursery rhyme: *eggs milk wheat yeast corn soy sunflower seeds*. “No bread? No dairy? Man, what did you *eat*?” my friends ask. “I would never survive without ice cream.”

The thing is, of course they would. If it was their only option, they could make do, the way that millions of Americans do every day. Humans are amazingly adaptable when they have to be, and it’s actually not that hard to convince a preschooler to stop eating things that make her physically ill. Compared to the agony of throwing up three times a week, it didn’t seem like a huge ordeal to give up rocky road.

Of course, that isn’t to say it was convenient. My immune system had managed to bar me from pretty much every staple of the common American diet, but surprisingly, the hardest to avoid was probably corn. In one form or another, the Midwest’s beloved crop has managed to invisibly infiltrate literally thousands of other foods. In his book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan describes the extent of our country’s corn addiction:

Corn is in the coffee whitener and Cheez Whiz, the frozen yogurt and TV dinner, the canned fruit and ketchup and candies, the soups and snacks and cake mixes, the frosting and gravy and frozen waffles, the syrups and hot sauces, the mayonnaise and mustard, the hotdogs and the bologna, the margarine and shortening, the salad dressings and the relishes and even the vitamins.

He concludes, somewhat ominously, “There are some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket, and more than a quarter of them now contain corn.” This may sound like an exaggeration, but the next time you’re at the store, pick up any processed food, find the nutrition information, and scan through the list of ingredients. Chances are very high that somewhere buried in the list will be either “corn starch,” “high fructose corn syrup” or “hydrogenated corn and/or soybean oil.”

The vast majority of Americans don’t know about corn’s many secret lives; they don’t have to, and maybe that’s okay. But life with allergies forces you to examine every piece of food you’ve ever considered putting in your mouth, and in the process, you gain a world of knowledge. Sometimes, this includes knowledge you never particularly wanted. I could read well at a young age, probably in part because I spent so much time speed-reading through lists of preservatives and additives. It didn’t bother me that I couldn’t eat Twinkies—those things contained some scary-sounding stuff.

There are other pockets of information you gain when you’re forced to abandon mainstream American cuisine. For one thing, food allergies often compel you to greatly expand the variety of ingredients you’re willing to try. You have no choice but to branch out, partly because you need to compensate for the things you’re not getting, and partly because you have to be very careful not to get too fixated on one particular dish.

In a cruel twist of fate (or is it irony?), eating too much of any food is a good way to develop allergies for it. Back in 1990, when Dr. Hrdlicka began his investigation into the foods that were making me ill, his first question for my mom was, “What does she eat the most of?” When my mom replied that I loved cheese and crackers, he predicted that,

in addition to the rash-causing devil juice some call milk, I would likely also be allergic to wheat. He was right, of course.

To prevent more allergies from emerging, I was placed on a special rotating diet, where no food could be repeated for two consecutive days. It wasn't enough to find a substitute for wheat or dairy—we had to find a lot of them. Luckily, there is an entire world of substitutes out there, a bevy of unknowns jostling in the wings, watching their more popular siblings hog the stage and waiting for their own chance to shine. And thus my family discovered the world of alternative foods.

Quinoa is a small, round grain with a nutty flavor. A staple of South American cooking for thousands of years, it has recently become more common in high-end gourmet magazines and restaurants. It cooks up like rice, and can be used in place of rice in nearly any dish, but unlike rice, it contains all the amino acids the human body needs to make its proteins. Quinoa flour can be used to make pancakes, which taste a little dry and potato-y on their own, but if you douse them in all-natural 100% maple syrup, they're actually pretty great.

Spelt is a close relative to wheat, close enough that for many people who can't eat wheat, it's not an option. Luckily, it was an option in my case, because spelt bread is delicious. Kamut, another alternative grain, can also be pretty tasty, especially as a puffed cereal. It's rumored to have been eaten in ancient Egypt and, as the packaging once proudly and ambiguously proclaimed, is mentioned in “some versions of the Bible.” Barley, in soups or cereals, was another mainstay. The only one I ever really hated was buckwheat, which simply has too strong a flavor to work as a wheat substitute—especially if you don't like the taste of tar.

Otherwise, for the most part, I was fine eating my weird foods. I learned to appreciate the pungent-yet-marvelous goat's milk cheese, as well as the warm molasses flavor of unrefined sugar cane, and also almond butter and cashew butter. (I wasn't allergic to refined sugar or peanut butter, but repetition bred risk, and Mom wasn't taking any chances.)

Lastly, and most importantly for my sweet tooth, there was carob powder—a bitter, earthy substance which can work as stand-in for cocoa, assuming you haven't had chocolate for a long time and aren't too familiar with the taste. The first time my mom baked a carob cake, my family sat around the table, chewing carefully before delivering a verdict. “It tastes like dirt,” said my dad. I didn't care—it was *cake*, and I could eat it without feeling sick. I was enchanted. Carob cake, slathered in canola margarine frosting, became my favorite treat, and any time I was headed to a birthday party or other cake-eating occasion, Mom would hand me a plastic-wrapped slice from her stash in the freezer. Sometimes she dyed the frosting green, for variety.

In the end, my food limitations actually had the effect of widening my diet. The rotational eating system meant that, unlike many young kids, I couldn't choose one or two foods as my favorite and ignore the rest of the culinary world. I didn't have the luxury of being picky—since there were so many things I couldn't eat, I was willing to try nearly any dish that wasn't going to upset my immune system. In fifth grade, one of my best friends was an extremely picky eater, a girl who lived off of bread and flat-out refused to eat vegetables. She didn't eat anything that wasn't beige. I remember being shocked that anyone would choose to live that way. Her self-imposed restrictions were far harsher than anything I had to deal with.

The allergies made me eat healthier, too, since corn ruled out all processed food, which in turn ruled out most junk food. Sometimes I would experiment—making nachos with goat cheese and canola-fried potato chips—but for the most part, I was more likely to munch on fruits, vegetables, or the hippie-ish all-natural snacks sold at Soup to Nuts, our local health food store. When Halloween rolled around, I still trick-or-treated, but it was more about the pursuit of candy, and less about actually eating the stuff.

There was a less tangible effect, too. American culture is largely based around eating, and the emotional connections tied to it. As a result, being on the outside of American food culture can place you on the outside of something larger. I suspect this is part of the reason why I'm so attached to the tale of my mysterious preschool-era illness. Growing up, everyone both fears and hopes that they're different from the other kids, and here I had solid proof that I really was an individual, since the punch line of the story was that milk was the culprit—*milk*, the very thing that we'd been told over and over was a dietary must for every growing child. It fed right into my self-centered, paranoid fantasies—and still does, to some extent. The exact thing that made everyone else healthier was making me sicker. It all made so much sense.

Being different, being outside of the system allows you to question it. The other reason I love that the milk anecdote is the way it champions standing up to authority. After all, the only reason I ever got better was because my mom listened to the advice of two different middle-aged, authoritative men with degrees on their walls and thought, 'This still sounds like bullshit.' It was a lesson I would have to take to heart, because not all adults fully understood the concept of food allergies, and they weren't always sympathetic about it.

In fourth grade, I went over to Jennifer Perez's house one afternoon to work on a project, and halfway through my visit, her mom popped in and offered us a snack. "Do you guys want some pizza?" she asked. I told her I was allergic to milk.

"Okay, do you want some macaroni and cheese instead?" When I pointed out that macaroni and cheese tends to also contain cheese, she rolled her eyes and snapped, "Well, what *can* you eat?" as if there were no other options, as if I'd willed my body into rejecting dairy just to be difficult. (In the end, I had some peanut butter and celery. It was very good.)

In truth, things already were considerably less difficult. The reason why the percentage of children with allergies is noticeably higher than adults is because people often grow out of their allergies. By the time I was annoying Mrs. Perez, I was down to only three forbidden foods: eggs, milk, and sunflower seeds.

I started consuming milk products again in seventh grade, and eggs soon after. The only allergy I never managed to lose was sunflower seeds, and to this day, if I have a bite of the wrong kind of granola or multigrain bread, the inside of my mouth begins to itch furiously, as though I were chewing on poison ivy by mistake. However, granola and multigrain bread are pretty easy to avoid, and so in effect at age 13, I suddenly found myself in a culinary world without limits, a world where I could pick up a menu and order nearly anything on it, with no concern except how it would taste. Pizza, cake, huevos rancheros, yogurt—the world was my oyster, an oyster I could eat with a side of cornbread if I so chose.

Three years later, I became a vegetarian.

I tell myself I gave up meat for ethical reasons, and to some extent this is true: you don't have to be a PETA member to be disgusted at the way factory farms treat their animals. At the same time, I understand that my background perfectly provided me with the mental framework necessary to go vegetarian. Now, instead of checking for whey or high-fructose corn syrup, I scan labels for beef tallow, chicken broth, and gelatin. Depending on the kind of restaurant, my menu choices can be whittled down to one or two items.

It's different, of course, because vegetarianism is a choice, a personal value. At the same time, any sense of moral superiority I might feel vanishes when I wonder if maybe the real reason I gave up meat was because I missed the weight of limitation, the good old days when conventional food wisdom was my enemy and I had to get creative in order to feed myself. Being a vegetarian offers similar challenges, with similar rewards. It was only after going vegetarian that I acquired a taste for sautéed portabella mushrooms, learned to truly love eggplant and chickpeas, and discovered the joys of a home-made veggie club sandwich.

Veggie Dagwood
Two pieces good, sturdy bread
Dijon mustard
Slices of sharp cheddar
Hummus
Strips of orange bell pepper
A handful of spinach leaves,
A big slice of ripe tomato
Thin slices of cucumbers
Assemble the ingredients in the usual fashion. If you need to, you can kind of use the hummus to anchor the bell pepper slices to the bread. The resulting sandwich will be about three inches tall, so be prepared to hear a lot of comments about Dagwood sandwiches, but the ribbing of your lunch companions will be worth it when you take that

first bite and experience the freshness of the vegetables against the tang of the cheddar and mustard.

The nouns might have changed, but the syntax is remarkably similar. People's reaction is sometimes the same, too:

“No meat? No chicken or beef, ever? What do you *eat*?”

Remembering years of substitutions, alternatives, and straight-out avoidance, the joy and triumph of putting together an amazing meal anyway, the excitement of happening upon some lesser-known but delicious new culinary solution, I answer with a smile:

“Everything else.”

III: Freshman Year: Zingerman's, The Eating Habits of Wolverines, and Operation Secret Pie

“Where are you going next fall?” This is all that adults ask me anymore, as if there is suddenly nothing else to ask, as if eighteen years of heartbreaks and triumphs and passions and hatreds have now been distilled into this single piece of information.

“U of M,” I say, and if the question-asker does not know me very well, their follow-up question is often something along the lines of,

“Oh, so you're a *Wolverine* now?”

When I applied to go to University of Michigan, I was unprepared for the change in phylum. Wolverines, also known as gluttons, quickhatches, or skunkbears, are nasty, aggressive creatures who have been known to chase down full-grown moose, but who are also perfectly content to subsist off of the rejected scraps of other predators. Simply put,

they are mean, smelly garbage-eaters. They also happen to be the mascot of my new school.

Apparently, people take college football rivalries very seriously around here. I have been told there are soon-to-be college students who decided on their university based solely on which team they wanted to root for. The Wolverine question is jarring for me, because I have been aggressively apathetic about all things athletic for my entire life. The idea of allowing the next four years of your life, and possibly your entire future, to be determined by your sports affiliation strikes me as lunacy. Personally, when it was my turn to pick a college, I gave my decision hours of intense, serious thought.

And then, when the time came, I made my choice based on sandwiches.

Perhaps an explanation is in order. When I was fifteen, my family moved from a small conservative town forty minutes from Chicago to a larger and even more conservative town forty minutes from Detroit, and I spent the next three years alternating between trying not to hate and reveling in my hatred of, Brighton, Michigan. There was nothing objectively wrong about Brighton—it was a quiet suburb with a pond, a high school, and a tiny Main Street, nestled in several miles of strip malls and big box stores. It felt as if it could've existed anywhere in America, and maybe that was the problem.

I didn't get a driver's license until my senior year of high school, partly because there didn't seem to be anywhere worth driving to. There wasn't much of a nightlife in Brighton. That little rectangular piece of plastic, once given, granted you the power to drive to a Meijer, an Applebee's, a Big Boy, or, if you were feeling fancy, a Panera's. I

had a hard time summoning much enthusiasm about the freedom to move from one mediocre chain to another.

I might have felt differently had I grown up in the area, but as it was, my perception of the place was not softened by any childhood memories of digging for worms, catching fireflies, or marching in the 4th of July parade. For me, Brighton was high school. That is to say, it was purgatory.

In comparison, Ann Arbor seemed like Utopia—a lively, open-minded city filled with places to go and things to do. I had never loved a physical location the way I loved Ann Arbor. It was a half an hour drive from where we lived, but on weekends, my parents and I would sometimes make the journey down US-23 for art house movies, people-watching, and Zingerman's.

Widely considered by the people who keep track of such things to be the second-best deli in America, Zingerman's is the culinary centerpiece of Ann Arbor. The entire restaurant is one-of-a-kind, from the set-up (housed in a pair of neighboring historic buildings as well as a heated tent in the winter), to the joyfully deranged artwork, to the amazing food. Crusty bread, slabs of aged cheddar, stone-ground mustard, ripe tomatoes—the sandwiches at Zingerman's have the power to change my opinion of humanity. In the same way that a masterful book or movie makes me believe in human creativity, an astonishing meal reminds me that people are capable of unimaginably beautiful things.

