The Vegetarian's Guide to Eating Meat

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The vegetarian’s guide to eating meat

by

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CHAPTER ONE

I’m standing in knee-high rubber boots, watching blood pool into translucent puddles, then drift slowly towards the drains in the center of the sloped concrete floor. My long hair is bunched up under a plastic shower cap, pulled down nearly over my eyebrows, and around my ears. I’m not talking much because it’s noisy in here: the hum and roar of an electric meat saw whirring through flesh; the metallic lurching of a pulley hoisting thousand-pound bodies up to the rafters; the hole-punch ricochet of a bolt gun and the resultant crumpling collapse. I’m just watching, as the staff of six works the Wednesday morning slaughter line at Black Earth Meats in Mount Horab, Wisconsin. And I’m staring at the skinned head of a steer.

The lower half of the jaw has been removed, in order to preserve the tongue, a prized piece of meat, for later sale, and the entire head skinned. Not scalded clean—the eyeballs and all the muscle of the steer’s head are still intact—but the hide has been removed, pulled gently backwards over itself to reveal the maze of tendon, sinew and blood veins just below the surface. The head hangs on a butcher hook not six feet from me, the sharp tongs of the hook punching up into what was the roof of the cow’s mouth. The head just hangs there, half-removed mouth gaping, metal curves emerging from below its teeth like fangs. The eyeballs bulge without lids or skin to protect them, looking wild and scared and confused.

I’m completely fascinated with this head. I cannot stop staring at it, at the crazy sideways eyes, the webbing of deep red muscles crossing back and forth over themselves like gauze, a bandage wrapped around the white skull. I think it’s rather beautiful, to see the inner life of a body exposed like that, to learn the under-skin mysteries of my food. But then, while I’m staring this intently, the cheek of the dead steer twitches.
I jump a little bit, shaking in these borrowed rubber boots, and watch as one of the muscles in the steer’s cheek pulses and flinches again and again, an involuntary muscle spasm, convulsing the entire skull. In half a beat, I regain my composure. I’ve read enough to know that this is not an indication that the steer is still alive. Its head is fully severed, I remind myself, its skin is gone. Sometimes, after death, reflexive muscle spasms will occur. They mean nothing.

I know all this, which is why I can continue staring at the skinned head of the steer, which goes on twitching and dancing, its feral eyes still casting out at me blindly, in death, perpetually half-eating the tongs of a meat hook. Why later, when recounting the story, I am able to say honestly that the skinned head of the steer provoked in me no visceral or emotional response. I remain curious, not disgusted.

What the skinned steer head did provoke, however, is a constant, whirring question running through my mind: how the hell did I get here? What am I doing on this, a pleasantly cool early morning in May, in the fuzzy green hills of southwest Wisconsin, standing in a puddle of blood, watching a truck full of cattle get killed?

~

I don’t know yet. But I think it has something to do with where I came from. I grew up in the kind of house where you have ravioli every Christmas Eve, where everyone makes it home for family dinner every night, where kids help their great-grandparents pick grapes from the backyard vineyard and spend their Saturdays ankle-deep in stomping barrels. I never considered that a pasta machine might not be a common piece of kitchen equipment. Or that a wooden folding rack is actually designed for drying clothes—because in my house,
we used it for drying homemade pasta. I grew up in an Italian household, where my grandparents were the first generation born on American soil and where food was central to the connection of our family to each other and to an older cultural memory.

I think the reason I was drawn to the severed head of a dead steer was that I’d spent my whole life operating under a heightened awareness of food as foundation for family and community, but feeling an enormous pressure from not quite being able to grasp and take hold of that power. I think the steer head symbolized, for me, what it means to vacillate between community and identity, between family and self, between inclusion and alienation. Standing in the slaughterhouse staring at the dead cattle reminded me of hiding under the kitchen table in my Nona’s kitchen, wearing big coke-bottle glasses, walling myself in behind a pile of books, staring out at the flurry of action around me, sensing its importance, but too scared to join in.

On any given Saturday of my childhood, we’d drive the hour down south to Dedham, Massachusetts to visit my grandparents and great-grandparents, and the women would cook. Holed up in the small, steamy, kitchen with the humid scent of boiling water, they would speak—though it sounds like yelling, anyone from an Italian family will tell you that volume is just how we show we care—mostly English, with the occasional ingredient named in Italian. Thick hands would dig deep into bowls of ground beef, twisting and rolling out meatballs. Large, square fingers would gently pull strands of dough into tiny strips. Dots and smudges of white flour would stick against sweaty, olive forearms, and when they wiped the sweat out of their strong, arching black eyebrows, dry, white streaks would remain. This is what women mean when they jokingly refer to slaving all day over a hot stove, but these women, sweating and laughing, these women loved the cooking, because the cooking would
give way to the dinner. What I learned from watching, and later, from participating in these scenes was that cooking is work, and eating is reward.

After my great-grandparents died, we moved the operation an hour north, into the kitchen of my parents’ house, and incorporated us, the three daughters, as extra labor. Making pasta is group work, day-long group work, and you need all the hands you can get.

The weather has to be right—not too cold, not rainy, or the dough will stay sticky and wet into the night, drooping on its wooden rack. Here’s the scene: Dad’s against the far wall, wrestling the drying rack open, sliding the wooden legs in place to hold it together. Nana and Mom work the chewy-tough spaghetti dough into long, flat strips, wide as a palm and about a quarter inch thick. My sisters, Meaghan and Caitlin, pretend to help, flicking handfuls of flour against the counter where it explodes in small dusty clouds. Gampi mans the pasta machine, clunks its metal heft against the chipped edge of the counter by the sliding glass door, his gnarled fingers working the knob to tighten its grip. I wait in the corner between the drying rack and the wall, waiting to catch the pasta.

Once Mom and Nana have rolled the dough out, Gampi is ready. The two women carry the dough over to their husband, father, together, one on either end, their hands against each other at the sagging center. They lift it vertically, holding one swaying end, suspended, over the patient metal rollers of the pasta machine. Gampi begins turning the hand crank—nothing automatic here—and the dough is pulled down into the machine. Step one: flattening. The three of them run the floured dough through the machine three or four times, just to get it thin enough, thinner-than-tissue-paper thin, too thin for human hands or clunky rolling pins to achieve. The dough grows ever longer in their hands, as its excessive thickness
gets stretched and redistributed as length, until Mom calls me over, to drape the yard-long cool cloth of pasta over my waiting arms.

Now, the cutting. Gampi lifts and unfolds the machine from itself, raising the slicing attachment into its place over the edge of the counter. These are the crucial moments that move so slowly, that require full cooperation and attention. I must feed the dough back towards the women above me at just the right pace—too fast, and the line gets backed up, the pasta bunched up on itself. Not fast enough and the dough pulls apart, pops like a bubble with the yanking pressure. Meaghan and Caitlin have usually run giggling to the corner to play with dolls until the pasta is ready to hang on the rack. Mom and Nana take the dough from me and guide it up and over, down into the machine at the perfect forty-five degree angle, making sure never to let it brush against the metal of the machine where it would snag and tear. And Gampi turns the crank quickly, more quickly than you would think, pumping it insistently, and out the bottom of the machine emerges the dough as spaghetti. The blades of the machine slice like a PlayDo set, pressing and cutting the dough into long, thin lines that wiggle out of the machine like freshly-cut wheat, into my father’s hands.

Dad gathers the pasta between his two palms, keeping them spread wide, so the damp dough doesn’t stick back to itself. He slowly, slowly, backs away from the machine until the dough is just about to pass clean through. Then my mother comes around to catch the other end, and they, my parents, take the sweeping strands of pasta together, towards the wooden drying rack. Meaghan and Caitlin leap to attention, tiny hands reaching up underneath the sagging blanket of pasta, inches above their palms. My parents never shoo them away as they mime helping, invisible assistance from their children below. The pasta rests against the drying rack and everyone exhales slightly. One batch down.
In all that work emerges an extended dance, all of us bowing and swaying around each other, narrowly avoiding collision, holding our breath. We slide from one spot to the next with broken pieces in our hands, the disparate parts that will eventually become a meal through our collective effort. In all of the work, the Irish parts of our family—my father and I—blend into the Italian, across centuries and state lines and homelands, becoming a single unit in the pursuit of the perfect pasta. There is no such thing as a kitchen too crowded.

Later, when we cook the pasta in big copper-bottom pots, when it steams up from the rolling boiling water, Gampi teaches us girls how to test its done-ness, how to tell when the pasta is *al dente*. He dips a clawed wooden spoon in, gathers a few strands of pasta, lets them drip dry over the sink, then takes them into his callused palm and flings them against the kitchen wall by the living room. Nana scolds, but he knows my mother will never tell him to stop. If the pasta sticks, clinging to the white paint, not sliding more than a millimeter down the wall’s smooth surface, the pasta is ready to eat.

I carried with me the lessons of that table, embedded in memory even as I grew and moved away and changed, missed family meals and meatballs. Plenty of families have rituals and ours are no different, centering around food, family, and an exhausting combination of incessant talking and incessant eating. We worked hard, we worked together, and we were rewarded with the pleasures of great food and each other’s company. I saw the kitchen as a place of shelter, where I was taken under the wing of these incredible women, and taught how to make something out of nothing, taught how to gracefully guide dough through the hand-crank pasta machine, or how to roll a meatball—fast, fast, between the two palms. And even though we don’t always make it ourselves anymore, Mom never has to ask what we
want for dinner when we’re home from the far corners of the country at the beginning of a week. Monday night in the Landrigan house will always be pasta night.

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But of course it could never be that simple and beautiful. My childhood was not a scene from *Under the Tuscan Sun*. In the kitchen and around the table, my family established a solid community, a basis for almost all of our communication with each other. As a girl, I found myself in the middle of this scene, feeling somehow separate, surrounded by mirrors who looked nothing like me. So while my family created its own food paradise, I waited just outside of it, watching from the corner. I hid under the table or behind the recliner, with my books. I was blonde and quiet, and preferred reading to talking or eating. I was skinny. And not quite fitting into the elaborate feast-making meant I had a lot more time to be inside my head, a lot more time for thinking about the larger implications of the food we ate.

No one who meets me in person, who sees my auburn hair, Casper-white skin, ice-blue eyes and rampant freckling, believes that I am at all Italian. When I was six years old, waiting for my sisters to finish their tap-jazz classes in the lobby of my ballet studio with my mother, I heard for the first time what would be a recurring joke of my childhood. My mother introduced me to another mom, who commented that she couldn’t believe how different we looked. My mom just smiled, put her arm around my shoulder, waist-high to her and said, “Yup, that’s Marissa. The milkman’s daughter.” Though I was puzzled then—we didn’t even have a milkman—I understood pretty quickly that I did not fit into this crowd of authentic Italian Women.
My two little sisters developed at much faster rates than I did, started wearing bras and shaving their legs, and inherited all of the athletic ability available in the gene pool. Their skin, and my mother’s, is dark olive brown, tanning and sizzling under the hot July sun of our backyard. Meanwhile, I cowered in the shade under SPF 50 and burned anyway. The three of them are a legion of wild curly brunettes with swirling, intense brown eyes. I am all Irish: skinny straight-down boy body, auburn hair, freckled chapped skin and pale blue eyes. My grandmother pinches their butts and smiles but shakes her head with sympathy while she pats my waist. *Those skinny hips might look nice now,* she warns, *but just wait until you try to have a baby.*

Italian women have hips, and Italian women cook. This is what we do. My Nonna, a lumbering white-haired matriarch, ulcers bulging within her support hose, could barely manage a flight of stairs, but could command a room with the clang of a ladle against a pot. When she called, we came to dinner. My mother managed to work a full-time job, raise three children within three years of each other in age, get her Master’s in Education at night, and have a hot meal on the table every night. You better believe we sat still, bowed our heads and gave thanks. No skipping out on family dinner in my house. This was the power of food—and that food was always, with the occasional exception of a communal cooking fest or a summer evening grill-out, created by women.

The Italian women in my family are loud and brassy and totally unconcerned with traditional gender roles. The food they cooked didn’t provide them with a kitchen table agency they were lacking in any other room of the house, or in the rest of the world. They all held down jobs outside the home. They mowed lawns and shoveled snow. They could out talk anybody within shouting distance. The food had power because *they made it,* because
the glaring light of that intense, no-holds-barred Mediterranean spirit somehow ran right down into those roasting pans and saucepots.

But not me. Worse than my bookish, quiet nature, worse than my skinny hips, worse than all that, my Irish looks seem to have come along with a totally un-Italian, un-feminine lack of ability to spice things up in the kitchen. My incredible lack of coordination escalates to dangerous proportions within the kitchen. In the kitchen, my clumsiness means more than cooking accidents—it means a lack of feminine power, a lack of connection to the women in my family.

I’m the one who, while carrying a fresh batch of pasta across the kitchen, trips over an untied shoelace and drops a whole wet pile to the floor. When my mother left teenaged me alone to reheat leftovers for my own dinner because everyone else had basketball practice or parent conferences, I ended the night standing on a kitchen stool, crying, scrubbing mashed potatoes off the ceiling.

Once, I tried to boil water for pasta, only to become too engrossed in a book, so that the water evaporated, burning black stains onto the bottom of the copper pot. In eighth grade, I had to bake a chocolate cake for French class, but we didn’t have the two cups of espresso the recipe dictated, so I left it out. The brick-like burnt cake was not popular in class the next day. One Saturday, my mother set hot dogs in a skillet for a quick lunch and then went to use the bathroom, instructing me to “watch the hotdogs”. She returned to find me, twelve years old and worried, staring intently at the charred-black meat.

At ten years old, I made cookie dough so rubbery, that when my six-year-old sister tried a bite from the bowl, the tough sugary mass stuck so hard against her baby canine, it
pulled clear of the gum. She ran crying from the kitchen to my mother while I stood guiltily holding a bloody unbaked cookie in my hand.

I don’t remember any moment of humiliation, any singular event that caused my mother to turn, finger pointed, and yell at me to get out of the kitchen. I just know I was never really invited. I just remember being given the non-cooking tasks: fold the napkins, set the table, pour the drinks, take out the butter or salad dressing, stack the rolls in the basket. I stood in the corner and waited to be told to eat.

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It wasn’t just cooking that set me apart from my family. Our practices of eating and the pleasures of indulging in variety and adventure also somehow became wrapped up in the female identity, in being a real woman and a real Italian. My mother and sisters see eating as a contact sport, an adventure. Why anyone would bother to turn down a food they’d never tried is beyond their comprehension—a position they argue often, trying to convince me and my picky father that our disgust towards Thai satay can be overcome, or that really, a samosa is just a fried potato. They never succeed. As a girl, I took refuge in my shared fussiness with my father, the two of us a steadfast fortress in protest of the invasion of weird ingredients into the family dinner. My father adamantly refuses to sprinkle Parmesan cheese on his pasta—in fact, refuses to eat pasta in any shape other than regular long spaghetti. No A-1 on the steaks or ketchup on the burgers. No cheese on the burgers. My aversions are mostly towards vegetables, specifically eggplant, broccoli, and the dreaded fungi: mushrooms.

But growing up, as a team against the others, we shared a loathing for ethnic food. My mother never bothered to cook Indian food, Thai food, Vietnamese food, or sushi,
because two-fifths of us wouldn’t eat it. Instead, from around the time I was twelve or thirteen, once every other month or so, the three of them would have “girls night out,” using the excuse to dress up a little, to tie their hair up in curled ponytails or style it straight, to wear heels and extra eyeliner, enjoying a more international approach to fine dining in one of the red-velvet booths on the main streets of Manchester, New Hampshire, then taking in a movie, one of the sweet romantic comedies my father and I had no interest in seeing.

My father and I, relieved to have narrowly avoided getting roped into the night, felt lucky to have missed out on the raw fish or curry and the overly-sentimental tearjerker at the theatre by the mall. We’d stay home and order a couple of pizzas—Hawaiian for me, plain cheese for him—and he’d let me watch him watch ESPN while I ate from a plate on the floor of the living room. He’d drink a Sam Adams straight from the bottle and leap up dramatically with each basket made. We’d laugh as I imitated him, launching myself into the air, coming down on one knee and pumping my elbow backwards, yeah baby.

My mom and sisters called these girls’ nights out, and that honestly never bothered me—I barely even noticed the irony of the name that so obviously excluded me. I loved those nights with my dad, treasured them as some private victory. These were my first ventures into feminism, my first little rebellion against the culture of womanhood, a culture that seemed to me based mostly on hair and makeup and a more intense relationship with food. I knew my father and I had more in common than he did with Meaghan or Caitlin, despite the fact that they actually played on the soccer and basketball teams he coached. We both liked pizza better than Indian food and we were never going to change. We watched the Celtics rattle the backboards at the Garden while they were off enjoying movies like *While You Were Sleeping* and *Notting Hill*, unrealistic and patronizing romantic dramas targeted
towards a female audience. Nights like those are still my idea of a good time—beer and pizza and television, staying home in my comfy pants. Though I’ve branched out a bit, discovering an adult taste for a good California roll and a vodka martini, I still prefer comfort food. I still love the Celtics. And I’d still rather not spend half an hour on my hair and makeup or ever try sea urchin.

But the girls learned things on their nights out, learned words I didn’t: Tikki Naan, spicy Hamachi, Tandoori, tekka, wai kani. They returned with cardboard containers, bottoms spotted with grease from thick yogurt sauces, or round aluminum plates with crimped edges lined with seaweed rolls and thin strips of candied ginger. They learned how to use chopsticks and a hair straightener, how to use naan as flatware and how to apply blush. I have to take responsibility for this: I decided I didn’t want to learn those things, and have yet to master any of these techniques. The food wasn’t my style, and neither was the style. But I sensed an important connection between food and femininity, something sensual or visceral, that I missed out on, an absence that still makes me feel a little like the gangly girl in the kitchen corner.

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This is the complicated history of me and my family and our food. I love my mother’s pasta sauce and meatballs. I love how loud we all are together, how our laughter rings off the walls. But being in a room crowded by family also makes me tired quickly. When I’m home I often retreat to my childhood bedroom an hour earlier than the rest, to have the quiet time in the dark to think. I spend more time thinking, less time participating and later in life that led to a sense of responsibility to look more closely at where my food comes from. But I couldn’t
just push my chair back from the table and walk away. I’ve never been fully one of them but never fully outside either.

Our family dinner tables terrified and mesmerized me, full of big booming voices and the incessant, overlapping chatter of too many people who have shared so much history. We packed in around Nona’s good table, her china cabinet shaking with our laughter. The hutch served as an extra table, because there usually isn’t enough space on the main table for all the dishes—homemade pasta, olives, tomatoes, spinach and ricotta cheese, sausages stuffed to the brim with my Nona’s bare, meaty hands.

At Nona’s table, my mother’s brother Paul would always sit next to me, on my left, because he is left-handed. My memories of these dinners always place me around age seven. Though my Nona died when I was twenty and away at college, the dinners are a reminiscence of very young childhood, and the characters of the family in those scenes remain frozen in time at their ages. Though he is more than fifty now, in my mind, at Nona’s table, Paul is a small, dark brown man, a natural with a short-sleeved, white, collared shirt and a cigarette hanging casually from beneath his small black moustache. He is thirty, unemployed and living at home, and he already has an ulcer. Paul is like all of the Italian men in my family. Small and straight, with gigantic appetites and metabolisms faster than my mother can speak, and all completely dependent on their women.

Even after my vision was corrected and I no longer had to wear my massive glasses, every woman at my family’s holiday tables seemed larger than life to me. My mother, with her rich, shiny brown hair tightly curled and pulled away from her face, wears purple and turquoise eyeliner, that’s how strong her skin is. My Nana, who is actually German, and married into the Italian family dinners, insists I sit on her lap every time I see her. My Nona,
the modest, white-haired matriarch, hands like a map, greasy with meat and the juices of fresh tomatoes, nods her head vigorously in the direction of my half-full plate.

“What’s wrong with your lasagna?” she bellows, “You didn’t finish!”

“Oh, I’m just not hungry anymore, Nona,” I reply.

But Nona is stubborn, like all good Italians, and she pretends not to understand the things she doesn’t like to hear. “Don-na be silly, ragazza sottile, skinny girl,” she shakes her head at me, “Pass me your plate, I get you some more.”

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The thing is, I like standing in the corner and watching. I am naturally quiet in new situations, preferring observation to participation in a phenomenon I don’t quite understand. This made my family think I was too bookish—my mom used to limit my time in the corner reading and force me to go outside and play with the neighborhood kids. But as I grew up in this world, the world in which I was so different, I decided I could create something out of that outsider identity: a new identity, an awareness and reclamation of being different. I became radical. More importantly, I made the conscious decision to identify myself as radical. By not cooking, I decided, I was refusing to subscribe to gender roles. And if I was stuck in the corner watching, I would make it a protest. What I ate or chose to cook would not be something that happened to me. My food choices would become active. No longer would standing to the side be about not participating. I wanted to see what I could learn when I decided not to participate.

I keep my mouth shut in the slaughterhouse. And I learn that it takes the man with the moustache and the electric knife less than two minutes to work the hide of the dead steer
loose from its hind legs, haunches, gut and back. Loose enough, anyway, that the steer can then be hauled up by its hind hooves, so that what look like two giant sets of tongs can be attached to the loose flaps of skin, so that the pulley system can do the rest of the hard work, peeling the hide back off the dead body, folding over on itself. I watch the tail pull nearly to the floor with the resistance, then spring back up and whack the dead steer’s stomach. I learn that skinning the whole steer’s body takes about five minutes.

I learn that a saw durable enough to saw a steer in half, straight through its bones, exists.

I learn from Francisco, the manager on duty this morning, just how different Bartlet’s slaughterhouse is from the other houses he’s worked. Francisco is a slaughterhouse worker professional, and spent five years at the Johnsonville (pork) plant before being hired by Black Earth Meats. When I ask him what the main differences are between the two models of slaughterhouse—one industrial and one family-owned—he gives me the one word I need: size. This one is much, much smaller.

But the thing that stuck with me the most, the thing I learned by being quiet that day, quieter than I ever imagined I could be, was what it looks like when a steer is struck by a bolt gun. I learned that nobody’s looking at you, so it’s ok if you jump when the gun goes off, at the enormous noise of metal shooting into a skull. I learned deep in my bones the sensation of collapse, the thump of the body to the floor.

I learned the body doesn’t lie still. The animal thrashes. Its legs, wild with firing synapses, kick desperately, frantically, kick like the animal is still in there, kick as if an electric pulse is running through their muscles, kick as if trying to stand up.
No one else in my family would have ever spent their summer vacation in a slaughterhouse.
CHAPTER TWO

It’s not like I didn’t know.

Giant metal chutes spit a flurry of white into a caged truck, like laundry, like garbage dumped from an upper-level apartment building. The sounds are deafening, a thousand birds tweeting, layered on top and on top of each other, the random bangs of a swinging metal door, the flutter of a thousand pairs of wings.

At first, the rotating conveyer belt looks like any other factory. An assembly line. A suspended, black rubber belt orbits a silver tank slowly, white blobs dangling, swinging gently as the belt moves in a long oval.

Then you realize they are bodies. The white hanging blobs. These are chickens, these are your chicken, these are Tyson frozen prepackaged breaded chicken nuggets. And the swinging metal arm that gently brushes up against each body as it passes, so slowly, on the conveyer belt is actually slitting their throats.

A dancing circle of swinging dead chickens, wings splayed, spins under its own weight, with gravity, like ten feather dusters gathered at the handle. Over a two-ton metal vat of purple blood, they hang, swaying in a post-mortem ballet.
This is just what you see. What you learn later involves other senses. Like the choking-on-acid smell of urine that infects every corner of an over-crowded poultry barn. Like the heavy grinding sound of a wood chipper slowed by 15,000 squirming bodies tossed in for easy disposal, the bodies of the chicken too sick for slaughter, too sick to ever be eaten. Like the numbing facts and wasting diseases or the jargon—agribusiness and force-molting and egg-to-layer efficiency ratio.

It’s not until later that you learn about the biology of a broiler (meat) chicken—genetically altered to grow twice as large twice as fast—crippled by its own weight, about the cancer and congestive heart failure, about the disorders where their legs snap beneath them, which the industry calls, charmingly, “cowboy leg syndrome”.

It’s not until later that you learn about the industry term “redskins”—for chickens whose throats aren’t slit by the automatic slitter, who aren’t caught by the back-up human laborer, who are, instead, boiled alive in the tank of scalding hot water in which they are dunked, to sizzle off their feathers.

It’s not until later that you learn that nearly ten billion chickens are hatched in the United States annually. Bizarrely, there are no accurate numbers, but roughly 99 percent live here, live these lives. Or that poultry are, in fact, legally exempt from the federal Humane Slaughter Act.
The tough rubber of these words in your mouth like ripping the meat off a wing with your teeth, like chewing through it.

~

Growing up, we ate chicken about four nights a week. My mom was relatively health-conscious, so we had red meat once or twice, the occasional pork chop or ham, and Monday night was pasta night, but the rest of the meals were filled in with chicken. Lemon chicken stir fry, breasts cut into little pieces and tossed in corn starch and lemon juice in a skillet, with box mix rice pilaf and heated frozen green beans. Nutty chicken fingers, tenders sliced and pounded, coated with crushed almonds and butter, baked and served with mashed potatoes. Chicken pot pie every November on my birthday, my mom’s homemade pie crust filled with shredded bits of chicken, cubed potatoes and carrots, green beans, corn and peas and gravy, baked until golden brown and bubbling up through the fluted edges.

On Thanksgiving, after the turkey was carved and gutted, after we’d sliced through one half of the twenty-pound bird my mother insisted on ordering, though there were seven of us for dinner only, my father and grandfather would return to the half-spent carcass and harvest the rest. They would dig their thick hands into the ribcage and pull out shards of meat, darker than a roux, dripping with bone grease, and toss them, by whole handfuls, into my mom’s biggest saucepan, where she would boil it in a stock to freeze as turkey soup for later, for the winter nights.
Every Saturday morning, with cartoons, my dad would make us eggs and bacon and we’d sit in our innocent stocking feet, wrapped in pink-striped bathrobes, watching Wile E. Coyote jump off cliffs, eating fried eggs with ham on English muffins or ham and tomato omelets, smooth and yellow and folded like a pancake.

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The images are grainy. They appear, enlarged, on a white projector screen, to be from another time. Mostly this is because they are recorded secretly, sometimes illegally. You see humans only disembodied, only as faceless individuals, sometimes just as hands.

You see these things in a college classroom, when you’re in your early twenties, shiny with idealism, newly radical, suddenly, born into it, surrounded by compatriots in the latest revolution—green, feminist, anti-war. You have recently declared a minor in political science and are a member of the Young Democratic Socialists and you participate in die-ins on campus. You are sitting in a classroom, a computer lab, with the lights down and Professor Bob Klier is showing you PETA’s “Meet your Meat” as part of a unit on the rhetoric of persuasive arguments.

After the video, Professor Bob switches the lights back on and stands in front of the classroom for a moment, his thin arms crossed. Professor Bob is a vegan, a skinny, long-haired vegan who you love, whose house you have been to and whose big St. Bernard you have walked and whose wife teaches creative writing at the Lansing Residential Center, the juvenile rehabilitation/detention center and these are the adults you hope to become. They are
poets and activists who rally against the myths of modern America you have spent the last year and a half just beginning to learn. And Professor Bob asks, So. What did you think?

And though the class is supposed to be discussing the rhetorical strategies at work in the video, ethos logos pathos drifts quietly away, circling backwards into the corners of the room as people start to raise their hands indignantly and shift in their seats uncomfortably and huff in frustration.

It’s not like that everywhere.

and

My family raises dairy cows and...

and

Can they even feel pain?

and

Whatever, steak is good.

and

Protein is good for you!

and

So we should just set the animals free?

and

What about hunting?

and

What about medical testing? that’s necessary!
and what,

So we should just all become vegetarian?

And you are just listening. You bite your upper lip, the way you do when you’re uncertain. You gnaw on the insides of your cheeks, the way you do when you’re thinking. You are starting to feel uncomfortable.

Because what it sounds like is people are justifying allowing the animals you just saw on screen to live life the way they do, to die the way they must, they are justifying that by saying they really like hamburgers.

And then your friend A.J. raises his hand to speak. A.J. is also a skinny vegetarian, your editor at Buzzsaw Haircut, the independent-thinking campus magazine for which you occasionally write. And A.J. says, actually, he really respects hunting and he thinks factory farming is different.

I think if you can look an animal in the eye, if you can see the life go out of it and are willing to live with that, if you respect the animal enough to engage it in a hunt, you will have the respect to use it wisely, however you see fit. But I think if you turn away from the thought of death in order to eat meat, you’re being cowardly, you’re letting someone else do the dirty work for you.

And you start to remember things.
The first time I saw a deer in my backyard, in the little alcove of trees I called the thicket, I ran back inside and whispered, thrilled, *Mom, it was a once in a lifetime experience.*

I hated working at the seafood restaurant in high school because we sold live lobsters to customers and I heard the screaming sound they made, which all the bearded men in the dirty kitchen told me was not, in fact, a scream of pain, but still I remember how it scratched its way down my spine and under my skin like fingernails bent backwards and I remember how the lobsters would try to scuttle away if I didn’t put them on the scale on their backs.

On my first and only fishing trip, I refused to use bait because I didn’t want to kill the worm by stabbing it onto the metal hook so I caught only a floating piece of cardboard. I remember the bloody gash through the gill of the fish my friend caught, ripping the hook out of its mouth.

And once, on a family vacation to London at age sixteen, I said something to my father. The five of us were sitting at a round table, crisp white tablecloth under silver, candles as the only dim light in the dark wood-paneled steakhouse in Battersea Park, and I pointed, shaking my head, up at the mounted head of a cow on a wooden plaque like a hunting trophy near the room’s crown molding. *Why,* I asked my father, *why would anyone want to think about the cow while they’re trying to enjoy a nice filet mignon?*
Well, he said, that’s what it is.

~

I grew up in the suburbs. Though we had a big backyard thick with rows of spindly pine trees, and though we went to the Deerfield Fair to hold baby chicks in our hands and pet boat-sized heifers each year, I was a suburban girl. I wore red flannel button-downs and wispy blonde pigtails, but I also wore thick periwinkle glasses to help with my eyesight. I lived on a block with a fence around the pool in our backyard, a block with power lines and a school bus stop and a sign that read “Slow Children” (no comma) where I could play outside after school in trees or on pavement, t-ball and capture the flag and ghost in the graveyard. I was not a farm girl. I didn’t really even know what a farm was, other than the petting ones we visited once or twice with play group.

When I was seven or eight, we spent a week in February on a farm in Vermont, the childhood home of my mother’s best friend, run by her parents, Red and Judy. I rose early, peeling back the handmade quilt on the twin-sized bed in the attic, slipping tiny cold feet into heavy brown hiking boots and clomping down the stairs, shivering but grinning, to help Judy gather the eggs. We crunched over frosted, shorn, dead grass into the hay-stuffed laying barn, the early morning geese caws outside muffled by the padded plywood walls. The barn felt warm, insulated, as if I could fall down anywhere and not get hurt, just bounce softly and giggle, a teddy bear in a pile of warm, dry towels. The hens were sleeping, hunkered down in their individual laying boxes, gathered piles of feathers puffed up and then exhaling, quivering with slight snores, beaks invisible, tucked beneath one wing. Judy called them her little
mamas. *Mama*, I whispered into the morning air, watching the grey smoke of the word drift away from me in the cold, as Judy handed me a woven wooden bucket, metal handle. *Go ahead*, she said.

When I imagine myself in that moment, I laugh a little at the pathetic look on my suburban face, small blonde eyebrows gathered together in confusion, static-charged bangs floating over big coke-bottle glasses. I had no idea how to gather eggs. So Judy showed me, using the back of her left hand to lift the sleeping hen, and her right to reach beneath the body and pull out a warm, brown flecked egg. I trembled with the first, terrified of the horror I was certain would be inflicted upon me if I woke the mama hen. But then I held a perfect, smooth, egg in my hand and felt the impossible heat emanating from it against my small palm. We went row by row, filling two buckets with the eggs from just one wall of the laying barn. When I crossed to the other side, Judy shook her head and whispered a kind no. *No*, she said, *those mamas are hatching.*

I only spent a handful of days at this farm as a kid. I barely knew Judy before that day and I haven’t seen her in decades. But when I conjure this memory, I feel an immense gratitude towards her, and a childlike sense of warmth. Because she let me in on a secret. In that private moment we shared in the laying barn, she pulled back the curtain and took my hand and showed me how something sacred happened.

Red and Judy’s farm, it took me fifteen more years to learn, was not what a farm really looks like anymore.
When I was twenty I watched a video and decided to become a vegetarian.

I walked out of a classroom and straight back to my dorm and I called my best friend Steve and then my mom.

To Steve I said: *This was horrible, this was unspeakably cruel. They were beating them to death and I just thought if we wouldn’t do it to a dog, then why to a pig? I thought what right do I have to cause the suffering of another living thing just so I can enjoy the taste of something—just the taste of it?*

To my mother I said: *I believe in living intentionally. I believe in living in a way that is compatible with my beliefs, I believe in holding myself to a higher standard. It’s like eating kosher or abstaining from meat during Lent or boycotting Nike. I’m allowing my everyday choices to represent my political beliefs.*

My mother said, “I am going to have to learn to cook all over again.”

~

But we don’t want to hear that story. Whether or not this is a story we know or fully understand, it’s not a story we’re particularly interested in. We may call them factory farms
or CAFOs, or just call it dinner—but whatever we call it, this is a story with which we are, by now, bored. We don’t want to hear about the poor abused animals. We just want to eat in peace.

So this is not that story. This is not the story of a little bleeding-heart girl who loves animals and was so horrified by what she saw in a PETA propaganda piece that she became a militant vegan.

This is just the beginning of the story.
CHAPTER THREE

In the fall of 2002, the year I became a vegetarian, I had just turned 20. Over the summer, I’d chopped off all my hair, leaving it spiky-short and dirty blond. A small metal ring with a blue bead circled the left corner of my lower lip. Two months later, I’d replace that with a stud and pierce the other side, then shave my head. I didn’t wear shoes to class in the warm weather, preferring the grass stains and the hot concrete on the soles of my feet. I saw no reason why I should shave my legs or wear makeup or care at all about what you thought. I was a sophomore at a private, liberal arts college in the Northeast, in a city whose mayor was a member of the Socialist party. Nader took the county in the 2004 presidential election. I enrolled in classes like Persuasive Argument, Social Movements and Social Change, Media and Politics. After a late-night meeting of the student government association, my friends and I went out for milkshakes and drafted a resolution opposing the Bush administration’s build-up toward the Iraq War—ours was the first college in the country to pass such a resolution. My idea of a good time was showing up for the noontime die-in on the quad.

In a class called Sex and Gender in the Third World, I watched a BBC News documentary in which a face-blurred eleven-year-old Cambodian girl, all brown skin and matted shoulder-length black hair, her small feet bare against the pedal of a sewing machine, told the undercover interviewer that most weeks she worked seven days, sometimes 12 to 16 hours in the Nike factory. I marched straight home and threw out the white basketball sneakers with a teal swoosh that I’d gotten a few years back. When I read an article for my Sociological Theory class that listed multiple instances of Wal-Mart closing departments or
entire stores whose employees had voted to unionize, I stopped shopping there. I believed in the power of my dollar as political choice, in the ability of a boycott to enact change, so I boycotted. A lot. I’ve instituted personal bans on Starbucks, ExxonMobil, ski resorts, the Disney Corporation, bras, and free trade zones.

It was in the context of this kind of political ideology that I first learned of the industrial meat industry, an industry like any other run by large, multinational corporations. It was in this context that I first learned of debeaking techniques, salmon farm runoff and pesticide leaching. It was this person, this shaved-head rich liberal girl who first learned of Hurricane Floyd.

When Hurricane Floyd hit North Carolina in 1999, waves more than ten feet high surged along the state’s southeastern coast. Flood waters across the state reached 500-year levels. Winds destroyed more than 80,000 homes and caused nearly $4 billion in damages.

But that wasn’t the worst part of Hurricane Floyd.

North Carolina is home to one of the country’s largest Smithfield pork plants, where thousands of pigs produce millions of gallons of shit each year, shit that Smithfield stores in open-air manure lagoons. The smell is bad. The poisonous toxic fumes that literally knock people unconscious in their own front yards are worse. But when Hurricane Floyd hit, more than 120 million gallons of unsheltered shit from Smithfield’s lagoons flooded into six different rivers, instantly killing millions of fish, and infecting the ground and drinking water of the surrounding area. Feces and urine from pigs raised in factory farm conditions—pumped full of disease-resistance antibiotics and recycled animal by-product feed—leached into the North Carolina soil, leached further down into the groundwater supply. Waste from the storm continued to leech well into the next spring. While human waste is carefully
monitored, forced to travel a highly-regulated route from toilet to sewer to ocean, animal waste sits, waiting, in an open cesspool for a hurricane to come and swallow it. There was nothing to be done. Many of the manure lagoons were simply underwater.

120 million gallons of shit. That’s ten times the amount of oil spilled by the Exxon Valdez tanker. And lest we simply chalk it up to uncontrollable natural disasters, should we believe this only happens in a hurricane, it’s worth mentioning that over the four years that followed Hurricane Floyd, Smithfield “accidentally” spilled nearly six million more gallons of shit into the same rivers. In the years since, state legislators have enacted new manure storage requirements, which at least force corporations to cover the manure lagoons—in certain cases. Pork producers vehemently fought such legislative action.

So sure, I may have looked like a caricature of a young, activist neophyte, fresh from her silver-spoon upbringing to new-age hippie college, learning the ways of the evil corporate world and revolting. But I took my political agenda very seriously in my early twenties. And my decision to become a vegetarian was very much a political decision, based on a desire to boycott bad corporate practices.

~

So it’s somewhat ironic that my first meals as a vegetarian, eaten in the crowded, generically-decorated dining halls of my college, were prepared by Sodexho, a multinational food services corporation. These dining halls were palatial, and would have impressed any dorm dweller. Each had a vegan station and a kosher station (with on-site rabbi), complete with separate kitchens and staff, tin warming counters polished to a glisten, swinging heat lamps hung down low over the chafing dishes of hot entrees, a sandwich bar, a salad bar, a
soft-serve ice-cream machine, and lots of choices. We could choose from three different dining halls, including one with a waffle station and a waterfall, or another that was open until midnight during the week. They were staffed by latex-gloved, hair-netted blue collar employees: small, frail women with thick glasses, men with big biceps, faded tattoos, edges softened with time, young Latin- and African-American men, fresh out of high school, who were not students at this college.

