



in the kitchen

an essay by dorette snover

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in the pennsylvania dutch kitchen where i was born and raised, i learned how to bake shoofly pies, served up cakes to grandpa howard, and heard stories about my prussian princess great-grandmother laura. they told me family secrets about her over plates of schnitz un knepp, a hearty german hodge-podge of ham and dried apples.

"she's crazy. thanks be to god that you're adopted and hoe no blood of her in you. child, pass the apple butter."

my brother jeremy was also adopted and was five days older than i. our adoptive mother, aileen, was a private practice physician schooled at women's medical college, later to become hahneman university in philadelphia. she doctored my biological mother, who died at twenty-nine from heart complications brought on by a bout with childhood rheumatic fever. my adoptive father, warren, called bud by everyone, was also my blood uncle. he was everyone's friend. he was the produce manager at acme markets, a well-known grocery store chain in the area.

they divorced when my brother and i were about a year old. i have very important memories with both of them separately but none together. we would go on rounds at st. joseph's hospital in reading with my mother and watch my father stock smokehouse apples in the fall in the aisles at acme. at some point, my father remarried a saintly woman, jackie, who often provided a safe place for jeremy and me to be. when jeremy and i would visit them on sunday afternoons, jackie would make spaghetti and meatballs and on our birthdays we would have huge horseshoe shaped cakes baked and decorated with roses in pink, blue, yellow and green by mrs. hilbert. as a child, i thought it was very exciting to have two houses in which to celebrate birthdays.

the needs of everyday life were secured by my grandmother. her friends called her dot or dorothy, or nana, for reasons i didn't find out till much later. mom decided to name me the french version of dorothy, dorette. on the eve of fat tuesday, she placed a bowl of fastnacht doughnut dough to raise on a table in my bedroom because the main heating vent lived there. i can still smell the warm yeasty potato dough. my mother explained that i was given this room as i was quite sick during my first year.

"we didn't think you'd make it. you couldn't hardly hold any food down."

no one would believe that today. i remember december suppers when nana, jeremy and i ate ketchup and butter sandwiches as the snow blew across the back porch. nana was too poor for anything else. i didn't know that then; i just loved the grand adventure of it all. and so i grew up watching carefully how food influenced all of us. nana held court with potato filling and my mother, aileen, shunned such simple roots and demanded that she cook citified delmonico steaks.



when mom would take us to new york city for easter, we'd pack jars of pickled red beet eggs and pepper cabbage to eat on the drive through the holland tunnel and all the bridges. we pulled up under the huge green awning at the waldorf astoria. she took us to saks fifth avenue to buy yellow easter suits, matching shoes and pocketbooks. i felt like a new baby duck when i walked down fifth avenue in the easter parade.

jeremy and i were treated as twins, though we had different mothers, but perhaps the same father. i may never know. i remember gargantuan double birthday celebrations at a greek restaurant on penn street in reading called the crystal. i waitressed there the summer i was eighteen. i always kept my tables laughing, but the day a birthday cake lit with sparklers slid off the platter onto the birthday boy, i wondered about making it my career. i cried my eyes out to the puerto rican salad maker in the kitchen i was so ashamed, but when i finally returned to the table the birthday boy, who was seventy, sat me on his lap and gave me a big kiss.

it wasn't until i was five that anyone learned my secret.

"why doesn't she answer? jeremy, what does she want?" jeremy spoke for me, as i was deaf in one ear. maybe it was because of my hearing problem that as a little girl i spent a lot of times in dreams, listening to music and dancing. i was actually set on being a ballerina. i wanted to live in new york city. i adored the french names for all the movements, the accessibility of the larger world through dancing and the framed degas in the studio where i took lessons. my instructor, pearl, was vivacious. i wanted more than anything to have pink satin toe shoes like she did. i didn't care if she was old. occasionally, i still dream of being a ballerina, but my knees can't take it like they once did.

then there was the kitchen. when we went to new york, i was so excited! in the dining room at the waldorf astoria, our waiter pushed open the doors into the kitchen. i was sure the most important secrets in the world were hidden here. who were those people? what were they doing? where were they going? what was that smell? did they get burned? my god, you could walk into a refrigerator and sit down in a bowl of whipped cream! when i peeked around the corner, a slab of beef was just hanging there. i was dizzy; it was a world beyond my comprehension.