Zingerman's also endears itself to me by having an entire section of its deli menu devoted to vegetarian sandwiches, as well as a number of meat-free salads. This list includes not one, but three shockingly delicious, stand-on-you-chair-and-cheer-it's-so-

good options. There's the Rodger's Big Picnic, with its aged cheddar, spicy mustard, marinated portabella slices, and asparagus spears that are forever rolling off the grilled farmbread but totally worth it. There's also the Mediterranean-inspired Gemini Rocks the House, which is so good that even my non-vegetarian father has been known to choose it over Reuben upon occasion—but then, what carnivore could judge him after tasting Gemini's mix of fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, and homemade pesto? Lastly, the Cyprus Salad, which combines mixed greens, kalamata olives, tomato, red onions, lemon zest, and grilled halloumi (a firm, salty sheep's milk cheese) into a refreshing, colorful storm of flavors.

Simply put, I tasted perfection in Ann Arbor, and I knew that I wanted to be a part of that. Becoming a Wolverine was really a small price to pay.

August comes, and I move my plates to my first dorm room, located in the East Quadrangle, an old brick building originally constructed in the 1940s. I have opted to enroll in the Residential College, or RC: a school-within-a-school which places a strong emphasis on foreign language study, learning communities, and creativity. Also, because many of our classrooms are in the same building where we sleep, you can show up to class barefoot in your pajamas.

It is still hard to believe that I'm living in Ann Arbor. After spending the last half of high school pining for this place, it is strange and wonderful to walk through the Diag on a warm fall day and think that in some way, this is "my" city.

I had worried that living away from all of my friends and relatives would be lonely and weird—and it turns out I was right. It is most assuredly lonely and weird, at

least for the first few months. The dorms are full of freshmen in the same situation, and initially we all buzz around each other, making the same asinine small talk (“What’s your major? Where are you from?”) with every stranger that we meet in the hopes that after a large enough number of interactions, we will somehow find a group we can belong to—if not by our winning personalities, at least through sheer random chance.

Neither my new roommate Jane¹ nor I are terribly social people, and although we attend some of the RA’s optimistic mixers and activities—especially the ones that involve free ice cream—we spend a lot of time in our room, quietly hiding from the relentless surface conversations and forced smiles of our more outgoing peers. Jane plays the computer or watches TV, and I do homework or kill time on the internet—killing time until what, I’m not certain.

Sitting alone in the cafeteria is awkward, and sitting at a table full of people who already seem to be comfortable with each other is a surefire way to evoke those feelings of mousy invisibility I hoped to leave behind in high school, but gradually, Jane and I develop a routine of going down to dinner together, and life gets easier. We are often joined by Chelsea, a girl I met during orientation who has the widest array of interests I’ve ever heard of: writing, martial arts, playing the horn in the Michigan Marching Band, sports, Finnish rock music, LGBT rights, knitting, and stage combat, to name a few. I sometimes feel a bit two-dimensional in comparison; everything in my life seems to always come back to food or words.

Nevertheless, over the semester, the three of us coalesce into a solid trio. Together, we watch NBC’s new show *Heroes*, sing along with the original Broadway cast

¹ Not her actual name.

recording of *Rent*, and host movie nights from Jane's and my room. And together, we brave the sometimes-delicious, sometimes-bizarre food offerings of East Quad.

Eating with other people—with friends—is comforting. It reminds me of my childhood, where, even during that much-maligned era of convenience food and TV dinners, my family sat down together to eat a homemade dinner nearly every night. It all sounds a bit like something from a Norman Rockwell painting, until you learn that my clan is held together by a mixture of affection, sarcasm, and wild irreverence. It is maybe for this reason that snarky banter can, to this day, leave me feeling kind of cozy.

Surprisingly, however, dorm food is not as deserving of snark as I'd expected. Certainly it's a step up from the grayish, soggy green beans I vaguely remember from cafeterias past. (My allergies in elementary and middle school effectively shut me out of the world of "hot lunch," as it was called. However, peering over at the patchy hot dogs and defeated vegetables on the trays around me, I rarely felt like I was missing out.) The quality is more on par with a food court restaurant, featuring genuinely tasty veggie wraps and Mexican entrees, but nearly inedible over-salted Indian food, as well as a weird eagerness to pretend that corn chips and synthetic nacho "cheese sauce" constitute a meal.

Eating is at least kind of an adventure, and on the worst nights, I can always raid the deli bar and the salad bar to assemble a rough approximation of my Veggie Dagwood. The real problem, as far as I am concerned, is that students living in East Quad don't have access to kitchens. At the time in our lives when we are supposedly learning to be independent adults, are we really expected to eat whatever is handed to us, mouths gaping

passively open like baby birds? Why even bother packing plates and forks and bowls if you have no chance to use them?

I am determined to cook, in any way I can. After hours of endlessly searching the internet for “no bake” anything, and after one disastrous attempt at fudge that turned out more like thick, sugary frosting, I hit upon the idea of pies. As long as you don’t mind forgoing the complicated pastry crust in favor of a cookie crumb concoction, pies are the ultimate prepare-in-your-own-dorm food: simple enough not to require much previous experience, yet complicated enough to impress strangers, a pie can be made using no appliances beyond a microwave and a mini fridge. Pie also happens to be a food that most people like, with enough different types to allow room for variation and experimentation.

As an added bonus, most of my ingredients can be conveniently stolen from the cafeteria. Cream cheese, yogurt, sugar, individually-packaged pads of butter—three times a day, these things are just left in the open, ripe for the taking. If you’ve got an empty container, an open mind, and a little moxie, the sky’s the limit.

The acquisition of foodstuffs gives me a cause, and my social network expands as I begin to organize mealtime cafeteria raids, which we quickly term “heists.” There’s nothing an RC student loves more than breaking rules in the service of something as silly as pie, and there’s nothing like the camaraderie of a group of RC kids re-imagining themselves as modern day Robin Hoods and merry men. With the help of some plastic containers concealed in purses and backpacks, we manage to sneak out untold amounts of food—including, on one memorable occasion, several pints of vanilla ice cream.

My goal is to construct a pie made of entirely heisted ingredients, but this ultimately always proves impossible. A lot of fundamental filling ingredients—raw pasteurized eggs, sweetened condensed milk, whipped cream—are simply not available at your local college cafeteria. In terms of making a cookie crust, I can always wait until Build-Your-Own-Sundae Tuesdays, when the East Quad cafeteria offers Oreo crumbs, but I am hampered by its infrequency, as well as the lack of any graham cracker equivalent.

In my very first attempt at a dorm-made pie, I figured I could make things work by simply crushing Golden Grahams, but the hardened sugary coating made the cereal stunningly difficult to pulverize, and I ultimately gave up when it reached the texture of loose gravel. Unfortunately, what had protected the cereal's structural integrity against my assaults proved totally inadequate in the face of sogginess; when I added the melted butter to my first crust, the mixture took on, and maintained, a texture I can only really describe as boogery. The filling, however, was phenomenal, to the point where people were willing to overlook the wet, lumpy layer of crust lying forlornly at the bottom of their plates, and this gave me the courage to try again.

Over the next one and a half years, I make lemon pies, pumpkin ice cream pies, orange-infused cheesecakes, chocolate silk pies, peanut butter pies, an innovation I term "Reese's pies" (chocolate silk and peanut butter in the same Oreo crust), and a second try at my initial foray into this whole pie-making scheme—Amaretto swirl cheesecake, only this time, with a crust made of real graham crackers.

It should be noted that these pies do not always turn out perfectly, or even "well" by my standards. The recipes tell you that a refrigerator pie solidifies if chilled

overnight, but anyone considering making such pies in their own dorm room should know that “solidifies” is accurate only in the very loosest sense of the word. Many of these pies, particularly those involving sweetened condensed milk, can be poured into a cup. (Nobody minds this, although my runnier pies are sometimes referred to as “pie-flavored milkshakes.”)

The chocolate silk pie can stand up on its own, mostly because it contains an entire cup of butter, which would be enough to solidify arteries, let alone pie filling. However, while the finished product is actually quite good—Chelsea’s favorite, in fact—I rarely make the chocolate silk, because my only source of butter comes in single-packaged teaspoons, and so I have to shuck 48 pads of butter before even getting started. Much in the same way, although lemon pies are Jane’s favorite, I always hesitate before making one because I really don’t relish squeezing a heap of tiny lemon wedges just to extract the requisite quarter cup of lemon juice.

And I have more limitations than just the inconvenient packaging of my ingredients. There’s the lack of a stove or oven, of course. But I also don’t have a sink, a countertop, a table, or even a rolling pin—when I want to grind up some cookie crumbs, I have to either break them up with a fork, or attempt to flatten them by rolling over them a few times with a tin can, using the windowsill as a workspace.

Part of me rolls my eyes at all of these setbacks, but if I’m honest, part of me enjoys it, too. Cooking is always a creative process, of course, but rarely does it involve the sort of problem-solving that requires you to figure out which everyday objects are also capable of doubling as kitchen implements. In addition, preparing food in an

environment clearly not designed for such a thing allows me to feel almost rebellious, in the same way organizing the “heists” did.

The other wonderful thing about dorm cooking is that nobody expects it when you offer them a piece of pie. I get to greatly enjoy the look on a person’s face when I fetch the Amaretto Swirl from the fridge, and he or she suddenly realizes that all of this talk of random dessert foods was not a joke, but a physical reality in which she or he is allowed to take part. I like being the sort of person who offers others unexpected pie, and so I begin to do it quite a bit.

Heisted Chocolate Pie Crust

1 ½ cups Oreo crumbs (available in the cafeteria on Sundaes nights, next to the ice cream machine)

1/3 cup sugar (can be found in a glass container next to the coffee maker)

6 tablespoons butter (equivalent to 18 packets of butter or margarine, found in the condiments station next to the jelly)

- 1. Finely crush the Oreo crumbs with a makeshift rolling pin of some sort. Set aside.*
- 2. Scrape off all of the butter or margarine pads from their little squares of cardboard. Place them in a microwave-safe pie dish, and microwave on high until melted.*
- 3. Add the Oreo crumbs and sugar, and stir until thoroughly combined. Using a fork, press the mixture into the shape of a pie crust, starting with the sides and ending with the bottom.*
- 4. Place in the refrigerator until set.*

IV: Sophomore Year: Chocolate Therapy and the Strange Lack of Magic Tea, the Era of Baked Goods, Finding Redemption in French Toast, and the Heifer Project

Halfway through our second year of living together, Jane tells me that she’s flunking out. Or rather, that she flunked out last year, and has been pretending to be a student for an entire semester. The housing department has told her she must move out

before Winter break, which is a week from now, and that she will not be allowed to live here next term.

There is a long pause. I glance down at the shopping list I'd been making: mostly snack foods, supplies for the little dorm parties we were going to be hosting next semester. On some level, I understand that I should probably be angry, but it's hard to sustain any emotion beyond *this is so freaking weird*.

I have no idea what I'm supposed to say, and looking up at Jane, I realize that neither does she. In fact, she looks close to tears.

"Hey," I say suddenly. "Want to go get some ice cream?"

Because I spent the first half of my life navigating around a long list of food allergies, and because those allergies included milk, I grew up without the option of soothing away my problems with a pint of Chocolate Therapy. I made do with soy and ricemilk simulations, but it wasn't until the childhood allergies faded away and I had my first taste of the real thing—smooth, rich, creamy—that I started to appreciate what ice cream could do.

It is possible that I now overestimate what can be solved with cake cones and sprinkles.

Jane and I trek through the Michigan winter sludge and take a bus to Coldstone. By the time we're heading back, I understand that it was a mistake to pretend that nothing is wrong, because once we've started, we can't stop. In our interactions, I've always been the wacky roommate, while Jane was the deadpan snarker, the one who witnessed my strange behavior and laughed about it. I didn't mind playing the fool a little, but now

I find that I have no patience with the charade. However absent-minded and silly I may be, at the end of the day, I'm still enrolled as a student.

As the days go by, Jane makes no move to come clean to anyone else—not her parents, and not any other student. Apparently, her plan is to leave for Winter break as usual and simply never return to school, saying goodbye to nobody and leaving me to explain her absence to everyone in the RC. This doesn't really seem fair to me, but it feels downright awful to do that to Chelsea, who was probably Jane's closest friend in college after me, and certainly deserves to hear the truth from Jane herself.

After a considerable amount of prodding, I convince Jane to tell her. Chelsea is as confused by the whole affair as I am—although, as she points out, this does explain some things in retrospect: Jane's lack of textbooks or homework, her vagueness about her own course schedule. It maybe also explains why Jane so enjoyed condescending to me; for at least a few minutes, she had some way to feel good about herself, some refuge from the panic and insecurity she must have been feeling. The knowledge doesn't make her current behavior easier to take, though. Chelsea and I spend much of the next week holed up in Chelsea's room, sitting on her bed and watching violent crime dramas as I vent about the weirdness of daily life with my roommate. I don't want to confront Jane about anything—God knows she has enough to deal with right now—but every time she makes a joke at my expense, I lose a little more patience.

“You're angry,” Chelsea says. “It's okay. I'd be angry too. Heck, I'm angry right now.”

I take a moment to wonder how in the world an adult would handle this situation.

Then:

“Want to get some ice cream?”

Chelsea grins back at me.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

The saga of Jane does not end with Fall term. When I return from Winter break, I discover that Jane has returned as well, having not told her parents anything, and expecting to be able to hide out indefinitely in her former dorm room. I allow her to stay one night, but when I confront her about it the next day, she responds by waiting until I leave the room, and then grabbing her suitcase and vanishing somewhere into the bowels of East Quad.