I didn’t know then that Sodexho, the 22\textsuperscript{nd} largest employer in the world, pays their food service workers as little as $8.27 an hour to reheat frozen bags of soup and spoon them out to college students and elementary school children, to wash our dishes, to stock our salad bars, to fill our ice cream machines, to swipe our cards at the entrance. Since Sodexho employees are only needed during the school year, most are essentially laid off during the summer months, and are not guaranteed their positions will be available in the fall. I didn’t know that the HMOs Sodexho offers their employees cost more than a quarter of a full-time income. That Sodexho posts annual profits in the hundreds of billions. That Sodexho’s highest profits stem from the private prisons they operate, including ones they contract with the U.S. military to build and run on foreign soil.

That most of the Sodexho workers making my on-campus food would have qualified for federal anti-hunger programs.

~

But with my newborn baby eyes only half-open in the harsh light of capitalism, I thumped my fist proudly against my chest. I thrust posters high in the air at rallies and marches. I fought with my parents frequently, as they watched their pixie-blond eldest
daughter transform into a punk-rock protester. My mother subtly prodded, wondering when I might start wearing bras to church again. My grandmother asked why I’d want to ruin my beautiful face with the lip piercings. I said things to my father like “Don’t you care about anything besides the almighty dollar?” despite the fact that he was currently shelling out more than thirty grand a year for my private college. My high school friends wanted to know who I had been hanging out with. I hid in my room and wrote angry things in my journal, indignant and righteous. Sure of myself. When my parents wanted to know who I’d become I asked them *how do you know this isn’t who I always was?*

So when I learned about the practices of industrial meat production facilities, I chalked it up to the beast of capitalism. Because when you’re raising that many animals—cattle, chicken, pigs—in a space that small, the shit has to go somewhere. And when large corporations control the industry from the ground up—from contract farmers to processing plants to packing to distribution—then those corporations get to dictate the production models.

The meat industry today is so consolidated, and so vertically integrated, that competition is virtually nonexistent. More than 90% of the broiler chickens produced in the United States today are raised by farmers contracted exclusively by the top four broiler chicken processors. The other 10% are raised by the processors themselves. In 2006, 90% of hogs raised were controlled by pork packers, either because they owned the hogs, or they contracted with the farmers who did. In 2007, four companies—Tyson, Carghill, JBS and Swift—owned 85% of the beef packing industry. In 2008, JBS and Swift merged.

An economist would say that a highly-consolidated market promotes oligopoly, and that when a few large corporations control too much of the market share, those corporations
get to set consumer prices absent from competition. When a few big companies own the majority, they get to decide what to charge for their product, no matter what the consumer is willing to pay. An economist would also mention that this kind of consolidation is bad for the producer, because the corporation controls industry standards, forcing adherence to certain cost-cutting measures. This means that farmers suffer too, because they have to keep costs down in order to maintain their contracts. This means that these are the conditions the animals are raised in, that there are no other options. Manure lagoons are in.

Corporate consolidation leads to corporate logic, the logic of the free market that responds only to money and is blind to common sense. It’s the logic that Peter Brabek, CEO of Nestle, uses when he says in an interview for the documentary film “We Feed the World” that he disagrees with the “extreme” opinion of “NGOs who bang on about water being a public right.” Corporate logic dictates that water is a foodstuff and should therefore carry market value. Brabek, like most free-marketers, believes in the power of the market to deliver a good to those who can afford it.

This is the same logic the Food and Drug Administration uses when it legally allows factory farm operators to feed “poultry litter” to cattle. Poultry litter, the waste found on the floors of poultry barns, may contain cattle protein because regulations allow for feeding cattle tissue to poultry. And cattle blood can be fed to calves in milk replacer – the formula that most calves raised on industrial feedlots receive instead of their mother’s milk. Finally, food processing and restaurant “plate waste,” which could contain cattle tissue, can still be fed to cattle. It makes money-saving sense to feed one animal’s waste to another animal and vice versa. But this kind of industrial agriculture recycling leads to cross-contamination,
infects chicken with mad cow disease, which doesn’t manifest in the bird, but can affect the person who eats the bird.

You can’t blame the gigantic corporation for behaving like a gigantic corporation. But it was this feeling of inevitability that reinforced my decision to become a vegetarian. The agricultural industry, just like any other industry, simply implemented corporate practices designed to make the most by spending the least. But I wanted no part of it.

~

Second semester of my sophomore year, I took a sociology seminar on “Class, Gender and the Workplace”. The ten other students and I launched a semester-long research project on the class and gender restrictions subtly applied to workers in different industries on our campus. We conducted personal interviews with white-collar (professors), pink-collar (administrative assistants) and blue-collar (janitors, dining hall) employees of the college. We wanted to investigate the class issues inherent in a private school in the Northeast. We wanted to expose something, to prove some truth.

I was in the blue-collar group. We were so earnest, in our hemp shirts and our vegan shoes, marching into the dining hall and asking the white-haired woman who swiped the ID cards at the door, and the tattooed parolees and the mustached men in matching blue shirts if they had some free time after work to answer a few anonymous questions about their family and educational background for a sociology project. When we met back in class, with other students seeking other interviews, we found that our group had a much lower success rate—our subjects didn’t have some free time. They had a bus to catch or a kid to pick up. It took
twice as long to get the same number of interviews. But when we did, we found anecdotal results that weren’t surprising.

We found that men were more likely to hold blue-collar jobs than women. We found that people whose parents earned less than $25,000 were more likely to hold blue-collar jobs, and those whose parents had less than a high school diploma were more likely to man a dining hall than a phone. We found, importantly, that those whose parents had less education, tended to seek out educational opportunities. More dining hall workers were taking the college up on their offers for free classes for employees than any other sector we interviewed. We wanted people to have to look at the realities of these industries. And we found that, generally, if you come from a certain place, if your skin is a certain color, if you make a certain amount, then your life is largely mapped out for you from birth.

~

In preparation for Christmas dinner one year, my father and I performed our usual kitchen duties: inserting the double-leaf into the cherry table, carefully draping the red and green plaid tablecloth, laying out the real silverware and the Christmas goose china plates, folding the napkins and preparing the bread basket. Everyone clattered into the kitchen as the last of the food made its way from counter to table. My grandfather, right elbow hunched up over his shoulder, finished carving the roast beef and laid the slices delicately on a large, crystal platter. My father scooped creamy piles of mashed potatoes into a serving bowl. Nana’s small, knotted fingers gingerly plucked warm crescent rolls off the cookie sheet, barely touching them as they leapt into the bread basket. And my mother surveyed everything: grabbed a spoon for the gravy boat, ladled green beans into the flowered
vegetable dish, pointed at my sisters to pour water, asked for a show of hands for wine—pinot, or cab? Then we sat, the seven of us, around the table in our usual Christmas Day positions, held hands and bowed our heads, and gave thanks. All of this, just the same as every year.

But as we began passing the plates from person to person, each one of us taking responsibility for serving whatever was closest, tossing rolls to our neighbors, licking drips of gravy off our fingertips, differences emerged. Dad prefers the ends of the roast beef, blackened to a spiced crisp on the outside, grey meat tough on the inside. Caitlin makes a little divot in her mashed potatoes to fill with gravy, the brown sauce erupting over the edges and flooding her plate. Nana takes two mouthfuls of everything, nothing more. Gampi loves the fat and gristle of the roast, keeping it in the corner of his mouth and gnawing long after the meal is done. And my plate, that year, held two crescent rolls, several forkfuls of green beans, and an extra-large serving of mashed potatoes. No meat, no gravy, not this time.

This was my first Christmas as a vegetarian, just a month after I’d stopped eating meat, and I was not at all prepared for the alienation I felt sitting at that table, looking around at the others’ plates, done eating before everyone else, waiting for them to finish their full meals. I suddenly saw how unlike the rest of my family I had become. The absences on my plate and my newfound vegetarianism were as foreign an idea to them as my lip piercings, just another strange habit I’d picked up at my hippie college. My vegetarianism strained everyone, as a natural extension of the outspoken, overly political stranger I had become in the year and a half since I started college. I don’t think they understood anything I did anymore.
This is not to say they were against it, that they actively discouraged me, or even complained. I only ate side dishes at this Christmas because I insisted my mother not go to any extra effort. In the years that followed, she made plenty of extra effort. She started making pasta sauce in two batches, setting about a third of the giant pot aside before she added the meatballs, so that my sauce was vegetarian. The next year, for Thanksgiving, she made me a polenta roast from scratch, straight out of the Moosewood cookbook, and since the complementary gravy was made from onions and mushrooms, she spent half an hour bowed over the sink, straining out every last mushroom. No longer content to let me eat whatever she was serving minus the meat, she made two entrees per meal—one with meat, one without—experimenting with ziti bakes, vegetable kabobs, couscous-stuffed peppers. My father started shopping in the natural foods aisle at the grocery store, stocking the freezer with vegetarian staples like Morningstar breakfast sausage patties and Quorn gruyere chik’n breasts, for my occasional visit home.

But they never asked me why I did it. With the exception of my sister sometimes shaking her head while she bit into one of Mom’s meatballs, I don’t know why you’d ever give this up, I don’t think a single member of my family wondered out loud about my reasons. Because to them, my decision to become a vegetarian might as well have been the decision to declare a membership to the Communist party, or to stop wearing a bra—instead of sharing common values with the family, I was moving away, running counter. We were a family that valued time together, especially in the kitchen. Why would I want to set myself apart, to intentionally move away from the center of our shared experiences? To my family, food is a crucial, collective activity. But to me, food has become more politics than community, more activism than ritual.
It wasn’t just being a too clumsy, too feminist, or too picky that separated the way I cooked and ate from the other women in my family. It was a fundamental difference in the way I saw food—and the world. My whole life, my family had believed that food is a place you come together. But I’d felt excluded from the domestic core, through some accident of genetics and through the choices of my political nature, so I ran with it. I decided instead that my food choices—refusing to cook because it would make me too typical of a woman, or refusing to eat meat for ethical reasons—could set me apart. I’d created an idea of myself as a radical feminist vegetarian, born not out of any inherent lack of femininity, but out of the refusal to adopt any domestic trait, and I clung to that idea desperately.

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The vegan station at the Campus Center Dining Hall served these veggie burgers, made with brown rice and black beans. I imagined them soft in someone’s hands, rolled around and flattened, the way my Nona’s raw meatballs felt in my palm before they were baked. The burgers were tossed onto a slatted grill by a twenty-something guy with flowers on the backs of his hands I could just barely see through the gloves, then wrapped in red-and-white-checked paper and placed in a cardboard container, next to the side of the coveted sweet potato fries. We loved the Sodexho sweet potato fries, the perfect layer of corn-syrup crispy on the outside, a delicate crust that broke open into the soft, tanning-salon orange flesh of the fry, always just this side of too hot, crumbling and sweet.

We would sit in circles around tables, we white college kids, and talk about serious things, about free trade and facial piercings, and shove whole handfuls of these sweet potato fries into our mouths. I was happy to let someone else do the cooking.
CHAPTER FOUR

After graduating from college with a degree in creative writing, I was faced with a choice: either find a low-paying job and a tiny apartment anywhere in the country or move back in with my parents. I picked the former. I couldn’t fathom the notion of sacrificing an ounce of independence, of trying to negotiate an adult space within the confines of my childhood home. But more than avoiding living under my parents’ roof, I wanted to surge out into the world and make a difference. I hoped to find a job in Montana, where my current boyfriend lived, and make a dramatic, cross-country move to the mountains to solidify my developing artist identity. But nobody was hiring in Bozeman. Instead, I moved to Washington D.C. for an internship with an environmental non-profit, attempting to make a career of political activism.

I fell in instant love with the city, the perfect combination for me at the time of arts and culture with politics, where I could visit any of the Smithsonian Institute’s museums or the White House, where on my half-mile walk to work I could stop and pick up the new Mountain Goats album at one of three different independent record stores. I saw impromptu drum circles flare up in the middle of Meridian Hill Park every Sunday early evening, residents in brightly-colored clothes dancing as the last slants of sunlight faded between the dense trees. I took yoga classes in a basement-level studio painted purple on the outside and run by two women whose black labs meditated with us. I stayed out late weekends, ears ringing from shrill guitars through massive speakers, listening to independent rock bands play cheap shows at the 9:30 or the Black Cat. I lived with three other girls, all working non-profit jobs. We stayed up nights swapping stories about microloans to farmers in Kazakhstan
and escorting pregnant women past the picket lines at Planned Parenthood. One of my regular responsibilities as a communications intern was the “hill-drop”, where I literally walked the halls of Congress, knocking on the doors of senators and representatives to ask if I could drop off a memo about preserving wilderness for future generations. I felt at home and purposeful. I described the job, in a letter to a friend, as “the real deal”, where I was writing about something I believed was truly important.

But the life of a new college graduate in an urban center is one of balance and sacrifice, mostly in terms of money and time. One night, I arrived home after 11 PM and realized I hadn’t yet eaten anything that day. Dizzy and grouchy, I flipped on the TV and pulled a few cardboard boxes out of the cabinets, tossing them on the breakfast bar in the kitchen to prepare dinner. I ripped the cardboard top off a box of Near East Parmesan-flavored couscous and poured the grain into a microwaveable bowl. I sliced open the seasoning packet and dumped the white powder, flecked with dried green herbs into the bowl, then covered the pile with water and popped it in the microwave for five minutes. While the casserole dish rotated on its glass plate in the microwave, I yanked open the freezer, cranky with hunger, and pulled out a red box of Boca Chik’n Patties. Two left. I unwrapped the patty from its individual plastic sleeve and tossed it into the toaster, turning the dial to low. Less than five minutes later, I sat on the Salvation Army couch (covered in my roommate’s Buffalo Sabers blanket, because you never know with something you get from Salvo), a plastic dinner plate balanced on my knees, watching Martin Sheen play the president on TV and swirling a Chick’n Patty through a small pond of ranch dressing.

This is what passed for dinner most of the nights in my first few years of vegetarianism. I was still young. I had generally no clue about budgeting for groceries. My
body still cooperated. I was in my early twenties and capable of eating anything short of Tupperware and remaining healthy.

I can’t pronounce most of the ingredients in the meat substitute products I spent a good seven years eating on a regular basis: maltodextrin, carrageenan, soy lecithin. The processing of ingredients for the modern American food system is nothing short of chemistry, an intricate science I can barely understand. When I read these ingredients lists, I don’t know what I’m seeing. I don’t know whether these are chemical compounds or natural ingredients, I don’t even know what natural means in this world.

The majority of the stuff—the patty itself—seems to be derived from soy, wheat and water. Not totally foreign, not easily identifiable as being unhealthy. When I was 22 and living on less than $100 for food each month, I didn’t know or much care about the processing involved, about the difference between a soybean and soy protein isolate, about the distance between a wheat field and textured wheat protein.

The main ingredient in a BOCA Original Chik’n Patty is soy protein, partly in concentrate form, partly in isolate. I’ve done the research and I still have no idea what either of those things means. What I do know is that edible soy protein isolate and concentrate are both derived by grinding a soybean into flour, removing the fat from the flour, and then reintroducing water to the flour to extract the protein. Chemistry was the only class I’ve ever gotten lower than a B- in, so the process isn’t exactly clear to me, but what I can discern is this: the protein separates from the flour in curd form, which is then spun in the centrifuge, to isolate the protein.

Aside from meat substitute products, soy protein demonstrates its flexibility by serving to powder beverages, to transform cream into a non-dairy powder substance, and to
create infant formula out of isolated vitamin powder. Also in texturing wet cat food. Soy protein is also skilled at emulsifying, or binding two liquid agents, a use with applications as varied as adhesives, asphalts, cosmetics, pesticides, and pleather. So the stuff of my BOCA Chik’n Patty could also be used to pave your driveway, kill your weeds, or make pants for the members of an 80s hair metal band.

I once saw an episode of the Biggest Loser, NBC’s weight loss show, during which their personal trainer took the contestants grocery shopping with a nutritionist. The muscular trainer stood, midriff-bared, alongside the trim blond in her blue polo as she told the group that they should do most of their shopping around the perimeter of the store because that’s where the “real” food was: the deli and butcher, the bakery for fresh breads, and the produce section. Avoid the middle, she told them, because this was where the processed food, highest in calories, lowest in nutritional value, lived.

When I bought groceries at nine p.m. on Sundays, I did all of my shopping at the center of the store, weaving back and forth between aisles of junk food, frozen food, canned food, boxed food.

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The problem with being a vegetarian, I discovered, was that you couldn’t eat meat. Steak was my favorite food when I was seventeen—I couldn’t get enough of that tough, chewy meat, of the red-grey flesh that peeled into thin strands between my fork and knife. I let each bite of steak drip a little onto my mashed potatoes before I ate it, savoring the juicy blood of the flesh as it flavored the potatoes. But being a vegetarian meant you had to eat a lot of fruits and vegetables, and I’d never really been a fan.
A truncated list of the vegetarian staples I dislike includes pinto beans, garbanzo beans (and therefore hummus), cauliflower, eggplant, summer squash, butternut squash, olives, artichokes, tofu and mushrooms. I gag over the grimy paste of lentils mashed between the flat plates of my teeth, the slimy flesh of an eggplant slipping towards the back of my throat, the grainy pulp of a soft pear. I can’t so much as graze the fuzzed skin of a peach against my lower lip without convulsing in a shiver. Once, in a *nice* restaurant in California, I accidentally put a slice of mushroom in my mouth—masked under the thick alfredo sauce on my manicotti, which I had ordered *without* mushrooms—and the gritty edges of it, its slickness against my tongue, made me so sick I had to run to the bathroom to spit it out in a trashcan.

I tell people I inherited my picky eating from my dad, but I’ve never been sure whether I think this is learned behavior or some sort of genetic anomaly. My Dad was the oldest child in a family of six, often left to fend for himself and his little brothers and sister. He learned to concoct a meal out of whatever was in the fridge, mixing cans of tuna with frozen peas, bologna sandwiches with chemical-white Wonder bread. One night, shortly after my parents married in their early twenties, my dad offered to make salad to go with dinner one night, then hand-shredded a bag of iceberg lettuce and sprinkled salt and sugar across the top. Even now, at age 56, when he orders a hamburger at a restaurant, he’s very clear: just the bread and the meat, hockey-puck hard. So when I was younger, my inherent pickiness was never really a challenge because my dad softened the impact, made me less of a pariah.

But once I was an adult, left to fend for myself with food, I quickly saw I had a trifecta of bad-eating habits: a childhood absences from the feminine instructive space of the kitchen, an aversion to vegetables and a newfound politically-driven diet. What all that added
up to was that I learned to cook cheap, easy and without meat. I ate mostly the same as I had before, subtracting the meat and filling in the blank slice of white on my plate with more of something else. Think frozen pizzas. Think tater tots and cheese sandwiches. Think Ramen. Think lots of Ramen (the mysteriously-named Oriental flavor, from Top brand only, not Maruchan, who added beef fat to theirs). Think Kraft’s blue boxes of macaroni and powdered cheese substitute. As I became more adventurous I branched out into the ethnic food aisle at the grocery store, tossing canned refried beans and flour tortillas, salsa and shredded cheddar into my cart for quesadillas. Couscous, I learned from an article my mother mailed me, was a quick and easy rice alternative, and lucky for me, Near East made it in a variety of boxed flavors for my convenience. And I discovered meat substitute products: Boca toaster-friendly Chick’n Patties (to go with the tater tots), “flame-grilled” veggie burgers and MorningStar breakfast “sausage” patties and “steak” strips for stir-fry and fajitas, the stuff of complicated chemical processing.

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The only place to buy groceries within two miles of my (very nice, fourth story, brick, secured-building, two-bedroom) apartment with a view of the Washington Monument was a Safeway. The produce there mostly looked nibbled by aphids—spinach dotted with brown-edged holes in a limp pile, slightly wrinkled carrots looking parched, alfalfa sprouts overly watered, clumping together in their small wooden pen. I can’t remember whether they offered anything organic. At 8 pm on a weeknight, when I usually did my shopping, under the yellow fluorescent bulbs, nothing looked that much like produce. Nothing in that section looked as if it had come out of the ground, in dirt miles and days away from wherever I was.
I’m sure there was a summer farmer’s market somewhere in the city, maybe even in Northwest, where I lived, but I never heard of it. I was making $1000 a month and spending $500 on rent just steps away from Safeway. I never bothered to look anywhere else.

In 2006, Mari Gallagher completed a comprehensive study of the city of Chicago to analyze a phenomenon she terms the urban food desert—a large geographic area with few or distant grocery stores. These areas are usually categorized by an absence of large national grocery chains, and by a preponderance of convenience stores attempting to fill in the blanks, selling expensive processed foods and little fresh produce. Urban food deserts also tend to have an awful lot of fast food restaurants—making the least healthy food the cheapest and most easily accessed option for the residents. Since Gallagher’s goal was to study the health effects of urban food deserts on the population, she developed a method of mapping the city by neighborhood, then divided the distance to the nearest grocery store by the distance to the nearest fast food restaurant (a number she refers to as the neighborhood’s Food Balance Score) for each block, tract and community area in the city, all while controlling for education, income and race.

The outcomes of living in a food desert are not surprising—a lack of food access contributed directly to poorer health. As grocery store access decreased, the rates of obesity, diabetes, cancers and cardiovascular diseases increased. Body mass index increased. Living in an urban food desert made the city’s residents more than twice as likely to die of cardiovascular diseases as those living in neighborhoods with the best food balance scores. The causal chain is fairly easy to identify: if offered the choice between constructing a multi-bus route to go grocery shopping once a week and walking next door to the McDonalds, where a greater amount of food is available for fewer dollars, most of us would pick the
Golden Arches. In fact, Gallagher’s study found that the distance to a grocery store had a greater impact on health factors than the availability of fast food. That is, the further a person had to travel to a store, the more likely they were to be unhealthy, even if fast food wasn’t at its most available. This suggests that people do not exactly prefer fast food—they are coerced into buying it through the difficulties of traveling to a grocery store.

So it may not be surprising that when you have a hard time getting to the place where they sell healthy food, you’re less likely to buy it. But there is more to an urban food desert than just access to healthy food. Gallagher found that the residents of Chicago’s food deserts were almost entirely African-American. In a typical African-American neighborhood, the nearest grocery store was twice as far away as the nearest fast food restaurant.

In a similar study conducted in 2010 for the city of D.C., the wards with the fewest grocery stores were also the lowest income wards. In the lower-income wards, grocery stores were significantly smaller per square foot, meaning that in places where people already make less money, only small grocery stores with higher prices and fewer selections exist. In addition, these stores are designed to service people who probably don’t have the time or money to transport themselves to a bigger, cheaper, healthier store. Essentially, urban food deserts represent a confluence of some of the worst social problems in the U.S: poverty, hunger, obesity and a lack of access to healthy foods. And those problems are, as always, afflicting minorities.

Urban food deserts are actually part of a larger urban paradox: it costs more to be poor. These are costs that come both in terms of actual dollars spent, but also costs in time and effort expended. Transportation is one such cost. If you make less money to begin with, chances are good you don’t have a car—if you do, it’s old and falling apart, more likely to
break down and need expensive repairs. This means you rely on public transportation, which follows a fixed schedule and costs per use, rather than wholesale. When it comes to grocery shopping, this means you can travel a greater distance to get to the cheaper stores and spend your extra cash on transportation. On the other hand, you could just shop within the neighborhood and pay the increased costs of the convenience store food. Imagine making this choice every week, or every time you need a gallon of milk. Imagine making this choice when you work one job from seven in the morning until 3 in the afternoon, and then another one from eight at night until five the next morning. So you pick the corner store, substituting time for money.

When there is a grocery store in your neighborhood, it’s going to be more expensive to shop there, and the reasons why prices are higher reflect the reason such deserts persist. Many of these stores charge more because the cost of doing business in some neighborhoods is higher. Small, local store owners don’t get the low wholesale prices that bigger chains get, and if they exist in a low-income neighborhood, their insurance costs will be higher. That’s the politically correct way of saying that the insurance companies believe convenience stores in minority neighborhoods are more likely to get robbed. On top of that, because the stores in low-income neighborhoods are smaller, operating one produces fewer dollars of revenue per square foot of space. So the owners try to close that gap by charging more per item than the larger, well-stocked chain stores.

These increased costs of business are the reasons that no enterprising entrepreneurs are clamoring to build grocery stores in food deserts—because low-income urban neighborhoods are business deserts, too.
In mid-July, the non-profit I worked for threw a company picnic. We rented a bunch of vans and drove out to Rock Creek Park in Maryland to spend the day grilling hot dogs and veggie burgers, playing volleyball, socializing and taking leisurely walks and bike rides around the wooded trails. Almost as soon as we arrived, a few other employees and I walked down to the edge of a small river running through the park, where there was a patch of warm sand, took off our shoes and waded in a bit. Standing ankle-deep in the cool water, I realized this was the first time I’d been barefoot outside all summer long.

Summer has always been my favorite season for that reason—because I got to spend so much time barefoot, outside. But now, here I was, living the environmental activist’s dream life, but barely finding the opportunity to access the patches of wilderness available to someone without a car in D.C. I’d spent the last eight weeks researching and writing about some of the most beautiful, exotic wild places that exist in the United States, investigating the archeological treasures yet undiscovered in Colorado’s Canyons of the Ancients, trying to find the words to describe the clay-colored striations on the stones of Utah’s Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. But I’d never get to visit them if I stayed working for them, in the city.

And after a few months, the ache of living apart from the person I loved began to wear on me. Since he was spending the summer in New York, he drove down to see me periodically. I flew up to see his brother get married. We continued to make plans for me to move to Montana in the fall. But one weekend when he was visiting, we had a huge fight that
ended with him telling me he wasn’t sure we should move in together when I moved west. A few weeks later, over the phone, he told me he wasn’t sure I should move out at all.

I went out into the night, to wander up and down the streets of Adams Morgan, the neighborhood up and down the bright 18th Street on whose corner I lived. After a few cigarettes on the roof of my building, I began wandering the streets, feeling safe enough but a little despondent. Lost. A man rode a bicycle toward me on the sidewalk, plastic grocery bags slung over both handlebars, the grey hood of his sweatshirt pulled up and masking his face. Though the sidewalk was wide, I stepped to the side, to let him pass. But as he did, he turned and barked *Bitch, I’m not in your way!*

I barely made it back to my apartment without crying, feeling hopelessly like the unprepared upper-middle class girl I was, burdened by the realities of a world in which not everyone had the time or the energy to be kind, to play outside, to get enough to eat. The city complicated my notions of an ideal existence. D.C. was, at the time, the murder capital of the nation. I carried with me at all times the map my roommate had given me on my second night there: red Sharpie circling the areas I should avoid all the time, blue Sharpie indicating the areas I should avoid when alone, or at night. My roommate’s friend taught art classes in a Southeast D.C. elementary school and had some of his student’s work hanging in their apartment. Red smears of marker on yellow construction paper to describe the view out the window of their home. Black, heavy-handed prison bars to illustrate a portrait of their fathers. When my roommates asked me what was wrong, that night, when the man on the bike yelled at me, I was too embarrassed to tell them the truth and just said, *the city makes me sad.* Knowing that they, in their liberal hearts, would understand, I told them, *there’s so much I can’t fix here.*
Here’s how it should have worked. I became a vegetarian. I began trying new vegetables like asparagus, broccoli, leeks, bean sprouts. I used only cloth grocery bags. I shopped entirely at the local farmer’s market. I learned to bake my own bread, weave my own mozzarella cheese from long, white, rubbery braids. I communed with my food, and through the food, my natural landscape. Eventually, I began gardening, producing as much of my own diet as possible, cradling little tiny pots of basil, chives, cilantro in the warm yellow light on the kitchen windowsill. I constructed a raised bed out back and planted red sweet peppers, rows of tomatoes staked to the ground and weaving green vines up towards the blue sky. Yellow squash and cucumber flowered along the ground, their spiky skin pricking my hands as I picked them every Saturday morning in the sun.

But that’s not how it worked. I ate frozen, microwaveable ready meals, vegetarian chik’n pot pies that top 1000 calories per individual pie and more than 64 grams of fat. I didn’t have any problem, as a vegetarian, with the bleached flour and sugar used to construct processed white bread, on which I spread Miracle Whip and sodium-high fake bologna. Potato chips and cheese spreads are vegetarian-friendly and cheap. While I heated and re-heated chemical compounds, low-income families chose between the wilting iceberg at the convenience store or an entire supersized Big Mac meal for roughly the same price, between a bag of organic pre-washed baby carrots or ten frozen Lean Cuisine mini-pizzas, between a gallon of milk or three two-liter bottles of soda. And just as my diet didn’t look exactly the idyllic way I imagined a healthy, intentional diet should look, the city was not the paradise of politics and art for which I’d hoped.
At a Safeway on Bradley Boulevard in Bethesda, the wheat bread costs $1.19, and white bread is on sale for $1. Wheat bread costs more than white bread, and, as at any store, the most expensive items are the freshest—the small piles of bananas, green peppers and oranges near the front of the store, maybe in a basket on the counter by the cashier. Because produce spoils faster, small stores stock less of it, hoping to get the rotting product off the shelf before it goes bad. And because produce is tougher to grow than anything made in a plant, because of the risk of loss and an ingredients list that doesn’t trade as commodities, farmers have to charge more to sell the produce.

In 2005, the American Dietetic Association increased its recommended daily intake of fruit and vegetable servings from five to nine. The leading causes of chronic illness in the United States are heart disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer, all of which appear to be significantly mitigated by consuming fruits and vegetables—in particular leafy green legumes and orange vegetables. Despite this, only about 40% of Americans ate even five servings a day. About 10% are estimated to achieve the nine-a-day goal. We’ve seen the food pyramid, but no one really eats that way, we think. It’s a goal, a guideline, a suggestion.

But for many families in America, families unlike the one I grew up in, in an affluent New England suburb surrounded by a forest, choosing between a dinner of free-range chicken and steamed broccoli or a box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese is more than a decision of taste. National Health and Nutrition Surveys from 2001-2002 found a significant difference in produce intake between income groups. Households making less than $25,000 a
year at less produce overall, and consumed more starchy vegetables, as well as less dark-green and orange vegetables.

So fruits and vegetables are the most expensive food to buy, and their cost peaks in low-income neighborhoods, where people have the least to spend. A recent study by nutritionists and research economists at the University of California Davis found that, in order to meet those new, updated 2005 Dietary Guidelines, a low-income family in Sacramento or Los Angeles would have to devote between 43 and 70% of their food budget to fruits and vegetables—which are among the lowest in calories per dollar spent.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest recently released a chart, a color-coded guide to the varying level of danger in common food additives ranging from caffeine to aspartame. The codes are green for safe, yellow for cut back, orange for caution and red for avoid. Of the more than 50 additives on the list, none are banned or even restricted by the Food and Drug Administration. These are everyday ingredients in our world—aspartame in our Diet Cokes, Red dye #40 (derived from coal and petroleum) in our kid’s Kool-Aid, potassium bromate in our bread flour. Eating fruits and vegetables then, is more than a choice we make to grow up big and strong. Eating produce means eating whole foods, foods that we can recognize as foods, food that grew up out of the ground. But even for an upper-middle class vegetarian living on her own, eating produce instead of prepackaged food was not an easy or obvious choice. Eating fresh produce instead of chemically-processed foods is really a grave matter, a matter of lowering our risk of developing brain cancer or dying of diarrhea by Olestra. But it’s not a choice we can all afford.
One early August afternoon, I sat with my boss, the communications director, on a lawn in front of the Capitol Building. We ate sandwiches out of Tupperware containers, waiting to begin the rally we’d organized to announce the launch of our new campaign to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from the Bush administration’s oil drilling. He told me they’d love to offer me an extension on my internship into the fall. We both knew that a co-worker one rung up was leaving in a few months, and I might well be up for his job. I told my boss thanks but no thanks. I was sorry, and I’d loved working for him, but I’d made up my mind that Montana would be a better fit, would offer me more of the life I wanted.

What I told myself, to rationalize the decision to leave a good job and great friends for a boyfriend who was only partly sure he wanted me, was that I had to decide which side of the door I wanted to be on. I could stay in D.C. and play politics, work my way up the environmental non-profit communications ladder. I could lobby Congress and take up a wardrobe of pant suits and kitten heels. I could plan rallies and phone reporters for coverage. I could work for change from within the system. Or I could stay on the outside, and live as an artist—in joyful solitude out in the mountains, in the midst of the wilderness I’d be working to protect, writing its beauty across pages that would inspire others to act on its behalf, banging on the door for change from the outside, as loud and raucous and uncompromising as I wanted. I wanted more—more choices, more nature, more of my relationship. I was worn out on the limited access the city offered me. So I packed up all my belongings into the two suitcases allowed on a plane and headed west.

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Sometime in August, just before I left the city, a friend from college called to say she was visiting, interviewing for her own future internship and did I want to grab dinner? When Kate said she hoped to check out an Ethiopian restaurant, my roommate Mika insisted she’d take us to D.C.’s legendary Meskerem, a three-block walk from our apartment. The three of us, in sandals and skirts, huddled on leather stools around a small, red table and let Mika order for us. The spiced smell of red pepper stung my nostrils.

Two waiters in loose white shirts and maroon slacks carried large metal platters over to our table, then stayed to explain the dishes: *Gommon watt,* the steaming pile of wilted collard greens stewed in berbere, a spicy red pepper; *Kik Alitcha,* a soupy yellow substance, split peas simmered in an onion sauce; *Misir Azifa,* finely chopped onion, green chile, pureed lentils. The waiters led the demonstration of Ethiopian eating technique. We were to break pieces of *injera,* a kind of floppy crepe, off with our fingers, then scoop up bites of each dish. No silverware. Lots of sharing. We all followed suit and stayed for two hours, as the waiters laughed at our messiness, wrapping their hands around ours, helping to guide the spicy foods into our inexperienced mouths.

D.C. has the highest concentration of Ethiopians anywhere in the U.S.—more than 150,000 in a ten-square mile city. In fact, D.C. boasts the largest Ethiopian population of any one area other than Ethiopia itself, and the Adams Morgan district has been nicknamed Little Ethiopia. What I remember from my night out at Meskerem was a sense of abundance, of new food and experience, of culture and art.

But I had the luxury of accessing that abundance. I could have taken the city buses or the D.C. metro to a farmer’s market on a Saturday, because I had Saturdays off from work. I could have gotten my roommate to drive me to the Trader Joe’s in Georgetown, because I
had a big enough paycheck to cover an organic grocery bill. I may not have had a lot of money, but I had a safety net, a college degree, a pale complexion and all the free time in the world.

The menu at Meskerem explains sharing injera as more than just an eating technique. Eating from the same plate, or breaking injera, together is a ritual that symbolizes the bonds of loyalty and friendship. When two people share a plate, they demonstrate their respect for one another, the connection inherent from trusting each other with food. The act connects person to person, but also person to food, removing the sterile boundary of the fork. But the height of this connection comes from the act of gursha—placing food from one’s own hand into another’s mouth.

I understood in my bloodlines the tenderness of feeding the ones you love. My great-grandmother’s hands were all over the food that went straight into our mouths. There was no sterility. No one wore gloves to roll meatballs, or to carry the spaghetti to the drying rack. But in the city, I saw reality, bruised and undisguised. People did not have the time of the money for this kind of community, and I lost it there, too. I saw how little people were willing to give. In the city, I began to ache for that compassionate connection, the willingness to come into close contact with the world, safe or not. I longed for the trust to open myself fully, but I couldn’t find it in this complex place of poverty and art, of politics and concrete.
CHAPTER FIVE

When I got off the plane in Bozeman, having left the city after just three months there, I was twenty-two and broke; three months after graduation and three months before my student loans came due, so I took the first job I could get, unpacking souvenirs in the basement of a gift shop on the corner of Main and North Rouse.

One of my co-workers was a small sixteen-year-old native Montanan, mouthy and eager in her forest green polo shirt, working Saturday mornings for a few hours to save money for college. She took to foreign, eastern, college-educated me, and we spent hours talking about reading while we pierced price tags into stuffed animals and t-shirts. Maggie, with her long mousy-brown ponytail and freckles, one day told me she thought she’d settle in Belgrade because there was still space there for a small patch of land, and she liked the dense hunting cover and she asked if I’d ever had venison.

“No,” I replied, casually, unguarded, “I’m a vegetarian.”

And Maggie said, “What? Oh. I… I don’t know if I can be friends with a vegetarian.”

I worked at a gift shop, so I interacted with tourists on a daily basis. Customers asked me where the best burger in town was (The Garage) or how far to the nearest post office (three blocks straight south, one west) or whether or not the Museum of the Rockies was open on Saturdays (yes, 10–4) or how I liked the powder (this one I made up, since I wasn’t then and haven’t yet become, a skier). I may have just moved into Bozeman, but I was a resident. I thought of myself as comfortable there.

When I asked Maggie why, she seemed slightly confused and said, “Well, it’s just…I learned how to skin and gut an elk when I was twelve.”
This was the moment I began to think of myself as an outsider in the West.

Vegetarian was like the scarlet letter in Bozeman. People genuinely thought it was weird to not eat meat—and up until this point, I’d only been a vegetarian in a liberal college town and an East Coast city. I was lucky to find a single entrée on any restaurant’s menu without meat, and constantly heard what I was missing out on. I couldn’t try the highly recommended Montana-grown bison burger at Mackenzie River, or the legendary, generations-old barbeque rub on the ribs at Café Zydeco. I went to Ted Turner’s Flying D Ranch and admired what he did for the sustainable future of the buffalo, but didn’t see much point in bothering to try a night out at Ted’s Montana Grill. One night my boss gave me a gift certificate to a restaurant in rural Belgrade called the Land of Magic Dinner Club. I took a fellow vegetarian, and we soon discovered there was not a single vegetarian item on the menu. When we explained our plight to the waitress, she actually laughed out loud. We got side salads and a side of carrots and a side of mashed potatoes and chocolate cake.

As autumn descended on Montana that September, I felt the first pangs of homesickness of my entire life. Autumn means everything in the Northeast, with its brilliant flaming leaves and pumpkin-carving contests at the state fair. But in Montana, fall meant one thing: open season. Everyone around me knew how to gut a fish and fire a gun into the heart of a breathing thing, and I was mildly horrified.

I felt as if I was floundering, wanting desperately to make a new home and a new life here with the man I loved. But he already understood this place, he accepted it for what it was—a place of the wide, wild open spaces of the outdoors, which he loved. But I saw my
neighbors hanging deer by their hooves in their small suburban garages. Hoofed feet stuck out of the backs of pickup trucks at the gas station all through autumn. The head of a bobcat was mounted on the wall in my favorite bar. I went to Yellowstone in October to see the elk rut; Montanans went to hunt the elk, easier targets when distracted by the mating season.