but life pushed against my mother. she married for the second time but he was a horribly abusive man. to all of us. things grew more and more complicated. she gave up her practice, had to go live in philadelphia, and took a position with the veteran's administration working on the board with lawyers deciding veteran's cases. first there was world war ii vets and then later vietnam vets. we only saw her on weekends. she became an alcoholic. nana struggled to maintain some semblance of order. but it was insane. bud and jackie kept quiet, never wanting to incur her wrath, though we all did.

when jeremy drowned at eighteen, it was a major blow to my triangle: mom, nana and myself. we were totally broken and never fully recovered. my father and jackie suffered, too. it was then that i felt a great tapestry spread out around me, swirled with tangerines, velvets, pink roses and unraveling green threads. i expect one day i will know why i can understand life only as i wind across valleys, rivers and up into cloud shrouded mountains.



a fabulous circumstance was meeting my husband, rich, when he was 15 and i was 16. he was from a simple family. he had a real mother and a father. he had two brothers and a sister. he listened to me and laughed at me. i laughed at him. he enjoyed food. i understood him and felt like i had known him since i was a little girl. we were both working at mr. angus steak haus and immediately took up with each other. i won't say there haven't been ups and downs. but if it hadn't been for him, i would never have survived jeremy's death. in his family, i learned about halushki and galumpki. poppy seed bread at christmas and mincemeat cookies. he brings so much joy to everyday life.

we married in 1978 and moved to boston for a year. the next august we traded the inner and outer loops of boston for the cattle ropes of laramie, wyoming. i learned that cattle were not the same beasts as cows. and that the winter wind can blow trains off tracks. i also discovered that even though i graduated from college with a degree in home ec ed, i preferred the kitchen. and so i pedaled from married student housing with yards full of prairie-dog towns to the university of wyoming bakery to make hundreds of doughnuts at five o'clock in the morning. after that, i met a swedish woman who told me i should come cook in the hospital. i thought it was a little strange, because my mother had always wanted me to be a doctor like her. she was not happy about this cooking thing. not at all. but i wondered if maybe i could heal people by feeding them instead.

after the dietician would leave for the day, i would make changes in her recipes for the regular diet patients. it worried me a little but the patients told me it tasted better with oregano and basil, something they didn't know too much about in wyoming. actually at the time i wasn't worried – i was just frustrated.

in between all of this, rich was studying electrical engineering and was learning to hunt. life was different in wyoming. it was our pioneer time; we were thrown back to a primitive state. we butchered and ate everything: elk, deer, antelope, sage grouse. after a particularly long day of antelope processing, i couldn't bear it any longer and wrapped up the legs and stuck them in the freezer.

it seemed only natural that i then went to cook at the farmhouse fraternity. i love big appetites. big breads, big cuts of meat. big ovens. big pots, big pans. big desserts. i love feeding hungry people.

i began dreaming about going to the culinary institute of america. i had read an article about it and remembered that when i was a waitress at the sheraton in boxborough, massachusetts, i was more interested in talking to the chefs who had just graduated from the cia than i was in getting back to my tables who had been waiting and waiting for their orders. but it is rich who gets the credit for encouraging me to go.

a year or so before rich and i married, nana was diagnosed with breast cancer. she had a double mastectomy and was well enough by june to be at our wedding. about a year after rich and i moved to boston, my mother and nana moved out to mesa, arizona. it was good therapy for both of them at first. but the desert heat baked everything to a crisp. it was christmas of 1981 that i saw nana last. i was in my second semester at cia when she died. but how could i give up then? it was because i believed in the power of cooking and nana that i went on. mom abandoned me and everyone for alcohol.



despite this, the two years i spent at the cia in hyde park, new york were two of the best years of my life. i worked in the katherine angell library and saw rich at christmas. we were together for the summer of my externship on hilton head island. he worked at dairy queen. i worked at the hilton head inn on sea pines plantation. it was a starry steamy summer, filled with peanut butter parfaits, dirty rice, oyster roasts, low country shrimp and she-crab soup. i adored working the saute line, even though it was 120 degrees and i must have drunk three quarts of water every night during service. it was thrilling and exciting, and i felt good, like i was doing something important.

after graduation, i was hired with a friend of mine, mary pat kiernan, for a job as a private chef at a business retreat in the mountains near almont, colorado. anne and perkins sams, from midland, texas, were great fun and high on the list of quirky, but who am i to talk? after that summer job, rich and i moved to colorado springs where i found a similar position for another texas family who lived near the broadmoor and owned an equestrian training center. in addition to cooking for them, i also cooked beef hearts for their dogs, made peanut butter cookies for their turtles and pineapple kebabs for their parrots. believe me, i can tell you things that would curl your hair. it did mine.