What follows is a long, long night of increasingly worried phone calls which go straight to Jane’s voicemail, frantically explaining the situation with an endless string of RA’s, searching the eerie East Quad basement with flashlights, and—with the help of Chelsea’s crime show expertise—filing a missing person’s report. Jane does eventually turn up, and by this point, so many adults have gotten involved that she has no choice but to call her parents and confess the whole thing. Within a few days, she has moved out of East Quad, and back to an uncertain future in her home in Detroit. Chelsea and I continue to eat a lot of ice cream.

With Jane gone, I have the room to myself, an odd adjustment to make. One of my old friends from high school is in town one night, and he drops by the dorm to visit. I remember Dane as a good-natured guy, easygoing but with a wild, spastic creative energy, and a tendency to make the kind of bad decisions that lead to really great stories. His antics made junior year in Brighton bearable.

He calls me to say he's found the building, and when I come down to let him in, he is dragging two battered toy pianos behind him. He looks exhausted.

Back in my room, he explains that he's just gotten back from a film-making contest, and the pianos were for writing the score. It was a 24-hour competition, and he isn't sure when he last slept.

We get caught up with each other, an exercise which lately consists of Dane unloading another few months' worth of bad news. He isn't going to school right now. He was in community college for a bit, but his grades weren't great and he hated one of his teachers, so he decided to punish her by failing her class, to make her look bad. He had a job at a call center for a while, until it made him go kind of crazy and he quit in favor of delivering pizzas, but he crashed the car into a mailbox—it's a funny story—and now he's working in a gas station.

His most recent girlfriend turned out to be addicted to heroin, but, he tells me, it's okay now: he's found a girl he could spend the rest of his life with. I ask if they're dating, and he says no, he asked her already and she turned him down, but he thinks they have real potential.

All while he talks, I am offering him things: a cup of tea, some hot cocoa, cereal, a nap, graham crackers, pie. I tell myself that it's just being a good hostess, but secretly I know that I am coming off as a deranged fifties housewife, the stereotype of a Jewish mother. Still, I can't stop trying to make him eat something, drink something. As though I could hand him a mug of Chamomile and make everything okay.

There is a famous Kerouac quote about only loving the mad people, the ones who are never ordinary or boring, and who burn like Roman candles until they explode.

College students tend to like it. Watching Dane sit in the chair that was once my roommate's, as he tells me about his plan to move to Chicago or maybe Ireland, all I can think is that I would give anything to only love people who can take care of themselves.

Failing that, a cup of magic Chamomile would do.

The era of pies ends soon after Jane's departure, when I realize that I know a pair of senior girls who share an apartment, including—wonder of wonders—an actual kitchen, with an actual oven. We quickly strike a deal: I can use their facilities to cook whatever I want to, as long as they get a share of it. They probably would've let me come over anyway, because we get along well and both Jenny and Manisha are extraordinarily nice people, but I liked the idea of having a trade of sorts, a negotiation. It feels good to repay them in something I've made with my hands. People have been making their living from making food since at least the days of the pharaohs, and I enjoy the thought of in some way being a part of that. It makes my skills in the kitchen feel more authentic, more legitimate, to be able to connect them to history. I'm just another craftsperson in a long tradition.

I don't have many practical skills: I can play guitar a little, make clay figurines, and pick up marbles with my toes, but it's hard to defend any of these as *necessary*. Still, even in the grimmest, starkest setting possible—even if tomorrow a sudden outbreak of zombies plunges the world into a post-apocalyptic nightmare where all lines of communication are severed, the economy collapses, and everyone is a bit too preoccupied to care about sing-a-longs and marble tricks—people will always need food. It's nice to be assured in one's own potential usefulness.

And although I love writing, and I have understood since I was fourteen that it was always going to be my major, it can feel like a lost cause sometimes. The cards are stacked against you as a writer. You spend all your time staring at notebooks or computer screens, agonizing over word choice and placing and punctuation—a comma here? Or maybe a semi-colon?—in a struggle to put a voice to thoughts and feelings that were never designed to be committed on paper in the first place. Your only tool is a language you didn't invent, but that you must find a way to understand and use, preferably in a way that it has never been used before. And when you're done, maybe hours later, there is absolutely no way to be entirely certain whether what you've created is any good at all.

It's glorious to be able to cook every now and then, because while writing is wildly subjective, cooking—or at least, baking—has a marvelous clarity. Does this story succeed in its goals? I have no idea. Does this bread succeed in its goals? Well, it rose properly, it's golden-brown, the crust sounds hollow when I rap it with my knuckles, and when I break it open, it tastes and smells like sweet yeast.

As an added bonus, access to an oven also makes a somewhat honest woman out of me, which is to say, it cuts short my career in quasi-theft. Having a proper kitchen changes the kinds of foods I can make, and this in turn changes the ingredients I need. The moment I switch my focus to baked goods, cafeteria theft loses its importance. Until the days the cafeterias are considerate enough to set up large, unsupervised containers of flour and baking powder next to the salad bar, I will have to buy my ingredients from respectable, above-the-level stores like everyone else.

And so, once a week, I dump all the books and papers out of my backpack, load it up with supplies, and walk the half-mile to Jenny and Manisha's place. They have what is called a galley kitchen, and although Jenny has done a good job organizing the place, it is still smaller than a walk-in closet. There is maybe two square feet of counter space available at any given time, and I found out the hard way that the oven runs about a hundred degrees too hot. I don't care, I love this place. After one and a half years of making do with windowsills, desks, and dressers, any countertop at all feels like a blessing. As for the oven, I learn how to gauge the temperature by dangling a meat thermometer from the top rack.

As I cook and wash my dishes (and sometimes their dishes, when I get carried away), Jenny and Manisha wander through the apartment, looking for things, bantering with each other, joking around. They are funny and interesting, easy to spend time with, and I find myself staying at their apartment later and later, long after the last tray of muffins has been pulled from the oven and left to cool on the table. By the end of the year, they are two of my closest friends. Manisha gets me an improbably good job, and I agree to sublet from her, meaning that when summer comes, Jenny and Manisha's apartment will become partly mine as well. The dishes currently stowed in my dorm room will be brought here, into this odd, lovable little room, where I will unpack them into drawers, shelves, and cupboards, and they will finally have a home of their own.

Spring break rolls along, confusingly located in February. I find myself visiting Columbus, Ohio, where I learn, not for the first time, that there is no way to cry with dignity in my brother's apartment. For one thing, he does not own tissues. If you want to

wipe your eyes or blow your nose, you'll have to make do with wads of toilet paper that scratch against your sticky red eyes and nose, leaving you feeling even more disgusting than before. For another thing, his bedroom, which is where I'm staying while he crashes in the living room, lacks a garbage can, so every time I need to grab more toilet paper or throw away the yards and yards of it I've already destroyed with tears and mucous, I have to creep past the couch on which he is sleeping. Although, since he's a light sleeper and I'm sobbing the whole time, it seems likely that he is awake and totally aware of what's happening.

It is frankly kind of unclear why I keep visiting my brother. True, we love each other, and we're even pretty close as far as siblings go, but after several years of these trips, patterns start to emerge. It's hard to deny that whenever I go see Casey, I will spend at least part of my stay curled in a ball somewhere, weeping uncontrollably, and convinced that I am worthless.

The problem is this: I trust Casey's version of reality more than my own. I'm not sure when this happened, exactly, but it must have been early. There was ample opportunity--he's two and a half years older than me, and so for my entire existence, he has always been in sight as the superior specimen: a kid like me, but smarter, wiser, funnier, better with people. Casey even became a vegetarian before I did. When one of my jokes makes him laugh, I understand that this is because the joke was truly funny. When he recommends a band, I know that they're good, even if I personally hate them. When he gives me any criticism, I have to accept it as the truth, and so when he dismisses me as being quiet and awkward around his friends, I understand that I am tragically fucking quiet and awkward.

Part of me understands that putting Casey on such a pedestal is fair to nobody. He's just a 23-year-old who got stuck living in Ohio with a crappy roommate and a job he doesn't really like; he shouldn't have to bear the responsibility of my self-esteem— heavy, strange creature that it is. Still, I can't help feeling angry sometimes, for reasons rational and irrational. The night I stay with him in Columbus, we sit on the floor of his apartment and talk for two hours about feelings and school and social skills, and the way that I can talk myself into hating everything about me. Our conversation loops like a figure eight, or a broken maze—returning to the same point again and again, with no resolution. All I want is for my brother to say that he likes me. Casey's reality is stronger than mine, and I can't shake the feeling that it would somehow fix me, to hear the words in his voice: *you're okay, Jess*.

I want it so badly that I actually tell him this point blank, voice hitching in the awkward rise-and-fall inflection of the recently crying. He sits across from me on the carpet and tries to reason with me, so it's clear that he wants to help, but it's just as clear that he isn't willing to say those words. Casey sticks with his personal convictions, and one of those convictions is that you should never praise someone just because that's what they want to hear. It would be disingenuous, he explains to me. Possibly he understands that it also just wouldn't work. The problem is in my own head; I'm the one who needs to think I'm okay, and until I believe this, there's really nothing he can do. Still, he is remarkably patient with me and my myriad neuroses, and this maturity is just another reason he is better than me.

The rest of my visit goes better for the most part, and we do have fun once I calm down and stop shedding all my fluids out my eyeballs. At 6 o'clock the next morning, he

wakes me up to say goodbye before he leaves for work, since my ride out of Columbus will likely pick me up before he gets back. “Thanks for being awesome,” he says, giving me a hug. I hug back, wanting to say something clever, to make him laugh, to do something that will make me deserve this kindness, but it’s still dark out and I’m barely conscious.

Several hours later, when I wake up for real, I discover that when Casey said yesterday that there wasn’t any food in the apartment, this was only the mildest of exaggerations. A quick search of the fridge yields mostly condiments, as well as a handful of more substantial items, seemingly unrelated: eggs, milk, and applesauce. If I want to eat something this morning, I am going to have to rely on myself. Thank God.

It always astonishes me when able-bodied, intelligent people say they can’t cook. That’s ridiculous. It’s true that there’s an art to inventing a dish out of whole cloth—mixing spices, balancing flavors—and preparing food this way can be an act of creation, equal to drawing or writing. Of course not everyone has the knack. But really, as long as you’ve got a decent recipe, cooking is about 90% reading comprehension. Anyone can empty some ingredients into a bowl and whisk them around for a while. You don’t have to be talented, or knowledgeable, or even terribly coordinated—as long as you add everything in the right proportions and do what you’re told, it should come out okay.

That said, a recipe is a promise, a pact you enter into, usually with a stranger—in this case, some random contributor to an online cooking forum—wherein they trust that you will understand and obey their directions, and you trust that those directions are

worth following. Either half of this can be broken, with any number of possible outcomes.

To complicate things further, most recipes are written by people with lives very different from mine. They are often the work of men and women who actually do this for a living, and as a result, hidden within the ingredient lists and the terse, imperative prose of instructions, there are all kinds of unwritten assumptions. Recipe writers tend to take it for granted, for example, that you own more than four forks, that you have access to basic pantry staples and fresh produce (not to mention a full-sized kitchen), that your workspace is not completely covered in dirty dishes and what appears to be mouse droppings, and that somewhere in your older brother's apartment, there must surely be a set of measuring spoons and measuring cups, because what kind of savage owns a Nintendo Gamecube, but not a single teaspoon?

In the end, I estimate all the amounts, sub out the white sugar for brown, and throw in some vanilla extract, because I may not know much in this world, but I am reasonably confident that it's hard to ruin French toast by adding vanilla.

The secret to good French toast is good bread. Each slice needs to withstand the onslaught of batter without getting mushy or falling apart, and this calls for strong bread, hearty bread, bread with a resilient crumb and an identity of its own. A baguette or a toasted brioche are great, and stale end-pieces are ideal.

The only thing on hand is a loaf of squashy imitation-wheat salvaged from the top of the fridge. This is not the down-home farm bread of my pioneer ancestors—it's Wonderbread with a tan. In lieu of sturdy bread, the best way to prevent sogginess is to use smaller pieces, meaning less dipping time, and so I hack each slice into four triangles.

The internet assures me that this tactic is a favorite among mothers trying to please picky eaters, and that as methods of serving French Toast go, it is both easy *and* fun, but looking down at those spongy, forlorn little wedges, I can't help wishing for some decent ciabatta. However, I lack the yeast, the time, and the kneading surfaces required to make my own, so in the absence of anything better coming along, it is time to make do with what I've got.

There is something pleasantly hypnotic about the frying stage of French toast. It reminds me of kneading bread in this way, the quiet zen of repetitive motion: dip, pan, flip, plate. The comfort of the routine, maybe. The batter sizzles on the skillet, and the whole kitchen smells like someplace I actually want to be—cinnamon, vanilla, frying oil.

I don't stop until the batter has all been soaked up—six slices of bread, or rather, 24 corners, later. I don't stop until I've made far too much French Toast for any one person to eat. This is partly because I hate wasting batter and partly because I'm just glad to be doing something I'm good at again, but if I'm honest with myself, a portion of this was probably meant for Casey from the very beginning. The gift of a Tupperware full of French Toast left in someone's fridge is a simple way to say *Thanks for the hospitality*, but I like to imagine that in this case it can somehow communicate a little more: *I'm sorry for being such a mess*, maybe, and *Please understand I'm trying to do better*, and *At least in this way we can be equals? Sorry your roommate is so awful*, and *Applesauce French Toast, who would've thought?* but also *For God's sake, take care of yourself*. If I can't offer him an uncomplicated, fun weekend with his little sister—and it seems that as of sophomore year of college I cannot—surely breakfast is the next best thing?