Growing up in the suburbs, I didn’t know any farmers. And though people in New Hampshire hunted, I only knew hunters as the ricocheting echoes of boom in the backyard, as the flashes of orange and the reason I couldn’t play out in the woods in October. The pine trees in the back of my house were thin and easy to see through, only an acre deep. The forest, as I knew it, was a safe place, safe for ground-level tree forts and Peter Pan fantasies, for sword fights on fallen logs across small brooks, a place full of dense orange needle piles that hid nothing more ominous than the occasional garter snake.

Hunting was a distant tradition, an idea I thought of as something from times past. The men of my family, what few there are, did not own any guns, or knives, had never spent a wet Saturday hunkered down in a blind, waiting for a pass of brown across the binoculars. We got all our meat at the grocery store and the only blood on my parents’ hands was from the packaging. We lived right up against the edge of the woods.

Plenty of people on the East Coast do hunt, but the culture of hunting in the West struck me as somehow different, more serious, more highly revered. The tradition of stalking and killing animal prey means something in a country founded on the back of the hunt. The history of the West is one of open range buffalo slaughters, which grew into small towns run by cattle ranchers. The gun is a triumph over those hard times, a memorial to the cowboy skills of the West’s recent past. Maintaining that tradition by teaching the next generation to
hunt is their way of keeping alive their history, and of differentiating themselves from we pampered East Coast liberals with our supermarket steaks and our big cities.

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In November of my first year in Bozeman, 2005, a teenager in Belgrade shot and killed the first legally hunted bison in the state of Montana in more than fifteen years. I read it in the daily paper that flopped in the early morning hours onto my front walkway. On the second day of the first bison season in a decade and a half, Buddy Clement, one of just fifty people to whom the state had offered hunting tags for bison that year, fired the kill shot into the animal’s head from about 30 yards away, in plain sight of the bull and four other bison grazing in the early dawn, about a mile from the closest road. He’d been led to the grazing site by officials with the Montana Department of Fish and Wildlife, the government agency who issued the hunting permits in hopes of maintaining a “target population” for the growing wild bison population in Montana. In the paper’s article, Buddy’s dad, who was with him, boasts proudly of his son’s accuracy.

I may have been an outsider, but I knew a thing or two about bison, having researched their complicated history in the American West, and it was difficult for me to separate that morning from the context of the bison’s near-extinction, from the story of European settlers interacting with Native Americans, from the great struggle of conquer and colonization that defines the American West. It was hard for me to imagine that Buddy Clement needed the meat, or how his family would honor the animal.

In the 19th century, bison were hunted nearly to extinction in the United States, their numbers dwindling to a few hundred by the end of the century. At the time, for white
European settlers, bison were hunted for their hides, a commodity product that needed to be sold in large numbers to be profitable. A good hide could earn $3 and a very good hide topped out around $50, in an era during which a day laborer was lucky to bring home a dollar for a day’s work. Teams of hunters would ride out into the Plains together, with their horses and their guns, and the best outfits were capable of killed 100 animals a day. In the later part of the century, there were nearly 1000 such outfits in operation.

Because the hides were the valuable part of a kill, the hunters preferred to let the animals suffocate rather than bleed out, so as not to stain the hide too badly. Not to mention that the thickness of a bison’s skull made lung shots more effective than head shots. After the animal stopped breathing, the skin team was up. They would use a sledgehammer to drive a spike through the animal’s nose into the ground, hook up a horse team, and then pull the hide off the dead body. Then the team left the carcass rotting in the sun. After a few weeks, after the sun had dried the skin to leather, after scavengers had picked the skeleton clean, the outfit would circle back to collect the barren bones and ship them back East to become knife handles, glue, décor.

When I heard of Buddy Clement’s bison hunt, I recalled this legacy. It mattered to me how the animal died—it mattered that there was no chase involved, no ritual of predator and prey. The bison didn’t know he was prey. In fact, bison have evolved to stand down and fight predators—they can be seen doing this when interacting with wolf packs in Yellowstone—so a man with a gun doesn’t appear to pose much of a threat. Some people would argue that makes the death better. Because the bison didn’t see it coming, it probably hurt less, there was no fear, no anticipatory dread. I don’t know what was going through that bull’s head, and I don’t know what was in Buddy Clement’s. I don’t know whether or not that seventeen-
Bison are ugly, awkwardly-furred, enormous creatures, and I love them. I think to love the bison is to love everything around it, to see where it belongs in the untouched western landscape, in history. The vantage points in between mountains, where there is green grass and snow far, far away. The bison is as much a part of the landscape as the chipped, grey slopes poking into the clouds. Being in the (distant) presence of a roaming bison herd reminds me that there are places you can go and see nothing else, see no sign of man, absolutely nothing directly touched or changed. Where you can fully experience the thrill, the slight panic of being the smallest thing in your entire life.

The people of Montana aren’t convinced that it’s possible for me to fully understand the bison. I’ve never run a cattle ranch and never been worried that a wild bison would infect my new calves with brucellosis. I’ve never seen a fence trampled by a stampede, or seen a wild bull charge a tourist in Yellowstone.

Montanans are naturally suspicious of outsiders. Once, a thin man in boots tucked a note under my windshield wiper at a gas station that said “Go Home, Yonker, Montana thanks you” because I had New York plates on my car. A former co-worker once told me you weren’t considered a Montana native unless your grandparents were born in the state. The isolationist tendencies are more of an undercurrent than a full-fledged separatist revival, but
there’s a reason Ted Kaczynski chose Livingston for his hideout. The seclusion of a Northwestern pine forest appeals to that sensibility, and Montanans are proud of how hard they had to work to cultivate this wild land into something habitable. They’d simply prefer it if celebrities from California and the federal government would leave them alone with their woods and their guns and their open containers of alcohol, but they won’t stand for that government or those celebrities to infringe on their old west traditions with New York liberal ideologies.

And sometimes I can understand the distance between a native and a migrant. There was a lot I didn’t understand about Montana while I was there. I’ve never been any good at skiing, and so I spent most weekends alone, while my boyfriend snowboarded the world-famous powder at Big Sky. So maybe I couldn’t understand the reality of the bison. Maybe I lived there too little for that love to be true. Maybe it’s wanderlust. Maybe my love for the wild, roaming animal is my overly romanticized crush on cowboy culture, just my wannabe road trip pipe dream. Maybe it’s Kerouac. Maybe the West is the place young people are supposed to be drawn to, because it’s wild and unsettled and far from my East Coast childhood. Maybe I really don’t understand the tradition that dictates hunting bison.

Or maybe my discomfort with the bison hunt was about more than an animal. The author Michael Perry has written that the land, the physical geography of a place always welcomes you, whether returning home or creating a new home. But, Perry writes, community is another story. You can’t force your way in. Perhaps I connected with the American bison, and through it, the place of Montana, without ever having fully understood the people.
I cried a lot that first fall in Montana. It puzzled me. I’d been so sure in Washington that once I got to Montana everything would be fine—all our problems would fix themselves. But late one night, my boyfriend and I had a big argument. He was finishing school and I’d moved three thousand miles from anyone I knew to be closer to him while he did and this night, he told me he wished I hadn’t come. He said that having me there, needing attention, was too much of a burden.

I wanted to prove my independence, to reassert some ownership over this new state that I’d declared my home for now, something separate from him. We had this running joke about a legendary secret hot spring somewhere in the middle of a tiny town called Ringling that we’d tried unsuccessfully to find twice before. I suddenly wanted to find it first, to beat him there. I drove my first car, the one I’d just bought from my boss for $500 cash, a 1983 Toyota Camry hatchback nicknamed Dimples for the small pings and pocks littering the hood and roof, from the great Billings hailstorm of 1987. A yellow October moon hung low in the sky when I set out around eight at night with my bathing suit in the backseat and a six-pack of Sam Adams, the beer that reminds me of home. It had been six months since I’d heard our friends give the cryptic directions. I didn’t know my way around this place in the day and hadn’t yet learned to read the mountains for direction: all of the ranges looked the same, sharp and movie-set flat against the distant sky. I barely even cared if I found the hot springs, just circled on the outskirts of this town muttering to myself.

Of course I never found Ringling that night, just stopped the car on the side of a dark road with no buildings or headlights in sight, just the faint silhouette of mountains, black
against the navy sky. I learned later that Ringling was named for another outsider, for one of the circus brothers, who bought the land here with the dream of building a one-million dollar resort spa around the hot springs. The Great Depression put a damper on his idea, but a resort does exist in nearby White Sulphur Springs, founded by an old Montana family. But that night, I drank a Boston Lager and fumed. I don’t remember how we resolved that fight, but I do remember stretching back out on the hail-pocked hood of my car, staring at the millions of distant stars, trying hard to locate the scent of sulfur.

On the way back home I got lost more than I wanted to be, and got scared, hunched forward toward the windshield as my small headlights tried to cut through the penetrating darkness between centuries-old mountains. Bridger Canyon is the place where Highway 45 runs through the Bridger Range of the Rocky Mountains, a road that circles back on itself like a tide and climbs diagonally up the bases of mountains where they couldn’t dynamite straight through them. Highway 45 tunnels underneath boulders and is sometimes nothing more than a bridge out over the tops of pine trees older than my grandparents. I ended up there, way after dark, hungry, knowing I was at least forty miles still from home. The road wove back on itself at nearly forty-five degree angles and I had the radio up loud to distract me and was singing along even though my knuckles were white against the wheel when a small mule deer bounded out across the road from left to right, hopping up over the metal guardrail and into my path. I acted on instinct—not a good one—and pulled the wheel sharply to the left to avoid the doe, who leapt over the right-side guardrail and back down into the canyon without a scratch. After a moment of slow motion, the guardrail I was headed for came sharply back into focus and I slammed on my brakes and actually squeezed shut my eyes, sure I would crash through the metal barrier and launch out over the rocks below. But I
stopped before I even touched the guardrail. I sat frozen in the dark canyon sideways across a state highway, panting, and all I could think was *thank goodness the deer is ok.*

~

After that night, I decided I needed to try harder to connect with Montana, to understand the place on its own terms. I tried to make an identity for myself among these mountains, one that might ground me to the place beyond just my relationship. I took an unpaid internship with an outdoor magazine, line-editing stories on the elk hunt, writing captions and copy for “Training the Bird Dog” and “Marksmanship 101.” And they let me cover one story: The Montana Derby Days horse show, a National Reined Cow Horse Association event, a festival-like demonstration of the antique style of roping cattle known as the *vaquero,* which is Spanish for cowboy. So the timid, 22-year-old vegetarian from New England went to the rodeo.

The Three Forks fairground was a dustbowl, hot without a patch of shade, dry white sand kicking up under pounding hooves and the squeals of calves scraping like fingernails down my spine. Little boys in spurs stood perched on the rickety wooden fence and yelled through the slats into the arena, “Git ‘er done, Daddy!” Women in gingham-checked shirts with pearl buttons tucked into their Wranglers swung long legs up and over the thick flanks of dappled horses heavy with equipment, or forced metal rods in between the horses’ wide, white teeth. The arena sometimes reached near silence, the crowd inched forward on the stinging hot metal bleachers as horse and rider skidded in the dirt for a sliding stop. All I could see were the terrified calves, small white and brown-spotted creatures, scared and running for their lives.
Men and women rode their horses around this small arena, grime caked onto hooves, and being judged on their herd work and fence work. Herd work means a rider chases a small herd of calves, cuts one away from the rest, and successfully lassoes it around the throat. Fence work means one calf is let into the ring with horse and rider, who chase it along a prescribed route. When the rider ropes the calf, he or she dismounts, runs the calf down, wrestles it to the ground and ties its four legs together tightly enough that they’ll hold for ten full seconds, which an official times. The fastest time in each category wins first prize, and the fastest combined time wins the grand prize: a rhinestone-studded commemorative belt buckle, a tangible memory from the old West.

The goal of a journalist is to remain completely unbiased while covering a story. Feelings are fine, but keep them out of the copy. Most journalists will tell you it’s not possible, but that objectivity should always be the gold standard. But I was young and I’d never been west of the Mississippi and I was getting a sunburn thinking how am I going to interview this guy with his chaps and his proud smile? How am I going to not ask him whether he’s afraid he’s hurting the cow?

I didn’t ask those questions. I wrote 350 words that skimmed the basics of the competition without so much as a mention of a poor baby cow, and threw in a couple of quotes from the riders and the event organizers about maintaining an important part of Montana’s heritage. I knew I didn’t understand this past.

I grew up in a northern suburb of Boston, so I understand about valuing history. I’ve walked the Freedom Trail and stood at the green on Lexington and Concord. I’ve touched Plymouth Rock. I’ve seen the Atlantic from the shores at Boston Harbor and tried to picture wooden crates of tea bobbing in the ocean and the red flares of cannons firing. Once, when
nobody was looking, on a field trip in fourth grade, I reached out and ran my fingers along the very first American flag that Betsy Ross ever sewed. Those were my wars. They were not the wars of a new frontier, an unwritten future, but against the past. And if three months in Montana had taught me anything it was that the descendants of the old western cowboys thought I didn’t know about real work, the kind that comes from raising food straight up out of the ground, or running a knife along the throat of a bull.

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I think the border between us, Montanans and me, when I lived there as a vegetarian, was the impartial position. In his book *Animals Like Us* philosopher Mark Rowlands interrogates the ethical principles at stake in the human decision to eat animals, using a thought experiment he calls the impartial position. Imagine that you are able to decide the rules of the world you will live in before you live in it: whether or not, for example, humans can eat animals. But from your place in the impartial position, you don’t know whether you will be born as a human or as an animal. Would you choose a world in which humans can eat animals, or a world in which humans never ate animals? Certainly, Rowlands concludes, you would choose the world in which you’d be most likely to live. As a human, worst case scenario, you’d be giving up the right to eat animals. As an animal, you’d be giving up your right to life. Of course you would choose a vegan world. And, the rules say, if it’s irrational in the impartial position, it’s immoral in the real world. Because humans give up only the pleasures of eating certain food, and animals give up life.

According to Rowlands, from an ethical perspective there are two central issues regarding the human right to kill an animal for food: how animals die, and that they die. We
must decide whether or not we believe it is right to kill an animal to eat it under certain circumstances. We must also decide whether or not we believe it is right to kill an animal under *any* circumstance.

Mark Rowlands’ use of the impartial position is actually based on a political idea developed by political philosopher John Rawls to justify the liberal principles of equality. Rawls called the idea the original position, in which every human, before she is born, lives under a veil of ignorance. From behind the veil of ignorance, we can’t see what traits we will be born with—we don’t know our gender, our geographic location, our socioeconomic class, our political stature. Now design a social contract. Because everyone would be worried about ending up in the disadvantaged class—being born a disabled black woman in the ghetto, Rawls says, we would operate by the rule of maximin, that which provides the most advantage to the least advantaged member of society.

Though this all sounds very similar to Rowlands’ explanation of the impartial position, I think there is a key difference. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls seeks to clarify his ideas by saying that the principle of the veil of ignorance is meant to be a political, not an ethical one, because individuality is an essential ethical value. Attempting to apply political values to an individual life strips that individual of her autonomy. And so justice “…leaves the weight of ethical autonomy to be decided by citizens severally in light of their comprehensive doctrines.”

I’d made my decision then, as a young activist vegetarian, and that decision meant there was a line I couldn’t cross, a fundamental difference in seeing the world I couldn’t accept between myself and a hunter. But I was missing the part about our comprehensive doctrines, the part which says everyone gets to decide for him or herself. So for my time in
Montana, I kept my distance. I told Maggie (truthfully) that I respected anyone who could shoot and kill and butcher their own meat, if they made good use of the animal. She told me that meant I was smarter than most vegetarians, and so we continued our friendship. And I kept my mouth shut at the rodeo because I knew that sentimentalizing the cow ran counter to just about every tradition in which Montanans found their sense of identity. Because I disagreed but it wasn’t my place.
CHAPTER SIX

The September I moved to Montana, my mother moved, too. I said goodbye to her in New Hampshire, but I spent one afternoon on my lunch break crying in a coffee shop on Bozeman’s Main Street, talking on my cell phone to my mother as my father drove her to Logan International Airport. She flew out later that day to Accra, and spent the next nine months living with a host family, working on the campus of a teacher training college in a rural village in central Ghana.

When I thought about my mother in Africa that first fall, I swelled with pride. She has spent her life in service to others: a childhood at home with my sisters and I, then more than 30 years teaching English to eight graders in the public school system, and now she was flying halfway around the world to establish a teacher resource room in a country where she knew no one. But I was also incredibly sad for both my parents. I know my mother well, and I knew that being away from the family and isolated would be difficult for her gregarious, connective self. And when I thought about my father, home alone in New Hampshire, making pots of spaghetti by himself, ordering pizza for one, watching ESPN with dinner every night—I couldn’t think about it too much because it gave way to dangerous impulses. I wanted to scrap my own plans. I felt a strong urge to give up the move to Montana, to forget about career advancement and my relationship and move back in with my dad to take care of him while my mother was gone.

I talked myself down from those impulses, because, ultimately, I knew my dad would never stand for it. He supported my mother’s international volunteering completely, took an active pride in her selflessness—and I knew he wanted the same for me. Plus, the notion of
re-entry into the childhood world of New Hampshire had been, since I was 18 and first left, one that filled me with dread. I got knots in my stomach imagining living with my parents again, even over summers from college. Living in that same house seemed somehow regressive to me, or defeatist. I decided, instead, to move to Montana and create my own world.

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Since I wasn’t living with my boyfriend at the time, I spent most of my time off work at his place. He was finishing a degree in environmental biology, which meant his free time was full of organic chemistry lab reports, studying for agronomy exams and weekend-long field research outings. I had time to spare, so I spent most of it getting dinner ready while he finished his homework, so we could eat together before he went back to work.

Of course, this wasn’t my apartment, nor was it my kitchen. This was the kitchen of three 21-year-olds still in college. My boyfriend’s father had bought the house and rented it to his son and two other Montana State students, but the freezer, refrigerator and cabinets were stocked with the kind of food you can only eat when you’re in your early twenties. Boxes: macaroni and cheese, Rice-a-roni, powdered sloppy joe mix. Cans: green beans, Spaghettio-s, baked beans, diced tomatoes, kidney beans, hearty beef stew. Frozen plastic bags: tater tots, chicken nuggets, steak strips. And plenty of beer.

My boyfriend and I didn’t have a domestic life together yet, so I tried to piece one together with the meager supplies handed down to me, in someone else’s kitchen, on someone else’s time, trying to steer clear of his roommates as they dumped cans of chili into plastic bowls and then ate the whole thing standing up with a ladle. My boyfriend and I were
both vegetarians, and cooking prefab and easy, for two, without meat, proved a challenge. I cooked frozen pizzas and served them with sliced green peppers and little bowls of ranch dressing, imagining that somehow the trappings of domesticity came through. When I used boxes of macaroni and cheese, I sprinkled our bowls with real grated parmesan. I microwaved frozen peas to go along with our toaster-friendly fake chick’n patties, dressing them up with tomatoes and pickles sliced with the serrated knife to make them look prettier. I brought over a couple of cans of tomato puree and paste, and my spice cabinet, trying to recreate my mother’s pasta sauce. I danced around his roommates in the kitchen: them, casting sideways glances, wearing their headphones to watch episodes of *Everybody Loves Raymond* on their laptops at the table; me, using the broiler to melt cheese on garlic bread.

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After about a month working in the gift shop, I found a “real” job, as Development Assistant to the local Humane Society, writing grants and organizing fundraising events to build a new animal shelter. And I hated it. Within a week, I realized that most of my job consisted of sitting in a chair, staring at a computer, and copying and pasting donor names into more than fifty form thank-you notes a week. Sedentary and lonely and bored, I started sending out writing samples to local magazines and newspapers, hoping that at least, on the side, I could find some writing work to make my life in Montana worthwhile.

When I got the first nibble—an editor liked my essay about bison—I decided I should make the leap fully. I’d moved to Montana to make a difference, to use my writing to create a better world and to live in that world at the same time. The animal shelter was a worthy cause, but a deeply saddening one for a girl whose lease and whose paycheck wouldn’t let
her take any of the dogs home. I needed direction. I needed a jump start, something to connect me to the place in which I was stumbling. So I called my dad.

I was nervous and shaking, so sure he’d tell me to buck up, that he’d try and talk me down. I burst into tears at his hello, worrying that this was a reckless, impulsive, childish decision and my father would tell me so, would urge me to stick it out. But when I told him I thought I needed to quit my job and find part-time work, so I could pursue freelancing more fully, he told me he had never been so proud. He called me brave. We spent an hour on the phone, and he helped me make a new budget, to figure out how few hours I could work to make enough to get by. We decided work as a nanny would be the best option—highest per hour rate, and more options for part-time work. I quit the next day.

More than freeing me from a job in which I was, that conversation with my father begin to soften the boundaries between my family and I. He’d guided me down exactly the path I wanted to go, and I wasn’t prepared for the possibility that my parents might actually understand me, might actually support some of my decisions.

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A week later, I began the job I’d hold for the next year and a half, spending three days a week as nanny for two adorable boys, watching them grow and learn, leading them through soccer practice and art projects and reading lessons. At first, I relished the chance to exercise my caretaking muscles, and think seriously about the business of being a parent, as I entered adulthood, and navigated career choices. I’d taken this job for the time it would offer me, the time to write, the time to be politically active, the time to eat and live well. But somehow,
when I left the job more than a year later, I was only one publication ahead, and nearly twenty pounds heavier.

According to nutritionists at the University of Georgia, modern American vegetarians are, in general, healthier than their meat-eating counterparts. Vegetarians in the U.S. have a lower incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes. There's some evidence that vegetarians have lower rates of osteoporosis, kidney stones, gallstones, and diverticular disease. And an American vegetarian has a significantly lower chance of being obese than the average American.

So imagine my surprise. Sure, I was 22, and beginning to gain weight naturally with age, my body imagining that soon I would have children of my own whose fetuses would need some extra padding. Since I was no longer walking to and from work, my lifestyle had become more sedentary. I wasn't making a ton of money, but had more than enough to get by, especially with the comparatively low cost of living of the single, upper-middle class white person. I only worked one job, affording me the time to spend on cooking and eating right. None of this fully explains just how severely I ballooned. When I became a vegetarian, I was at 112. At my peak, about five and a half years in, I weighed in at the gym on one particularly low February afternoon at 138. The changes in my body were clear evidence of unhealthy eating, despite the label I’d placed on myself by abstaining from eating meat.

Being a vegetarian didn’t make me gain weight, but being a sloppy vegetarian did. Almost constantly throughout the day, I’d find myself reaching for a handful of chips or a bite of candy. I’d snack on ice cream in the middle of the afternoon while the kids napped. I ate sugary cereal or frozen waffles as a mid-morning snack, even on the days I caught breakfast at my apartment before work. Perhaps even worse, I was eating mostly the kind of
food we feed to children under the age of four. I’d split a box of macaroni and cheese with eighteen-month-old Kade for lunch, devouring the lion’s share. When frozen chicken nuggets or fish sticks with frozen French fries, yogurt and fruit were on the menu, I had French fries. I ate cheese and mayonnaise sandwiches, baked potatoes with cheese, pasta, frozen burritos, cheese quesadillas, grilled cheese sandwiches. Through some combination of my lack of natural cooking ability and a toddler’s influence, I ate a diet that consisted mostly of cheese, starch and more cheese. I didn’t choose apples and peanut butter for snacks (even when I was feeding those to the kids). I skipped the fruits or frozen vegetables I happily sliced up for them. Somehow, though I’d declared a part of my identity as a conscious and ethical eater, I still prioritized easy, fast, cheap, comfort foods.

I genuinely love children, and my inner conscience screams at me for even thinking this, but the truth is, I ate because I was bored. I could have easily found the time to work out on the at-home gym or to prepare a lunch consisting of more produce. I was at home—albeit someone else’s—all day, and I wasn’t occupying my time with anything else. The kids largely played on their own, requiring supervision but happy to give me a half-hour here or there to work making lunch or preparing an art project. I was stuck in a house all day with no one to actually talk to—unless you count discussions of coloring projects or re-reading “Z is for Zamboni” twice before naptime.

In some way, I wonder if I was subconsciously avoiding cooking too much because I felt like avoiding the kitchen was the last vestige of my real identity, the political feminist self I’d worked so hard to craft in college, striking out from my parents’ house for the first time. Somehow, at age 23, I’d become someone else’s kids’ stay-at-home mom. Being a parent is an incredible responsibility, but one I wasn’t at all ready for. I was a recent college
graduate doing a job I loved that didn’t have anything to do with my degree, and my internal feminist (unfairly) blamed the domestic sphere. Maybe in some way, being a lazy cook was my attempt at rebelling against the role I thought I’d been cast in—the role I mistakenly identified as hamstrung suburban housewife.

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History charts a complicated relationship between women and food, mingling religion, evolutionary biology, politics and outright oppression. As women, we are taught to eat as little as possible, while also learning that providing food is one of our most important duties as a wife or mother. Why women took to the kitchen in the first place is a matter of some debate. Anthropologists have suggested that the relationship between women and the domestic sphere is a logical extension of childbirth—since women were already homebound by pregnancy and birth, it made sense for them to continue to adopt the duties of keeping house, while men ventured out as hunters. Some evolutionary biologists think that a desire to provide food may actually be bred into women—since the ultimate goal of evolution is to insure the survival of our offspring, and the survival of offspring depends on an adult who can provide healthy food, women who did the best job providing food for their children would have been favored by natural selection.

The relationship between women and domestic duties is not without trouble. This was not some harmless inevitability. The idea that it is a woman’s duty to provide food for her family has been, very intentionally, linked to her self-esteem, to her success as a woman. During and after the Industrial Revolution, a new idea of womanhood began to emerge in advice columns and magazines, in religious journals and fiction—in popular culture, and
now, imbedded in our collective consciousness. Called the cult of domesticity, or the ideal of true womanhood, it centered on four central components to achieving success as a woman.

One of the four most revered traits was domesticity, the goal being to create in the home a peaceful sanctuary from the evils of the industrial world. By aligning a woman’s domestic duties with her moral duties—the other three pillars of true womanhood being piety, purity and submissiveness—the cult of domesticity seemed to endow women with the power to stave off the temptations and violence of the outside world by establishing the proper home environment. And food was a crucial part of that environment. The Ladies New Book of Cookery put it clearly: “food prepared by the kind hand of a wife, mother” had “a restorative power that money cannot buy.”

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A series of polls conducted in the late 1990s by Harvard University revealed that, even among families in which men said they were happy to help with domestic duties, women still did twice as much housework as their husbands or partners. Men nowadays do more around the house than their fathers ever did, but the burden still falls on women. On average, working mothers do about 20 hours of housework a week, down from 30 hours two decades ago, while their husbands are doing 10 hours a week, up from five. Perhaps most importantly, more than half of all women questioned expressed at least some dissatisfaction with the amount of help their husbands provide around the house.

I certainly wasn’t thinking about the history of women’s domestic duties while I worked as a nanny. I loved the way little Kade’s chubby cheeks cracked into dimples when he saw me every morning. I’ll never forget the wonderfully fulfilling sense of purpose in
holding his hands as he first started to toddle around the house on two legs. I cried when I left the children and the job a year later. But maybe, no matter how much you want something, or how much you enjoy it while you have it, you can’t help but feel resentful if you were backed into that corner.

I’d decided years ago that cooking wasn’t for me—it was a trapping of the domestic, a traditional feminine responsibility. As an activist eater, I’d eschewed that duty. I wasn’t interested in ever being a housewife, and so perhaps I lashed out subconsciously, because I sensed how much I was losing in caring for other people. Maybe food was a wall I built up between me and the modern American kitchen because I was too scared of the loaded female history that space carried.

My efforts to create a home were spread too thin, misplaced and awkwardly rendered. I helped to raise one set of children, cooking their lunches and folding their laundry and driving them to soccer practice. But during that whole year, my father cooked for himself, a burden I felt even on the other side of the country. He began to help me form my writer-activist identity, one that I thought I could only achieve separate from my parents, while I tried to separate myself from a woman’s domestic duties while working a job that required them. And I was left with only scraps for my relationship, taking care only as far as I could within the limitations of our current living arrangements, burdened by resentment and loneliness.

I didn’t have a home. I had three, and none were getting enough attention. And somewhere in all of that, I got lost. Somehow, in becoming a caretaker for everyone else, I became too resentful to care for myself. But being an unhealthy vegetarian didn’t make me any more of a feminist. It just made me fat.
CHAPTER SEVEN

About a year and a half after moving there, I was done with Montana. Though I’d romanticized the great American frontier, and though it was a dramatically beautiful place to live, I’d only ever been there for my boyfriend. I was twenty pounds fatter. I couldn’t find a job writing—the freelancing I had done was sporadic and relatively uninteresting. He would have been happy to stay, but when he finished school in December of 2006, the first job he found was as a field research assistant on Channel Islands National Park, in southern California. He’d get to put his degree to good use studying the nesting habits of migratory seabirds and, more important to him, spend whole workdays outdoors, hiking a single-mile-square island with a pack and a field notebook, scuba diving and kayaking near packs of sea lions in his off time.

They needed him there in a week. The whirlwind decision didn’t leave much time for discussing. We’d carried on a long-distance relationship before, and the job, at least for now, was a six month position. So while I debated whether or not it was worth it to make a drastic move for a few months, or to live without him for a few months, in a town and in a job with which I was increasingly unhappy, he began finding rooms for rent, and packing up the trunk. The matter of where I would continue to live was left entirely up to me.

I had nothing to lose. I had nothing to tie me to Montana. I was 24, and in love and couldn’t think of anything better than moving to the Pacific Ocean. Kerouac, again. So, two days before he left, I told him I’d decided to move down to California too, so we should start looking for apartments together.

He said, _oh thank God. I wanted you to come but I was too afraid to ask you._
I moved to southern California in April 2007, about five weeks after he did. I packed all my most important belongings into the back of my car and drove down through Idaho and Utah, where the mountains were still mostly covered with snow. I crossed the scorching hot desert landscapes of Arizona and Nevada, then pulled the car over at a rest stop somewhere in the Mojave Desert to dig out the deeply-buried sunscreen from one of my suitcases. But it was too late. I arrived in Ventura tired and sweaty, with a lobster-red sunburned left arm, as if I had arrived at the Promised Land. I didn’t know much about my new home, but I knew southern California was the home of the avocado and of the migrant worker, so I figured the produce was going to be good.

The terrace of our first apartment, shared with another roommate he’d found in a rush, on his drive down south, faced east and just outside the cement wall on the patio, a lemon tree grew. I woke up to my first spring California morning, crisp cool like a September in the mountains, the bright sun streaking through the window, poking its way through giant ferns, to a hummingbird flitting between birds of paradise, and the clean scent of lemons. The sun caught the dew that had formed in the still-cool April night on a dazzling yellow orb, which I picked, squeezing it fresh into my morning mug of green tea out on the terrace.

In my first week, I found a job working at an after-school tutoring center, so my hours were usually 2-8PM. Lunch was the big meal, the highlight of my day. I wish I could describe them as elaborate lunches, but the truth is, the produce was so fresh, so good, I barely needed to do anything with it. I would chop and slice and occasionally fry in a little olive oil and garlic, but my lunches were mostly giant platters of misted vegetables, a few
slices of a baguette, and some cheese, maybe a handful of nuts. I sat on the terrace, barefoot, inhaling the delicate sour of the lemon tree, watching birds and trying to ignore the distant sounds of traffic, reading a book and eating with my hands: snapping asparagus spears drizzled with balsamic vinegar, c-slices of mellow green avocados, salted tomato wedges, whole strawberries. Honestly, I made fresh-squeezed lemonade and orange juice. As far as I was concerned, southern California was food paradise.

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I was right about the amount of food grown in California. For more than 50 years, California has been the country’s number one food producer. More than half of the fruits, nuts and vegetables sold in the United States are grown in California, which is also the number one dairy state, despite Wisconsin’s claims. Some products, including almonds, artichokes, dates, figs, and kiwi are grown exclusively in California. More than 70 percent of the country’s olives, and more than 80 percent of our strawberries, come from California.

Of course, this is because California is a strange world, where seasons seem to have no bearing. A California native will tell you there is plenty of variation in the weather between November and June, or point out to you the numerous ski resorts the northern half of the state boasts, and those things are true. But to we outsiders, to people who’ve felt the pangs in the shoulders from shoveling three feet of snow after a mid-April snowstorm, to people for whom Thanksgiving at the beach was never a possibility, the weather in California seems, as does most of the state, idyllic. Flawless. And perfect for a long growing season. California’s unique climate is, in other words, one of the leading reasons why most of us have developed a taste for strawberries in January or avocado in March.
Everything felt good and fresh and new. In addition to my day job, helping the underachieving children of rich Orange County lawyers study for the SATs, I’d found myself a regular freelancing gig with a local arts and culture newsweekly. Since I turned around my first assignment so quickly, the editor gave me weekly assignments for the rest of the nine months I’d live in Ventura. I went out into the world as a reporter, feeling engaged in the community, in the arts, in politics, following stories out to the islands, into symphony halls and crowded bars for live concerts, around art galleries, culminating in interviews with musicians. I was teaching and writing for a living. I spent my days wandering around in the sand, marveling at the ocean and typing at coffee shops for the free wireless. I made barely $1000 a month. I was 24 and I lived at the beach.

One story assignment took me out to the Pacific Corinthian Yacht Club on a Friday night in mid-July, at the height of a southern California summer, to cover an upcoming race of classic wooden yachts. I thought this a marvel of an event, a traveling through time and social class that put me in kitten heels and a short skirt, drinking a glass of chardonnay to fit in.

My contact at the yacht club introduced me to Jon and Graeme, saying they’d be my tour guides for the evening. While it’s in my nature to be a little wary when two middle-aged men offer to show me their sloop, I definitely wanted to see what the inside of a classic yacht’s cabin looked like. So I shook their hands demurely and got the spellings of their last names and let them lead me down the winding staircase to the plank dock below.
As soon as I stepped off the bottom step to the dock, Graeme’s head snapped around to look at my feet.

“Heels?” He shook his head, the gray edges of his hair rustling in the ocean breeze. “No way you’re getting on the Raiatea with heels on.”

Jon laughed a little. “Took us two hours to varnish the main deck’s teak flooring and a couple thousand to pay for those boards—you’ll scratch ‘em up.”

I was horrified. How did I always manage to do it? I thought I’d get all decked out, did my best to look the part and still embarrassed myself. I was in no way qualified to be a reporter—shy, conspicuous, totally unaware of fashion. Could I be any more obvious?

I’d felt, to be honest, a strange sensation of floating through my life in California. I loved the town. I was financially stable. My work was fulfilling, and the closest I’d come to my degree in writing since graduation. But I found myself slipping up in familiar ways—wearing the wrong shoes. Standing off in the corners and watching. Avoiding interviews at all costs, preferring the phone to in-person. I was interested in spending all my time alone on the beach at sunset.

Even my plans for covering the yacht club belied my hesitation in working as a reporter—I hoped to spend no more than an hour covering the story. Then a dinner for one of stir fry with the last of last week’s farmer’s market vegetables, an hour of TV, organizing whatever notes I gathered and going to bed. Most of my three months in California had been spent similarly. Every other week, my boyfriend was out on the island counting nests, so I put in plenty of overtime at work to fill in the blank spaces and got used to hanging out in my underwear and cooking for one.
“No big deal, sweetheart,” Jon said, throwing his big arm around my shoulders. “You’ll just tour the boats barefoot.”

Graeme smiled again, kindly. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

Though it was true—my cute shoes had betrayed me for the conspicuous outsider I was—I felt better knowing that it was out there. I wouldn’t have to pretend to recognize anything, and I knew it was better for the story that they carefully explain everything to me as a beginner anyway. I decided to hang out for the evening, to make some small talk, to enjoy myself, to feel some sense of groundedness in this place.

“Alright, star reporter,” Graeme continued, taking the empty wine glass from my hand and setting it on the bare deck. “Let’s get you a real drink.”

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The image of the leather-tanned, bandana-wearing California grower is a good idea on paper. This image is not an illusion. But neither is the farmworker exactly as he seems—though he is usually a he. According to the California Institute for Rural Studies, the typical farmworker in the U.S. is a young man who has left his family to work in the field. He usually spends between 12 and 14 hours a day in the field, six days a week, and makes between $7,000-10,000 a year. The farmworker has no health insurance. No sick days, no vacation days, and certainly no union. More than 50% have never been to a dentist—about 1/3 have never seen a doctor. Typically, farms provide housing for their workers during the growing and harvesting season, to maximize the picking hours in a day. Workers can expect to pay about $50 a week to live in run-down shacks or trailers, sometimes with as many as 15 other people.
All this, all this our farm workers get in exchange for picking the food we need, for working the third most dangerous job in the country. The odds of dying on the farm are 39 out of 100,000. Farmworkers suffer the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries and skin disorders of any workers in the country, and are more than 25% more likely than the average American to develop asthma, birth defects, tuberculosis and cancer. Children of migrant farm workers have higher rates of pesticide exposure, dental disease and malnutrition.

Because, oh yes, the agricultural industry is exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act’s child labor regulations. In every other industry, the minimum age to work legally in this country is 16. On a farm, it’s 12.

~

I was conscious, when I accepted the first Jack and Coke on board the Raiatea, of the fact that I probably shouldn’t be drinking while covering a story. But something about it seemed appropriate here: these men referred to themselves as salty dogs and to me as a star reporter; they wore baseball caps to a yacht club and had stocked the bar on their boat with top-shelf liquor and plastic tumblers that wouldn’t scratch the floorboards if they shattered. My kitten heels were poking out of my purse and my bare feet felt comfortable on the teak floorboards.

I hadn’t been out for drinks since I’d moved to California. My boyfriend was gone most of the time and anyway his idea of going out was throwing on a pair of flip-flops and grabbing a beer at the Sewer, the alleyway bar around the corner from our apartment. Nothing seemed better to me than watching the sun set into the Pacific with cocktail in hand, shooting the breeze with a bunch of kind middle-aged men. Here was a chance to play dress-
up and entertain the notion that I was an adult who knew how she liked her whiskey. Plus, open bar.

So I followed when Jon and Graeme led me onto the deck of their harbor neighbor, the Spitfire, where the crew were playing Scottish bagpipe music loudly and accepted when they offered me a mai-tai, and a second one, and declared myself a member of the Hunter S. Thompson school of journalism. I kicked my bare feet up on the white plastic cushions on the Spitfire’s benches and said, “Tell me your favorite race stories, gentlemen.”