when erick and jaryd came into our lives, rich and i were determined to spend our time with them. now they are almost fourteen and eleven (and a half, okay jaryd?) and i have never regretted a single minute. they are my two angels. and my two trouble-makers par excellence. but i have been fortunate enough to share an incredible journey, a child growing up. they have different interests. karate. alligators. track. drawing aliens. vietnamese food. brownies and chocolate fettucine. of course it's not over yet.

when erick was very small, i began writing restaurant reviews for a local business magazine. but it wasn't until we moved to chapel hill in 1990 that i realized there was almost as much freedom in the world of writing as in cooking. today, i also love feeding readers with words. since living in the south, i have been lucky enough to write for local and national publications, and to gain experience in food-styling for photography. i've learned to be fearless in submitting queries. what can they say but no? i've heard that before and i will hear it again. it's part of life.

before i watched my mother die of pancreatic cancer in 1998, i consumed a great deal of time caring more about meeting everyone else's expectations. what did it mean to be a home economist, a chef, a food stylist, a food writer and then a fiction writer? since then i have narrowed my gaze. i care only about doing what i need to do for my family. i have struggled with the fact that i never learned or paid attention in the traditional way. it was much to my detriment and to my growth as a person.

perhaps i have spent too much time telling about my childhood. it cast a magic spell over me, although much of it was quite strange. i always felt as though i was walking through the looking glass.

perhaps that's the reason i take great pride in developing kid-chefs, my culinary camp for kids. i can't set the rest of the year's pace for the kids who come into my kitchen. but for one week they can experience the world through smelling, tasting, touching and creating. i feel it is imperative to share the special space of the kitchen with them. to honor them. what is more important than our children?



i divide my year between these very intense summers of kid-chefs in our home in chapel hill, and writing freelance food pieces and fiction. in between, rich and i hold cooking workshops with our tuscan wood-fired oven and are developing a program for using cooking as a means of corporate team building. i love nothing more than to gather around the table, teaching and sharing with friends, old and new, young and old, the magic that exists in the kitchen. the magic that can open hearts and doors for all of us.

i continue to be challenged by the novel i am revising, eleone. it is totally self-driven and it has occupied the greater portion of my energies for the last five years. many people said, don't bother, it can't be done. why would you want to write about that? those kinds of challenges only make me want to overcome whatever stands in the way. after my mother died, it became even more important to me. it is the tale of a contemporary food stylist, elyn, and her 16th century family in gascony. it features a wood-fired bread oven in southwest france and a tiny village there and how their lives revolve around the bread, among other things. when elyn travels to gascony to style the food for a movie being filmed, she makes discoveries beyond the periphery of the camera, which change her life.

my personal life and my career have really merged at this point. i write from home, teach from home and live at home. what i live is what i do. it wasn't necessarily my plan, but it has been what i wanted all along. i relax by planting more basil for the deer, visiting friends from armenia and argentina, and writing stories about places like the 25 hour café. i am thinking of taking up archery. again. i'd love to learn more about mesopotamian food rituals and visit tunisia.

when i have trouble achieving what i've envisioned, i look long and hard at julia child. she started late in life, too, and has kept to what she believes. no matter what. the very first time i met her was at draper's, a cafe at the greenbrier in west virginia. i'm sure she didn't understand a word i was saying, because i was just a blithering idiot. but julia, thank you.

one day i'd like to return to an auberge on the banks of the gelise river in gascony, france and spend time with rich there; baking bread, sauteeing foie gras and catching eels.

the greatest challenge is being my own boss. i have had to learn when to back off of a project, perhaps if there are differences with an editor that are hard won. and when to plunge ahead. the dare in doing what you love is the false notion that you should not be paid well. the convolution of doing what you love incurs some level of guilt, which defers payment. some projects i take on for the equation of money and their simplicity. others i do for the pure love and satisfaction in taking on the challenge in completing them. i know a great deal more about myself since i've been quiet inside than when i was driven by other's ideas of who i should be. i listen intensely to my gut feelings, to my husband, rich, and to my sons, erick and jaryd.

at times, it's been ridiculously cold and flooded by the river wearing boots that were five inches too short and at other times the sun has warmed the earth so much that roses emerge from every crevice. but i wouldn't change anything. i am thankful for both.