Applesauce French Toast:

In a large mixing bowl, combine two eggs, ¾ cup milk, 1 teaspoon cinnamon, two tablespoons brown sugar, ¼ cup applesauce, and a teaspoon of vanilla.

Cut slices into four triangles.

Soak one bread piece at a time until saturated.

Heat butter or oil over medium-high heat in a skillet. Cook bread until golden brown.

Serve with syrup if you've got it.

It is a relief when school starts again, although not for long; I am getting sick of Astronomy. The teacher seems almost perversely focused on one concept: humans used to think that the Earth was the center of all existence, the fixed point around which everything spun, but it is now understood that we really are just some random, water-covered pebble orbiting a small and not terribly important sun somewhere on one side of the Milky Way, surrounded by vast stretches of larger celestial bodies, none of which take any notice of our existence and all of which would be utterly unaffected were we to suddenly get exploded by a giant comet. In the grand cosmic drama of the Universe, our planet doesn't even get a speaking role—we're just a minor detail in the backdrop.

His lectures are filled with analogies designed to illustrate just how small and unimportant our home planet really is: the Earth is a ping-pong ball, the Earth is a marble, the Earth is a grape, the Earth is a single particle. After what feels like several weeks of this, it's all I can do not to stand up in the middle of the auditorium and shout, "Okay, I get it! We're *really, really, really* small!" I mean, I'm a 5 foot 2 introvert who hates conflict: smallness is hardly a novelty here.

In Sociology, we're learning about the Milgram Experiment, which I'd heard of in passing but had never had to understand, and it's a bit hard to take, knowing how many seemingly ordinary Americans were willing to administer what they believed to be harmful electric shocks to an innocent man, simply because a guy in a white coat told

them to. Two thirds, in some models. What do you even do with that kind of knowledge? How do you incorporate it into the way you see other people, the way you see yourself?

Liberal arts classes ask you to see the world with complexity, and of course, this is good and valuable. If there's one lesson I'm gleaning from the endless parade of human tragedy that is 75% of my courseload, it's that we allow terrible things to happen when we refuse to question our comfortable assumptions: that the government always has our best interests at heart, that we are fundamentally kind and thus incapable of harming others, that if someone is suffering then they must somehow deserve it.

It is disorienting and stressful and scary to be confronted with the enormity of what people have inflicted on other people. Again and again, the implication is that evil isn't some outside enemy you can fight and defeat—it can never be destroyed because it is an intangible force that operates in degrees and lurks inside of you and everyone you love, impossible to detect because it always, always feels like something else.

The things that usually pull me out of a gloomy mood—craft projects, sing-alongs, giving people unexpected baked goods—all seem so trivial. Whimsy is one of my guiding principles, but in the face of tragedy, it only feels hollow and ridiculous. I want so badly to make things better, to save the world, to be the counter-example, but where the Hell does one person even begin? It's February, the world is built on suffering, and I am really, really, really small.

After several weeks of covering grim experiments and bloody massacres, the two professors teaching my Sociology class explain that it is time to start our long-term

projects for the semester: identify a social wrong and try to work towards righting it.

Given the circumstances, this feels like an awful lot of pressure, but it's still a relief to be directing our energies towards something other than seeing just how low the human race can really sink. There's really only so many times you can poke a stick in that particular wound.

It occurs to me that, while I think about food all of the time, I almost never think about hunger. It's one of those problems, like malaria or civil war, that belongs either to people from the past, or people living in Third World countries on the other side of the planet, and as such, it tends to feel safely remote. But it is real, and killing 31 million people every year, even though we grow enough food on the planet to feed everyone twice over.

And that's where the cows come in.

Heifer International is a charity my church congregation started sponsoring when I was very young, and so it was always on the periphery of my childhood, like the Smurfs. Heifer's premise is that, instead of merely airlifting in some sacks of grain and powdered milk, you should fight hunger at its source, by giving people a way to provide for themselves. Donations go towards buying farm animals to send to impoverished communities. The thought is that each animal can provide all kinds of benefits—for example, ducks lay eggs which can be eaten for protein, but they also produce feathers and eat pests that would otherwise ruin crops—and can also reproduce, thus spreading the wealth even further.

My goal is to raise \$120 for Heifer International, enough to buy one goat. I have little experience in fundraising, none at all in taking charge of a project like this, and zero

idea of whether or not it will work. I do, however, have a plan: use everything you've got. In my case, this means patching together a strategy that relies on a series of skills I have spent years dismissing: the ability to sculpt tiny animals out of modeling clay, the ability to write a funny aside, the ability to properly combine wet ingredients with dry. It still feels vaguely absurd—I am about to attempt to save the world, or at least a small corner of it, armed with mostly whisks and spatulas. Still, maybe there is a certain beauty to it as well: to fight for a cause you believe in, using the tools you best understand, even if that happens to mean cookware.

The plan is this: I will reserve a lounge in East Quad and host a series of fundraising dinners. Five dollars will buy a full meal: a plate piled high with a hearty vegetarian main course, side dishes, bread, fruit salad, and dessert—all prepared and provided by me. I've made tiny clay figurines of cows to sell on the side as an extra, but most of the focus will be on the food. I have never made dinner for more than four people at a time, and the prospect of cooking for maybe eight times that many is both terrifying and exciting.

One thing that makes me nervous is that my success depends on convincing a large number of cash-strapped students to donate money to charity. True, college kids are believed to be an idealistic bunch, but my misgivings persist. Half a syllabus' worth of massacres and human atrocity can leave you a little skeptical of the inherent goodness of others. I know I can count on my close friends, but it's equally clear that this will not be possible through their help alone: I will have to reach out to people I don't even know that well. I will have to talk up this event, to make it sound like a surefire good time. God help me, I will have to schmooze.

For the next week, I do my socially awkward best to approach people about the dinners, trying to gauge their interest level. To my pleasant surprise, everyone I talk to seems willing to attend. At least one person even suggests that I charge more than five dollars. Score one for humanity, I suppose, though the cynic in me is quick to point out that my plan benefits from people's inherent laziness. After all, I'm inviting them to an event that will be held in the same building where they live, so it's not exactly out of their way. Not only that, but the East Quad cafeteria is closed on Saturday, so my only competition in the matter are restaurants, all of which exist outside the safe brick walls of our building. A trip to any of them would necessitate actually putting on a coat (and shoes!), and venturing into the depressing slush of Ann Arbor in March. Any reason to stay indoors during the end stages of Michigan's long gray winters is not really a hard sell.

Which is why I am worried when East Quad doesn't respond to the room request form I'd submitted weeks ago. This is also why said worry turns to panic when I finally bring this up to the lady at the front desk and she explains that public spaces in East Quad can't be used for events that serve food or charge money. My options are to find some other outside location, or to dispense the food from my own room in what is not necessarily a strictly legal manner. I pose this question to my prospective guests via Facebook, and they overwhelmingly choose the latter. In retrospect, this is hardly a surprise: asking RC kids if they'd like to break some rules is like offering a sugar fiend a bucket full of pixie sticks.

With that settled, I can return to freaking out over the even bigger question: what in the world am I going to serve these people? Because I want the donations to all go

straight to the cause, I am buying all of the ingredients with my own money. And I do mean *all* of the ingredients. In my room, there is some cereal, half a box of graham crackers and some baking supplies, but that's my whole pantry. In terms of the building blocks for an actual meal, I do not have so much as an onion to my name. This means that I will have to make lists and shop intelligently, which means putting a lot of thought into what exactly I'll be making.

I go to the internet for help. My old standby is cookinglight.com, a source I learned about through my mom, back when I was first getting interested in baking. The trouble is, now that I'm not living in my parents' house, benefiting from a large and expensive fridge whose many and expensive contents seemed to replenish on their own, I can't help seeing Cooking Light a little differently. While most recipes make the assumption that you are an adult with a counter top and an oven, Cooking Light makes the assumption that you are an upper-middle class city-dweller with money to burn. All I want to do is find a decent recipe for fruit salad, but everything seems to involve wine reductions and goat cheese. Back home, I would never have to fret about the cost effectiveness of buying a bag of almonds to use in a single dish, but here in my dorm room, Cooking Light seems a bit ridiculous, a window into a world of decadent yuppy privilege. Even their occasional feature about cooking on a budget tends to take for granted that you can afford to splurge on prosciutto.

Allrecipes.com is the more populist recipe database, with its contributions coming less from professionals working for a cooking/lifestyle magazine, and more from harried housewives and grandmothers. Unfortunately, after 20 years of being raised with Cooking Light-level standards, the squarely middle-class, down home world of

Allrecipes is completely alien to me. Allrecipes doesn't expect you to own white wine or fresh parmesan, but it does ask you to accept that gelatin and marshmallows will make any fruit dish better. I understand that not everyone grew up with near-limitless access to fresh produce of all colors of the rainbow. I understand that most people—myself presently included—can't afford to shop like this. And I understand that, without pomegranates and blackberries, adding pizzazz to a dish requires a certain degree of culinary creativity, but despite all of this, the first time I find a fruit salad recipe that calls for a can of apple pie filling, I can only stare in horrified fascination. Fruit salad should not be goopy.

There is a delicate balance here, between nutrition, economy, and flavor, and it's frustrating to think that maybe you can only ever get two out of three. Make do with bland fruit cocktail from a can, spend half your paycheck on exotic dates, or spice up your fruit salad with a fistful of corn syrupy, gelatinous goo: it's your choice.

In the end, I don't even use a recipe. I buy a pint each of blueberries and strawberries, justifying the expense because the rest of the ingredients don't cost me anything at all. The bulk of the fruit salad is made of bananas, oranges, and apples—all lifted one at a time, over a course of several days, from the school cafeteria. It turns out that in the struggle between price and quality, theft can be a fertile middle ground.

There's the concept in your head—the bright, unfiltered idea—and then there's the banal, uphill struggle of pulling that idea into the physical world, and by necessity there will always be sacrifices made in the service of reality. This is something you learn relatively quickly as a writer: that the story will always be deeper, richer, more vivid and nuanced when it only has to live as an abstract. Pieces will always get lost in

translation—events compressed, nuances blunted, images confined to what you can spell out and imply.

Planning an event like this can feel similar: however big and idealistic the dream, the simple truth is that concessions must be made. It's true that I am buying all the supplies with my own money, but as I calculate menus and grocery bills and guest lists, there is a constant nagging doubt that if I can't raise more than I spend, it would be more efficient to just donate all the supply money to charity and be done with it. I want to serve the most delicious, healthiest, most eco-friendly meal possible, but in the end, the biggest priority here is to raise money. And so I cut corners. I steer clear of Kroger's pricy organic section. I pare down my shopping list, endlessly reshuffling the menu in an attempt to get the most out of every item purchased. I plan dishes around canned beans and root vegetables. I buy paper plates and plastic cutlery, because cooking for twenty people is all well and good, but I draw the line at doing their dishes.

Normally I am all about trying to save the environment and reduce landfill sizes, but it turns out that these convictions can be temporarily peeled off and set aside, like a jacket on a muggy day. It is a little disconcerting to learn how quickly I am capable of ignoring an entire section of my conscience, but I can't deny it's convenient.

I have enough to worry about anyway. The day of the dinner, I am a neurotic tornado of cooking. Some of the side dishes could be assembled ahead of time and chilled, thank God, but the enchiladas and the brownies must be prepared today and served warm. They're both favorite recipes of mine, old stand-bys that I've used many times before, but making them in triple batches on a deadline adds a new and exciting degree of insanity to the mix.

Never has Jenny and Manisha's kitchen seemed so very small. Never has their postage-stamp-sized countertop seemed so hilariously meager, or their idiosyncratic oven seemed less capable of getting the job done. To make matters worse, I've just started sautéing the onions and garlic when I realize to my horror that I've bought two cans of the wrong kind of tomatoes—tomato sauce instead of crushed tomatoes. They sport nearly identical labels, but the two are crucially different in texture—the sauce being a homogenous red mush while crushed tomatoes maintain their gloriously pulpy, seed-filled integrity.

Chelsea, to her credit, does not so much as bat an eyelash when she answers her cell phone to my shouts of “Chelsea! Chelsea! Come quick, it's a tomato emergency!” I'm too far into the recipe—there's no time to wait for the requisite two cans of crushed. I have one can of the correct stuff, but as for the rest, the only solution I can see is to use one can of the tomato slop and hope to make up the texture difference by adding some fresh chopped tomato. Chelsea agrees to stop by with a few tomatoes, because she is the best friend in the world, and she also spends a few hours helping me cook. They're valuable hours, since I'm running a little behind and frankly need all of the help I can get.

That familiar voice of doubt is running full blast in the back of my head, saying “Look at you—you don't know what you're doing. You'll never be able to pull this off.” In the end, it turns out that, for brief periods of time, I can set aside my doubt the same way that I can set aside my concerns about buying plastic forks. It's not that I become a more confident, competent person. It's simply that there is no time to pay attention to my insecurities: twenty people are counting on me for dinner, and I am counting on myself to

make this happen. There is no mental energy to spare. The event starts at 6:30, and no matter how much of a worrier I am, no matter how much I normally define myself as someone who freaks out under pressure, the most important thing is to execute the plan, to push myself into being the sort of person who has a plan and makes things happen.

And when 6:30 rolls around, wonder of wonders, we are done.

The final menu for the first Heifer Dinner:
Three batches of cheese-and-spinach enchiladas
Two batches of corn-and-black bean salad
A huge bowl of fruit salad
Garlic bread
Two batches of pasta salad
Three batches of brownies.

(The brownies are insurance. However badly I may screw up everything else, I have yet to ruin a tray of these chewy, chocolatey baked goods. Worst-case scenario, if nothing else turns out, my guests can comfort themselves with the knowledge that they haven't wasted their money on a terrible meal—they have simply purchased the world's most expensive dessert.)