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So why would anyone want to do farm work—if it’s so back-breaking, hot, exhausting, dangerous and underpaid, why would you sign up for it? Because you don’t have any other option, of course. It’s probably not a surprise that the vast majority of California’s farmworkers—and, in fact, a majority of farmworkers across the country—are undocumented immigrants. Close to 90% of farmworkers in the U.S. are Spanish-speaking, and most of those were born in Mexico. Over 50% of immigrant farmworkers nationwide are not protected by legal documents, and so, in this country, they have no legal rights. This lack of documentation contributes, along with a tight bottom line and a slim margin of economic error on the farm, to the horrible working conditions of the modern American farm.

When sociologists discuss patterns of migration, they have two terms to explain what makes a person move from one place to the next—they call them push factors and pull factors. The pull factors for farm work in the United States are that agriculture is a dangerous industry. Because the jobs are so life-threatening, and the pay is so low, the agriculture industry would either have to raise pay and improve conditions—or recruit workers from
abroad, where there are more laborers, fewer jobs and much, much lower wages. The U.S. agriculture industry is primarily located in California, where a cheap and willing supply of labor is close at hand, right over the border. Why provide healthcare and housing when you can just import illegal immigrants instead?

The push factors are the things that make a person’s home country worth leaving behind. The push factors are the things that make working 80 hour weeks hunched over in a field under the blazing sun for seven grand a year look like the American Dream come true. It’s got to be pretty bad in Mexico if that’s your idea of opportunity.

Before you begin to think that the solution here is to close the borders and take those jobs back, I should make it clear that this is a pretty good deal for the U.S. too. Paying migrant farm workers next to nothing and having a constant stream of people willing to work cheap is what keeps us all in fresh produce, all year round, for pennies. It’s the reason why I can walk into a supermarket in the middle of February and buy a head of romaine for 99 cents. And if the cheap food itself weren’t benefit enough, the U.S. Social Security Administration has recently estimated that three out of every four undocumented immigrants pay payroll taxes (in addition to paying the same sales and consumer taxes the rest of us pay), and that undocumented workers contribute six to seven billion dollars in Social Security funds that they are not eligible to claim.

Anyway, show me the pools of American citizens out there just dying for a job picking lettuce in Oxnard.
The sun dipped lower, casting a harsh orange sheen on the surface of the ocean. I sucked on the cherry from my hurricane and wondered why, in the face of all this sunlight, did I still feel so disconnected from this strange permanent-summer life? Me as a reporter in California was a good idea on paper. I’d wanted to live here, and I’d wanted to work as a writer—but there was something just slightly off, something missing. I didn’t know yet what it was.

Jon and Graeme and I ended the night back inside the club, the three of us gathered around a small white-clothed table, a Long Island iced tea in front of each of us, listening to the jazz trio on the balcony.

“So star reporter,” Graeme leaned in. “Tell us something about yourself.”

First, don’t talk about yourself is a pretty basic tenant of journalism. It’s not about being secretive, but the more you talk the less they do, and they’re the story.

Second, generally speaking, it’s a good idea not to get personally involved in your story. It’s much more difficult to write something when you feel too strongly one way or the other about your subjects. So making friends is generally discouraged.

But third, I was drunk. I weighed 120 pounds, hadn’t had dinner and had downed a glass of wine, a Jack and coke, two mai-tais, a hurricane and was working my way through a Long Island iced tea at this point.

So I told them I’d just gotten engaged.

And they balked—couldn’t believe how young I was. Where was the ring? Well, it was spontaneous, I said, and told them the elaborate story. How I’d gone out to Santa Barbara Island with him for a night, and how we’d sat watching the sunset on Signal Peak. And how he’d just leaned over and whispered let’s get married and how I’d started to laugh
at first because I thought he was joking. And how we wouldn’t actually get married for a few years but we wanted to make that commitment.

None of which was true.

And even as the words were coming out of my mouth I wondered why. I had plenty about myself I could’ve told them that wasn’t a lie, but suddenly I wanted all of this life. I wanted, very suddenly and very strongly to be this person: the girl who wore pearls and drank whiskey at yacht clubs, the girl who was engaged to the boy she’d already moved cross-country for—twice—the girl who could swap stories with anyone she encountered, seamlessly, flawlessly, without being too shy to ask any questions or getting drunk or wearing the wrong damn shoes. I couldn’t deny anymore that as beautiful as California was, as happy as I was tutoring and writing, that something wasn’t right for me here. I was lying to two complete strangers about my life.

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If you take a left down Telephone Road in Ventura and drive to the end, you’ll hit the t-stop at Olivas Park Drive, always my favorite road there. Stretching for ten miles clear across the city, from the beach into the suburbs of Oxnard, Telephone Road is relatively undeveloped, lined on both sides by spacious agricultural fields.

And right at that t-stop, at a little red barn that’s been converted into a small market, the owner of the property sells produce straight off the field all week long. The floor is just cement and the aisles are constructed of plastic folding tables, stacked with wooden crates, each holding a small pile of some fruit or vegetable. I’d usually stop on my way home from
work, grab a head of red bibb or a pint of berries or a couple of oranges, just to run my fingers over this, the freshest produce I could imagine.

I became a writer to help change the world, but wasn’t doing the kind of writing I imagined. I moved to Montana, and then to California, for a relationship that I believed in, but I couldn’t seem to fully grasp a hold of happiness. I began to think I had lost some fundamental part of myself, some deeper, internal sense of identity, to the lure of the mountains or the Pacific, to the lure of love, or maybe just to laziness. Maybe, I thought, everyone believes in boycotts and romance in college, and then the real world tramples on those ideas a little bit. But standing in the Olivas Park market, I could still glimpse, even if just barely, the life I’d imagined I would live as a feminist, an activist, a vegetarian.

When I became a vegetarian, I did it because it mattered to me where my food came from and what it took to make it. Here in California, I thought I was finally getting the vegetarian thing right because I was buying directly from producers. It wasn’t always organic, I knew, but it was practical and every day. I’d carry whatever purchases out to my car and load them into a cooler in the backseat and drive to the beach to read or write for an hour while I watched the sun set. And when I drove away, I’d smile at the workers I saw out in the fields that surrounded the Olivas Park market, as they bent at the waist and stood, over and over, tossing watermelons down a line of brown hands.
CHAPTER EIGHT

The stench of fish guts has sunk into the wood of the Ventura pier, its wide thick planks sticky and wet with blood, and with the ocean. Salt water sprays the pier constantly, embedding sharp crystals and dank, faint rot into the meat of the wood. Late in my California summer, I stood on the end of the pier often, and became immersed in sea there: in the loud caws of circling gulls like buzzards, the spray stinging my porous skin, the hot July sun sizzling my burning shoulders, and the stink of fish everywhere.

Some, I saw, fish for fun: white and Chicano families gathered around one or two poles, a red plastic cooler with long necks and juice boxes, a portable stereo hissing a crackling connection from the mainland, a picnic of Zip-locked bologna and cheese sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly on white Wonder bread, baggies of grapes. The fathers wrap their arms around children, guiding the long, thin line down into the sea. They throw fish bodies onto ice or the plastic cutting boards nailed to some of the piers’ benches. They laugh.

Some fish without laughing. These are the men—mostly men, almost always men—you see sitting cross-legged on sidewalks outside the Main St. Ben & Jerry’s or curled, sleeping surrounded by garbage bags beneath the trees in Fir Street Park. Men who walk more slowly than any others you’ve seen, not because they are laden with all their worldly possessions, though they are—flannels tied around their waists, leading scrappy, matted dogs on leashes of rope, pushing rusty bicycles sagged with the weight of accumulation—but because they have nowhere to be. These men fish off the pier with scrabbled-together equipment, with branches, actual tree branches stripped of foliage, and worms not purchased
at the small tackle stand on Fifth and Laurel, but dug from the ground or gathered, after rain, in discarded Chinese take-out containers.

The fish bodies pile and glisten in the midday sun, the wet of the ocean sizzling off in the heat. Men with meaty hands wrestle the fish dead, the left hand wrapped around the body, holding it still, while the right hand delivers a blow with the dull end of a knife to the back of the fish’s head. The tail, removed, is thrown back into the ocean. Blades wriggle between skin and muscle, peeling back the shimmering silver scales. The men use their wrists to lift baseball caps slightly, and toss the fish bodies into a cooler, onto ice, for dinner back at home, pan-fried and seasoned with lemon, or grilled in aluminum foil over a low charcoal burn, served with grilled corn, a citrus salad.

The men with their dogs and their bicycles, they toss their fish, whole, into white plastic buckets. Later in the night, you see them in small packs on the beach, gathered like hunched birds around a fire in the sand, fish impaled on sticks, held over the open flame. There, in the dark, you hear their distant, rough laughter, you see the bottles wrapped in brown paper, you smell the burning flesh of their unskinned fish.

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Once on a street in Ventura, a homeless man asked me to buy his pregnant wife a meal. I hear, now, how it sounds like a scam, sounds like something you’d say to a 24-year-old girl with a laptop in her arms, wearing flip-flops at noon on a weekday on Main Street. But this middle-aged balding black man in a stained white tank top walked up to me and said *Excuse me, miss.* He told me he wasn’t going to ask me for money, so I wouldn’t think he was going to waste it on booze. He told me they’d just been evicted and his wife was six
months pregnant and having cravings—told me all she wanted in the world right now was Eggs Benedict from the Busy Bee Diner. Something in his excuse me, miss broke my heart. I chose to believe him.

But when I walked into the Busy Bee they didn’t have Eggs Benedict on the menu. I panicked. I wasn’t going back out to that man to say his wife couldn’t have the one thing she wanted to eat, so I flagged down a waitress and begged. I begged her, and she special-ordered two Eggs Benedict for me. I paid the $14.50 and brought them back out to the man, who had pointed to his shirt when he told me he’d just wait outside, who started to cry when I said I’d got one for him, too.

At the end of Ventura pier there is a warning sign about the kinds of fish you can catch there, about which ones are safe for your children and pregnant wives to eat. Some species are too dangerous, their fatty tissue too susceptible to accumulating deposits of toxic chemicals, from the agricultural pesticides soaking deep into the soil of Ventura County running off into the ocean. The sign, posted by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment advises against eating certain species from certain locations, and recommends that all other fish be thoroughly skinned before consumption.

The happy white and Chicano families laugh and reel their fish in and sometimes toss them back. They examine the fish bodies for fungus or other evidence of internal decay, and they throw them back into the ocean and reach into the cooler for a Fruit roll-up.

The men with bicycles, I don’t think they ever throw a fish back.
CHAPTER NINE

Some people need to eat meat. Others need to eat less.

My third morning in Ghana, my mother and I emerged, hair wet from the shower, skin already beginning to bead up with moisture in the heavy July heat of West Africa, from the guest bedroom we were sharing, and padded across the bare concrete floor of the living room. No one else was yet seated behind the dressing screen folded around the card table that designated the dining area, but we knew that they had been up for hours, waking in the three a.m. dark to begin chores while we huddled beneath our mosquito nets and tried to ignore the five a.m. rooster call. We sat and waited. Egg substitute, the kind that comes in a cardboard carton and gets mixed with water to form an edible substance, sat on my plate like a pancake. Two cans waited side-by-side on the table, an open can of thick, sweet evaporated milk and an unopened can of garbanzo beans.

Mr. Mensah soon joined us, the man who had been my mother’s boss for a year, a softly dignified man, the principal of the teaching training college at which she had volunteered. His royal-blue gown draped richly across the dark skin of his arm.

“Oh,” he said, so softly, and picked up the garbanzo beans and left the room. I felt a moment of relief. I hate garbanzo beans. They crumble too softly and easily between my teeth, like chewing sticky pads of dirt, like flavorless peanut butter stuck in a thick paste against the roof of my mouth. The idea of eating them, gritty and cold, for breakfast, made my already sensitive stomach turn. I heard the screen door that led toward Adjoa’s outdoor kitchen creak open and slam behind Mr. Mensah, and his distant voice, staccato, calling,
“Mother.” And just as soon, he returned, open can of slimy beige beans waiting, in hand. He lowered the can, graciously, directly in front of me on the table.

“Adjoa is worried about you,” he said. “You need protein.”

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I visited Ghana with my mother in the summer of 2007, a year after she had left the continent. My mother had lived with the Mensahs for a year, volunteering at the teacher training college Mr. Mensah headed in rural Bechem, five hours on pock-marked red dirt roads from the capital city of Accra. She’d promised the family she would return to visit, and when she did, I went with her. The trip became a sort of experiment in expanding my thinking about my parents. I’d always thought I was the activist in the family, the overtly political one. But I traveled thousands of miles to see the continent where my white, upper-middle class mom had volunteered for nine months, away from her family and the stability of the suburb. I slept in the room where she took her daily malaria medication and made lesson plans and practiced her Twi (the African dialect spoken in Ghana). She was the one out in the world, making a difference, putting on HIV/AIDS awareness plays and forming non-profit cocoa-growing cooperatives to help fund education for women and children. Was it possible that my mother was actually much more radical than me?

I was lucky, when I visited Africa, that I was not a complete stranger, because my mother could explain in advance that her whiter-than-a-Beluga daughter did not, in fact, eat meat. Voluntarily. And Adjoa, the matriarch of the Mensah family, had, for the entire two weeks I’d stayed in their enormous-by-Bechem-standards, one-story, two-bedroom house, cooked me three meals a day without meat.
Even so, Adjoa’s idea of being a vegetarian was not quite as nuanced as the idea has become in the United States. One night, she made her famous pepe soup, a watery broth the deep rust color of an heirloom tomato, spiked with grated red pepper of some kind. This was neither the smoky burn of chipotle nor the clean, wet heat of a jalapeno, nor the coarse cough-in-the-back-of-your-throat of black pepper. This was fire engine. This was nose-running, ears-sweating, hair-frizzling heat, the kind of heat that I felt under my skin like a sunburn, blood surging towards the surface. My lips tingled, nearly numb by the time I reached the bottom of the bowl.

I’m a picky vegetarian white girl from the suburbs of New England, so this was a little outside my comfort zone. But so was Africa. I relished every obstacle, every unfamiliarity there as a learning experience, as a jolt of electricity, so I ate the entire, blistering bowl of pepe soup. But as I lifted the heavy ceramic bowl to my mouth, to swallow the last few drops, I saw faint grey flecks stuck like algae beneath the last dredges of broth. The remnants of the shredded goat that Adjoa cooked in the pepe soup before serving it, careful to ladle my bowl full without any meat.

In *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan names the social bond created by the sharing of a meal, “table fellowship,” and uses this as one of his several arguments against vegetarianism, suggesting that choosing to abstain from meat for ethical reasons may create socially uncomfortable situations. In his recent book, *Eating Animals*, novelist Jonathan Safron Foer responds dismissively to Pollan’s point by suggesting that “selective omnivores” (people who only eat meat raised in under certain, sustainable circumstances) are actually more socially awkward. While I don’t think social grace is of equal concern to the humane treatment of animals, and I don’t think being a difficult houseguest is any reason not to do
something a person feels morally compelled to do, I think both authors are missing something, something that I was forced to see in Ghana: in some places, people don’t have the luxury of choosing their diet the way we do here, in the land of Whole Foods and 24-hour healthcare.

To Adjoa, it was inconceivable that I would voluntarily give up eating meat because meat, rare and expensive, is a crucial part of her children’s healthy diet. Without the (very) occasional animal meat they consume, their diet would be largely absent protein. And no amount of dried, boxed egg substitute, no can of garbanzo beans, nothing flown in from the United Nations in giant blue boxes will make up for that. So when I discovered chevon in my pepe soup at Adjoa’s table, I did not make a fuss. I did not remind her or my mother what being a vegetarian meant, or why I had chosen to become one. For most of the two weeks I spent in Ghana, I did what I did that night: I sat back and watched. I learned to sit quietly and observe a world that in no way resembled the world I thought I lived in.

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Mostly, the people of Bechem eat high-starch carbohydrates. One night, we had fried yams—not sweet potatoes, which are not, in fact, of the yam family—but massive beasts of a root vegetable, dense white-yellow flesh sliced thin and fried in homemade corn oil, a sort of Ghanain French fry. When Adjoa pulled them from the red clay soil of her vegetable garden, the yams were fully the length of my arm and three times the width, like an enormous, elongated potato. She spent the entire afternoon scooping the flesh out of the skin, mixing it aggressively with water in a big wooden bowl. Then, she placed the bowl on the ground and sat on a small wooden stool and pounded the yam flesh with a flat-headed stick, as her
daughter-in-law spun the bowl, fast delicate hands barely missed by the insistent hammering of Adjoa’s stick. Only after all this could Adjoa boil the flesh, to fully remove all the toxins, then shape it into flat chips for frying.

We ate peeled cassava root, again boiled for safe consumption, another tuber vegetable resembling the potato, whose roots, when peeled, were the width of bananas, but long and bumpy, curved in strange places. The shape of the cassava root, like a thick tendril, finally made me realize that we actually eat roots—these looked like the gnarled roots of ancient trees. Yams and cassava are what nutritionists and anthropologists call staple crops. They are what grows in Ghana, and both are remarkably similar in taste, texture, use. Like a tougher, less flavorful potato, hard as rocks coming out of the earth, and so heavy with starch they nearly form dough in your mouth as you chew them.

We ate bananas (small, purple-green soft, sweet fruits, nothing like Chiquita), plantains, pineapple, mango. We ate canned food—lots of canned food—everything from milk to spaghetti with tomato sauce to garbanzo beans to water chestnuts. Since neither the Mensahs nor the entire population of Ghana have a reliable source of electricity, we ate what was non-perishable or what we could pick right before the meal.

On average, my mother says that during her time there, the family ate meat about once a week—usually a chicken bought on the way back from church and slaughtered for Sunday dinner. Occasionally, they’d have a can of pickled mackerel, or a spare handful of beef or chevon traded at the market for some of Adjoa’s bread, which she produced in mass quantities to sell.

About once a week. And the Mensahs are, by far, the wealthiest family in Bechem.
While many people in the developing world eat or have available enough food in sheer caloric intake, livestock consumption provides a micronutrient-rich supplement to a staple-plant based diet in developing nations. Animal-source foods (including meat, milk and eggs) are particularly appropriate for combating the range of nutritional deficiencies faced by people in developing nations, providing them with additional iron, calcium, and zinc, and stabilizing a food supply which often fluctuates seasonally.

Beyond limited access to food, the developing world is full of people who have trouble eating even when food is available—like children whose stomachs are small, whose intake is physically limited, or HIV/AIDS patients whose bodies are slowing, sluggish, reduced to fulfilling basic needs, for whom digestion is a full day’s work. Because it provides such a high amount of protein per ounce, meat is uniquely poised to help fulfill nutritive requirements for those populations.

Sitting at the Mensahs breakfast table, choking down cold, grimy garbanzo beans for breakfast, I marveled at how easy it was for me to decide to stop eating meat, and what an impossible decision that would be for any of the residents of Bechem. As I mashed up the beans with my fork, trying to mix them into the cold eggs to mask the taste and texture, I wondered how I could possibly justify telling the Mensahs they shouldn’t eat animals because in my country meat causes heart disease, because in my country we raise far too much. Because in my country, it’s killing us.
I love bacon. The fried crisp of bacon crumbling between my teeth is unlike any other eating sensation I’ve had. Not the crunch of a potato chip or the fibrous movement of other meats. Somehow salty and sweet, the oily maple flavor I suck out of each strip. Bacon is delicious with everything—crumbled on a salad with blue cheese, wrapped around a chicken breast with brie bubbling out of the center, brittle and standing alone, alongside scrambled eggs.

One strip of bacon contains about five percent of the daily recommended intake of fat.

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Low-density lipoprotein molecules are globular, their edges rounded and seamed together like two soap bubbles. But they have a hollow core, an invisibly small hole curved into the center, in which they carry cholesterol. LDL molecules move through our bodies like this, floating innocuously in our bloodstream, bouncing off arterial walls, pausing occasionally to deposit the cholesterol they carry in their inner chamber.

But our bodies are prepared to counter this attack. They send out troops of white blood cells, which swarm to the site of the cholesterol deposit to form what are known as foam cells. Foam cells appear, on a microscope slide, as spongy pink islands in between rivers of white, smeared pink blood dotted with tiny purple spots, like some watercolor membrane. They are foaming, unfortunately, because our white blood cells cannot process the cholesterol—they grow, foaming outwards, until they rupture, depositing more cholesterol, attracting more white blood cells, repeating the cycle.
This is how arteries get blocked. Eventually, these long, tube-shaped blood transporters become so built-up with cholesterol and foam and charging, useless white blood cells that a clot begins to form. This reduces the flow of blood and oxygen to the heart, causing extensive damage to the walls, to the rhythm, the function of the heart, as it slows its beats to keep time with the dwindling supply. This is how people die of coronary heart disease.

We can develop coronary heart disease through any number of ways, including genetic predisposition, smoking, being men. But one significant factor is an increased presence of saturated fatty acids that cause these LDL buildups, most primarily from the consumption of factory-farmed red meat. Meat, we in the developing world have been told for a while now, is dangerous. Coronary heart disease may seem like an extreme example, but there are others. Heme iron, present only in animal meat, appears to change the lining of the colon, and cause abnormal cell growth, leading to an increased risk of cancer. Same goes for breast and prostate cancer.

According to a massive study headed by the National Cancer Institute, conducted over the course of a decade on half a million Americans, people who eat more red or processed meat were also more likely to: smoke, weigh more for their height, consume more total calories, consume more than the recommended weekly amount of alcohol, consume more total fat, consume more saturated fat. Subjects who ate more red meat were also less likely to: eat fruits, eat vegetables, eat the recommended daily amount of fiber, take vitamin supplements, be physically active. But the study controlled for all of these other factors and conclusively isolated increased consumption of red and processed meat as a cause for increased risk of heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and certain types of cancer.
In other words, science agrees that eating more red meat is, in fact, bad for you.

Consuming more red meat, or more processed meat, significantly and conclusively increases our chance of dying sooner than we ought to. But not all meat is created equal. The way we produce it here in the industrialized world—on a steady diet of corn and antibiotics—seems to directly contribute to these increased risks. All other things being equal, eating more than four ounces of red or processed meat a day makes a person 20 to 40 percent more likely to die. Extrapolated to older Americans, ages 50 to 70, over the course of a decade, this means that the deaths of about one and a half million people could have been prevented by eating less meat.

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In an editorial published along with these study results, Dr. Barry Popkin of UNC’s School of Public Health recommended the following changes to American diets for avoiding the risks associated with red meat consumption: people should eat a hamburger only once or twice a week instead of every day, a small steak once a week instead of every other day, and a hot dog every month and a half instead of once a week. In place of red meat, non-vegetarians might consider poultry and fish. In general, everyone should increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables. Sounds rough, right?

When I was sixteen, I told my best friend that I could never become a vegetarian because I loved steak too much. I understand the allure of red meat, the chewy toughness, like slightly worn out gum, dripping and juicy, pressed and grinding in your jaw. My father used to grill steaks out in the summer, and I remember vividly jamming toothpicks between my teeth after those July meals, grey-black steaks peppery and flavored with nothing more
than the juice caught up in the muscle of the animal, corn on the cob dripping with butter and salt. The stringy tendrils of silk and shreds of flesh caught in my mouth. So, I get it. Meat tastes good. Do we really have to give it up?

What if, instead of thinking of this as sacrifice, we think of it simply as cutting back? And cutting back to only once a week, which is not exactly a rarity. This barely even makes steak night a treat. Once a week, red meat becomes a habit rather than an extravagance. What if we remember that, with every extra bacon-double cheeseburger, we are slowly killing ourselves?

This is what I began to remember in Ghana, feeling the familiar stirring in the pit of my stomach. The sensation of helplessness and rage and obligation that combines to form activism. I remembered that I lived in a world of gross inequality. I began to feel and sound, I know, like the girl with the lip piercings again. What I learned in Africa was that, shaved head or no, there are some things worth fighting for. I am not willing to live in a world where some people die from consuming too much meat and others die from not consuming enough. I can still love steak and only eat it once a week.

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One of the most charming things about being a vegetarian is the angry folk—the people who, for some reason, are so outraged that a person would ever voluntarily give up eating meat that they seek to engage you in constant argument about why that was a really bad decision on your part. I heard a lot of complaints over seven years: I was putting America’s farmers out of business, I was an elitist and a snob, that soy is really bad for
people, that I couldn’t possibly be getting my necessary amounts of protein, iron, vitamin b-12, omega-3 fatty acids. But one of my favorites was, and still is, the claim that humans are meant to eat meat.

Senior year of college. As a writing major, I had a lot of friends who were the artsy creative type, so we often spent our weekends cheering for each other at comedy open-mics, enduring painful karaoke bars, posing in each other’s photo shoots, and starring in each other’s student films. Which is how I ended up spending an entire, excruciating weekend, at my friend Jess’s childhood home in New Jersey, listening to lectures from my co-star, Bob, who had grown up on a cattle ranch in North Dakota. When we ordered dinner Saturday night, writing a list for Jess’s mom who was driving to the local sub shop for sandwiches, I asked for the veggie sub. Bob, all freckles and curly blonde hair, six feet Midwestern tall, squinted his blue eyes at me and said, “Please. Tell me you’re not a vegetarian.”

I was. And so I had to endure a half hour of Bob’s sermon on the American culture of ranching and the nutritional benefits of meat-eating. I knew that Bob was from a ranch, and I knew that ranches in the United States were suffering, and I knew that Bob was just reacting emotionally, viscerally, to the idea that I was robbing his family of some much-needed business. So I listened to his diatribe, annoyed but silent, until he shrugged and said, “Whatever. You’re going to die younger. Humans are biologically programmed to eat meat.”

I had had enough. “Bob,” I said, “aside from it being incredibly rude to tell someone they’re going to die, that’s not true.” I told Bob I’d done my research and the human body, in its current incarnation of evolutionary progress, with the resources for alternative protein sources currently available, does not need meat to survive.
What I learned in Ghana, what I’ve learned in the years since that conversation, is that nothing is that simple.

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Biological anthropologists study the evolution of modern humans by examining both hominid fossils and modern human populations, trying to draw connections from past to present. They hypothesize, because of what they know about bones and brain size, about bipedalism and cranial anatomy, that modern humans still inhabit prehistoric bodies. So, the nutritional requirements of modern humans were probably established at some point in our past, as part of an endless cycle of evolution. The food we ate dictated how and in what ways our bodies were able to grow and change, and our new bodies affected our ability to gather, prepare and eat new foods.

But complications arise when examining the diets of early hominids, in order to determine which diet might best fit our existing bodies, because early hominids ate many different types of diets over the last five million years or so. Australopithecines of Africa were scavengers, eating a mixed diet of animal protein killed by other animals, plants and nuts. *Homo erectus* was a hunter who used stone tools and developed the ability to cook or roast animal flesh, who also ate plants extensively. Neanderthals hunted large game in cold climates, relying on fruits and nuts during the coldest months when access to animal game was limited. And the earliest incarnations of *Homo sapiens* hunted small mammals, dug and foraged plants, and picked berries. Importantly, these early humans—who would not look out of place if they walked among us today—developed the ability to gather wild grains to grind and bake into breads or cakes. Later, descendants of the same species, our most recent
chronological ancestors, ate a fully mixed diet: roots, fruits, leafy vegetables, nuts, and a small proportion of animal fat, smaller than at periods earlier in human history.

So the question is not only *what did our ancestors eat* but also *who are our ancestors*?

~

Changes in the human diet spurred changes in human society, both nutritionally and socially. When *Homo sapiens* learned how to harvest wild grains, he began the process of learning to cultivate those grains—the very first farmer. Once we could plant crops in rows and have ready access to food, once that reliability was secured, humans could relax a little. We could stay in one place, making us safer from predation, helping us to begin building what we now know as civilization.

But earlier than that, about two million years ago, when early hominids began eating meat regularly, we suddenly saw a rapid increase in growth and development. Our bodies received the energy they needed to stitch together thicker, stronger muscles. Calcium shot into our bones, and our skeletons began to shift and expand, growing taller and more narrow, for better balance. The dense vitamin value of meat—those b-12s and zinc and iron—went straight to our heads, feeding the evolution of our massive brains in both size and ability. Modern humans use nearly a quarter of their resting energy to feed our brains. Chimpanzees use 10 percent. Gorillas use eight. Meat was the most nutritionally-dense, energy-rich food available to people over the course of our development, and meat has therefore caused much of that development and that is what makes people say we are “meant” to eat meat.
Hunter-gatherer societies still exist in the world. Here in the United States, we may sometimes forget that there are places on the planet without Wal-Mart or interstate highways or suburban subdivisions, but they are there. Biological anthropologists spend most of their time in the field studying these people, mostly in rainforests and Pacific islands, in order to better understand how our ancestors might have lived. Modern human hunter-gatherers move, on average, eight miles a day in search of food. No McDonald’s drive-thrus. No Chinese take-out. No home delivery of groceries. If they want meat, they need more than a phone to get it.

It is this distinction that led to the consensus, among biological anthropologists, that it is not only the amount of meat consumed that causes obesity and other diseases in developed countries—but that the amount so drastically overestimates the amount of work done to get it.

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To say there is no public transportation in rural Ghana would be an understatement. For the most part, there is no transportation. The roads, what few there are, are rarely paved, which is usually a blessing. When pavement exists, it is so degraded—whole chunks of asphalt missing, large triangles split and moved slightly by traffic, creating dangerous rock outcrops in the middle of the road—that accidents often occur. So for the most part, the staff and students at St. Joseph’s only get around town. Water is available on the campus, and the yellow man-drawn cart at which cell phone minutes are sold usually parks right outside the gate, knowing his wealthiest customers live just inside. Getting anything else—food, books, paper, pens, beer, clothes—means walking two miles into downtown Bechem.
This is not a difficult walk, unless you count one-hundred-plus temperatures difficult. It’s flat, the dirt road not unlike the hard-packed mountain trails I’ve spent most of my life climbing for fun. And walking from St. Joseph’s clear across Bechem, all the way to the cocoa plantation on the far east side of town, is only a total of eight miles one-way. But this is where the grocery store is, where the tailor who makes all the town’s clothes works, where the only printer in town is, where the only public phone in town, the only bar in town is. There is no bank, no post office. Imagine how many times a day you go “into town” and back. Imagine what you take with you each way. Imagine doing it on foot, without a car. The idea of eating a steak when you get home starts to look a little different.

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On the sides of roads all throughout Africa, market stands spring up in the most unlikely places. We’d just be driving along what looked like a forest to me, a heavy near-jungle of low-slung greenery, looping vine-branches and scrappy underbrush, when we’d speed past a plywood table, two poles and a piece of cloth draped over them, a few scattered people selling bananas, papaya, meat, cell phone minutes.

These roadside stands are one of the only places to buy meat in Bechem, and that meat usually takes one of two forms: either giant snails or bushmeat. Giant snails are pretty self-explanatory, and though they were never made available to me for trial, I guarantee I would not have eaten one. Still in the shell, they loomed the size of my spread hand, dirty tan-brown with black, slimy snail heads emerging from one end, piled high on a flat woven basket that a young man balances on his head.
Bushmeat. The mystery of the phrase still lingers on me. I’ve seen glimpse of the animal, far below the status of the Mensah family, and therefore never even a remote possibility for me there. They would have been insulted if I’d asked if they’d ever eaten it. The roadside stands would sometimes have these wooden racks set up, two-pole legs on either end with a third pole balanced across them, from which hung tens of obscure brown animals. They looked, in my distant glances of them, like large squirrels, big bushy reddish tails that tied them to the pole. But the rest of the carcass had already been skinned, so the pink-white fleshy body underneath was all that remained, making identification more difficult. I asked multiple people multiple times what kind of animal bushmeat came from, and I only ever got one answer: a shrug. It’s just bush meat.

The other way to get meat in Bechem is to raise it yourself. St. Joseph’s Teaching Training College provides an entire campus complex of houses and apartment buildings, garden space and common areas for their faculty, staff and students. Within the crumbling yellow concrete walls, families live communally, keeping small plots of land to grow banana, mango or plantain, and trading cultivated fruits or baked goods with their neighbors. And they are encouraged to bring small livestock operations. Walking the pathways that weave across campus, I often encountered a roaming chicken, white feathers dusty with kicked-up red dirt. Once, a loping goat followed me all the way down the road to the mango tree, unabashedly munching the grass around me as I sat and read. Her floppy grey ears swung absent-mindedly in the hot air, swatting at dizzy flies.

The families at St. Joseph’s rarely ate the animals they raised, instead selling their milk or eggs for months, before slaughtering the animal to sell its meat too. They kept livestock animals for business, not cooking. But their business model was clearly casual, not
large-scale or industrial. There were no feedlots, no rows of battery cages, no artificial insemination or growth hormones or antibiotics. I saw a lot of poverty in Africa, and big holes, chunks of absence when it came to material possession and the comfort of a secure source of food and income. I didn’t meet anybody with Type 2 diabetes or the luxury of turning down a steak. I didn’t meet a single smoker.

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It’s difficult for me, in the face of all this, to come to any singular conclusion. All I know is that the people relegated to eating bushmeat were the ones who lived in mud huts out in the forests, outside the limits of anything called a town. I know that on the southern coast, the number of fish the villagers catch on any given day directly equals the amount of food they have to eat that night.

I know that I was very quiet in Africa, and very quiet about it when I returned home after my two-week trip. Whenever anyone asked me about the experience, I told them I was “still processing,” to avoid having to talk about what I saw, what I learned, or what it meant to me. I didn’t know. I know I fluctuated wildly between rage and hope, between deep sadness and motivation. I know when I came back, I decided it was time to start writing again, in earnest. I know that going to Africa pushed me back into the world I wanted to live in, and the activism I’d slowly, without noticing, abandoned. Because it reminded me of what’s at stake in the choices we make about what food to eat. Africa made me see how important food was, by looking at the lives of those who don’t have the same choices.

I know that Adjoa would be embarrassed if she read this. She wouldn’t say anything. But she loves her life. I’ll hate myself if anything I write here comes off as pity, because
Adjoa doesn’t think of her family’s food choices as degrading or even limited. Every single day, when she rolled out of bed at three in the morning to begin baking bread to sell on Saturday at market, she slipped on her loose-fitting purple t-shirts and leggings. And she walked silently out to her kitchen, straddled a bench and began mixing flour and water, kneading until her black palms turned as white as mine. And while she worked the dough, palms flat against the tough gluten, she sang,

*Joy like a river, joy like a river, joy like a river in my soul.*
CHAPTER TEN

Since graduating from my bachelor’s program, I’d worked in non-profit communications and media relations, political lobbying, souvenir retail, grant-writing, freelance reporting, nannying and for-profit tutoring. I’d tried a lot, and nothing had quite fit except the tutoring, a job in which I felt I was actually contributing to someone’s life, in which I struggled to reach children who couldn’t sit still and high school quarterbacks who knew that a scholarship was their only chance at affording college. And when I returned to California, after my trip to Ghana, with a renewed commitment to writing for those without a voice, I discovered the MFA program, an alluring mixture of writing, talking about writing and teaching other people about writing that seemed ideal. I could fulfill the promise I’d made in a dorm room in college, to live my life with intention, and I could do it as a creative writer.

I launched into the year-long application process in a California fall, a strange seasonal vacuum. I spent days at the beach studying for the GRE and I spent evenings indoors, brewing apple cinnamon tea to recreate the sensory details of autumn in the Northeast for my writing sample. The smells of autumn reminded me of building a bonfire, and I felt the rekindling of something inside my chest. Though I’d treasured the landscapes of Montana and California, they were missing pieces of my identity that would have allowed me to feel fully a part of a community there. And though D.C. had offered me the activist community, it was lacking the beauty. Deciding to go to graduate school was, for me, an attempt to find a marriage between the two, to see if I could exist as an independent, political self, and still feel a sense of connection to a place.
But the one piece I still wasn’t sure about was my relationship. My boyfriend and I felt comfortable together in California. We’d found a rhythm, between the space apart while he was on the island and the time together in between, that worked. When I told him I was applying to graduate school, though, I had no idea whether or not he would come. For years, we’d done this careful dance, trying to avoid pressuring each other into a life or a decision made only for the relationship’s sake, hoping instead that the planets aligned and everything took care of itself.

When I showed him my list of schools, he re-wrote the list in order of places he’d like to live. Iowa State University was last. Six months after that, with three acceptances but only one financial aid package, we moved to Ames.

We drove the rented Budget truck into town, getting off Route 30 at the Duff Avenue exit, with its big-box stores and its used car dealerships and its smoke billowing from the garbage-burning power plant. We sat in silence at the train tracks, waiting behind the lowered gates, as the metal cars covered with yellow and purple graffiti screeched past us along rusted rails, carrying corn oil to the coasts. I turned to look at him in the passenger seat and said, *I’m so sorry.*

~

One twilight shortly after I moved to Iowa, in early August, I drove around until I found a corn field out on a long stretch of road where I couldn’t see a house. I was pretty sure walking around someone’s cornfield would be considered trespassing, but I felt, as I often do, the need to come in close contact with the species of a new place. I hiked in the Bridger Mountains in Bozeman, picking wildflowers to identify and scouring the soil for bear tracks.
I visited the Pacific Ocean and let kelp drape itself around my bare ankles in California. I
dipped my toes in the cold water of upstate New York’s glacier-fed gorges. In Iowa, I
figured, a cornfield was the most natural thing—not because I couldn’t find a prairie. I could,
and had loved walked around with grasses tickling my ankles. I chose a cornfield because
there is more corn here than anything else—more than woods or prairie grasses, more than
roads or houses or people. This was the defining characteristic of my new hometown and I’d
never seen a corn plant up close.

I grew up on the East Coast. And though I moved out West in my early twenties, I did
it quickly, passing through the Midwest like a politician, snapping a photo of the Mississippi
out the window of my moving vehicle, eager to get to the other side of the country. So when,
at age 26, I discovered I’d be moving to Iowa for graduate school, I was more than a little
concerned. I had never heard of Ames, had barely heard of Des Moines. I didn’t know how to
pronounce the name of any town. I had never heard of a cheese curd. I was pretty sure I’d be
landing in the middle of a cornfield with no sign of civilization anywhere, an assumption that
wasn’t helped by all my eastern seaboard friends, some of whom actually laughed when I
told them Iowa State. My best friend said she’d always wanted to see a tornado. My uncle, a
political reporter who had actually been to Ames, covering the Iowa caucuses, told me it was
a college surrounded by cornfields.

Turned out, we weren’t entirely wrong. When I got off the interstate in Ames and saw
a giant pitchfork sculpture next to the Target, I was not at all surprised to have my worst
fears realized. The local television stations aired commercials for Roundup-Ready soybean
seed and PSAs by the National Corn Growers Association about how high fructose corn
syrup is natural and healthy if consumed in moderation. Though I now feel guilty for my
elitist assumptions, based mostly on ignorance and television, corn is without a doubt the predominant feature of the Iowa landscape, closely followed up by soybeans. So it was with this in mind that I decided to take a stroll through a cornfield.

Walking through a cornfield is a strange experience, a mixture of natural retreat and demonstration of industrial efficiency. Green floppy leaves brushed against my shoulders as I wriggled between the stalks, thick as my wrist and unbelievably straight. Corn is actually planted in rows so close together I could hardly make my way through—I learned later that corn is almost entirely machine-planted and –harvested now, so walking rows has become obsolete.

I didn’t make it into the field very far, but I was far enough in to be completely submerged in corn, my orange sneakers dusted with dirt, shoulders pulled forward in front of my body, and proud straight corn extending well over my head. I stared up at the faded purple sky through silky threads, and watched distant stars begin to appear. Each time a car rushed by out on the road, a residual breeze rustled the leaves of the plants around me into a soft whisper. I scuffed my toes into the dirt beneath my feet, turning heavy clumps of black soil over and thought of the natural ingredients for growth found in this rich dirt, and all I could think was what a waste.

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I spent the first two weeks of our time in Ames with a smile plastered across my face, playing tour guide, pointing out every minute detail with immense hope, as if I knew this place somehow, as if I had any idea how to function in the Midwest, as if I ever thought I would end up in Central Time Zone. Wow, look at all this great produce at the Farmer’s
Market, and can you believe how many parks there are and did you know Ames is on one of North America’s biggest bird migration routes? I was put-on-a-brave-face. I was bloom-where-you’re-planted. He was sullen. He was God, it’s so flat. God, it’s so boring.

This was early autumn in Iowa and the trees exploded into flaming color, lining the streets on both sides with bright orange leaves that stretched over my head and joined hands in the middle of the road. I started my MFA program and suddenly my life was consumed with reading, writing, talking about reading and writing, teaching reading and writing, more reading and more writing. My ecstasy with life grew into the town I never expected to love, into the leaves and the parks and the birds. I loved everything about Iowa even when I didn’t. I told him I thought I saw potential in all the wide, flat land, in the soggy black dirt.

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The nutrient-rich soil of Iowa grows more of the United States’ corn crop than that of any other state in the country, in 2009 yielding more than 60 million metric tons of corn. But very little of that went to actually feeding anybody. Most of the corn grown here—and corn is the U.S.’s number one agricultural crop in terms of the total amount of land planted—is fed to feedlot-raised animals. Pigs, cows and poultry now all eat a diet consisting almost entirely of corn and other grains, and their consumption makes up about 43% of our country’s corn crop. Another 32% becomes ethanol. 15% of it is exported to other countries, which also use it for ethanol and feedlot animals. The remainder, about 10%, is made into some form of value-added product, from high fructose corn syrup and corn starch to cereal and grain alcohol. The corn grown here in Iowa is not the corn on the cob you toss onto the grill in cute aluminum foil packets next to the burgers. In fact, you wouldn’t want to eat it.
Agronomists and geneticists have selected this corn over generations for its high starch content, while it’s the protein that makes your sweet corn kernels taste so buttery.

But for all that, we do eat corn in this country—a lot of it, in the form, mostly, of meat, which is the extent of what I knew about corn before I moved to Iowa. So standing in the corn field and thinking about the waste of that food, I was lamenting the sentences I’d read in Francis Moore Lappet’s *Diet for a Small Planet* and feeling my usual vegetarian environmental self-righteousness. A 10-acre farm can support 60 people growing soybeans, 24 people growing wheat, 10 people growing corn and only two producing cattle. Given that most corn is fed to cattle, this land use represented, to me, a colossal waste of natural resources, in a world where millions of people are going hungry every day.

I also knew that most animals were not designed to eat corn. Cattle, for example, are bovines with complex four-compartment stomachs called rumens, evolved to eat vegetation. Feedlot cattle develop digestive problems from eating corn rather than grass. Corn-fed cattle are prone to severe bloat, indigestion, and other conditions that can weaken their immune systems, making them susceptible to serious diseases. This is why most cattle now are fed continuous low-level doses of antibiotics. The natural lifespan for cattle is twenty to twenty-five years. Most beef cattle now are slaughtered around the age of fourteen to sixteen months. This is mostly an issue of efficiency, for now we have figured out a way to get cattle fat and meaty faster, which means a quicker turnaround time and higher profits. The key to this new process is a corn diet.

After being weaned from their mothers, calves are shipped to feedlots, where they are fed diets of corn, fat, protein supplements, and some alfalfa hay and corn silage for roughage. If not slaughtered at a young age, cattle would likely die on their corn diets—or we would
have to develop another way to continually medicate them to prevent death without ruining the meat. So the early slaughter is both an economic benefit and a health necessity. Win-win for the industry.

The industrial corn and meat industry, their joint endeavor, is simply a way of staving off the inevitable. We know we are making the cattle sick. We know they will die of their diet. So we kill them off more quickly and convince ourselves that absolves us of having fed them the poison in the first place. We’re saving them from themselves.

~

In October, I wrote a short story about a girl who moves to Montana to follow her ski-bum boyfriend, then hates it there. She feels alone in the winter, feels only isolation in the snow, resents his childlike joy and wonder at the season that is burying her. Before I submitted the story for workshop, I told him the plot line, in our apartment, perched in the corner where my writing desk was, while he ate Ramen noodles on the futon. I didn’t know how the story would end yet, I told him, but I thought she would break up with him and leave the West—I thought it would be a story about young love and place, about how you can’t force a home somewhere. He yelled.

He yelled about blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction. He yelled about my hidden desire to end our relationship. He yelled about the past—told me I hadn’t gotten it right, that I’d loved it in Montana, even as I explained that I wasn’t she, that it was a fictional character. And he yelled about Iowa, about how even if I had hated Montana, didn’t he get any credit for coming here, to a place he hated, for me?
I changed the end of the story so that the girl’s boyfriend died in an avalanche, instead. He preferred this ending.

~

In November, the leaves had all begun to fall from the trees and turned to the dry brown color like paint faded from the sunlight. In November, a group of us went out to celebrate my birthday. We fought the next morning, as he told me how left out he’d felt, that I hadn’t paid him enough attention. And while I played hurt as he hurled accusations, while he told me that last night, sitting on a bar stool surrounded by adoring fans, I was acting like the prom queen, in truth, all I kept thinking was, well isn’t it my turn?

In November, his old boss called and offered him a job for the next summer, his dream job, tracking blue- and golden-winged warblers through the forests, catching them in mist nets and holding them in his palms, long fingers curled gently around fluttering wings and fast heartbeats, inserting syringes, testing their blood. His dream job. In New York. There was a promotion and a pay raise and of course he had to take it, we agreed he had to take it. We would spend the summer apart. In November, and in December, papers flooded down on me and I spent all day in my office on campus, hunched and scribbling comments, furiously typing, buried and buried. I thought about the coming winter, and wondered what it would look like stretched across this smooth, even, Midwestern horizon.

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The story of how we became a nation of corn is an absurdist tale that somehow involves the military-industrial complex, Richard Nixon, the Great Depression and an unfortunate choice of words. But it is really the story of transforming American agriculture into industry.

- **Pre-Great Depression:** The government began stabilizing the price of corn. We couldn’t let it simply be dictated by the fluctuations of the market, because we weren’t talking about mortgages or investment bonds, we were talking about food. If farmers started going out of business because of a low return on their corn crop investment, there would be less food for the same number of people, which would mean higher prices that people couldn’t afford. We were stuck applying the laws of a free market to one of the things we all need to survive.

- **Enter the U.S. Farm Subsidies Act.** Initially, the government supported flailing agricultural market by providing temporary loans to farmers, allowing them to store their surplus corn when the market prices was too low for the farmer to make a profit. This protected the farmer from a loss, and allowed him to plant for the next year, without flooding an already saturated market with excessive produce. When the price stabilized, the farmer could sell his corn and pay back the government. If he never paid the loan back, the government got to keep the corn, and sell it themselves.

- **Post-World War II:** Surplus of ammonium nitrate, previously used for explosives. The U.S. Department of Defense launched a massive research project to develop new uses, one of which turns out to be fertilizer. But this fertilizer favored corn. Soil that’s been growing corn for a few years starts to lose its nutrient resources, and needs to be “fixed” to allow those to naturally regenerate. In the past, farmers accommodated
these natural soil cycles by rotating their corn crops with legumes, a natural nitrogen-fixer in soil. But a nitrogen-based fertilizer allowed farmers to grow more corn, to grow it faster, and to eliminate their off years of planting. Now it was all corn, all the time.

- Enter Earl Butz. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture attempted to boost the market value of corn by selling massive quantities of it to Russia, who had been experiencing a severe shortage. Butz’s plan worked all too well, skyrocketing demand. The price of grain hit an historic high and there wasn’t enough to go around, so Butz embarked on a marketing campaign urging farmers to “get big or get out” to meet the demand. Then, he replaced the existing subsidy system of loans with direct payments. Now, if you were a farmer trying to sell your corn in a low-priced market, the government just bought the corn from you. Grow as much corn as you possibly can, the government said. No matter what your loss is on the market, Uncle Sam will write you a check for the difference.

- Move to present time: We’re still paying farmers for all the corn they can grow. Since 1995, the Environmental Work Group reports the U.S. government has spent more than 73 trillion dollars on corn subsidies alone. Desperate to rid itself of all this corn, the government began selling corn at lower prices than any other commodity crop, and enterprising corporations, seeing an opening, began to find creative new uses for all this cheap corn. Corporations developed it into starches, syrups, flours and emulsifiers, found a way to bake it into bread, to mix it into ice cream, to fold it into salad dressing. The massive increase in
production continues to saturate the market, to saturate our diets, which keeps the price of corn low, repeating the cycle over and over.

We’re simply in too deep at this point to back out.

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I think eventually, we both knew there was nothing else to be done. He quit his job in Iowa, though he wouldn’t move until April. In February, he went to Montana to ski with his father, spent two weeks riding the familiar powder, drinking Big Sky beer with his old roommates, his hair winter-long and always flattened beneath a wool hat. I didn’t have time to notice he was gone and then it was March and the snow started melting and then it was April and he moved back to New York.

In May, I woke up. School was over for the year, and I was staying in Iowa. Spring had arrived, fully and with tiny white blooming lily-of-the-valley in my front yard. Green buds lined the bare branches of winter-worn trees and puckered until bursting. I got a haircut for the first time in six months. To celebrate the end of the semester, I drove north to Minneapolis to see my favorite band. I spent $60 buying Jameson for my friends at the Local and stumbled into First Avenue. And when the singer crawled down off the stage into the staggering masses, I pressed drunk into the crowd, felt the heat mingling through sweat-soaked clothes and I wrapped one arm around him while the microphone banged against his teeth. Together, we all screamed and sang. Alone, I made up my mind. At home in Iowa, I called him and said this isn’t working.
My sadness of the loss was tinged with Iowa, yellow-brown around the edges, blurring to gold with a few weeks’ time. I shrugged and thought, *I guess you can’t have it all.* I was the happiest I’ve ever been in Iowa, but it wasn’t enough to make him happy. Just when I felt like I’d finally figured out my half of our life, his was falling apart. My relationship couldn’t stand up to my claiming a sense of self, a new purpose, a new independence.

And just as I began to articulate my identity once again, I needed to ground that identity in place. Whether or not it was a place I’d ever expected to end up, I thrust a flag into the black dirt of Iowa and chose to make something of it, to call it a home. Still, nothing was perfect. I had my ideals, my identity, my forced home, but I was alone. I was reiterating my commitment to live my life in a conscious, ethical way, as a vegetarian. But I lived in Iowa, right in the belly of the industrial agriculture beast. The USDA has research labs for genetically modifying pork hogs on my college’s campus. I am surrounded by miles and miles of corn. Iowa showed me that everything is a tradeoff. You gain something, you get something else taken away.

This isn’t an indictment of Iowa itself, or of the Midwest. I’ve seen how impossible it is for farmers to make a living in this system, and how angry it makes them to poison their land and animals. Iowa is more than some backwards agricultural world where everyone drives a pickup and wears a John Deere hat (though I have seen quite a few). Agriculture is a way of life here passed down between generations, a connection to the land that none of the kids in my hometown in the suburbs of southern New Hampshire ever felt. Most of my
undergraduate students come from farming families, raising cattle or hogs, or growing a rotation of corn and soy, and most of them plan to take over those farm after graduation—some as the fifth generation. I’ve learned the term century farm and what it means, a deep abiding commitment that neither natural disaster nor bankruptcy can sever. I think that relationship to a patch of ground is kind of beautiful, and definitely admirable. So nothing’s perfect.

No one here likes what they’ve become, but we’re too far gone.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Summer in Iowa exposes the landscape like new. In most places where it snows heavy in the winter, spring is a revelation. But in Iowa, winter reveals the truth of the land—there are slopes and hills here, small pools and ridges barely discernable to the untrained eye. Snow showed me these, allowed me to see where there was an undulation in the dirt and where there was a slight ridge in the grass, where there was shadow and where there was light. So when summer came and everything bloomed, and the tall grasses began to wave again on the prairie, I understood Iowa because of the winter.

I started driving around this new state. When I wondered where Grand Avenue would take me if I kept following it north, I just went north. I learned new curves in new roads and found new towns—without much to offer, but there—scattered like gas stations along the major national interstates. I finally got around to staining my bedside tables, and to trying that new recipe for teriyaki roasted vegetables my mother had sent me. I bought new curtains. I remembered I like raspberries. His books were still scattered among mine on the shelves, and I knew the time would come for splitting up silverware, in August, when he would return from New York with a U-Haul trailer to empty my apartment of his belongings. But the ground around me warmed to the touch, and I felt the beginning of something under my skin.

Most of all what I wanted to feel was re-investment. In the spaces I’d let atrophy, over the course of the year of slow descent, I wanted to work on rebuilding muscle. And for me, this began with two things: finding a community in the place that would now be my home—not our home—for the next two years. And actual muscle.
I wanted to move physically, to develop my body and reclaim its health. Finally, those extra twenty pounds were a non-negotiable. I ran for the first time in eight months, barely able to make the one-mile loop I’d tried once when we first moved to the corner of 8th and Kellogg. I started attending yoga class, provided for free at the school’s fitness center, four times a week. My yoga mat slung over my shoulder, in flip-flops and yoga capris, I lost myself listening to Radiohead on the bus rides to and from class. Music and exercise merged, and I felt my life running together like a watercolor.

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Part of my new efforts against laziness was eating better—both in terms of actually adhering to the food pyramid, but also of a recommitment to the ethics of my diet. So one Saturday, I threw a couple of cloth grocery bags into the metal baskets on the back of my bike and pedaled to the newly-expanded Wheatsfield Co-op.

The walls were painted purple, murals of smiling animals danced around the café tables, and the chalkboard sparkled with neon chalk advertising the week’s member specials. Just off to my right, the produce section glowed with abundant fruits and vegetables in a light mist. I was ready to begin my new life as a healthy vegetarian. Gone were the days of microwaved pizza snacks and instant mashed potatoes, the overly-processed squeeze bags of rice and the canned green beans. Cloth bags in hand, I began my new food life one aisle at a time.

In the ethnic and breakfast food aisle, I gathered a handful of cooking staples: Amy’s vegetarian refried beans for burritos, Muir Glen organic tomato paste and puree for making my family’s secret recipe sauce, Cascadian Farms cranberry almond granola for quick
breakfasts. I felt a little guilty picking up any canned goods—but convinced myself that buying organic brands from the co-op did make a difference. I was used to shopping at a massive, 24-hour grocery store, which stocked about 45,000 products, all of which came from big corporations like Kraft and Heinz and ConAgra—companies that polluted the land and exploited their workers. Buying a cardboard carton of Earth’s Best potato leek soup and depositing it into my cloth grocery bag one aisle over from the grilled tofu sandwiches at the deli felt different than buying a can of Campbell’s tomato soup at eleven o’clock on a Wednesday under the fluorescent lights of a corporate grocery chain.

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Recently, a friend sent me a chart—organic subsidiary brands of major food corporations. I think whoever created it thought that it would be helpful, a guide for ordinary citizens who would prefer to buy organic, to identify the “good” or “safe” brand names at the stores of 45,000. But seeing the corporate connections of even the organic food industry laid out like that destroyed me. I was in my first step along the path that I thought would help me begin to reclaim my identity, my sense of self and my sense of importance as an activist, and I was already facing defeat. Because it turned out that organic no longer meant adherence to the principles of the back-to-the-landers who originally founded the Cascadian Survival and Reclamation Project. Now, Cascadian Farms is a General Mills subsidiary.

The products are still grown organically, without pesticide exposure and with minimal environmental impact, but the industry experienced the same pangs of growth anybody does when they hit puberty, facing and answering tough questions that shape the type of organic food you can find in the grocery store today.
When the organic food industry became popular with consumers, food processing corporations decided to get in on the growing market, and began buying up smaller, struggling organic farms wherever they could. Gerber, Heinz, Dole and ConAgra all created or purchased organic brands. So the USDA got involved and started regulating what it meant to stamp the word “organic” on a food product. This was the beginning of an ideological debate that continues today about the fine line between a philosophy and a marketing strategy, between an idea and a practice. As soon as government regulations got involved, enterprising corporations found a way to adhere to those regulations on a completely different size and scope than the original organic movement intended. I felt as if buying organic from ConAgra ran counter in some ways to the intention I had in buying organic. But, if no one’s regulating the industry practices, what’s to stop anybody from calling their food organic and cheating? Can an organic industry still represent what it means to be organic?

Most of those questions, I learned, have been answered, at least from a practical standpoint. The USDA allows organic factory farms. Organic dairy cows are not required to graze on pasture—only to be fed a diet of organic corn silage. Horizon Organic’s large-scale industrial dairy exists in the middle of the western desert of southern Idaho. Horizon cows live out their days on a dry feedlot, eating their organic grain and silage diet shipped in from all points west, being milked three times a day. Under close surveillance from a veterinarian, these cows cannot be given antibiotics, but still live in a scenario that might necessitate it.

Industrial dairies like this have led to the common misconception that organic food might even be cruel to animals. In order to stick to organic regulations, the cattle are not permitted to receive antibiotics, but do still get sick and die. These losses usually lead to
higher organic prices at the supermarket, because organic dairy farmers might lose more animals in a season to disease. But disease, and the antibiotics needed to treat it, disappears as a serious, wide-spread issue when cows are allowed to roam and graze, and don’t live above their own manure runoffs.

The point isn’t necessarily that all organic farms are simply big corporations in disguise, mistreating their animals and pulling the wool over unsuspecting customers’ eyes—only that our notion of what organic farming looks like, or should look like, is not accurate.

America’s organic industry is essentially a battle between populists and purists. The populists argue that within the current food system, small-scale means limited market. Unless organic is big, it can’t be competitive. Industrial organic is, then, the only way the average person can afford organic. The purists are the counter-culture roots of organic, who believe that organic shouldn’t just fit into the existing food system, but should create a new system, that it should do more than provide organic counterparts to conventional foods, that it should be better, should devote itself to whole foods and healthy produce. The purists lost.

As anyone who’s ever eaten an Amy’s frozen pizza or a Rising Moon burrito can tell you, there is such a thing as organic processed food, in which additives and synthetic chemicals are permitted. In a 1996 article called “Can an Organic Twinkie be Certified?” nutritionist Jane Dye Gussow demonstrated that, within current regulations, such a thing was possible.

Once I saw this corporate organic chart, the labels in the aisles, even at the locally-owned cooperative, changed. Organic is important, industrial or no—the dangers of pesticides on the human body and the geographic landscape are very real. But an organic farm that has a massive manure lagoon, or twenty-thousand broiler chicken houses, was not
what I imagined when I recommitted to the co-op. It wasn’t what I was willing to pay the extra buck for. Knowing my food was free of pesticides and antibiotics wasn’t all I wanted. There was something more to it, some intangible value or promise to the land, some ideal of a more challenging, more ethical food.

Two months after the end of my relationship, I spent a few hours grading papers in a friend’s apartment late one Sunday night. My friend was teaching out of town for the summer, so he’d left me his key to bring in his mail, to water his plant, and to take advantage of his air conditioning and DirecTV. My bag waited between the couch and coffee table as I packed up, lowering the blinds and turning off the air conditioner. But when I took an extra step toward the coffee table, to lean over and shut off the television, my left kneecap brushed up against the corner of the table and slid, with unbearable slowness, out of place.

My foot must have been planted just right, my leg fully extended—I hadn’t even hit the corner of the table with much force. But I felt that slide, a familiar sensation, and toppled onto the couch on my back yelling curses. In high school, I’d dislocated my left knee a handful of times—landed wrong doing a hitch-kick at dance rehearsal for a performance of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, kneed sideways coming down from a rebound during a basketball game, sliding on wet grass playing badminton in my grandparents backyard—but those times had been a quick, stinging sensation, a sideways click-pop. The pain was excruciating, radiating throughout my entire body, but it was over as soon as it happened.
This was different. I realized this the moment I landed on the couch and caught a
glimpse of my leg. My knee was still out. My knee was still out, just cocked off to the left at
an angle so unnatural is made me queasy. Holy shit. Panic surged through my veins, and a
trembling shot through my entire body, because I had no idea, no idea what to do next. I was
stuck in an apartment, I was alone, and I was broken.

After a few, quick, failed attempts to snap my leg straight and get the joint back into
place, I was able to stretch my arm just far enough to get my hands on my cell phone and dial
911. Two hours later, after an IV of morphine and valium, a ride down two flights of stairs
on a portable chair carried by two fire-rescue men, a shock-induced shiver attack in the back
of the ambulance and—I swear to God—an icepack for the pain at the emergency room, I
finally saw a doctor. He lifted the blanket covering my leg, which one of the firemen had
draped over me, whispering, you don’t need to see that anymore, and said, yup, that’s out.
You want me to put it back for you?

I did, but was more interested in his next question—do you wanna not remember it? I
practically wept with relief that I could be unconscious for the reduction, having seen it
happen to my father before. And less than an hour later, I was on my way out the front door
of the hospital on crutches, my entire left leg in an immobilizing brace, taking a cab the three
blocks back to my own apartment.

The next morning, I woke up from a few fitful hours of sleep on my back, a pillow
propped under my aching leg. I popped a couple of ibuprofen, took a bath—too afraid to
stand on the weak joint without the immobilizer—and headed up to school for a few hours of
student conferences.
It wasn’t until I returned home that evening and made myself dinner that what had happened really hit me. I hadn’t actually experienced much pain—mostly, I just felt fear, as drugs numbed the physical sensations quickly, and I knew the worst was over once I’d had the leg reset. I’d start physical therapy in a couple weeks, to strengthen the joint preventatively. I made myself a simple supper of pasta, already exhausted from the exertion of hauling my weight around on crutches and from the steady diet of pain killers. But when I put the food into a bowl, I realized that on my crutches, I had no way of carrying the food from the kitchen counter to the futon, where I usually ate in front of the television.

I lost it. I burst into tears there in my kitchen. For the first time since my breakup, I realized fully that I was completely alone. Faced with another defeat, another way in which my attempts at asserting independence were falling short, I sobbed, understanding I had lost someone to take care of me. In the moments when I most needed an extra set of hands, I was on my own. I couldn’t even feed myself. I was broken. And I was alone.

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When I became a vegetarian, I thought for sure that working harder to get it meant that my food would be more ethical, would have a lighter carbon footprint, and would certainly evade multinational corporate conglomerates that disobey federal health regulations and disregard animals’ pain. Turned out, nothing in the free market is that simple.

According to the Boca Burger website, the birth of this line of veggie burgers happened in Boca Raton, Florida, when a chef decided to construct a veggie burger that actually tasted good. What the website doesn’t mention is the Boca was acquired in 2000 by Kraft Foods, the largest food processing company in North America. Up until 2007, Kraft
was owned by Altria Group—the new and improved name of the public-relations challenged Philip Morris, USA.

When I started picking away at the corporate connections in the food industry, I began to feel like an internet crazy, like I’d suddenly become the kind of person who posts on message boards about the conspiracy to take over South Dakota for the Soviets or the government’s secret injection of every newborn baby with experimental vaccines. The more I dug, the more I convinced myself maybe I was just making mountains out of molehills—maybe I was looking too hard for something not really there.

Until I read that in 2001, a U.S. jury ordered Philip Morris to pay three billion dollars in damages to a smoker suffering terminal cancer, a landmark legal victory for the anti-tobacco movement. Philip Morris appealed the decision, but the next week they went out and raised nine billion dollars—by selling just 16 percent of Kraft Foods. Suddenly, my purchase of a Boca burger—supposedly free from the stains of corporate greed—just went to helping an evil tobacco corporation from sinking into bankruptcy.

Until I also learned that Kraft owns and operates the Oscar Mayer and Louis Rich brands of deli meat and bacon, made from pig meat purchased from Smithfield. Right back in the center of the shitstorm.

I hobbled along, limping and bruised, trying to do better and bumping into things, hitting my head, grazing the sharp corner of reality at every turn. When I dislocated my knee, I lived in a two-story apartment, with the bathroom and bedroom on the second floor, so in order to go to the bathroom, I had to haul myself on crutches up a narrow, carpeted staircase,
and then back down, without slipping, catching a crutch on a stair ledge, or leaning too far forward. Eventually I gave up, hopping up the stairs on one foot, and sliding back down on my butt. I spent the entire day except the one hour I was teaching sitting on the futon, my leg stretched out in front of me, taking painkillers, grading papers, watching television and dozing. I felt nothing short of pathetic.

What frustrated me the most about my injury was that it prevented me from exercising in the newly passionate routine I’d established. No biking or running—not even yoga for a couple of months. Instead, I had slow, intensive physical therapy. On the first visit, the therapist measured my thighs to see how much muscle I’d lost since the injury, and found my left leg to be nearly two full centimeters smaller than my right. This was much more atrophy, she said, than could have occurred in just two weeks in an immobilizer. I was stunned—despite my efforts for the first two months of the summer toward getting in shape, toward strengthening my body, my leg had been weaker before the injury.

I felt like I was losing ground, fast. Like no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get where I wanted to be, where I thought I could be. I’d been exercising like crazy for two months and I managed to hurt my knee worse than ever before. I’d been trying to get better. Looking at my knee reminded me that trying wasn’t good enough, that I couldn’t just tell myself I was improving. And actually improving still seemed too far off. I was ready to give up.

When the therapist ended each session with a massage that shifted my knee cap back and forth, I had to look away. It wasn’t the weakness that sickened me—it was my fear. What I didn’t tell the therapist, or anyone, was that I didn’t want to go back to biking or running. I didn’t want to exercise anymore. I didn’t want to take any risks. I wanted to ask her if I
should just wear a brace all the time, to avoid tripping down a staircase or stepping at an awkward angle off the sidewalk. I couldn’t bear to look at her kind hands pushing the tiny disc millimeters inward, trying to retrain the muscles to resist this sideways motion, trying to teach my broken leg to be fixed, because I was too afraid of ever getting hurt like this again.

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One day at the local co-op I was in line behind a guy who, by all outward appearances, looked like an activist vegetarian. He wore the Adbusters No Sweat black dot canvas sneakers. His Brooklyn hipster facial hair—dark brown and patchy, a messed goatee and moustache—and thick black-rimmed glasses peeked out from atop a heavy, olive green puffy jacket, worn over skinny black jeans. As he unloaded his sparse cart, I noted a bottle of white cranberry juice, a bag of tortilla chips, a jar of salsa, a loaf of bread, and no less than ten containers of Yves brand fake deli ham slices, prepackaged, dull grey.

If I were a different person, if I were still the girl with the shaved head who stood in the rain at the entrance to my college holding a hand-painted poster that read “No Blood for Oil”, I might have stopped him. I might have shared that I’d eaten my fair share of soy/black bean/mycoprotein meat substitute products, and I might have asked him why he was a vegetarian. And if he had said anything about factory farming, about environmental damage, about corporate ownership or industrial agriculture or fair trade, I might have asked him whether he knew that Yves is a product of the Hain Celestial Group, who also owns vegetarian favorites Spectrum Organics and Rice Dream Ice Cream and Tofutown. Whether he knew that Hain Celestial was responsible for the McVeggie, the 400 calorie veggie burger produced by Yves exclusively for McDonalds. Whether he knew that McDonalds serves the
McVeggie on a whole wheat bun, slathered in BBQ sauce that, according to signs at the counter, may or may not contain rendered beef fat, signs that also warn the burger may come in contact with meat or chicken during cooking.

I’d ask him whether he knew that Hain Celestial was a subsidiary brand of Heinz Corporation, one of the top twenty food producers in the world, or if he could name any other Heinz brands. Smart Ones frozen meals maybe, or Boston Market frozen entrees—both of which the Heinz company makes with chicken bought from Tyson. Tyson, the largest meat producer in the world. Tyson, who in the last decade has paid more than $7.5 million in fines for felony violations of the Clean Water Act.

I wanted to ask him the same thing I asked myself: what good do you actually imagine you’re doing? When buying a Boca burger means, in no uncertain or abstract terms, helping the defendant in the largest anti-tobacco lawsuit in history avoid bankruptcy. When buying Boca finances additional purchases from Smithfield. What are you avoiding when buying an Yves tofu sausage means helping to establish an exclusive contract with the world’s largest and most notoriously unhealthy fast food company? When buying Yves means you might as well be buying from Tyson?
CHAPTER TWELVE

But then, just as slowly, the world began to turn again back towards the light of summer. I felt hope again. By which I mean, I met a guy.

Not met, actually—we’d been friends for a year, both in the MFA program. One night, out with a group at the local bar, Scott and I got into an argument. He made some crack about Pamela Anderson’s right to his respect and I lost it. We had an all-out silent-treatment contest for a few hours, in front of our beers, making all our friends uncomfortable.

Scott and I had bonded during our teacher orientation over a mutual affection for a particular independent music label from Omaha. He’s a glass-half-empty kind of guy. He played football in high school and still spends ninety percent of his autumn weekends parked on the sofa. He’s the quietest person I know, and has everything figured out in his head before he opens his mouth. He jokes about everything—even the things he takes seriously—there’s no line he won’t cross.

And I’m the sunny-side-up girl who takes everything seriously, the sensitive emotional type who cries at Humane Society commercials, the artsy girl who wore all black to high school on the day George W. Bush was ruled the president. But these lists of personality traits don’t tell the whole story. For some reason neither one of us could put our finger on at the beginning there, we fit together, despite thinking we shouldn’t. He made me laugh hysterically, at least once a day. And when he left for Omaha at the beginning of that summer, he trusted me with the key to his apartment, the apartment that none of our other friends had even set foot inside.
It happened so slowly we could barely tell it had happened. One night, we met at the bar, and he confessed his unhappiness in Iowa. He railed against our little Midwestern town, its absence of culture, the lack of any real connection, the uselessness of his time here. And I was there to remind him we were here for the writing program, which was outstanding, and that he had started a novel, a lifelong dream, even stuck here in the crappy little town.

A few days later, we sat together in his apartment eating cereal and listening to a Nada Surf album. When they sang *I almost love this town when I’m by your side*, he said, *that’s how it is with you.*

We need the balance we provide each other. What I mean is, he’s everything I never knew I needed. I found something in the exact place I never would have thought to look.

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That summer, as our relationship slowly turned into one, he was back in his hometown of Omaha teaching, so we went back and forth to visit each other on the weekends. On one of my trips there, he took me to his favorite used bookstore, Jackson Street Booksellers in the Old Market, where the owners never say no. Piles of books were stacked precariously in the aisles and against the walls, and we wove our way around the shelves. He snapped cell phone pictures as research for his novel, and I pressed my nose into his upper back. We laughed about the lack of discrimination as we found as many copies of Cormac McCarthy books as Dan Brown and Danielle Steel novels. We were brand new book nerds in love and in our element. We each left with an armful. I finally picked up this one I’d been meaning to read for a while now—Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma.*
While it’s probably not fashionable anymore to admit that Michael Pollan changed the way I think about food, that’s what happened. I read the whole book on a week-long trip at the end of that summer back home, back to New Hampshire. Here were the missing parts of our collective agricultural history, a series of steps that changed the geographic landscape of the American Midwest and the waist size of an entire country that no one, up until now, was talking about, at least not where I was from.

While I’d heard of corn starch and high fructose corn syrup, I had no idea why it was in everything we ate, and I had even less of an idea how ridiculous that origin story was. I knew I’d been eating more processed food than I should be, and I had seen those dietary choices meant more than a few extra pounds on the scale—bad enough. But now, I began to see that maybe corn tied me into a system I’d thought I’d opted out of. I began to trace a line from those crowded cornfields, not to the cattle feedlots I’d been avoiding for seven years, but straight into my own pantry. I didn’t like what I found.

And as I learned all this, as I was forced to examine the ways in which I might actually be contributing to the problem, I was beginning to reconnect with my family, with that hometown I’d long since abandoned. Over the course of the week at home, I shared tidbits from the book with my parents, who surprised me by telling me the pieces they already knew.

That the doctor had told my mother to stop drinking conventional milk after her hysterectomy because of the estrogen-mimicking properties of Bovine Growth Hormone.

That my family did, in fact, now have a milkman, who delivered once a week fresh from the next town over.
That my mother’s summer vegetable garden had grown from what was, in my memory, a small plot of cucumbers and tomatoes into most of the backyard. That she’d taken up making fresh salsa and canning chutneys and sauces, freezing corn and green beans for the winter.

That their favorite place to meet for lunch was the little organic café just around the corner from my father’s office. That when they took me to Seedlings for lunch one day, my father ordered a salad.

This was summer in the Northeast, a sweaty, thick time when the pool in our backyard doesn’t seem like a luxury so much as a necessity, when we drank leisurely coffee on the back deck in the morning. My mother told me long stories about her family’s recipes, and her food memories from childhood. I sat and talked with my father about climate change and the moral imperative to protect the plant for the future while he grilled hamburgers and vegetable kabobs. I felt like I had landed back on even ground, my feet steady beneath me.

On the plane ride back to Iowa, as I finished *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and weighed the new conversations with my parents, I found a more profound lesson, a deeply hopeful idea. More than simply being a condemnation of industrial agriculture, at its heart, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* is a book that believes in the possibility of something else out there, something better. When Pollan writes of his visit to Joel Salatin’s Virginia farm, he nearly weeps with relief on the pages of the book, relief for having found a better way. I began to wonder whether I might be able to find something else to believe in, too. Maybe I just hadn’t been looking in the right places.
When I returned to Iowa, and to the last few weeks of summer, I began to notice the ways in which our eating habits illuminated some of the differences between Scott and I. I was a bit rabid in my political opinions, and he was from the Midwest, which meant that while he was very liberal, he doesn’t think much of people telling other people what to think. I was a vegetarian and he was not. So our dinners were often a series of cook separately, eat together affairs. One night in June, we walked down the street from his apartment to the co-op for ingredients. I’d already prepared some almond couscous with cranberries for my dinner, and he had some tortillas to use up, so he picked out some wild-caught tilapia for fish tacos. I figured since I was at the store, I might as well get something more substantial, and grabbed a frozen box of Quorn breaded cutlets. We got back to his place and took turns with the microwave—me heating my fake chicken, him melting the shredded cheddar and warming the salsa he spread over his cooked fish, and sat, side-by-side on the couch, in front of the TV, hunched over our dinner plates. He actually ate more vegetables than I did that night, if you count the tomatoes, peppers and onions in his salsa.

I took it upon myself to reform his eating habits, as if the desire to feed those you care for was bred into me. In spite of a lifetime of not being much of a cook, the moment I found someone who needed to eat better, there I was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables. Though I was wary, having been burned before by my incessant desire to nurture, I was unstoppable.

But surprisingly, in reforming Scott’s eating habits, I began to realize just how much mine needed reforming, too. As I stretched my imagination to conjure up new recipes, I was forced to notice how many of my staples relied on pasta or a box of dehydrated potatoes. In cooking for someone else, I felt the weight of duty once again, to provide a healthy,
balanced, nutritious meal, which was not at all what I’d been feeding myself. I needed to step up my game.

In a new relationship, you want everything shiny and new, you want to be the best version of yourself possible. Frankly, I didn’t want my new boyfriend to know that for the most part, I ate boxed food and Morningstar BBQ riblets from the microwave. So, I put my best domestic foot forward whenever we ate together. I baked vegetable potpie, roasted potatoes, peppers and zucchini in a balsamic glaze, rolled out sheets of phyllo dough into spinach and tomato quiche. I was determined to convince him, and in many ways, myself, that healthy food could be good food.

This never quite worked. I could sense in most of our dinnertimes a sportsmanship—he was game to try whatever vegetarian concoction I placed in front of him, and I was adamant in my defense of the nutritional properties of leafy greens or the heart-healthy perks of bell peppers, but we both knew he really wanted a steak. I waived. I’d been here before. I’d forced the domestic on someone who wasn’t ready for it in my last relationship. I’d given all my energy over to caring for someone else and not myself. I’d let my self-esteem get wrapped up in someone else’s approval of me—never in my cooking, but in other ways. I began to worry that trying to get Scott to eat more healthy, vegetarian food, was only going to get me hurt again.

One night that summer, we split a pitcher of beer on the back patio of the Rose and Crown in Omaha, surrounded by colored Christmas lights and smokers, and talked about our eating habits, our diets, this underlying resistance we both seemed to have to eating any better.
“I think it’s cultural,” he told me. “Look where I’m from. If a meal doesn’t have meat, even if it fills me up, I still think that something is missing.”

All this time I’d thought the problem was circumstance—I thought I’d eaten poorly in Montana because I’d been cast too young in the role of mom. I thought I ate better in California because I had the option. I’d blamed my inability to cook on the desire to be a woman with a career, a woman who didn’t have time to prioritize cooking and eating well. It hadn’t occurred to me that being a bad eater might just be a symptom of how I thought about food.

I was the problem. I noticed that I was putting on the positive eating habits under the guise of helping him eat better—that whenever he was out of town, I reverted to old lazy habits. Without someone else to take care of, I microwaved dinner or grazed on snacks all night instead of taking the time to cook something good.

This wasn’t an issue of me, as a woman, having a dysfunctional relationship with food or cooking. This wasn’t latent feminism manifesting itself as resentment towards the kitchen. It wasn’t nearly so psychological. What I discovered was that I was remarkably similar to the average American. I preferred fast food to hand-crafted food, which usually meant preferring something that came in a box and could be microwaved, even if, for me, those products were made of soy and textured vegetable protein instead of minced white fish or pureed chicken carcass.