We take a moment to admire this stunning and bountiful spread of food, and then it hits us: we have exactly zero seconds to move an entire feast from the third floor of an apartment building to the second floor of a dormitory several blocks away. Nearly everything is in floppy, lidless containers, and nothing can be stacked.

We have Manisha's car to cross the road distances, but even so, the logistics of transporting the meal eats up fifteen minutes, so when we stagger up the stairs with our first armfuls of food, I am half-convinced that all of the guests will have given up and

gone off in search of a quicker dinner. I am forced to reassess this when we reach our hallway and catch sight of the crowd of people patiently waiting at my door. It is a touching sight for me, and when they volunteer to carry the rest of the dishes to my room, I feel a sudden wave of gratitude so intense that it makes me giddy.

In the end, it is another sort of concession: I'd wanted to pull this off on my own, to throw these dinners together single-handedly, but almost immediately I am forced to rely on the kindness and generosity of my friends. Jenny and Manisha's kitchen, Manisha's car, Chelsea's tomatoes and assistance—hell, even the buffet table itself requires a thank-you list. Ever since Jane moved out, the room has been somewhat lacking in furniture, but on the morning of the dinner, Caitlin and Molly stopped by and helped me drag Jane's mattress out of the room so that we could prop her abandoned bed frame on her desk and dresser, creating an impromptu table which was instantly transformed into a credible piece of furniture when Caitlin lent me her Persian-rug-patterned table cloth. Why anyone living in a dorm room would own a table cloth is a mystery to me, but I am beyond asking such questions. I'm evenly strangely grateful to Jane, whose absence has turned my room into the best possible venue for an amateur buffet.

My guests return bearing all of the food—it only takes them one easy trip, and when everything is finally set up, and people begin to dig into the food, ooh-ing and ahhing, I can finally sit down for a moment and let my shoulders gradually untense. It's hard to believe that after weeks of planning, setbacks, and rollercoastering emotions, the first Heifer Dinner has finally been accomplished, but the evidence is right there to see, smell and taste—wonderfully, improbably, miraculously tangible.

Spinach and Cheese Enchiladas (serves about 8)

8 large flour tortillas

Sauce:

One onion, chopped

Three cloves of minced garlic

Enough olive oil to coat the pan

One large can of crushed tomatoes (or half a can of tomato sauce and one chopped tomato)

Dried basil and oregano

Filling:

One cup of grated cheese (sharp cheddar is the best—it has a lot of flavor so you don't need as much of it)

Fresh spinach, chopped up a bit

Chopped green onions if you have them (otherwise, finely-chopped raw onions can do the trick)

Sliced olives, or if your friends don't like olives, black beans

1. Sauté the onion and garlic in the oil until soft.

2. Add the tomatoes and spices. Simmer.

3. In a large bowl, combine all of the filling ingredients.

4. Pour half of the sauce into a baking dish.

5. Divide the filling amongst the tortillas, roll them tightly, and place them on the baking dish.

6. Top with the remaining sauce, and bake at 350 degrees for 15-20 minutes.

V. Junior Year: Co-op Living, The Joy (and Pain) of (Vegan) Cooking

The first thing I noticed about Karl D. Gregory Co-op was the sunlight. The only other co-op house I'd toured had been downright dingy, a claustrophobic jumble of small, mostly windowless rooms all featuring quirky decorations and the mild but pervasive smell of unwashed bodies. The overall effect was of an entire house made of basements, and I'd spent most of the tour counting the minutes until I could escape into the fresh air. The whole excursion had shaken me. I'd been left wondering if maybe I just wasn't cut out for cooperative living after all—too narrow-minded, too square, too attached to bourgeois notions like clean plates and showering.

Walking into Gregory house felt like a revelation. The floor was clean, the entry way wide and inviting, and from where I stood I could see a huge living room, one wall

all lined with windows. Sunbeams streamed in through the glass and onto the comfortable-looking sofas, and, in later versions of this story, the clouds parted, a rainbow spontaneously formed, and a choir of angels and cartoon birds began to sing a song about destiny. Within a minute of stepping inside, I understood that this was where I belonged.

The second thing I noticed about Karl D. Gregory was the kitchen. It was enormous, though this made sense; it was shared by 29 people. My tour guide explained that dinner was provided six nights a week, and that it was made by members of the co-op, who took turns. Each night, a designated chef and assistant chef put in a total of five hours of work in order to get supper on the table. Cooking for thirty people every week...even after the Heifer dinners, my mind boggled at the thought.

However, I could already notice a key difference from the Heifer dinners: Gregory's kitchen was clearly equipped for such a task. It was a set-up I could only have fantasized about while flailing around in Jenny and Manisha's galley kitchen: three gleaming stainless steel refrigerators, two full-size ovens and stove tops, three sinks, wide stretches of counter space, and an industrial-strength mixer. Even before my guide proudly showed me the wok as large as a kiddie pool, the only question on my mind was, "Where do I sign up?"

My first night at Gregory, immediately after unpacking all of my boxes and suitcases, I decide to bake brownies, my old Heifer standby. It seems like a good gesture to extend to my 28 new housemates, a hello considerably more memorable than words. I'm measuring the sugar when I learn that among said 28, there are at least two vegans.

Of course, this means that if I make the brownies the usual way, there will still be 26 people capable of enjoying all the eggy, buttery, glory. Still, I hesitate. It wasn't so long ago that my allergies had me avoiding dairy too, and I can remember how it felt to be shut out of the world of mainstream food, eyes fixed on my empty desk as the other kids were handing out their birthday cupcakes.

The vegans probably need brownies more than anyone else, I decide, swapping out four eggs and two sticks of butter for equal amounts of potato-based egg substitute and margarine. This turns out to be a phenomenally bad call, since despite what Big Margarine might have you believe, there are some things only butter can do. Even after double the baking time, I can't get the damn thing to solidify, and it remains a gooey, *chocolate-like* mass swimming in a thick layer of vegetable oil-based ooze. It is the worst culinary mistake I've made in years, and it's also my introduction to cooking at Gregory.

A few people politely try a bowlful, but they don't exactly go back for seconds. As soon as I get tired of looking at the gloppy mess, it is banished to a plastic container on the lowest shelf of one of the fridges, where it remains until one of my housemates finishes it off, too far into the throes of PMS to care about things like texture and basic sanity.

Thus, I am presented with two lessons right off the bat. First, that successful vegan cooking, especially in the baking department, will require a completely different mindset than the one I've grown used to. Secondly, if you live in a co-op and you make something that is available to the general public and contains both sugar and cocoa powder, it will pretty much always get eaten, even in the face of all other logic.

Cooking in Gregory requires other adjustments, as well, in the form of scale. The first few times I try to mix something up in one of the house's enormous bowls, it feels as though I have snuck into the kitchen of a giant. This feeling only is magnified when I need to grab anything off the top of a cabinet, and am forced to climb onto the counter, pull myself into a standing position, and reach over my head. Gregory was a frat house before the co-op council bought it—that's part of why the building works so well as a co-op; it was designed with group living in mind—and I can't help wondering if perhaps it was a frat house built specifically for basketball players, or stilt-walkers.

Still, after cheffing for the house several times, it quickly becomes clear that what seemed downright whimsical—the tire swing-sized wok, for instance—is only natural and practical when you're trying to feed 29 people at a time. Gradually, I get used to the gigantic bowls, to cans of beans larger than paint cans, and sacks of frozen corn that could fell a moose. Six cups of rice begins to feel downright scanty, and two heads of lettuce are reason for concern if you're trying to make a salad. The other new chefs and I learn how to plan an industrial-strength meal, with options for vegans and the allergic alike, and how to make this happen in three hours or less.

Eventually, I even learn how to make a dairy-free chocolate cake without embarrassing myself. When I pull it out of the oven for the first time, it is a thing of beauty—solid and perfectly-cooked. The smell of warm cocoa fills the kitchen of Gregory house, and for a moment, I can hear my imaginary choir of birds and angels.

Hey-This-Is-Pretty-Good Cake

The banana in this recipe was my own innovation, born out of trying not to waste ripening fruit. The result was a marvelous richness, with a subtle banana flavor that works well with the chocolate. If you don't have any bananas, you can use an additional ½ cup of water instead.

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup white sugar
1/4 cup cocoa powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/3 cup vegetable oil
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon distilled white vinegar
1/2 cup water
One large, ripe banana

- 1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease one 9x5 inch loaf pan.*
- 2. Sift together the flour, sugar, cocoa, baking soda and salt.*
- 3. In a separate bowl, mash the banana into a thin paste. Add the oil, vanilla, vinegar and water, and stir. Combine the wet ingredients with the dry, and mix together until smooth.*
- 4. Pour into prepared pan and bake at 350 degrees F for 45 minutes—less if you prefer your chocolate cakes a little gooey in the middle. Remove from oven and allow to cool.*

This is not to say that life in the co-op is a nonstop cartoon paradise, some shining socialist utopia of collective living, democracy, and dairy-free baked goods. Being part of a co-op has its ups and downs, and nothing can really prepare you for the experience of sharing a house with 28 people.

It's surprisingly unlike a dorm. There's no real room for that kind of anonymity, just one big antique house with wide hallways and ornery plumbing. As the weeks go on and we each settle into the rhythm of personal habit, I find that my daily routine tends to intersect with those of many of my fellow co-ops. I went into the co-op not knowing most of these people—25 of them were total strangers to me when I moved in—but there is something inexplicably comforting about seeing the same faces every day.

I brush my teeth alongside housemates, hopping to the side to make room at the mirror. At breakfast, we share the same table, and the same daily edition of the New

York Times—crossword puzzle always half-completed in pen by the time I take my seat. After classes, I can flop onto a couch in the common room and know that there will be other students to talk to, cracking jokes, arguing politics, and desperately procrastinating the papers we all need to write. We eat our dinner together around the huge dining room table, vote on important decisions as a house, and we're all responsible for doing the chores that keep the building functional.

When the ancient radiator starts complaining, letting loose a series of alarming clanks that sound for all the world as if an angry hook-handed man is trapped in the walls and has chosen to channel his aggression on the pipes, we all hear it. (“Igor’s acting up again,” we say.) What that same radiator stops working in the middle of the night during the coldest part of January, we drag our pillows and blankets to the common room, lying on the floor together in an impromptu slumber party of shared misery and cuddling-by-necessity.

Operating as such a self-contained unit, there are times when living in Karl D. Gregory feels, more than anything else, like living in a large family. (Although admittedly, it is a family where the parents are more or less the same age as their children, which can occasionally make discipline a little awkward.)

Still, there are times when I am forced to remember that we aren’t a family at all, and could never one. The only thing we all have in common—other than being young and mostly students—is that we each, for whatever reason, signed a contract to live here. Although many of us grow fond of each other, it is a bond born partly from shared interests and partly from familiarity, and there’s no guarantee of that unspoken cushion of unconditional love to soften any conflict between us. This lack of built-in affection,

along with the lack of shared background, quickly becomes apparent whenever there's a serious argument, and suddenly everyone's coping strategies are nakedly on display.

I grew up thinking I was fragile, because whenever my emotions veered toward sadness, I reacted by inwardly collapsing, baring my soul to the nearest sympathetic listener as tears crawled down my cheeks. It took shockingly little to make me cry (and only milk to make me sick), and so I was always half-convinced there was something wrong with me, some twisted, outsized melancholy unknown to healthy people. Living at the co-op forces me to realize that there are no healthy people, only some who are better at hiding their problems, or sublimating sorrow into something else.

My first year in Gregory, one girl becomes so filled with rage that she single-handedly breaks a bathroom stall, kicking it so hard that the door pops free of the lock mechanism altogether. It swings crookedly outward into the bathroom as she continues to shriek. She is admittedly a dramatic case, but there are a lot of strong feelings seething under the surface of house life that year.

And nothing ignites strong feelings faster than arguments about food. When the issue is how to fuel your own body, things get personal fast. There is no shortage of food controversy in Gregory, in part because there are so many people with so many different likes, dislikes, and dietary needs that it is all but impossible to keep everyone happy. We have vegans who (obviously) can't drink milk, but we also have a housemate who is allergic to the soy alternative. We have self-described "meatitarians," who resent the dinner chefs' dependence on soybeans and lentils, but we also have 13 vegetarians who require it.

Unfortunately for the carnivores, most of the people who sign up to cook dinner are either vegan or vegetarian, and are varying degrees of squeamish about the thought of working with raw meat. Even the cooks who are comfortable with meat and dairy don't always prepare it; when you only have three hours to cook for nearly 30 people, it is easier to make the same dishes for everyone, meaning that our meals are often vegan by default.

Admittedly, in my junior year at Gregory, there are only two and a half vegans, and it does seem a bit odd to let their food ideology dictate what the entire house will eat. Also, just to complicate matters, Gregory is officially listed among the co-ops as a house that serves dinner "with vegan and vegetarian options," so many people signed up to live here expecting this meant there would be meat every night, along with a meatless alternative for those who happened to require it. These people had no idea that they were about to be plunged into the vegan culinary underworld, and they are not necessarily pleased about it.