I allowed the business of my overly-scheduled life to dictate the most basic, important decisions I made every day about what to put in my own body. I ordered pizzas and drank too much beer. I didn’t understand why a person would take the time to simmer white rice and add spices and fresh herbs, when they could just buy a plastic bag you could squeeze and
microwave in 90 seconds. This wasn’t just me—it wasn’t about being or not being a vegetarian, or about being a woman. It was a cultural disorder, plaguing almost all of modern America.

In fact, it was only when I abandoned the narrow-minded notion that being a good feminist meant you couldn’t ever do anything nice for a guy that I began to learn to cook better. I wanted to cook because I wanted to take care of him, and I wanted to be a part of making his life and his health better. But maybe I needed help, too. And over the course of the summer, taking care of someone else had become a way to empower, rather than detract from, my own well-being.

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When I think back to the second half of that summer, I feel alive with possibility. Something had opened up in my chest again, something that had been closed, something that allowed me to take action. In physical therapy, I asked when I might be able to start biking again and my therapist, surprised, told me I could add it to my rehabilitation. She was thrilled to find something I actually liked doing—I’d never bothered to mention how much I loved biking before, and it was the perfect low-impact way to strengthen my leg again.

Scott was there every step of the way, tough love style, telling me to quit whining and get on the bike. To get up off the couch and make a salad for lunch. To sit down at the desk and get to work writing. I only thought I’d been taking care of him. Truth was, he was caring for me by forcing me to be the person he saw I could be, a girl way tougher than I would have called myself. He called me scrappy. My heart melted.
When he left for Omaha at the beginning of the summer, he left me the key to his apartment, so I could water his plant, an amaryllis. I’ve never been good with plants. I always forget to water them, even when they’re right in front of me, or I put them out into the elements too early in the season or some freak accident occurs—bunnies nibbling my otherwise healthy basil. The day after I dislocated my knee in his apartment, I went back on crutches to water the amaryllis. I was working against 26 years of killing plants and this one belonged to someone I really wanted to impress. And somehow, I kept the amaryllis alive for two months on my own. Those giant green stems grew beyond our expectations. No blooms, yet, but we didn’t know if that was normal. But those long, electric green stems just kept getting taller and taller until the bulb couldn’t hold them up anymore, and we had to lay them against the window to keep the plant upright.

I’d improved my health because I’d found it in me to take on the risk of pain again. I succeeded in nurturing the plant because I could, because I’d always been able to, but now he was holding me to it. And I discovered I could solve my eating habits by cooking for myself. For every problem, there was a solution—I just needed to take the action.

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I wanted more. I wanted to invest in my body and in my community, and food seemed like the place to start. I wanted to try again what I’d started earlier in the summer, before I hurt my knee, when I still believed I might be able to make a home for myself in Iowa. I wanted to connect with the people around me. So when I went to the Ames Farmer’s Market for the first time in the summer of 2009, I had a purpose. I was on a mission. I
wanted to find a source—whether that was one farm, or one market at least—that I could trust, someplace that I could just believe in.

Without realizing it, I’d timed my entry into the local food supply of Iowa at exactly the right time, when just about everything was in harvest. The last remains of young fruits waited in small bunches along the checkered-tablecloth lined stalls, and more mature, ripening fruits gathered in wooden crates in bright colors. As I made my way around the small train depot, pointing at little baggies of snow peas and green beans, handling tomatoes in purples and oranges I’d never seen, squeezing ears of sweet corn and buying curvy bell peppers, something weird happened. People started talking to me. I bought a cucumber from Paula of Twin Girls Gardens from Madrid, and when I said something about it being a cute name, she nodded in the direction of the tow-headed giggling blond girls sitting under the white tent with her, broke into a smile and explained that she named the farm after her daughters because they were her inspiration.

She wanted her daughters to have a healthy lifestyle, and to Paula that meant plenty of sunshine, fresh air and homegrown produce. So she ramped up her hobby garden into a full-fledged farm, using only natural, chemical-free pesticides and fertilizers. A couple of years ago, she saw how she could make the farm even more self-sustaining by producing her own fertilizer, so the girls added a couple of sows to the mix, and started selling pork products. As I left with my cucumber, Paula mentioned that she keeps a farm stand open all week in the summers—an honor system, where people can take what they like and leave the money in a cash box. She told me I should swing by, anytime.

I bought a gallon of non-homogenized milk from Picket Fence Creamery, where daughter Jenna and father Jeff manned the booth. As I waited for my change, I fingered a
brochure they had on the table about “Sample Sundays” and Jenna, seeing my interest, took the time to explain the idea to me. Once every couple of months, they invite people out for a free-for-all at the creamery, to wander around the grounds and see the cows grazing on fresh pasture, to raise awareness of the farm store they have on site where they also sell meat and dairy products from 90 other farms in the area. They roll out the big grill, sell brats and burgers, have live local music and cheese curd or ice cream samples.

Jenna told me they just wanted people to feel comfortable visiting the farm. They keep it open to the public all year round, but discovered if they provided a specific time and date, the party was pretty popular and served to put a lot of customers at ease about where their dairy products came from. I bought the milk and a half gallon of chocolate ice cream. (I need to take a minute here to say: this is the best ice cream I have ever had. Nothing tops the smooth creaminess, the melt-in-your-mouth chocolate that’s not too rich but still soft with sugar. Scott said once that the ice cream was so good that if he lived somewhere else, he would make regular trips back to Iowa to buy it.)

I wandered into the indoor section of the market, to grab a dozen eggs out of the cooler inside and pay at the register, and the woman who rang me up smiled at the label on the carton.

“You’ve got to go say hi to Cindy,” she said, gesturing toward the name of the farm, “She’s outside with the honey and her weekly cooler.”

I thanked her and said I would, and she pointed the table out to me before going back to her knitting. Cindy Madsen, who I later learned was the co-owner of Audubon County Farms, waved to me through the open doorway and I wandered over to shake her hand.

“Just wanted to say thanks for the eggs,” I told her. “What else you got out here?”
Cindy showed me the honey and beeswax candles and then flipped open the white cooler at her feet to reveal frozen shrink-wrapped bloody packages of meat. She began listing them off, “Brats, pork chops, tenderloin, whole chickens. What’re you looking for?”

I told Cindy nothing this week, thanks, but stayed to talk a little more about the farm, where they raise bees, hogs, and hens. She and her husband Vic are both family farmers, but, much like Paula of Twin Girls, realized when they had children that there was something broken in their existing agricultural practices. Cindy hated that she had to tell the boys to stay away from the big farm machinery, or to stay inside on days their parents were spraying the fields with pesticides.

A farm, Cindy told me, shouldn’t be a place too dangerous for children. So she and Vic decided to reclaim the farm, to revisit what an agricultural heritage had once meant. First, they began a new rotation. Instead of the traditional Iowa corn/soy planting schedule, they grow and harvest non-GMO corn, soy, barley and hay, using a natural nutrient cycle by feeding these products to their animals and using large-scale composting to fertilize the plants. The livestock are raised without hormones, drugs or meat by-products, because, as Cindy says, if you keep them in a clean place, and use good sanitation, they’ll stay that way.

But perhaps most importantly, the Madsens have found that what makes such a way of farming feasible is direct marketing—being able to shake hands with your customers and hand them the product that came straight from your farm. It’s what keeps the prices of the Madsen’s products reasonable—comparable and in some cases, cheaper than the supermarket varieties, and it’s what keeps customers coming back.

People love to look at the photos of pigs and hens roaming on the farm. It’s the ideal they were hoping for when they bought the carton of eggs with the happy cartoon chicken on
the side of it, only this time they can see it’s a real animal, they can ask for details. Cindy’s
given farm tours to toddlers who screamed at the sight of a baby chick, so unfamiliar are our
children now with livestock, but no one’s ever left the farm disappointed or turned off. When
people meet the Madsens and tour their farm, when people have the opportunity to ask
questions about growth hormones and antibiotics, they form a deep, trusting bond with the
farmers who have finally been willing—and able—to be open and honest about their farm.

I left Cindy, and the farmer’s market that day, with a lot of answers to the practical,
literal questions I’d had about standards and pesticides, about organic certification and
 genetic modification. But I had a whole slew of new questions. I was beginning to see that
the idea of eating ethically was significantly more complex than I’d originally thought. I’d
constructed a world in which food was a black or white issue, a series of dichotomies with a
rigid line down the middle. Conventional pitted against organic, industrial the opposite of
 sustainable, distant food that can’t possibly compare to local. But on which side of the aisle
could I place Earthbound or Cascadian, the industrial organics? I knew Tyson occupied
massive chicken processing facilities in Waterloo and Perry, Iowa—did that count as local
food? Where did I put someone like Cindy?

Of course, up until then, my most serious distinction when it came to food was the
one between meat-eater and vegetarian. I hadn’t changed my mind at all about Tyson or
Smithfield or Carghill. But I was so impressed by Cindy Madsen and the other farmers I’d
met who raised livestock. I was trying to take action again, to insert myself into a positive,
beneficial food community. Could I—should I, as an ethical eater—consider buying a
chicken from Cindy Madsen to further my new efforts to support the local, sustainable,
creative farmer? I’d been looking for something to believe in, and I thought I’d found it. But it didn’t look anything at all like I expected.

~

In August, Scott moved into a new apartment. With a smaller brace still on my knee, sweating and itchy in the sweltering Midwest sun, I couldn’t be much help. When I asked what I could carry, he said the plant. I put it on the floor in the front seat of my car for a trip over to his new apartment and then stayed behind while he drove the moving truck over. I sat in the empty stairwell, by an open door, reading, stretching my sore joints and waiting for the carpet cleaners. Unfortunately, the plant didn’t fare so well in the car, with all the windows up, in the direct sunlight, for more than two hours. When we made the last trip to his new apartment, I emerged, sheepish and said, “I think I killed your plant.”

Those big, beautiful, green stems, tall as hope, had wilted, turned dark olive green like leaves just before autumn. They’d collapsed on themselves and were starting to shrivel. But when I lifted it up out of my car, showed the drooping amaryllis to him in his new apartment, all that happened was he laughed. He just laughed. This wasn’t some massive domestic failure, not any kind of judgment on me as girlfriend or person. I’d done my very best, and a simple mistake wasn’t the end of the world. We joked that I’d done so well, but it couldn’t be helped. He told me I had a black thumb—two hours in my care and I had maimed the amaryllis.

The next morning, before he left for his last week in Omaha, he gave me the extra set of keys to his apartment. Mine for good. And kissed me on the forehead and told me it was my responsibility to rehabilitate the amaryllis.
Just as I’d seen sustainable, local livestock production on a small scale at the farmer’s market, with a little research, I learned that sustainable meat production didn’t have to be a contradiction. A recent study out of Cornell University investigated New York state’s ability to support its own population with agriculture. By examining the soil types and the requirements for a variety of diet types, the Cornell researchers wanted to learn on which type of diet could the state of New York support the largest percentage of its own population.

Surprisingly, a purely vegetarian diet was not the most land-use efficient. Fruits, vegetables and grains for human consumption must be grown on high-quality cropland, and there isn’t much of that in New York. So, while Francis Moore Lappe was right at the time, that vegetarian diets may require less land per person, those diets use more high-valued land. But meat and dairy products from grazers like cattle need land that is of lower quality, but is more widely available. A large pool of such land is available in New York state because for sustainable use, most farmland requires a crop rotation with perennial crops such as pasture and hay.

The authors of the study are quick to point out that for this system to be the most eco-friendly, the normal American should still significantly decrease his or her meat consumption. But I was most intrigued by the reasoning behind this finding. Essentially, science found a way to prove what nature already knew—that food is produced in an unbroken cycle between earth and animal. Humans can’t eat everything in front of us. By using animals as a sort of middle man in our digestive system, we can make more efficient use of what we have. Eating some cattle lets us eat grass.
Of course, this is all based on the notion that the cattle would be raised sustainably, but the point it, these pieces could all be working together. We could eat some meat. But we could direct our food consumption into the environment, instead of away from it, by economically and ideologically supporting sustainable agriculture. Just as our lattes or January strawberries can support fair trade and shade cropping and living wages, our burgers might be able to support rotational grazing, might be able to work with our ethics, rather than against them. It seemed to me that if we are able to get our hands on a little information, we could invest in something positive instead of turning our backs on something negative. If I saw a farmer raising cattle in a way that made sense for the environment, shouldn’t I invest in that farmer—even if that means changing my mind about what “sustainable” means?

~

Seven years after I became a vegetarian, I’d done a lot of growing up and getting cynical. But I was then, and am now, still an idealist at heart. I still believe in the power of direct action, and in the beauty of words, and in every individual’s ability to enact change. I even still believe in the power of the boycott, and history has plenty of examples of successful boycotts to back me up. A certain Boston gathering comes to mind. The U.S. refusing to participate in the 1980 Moscow Olympics in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Maybe the best-known and most wildly successful boycott took place in Alabama in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus. Stretching a full year from that first December, the sheer mass of organization of blacks and civil rights activists pummeled the south with an intense moral demonstration that forced an entire
country to question the logic and ethics of its segregation practices. The crippling financial result echoed well beyond Alabama, into the white marble halls of the U.S. Supreme Court, into the decision in *Browder v. Gayle*, which ruled Montgomery’s bus segregation unconstitutional.

But the Montgomery bus boycott was about more than a refusal. The people involved refused to move to the back of the bus, and later, they refused to ride the buses at all. But they kept commuting, kept working. The bus boycott succeeded as much for the refusal to ride as for the actions of others. Success came on the backs of black taxi drivers who charged as little as ten cents for a transport who was part of the protest. Success came at the hands of white housewives who drove into the ghettos to pick up their maids and gardeners and dishwashers. The people of the Montgomery bus boycott didn’t just stop acting—they redirected their actions. They didn’t stay home. They found other ways to get to where they were going.

I still haven’t set foot in a Wal-Mart, but maybe the only thing I’ve never considered boycotting is voting. In college I knew a handful of radical young people, passionate political people, who didn’t plan on casting a vote in the 2002 presidential election. They didn’t support President Bush and they couldn’t stomach the democrat’s watered-down attempt at a candidate, but neither did they want to cast an undermining vote for Ralph Nader. Voting, for them that year, was unconscionable.

But I voted. I marched proudly into those weird, blue-and-ivory-striped curtained stalls they have in New York, pulled a lever to swing the curtain shut, and then another lever to vote Democratic straight-ticket and wore my sticker in front of all my radical friends for
the rest of the day. Because I couldn’t get behind the idea of sitting out something that important.

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In the two weeks for which Scott left the maimed amaryllis in my care, before he returned to Ames for the start of the school year, I decided I was going to kick ass at plant-nurturing. I’d reawakened that summer, because I’d remembered that being an activist isn’t just about refusing to do something. Activism is a belief in action—in the inherent value of digging your hands in, a belief in voting and care-taking and laying deep roots. Taking care of the amaryllis was no longer about proving my sweet feminine side. It was about cultivation. I was going to do this right. No messing around. I pulled open my computer to research the care and needs of an amaryllis. And I discovered it wasn’t an amaryllis at all.

The real amaryllis is a delicate pink thing, a native of South Africa also called the naked lady. It typically blooms indoors, in the winter, tissue-paper pink and white petals unfolding gracefully. But what Scott had was a bright red flower—I knew from when it first bloomed last year—the commonly-mistaken-for-amaryllis Hippeastrum. The Hippeastrum is a whole different beast, a big, red, showy flower, loudly announcing itself to the world, a fire engine in the snowy winter. Though the bulb is tender and should not be exposed to frost, the flower grows quickly and with ease. Its name means horsemen’s star, and it is believed to be named after a medieval weapon. A seriously scrappy flower.

I got it a new pot—not one of those cheap, disposable, green plastic things—and set the plant deep in the soil of a solid pottery home. I reburied the bulb deeper in the wet, black dirt, so the plant could be better prepared to hold up its own burgeoning weight. I trimmed
back those wilted tips of green stem to a more reasonable height, undoing months of growth, a gesture of hope that it would grow again. I let myself into his apartment. And I put the morning star on the coffee table that dislocated my knee, by his new window, to greet him new and alive when he got back.

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Sometimes you have to give up. Sometimes you have to lose it all. Sometimes you have to break up with your boyfriend of five years to learn that love doesn’t only look one way. Sometimes you have to suffer great injury to understand how much pain you can handle. Because I only saw the possibility in Cindy Madsen once I had acknowledged, full-on, the flaws in my old way of thinking about food. I had to lose hope in my brand of vegetarianism in order to take the new action that was really going to do to the most good, that was going to be the best path for me. And so early in September, I bought my first chicken breasts in seven years from Ferndale Market farms, via Wheatsfield Co-operative. And Scott offered to cook them for me.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The texture was the strangest thing. After nearly seven years—five skipped Thanksgiving turkeys, six passed-over prime rib Christmas dinners, one very depressing trip to the Charlie Palmer in Washington, D.C., and one thoroughly unpleasant digestive experience with a bowl of pepe soup contaminated with goat in Ghana—after seven years’ worth of internal and external debate, my first mouthful of chicken and all I thought was, I’d forgotten how hard you have to work to chew this stuff.

For the better part of three hours before the meal, for the better part of the month that it took to make the decision, I had been preparing to eat meat again. For the first round of chicken, I decided not to go with something completely unfamiliar, which meant buying the breasts already trimmed and skinned from the store, rather than from the market, where the animals were only sold frozen and whole. I wasn’t quite prepared for that.

I stood alone in the kitchen, slowly stirring pasta sauce with the big wooden spoon that my mother had taught me was the staple kitchen utensil. I had made, as usual, far too much sauce for two people—I only know how to make it in large batches. The sharp scents of garlic, basil, black pepper, and parmesan tingled inside my nostrils, floating up from a big, copper-bottom saucepan, simmering over a low heat. Fresh snapped green beans waited in a second saucepan for the burner to click beneath them. The shrink-wrapped breast of a chicken that had very recently pecked grubs from cow manure, a chicken that bobbed its white feathered head to the dirt of a farm somewhere in Minnesota, sat, defrosting, on a Fiestaware plate in the refrigerator.
These details were important, carefully culled to construct this meal. Green beans for the fiber, to help with digesting my first bites of meat. Ziti with Nona’s pasta sauce for comfort, familiarity. My boyfriend as cook, because I’d never actually cooked a chicken before. The chicken breast because I could trace it back to the farm, a multi-generational family-owned integrative poultry farm in Minnesota. Chicken raised on pasture, with a diet containing no hormones, no antibiotics, and no animal by-products. Farmers who partnered with a locally-owned slaughterhouse to process the chicken in a minimal, clean, humane way. I wanted to redefine the boundaries between human as eater and animal as food, I wanted to forge a new relationship, to taste the fertile agricultural lands of the Midwest that were now my home.

New-age organo-hippie as it sounds, I wanted to honor the chicken. I wanted this time around to be different.

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Scott and I entered into this preparation with the chicken together. I warned him the day before that tomorrow would be the day I’d buy my first chicken breasts and we planned the menu. He suggested cutting it up and mixing it in with something my body considered normal, to stave off potential illness. I decided on pasta, the sacred ritual of the Italian, easily my most commonly-eaten meal. He opened the bottle of 2001 reserve Chianti from Tuscany to toast the special occasion. I set the (coffee) table—fork and knife, paper towel napkin. He carefully laid out the safety regulations. Don’t use the same utensil or plate for both the cooked and uncooked meat. The George Foreman handbook says six minutes for a chicken breast, but he does seven just to be safe, and if the inside is still at all pink, cook for another
minute. He explained the steps of cooking to me, how he usually seasoned the chicken, adding oregano to echo the tomato sauce, and rosemary to complement the white meat.

When the grill was ready, I watched over his shoulder as he sliced open the plastic, peeled it backwards off the slimy pink breast, and sprinkled the herbs across the chicken. This is the first step, I thought, of transforming animal into food. When he slid the tongs of the fork into the chicken and lifted it from its package, I caught sight of the purple-red bloodline on the underside of the breast and started a bit. This now-cold slab of meat once had veins and muscle and a heartbeat. This was the head of the cow on the wall of the steakhouse, the shell of the living lobster, this was the thing that once lived so that I could eat it. I made sure to look straight at the chicken when he set it against the black ridges of the grill and closed the cover. Seven minutes until dinner.

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I stood awkwardly in the kitchen while we waited for the chicken to cook, shifting my weight back and forth between my feet, stirring the pasta, tasting the tomato sauce, sliding my fork into the beans, repeating. The grill hissed and sputtered on the counter. Tendrils of smoke snaked up from the sides, and I leaned in to smell them, picking up only the vaguest scent of oregano, tinged with something unfamiliar. Something smoky, like a campfire or popcorn burning in the microwave. Right. Flesh. Thinking of it as flesh gave me pause, my stomach spinning slightly with nervousness. What if it made me sick? What if I didn’t even like the taste of meat anymore?

The doubts of the last few months came rushing back, my finely-honed guilt reflex kicking up in the back of my throat. Was this a pointless exercise? Was I simply justifying a
desire to eat meat again with the logic of supporting local, sustainable, humane farming? The worries still moving around under my skin stemmed from the fact that I was still struggling to define what any of those words meant. I’d seen enough in the last month or so of research to make me wonder about any company’s or farmer’s accurate use of these concepts. I’d seen Monsanto commercials extolling the “eco-friendly” virtues of Round-Up Ready soybeans, describing the corporation’s love of the Iowa soil. I’d seen how illogical the local food labels could become, when you live within 100 miles of a Tyson packing plant. I’d seen organic avocados flown into Wheatsfield co-op from Mexico. I was beginning to worry that this was a pointless endeavor—that no matter how hard I tried, I would find it impossible to identify everything I ate, to trace it back to its source. I could see myself giving up after a few weeks, frustrated and disillusioned, unable to believe there was such a thing as sustainable agriculture, as humanely-raised meat.

But I was so tired of being disillusioned. I can’t get away from my idealism. My personality suits itself to believing in things—not blindly, or without effort—but to believing and participating. I wanted to remember a time, even a time before me, when people knew where their food came from and how it had been raised, whether or not they did it themselves. I was re-entering meat-eating in order to reclaim food as a responsibility, to myself, my body, my family’s health, but also to the natural world that provided food for me, that has always been the source of our food. I wanted to move closer. I wanted to believe again.
On his (recently canceled) television show British chef Jamie Oliver sought to educate American children and families about the dangers of industrial food by demonstrating what goes into making those foods. He opened the first episode with a tried-and-true tutorial for kids on chicken nuggets. He described for the cameras the widespread success he’d had with this activity in Britain—once the kids see this, he said, they are so grossed out they’ll never eat a chicken nugget again. A group of elementary-school children arrived, all around five or seven years old, and gathered in an eager circle around his cooking station. Jamie showed them a whole raw chicken, which they correctly identified, then he broke it down into breasts, wings and drumsticks. These are the parts you eat, he told them, *this is food*. With just the carcass and giblets left behind, Oliver asked the children if they’d like to eat that. A chorus of horrified squeals rose up from the crowd of kids and he laughed, waving the chicken carcass in their faces.

*But you can get food out of this part,* Oliver explained. *Watch me.* He began hacking at the carcass, cutting into pieces small enough for an industrial food processor to handle. Bone, connective tissues, marrow, chicken skin all were thrown into the processor, then whipped into a pinkish mayonnaise consistency. The children gagged and moaned around him as Oliver strained the processed chicken carcass through a sieve and mixed it with flavoring and stabilizers, and formed into a patty. Breaded it, then fried it. Instant chicken nugget.

As the nuggets made just before their eyes transformed in a sizzling pan, Oliver turned, confident, to the group and asked *Who would still eat that?*

All the children raised their hands.
Jamie Oliver’s idea, which he was horrified to discover did not seem to work in America, was that if kids saw how disgusting their processed chicken was, they would be too grossed out to eat it. Some might see this as confirmation that you can’t trust kids to make their own decisions. Some might see it as a story about how wrong Oliver was—that for some reason, Americans don’t want to see what’s right in front of them, that even if you do show us the innards of the beast of industrial agriculture, we’ll keep right on eating fast food.

But I think it’s a story about the potential of that idea, and proof that we’ve got to keep it up. Right now, we don’t have the tools, the words, the information to make a decision about healthy food and unhealthy food, because we’ve been trained to listen to labels, sound bites, advertisements, slogans. One-liners aren’t enough. The conversation about what’s wrong with the way we eat is about so much more than caloric intake alone. I realized then that I might never find the perfect place, the single option that was without flaw. My chicken might not always be perfectly sustainable, perfectly local, perfectly humane. But it’s better than that—it’s real. And I still believe that if we show people where a chicken nugget really comes from, they will stop eating them. As long as there is an affordable way to get a better chicken.

~

I understood the better option as soon as I saw it. When I visited Audubon County Farms and toured the green hills with Cindy, I saw the sustainable possibilities alive in front of me. I shook the hands of Cindy’s husband, a man whose father taught him this trade, and then the hands of their sons who would one day learn the farm as their own. I saw the glints in their eyes when they described the rolls and undulations of the land under their feet. I’ve
seen the same shine in the eyes of a Wisconsin cheese-maker named Mike, gesturing out
towards his milking heifers, describing the clovers they love to snack on as “cow ice cream.”
When I stood beside an Amish vegetable farmer barefoot in the dirt as he hoed. When a
farmer friend posts pictures of his free-ranging turkeys on his Facebook page. And I just
understood. What it means to treat an animal humanely is intangible—you can’t hold it, but
you can see it. I knew that this level of devotion is what all farmers, all consumers, owe their
food animals. When I got close enough to the source of the food to see how it lived, I could
just sense what was right by me.

Jamie Oliver’s activity is based on this idea—that we all know the difference when
we see it. We all have the idea somewhere in our head. But most of us don’t get a chance, or
don’t take the time, to look for our food animals anymore. What those of us who have gone
looking into farming practices find is such a mess, a blurry reality of closed doors and dead
bodies, that when we finally find someone willing to give us a tour, we’re elated. What we
find is that the people willing to show you how they’re raising your food are probably doing
it right.

This is why, when Michael Pollan visited Joel Salatin, the biodynamic farmer using
remarkable integrative practices on his farm, he found a renewal of optimism. Salatin is
making the best use of his animals’ overlapping needs and outputs to create a model farm
that works in harmony with natural processes. And though there have been critics of Salatin,
even those critics find their own version of him. In his book *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safron
Foer allows another farmer named Frank Reese to rip into Salatin’s farm, without any
endnotes or supporting evidence, to suggest that the Salatin farm is not exactly the idyllic
operation Pollan would have us believe.
But then Foer goes on to visit and praise Reese’s farm, going so far as to deem him the “last truly independent poultry farmer.” Foer’s ultimate conclusion in his book, however, is that every farm has flaws, that even Frank Reese has trouble finding a slaughterhouse that causes no pain to the animals he brings there for processing. Though he lauds praise on the Reese, he admits there is no perfect solution. If neither Joel Salatin nor Frank Reese can do it right, then who can? If there is no such thing as a cruelty-free animal farm, no such thing as paradise, Foer wants no part of the meat eating scene whatsoever. I can accept that as his choice.

But I don’t want one farmer. I don’t need my Joel Salatin or Frank Reese. Don’t just look to the Madsens. I can’t accept the idea that there has to be one perfect farm. Ultimately, trying to define what is good food—healthy for us, sustainable for the planet, humane for the animals—is a flawed enterprise, rooted in the idea that there is one right. There is no single right model for healthy food, and no single way to produce it sustainably. Each farm has different needs. Each exists in a different location, with different resources. Some integrate multiple animals and crops, and for others, this is too expensive. Why should that make one more worthy than the other?

I don’t want anyone to think they can only buy a chicken from Cindy Madsen, or only shop at the co-op and farmer’s market. Just as a healthy diet can sometimes include ice cream (preferably, yes, from as sustainable and a delicious place as Picket Fence Creamery) and potato chips (preferably homemade, with a lot less sodium), a sustainable diet can sometimes include meat. But it’s up to all of us as individuals to define for ourselves the standards we want to hold our food to. And the only way we can do that is by seeking out the necessary information—taking the time to visit the farms and get to know the farmers. We have to
spend time learning the ingredients list, and most of all, asking a lot of questions about what’s in it, and how it got there. Once we do, we have to make that choice repeatedly, we have to show up as consumers, not just stay home, to keep big agricultural interests from lobbying against small-scale organic farmers. We have to put our money where our mouths are. But only we can decide what counts as healthy in our own bodies, and what counts as ethical in our own hearts.

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So, a month after deciding to give meat-eating another chance, I sat down with my chicken. With my plate in front of me, I took a sip of wine and a deep breath. I got both pasta and chicken in the first bite, just to be safe. I chewed, slowly. Swallowed. No vomiting yet. Took another bite, and this time thought about it, let the cube of chicken roll around on my tongue, tested it between my teeth before I allowed myself to taste it, or to think about the rosemary.

I have never been so conscious of a meal in my life, which was the point. The meat was chewy, a little tough, stuck my jaw together, made the muscles work harder. Juices leaked from the chicken and pooled in the corner of my mouth. I sucked on the chicken again, to draw out more of the sweet flavor.

I wondered how to describe the taste, so specific, and could only come up with one word—chicken. It simply tasted like chicken, a moist, savory, chewy thing I would have to learn all over again. And then, with it still in my mouth, as my highly-evolved teeth worked the meat up and down, I forced myself to think of a living chicken, to think of it as animal, to picture the yellow feet pulling apart grasses, to picture small piles of smooth, speckled eggs.
To my surprise, I didn’t gag, or spit the chicken out. I felt a surge of emotion somewhere in my chest, and smiled slightly, thinking of this creature that had lived on grass, that had lived as a chicken, that had died. I felt a sort of grateful fondness, and I swallowed.

“Well?” Scott asked, turning to face me. “What do you think?”

I nodded, and smiled, then took another bite. “Tastes like chicken.”
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dissecting

When I looked more closely, it quickly became clear that the bloody, yellow-skinned lump of frozen-rock-hard chicken was a long way from shredded chicken quesadillas for dinner that night. I spent a few long minutes turning the block in my hands over the sink, looking through the skin and plastic for some familiarity, some recognition of this as either food or animal. Turns out, when you buy a chicken directly from a farmer and check the box labeled “cut up” instead of the one labeled “whole” that doesn’t mean you get the pieces trimmed and cleaned and packaged in shrink-wrap and Styrofoam the way they come at the grocery store.

In my defense, I was a beginner here. This was just two weeks into my return to meat-eating, after a seven-year hiatus during which I finished college, got my first apartment, and started learning to cook for myself in earnest. I knew how to cook—vegetarian. Before this week, my experience cooking and preparing meat had been limited to setting the dinner table while my mother sautéed in the background. I had no idea what a chicken looked like in the stages between being a live chicken and being breaded chicken tenders with a side of fries. But I did want to learn. And so four weeks in, I bought a chicken from Cindy Madsen.

That night, I turned to one of my more reliable sources of information on all things random: HowStuffWorks.com. A quick search for “how to cut up chicken” revealed just the article I needed, complete with step-by-step directions and images to lead the way. I left the chicken in the sink overnight to defrost. The next afternoon, I pulled out the cutting board,
emptied the sink of dirty dishes, got out a few plastic bags for debris and set to work learning how to dismantle a chicken.

The first thing I had to do was figure out what I was working with. The How Stuff Works article had directions for cutting a whole chicken into halves and quarters, for cutting into pieces, for cutting Chinese-style chicken, for skinning, deboning, slicing and dicing. I used a knife to open the shrink-wrapped plastic bag and dug my hands right into the body of the chicken, gently pulling on the outer edges to see where it would come apart. The legs and wings folded outward, creaking with the slow crack of half-melted ice, but the breast stayed intact, and I could see the backbone ridges running along the length of the chicken. I pushed around the instructions with my elbows, palms already olive-oil greasy with raw meat, and studied the black and white images as if trying to discern a route by staring at the squiggly red lines on a map, looking for something like the chicken in front of me. Best I could tell, before freezing it, someone had cut this chicken into an undivided breast, whole legs, and wings, and then had folded them all back together like some macabre autopsy survivor. I would have to separate the breast, separate the legs into thighs and drumsticks, remove the back and breast bones, and skin the whole thing.

I’d been a vegetarian for seven years because I never wanted to have to look at a chicken this closely. I’d spent most of my life looking away from the animals I was eating, wanting badly to forget the big, milk-eyed cows at the state fair while I enjoyed my New York strip and horrified by the occasional vein I could spot beneath the lemon-herb breading on my haddock filet. I hated eating lobster—a crime in coastal New England—because it looked too much like the animal it had once been. I preferred breaded, fried, chicken tenders to wings or drumsticks, canned tuna to tuna steaks, preferred not to think about the living
thing while I ate its dead body. But if I was really going to do this—eat meat in order to become a more integral and intentional part of my food system and through that, my community—I needed to face my initial source of disgust. However much it disturbed me, I could no longer look away from the facts of body and bone and blood that went into eating animals.

Cutting

1. *Locate the joint by moving the thigh back and forth with one hand while holding the drumstick.*

I stood in the kitchen with the chicken, prepared to interact for the first time with my food as a dead animal, ready to confront the anatomical reality that went into making my meal. And it really grossed me out. I grabbed the chicken’s leg with both hands and slowly worked the joint as the directions suggested, surprised at how smoothly and easily it moved. The leg of a chicken bends in the opposite direction from that of a human, and as I gently pushed up on the bottom knob of the drumstick, the thick, meaty side moved in response. I could see this working as a joint. I could imagine the leg, covered in fine white feathers, lifting a grotesque yellow talon into the air, in the jerking, careful walk of live chickens.

I wasn’t sure what to make of the object in my hand. In some ways, it appeared so animal, in some ways a leg, the buttery skin pocked with hair follicles like pores, dotted the way my own skin is in places. But detached from its body, scalded clean of feathers, cold and animated only by me, a chilling marionette, the leg reminded me of nothing so much as it did food. I didn’t really recognize it as part of a once-living creature, but I did recognize the z-
shaped wings from those I’ve seen slathered in thick, orange buffalo sauce. I could clearly see the bulges of meat lining the bones of the drumstick, pulled taut to the edges. My goal was deconstruction, to convert this leg into those parts, so I laid the leg down on the plastic cutting board and began sawing through bone.

2. *Place the leg, skin side down, on a cutting board. Cut completely through the joint.*

*Repeat with the other leg.*

Not really sure where I was supposed to cut through the joint, I just started cutting somewhere near the middle of the leg, trying to clear the skin out of the way so I could identify the center. The knife slipped a bit against the flesh, slicing the skin but only really pushing the meat around. I switched to a serrated blade and dug in with more force, and felt the muscle give, catch against the grated edge of the knife, and tear. Eventually, I could see the bright white ball fitting into its socket. I stopped cutting and lifted the leg again, watched the joint function as a perfect anatomical specimen while I moved the drumstick and thigh back and forth.

I’ve seen bone before, human and animal, but the intricate inner workings of our bodies always leave me shaking my head in slight disbelief. I thought back to the x-rays I’d recently seen of my own dislocated knee, and recalled that human knees don’t work like chicken knees. Human knees aren’t ball and socket joints—but our hips are. This gave me pause. Considering the joint of the chicken’s leg I was about to break in any way like a part of my own body made me cringe. Though the animal was long dead and past suffering, I knew I was about to injure the chicken, to render its body broken.
I readjusted my grip on the slippery yellow skin and tried to yank the two pieces of the leg apart, producing slight cracks and one convincing pop, but not breaking anything. I bent the joint in the wrong direction. Still no success. Back to the knife. I thought about wedging the tip of the blade in between the ball and socket and prying, but, fearing for the safety of my eyes, decided just to cut through the bone. This was surprisingly easy. Not exactly what the instruction suggested, but not the first time I’d deviated from a recipe. I took the blade to the bone with quite a bit of force, imagining I was holding a hacksaw and performing an amputation. But the serrated blade only needed a couple of quick, insistent slices, scarring the bone enough that I could break it. No shards splintered out, just a clean snap. Now I was in uncharted territory—bone marrow. I could see the complex underworld of a chicken bone, the spongy pink mesh that lived inside the skeleton, still laden with red blood cells.

I gagged and dropped the broken leg to the counter, leaning into the sink in case of vomiting. As I hung my head, eyes closed, nose plugged to block out the dank scent welling up from the carcass, I wondered again why the hell I was doing this. What kind of person wants to see these things? Wouldn’t it just have been easier to stay a vegetarian, and never have to know what chicken bone marrow looked like? Why was I even bothering? I felt so sick, my stomach churning with hyped-up acid, that I wondered whether I’d ever be able to actually eat this particular chicken.

If you buy into Kiersey personality typing (and I do), which uses the basics of Myers-Briggs personality testing to group people into one of four broadly-defined characters, then I am what you would call an Idealist. There’s a lot to this characterization, but one of the most
prominent features of Idealists is our search for self-actualization, which means, basically, the unending, dogged, often truly frustrating pursuit of becoming the best version of myself.

This means that once I’ve made a decision, once I have chosen the path I think will make me a better person, I stay on that path. I understand the world by feeling it, and so to experience a true connection to my food, to really understand the sacrifice at stake in eating meat, I had to dig in with my bare hands. I had to let go of my salmonella fears, my squirmy discomfort with flesh. This is how I found myself, eyes watering, shining-wet knife in hand, mouth-breathing to avoid the gradually building sour smell, snapping ribs and sawing the heart-shaped breast of the chicken away from its backbone.

3. Cut through any remaining connective tissue, and pull the breast away from the backbone.

The flesh peeled back from the bone easily, and the serrated blade moved through the soft tissue without a struggle, just a few pink shreds left hanging to the backbone. I laid the thick piece of smooth flesh onto the cutting board. I examined the fine white tendons like the roots of a tiny plant reaching into the soil, the traces of a bloodline where the backbone had once been. Then I realized what I was left with, what I was still holding: a ribcage, complete with dangling chicken heart. I put the knife down.

Given the size and amount of meat splayed on the cutting board, the smallness of the ribcage mystified me. I could hold it, cradled in both my hands, and did, hovering over the sink for a few long minutes, running my thumbs lightly along the delicate, curved rib bones. Blood smeared against my left thumb and I stared at it, I stared at the ideas of life and death I held right there in my palm. I stared at the blood because I was trying not to stare at the heart.
I wanted so badly to touch it, but somehow felt it would be mildly inappropriate, a sort of invasion, for a human finger to ever come in direct contact with that most crucial organ of any other life form. But then I remembered I was sawing this chicken apart and people get autopsied and hunters fish bullets out of deer hearts and so I touched it. I touched just one hesitant index finger to the purple-red dangling heart, like a shrunken cranberry in an open-air cage, then jerked my hand back quickly.

In an opinion piece for the New York Times, Roger Cohen suggests that Americans tend to prefer excised chicken breasts, plastic packaging and gloved hands to my current visceral, bloody approach to food, because we are, in fact, terrified of the innards of the animals we eat. The guts, he says, reek of life. Maybe all we’re scared of is being reminded of just how much we resemble an animal on the inside, too. I’d never seen a real heart—of any animal—before. This was unbelievably, impossibly tiny, no bigger than my thumbnail. I just stood and stared for quite a while, then carefully laid the entire ribcage in the sink. I watched as gravity tilted the heart backwards until it rested against the backbone, and I left the carcass there while I, newly serious, went back to the business of converting life into food.

4. Place the breast, skin side up, on a cutting board. Split the breast into halves by cutting along one side of the breastbone.

Now I had wings, thighs, drumsticks and chicken breasts. When I started this process, months ago, I thought that if anyone faced up to the fact that their steak was a cow and their bacon was a pig and their chicken was a chicken, they would surely look away in disgust. I’d spent most of my life imagining that thinking of food as an animal would necessarily
preclude you from being able to eat that animal, especially if you could visualize its life and inevitable death. But after I touched that heart and laid it down, I felt a strange and distant respect for the animal that was entirely separate from thinking of it as food. I still didn’t think I’d be able to eat chicken for dinner that night. But I was no longer gagging.

Deboning

1. *Grasp the breast with both hands and gently bend both sides backwards to snap the breastbone.*

2. *With fingers, work along both sides of the breastbone to loosen the triangular keel bone; pull out the bone.*

I picked up the ribcage I’d laid to rest in the sink, needing to separate the meat of the heart-shaped breast I’d later eat from the skeleton that had once carried it around. The skin of the breast meat greasy against my palms, I wrapped my thumbs around the inside of the ribcage, careful to avoid the heart, and pulled backwards slowly. The breastbone gave easily with a quick snap that startled me, and I almost dropped the chicken breasts. I laid the floppy body down on the cutting board.

I pressed my fingers against the flesh of the chicken, like pulling a lost drawstring back towards the opening, and a small pointed white bone emerged from the tip of the breast. After a few slippery losses, I slid the bone up and out of the inside of the chicken breast.

3. *Slip the point of the knife under the long rib bone on one side of the breast. Cut and scrape the meat from the rib bones, pulling the bones away from the meat.*
Now, I began to feel vaguely hunter-gatherer. No matter that the knife I was using was high-quality serrated Oxo, there was something undeniably primal about sawing through flesh, about the grating feeling that shivered up my arm each time the blade slipped and made sideways contact with the rib bones. I was scraping meat away from skeleton, taking a kill—albeit not my own—and harvesting it. I was pulling the carcass out from the inside.

4. Cut the meat away from the wishbone with the tip of the knife.
5. Grasp the tip of the wishbone and slowly pull it out of the breast, making sure not to snap it.

Once I’d freed the edges of the wishbone, carefully, with just the sharp point of the blade, I used my thumb and forefinger to grasp the very top, the little point that some neutral party is supposed to hold after Thanksgiving dinner, and slid it, slowly, up out of the breast. When the dishes are scraped clean, as the last few uncles mop up gravy with crescent rolls, and grandmothers stack bones and remnants of skin on one plate to carry over to the trash, this is the part of the turkey that’s left, this is the part that you wish on. I stood over the sink in my kitchen, still breathing more shallowly than usual because I was pretty sure it’d be bad luck to snap the wishbone on the first chicken I’d ever dissected, wondering whether or not I could snap it by myself, or what I would even bother to wish for.

I decided I was pretty lucky. More than a wish, I could only think of blessings, of thanks. This was an endeavor already so laden, in my own mind, with meaning and potential, that wishing or cracking the bone seemed trite. Hokey. Unnecessary. Plus maybe in bad form, for the chicken’s sake. So I laid the wishbone, intact, beside the snapped ribcage in the plastic bag in the sink.
Skinning

Just the word skinning made me uncomfortable, possibly because of its association with childhood injuries, a frequent occurrence for me, usually targeting the knees. I pictured bloody scrapes, pocked with fragments of loose pavement embedded under the skin as it scabbed over. I pictured creepy guys in red flannel shirts practicing taxidermy, or converting downed grizzlies into bearskin rugs. For some reason, this step of making my chicken edible seemed more grotesque than any other, as if stripping the chicken of its skin was more invasive than snapping its backbone or touching its heart. I felt like removing the skin was my final act of defiance against the chicken, my insistence on making it palatable for human consumption. But I bought skinless chicken breasts at the grocery store, believing the absence of the fatty skin made the meat healthier, and I was determined to really know what went into making them look the way I saw them in the freezer section.

1. *Grasp the skin with a clean cotton kitchen towel to improve your grip. Take the towel and pull the skin away from the meat.*

Skinning was hard work. Since I was nearing the end of an hour with the chicken, I was growing impatient, still interested in finishing the job, but eager to get back to the papers that needed grading, the plants that needed watering, the television that needed watching. Skinning was seriously slowing me down. I used paper towel, not wanting to part with any of my brightly-colored kitchen towels to improve my grip. (This is absolutely necessary, despite the suggestive tone of the direction. When I tried to peel the skin backwards off the thigh without a paper towel, well, that’s how I lost one thigh to the dirty kitchen floor.)
Starting was easy. Make a small slit in one end of the skin and pull. The yellow skin, white on the inside, folded backwards over itself without much difficulty. But there came a point of critical mass, somewhere around the middle of a thigh, or near the bulge of a drumstick, at which the skin becomes backed up against itself, providing too much friction for even the paper-toweled hand to go much further.

The white, inner part of the skin stuck to the pink flesh, as if sewn on some internal seam. As I pulled, hard, on the flaps of squishy, fatty skin in my right hand, I could hear the muscle of the chicken giving, this slight sucking noise, an impossible suction. I twisted my wrist, doubling the stretched-out, flopping skin over the back of my own hand and yanked harder, but still couldn’t part the chicken from its skin. I took the knife out again and laid the drumstick sideways on the cutting board, pressing a paper towel down on the skin and sawing through it, leaving small shreds of skin still stuck, dangling, on the tip of the drumstick. Good enough. One down—one drumstick, one thigh, two breasts to go.

I stood bent over the kitchen counter, grunting slightly, yanking at a half-exposed drumstick, trying to roll the wet skin over itself bit by bit and I think it was somewhere in all this that I realized I was no longer dealing with an animal. The work was hard, messy, and completely undignified. This was no longer a ceremonial approach to honoring the life of the chicken by recognizing it as a living thing, there was no element of prayer or ritual. I was pulling skin off meat because I didn’t want to eat the skin. This act finally, fully divorced me from the idea of this chicken at one point being a chicken. Now it was chicken.

2. **Be sure to discard the skin.**
In his column, Roger Cohen wrote of the moment he finally felt at home after moving to France as the moment when he saw glistening fish guts being coaxed by the ungloved hand of a friend from the belly of a sea bass. For Cohen, this moment, this image, represented the relationship between food and people that French culture has managed to preserve, while American food has been sanitized to the point of complete disconnect.

For me, this moment of reconnection, of realization, came when I held the freshly skinned and trimmed part of the chicken known as the tender in my palm. As a child, a white-blond, freckled girl of the Northeast, I would refuse to eat almost anything that remotely resembled an animal. In New England, this is tantamount to sacrilege, because it meant I wouldn’t eat clams unless extracted and deep-fried, and I would never touch an oyster, shrimp or—worst of all—a lobster. So chicken tenders were my eating-out best friend. No matter where we were—even at the gritty-with-sand shack on the coast of Hampton Beach where you get your food in cardboard boxes and sit at damp picnic tables over a concrete floor—I could get chicken tenders. But I had always assumed that they were named “tenders” because of the shape, or that it was a way of cooking them or something. I had no idea, until that day, until that moment, at age 26, that the tender was actually a part of the chicken.

Once I had deboned the breast of the chicken, and slid the meat apart from the body, the directions instructed me to slice along the thin white tendon that separated the breast from the tenders, the small, plump flaps of flesh running along the edge of each breast. After I completed one side, I lifted the tender, puzzled, closer to my face for examination. Yup. Looked just like the breaded, deep-fried kind I’d eaten for the first eleven years of my life. I
couldn’t believe how perfect the meat looked, Easter-egg pink, the exact length of my palm. I laid the tender across my hand to poke and prod for a few more minutes. I wandered around my apartment holding the tender, examining it, cradling it with the fleshy parts of my hand, utterly in awe.

My first encounter with the insides of a chicken had exactly the opposite effect I imagined they would. Rather than making me sick or grossing me out, rather than making me feel guilty or re-affirming my abandoned vegetarianism, seeing the anatomical realities of the chicken I would later eat gave way to a wonder I never expected. This was like the first time I saw the desperately grabbing tentacles on the bottom of a star-fish, or saw a mosquito suck blood in time-lapse slow motion. I got it. Once I got under the skin and saw the veins, the tendons, the bones, the heart, I felt an indescribable attachment to the chicken that allowed me to accept it for what it was—a once-living animal, now dead, converted to food.

I still didn’t cook the chicken for dinner that night. I decided I needed some space between the up-close examination and eating. But the next night, when I unwrapped the drumsticks from the aluminum foil in which I’d stored them, when I let them soak in buttermilk with mustard and Frank’s Hot Sauce, then dredged them in egg and flour and laid them on a rack to bake, I swelled with pride. This was my chicken, a chicken I did more than buy, a chicken I’d known intimately, a chicken I’d approached full-on. And later, when I held the ball of the drumstick in my hand and bit off the chewy dark flesh, I could honestly conjure, without gagging, the image of the dancing leg moving back and forth just before I dislocated it. The familiar pleasure of that memory mingled in my mouth with the distinctive moist taste of the chicken, with the mustard and hot sauce smeared over it, as my teeth worked the tough meat up and down, slowly. And I swear, it really did taste better.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I cried over my first pie crust. Too crunchy to bite through on the edges. Soggy and drooping with gravy in the center. A total culinary failure. I stood in the middle of my kitchen with a potholder in one hand and a spatula in the other, and burst into tears. My mind flooded with memories of burnt tacos and evaporated water from my youth. To the horror of my internal feminist, I found myself sobbing in the kitchen and thinking, what good am I if I can’t do this? This is my job. I make food this way because I want to share the joy of food with other people and if I can’t make good food I have failed to care for the people I love in some crucial way. Maybe I couldn’t do this. Maybe, I thought, I am just an inherently bad cook, too distracted for domestication, too clumsy for the culinary arts, too feminist to be any good in the kitchen. Caught in this horrible limbo between wanting to be a good cook and wanting to be an independent woman, between wanting my boyfriend to love the food I made for him and hating myself for caring, I finally broke. I had no idea how I had ended up here, a feminist who cooks, an ethical eater who eats meat, a woman, back in the kitchen, crying over the damned pie crust.

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Back up. I was in the kitchen for a reason, and it wasn’t the patriarchy that forced me. What opened my eyes to my ability to manage in the kitchen, what awakened in me the possibilities inherent in food, was not a lesson from my mother, not a decision to become the domestic goddess women are supposed to be—it was learning to cook and eat meat again. I’d fought since my childhood against the idea that being a woman meant that the kitchen
was the place where I belonged. But I’d found myself in a dietary ethical conundrum—eating healthy, sustainable food seemed to mean I was going to have to cook it myself.

Because of my idealistic commitment to making my new ventures into meat-eating intentional, those ventures were also highly controlled. I wanted only certain kinds of meat from certain farms. I had to know, or know of, the farmer who raised the chickens who laid the eggs I’d buy. I needed to see the cattle to eat the steak. Sometimes this meant going without meat and falling back on vegetarian staples for a week, and often, developing better, healthier vegetarian entrees, rather than meat and potatoes meals without the meat.

The more I learned about the food industry, the more I saw what I wanted to avoid. I realized the dangers of industrial agriculture were not just the restrictions of a pig’s gestation crate, or the environmental pollution of the salmon farming industry, but also the Bisphenol-A lining the cans of green beans, or the coloring agents added to microwaveable rice. Preservatives, additives, chemicals, and subsidies all seemed as worrying to me as slaughter practices and animals’ living conditions. The more I saw, the more I wanted to see. No longer did I focus only on eating humane meat. Now, I cared about eating humane, low-impact, healthy food, and for the most part, that meant making it myself.

This is why eating meat again led to learning how to bake my own whole wheat and ciabatta bread, wondering what natural ingredients I could use to make my own granola bars, blending whole fruit smoothies after workouts, figuring out how to make low-fat brownies or my own pumpkin pie.
I wanted to dig my hands into the skin and discover this food from the inside out. Once I accomplished that, once I knew the difference between a breast bone and a keel bone—hell, between a breast and a thigh, I felt empowered to take over the kitchen. I was learning all the tricks a good Italian woman should know: how to trim the fat off a pork chop or how to time the perfect medium rare on a ribeye. I could understand this now as an exercise of power, as it so often seemed from my mother or grandmother. I was taking charge. I could be my nurturing self by putting a healthy, delicious meal on the table.

Every Tuesday afternoon in September and October, I stumbled home from Farm to Folk, the a la carte community-supported agriculture program I’d joined in Ames. Farm to Folk is the perfect model for the young, the poor, the graduate student. I wanted to buy local, seasonal produce, but didn’t have the couple-hundred for a traditional CSA farm share. Farm to Folk offers, for a small annual membership fee, the opportunity to buy a la carte from a variety of producers, who deliver the loose produce with their regular CSA shares once a week, where the volunteer staff sorts it for pickup.

I was deep into the experimental phase. It was early autumn, and my arms were constantly laden with cloth grocery bags. New produce tumbled out onto the counter in the warm, slanting autumn sun. Potatoes and yellow onions, raspberries, apples, red and green bell peppers. Blue plastic bag of leeks, the length of my arm, their bulbous white roots still smelling like the soil. A small bundle of baby bok choy, flowering green leaves wrapped with a blue rubber band. Knobby zucchini and summer squash curved like an elbow in their own bundle, heavier than the rest. Small paper bags revealed a wealth of tomatoes, all heirloom varietals, some purple-red and bursting at their own seams, others smaller and softer, sunset orange and golden yellow. I had never eaten a tomato whose name I didn’t
know. I had never cooked a summer squash. I didn’t even know which parts of a leek you could cook. But I was ready for some kitchen adventures.

In the weeks that followed, I experimented with all these new ingredients. Some, like the puree of summer squash soup with parmesan phyllo triangles, were a success—a velvet-smooth yellow soup, harvest-sweet with just the right hint of salt. Roasted balsamic zucchini with bell peppers. Teriyaki noodles with bok choy and carrots. The leeks were a challenge—when I tried to bake them into a torte, their bitterness overpowered the Gruyere cheese and orange peppers. Scott was an amazing guinea pig, bravely wolfing down whatever I put in front of him, lavishly praising my successes and letting me down gently when things didn’t turn out so well, or at all.

Finally, I was trying again. I spent an hour or more preparing dinner each night. I researched ingredients on the internet. I daydreamed recipes during classes. Instead of satisfying myself with spaghetti and a jar of Muir Glen sauce, I created new sauces that spoke to the season—lemon sauce with sugar snap peas or creamy onion sauce dyed pink with the juice of a rainbow chard stem. One week, I even called my mom and confirmed the herbs in the family’s pasta sauce so I could make my own from scratch. Every new experiment became a notch on my apron string, an achievement of which I felt genuinely proud.

About a month into my new forays of cooking, though, I began feeling uncomfortable. I was spending an awful lot of time in the kitchen for a feminist. What if, I thought, this notion of ethical eating and cooking is simply a way to justify walking down the path of traditional womanhood? Was I falling prey to some subconscious lure of domesticity? Though cooking was a lot of fun, I could see the future playing out just like I’d
always worried: I’d become a stereotypical housewife, whistling cheerfully while I cooked my man a hot meal, grateful for a smack on the ass before he settled down in front of the television while I ironed his work shirts and put the kids to bed, then pounded a couple of dirty martinis and a handful of mommy’s little helpers. I was spiraling and I knew it, but I wasn’t sure how to tell the difference between a woman who cooks because she’s been backed into that corner and a woman who chooses that corner for herself.

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In her new book *A Taste for Civilization*, Janet A. Flammang suggests that second-wave feminists, in freeing women from the kitchen, perhaps went too far in denigrating the work that went into preparing food—by encouraging women to do something else, essentially, society convinced them that feeding their families was of lesser concern. In the 1960s, according to Fleming, once Betty Friedan figured out what was making housewives so unhappy, as consumer prices rose and incomes stayed the same, more and more women began entering the workforce and leaving those virtuous domestic spheres to which they had, for so long, been tied. And that was when we stopped cooking for ourselves.

Michael Pollan has observed a similar trend in his writing, though he has the decency to acknowledge there were other causes contributing to the shortening of cook time in America. In an article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Pollan writes that the amount of time spent on food preparation in America has fallen since 1965, though the drop has been at the same rate (about 40 percent) whether the women of the household worked outside of the home or not. But married women without jobs still spend more time in the kitchen than any other group of women (about 58 minutes a day) compared to the low of 36 minutes a day for
married women with jobs. These numbers suggest to me that women are still beholden to the kitchen, that we still, despite Gloria Steinem and stay-at-home dads, feel the pressure of responsibility for food preparation.

Both of these writers want us to take food preparation seriously, as the uptick in American obesity seems inversely proportional to the amount of time we spend preparing our own food. But I wasn’t interested in supported a movement that insisted that doing that work was only a woman’s responsibility.

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One of my favorite indulgences as a vegetarian, usually only allowed on nights when I was home alone, no roommates or boyfriend around to judge, was a frozen Amy’s single-serving veggie pot pie. The small aluminum container fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. I wore my sweatpants and ate my favorite comfort food, enjoying the familiarity of a brown country gravy, a warm wheat pie crust, small cubes of tofu baked beside tiny white potatoes, peas and corn. Naturally, when I started eating chicken again, I felt an immediate desire to bake a chicken potpie. But instead of buying a frozen pie, I decided to make one from scratch, an endeavor that had never even occurred to me as a vegetarian—why would it when I could just go to the frozen foods section of the grocery store and grab one that came in a box? And I figured as long as I was peeling and dicing the potatoes and carrots, as long as I was hand-snapping the green beans off a stem, as long as I was boiling my own gravy, I might as well try my hand at a whole wheat pie crust.

I took an entire Friday to get it right. I cut butter into wheat pastry flour, bent over a white plastic bowl, slicing insistently as tiny crumbles began to form, like peas of butter
encased in flour. I sprinkled water conservatively across the dough and dug my palms in to
knead it together. The flour remained dry and loose, and the water created only tiny pockets
of dough. I added more water, and more again. Finally, the dough formed enough of a ball
that I could turn it out onto the counter, pressing with my thumbs to connect the elastic dough
back on itself, with the heels of my hands, hard, to work the gluten. The dough was now
sticky and too elastic, and every knead clung to my palms, making me look like some yeasty
swamp monster. I grabbed the rolling pin and slowly began to shape the crust into a circle,
but its edges cracked and peeled, falling away from itself. I pressed on, undeterred, and laid
the first heavy crust in the bottom of a pie dish, where it split right down the middle. I filled
it, nonetheless, with the simmering gravy, shredded chicken and vegetables, then quickly slid
the other half-inch thick crust across the top. They were already too hard to even press the
edges together, but I threw the whole thing on a cookie sheet and stuck it in the oven.

When I removed the pie from the oven, 20 minutes later, I set off the smoke alarm
because so much gravy had seeped out over the unsealed edges and burned onto the floor of
the oven. It took the heavy-duty serrated knife to cut two slices from the pie, both of which
broke and slid off the spatula before making it to the plate. All that remained in the pie dish
was a crumbling crust soaking in a pool of gravy. This was definitely not how June Cleaver’s
potpie would have turned out.

I felt myself slowly being crushed between the closing walls of feminist and foodie. I
wanted to be a good cook but I didn’t want feel obligated to be one. Janet Flammang and
Michael Pollan seemed to be telling me that to be a better eater meant spending more time in
the kitchen. The old familiar refrain of the cult of domesticity began to play through my
head. This is your job, the internal pressures whispered, you’re better at it than he is anyway.
The problem was, I was starting to agree. Food, I was beginning to discover, is crucial.

Feeding someone is about love and responsibility.

But I realized both authors were wrong. The lingering voice of the patriarchy had, once again, oversimplified. Because despite the valid points they both make about the relationship between cooking more and eating better, both of these writers are utterly locked into the dominant cultural view of history, despite the fact that both have made a living analyzing socio-historic trends. Why are we only talking about women as cooks?

Yes, cooking time significantly diminished as women began working outside of the home in large numbers. The unanswered question I’m interested in is this—why haven’t men stepped up? If the workload between men and women outside of the home is now reaching an equal playing field, then why hasn’t in-home work like cooking leveled out between the sexes as well?

In fact, far from blaming second-wave feminism for urging women to leave the kitchen (an urging that Anna Clark of Salon observed would not have been successful if women weren’t unhappy in the kitchen in the first place), I blame sexism for the fallout of our healthy eating pattern. If women hadn’t been the only ones ever taught to value cooking for our families, maybe women leaving the house wouldn’t have had such an impact on society’s healthy eating habits. Ultimately, by historically linking the denigration of cooking with women choosing to work outside the home, without any deeper questioning of the normative values that demonstrates, aren’t we still telling women their place is in the kitchen? Aren’t we still suggesting that women have to choose one or the other, that they must decide between a healthy, happy life at home or a career, and can never have both?
We see the unhealthy eating everywhere, not just in women, and not just in the families of women who work outside the home. And we have to acknowledge that our unhealthy eating is demonstrative of larger social issues—of the corporate takeover of the agricultural industry, of the value of the low bottom line over any more expensive value like health or safety, of devaluing of the natural landscape and the lessons that it has to offer human society—in order to do anything about it.

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I know all this is true because when I lost it, crying in the kitchen over the sorry, sagging piecrust—I am not ashamed to admit—it was my boyfriend who calmed me down. He firmly removed the spatula from my hands. He hugged me and steered me toward the door, telling me to go to my yoga class, relax, that he would clean up the mess and that when I got back, we would order a pizza, his culinary specialty, and that there was nothing wrong with that.

He was right. There was nothing wrong with that. There was nothing wrong with sometimes wanting a pizza, with a quick meal rather than an elaborate one. It’s not about being the perfect anything—cook, feminist, woman—all of the time. It’s about trying really hard to be. With that great effort came, sometimes, massive failure. But in the failures I came to understand what it means to be a woman in the kitchen. Being a feminist doesn’t mean you can’t be a cook, and being a cook doesn’t mean you can’t be a feminist.

As a girl, I shrugged off the great responsibility of the kitchen as something I didn’t much care for if it meant subscribing to all the other trappings of “being a woman,” if it meant styling my hair every day or wearing makeup, if it meant giving up my political
beliefs for the sake of an harmonious table. But in doing that, I made it a black-and-white issue.

My views as a 21st century feminist have always been inspired by the doctrine of choice. I don’t look down on women who choose to wear make-up, as long as no one expects me to do it, as long as I live in a world where I can be taken seriously without it. I applaud mothers doing the brave and difficult work of raising their children at home—as long I don’t live in a world that tells me raising good citizens is my, and only my, responsibility, as long as I never have to abandon the teaching and writing I love, as long as I can partner with my future husband to raise our children. Why should choosing to cook be any different? Why can’t I choose to love working in the kitchen and still choose to ignore the social norm that says I should like chick flicks better than basketball?

Because when we stop making choices for ourselves, whether they are driven by patriarchy or our own internal guilt, we ignore the feminist potential in the everyday, the empowerment inherent in taking charge of the source of our food, and doing the hard work of living ethically. What could be more radical than serving a chemical-free meal crafted from local, organic ingredients, food that came up out of the ground, to the people I love? What could be more traditional than carrying down family recipes, than wanting to take care of my family by serving them food that matters? I think owning both the successes and the failures, being both radical and traditional, trying hard to be good, but being able to laugh when I flounder, is the distinction between a hands-tied housewife and a feminist cook. Even if that sometimes means ordering take-out when you blow the piecrust.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In June of 2009, the London Telegraph ran an article about the recent shift towards local, sustainable food with the title “Is farming the root of all evil?” As an Anthropology minor in my undergraduate institution, I read Jared Diamond’s famous essay “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race” about early human societies making the switch from a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to subsistence agriculture. Knee-deep in research about sustainable agriculture practices, organic certification, humane meat-eating and other contradictions, I had a feeling I might be missing an important part of the story by relying only on my own experiences.

I didn’t grow up on a farm, and with the exception of the county fair and the occasional visit to Red & Judy’s in Vermont, I’d never so much as seen a livestock animal. In Iowa, I saw a lot of farms—but all of one model, the corn/soy monoculture. I didn’t think farming was the root of all evil, because I’d heard a lot of people talk about how little money farmers make. I’d met some people who were working really hard to change that model in Iowa in spite of the financial losses they suffered. My new goal was to support models of agriculture that reflected natural nutrient cycles and human health, but the reality was, I had no idea what I was talking about. I didn’t know what it really meant to be a farmer. So I decided to spend some time working on a farm.

Luckily, a graduate school colleague knew a couple who ran their own organic vegetable farm, who also happened to have a guest house where I could stay for a few weeks, while volunteering casual, inexperienced farm help in whatever capacity they saw fit. As had been the case in most of my explorations of food since my return to meat eating, I was
willing to get involved any way I could, just for the sake of getting closer to the source. I sensed that the closer I got to the beginnings of food—the seed, the soil, the farmer who harvests—the more I would understand about what it meant to grow sustainable food.

When I arrived at Shooting Star Farm early one May Sunday evening, much to my surprise, I did not discover any evil. This didn’t look like a terrible mistake to me. Stretches of rippling ridges of southwestern Wisconsin surrounded the tiny yellow house and the larger yellow farmhouse, the worn red packing barn, the wandering black cat. This looked like a pretty nice life. Husband and wife farmers Rink DaVee and Jenny Bonde run Shooting Star Organics with only the help of two or three other workers, some of whom work part-time, some of whom work full-time seasonally. The land is theirs, bought, gradually, from the previous owner, and they built both houses on the property themselves. With just this small an operation, Rink and Jenny manage to maintain organic certification and run an organic produce direct-to-restaurant distribution business on the side. This sounded like hard work yes, but lovely work in beautiful, peaceful surroundings.

The next morning, when I woke early, slathered myself in sunscreen, donned my breathable Army surplus sunhat and work gloves, and headed out into the fields to help harvest, wash, package and plant, I got my crash course in what it means to be a small-scale organic farmer. The hard work I imagined farming must be before I came to the farm was merely an illusion, an idea of work, compared to how my body felt at the end of that first day. We began the morning hauling trays of tomato, pepper and eggplant seedlings out of the greenhouse and into the sun. Jenny explained that the warm-weather crops—one that are harvested in midsummer—can’t go straight from the heated greenhouse into the ground,
where in late May, they still have to contend with cold. They need to be exposed to that air in the early mornings for a few weeks, to become hardy before they can go into the soil.

My upper arms already pulsing with heat, I headed into the far field with Rink to pick French breakfast radishes, the size and shape of arthritic fingers, but bright, happy pink and white, and to bundle them for sale. For about two hours, we crawled along the slimy dirt on our hands and knees, wrapping palms around wet green leaves and pulling the vegetables up out of the soil. Then, we moved for another three hours into the hoop house, a sort of giant greenhouse, a covered and warmed structure, but one in which plants still grow in the ground, to pick turnips, again pulling them by their stems from warm underground growing places, and bundling them by size, the smallest no bigger than the tip of my nose, the largest the size of my fist.

By the time we stood up in the radish plot, my knees were already swollen and stiff. In the hoop house I moved around in a seated position to give my sore joints a break, but soon felt a searing warmth spreading in my lower back. Later that week, I would notice stretched sore muscles in my abdominals, from bending and lifting heavy bags of fertilizer, and strains in my hamstrings from the sideways-step lunges I did up and down the rows while laying pepper plants.

More than the physical aches of the work on the farm, I found another way that the labor was hard—it was dirty. Dirty doesn’t even begin to describe the layer of slick you get up to your knees crawling up and down the ground of a hoop house that’s just recently been watered, or laying irrigation strips beneath a plastic tarp covering in the eggplant plot. We all know what happens when water mixes with soil. What you might not know is what that combination does to even your heaviest hiking boots when you step ankle-deep in it: sucks
the shoe right off your foot, so you come down into the muddy soil in nothing but a gym sock.

But all that dirt and muck—the smudges of it on my face and arms, crusted into my braids—reminded me of the fundamental truth of the farm. All food grows in the ground. Food, when you do it right, comes up out of the dirt of the earth. And sometimes that’s messy.

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The topic of lunchtime conversation—which would also be the topic of tomorrow’s breakfast conversation, the topic of conversation every morning and every night here—was the weather. Every night, Jenny had a report about how much rain might be falling tomorrow, and during which hours. But for the first time in my life, this kind of information was not small talk, but absolute necessity. Knowing that it would rain between one and three in the afternoon meant we had to get started an hour earlier to get all the lettuce harvested and out of the field before lunch, so we could wash and pack it in the barn during the showers. Cutting lettuce in the rain would mean dirty, slimy leaves that would take more washes to come clean, and the washes would wilt the lettuce with too much moisture.

Jenny had to know the weather. She had to know when it was going to rain to plan the daily schedule, to decide whether or not to put the seedlings in the ground, to know if we’d need to water the baby lettuces waiting for harvest, or if they would have a storm to help them grow for another two days in the hot June sun without drying out before they were ready to pick. Knowing the weather meant knowing how much produce would be for sale that week.
One afternoon late in the week I got caught in a torrential downpour while attempting to plant leeks, their newborn root structures disintegrating in my fingers, the seedling threads like blades of grass crumbling under a few drops. I had to run inside to save them, and then ate avocado sandwiches standing up in the kitchen to avoid muddying the table. The weather was ever-present, another reminder that food-growing is an operation that can’t be done without the cooperation of nature, a cycle that can’t be complete without the basics of sunlight and water. A simple truth, but one I wasn’t sure was common knowledge anymore, in the world of Taco Bell’s 88 percent beef burrito.

Late in the afternoon on my first day of work, Rink took me for a walk through the carefully-planned fields of the farm’s acre and a half, to show me which crops went where. We stopped in front of a fallow plot, a patch of field that looked to me like a lawn cut for the first time this spring, full of dead grasses lying sideways, uprooted, but nearly four feet long. Rink told me that just two days earlier, all this had been wheat, which they plant in alternation with other crops to fix nutrients in the soil, tall enough so that on Saturday night, their son Charlie and some of his four-year-old playmates had played hide-and-seek in the tall, lush field. Now it lay dormant, after Rink tilled the wheat over, so it would gradually decay back into the soil. *This is what I love about the farm*, he told me, *it’s ephemeral.*

Though any given field can look completely different from one day to the next, Rink sees the whole farm as engaged in one, endlessly repeating cycle, each field a demonstration plot of a different step along the same path from soil to seed to plate.

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In February of 2009, a buyer for Whole Foods market, the all-organic national grocery chain, wrote a short blog piece called “It’s Summer in February,” a title that probably makes most locavores cringe. In the post, the blogger profiled a small-scale farmer in Chile from which Whole Foods buys nectarines, plums and grapes. Juan Miguel Errazuriz is a second generation grower, whose family has been involved in farming for the past 250 years. Errazuriz traveled the world for three years to research horticultural practices and technology before deciding on a type of fertigation (simultaneous fertilization and irrigation) that supplies water and nutrients directly to the trees’ roots. Errazuriz is one of only a few growers in Chile who uses drip irrigation to control the trees’ root systems and maximize flavor.

The heart of the local food movement is the notion that buying food closer to home is better for the planet and better for your conscience. Shopping at the farmer’s market helps teach us what can be grown in our own backyards, teaches us important lessons about seasonality and the natural cycles of agriculture. Buying local also contributes significantly to the local economy, keeping food dollars within the state or community, rather than shipping them to another continent.

But it doesn’t seem that simple to me. We live in a global community, and I’ve never been a fan of isolationism. And we can’t grow everything in our own backyard—nor should we try. Each plant is developed in concert with the soil of its home, and is meant to be enjoyed when grown in that soil. You can grow a San Marzano—a thick-fleshed paste tomato, perfect for simmering into sauces—in North America in the summer. But it’s better in San Marzano, where the volcanic ash in the soils around Mount Vesuvius filter impurities
from the water to produce the strong, sweet flesh of the tomato. The identity, and therefore the quality, of a food is attached to the place the food comes from.

The most idealistic among us, people like me, want to believe that we will dedicate ourselves whole-heartedly to whatever ethical decisions we come to about our food, or anything. But I know there are certain foods I’ll never give up, even though you can’t grow them in Iowa. I’m not deluded enough to pretend I need bananas in the winter, or to justify my love for fresh chocolate as anything other than an indulgence. But I am practical enough to know this is how people work. We do the best we can, but we’re never going to be perfect and I don’t believe in absolutes. Even Barbara Kingsolver, when she and her family embarked on their “year of food life,” dedicating themselves to growing their own food or buying within 100 miles of their farm for a year, allowed herself a coffee clause, made coffee the one product exempt from the food miles limit. Kingsolver explains this exception by offering a detailed description of how the coffee industry exemplifies global fair trade struggles, suggesting that the principles of the local food movement can expand to the global food trade by rewarding distant producers using sustainable methods with a fair wage for their product.

I was won over by her argument, at least partly because I’ve seen myself on mornings without coffee. For a fleeting moment, guilt flooded back to me—was I really only justifying a desire for coffee with some fair-trade agreement? Can natural foods be shipped internationally and still be ethical? How do we draw the line between indulging ourselves too far, between being unreasonable consumers trained by free trade to expect all produce, all year round, and being smart global citizens, content to share values across oceans? Can food be good for the planet if it’s not grown in the backyard?
Over the last few months, I’d come face-to-face with a lot of tense boundaries in the burgeoning food movement, like big organic, and local industrial. Sustainable food, it seemed to me, is a tense marriage between reality and idealism, and any good relationship requires a little compromise on both sides.

There is certainly an argument to be made that buying nectarines from Chile in February and shipping them by airplane to Whole Foods in Minnesota and Maine and Mississippi isn’t natural. Refusing to eat only what we can grow in our own region bucks the very nature of soil, the cyclic character of agriculture. But the mission, the driving force behind my research—both field and internet—into farms, was to see up close the models of agriculture I wanted to support. I knew I needed to get my hands into the soil to figure out what it meant to the food I ate. And when I read about Juan Miguel Errazuriz, I was seriously impressed.

Eating only what we can grow ourselves sounds to me a lot like what we tried to do in World War II to protest the alliances of our food producers, and Juan Miguel Errazuriz doesn’t sound like the enemy. In fact, he sounds like an incredibly conscientious farmer, a man committed to sustainability and innovation, and like someone worth financially supporting. If we want to support local sustainable farmers because we value their contribution to our economy in the face of large-scale industrial competition, why wouldn’t we want to support someone doing the same thing in a country where it is arguably even more difficult, one overrun with poverty and slave labor? It is possible that buying nectarines in January or coffee from Belize could actually do some good for the impoverished around the world to empower themselves? Is it possible that positive farming might let us have it all?
Saturday morning, Rink and I started loading up the van early, around six, with two fold-out tables, a couple of checkered cloths, plastic crates and bag-lined cardboard boxes of arugula, red and green bibb lettuces, turnips, radishes, spinach, rhubarb, and parsnips. We were headed for the market.

A whirlwind of local vegetables, meats, honey, berries and music, the Mineral Point Market nestles itself into the green corner of Water Tower Park. For a town of about 2000 people, the market is packed with vendors and customers. In wet pigtail braids and a long-sleeved shirt against the slight chill in the late May morning, I was terrified. I’ve never been much a fan of interacting with strangers. I’d never worked a farmer’s market—or a farm—before. I knew I’d be doing a lot of math in my head. Rink and Jenny had been so kind to let me, utterly suburban and lost in the fields, work for them to figure out just what it is a farmer does, and I was afraid of messing up. Market is a significant portion of their livelihood—no longer could I take things slow to avoid bundling too many shrimpy radishes, or to make sure to trim just the right amount of stem from the baby arugula I harvested. This was business.

Once we wrestled the canvas roof tent open and laid out the tablecloths across the tables, once we’d stacked crates of turnips in piles behind us and arranged flowering heads of red bibb in a display, I began bagging spinach. I quickly figured that one of my loose handfuls was about two ounces of spinach and sped up, tossing handfuls of dewy leaves gently into plastic bags, trying to figure out the tare function on the scale, and carefully folding the loose plastic over on itself for sale. After a few brief minutes of this, a repetitive respite of toss, tare, twist-tie, I looked up to see that the floodgates had opened. Just before
nine a.m. when the market officially opens, customers with cloth bags, pulling red wagons, led by children or dogs, edged their ways up to our table and began shopping. I watched as food transformed yet another once-empty space into community.

I’d gotten the gig working with Rink and Jenny through one of my graduate-school professors, a close personal friend of the farmers and former resident of Mineral Point. I expected to be working the market that day, hopefully as far behind the scenes as possible, but what happened instead was Rink spent the next four hours introducing me to everyone.

“This is Marissa,” he’d say, “she’s a student of Dean’s.”

And the replies rolled in: people asking after Dean, asking how he was as a teacher, telling me how much they missed him, lauding praise on the great work he did for the arts in Mineral Point, or laughing over their favorite drinking-buddy story of him. We were selling food, but by the end of that morning, I felt more engaged with the town than I had in the week I’d been living there.

Near the end of the market, as business started dying down, Rink shooed me away from the booth. Go explore, he said. This is a great market, I want you to get to see it. So I wandered in laps around the park and watched as a small town re-affirmed its identity. Children climbed on the playground structures with half-eaten carrots and turnips in their hands. A string band played polka. Amish men and dreadlocked women sold goods side-by-side. A new resident in town, someone’s transplant wife, bought something from every producer as a way of introducing herself around the community.