Still, nobody is going to starve or betray their political beliefs by going meatless once in a while, and I have little patience for my housemates who whine that dinner can't be dinner unless it includes some form of animal flesh. At this point, I haven't eaten meat in about five years, and have long ago learned to plan meals around vegetables, grains, and alternate sources of protein. In theory, I try to believe that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion, but in reality, whenever a fellow co-op member starts into a defense of a more meat-centric menu, I can barely hear them above the voice in my head saying, '*Wrongwrongwrong, you are wrong.*'

“If you want meat that badly, there’s nothing keeping you from preparing some for yourself,” I snap. “There’s always chicken and ground turkey in the freezer—food we buy *as a house*, by the way, meaning that it’s partly funded by vegans and vegetarians, but you don’t see us complaining about that.” My opponent rolls his or her eyes, but refrains from pointing out that, by complaining about not complaining, I am in effect more or less complaining. Instead there is the inevitable response,

“We fund your tofu and soymilk!”

“Nobody is ideologically opposed to soybeans,” I manage through gritted teeth.

“I am! That stuff is disgusting, and I hate eating it.”

Often, the person I am arguing with also has a problem with the amount of vegetables at dinner. Hearing people talk about their food preferences—not needs, but *preferences*—in such heated language reminds me of a childhood spent eating whatever was put on my plate, grateful simply if it didn’t make me physically ill. In some ways, having an array of childhood allergies made me more open-minded, but in other ways, it left me with almost no patience.

“Call me when the foods you want to avoid actually make you vomit, and we’ll talk.”

Sometimes, our monthly house meetings devolve into terrible arguments, meandering awful conflicts with no resolution in sight. We rarely argued like this back at home, partly because when things got bad we could always laugh about it. In Gregory, however, not everyone handles their problems by laughing or crying. Once the initial spark of annoyance on my part dies down, I don’t know how to react to angry people. I don’t know how to talk to someone who carries their rage around, ready to dive into it

again should they feel at all threatened. It's still hard for me to accept that there are problems I can't fix through discussion or baked goods, but life at Gregory shows me that I still have a lot to learn about people. It mostly just makes me sad again. I go on a lot of walks that year. I go on a lot of walks and I eat a lot of ice cream.

Still, when January comes and it's time to start planning ahead for next year, there is no doubt in my mind that I will choose to live in Gregory again. When it's bad, it's pretty bad, but when it's good, it's amazing.

My first or second month living here, I came down to the kitchen to entertain my friend (and now roommate) while she wiped the counters and mopped the floor. I'd brought my guitar with me, and so I stood barefoot on the tile and strummed the chords to a Postal Service song we both loved:

*“They will see us waving from such great heights
'Come down now,' they'll say
But everything looks perfect from far away
'Come down now,' but we'll stay...”*

When I started to sing it aloud, my roommate sang along freely, her years of choir training evident as she found the harmony and brought it out. People wandered through the kitchen as she and I sang, and by the end of the first chorus, we had gained two more singers, new housemates whose names we barely knew. One guy brought out his guitar, and we all made music together: me, Colleen, and two near-strangers who had simply happened by and heard a song they liked.

It is moments like these which pull me back to Gregory, moments that offer a fleeting glimpse of just how good communal living can be. Plus, the rent is very, very cheap.

VI. Senior Year: Sourdough Bread, Mint Hot Chocolate, and Apple-Cinnamon-Invention Muffins

I am not the kind of person who names inanimate objects. After nearly four years of college, my laptop remains unchristened, despite the many ups and downs we've shared—and despite the fact that between checking e-mail, writing papers, and procrastinating the writing of said papers, I have certainly spent more time with my computer than with any living person. I do like the idea of naming your electronics. Folklore tells us that to give something a name is to define it, to have power over it, and perhaps Bartholomew or Portia or Harrison the Laptop would run a little faster, or hold onto its battery charge a little longer. Still, in the end, I just don't have that kind of relationship with my own possessions. My computer is only a means to an end; we will never be on a first-name basis, it and I.

How then, do I explain Jenkins, who is currently nestled in the right-hand side of the co-op refrigerator, name taped prominently across the lid of his jar?

I didn't set out to become a sourdough person; I was just trying to avoid all corn products. It was the middle of summer, and I'd just finished reading the Omnivore's Dilemma, Michael Pollan's well-reasoned and compelling study of just what is wrong with mainstream modern American cuisine. (Hint: many things.) One of Pollan's key points is that much of the variety that we see from the supermarket shelves is artificial. The endless bright packages of snack foods tend to contain pretty much the same ingredients, which is to say, flavoring additives and corn. I'm not talking about sweet corn the delicious summer vegetable, but its starchier and nutritionally bankrupt cousin,

near-inedible on its own, but ubiquitous as an oil, syrup, starch, or all-around cheap filler ingredient.

Pollan writes at some length about the harmful effects of the corn business: how government subsidies of corn effectively support the junk food industry at the expense of farmers struggling to grow real vegetables, how raising cows on corn-based feed makes them grossly unhealthy, and how Americans living on a meat-based diet really do have no idea just how much corn they've indirectly eaten. Being a vegetarian, of course, I was feeling pretty smug about myself for not falling prey to the blind corn consumption of my omnivore brethren—until I looked down at my store-bought bagel covered in peanut butter and cheap jelly, and realized that every item I was eating also contained corn.

From there, it was an easy leap to see if I could eliminate corn from my diet altogether. Or rather, the mental leap was easy, the elimination part proved considerably trickier. It was like having allergies all over again, except this time I knew precisely what I was missing. Hershey's chocolate, hard candy, cereal, ketchup, jelly, ice cream—*ice cream!*—store-bought bread, crackers, baking soda: the list went on. It was a summer of making every meal from scratch, down to grinding my own peanut butter in the food processor. I hadn't intended to lose weight; my only goal was to keep up my insane personal corn embargo as long as I could, but when I had to create all of my own snacks, I found my laziness often won out over any cravings for homemade junk food. After three hours cooking dinner, an orange for dessert starts to sound pretty good.

I could no longer idly grab a piece of toast to munch on; bread had to be carefully conserved since I didn't have the time or energy to bake more than one batch of pitas a week. The low point came when I discovered that the active dry yeast I'd been using to

leaven my flatbreads had been farmed in an industrial setting and—very likely—fed on corn. Nothing seemed safe from the grasp of Big Maize. Then, in a burst of clarity, I remembered sourdough.

I had been baking bread for years, but only quick breads (the general term for banana bread et al) and traditional yeast-fueled loaves. I had never attempted to make sourdough before; it seemed so daunting. However, with my impulsive and ill-conceived personal embargo of corn as a motivator, I was ready to give it a try.

All sourdough recipes require starter. In a truly legit recipe, it is the only leavening agent—and oh, what a leavening agent! Starter serves the same technical function as those little packets of sandlike yeast you buy at the store, but it is infinitely weirder. Potent, gluey, and bubbly, starter is what gives sourdough its distinctive, delicious tang.

The secret to making starter is this: you mix some flour and water. Then you leave it out for a while.

The goal is to collect some wild yeast from the air, a notion which still seems to me both unspeakably poetic, and vaguely disturbing. Wild yeast is pretty easily caught; leave it a requisite bowl of flour-and-water mixture, and in a few days, your starter should be bread-worthy. It's a strange feeling to learn that, unbeknownst to you, all the time you've been living your life, you've been surrounded by an invisibly tiny and very helpful fungus floating in the air. Still, I like the idea of micro-organisms that aren't trying to make us all ill, and I've always liked the symbiosis between the baker and the yeast ("I'll feed you if you help me make this bread rise, little guys!"), even though that

exchange ends with us killing the yeast at a high temperature and then eating the fruits of its labors, sometimes with butter.

Still, making sourdough is hardly yeast genocide. Since starter is kind of boring to do from scratch, the general idea is that you must maintain your current starter as long as possible, “feeding” it more flour and water every week. Thus, keeping a jar of starter is kind of like having a pet. You can’t cuddle it, but the websites do suggest giving it a name. If you take care of it, theoretically, your starter could outlast you. I like that. Commercial dry yeast exists in a state of suspended animation until you proof it, and then ten minutes later, it disappears into the dough. Sourdough starter, on the other hand, is a *presence*. It demands commitment. Sourdough is in this for the long haul.

More importantly than enjoying the idea of sourdough, I happen to really like the thing itself. It goes with just about anything, it tastes delicious, and the smell reminds me oddly of home, or at least childhood. My brother worked at Panera’s for the last half of high school, and during this time, his hair, clothes, and most of his possessions took on a powerful aroma of pungent dough. Casey soon tired of this, but I thought it was kind of cool. Hugging him was like standing in the door of a bakery.

My first loaf is objectively a failure. It has absolutely refused to rise, which is arguably kind of the *point* of bread. It has the correct smell, at least, and when I break off a chunk, I discover that the crumb, while dense as a brick, has the correct flavor.

As I stand around wondering how in the world I am going to be able to cut this thing without doing the knife any serious damage, my housemates Taylor and Rocky drift

into the kitchen. I chip them off a piece or two, and we stand around the kitchen island for a while, making small talk and eating.

“Any thoughts on what went wrong?” I ask Taylor, who tends to have Opinions On Food. Her dad actually makes sourdough with some regularity, it turns out.

“Did you use bread flour?” she responds, and I have to admit that I didn’t; the recipes all called for it, but I used all-purpose because it’s always available at Gregory. I hang my head in shame.

And that is why, the first time I meet Taylor’s dad, he is carrying a 50-pound bag of bread flour into the kitchen of our co-op. It is a present for me, and also a bit of an investment: he has come to Gregory, he explains, to instill in me the correct methods so that the world may have one more competent sourdough baker. Apparently, sourdough people look out for each other. In my dabbling with flour and wild yeast, I have stumbled onto a subculture, a brotherhood of tips, tricks, and shared jars of bubbly starter.

There are definite benefits to being in the sourdough mafia. Taylor’s dad spends an hour or two with me, giving me his standard recipe—which yields six loaves at a time—and running through all of the basics.

“What are you using for proofing baskets?” he asks, and I’m already lost. It turns out that sourdough is a serious business, and one which requires certain pieces of equipment—not just the correct kind of flour but also spray bottles, small baskets, bandanas, and shower caps. My second batch of dough is already too far along to wait for proper supplies, so instead I wind up cutting an old soymilk crate into a series of boxes, which I perforate over and over with a box cutter, in the hopes of achieving

something basket-like. These I line with pillowcases, until I run out and line the rest with heavily-floured paper towels. It feels almost as though I am making a nest for my little loaves.

To a sourdough novice, the amount of work involved in making a single batch is kind of staggering. It's a three-day process. The first day consists of nothing but adding carefully measured amounts of flour and water to a portion of your starter every five to six hours. This in and of itself is not a huge time investment, but it is a commitment, forcing you to structure your day around your starter's feeding schedule. Several times over the course of the summer, I will find myself leaving social engagements early in order to tend to Jenkins' needs. It feels a little like caring for a sick child, albeit a child that I can leave unattended in the kitchen for hours at a time.

The resulting bucket-sized bowl of slurry does not even resemble bread dough until day two, when you finally stir in enough flour that the whole mess can actually be kneaded. It is an odd feeling to knead something with that much heft; it reminds me of my earliest days in Gregory, when preparing food in our industrial kitchen always felt like cooking for giants. I try to keep it confined to a cutting board, because wet dough is ghastly to clean off of unsoakable surfaces, but the dough must be managed very carefully, or it will easily ooze off the edges of the cutting board and onto the counter like a lazy octopus.

Halfway through the kneading process you add the salt, which is very important to sourdough; people don't realize how much of the classic sourdough flavor is actually sourness playing off of saltiness. The salt isn't first combined into the dough itself; you sprinkle it over the entire chunk of dough like glitter in a dormant snowglobe. It's more

salt than I've ever added to anything else at one time—three tablespoons—and so it really does cover the dough in a noticeable crust. This sits for fifteen minutes, and when it's done, the dough is much moister, allowing you to add even more flour. This is also generally the point where I realize that I've forgotten to add the wheat germ; it's supposed to be added very early on the second day, but I nearly always end up frantically kneading it in by the fistful.

At the end of all of this kneading, the dough is divided into six surprisingly heavy grapefruit-sized loaves. Here is where the proofing baskets come into play—or proofing jury-rigged cardboard boxes, depending on what you have at hand. The loaves sit in these baskets overnight in the fridge, getting a chance to “breathe” and slowly rise some more. The next morning, you take the baskets—or “baskets”—out of the fridge, and the loaves are plopped onto a cornmeal-dusted cookie sheet for one last four-hour rise.

The funny thing is, after all of that work, the loaves really only bake for about thirty minutes. Of course, this is because the only safe way to cook sourdough is at insanely high temperatures—500 or 450 degrees. This is actually a safety precaution, followed in order to kill off all of the micro-organisms that *aren't* helpful yeasts. The downside to relying on wild critters to leaven your bread is that when you leave your starter out of the refrigerator overnight, it often attracts other critters as well, including some microscopic creatures you rather adamantly don't want to eat. Technically, raw sourdough should be handled with similar caution to raw egg—certainly it is not safe to consume anything containing starter until it has been cooked, and even then, after it's cooled for about an hour. However, much like cookie dough that contains raw egg, in practice, people usually break the rules a little, myself included. I can't help it. It's hard

to wait that hour when the loaves are sitting right there on the table, golden brown and steaming hot and wafting that peculiar tangy bread scent of sourdough.

The first Sunday in February of my senior year finds me, as usual, in the kitchen. I am making up a recipe for muffins, which I am making for my boyfriend, and a year ago every part of that sentence would have been inconceivable to me.

“Cooking is an art, not a science,” my mom is fond of saying—meaning that recipes don’t need to be followed to the letter in order to come out well. Baking, on the other hand, *is* a science—a baked good requires a very specific ratio of ingredients in order to correctly react in the oven—and this is one of the things that I like most about it. Your success as a baker only really hinges on your ability to slavishly follow directions. A trustworthy recipe is like a reliable map, or a good friend, or a religious text that actually does what religious texts are supposed to do—providing guidance, a series of wise and concrete suggestions which, when followed, will have wonderful results. There is none of the doubt or vagueness generally present in the rest of my life, only instructions in black and white.

Throwing together curries or stir-fries or pasta dishes may be more creative, with more room for improvisation, but it requires relying on one’s own instincts to a degree that makes me uncomfortable. I can’t make soup without another person around—I require that second pair of taste buds to help me judge whether the broth is fine on its own, or whether it needs more garlic. (The answer to the garlic question, by the way, is pretty much always “yes.” This is another thing my mother taught me.)

Three semesters of cheffing at the co-op have forced me out of my comfort zone in regards to recipe obedience vs. culinary anarchy. You often don’t have a choice when

you have three hours to prepare food for 29 people with limited supplies; at the very least, you must learn how to make substitutions. You could argue that this is all my new muffins are—a series of substitutions to an existing recipe. However, while I'm not sure where the line is between modification and creation of something different entirely, but I have a feeling that by the time you have converted a recipe for orange banana nut muffins into a recipe for vegan apple spice muffins, it is time to call it your own.

2 cups all-purpose flour
¾ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/8 teaspoon ground ginger
A pinch of ground cloves
½ cup white sugar
½ cup brown sugar
¼ cup dairy-free margarine spread
2 large eggs, or an equivalent amount of egg substitute
1 cup applesauce
½ c finely-chopped apple
Apple juice and lemon juice

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Combine the flour through cloves and whisk.*
- 2. In a separate bowl, beat the sugars and margarine together until creamy.*
- 3. Add the eggs, applesauce, and apple pieces to the sugar mixture. Stir.*
- 4. In a small bowl, pour three tablespoons of apple juice. Add a small amount of lemon juice until you have judged the sourness to be comparable to orange juice. Measure out three tablespoons of the resulting mix, and add it to the wet ingredients.*
- 5. Add the wet mixture to the dry one, stirring until just combined. Spoon into a greased muffin tin, and bake until a toothpick inserted in a muffin comes out clean.*

Unlike sourdough or yeast breads, quickbreads don't rise due to the work of intrepid micro-organisms, but instead through a chemical reaction triggered by adding some kind of mild acid to a base (usually baking soda). The carbon dioxide released creates the bubbles which will leaven the bread. This is why it is important to get muffins in the oven the moment you've combined your wet and dry ingredients—if the

carbon dioxide escapes before you bake the mixture, your muffins turn out tough and concave. As I've said, baking is a science.

However, just because it can't be improvised doesn't mean that there is zero room for experimentation. I had made apple-orange-banana bread before, not because I'd wanted to create a new recipe, but because once I'd mashed my bananas, I'd discovered that I didn't have enough, and was thus desperate to find some ingredient of equivalent texture, to keep everything from drying out. From there, it was a reasonably short leap to apple-orange bread, but here I was stuck for a long time. I wanted to add warm spices, but wasn't sure if it would fit with the orange flavor, and lacked the bravery to try it and see.

I am in many ways not a particularly brave person. Not just because I am afraid of many things (failure, death of loved ones, personal embarrassment, rejection, hydrogenated oils, escalators, large dogs stepping on my feet) but because I despise taking risks, and will go to great lengths to avoid doing so. One of the reasons why I didn't date for the first 22 years of my life is that I have always harbored an intense fear of the people I find attractive. Any time one of them was in the room, I was busy plotting my escape. This tended to throw a wrench into the getting-to-know-you process.

Colin and I met at a co-ed slumber party, which sounds sleazy unless you know the people involved—Holly, Aaron, Jackie—and thus understand that we do not party like the wild fashionable young hooligans of vodka ads. Instead of pizza and mixed drinks, we sat down together for a home-made meal (Holly and Aaron cooked the macaroni and cheese and the chicken from scratch in Holly's tiny apartment kitchen, I brought a Tupperware full of spinach salad and a batch of fresh pitas wrapped in a

kerchief). Instead of drunken dancing or tomfoolery, we wound up watching a movie, and then talking until after the sun came up.

Halfway through dinner, Colin mentioned that he loved *This American Life* and *Radiolab*, which happen to be my two all-time favorite public radio shows, and I was so impressed—people my age never know public radio, especially not boys, and especially not cute ones—that the portion of my brain that edits what I say temporarily shut down. “Okay, we have to get married now,” I told him. “I know that you don’t know me at all, and you didn’t go to Holly’s party looking for a spouse, but it’s too late, we have to get married.” To my tremendous relief, he didn’t seem creeped out at all. Instead, without missing a beat, he made a joke about sharing *This American Life* host Ira Glass, and as everyone laughed, I began to eye the exits of Holly’s apartment, wondering if there was still time to crawl out a window and disappear into the night. A cute, funny boy with good taste in public radio and a high threshold for weirdness? It just wasn’t fair.

Holly lives in the wilds of North Campus, an isolated, tree-filled area about as far from the restaurants, coffee shops, and over-priced boutiques of Central Campus as you can imagine, and thus even if I had managed to slip away while nobody was watching, I would have been stranded among deer and overweight raccoons. The only solution was to conceal any possible interest I had in this man—if I couldn’t hide myself, I could at least hide my increasingly ridiculous crush on him—and so I spent most of the night talking with Jackie, one of my best friends from high school. It wasn’t a perfect fix because Colin was still in the room, and still capable of adding to the conversation in a way that made it clear that he was also smart and interesting (and interested in baking pies! The kind with actual pastry!), but it was better than nothing.

At least I only had to keep my cool until the wee hours of the next morning; I was leaving Holly's early in order to catch a sword-fighting demonstration at 11 am. This was going to involve a great deal of travel time, since I wasn't even sure how to get to the Student Theater Arts Complex from North Campus.

"I know where it is," said Colin. "I can go with you if you want."

There was what felt like a very long pause.

"Thanks," I said. "That would be great."

When the morning came, and Colin left to get a clean pair of clothes from his nearby apartment, I took advantage of his absence by berating my friends for indirectly putting me in this position.

"Don't you guys want to come with us?" I asked. "Please, you would make this so much less awkward. It's sword-fighting; it'll be cool."

"It's ten in the morning," Jackie mumbled. "I'm staying here."

"It isn't fair," I said. "Why does he have to like *public radio*?"

"You would be adorable together," offered Holly.

"The last time my friends said that about me and a guy, it ended in heartbreak," I told them. "The time before that, it ended with heartbreak *and* me in a mouse costume."

There was a pause.

"Wait, what?" said Holly.

Luckily, the mouse suit story was one that I could tell pretty quickly, because like the childhood allergy story, I'd told it so many times, both to other people and to myself, that it could now be reeled off at top speed.

The first time my friends tried to set me up with a boy, the gentleman caller in question was the cousin of my friend Dane. His name was Mike, but even in my head, I referred to him as Impenetrable Shield Of Sarcasm Boy, because he communicated almost entirely in dry asides, and while it was probably not all that difficult to delve beneath the glib, sarcastic surface, it was certainly not something I could do.

I was seventeen. I'd met Dane because he and his friends made movies, semi-seriously, and they'd decided at some point that it would be nice to have a girl in the group, in case they ever wrote any parts that demanded feminine wiles, and couldn't be accomplished by putting Jake in a wig. Dane chose me in particular because we were in high school improv club together, and while he didn't know me and had never interacted with me, he saw that I had no compunctions making an ass of myself in front of other people. I knew who he was because I knew he made movies, but I was far too shy to directly approach anyone I admired for any reason, so when he asked me to join I was utterly shocked but pretty thrilled.

From the beginning, I had a hard time figuring out where I fit in. I was the only member of the group who had gotten in "based on talent" as Dane would sometimes remind me, but I was also too shy to push my own ideas, and so would generally end up not having much to do in the movies. Much of their film-making process involved large stretches of procrastination between takes, where everyone else would play video games and trash-talk each other, while I quietly sat on the couch and thought about other things.

This happened so often, and left me so bored, that I began to invent a series of mental hobbies, little thought experiments with which I could amuse myself without

batting an eyelid. For instance, as Grand Theft Auto blared in the background, in my imagination I would be silently organizing every type of jam, jelly, or preserve I could think of by color. The “blue to red” part of the spectrum was easy—blueberry, blackberry, boysenberry, grape, raspberry, cherry, strawberry—but yellow to blue was a constant struggle.

Someone with better social skills might not have retreated into the seductive world of mentally sorting jelly, but I was a nervous, awkward introvert anyway. There was this weird dichotomy between me “the professional” and everybody else, who were there because they were Dane’s friends. It felt a little like they were real teenagers, and I was some random extra who had been flown in at the last possible moment in order to fill out the scene.

Dane and Jake had the kind of bad judgment that tends to lead to good stories, and when we weren’t filming or procrastinating, they would do the craziest shenanigans, while I hung back and watched. Impenetrable Shield Of Sarcasm Boy was also more of an observer than a shenaniganner as well, so very occasionally we would hang back and watch together, and he would make some witty comment and I’d laugh and I’d make a wannabe-witty comment and he’d smile. I liked him a lot. He was smart and very patient with his wacky friends and funny as hell and he was good at guitar and he had a nice smile. This was basically all I knew about him. I didn’t actually interact with him all that much, because if I interacted with him, there was a chance that he’d figure out that I liked him.

One day at the lunch table, my friends (who were mutual friends of Dane and thus knew of Impenetrable Shield Of Sarcasm Boy) mentioned that ISOS had just been

dumped by his girlfriend. Totally unaware that I had a huge crush on him, they jokingly suggesting that I go out with him, reasoning that he and I were both single, and that together we'd "make awesome sarcastic babies". It wasn't until I began blushing as red as the bell peppers in my sandwich that they realized my true feelings for ISOS. This hardly deterred them from their teasing—if anything, it just gave them more focus—but as they cracked jokes, the conversation started to take on a serious edge. They had a goal now. They were going to make this happen, they informed me, as they hatched complicated schemes.

A few weeks later, we were filming a movie at Dane's house. It was a comedy-horror about an amateur scientist who accidentally transmogrifies his wife into a mouse. I played the mouse. I had no lines. I did get to squeak in a few scenes, and I was determined to make the best of the situation.

It turned out that when my friends said they were going to set me up with ISOS, what they meant was that when he and I were in the same room together, they were just going to pretend that ISOS already returned my feelings, and joke about how in love we were. I have no idea why they thought this would work, but as you can probably imagine, the end result was astoundingly awkward.

I'm reasonably sure ISOS didn't like me back at all--he certainly had no reason to, because I never spoke to him--but he started being nicer to me than usual. He even tried to talk to me, but I was so nervous, and trying so hard to prove that I could be as impenetrable and sarcastic as him, that I kept accidentally killing the conversation. This went on for several hours of excruciating embarrassment, and as the night wore on, I realized that I was effectively killing my chances, such as they'd been, of ever ending up

with this guy. There was no hope now. He was forever going to remember me as that quiet, socially retarded friend of Dane's, who happened to be nursing an embarrassing crush on him.

So in the middle of all of this, I have to get dressed up for my role, my job, the manifestation of the reason I'd ever met Dane in the first place, the reason I was there that night at all.

The thing you have to understand about the mouse costume was that it wasn't just ears and a tail. It wasn't a casual couple of accessories, the kind of thing you could play down when you weren't on camera. No, we are talking a Pinky costume, as in Pinky and the Brain, complete with footie pajama-style feet, a huge droopy tail, and a hood festooned with Pinky's gaping crooked eyes and enormous buckteeth. It was also way too big for me. However ridiculous your mental image might be at this point, keep in mind, in actuality I had even less dignity, because the thing sagged.

So between takes, as I stand there wondering why I'd ever had any confidence in my friends' ability to make love happen for me, or in my own ability to make it happen for myself, as I try to articulate in my own head what separates me from normal people, what exactly makes me a different goddamn species than the kids who love and are loved, I look over at Dane and his girlfriend, and Jake and his girlfriend, and Impenetrable Shield of Sarcasm Boy with his quips, and I see their jeans and black T-shirts and inside jokes and their ease with each other.

And I look down at my paws and sigh. I'm never going to have what they have, I think to myself. And I know it now, from the top of my ears, to the tip of my droopy pink tail.

“It seems unlikely that that’s going to happen again,” argued Jackie.

“He’s majoring in *performance art*,” I said. “It’s totally within the realm of possibility.”

Luckily, no mouse costumes came into play that morning. Colin returned to Holly’s apartment, my friends pretended not to laugh their heads off about my predicament, and then they bade us goodbye. And so the two of us set off for Central Campus together, walking side by side and making small talk as I gave my brain strict instructions not to over-analyze, not to get caught up in what I wanted this to be. In a way, it helped that I had just come straight from a slumber party; greasy-haired and sleep-deprived, I could push my way towards a zen sort of detachment, an understanding that since there was no chance I was even remotely attractive in my present state, there was no reason to worry about it.

At the end of the sword-fighting demonstration, he asked if I’d be interested in accompanying him and some of his friends to a free concert of experimental music the next day, and I could feel a little of my zen calm evaporate. I’d had bad experiences with getting my hopes up in the past, but it did seem like one possible interpretation of events was that Colin was maybe interested in spending some time with me. Perhaps.

The concert plans were expanded to dinner at a local sushi place beforehand, and when it turned out that the concert had in fact happened the previous night, concert plans were replaced by dinner entirely. That Sunday night, I cooked a co-op meal from 3:30 to

6:30, rang the dinner bell, and then immediately pulled on my coat and boots and power-walked to a restaurant. The absurdity of the situation was not lost on me, but I was a little preoccupied as I headed toward Colin and his unknown friends, my head filled with the now familiar litany of *Don't freak out don't freak out don't freak out*.

Luckily, both the company and the cucumber rolls ended up being very pleasant. While it is without a doubt delicious, sushi is not necessarily the ideal food to eat with strangers. American-style rolls are often too large to consume with chopsticks in any sort of graceful way, forcing you to either bite the piece in half and watch as the whole thing sadly unspools on your plate, or to jam the hockey-puck-sized wad of rice, seaweed and fillings directly into your mouth, hamsterlike, in one cheek-stretching go. It is not the best context for forming first impressions, but the group was blessedly relaxed about table manners. Consensus leaned more towards the second school of sushi consumption, thankfully, since this approach tends to be not only tidier, but more fun.

The evening was going surprisingly well; I had yet to embarrass myself in front of Colin and his friends, and any disappointment over missing the concert was overruled by the knowledge that I certainly have a better appreciation for soy sauce and ginger than for experimental musicianship. And so when the group decided to head down to Pinball Pete's for a few rounds of after-dinner pool, I went along, despite a dislike of arcades and games of hand-eye coordination, and despite my continued trepidations about actually spending time with a cute boy. And this is how I found myself playing the world's most awkward round of pool against Colin, a round which I arguably won on a technicality, but as any objective observer of my pool-playing style would attest, the truth of the game was that we somehow managed to both lose.

We had spent much of our pool match discussing how Scrabble was a superior activity in every possible aspect, and so when the smoke had cleared from our epic pool showdown, and we realized that everyone else had quietly dispersed, it seemed reasonable for me to suggest that we walk the 10 minutes back to Gregory House and have a proper match of wits and vocabulary. However, I hadn't finished the obligatory condensed Gregory tour ("this is our hallway, this is our kitchen, this is the wok so large you could bathe a child in it") when my friend Naomi appeared on the scene and suggested we accompany her to the arboretum for a late-night poetry reading. Colin and I agreed to raincheck on the Scrabble; board games can happen any time, but spontaneous moonlight poetry readings really have to be seized as they come. And so we sat together in the common room, watching as Naomi gradually collected a group of about ten people, and then we all tramped back into the January night.

The ground was slick with frozen snow as we edged our way over the rolling hills of the Ann Arbor Arboretum, affectionately known to locals as the Arb. I nearly fell a few times. Colin cautioned me not to die, explaining that my death would bum him out. I tried not to read anything into this other than basic concern for the life of a fellow human being, and mostly failed.

The eleven of us just kept walking farther into the Arb, with no set destination in mind. Just when I began to think we would perhaps keep walking forever, disappearing into the trees to live on bark and acorns, someone sighted a hill suitable for poetry, and we trekked over to claim it. When we realized the hill was already being used by a group of sledders, Naomi just convinced them to join our reading instead. It was that kind of night.

We formed a slightly misshapen circle, the co-ops standing or sort of crouching, the sledders perched on their sleds. Naomi opened the reading with Shel Silverstein's 'Invitation': "If you are a dreamer, come in / If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar, a magic bean-buyer..." I've always loved that poem—who doesn't?—but that sense of possibility, of stories about to unfold and strangers about to reveal marvelous secrets had never felt more true than in that moment. When she finished ("Come in! / Come in!"), there was a slight pause.

"Who wants to go next?" she asked. The only sort of courage I have with any consistency is the courage of performance, and so I opened my mouth and sang a poem by the Persian mystic Rumi, one we used to sing in my Unitarian Universalist Sunday school:

*"Come, come, whoever you are
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving
Ours is no caravan of despair!
Come, yet again come."*

Because the reading had been borne out of a whim, there hadn't been much time to prepare. My housemates had simply grabbed whatever random volumes of poetry they could find on their way out the door, and the result was pleasingly eclectic: a hodgepodge of modern pieces written by unknowns, along with the classics we'd been assigned in classes but actually enjoyed enough to keep. One girl brought her copy of the medieval German epic *The Nibelungenlied*, and she read us descriptions of feasts and lords and ladies, the pages of her book illuminated by the blue glow of someone's cell phone screen.

Naomi and I performed ‘The Jabberwocky’ by memory, with Naomi doing most of the heavy lifting and me chiming in whenever I could--"One two! One two! And through and through!" Even the sledders joined in on the poetry-reciting action, reading from a borrowed Robert Frost anthology. (Colin read a poem from the same book, and I couldn't help thinking that he had an excellent voice for Frost, although I was vaguely aware of some possible bias on my part.)

Eventually, the sledders had to get back home, and the reading dispersed. My housemates, Colin, and I headed back to the co-op, but we were all too invigorated by the crisp January air and the sense of possibility to call it a night, and so the subject of cocoa came up. I'd recently been told that tea and hot chocolate were delicious when combined. It seemed like a gamble—Earl Grey and chocolate together? Really?—but at that moment, I happened to have a small stash of dried mint leaves given to me by my friend Jackie. I'd been wondering what to do with them anyway, and peppermint hot cocoa certainly seemed a worthy experiment. The assembled group agreed.

I dashed up to my room and returned with a baggie filled with dried green plant matter, a scene which would've had a different connotation in any place but Gregory house. As everyone gathered around the stove, I pondered the way that the evening had once again carried me back to the worn blue-and-white tiles of the co-op kitchen. I had already spent three hours there that afternoon, and now here I was again, heating up a pot of water for the mint leaves and searching for the hot cocoa mix. Maybe on some level it was an issue of safe ground—this much proximity to a boy I liked was putting me on edge, like drinking a latte on an empty stomach or meeting a minor celebrity, and since

curling up in a fetal position was clearly not an option, retreating to such a familiar place was the next best thing. Maybe it was just habit.

Given that Gregory contains a large dining room, a basement with a TV, and a common room full of sofas, it is funny how often we wind up congregating in our kitchen. The room boasts harsh artificial light, pretty much no seating, and the constant hum of the refrigerator, and yet we keep coming back, like moths drawn to the flickering blue flames of the stove's pilot lights. You always feel bad for the co-op'er who chooses the bedroom directly across from the kitchen; they think they are getting a good deal because it's a reasonably large single, but little do they know that they've just signed up for a year of struggling to sleep amid the boisterous conversations and late-night cooking experiments happening directly outside their door.

As Gregory house cooking shenanigans go, this was hardly worth writing home about: no boiling oil, no butterbean-laced frosting, no dry pasta sticking out of the pot all aflame like a fistful of semolina candle-wicks. Still, questions lingered. Wouldn't the mint water weaken the hot chocolate? The solution, it was decided, was to brew the cocoa double-strong, like hot cocoa concentrate. Richness was the goal.

“Anyone mind if I use soymilk?” I asked the assembled group.

“Oh, so the vegans can have some, too?” someone asked.

“No, the cocoa mix is nonvegan; it's got whey in it for some reason,” I explained, feeling horribly self-conscious. “I'd just rather use soymilk, if that's okay.” (This is a holdover from my allergic days—even years after my dairy restrictions have lifted, I still have a hard time drinking a cup of cow's milk, no matter what else it may contain.) The self-consciousness only increased as I began to stir in the cocoa mix; to be honest, hot

chocolate is one of those astoundingly simple things with which I've long struggled. Back when I made it for Jane and myself in our dorm microwave, the last few sips were always a terrible disappointment of bitter, clotty dregs.

It's easier to make cocoa on the stove, though, because it seems the only way to combat the horrible dregs is to stir early and often. Colin peered over my shoulder.

"Oh, you need to add way more chocolate than that," he said.

I peeked into the pot. It was already looking kind of thick, but his confidence was persuasive, and besides, who has ever complained of overly chocolate-y hot cocoa? Carefully, I dumped in some more.

"How can you tell when there's enough?" I asked.

"When you can't move the spoon anymore," said Colin, and okay, that sounded about right.

Eventually, after a lot of stirring, all of the mix more or less dissolved into the soymilk—although of course, not before every vegan in the house and the girl with soy allergies had each wandered through the kitchen saying, "That smells really good! Can I have some?" and I had to keep explaining, apologetic grin in place, that due to personal quirks, I had made hot cocoa in the least inclusive way possible. Luckily, the old Gregory house culinary customs of last year were still in effect: as long as my housemates were living and breathing, a vessel full of any kind of warm chocolate was not about to go to waste.

I poured the peppermint water through a sieve into the pot, and stirred it all together. The smell and consistency, at least, were promising, and the color lacked the sickly green tinge I'd been half-fearing. There was a mad scramble for mugs and cups,

and we each poured ourselves a cautious half-inch of the mint tea and cocoa concoction. It was quite good, I decided; Colin had been right about the chocolate levels. We retired to the common room, me and Colin and a few others. We sat on the floor together, sipping our mint-infused cocoa and I sternly reminded myself to stop smiling at him for no reason, because this was bound to be a dead giveaway.

No matter; less than a week later, and only eight days after meeting for the first time, we were officially dating.

These are the things I reflect on as I spoon apple-spice batter into a row of muffin tins. I find myself mentally reviewing the story of how we met sometimes, partly because I still can't quite believe that it happened: that there could be a cute guy somewhere in the world interested in both Ira Glass and me. Nevertheless, he exists. I have been dating him for a month and I have seen the inside of his apartment, a one-person Northwood unit that feels in many ways like the opposite of my bustling co-op. And I have seen the inside of his fridge, too, which was entirely empty except for a jar of pasta sauce, and a carton of soymilk he'd bought for my visit, in case I wanted some hot cocoa.

I can't wrap my head around such barren kitchen contents. I have to keep reminding myself that Colin is a sophomore who eats most of his meals in the cafeteria, as is customary for a busy student, and that my stashes of graham crackers, cream cheese and heist-fueled bowls of fruit salad were the anomaly in terms of college living. Besides, I think as I sling the muffin tins into the preheated oven. Now he'll have one more item for his fridge. Part of me is worried that my orange banana into apple spice

muffin alchemy will fail; I took a risk and replaced the orange juice with a mixture of apple juice and lemon juice, tasting it until the tartness seemed comparable. This kind of instinct-based approach is normally the last way in the world I would be making baked goods, but taking chances has been working out lately, so why not here, too?

Four years have passed since I arrived in Ann Arbor, and much of it spent in one kitchen or another. It is common practice to ask authors or aspiring writers why exactly it is that they write, and I find that my answer to “Why do you write?” is pretty similar to the more relevant question here, “Why do you cook?” That is to say, it’s complicated. There could never be one answer that would explain the many reasons I have for preparing food as often as I do. But briefly:

I cook to say *I’m sorry*, I cook to say *thank you*. I cook to create something that has never quite existed before, and I cook to be the kind of person who creates something. I cook to keep Jenkins alive. I cook out of habit, I cook to comfort myself, I cook because sometimes the only way I can feel okay is to hide out in a series of unambiguous tasks that I’m good at. I cook so that there will be cake. I cook to show sympathy, I cook to take care of my friends, I cook so that some small part of the world will make sense. I cook because I’m hungry or obligated or sad or bored, I cook because it connects me to history.

I cook to say *I like you*, I cook to say *please like me*. I cook to say *look what I can do!* I cook to put off all of the things that I should be doing instead. I cook to feed my housemates, I cook to have something to bring to dinner parties, I cook so that I may know where my food came from and what went into it. I cook because it’s healthier and

cheaper. I cook to challenge myself, I cook to raise money for causes I believe in, I cook so that I may feel generous. I cook because everyone needs a back-up plan in the event of a zombie apocalypse. I cook to be social, and I cook to spend time alone with myself. I cook for the sizzle of pancakes on griddle, the swell of bread rising on pan, the aroma of deep-frying falafel. I cook because it's the tool at my disposal, I cook because my mother did it, I cook to get something done. I cook because from the moment my body tagged milk as a foreign invader, I never had a choice.

Over the years, I have cooked in apartments and dorm rooms and houses. I have cooked using the most makeshift of tools, and I have cooked armed with a drawer of ridiculously specific gadgets. My own plates, cups, and bowls are tucked away in a box in the co-op basement for now, lying dormant but not forgotten until the day that I leave the sunny common room and enormous kitchen of Gregory house to strike out on my own, somewhere in what is commonly referred to as the "real world." I still don't really know where those dishes are headed, but when I imagine my future in vague, gauzy outlines, it's always the food I see.

Maybe I will wind up in another co-op, frying up veggie burgers for my new housemates. Maybe I will get an apartment in Chicago or New York, sitting on the floor with my new city friends and passing around fresh goat cheese and homemade bread. Maybe I will live abroad and gain new appreciation for curry or kim chee or baked beans on toast. Maybe Colin will be there, baking pies and helping me chop garlic, or maybe my sous chef will be someone entirely new. Maybe I will spend the next four years cooking alone.

The future is even more unknown than it was back when I was first communing with my new dishware in 2006, and God knows that I am still afraid. Even so, in the past four years, I've done a number of things that should've been impossible for someone like me—preparing a feast for 30 in a galley kitchen, anyone?—and if I found a way to make pies in a dorm room, surely I will figure out a way to make things work wherever I do wind up. There are certainly days when I'm sure that I will never manage this business of being an adult, that I'm doomed to a life of ramen and canned fruit cocktail, but for the most part, I have faith that eventually I will find a way to put avocados and aged cheddar on the table, that red bell peppers and stone-ground mustard will be within my grasp once more.

Even if the details of the recipe are uncertain, I believe that in the end, the dish will be delicious, unique, and worth the prep time. Maybe it's optimism or complacency or misplaced hope, but after so many years of pulling things together at the last minute, this sense of assurance is starting to feel a little like experience, a little like wisdom. The future is getting closer all the time, and when I close my eyes, I can almost taste it.