On the drive back to the farm Rink told me that in Mineral Point, they called market “church.” This is their weekend worship ritual, their version of finding spirituality and living in harmony with a higher moral calling. Thought it was sort of a joke—the market was a
place for gossip and socializing, and a place where people who lived ten miles out of town on a farm could spend time chatting with their friends—there was a current of truth to the mingling of food and religion. On the cool, sunny afternoon I spent there, I couldn’t conjure something more significant than a community committing itself to supporting the people who worked hard to providing healthy, safe food for their neighbor’s children. When hands were shaken and produce bags stuffed full here, it meant something greater. It meant something like *take this, all of you, and eat of it.*

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When I was eleven I learned the phrase “latchkey kid” and loved having a name to call myself, proudly escorting my younger sisters from the school bus across the street to our house, unlocking the front door with the key I kept on a special Tigger keychain that only I had. We would unpack our bags, throw away our uneaten vegetables, change into jeans and prepare the snacks. We made cucumber and butter sandwiches with Wonder bread, cut slices of apple doughnuts, arranged Triscuits around spreadable cheddar cheese. My mother would arrive thirty minutes later, boil the water, and sit down with us around the kitchen table for our tea parties. We drank tea out of matching china cups set precariously on saucers, used dainty tongs to drop cubes of sugar, poured milk from a crystal creamer’s spout. *Just us girls,* my mother would say, grinning as we whined about spelling vocabulary or showed off our new techniques for weaving weeping willow branches into crowns.

Even on the busiest days, we found an hour for afternoon tea. So when I was young, I understood the kitchen table as community, as space to share. Food, I learned, was a way to forge bonds. And ever since then, I’ve loved visiting farmer’s markets for the same reason:
because in the faces and the handshakes there, I can see a community developing its identity. But then I remember D.C. and I remember the migrant workers in California, and I remember that not everyone has a farmer’s market they can get to, or the time to spend bonding with neighbors over slow bartering. Maybe.

In 2010, Denver’s nonprofit urban gardening organization will build the city’s 100th community garden. And the DUG projects are seriously busting some stereotypes. In the gardens, suburbanites from Aurora and upper-middle class professionals from Rosedale looking for a hobby or a way to burn off workplace steam, work alongside East Asian and Somali refugees, former gang members, Mexican immigrants and parolees. People farm here to be reminded of the agricultural life of their former homes, to locate people they met in refugee camps, to earn fresh produce the only way they can afford it, to provide food for AIDS victims and homeless mothers, to work off community service hours. The garden transforms immigrant into community leader, refugee into small-business owner, connect across language barriers, income levels and criminal records.

Ana Chavez founded Denver’s Peace Garden as a memorial to her 16-year-old-son, a casualty of the early 1990s gang wars in East Denver. What was once meant to be a place of solitude and refuge from the violence raging outside has become an active force in the demolishing of that violence. Schools provide extracurricular activities for at-risk youth in the garden, bringing the children of Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants, many of whom have buried their friends to gang violence. Along with simply keeping the kids away from the streets where gangs would easily swallow them up, along with offering them a very real chance of survival by providing food and skills that can lead them away from the drug industry, the Peace Garden is a community. By giving kids an alternative to the familial ties a
gang has to offer, Chavez says, she teaches the kids that they are not foreigners in this city. That they belong here, that they belong somewhere. They develop ride in growing food, rather than initiation rites. Somebody wants them.

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Detroit has lost half its population in the last 50 years. The latest estimates from the city planning department suggest that there are around 103,000 vacant lots in the city. You could walk these blocks and see abandonment, see nothing more than old factory yards and empty sagging houses. Or you could choose something else. You could choose to see potential, the beginning of a revolution. Mari Gallagher estimates that about half a million Detroiters live in food deserts—so why not feed them? Non-profits have sprouted up, not just to reclaim abandoned buildings and start a few farmers’ markets, but to redesign their city in a way that solves both its problems at once, to transform loss into hope. Symbols of vacancy become satellites of natural beauty, sources of necessity, in a city suffering the loss of both. Discarded tires become pots, and lettuce grows in the dirt there. According to the founder of D-Town, one of Detroit’s urban gardening organizations, lifelong Detroiters are recodiing to the neighborhoods they would have left long ago if only they could have afforded it.

*Shit, they say, I can grow stuff, man. I can grow my own.*

What I see in urban farms in Detroit is the rebirth of a city after its collapse, but also the future of the country. We are entering, or have perhaps already arrived, in the age after oil, in the age after which it becomes impractical to ship most of our food supply from around the world. Detroit—who knew?—might offer us a model for feeding ourselves after
the bubble has burst, might be the first step along the post-industrial revolution. What I see in urban farms in Detroit, and Dorchester and East L.A. and Denver and Chicago are a bunch of people finally taking seriously the massive ethical responsibility of providing food for people. Farmers know how important this is. Parents know how important this is. What else do we have to show our love, sometimes, but food? What else do we need to survive as a community, but food?

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In a short documentary about gardening in Detroit, the director of Urban Farming said she has had residents of the neighborhood tell her that in any given season, they were literally surviving off the garden. How, she said, do you say no to feeding people? We have sprawling cities, parking lots on top of parking lots, empty lots, abandoned warehouses, miles and miles of concrete, and a country in which some people can’t afford to eat fruits and vegetables—urban farming seems to me to be the means for every end. Community gardens are springing up everywhere—in the middle of Chicago and Washington D.C’s food deserts. Minneapolis has one of the largest farmer’s markets in the country. Seattle named 2010 the Year of the Urban Farmer and changed zoning laws to accommodate backyard chicken-coop operations. Los Angeles and New York City are developing comprehensive local food plans.

Even if the charity of it doesn’t exactly pump up your bleeding heart, there is a practical, economic case to be made for urban agriculture. In 2009, Fortune magazine ran a profile of former American Express star broker John Hantz, whose newest investment project is for-profit commercial organic farms in Detroit’s vacant lots. In Brooklyn, a pilot program called Green Carts provides microloans and permits to take carts full of fresh, local produce
into food desert neighborhoods—providing mostly immigrants with small business ownership opportunities and combating obesity in urban environments.

Food gives us opportunities to feed more than our growing bellies. Kids are getting out of gangs and off drugs. Suburbanites are interacting with Somali-Bantu refugees. The Los Angeles local food movement has meant the marriage of Orange County’s political clout and the plight of the Mexican migrant worker, as the demand for local food by those who could afford it is leveraged into labor reform for farm workers. All because we took food out of the corporate warehouse and put it in our cities, in our backyards, took it from abstraction and microwave to local and personal. We’re getting better, fresher food, transporting it locally in a way that’s better for the environment, growing it in a healthy, sustainable way, improving our local economies, investing in our neighborhoods economically and socially, establishing political will and a new way of thinking about labor, class and community. Is it too much to suggest that maybe food is not the root of all evil?

~

What I learned at Shooting Star Organics is this: It’s really hard to be a farmer. You don’t make enough money—Rink told me that he decided to work part-time on the farm and part-time for his own distribution business when he figured out he wasn’t making full-time wages off his land. You have to put in long, long hours—nearly every night I was there, either Rink or Jenny was back out in the fields after dinner, after Charlie’s bedtime, watering or mowing or weeding. The work is painful. My back ached with radiating pain after just a few hours bending and straightening to put tomato seedlings in the ground. My knees split
from crawling along soil and rock. My palms blistered from hoe-weeding, my shoulders burned from hauling fifty pound bags of fertilizer back and forth across the field.

You need specialized knowledge about nature most Americans abandoned generations ago, about weather patterns and rain collection and soil nutrient cycles. You have to jump through hoops—one morning, Jenny spent four hours with the government organic certifier, for whom she organizes the farm’s entire purchasing line, keeping years of receipts for everything from fertilizer to seedlings in labeled filing cabinets. He told her she had the best organized system he’d seen. You have to do all this while raising your kid and working on Saturdays.

But I also learned that they love it. Both Rink and Jenny came from non-farming backgrounds, Rink born and raised in Chicago, Jenny on her way to a Masters in Psychology when she decided to take up farming. They were tenant farmers at first, living in a one-room house with a sleeping loft on the land until they could afford to buy it, before they could build the bigger house. On our tour of the farm the first day, Rink pulled back a black plastic covering one row of crops to reveal sprouting baby lettuces and asked “Isn’t that so pretty?” They both chose this life as the one they wanted.

On one of my last days at the farm, as Rink and I walked up and down the rows, one foot in front of the other, tossing squash seedlings to the soil, where we would later crawl along the ground and scoop palms full of dirt up to plant them, Rink stopped, resting the tray of squash plantings on his hip and asked, “You know what I love about squash?”

I smiled and shook my head.

“It’s so precocious,” Rink continued, returning to the rhythmic dropping. What he meant was that squash plants flower very quickly, taking only about a week from the day we
put them in the ground to blossom. To Rink, this plant was one of the best representatives of the cyclical nature of a vegetable farm, but I was struck by how human he made them. These plants could be described with the same adjectives a person might use to describe their kids. Though Rink has a son—who he loves, very much—he sees the plants as his too, not with the same level of love, but with the pride that comes from a powerful, long-term devotion.

That’s when I saw food-growing for what it was to Rink & Jenny—more than hard work, more than sore knees and sunburns, more than extra paperwork and no extra cash for health insurance. It’s farmer’s markets and shaking hands, it’s wind and sun and rain, it’s the reason for soil. It’s pretty lettuce and precocious squash. There is no evil here. Farming is as simple and beautiful as growing food for people to eat.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Do you feel that?* He turned to me and asked, tucking the brim of his camouflaged cap up an inch on his forehead. *How everything just got quieter?* I nod silently, solemnly, though it’s not completely true. I’ve been focusing on the trail in front of me, which is particularly rocky here, on the way my brand new hiking boots slip over the shards of mountain slick with pine needles and a vague lingering frost. I’ve just been trying to keep up.

*This is the imaginary dotted line in the woods. When I cross it, I know I’m in elk country.*

~

The morning hadn’t yet begun when we’d headed out, pulling on gear in the empty trailhead parking lot, loading the rifle by headlamp shine. I’d stumbled along the first few miles of the marked trail in darkness, skipping to keep up with his familiar, brisk pace and hoping my rain pants swishing as my thighs moved rapidly weren’t making too much noise. The sun rose gradually over the next few hours—not that I could see it. We were deep in the crease of a canyon in southwestern Montana, surrounded on all side by glacier-cut rock and centuries-old pines. The sunrise appeared to me only as a slow greying of the air I breathed, the dark purple-grey of six giving way to the fuzzed pale grey of seven and eventually the fogged mist of daylight in the mountains. Grey gave an ethereal quality to the day, hushed, the sounds of our boots muffled by a carpet of needles, the occasional swish of a branch against our jackets.
As we walked the first few miles, he told me about how hunting used to feel. Most of it’s gone now for him, he says, and he misses it. In the dark car on the drive to the trailhead, in the restaurant the night before, he crouched beside me, among the crowd, and I could sense he was testing me. I told him it wasn’t about the kill for me—that wasn’t why I was here. And he told me then that now, it’s as much about being in the woods and walking around as taking an animal.

On the trail, he told me it used to be an adrenaline thing, a-got-to-get-that-animal drive of problem-solving, a heart-pounding urgency, a competition. He misses that. But this is what he has now, instead.

Later, when we thought for a while the hunt was over and were walking straight down a steep ridge to find our way back to the hiking trail, he turned and said, we’re not really hunting right now. We’re just walking.

~

We left the trail about four miles in, veered off to the right and straight up a steep, rocky slope. The rocky debris grew slicker as we climbed and he told me this was how he knew there’d be snow up ahead. We cut back and forth across the mountain, lungs heaving, arms slicing through snapping branches, ankles turning as our feet slid from rock to uneven soil. We had to climb long and high, he’d told me already, to come down into the burned remains of the canyon from the north, so the animal—that’s how he spoke of it, as a single one, the mythic iconic animal—wouldn’t catch our scent on the southern wind.
As we scaled—as he scaled, and I scrambled up behind him—as our bodies leaned into the incline, my hands sometimes dusting the frosty soil in front of me for balance, he showed me things. The muted symbols the elk had left behind. He would pause, his voice hushed now as the sun bore through our heavy jackets, as we rose in altitude, and crouch slightly, point towards a patch of scuffed dirt. There he was. He spotted little clusters of pellets, or hoof prints in the crumble of a bit of snow and he could know the animal that way. When he pointed them out, I could see them. But if he hadn’t been there to show me, they would have remained hidden. He was tuned to the higher frequency of the hunter.

I knew this wouldn’t be the day I learned to stalk an elk. Why had I ever thought it could be taught in only one day? This was a lifetime’s work, to learn the woods.

~

When I said I just want to see what it means to hunt, I could see in the softening of his face, in his solemn nod, that I’d said the right thing.

When I’d lived here, in Montana, years earlier, I hadn’t understood what it meant to hunt. In this place where hunting is cornerstone, legend, the very reason for autumn, I had been an outsider, had never really considering the possibility that some people respected and ate the food they killed. I knew it happened. And as a distant theory, I could see it as sort of noble, as a ritual, as a way of honoring the sacrifice of the animal, engaging with it personally, in the ancient tradition of predator and prey. But when I saw it there in Montana, up in my face, real deerskin blankets and buffalo heads mounted in bars and dead bodies tossed in the backs of pickup trucks at gas stations and men with cold, bloody hands, it just
seemed awful. I sound like the judgmental, East Coast liberal they were all sure I was but it didn’t seem honorable. It just seemed like people liked killing stuff.

Until Maggie from the gift shop explained it to me as the thing she did with her dad.

Her father had given her a hand-carved skinning knife for her thirteenth birthday, and she thought of it as the place they got to talk and the way they connected with the place they loved. She’d been up to her elbows in intestine and she’d tasted elk liver and she and her dad carved barrettes for her hair out of the antlers, chipping the ivory like elephant tusks into wide, flat, slabs they could hot-glue to a metal clip she could wear to work at the gift shop.

I understood the idea of sharing a food ritual with my father—though ours involved pizza and watching basketball, the occasional toasted peanut butter sandwich or pot of tomato soup on a rainy Saturday afternoon—and I knew those precious hours a girl spends with her father matter especially in this messy world. I wasn’t won over immediately. But I began to see that hunting could be more than sport, more than a primal desire to pull a trigger, to watch blood pool out from a fatal gunshot wound, or a slit throat, more than a greedy lust for death. When I saw Maggie’s barrette, I began to see that how the animal died could matter to the people who killed it.

And now, almost exactly five years later, I’d come full circle. I’d returned to meat-eating as a way to live more intentionally. I’d worked on a farm. I’d watched a steer get slaughtered in a Buddhist’s packing plant. I was ready. I knew that in order to completely embrace this, to create of my diet a site for ethical choices that would fan out into the rest of my life, I was going to have to learn what it took to kill an animal. On its terms.
When we stopped for lunch, brushing snow off a log near the side of the slope we were climbing, I realized how tired I was becoming. My ears rang with the thump of exertion, my cheeks flushed with blood. I crouched on the log and ate peanut butter and jelly ravenously, to quell the lightheadedness, and he showed me how much further we had to go. From here, we could see the canyon, and he pointed down into it, to a patch of blackened trees that had burned years before. There, where the elk made their daybeds, high enough to ensure a thick blanket of snow to cool them as they slept, we’d find the bull he was after.

After that moment, after I’d had a chance to realize my lack of training, my exhaustion, my distance from the ritual that was unfolding for him, the climb became harder. Suddenly aware of my awkwardness, I heard every snapped branch under my feet; I flushed with embarrassment at the noisiness of my labored breathing. He pulled ahead of me easily while I willed my legs to lift lift lift in and out of the now-ankle-deep snow. He stopped and told me I was doing great for someone who’d come from sea level. For someone who’s come from sea level. I was hauling myself up by tree trunks and seeing little hypnotic worms around the edges of my vision when I saw that he’d stopped up ahead.

There they are. Elk tracks.

And that’s when we heard the gunshot.
Shit. Fuck. Our eyes met, our faces static and waiting. No second shot. He swore again, under his breath, turned from me slightly. That was our animal.

We hiked on a little, following the now easy-to-spot hoof prints in the snow. Hoof prints of another animal, a horse, danced in and out of the elk’s prints to form a wide, woven trail, something more obtrusive than anything I’d seen all day, obvious, the way it is when people walk in snow. In all the years I’ve been hunting around here, I’ve never seen another soul, not one person. We heard the whinny of a distant horse. I hate hunting with people. He showed me where the elk had first noticed it wasn’t alone, how its prints began to weave around trees, up and down the slope. He laughed and shook his head like you do at an old friend’s jokes, like when people hear a story and say Isn’t that just like Jim? The elk had toyed with them.

As we walked, I placed my feet intentionally in the elk’s trail, treading the same path as a dead or dying animal, as if our overlapping steps were some sort of ritual, though this wasn’t my kill, though we wouldn’t get an animal that day. But then we came to the place where they’d shot the elk, to the explosion of kicked-up snow and the dirt revealed beneath it, the charging downslope footprints. There was no blood.

And just down a ridge, he began waving, seeing the hunting party before I saw them, as he had the whole day. He swore under his breath again and then called cheerily, Congratulations!

~

I must’ve looked crazy to them, in my heavy rain pants and fleece vest beneath my winter coat, with a hat pulled down around pigtail braids and the black smudges of burned
tree char on my face. When I saw them I saw the hunters I’d imagined, the men with cowboy hats and blaze orange vests who’d ridden in on horseback and photographed themselves with casual arms draped over a dead and broken neck. The one with the blue sweater, who’d fired the fatal shot held a small hatchet in his hands—they prepared to butcher the animal—spread his arms wide, and said *Welcome to my kill.*

I remember the enormity of the animal, and the faint stuffy smell of its fur, damp with sweat and snow. I remember seeing the puddle of blood and thinking, this is where it all was. I remember its open brown eyes, wet with the glaze of death. I watched carefully its rear haunch, its massive chest cavity, not yet split open, fully expecting the lungs to heave once more, the foot to kick a last ditch effort at life. It remained still, and we left the three men to clean and pack the elk, and carry it out on horseback.

~

The Native American tribes of the Great Plains are sometimes called the Buffalo tribes, because the animal was so central to every aspect of their way of life. Though some tribes were fully nomadic, following the herds along their seasonal paths of migration, and others were semi-sedentary, raising crops in addition to hunting bison—all relied on the bison for food, clothing, shelter, decoration, crafting and spirituality. Before the tribes fully adopted horse culture in the early 18th century, they hunted and killed bison on foot, requiring large numbers of Indian hunters to move out early, surround a bison herd and drive it into a place where the animals could be most easily slaughtered. Sometimes the tribes would build v-shaped funnels, and corral the bison into an enclosed space, where they could be easily targeted with bow and arrow. A hunter dressed in the preserved skin of a bison, imitating the
call of the animal, could induce a stampede, and then direct the flow of the snorting, startled animals directly off a cliff, where sometimes hundreds of bison would fall to their death.

When I read accounts of Plains Indian bison hunts, I am struck by how similar they sound to large-scale, later century hunts. There may not have been gunshots or horses, but we can imagine that the bison were equally startled, to be willing to stampede off a cliff. We assume a level of fear. I can’t know whether it is more or less painful or desirable to be killed by a bullet wound or by smashing my skull on a cliff floor, my brain exploding out from inside, or to be crushed by a falling bison bull. Why, then, does it feel different? The weapons and circumstances may be different, but the fates of the animals are essentially the same—the bison end up dead in both stories.

The only answer I can come up with comes from what happens afterwards, from the results of the Indian bison hunt. To get optimum use out of the animal, the Native Americans has a specific method of butchering the animal, skinning down the back in order to get at the tender meat just beneath the surface. After the removal of this, the hatched area, the front legs would be cut off along with the shoulder blades to expose the hump meat as well as the meat of the ribs and the bison's inner organs. After everything was exposed, the spine was then severed and the pelvis and hind legs removed. Finally, the neck and head were removed as one. This allowed for the tough meat to be dried and made into pemmican, a mixture of fat and protein that was more easily preserved. In this way, each bison rendered as much meat as possible, enough to last a family an entire winter. After all this, the hunters would tan the hide for leather to sew into clothing and tipis, strip the sinew for bows, scoop out the fat and innards for cooking grease, dry dung to build fires, and even boil the hooves for glue.
This in-depth processing may just be reality—certainly these practices evolved from necessity of life on the plains. But there is a ceremony to it, the ritual of processing an animal so thoroughly as to become respectful. Maybe this suggests that the idea of how an animal dies is not limited simply to the conditions of its life while alive, or to the process of the hunt itself, or to the circumstances or the means of death, but also to the aftermath of the death. In order to fully own the reality of an animal dying for human consumption, perhaps we have to be willing to dig our hands in after the fact, to muddy around in the blood and sinew long enough and deep enough, to understand the possibilities inherent in its body. By refusing to leave any part of the animal behind, the Plains tribes honored the animal’s sacrifice, venerating its life enough to make good use of its death.

Elk, impossibly, were once plains animals, he told me. They roamed the Great Plains of the Middle West, alongside bison and other herd grazers. So they are grass animals, flat land animals, herd animals. But white people, as always disruptive, moved onto the plains and needed more and more land for themselves, tearing up grasses to plant fields, or to build houses, and the elk were forced farther and farther west until they had no choice but to adapt to a mountain climate. Their bodies developed thicker skin, heavy with fur. Their hooves hardened, their bones strengthened into a tougher skeleton, to better weather the tough climbs and treacherous stumbles of a ridge and canyon life. And their herds shrunk because there is so much less grass on a mountain’s stiff vertical incline, too little grass to support multiple elk families. Now, they graze in herds of four or five, just cows and calves, with bulls ranging separately. Despite the best efforts of geography and evolution, the elk couldn’t shake their communal lifestyle. No matter how small, they still roam in small herds.
He knew the rest of the elk’s group would have panicked, charged down the mountain to their safe, familiar bedding spots, and knew they would be impossible to hunt now. With the echo of a gunshot fresh in their animal brains, they wouldn’t let their guard down easily. And I was showing my exhaustion, dizzy and panting, so we decided to begin the hike out.

We descended along the nose of the ridge, across the elk’s canyon from our lunch spot, weaving back and forth out toward the edge, where he had seen his favorite, the prized big bull bedded down once. We followed the small herd’s frantic tracks away from the kill site—great swaths of dirt kicked up, like a car had barreled through the forest, staggering, intersecting, careening away from each other. Even I could see this. He showed me where some more sure-footed, older elk had found well-known escape routes, and where young, flustered elk had just spooked, knowing somehow instinctively they should run down.

He’d pulled the rifle up to his shoulder so many times I didn’t think much of it anymore except he fired it this time and the gunshot rang like it’d been fired in my skull. I watched, distracted, as the golden shell dropped to the soil and didn’t get my hands up to my ears for the second shot either.

When he turned to see if I’d seen the animal, his face broke into a wide grin at the shock in my expression. He spoke more softly than he had all day, told me we’d have to sit and wait. I was puzzled but compliant, thoughts bursting into my mind, wanting suddenly to talk, as I often do, to rehash the experience out loud with another person, to run over what
had happened, what we’d each seen, to share and to laugh. But instead we waited in
excruciating silence, so that the animal wouldn’t hear us and try to run. If it was wounded,
we wanted it to lie down and die right there, for it to be fast and painless and easier for us to
track to the kill site.

We’d come across the bull a few paces back, had seen him grazing casually out on
the very nose of the ridge we were descending. We hadn’t been looking. But there he was,
calm just as the footprints we’d found had begun to reveal, starting to relax from the memory
of the last kill. We froze and he fired, twice.

As we waited, he told me he wasn’t sure if he’d hit it, described the freeze and the
movement, how after the first shot, the elk had remained perfectly still, staring right in his
direction through the scope. But when he fired a second time, it started, an awkward lunge.
He couldn’t tell if it was hit or running, but he told me, your eyes don’t lie. Something about
the movement didn’t look right. He thought he hit it.

~

When it was time, we found the spot on which he’d shot the elk by a surprisingly
small amount of blood. We weren’t in snow, having descended far enough to come out of it
for a while, and we had to find and follow the blood trail to the animal across rocks and pine
needles and fallen tree branches.

Finally, I had a hunting skill. I could spot the blood trail with ease, some combination
of hyper-concentration and good up-close eyesight and color distinctions. We crept, hunched
over, staring intensely at the forest floor, and I would spin my head slowly, point here’s
some. And revel in his surprised, Jesus, because finally, I had found some way to contribute to the hunt.

We wove improbably around, watching the blood smear itself against a sagging tree, or loop back over itself. Clearly, the animal was panicked—a good sign. But after a few moments, he began muttering again, that this wasn’t nearly enough blood. Worst case scenario. A non-fatal shot.

Sometimes we had to touch the spot, to test whether that was a speckle of blood on that leaf or just the orange of fall beginning to pull the chlorophyll from the plant. Blood. I rubbed the familiar warmth between my fingertips, brushed it off onto my pants. I realized, kill or no, I would have the stain of this hunt on me now, permanently. Every now and then there would be a lurch, a gap in the steady but miniscule stream of blood. In one, he found a bone and swore again, a fragment of leg or shoulder that told him the bullet had ricocheted inside the animal’s body, probably not direct enough into the flesh to reach any vital organs.

After what felt like an hour, we hit snow and shortly after found a giant puddle, a wide ribbon of bright red blood. I thought we’d find the body any moment. But no. The elk had started to give in, had laid and rolled in the cold snow, and then had surged, a last evolutionary burst of life in him, to his feet. A few paces away there was another, smaller puddle where he had fallen again. But he had kept going.

~

In his book *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*, former cattle rancher Dan O’Brien writes about his decision to begin raising buffalo for slaughter on his South Dakota ranch. In the book’s final chapters, all of his ideals about raising grass-fed beef the way nature intended it
to be consumed come to a head, as he is forced to, of course, slaughter the buffalo. Though he is made slightly uncomfortable, having come to care for the animals deeply, he embraces the opportunity. He sees the way in which the animals die as a central part of his negotiation with nature, his responsibility for being a rung above the buffalo on the food chain.

O’Brien’s principles are based on the concept that there are two great forces that link all of existence to each other—the first is our eternal desire for life, and the second is a connective force, one that places us in a context, in relationship to the rest of the world.

In the spirit of the second, connective force, O’Brien makes the buffalo kill into a ceremony. He asks a friend suffering from the great loss of his son to perform the honor of killing the buffalo. He refers to the process as a harvest throughout, even comparing it once to the act of picking fruit, rather than as a hunt. He doesn’t pull the trigger, but instead chooses to watch. And when the corpses of five buffalo bulls are on the bed of a trailer, dragged behind his pickup on their way to the packing plant, he pulls off to the side of a road to burn sage over the bodies, a Lakota ritual to whisper a thank you for the sacrifice they made so that he could make a living.

We can’t turn away from the fact that animals die for us to eat. There are plenty of people, my former self included, who can’t accept that fact without contention—and so they choose not to eat animal meat. I don’t have a problem with that. But to ignore that it happens at all is, I think, to abdicate responsibility—to ignore that we are, in fact, part of a natural cycle of life and death. Ignoring the death of the buffalo, or of a chicken, is to ignore our own death. We will all die—as will all the buffalo, all the elk. To deny that is to forget that we are all still animals, caught in an intricate web of survival, a complex dance that is about more
than just life and death—about the quality of the life, about the conditions and dignity of death.

~

After at least two hours of following the blood trail, weaving through the dripping rivulet of life seeping from the elk’s body, we decided to give up. After the two puddles, the blood had virtually disappeared and he told me what the elk had actually been doing in the snow was packing the wound. Instinctive first-aid. Animals know to roll around in snow to stop the bleeding. He probably had a broken leg, and would limp for a while, but would find his way back to his herd and would be just fine.

He was determined to come back, to find the wounded elk later and take it, but we were losing light fast and wouldn’t have time to clean the kill anyway and needed to find the trail soon. So, exhausted and dejected, we walked away from the hunt. He told me he’d killed 21 elk in 22 years and had never, not once, lost an animal. I couldn’t help but feel like a bad luck charm.

In our erratic wandering after the trail of blood, like dogs, we’d ended up far from where we’d started and far from where we needed to be, tucked on a side slope near the back of the canyon we’d hiked up and around earlier. Our path out was in a rocky chute, covered with crumbling boulders and even that would only put us back on the trail, where we’d have another few miles—depending on where we hit it, before we made it back to the car. We were cold now as the sun began to set and my thighs quivered with exertion. My knees ached from the sheer inclines up and down. But we had no choice. Crab-sliding up and over rocks, ankles wobbling, slipping, catching our hands on bare rock, we kept going.
We emerged from the canyon an hour later, in the half-light scouring the landscape for anything familiar, to orient us back onto the trail. We waded across the creek and then back across it, scrambled on hands and knees up a mound of dirt and cheered when we discovered we’d hit the trail. We tied our shoes, put on our head lamps, knowing we’d need them soon, dug apples out of our pack and started the hike out. The hunt was over.

~

Some plains tribes ritualized the beginning of a bison hunt with a ceremony to honor the bison’s contribution, to reinforce their promise not to misuse its sacrifice. When the hunting outfit approached its first herd, the hunters would quietly encircle the herd and begin to chant, calling to the animals to come toward them. They believed that the bison would offer himself only to a hunter of pure heart. When the first animal began to drift from the herd, probably simply made curious by the sound, or wandering to a better patch of grass, the hunters took this as a sign of the bison offering himself in sacrifice for the good of the people, and the protection of his herd. The hunters would shoot and kill this animal, and leave the rest of his herd alone for the remainder of the hunt.

This is not to say that the Native Americans had it all figured out—this is not a story of noble savages living in harmony with nature, or of pure hearts. But even then, even among a people who lived and died by the same rules of nature as the bison themselves, they had to make up stories to explain why they should be allowed to kill an animal to eat it. And I think the stories we tell ourselves about our relationship with food animals matter. Those stories reveal what we value, reveal whether it matters to us how the animal dies, or that the animal...
dies, reveal how we will treat the animal once it’s dead. Most of all, the story, or whether we even tell one, reveals how we see ourselves—are we part of the same endless cycle of life and death, or are we on a different level of existence? These are not easy questions and they do not have yes or no answers—we have to create legend, to write story, in order to come to terms with our place within the animal world.

~

The night before, I’d met him for drinks at a restaurant where he’d been with a group of other people, and so we told the story of the hunt we had planned. Another writer there laughed and said this is your first time hunting and you’re starting with elk? That’s like learning to fly-fish with steelhead! I had no idea what he meant.

But later, I spoke quietly to the fisherman and he told me of how sacred fishing was to him. He said you stay focused on that animal. Sometimes there will be other people around and it won’t feel right—in the height of summer, everyone knows the good fishing spots—but when I’m about to take a fish, I look right down at the water and focus all my attention there and put on the blinders and block everything else out. That’s when everything slows down and fades away. And all the little things, like tying a knot (which he demonstrated with big, brown hands) and casting the perfect line (his arm gently moving through the air) become important. No matter how many people are around, it is a liturgy.

And those little actions, I said, are your prayers.
When we hit the car it had been dark for hours. It wasn’t until I sat down that I realized how freezing cold I was, feet soaking wet in the puddles inside my boots, muscles vibrating in sheer exhaustion, nothing left to give but warnings. I was done moving for the day. The drive back fades in and out of memory. He fed me chewable aspirin for my knees but didn’t take any for himself, saying his discomfort was on autopilot. Our headlights cut around the swerving mountain road out of the canyon and we spoke only in scraps.

One thing I’ll remember, I told him, is how little advantage it turns out a gun is. After hours of hiking, careful walking through woods, avoiding branch-snapping or rock-knocking, he got one shot off one time and missed from seventy yards away. The gun was the only chance he ever had at taking an animal, and that had surprised me.

And he told me this wasn’t how most people hunted. Mostly, he said, people get up before dawn, and hike in while the elk are out for their morning feed. They camp out, in a tree or lying down, load their guns and wait. They wait for the fed, tired elk to return to their beds for the day, and they fire at them, unaware. That, he told me, was a lot easier.

I laughed a little. I couldn’t imagine such a thing as easy right now. Yeah, he said, it’s a fuckin hard way to get meat.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When I moved to Iowa for graduate school, I had a pretty serious existential crisis. In my early twenties, I moved so frequently, hopping from coast to coast with stops in cities, ski resort towns, surf towns and old college haunts, that by the time I packed up the U-Haul again for Iowa, I began to feel ready to settle down in one place. But the Midwest had never been the place I imagined myself. Of all the schools I applied to, though four were in the Midwest, I dreamed about Pennsylvania, Oregon, Montana. Here I was, moving again just when I was beginning to get sick of it, and headed straight for a place I had little interest in calling home.

Years have passed since I moved here and, much to my surprise, I think I might stay in the Midwest. Though Iowa itself will probably not be my final destination, I’ve fallen in love with Minneapolis, Chicago and Omaha, and I can see myself making a home and a life here. If you’d told me three years ago I was going to end up a meat-eating feminist with an ex-quarterback boyfriend from Nebraska, I would have laughed at the idea that I could become “that” person. But one of the things I’ve learned is to never say never—and that the differences that separate one person from another, or one region from the next, are far less important than the human values and shared experiences that connect us. What I discovered in the Midwest was that finding community and connection was more about how than where. You have to choose the place you want to call home.

My boyfriend was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. Though, yes, he would insist I remind you, it’s a major metropolis, thriving with one of the biggest independent music scenes since Seattle in the early 90s, the heart of the place is Midwestern. He’s an athletic,
cultured guy, a great dresser who reads *The New York Times* daily, but he was corn-fed, grown on a steady diet of meat and potatoes. As a feminist vegetarian from the elitist East Coast, I made an unlikely match for him. But we work.

In being able to see past the distinctions between New England and Middle America, the cultural tension of “back East” and “out there,” we were able to find each other. He found a girl who loves cooking for him but insists on making her own *chili con queso*, rather than buying the processed kind, who forces him to eat vegetables with every meal. I got a guy who’s happy to come watch me perform in *The Vagina Monologues*, and who can grill a mean grass-fed steak for my birthday dinner. When we share the kitchen—whether standing out in the driveway with the charcoal grill and a couple of Fat Tires, or enjoying homemade bruschetta and a nice bottle of red—we remember all that we have in common.

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Food connects us to each other, and when we begin the process of weaving individual lives together, we create the elaborate tapestry known as community. Where food meets people, it’s easy to put your finger on the essence of a place. Every farmer’s market I’ve ever shopped at has its own distinct character, a flurry of booths and bartering, a sensory experience defined by the qualities of that particular place, brought to life in a sort of new urban-pastoral tableau.

Some places I’ve lived didn’t have much of a market—like Bozeman, whose weekly market at Bogart Park abutted the summer sounds of kids swimming in the municipal pool adjacent. I’d head there from work on Tuesday evenings and wander aimlessly with a cloth bag beneath the park’s arching concrete shelter, often picking up only a few herbs or a loaf of
bread. The booths are occupied more by craftspeople than farmers, because Montana is mostly cattle and wheat territory. I’ve bought jewelry and soy candles there, petted humane society dogs up for adoption and goats on display next to their cheese maker. But there was always live bluegrass, an irreplaceable component of summers in Montana. Sometimes I’d pack a bottle of wine and a blanket, buy some bread and cheese, and sit and watch small children swing in circles with their parents to the foot-stomping rhythm of the upright bass and banjo.

The downtown Ventura farmers market on Saturday mornings quickly became a weekly food-buying ritual for me when I lived in southern California. I’d walk the four blocks from my apartment and buy coffee and a pastry for breakfast and spend an hour wandering up and down the four or five rows of booths set up in a parking lot south of Main Street. When I returned to my apartment, I was only about twenty dollars lighter and weighed down with fresh cartons of dewy strawberries, one or two ripe avocados, a bag of knobby yellow potatoes, a half-pound of green beans scattered by the handful into a cotton sack, green, yellow, red, orange bell peppers, misty purple-red cabbage, knuckled carrots by the bunch. My proximity to the land of migrant workers made fresh, local produce cheap enough that I ate well.

While a market illuminates the seasonality of the produce, and therefore the climate of a place, it embodies more than that, too, by teaching us something about the character of the people who live there as well. The Ames, Iowa farmers market is held at the old train depot, a testament to founding of a frontier, to the transcontinental railroad on whose back this town was built. The Bedford, New Hampshire farmers market has a police officer on duty to direct traffic in and out of the gravel parking lot which is dotted with Audis and
Lexuses. In these details, we learn who our neighbors are, and what matters to them. For this reason, for the people, my favorite market by far is the one in Ithaca, New York.

A massive open-air wooden pavilion, built specifically for the market on the original wooden dock landing of Lake Cayuga, bustles with nearly 150 vendors selling everything from rhubarb to hand-woven black ash baskets to made-to-order crepes and Vietnamese food. The Ithaca market has it all: the vibrant produce grown by a swath of dedicated back-to-the-landers or their descendants who drive their biodiesel vans down from the eco-village to stuff bunches of carrots or heads of radicchio into cloth bags; the hippie artisans sporting dreadlocks or tattooed arms, sewing hammocks from hemp or making their own lavender soap; the new urbanite entrepreneurs, giving free samples of their latest Pinot Noir; a variety of ethnic food vendors that speaks to the city’s mixed cultural heritage, Tibetan, Mexican, Sri Lankan, Cuban; free steamboat rides up and down the length of Cayuga Lake.

I’ve spent hours at the Ithaca market, ridden the two miles on my bike from my purple house by the gorge and not been able to find a spot to lock up, so crowded are the many bike racks the city provides there. I’ve brought toddlers there on day trips, and laughed as they fed the ducks croissant and played with my neighbor’s Australian Shepherd. But I think I love the Ithaca market as much as I do not because it’s the best market, or has the most to offer either in terms of fresh produce or crafts, but because it’s the most perfect illustration of what Ithaca is, this wild chaotic city of ex-hippies and young professionals stuffed to the brim with Tibetan monks protesting on the commons, Christian communes running Yerba Mate shops and poetry slams at Juna’s Café on Friday nights. And the Ithaca market somehow manages, with art and nature and food, to communicate all that.
Farmers markets connect us directly to the place we live—both in terms of people and food. We learn what the soil of our own backyards is capable of growing and when. Barbara Kingsolver calls this idea of rediscovering seasonality “stalking the vegetannual.” According to Kingsolver, the growth process of a single plant—from leaf to flower head to fruit to shell to root—illustrates the entire growing season. It’s not natural for land to produce fruit in May, or leaves in October, and by buying our food locally, we see this natural cycle writ large across the booths at a farmers market.

This connection with the natural identity of our hometown is an integral value of the farmers market. But I think we learn even more about our community than what crops the land can grow there. We learn who our neighbors are and we learn what kinds of products are valuable to them. We learn what kind of music they like and we learn what age they tend to be, what they wear, and even how committed they are to our shared place. And learning all that about the people and the land around us is the first step to placing ourselves within that giant quilt, the beginning of finding our own identity within the fabric of a place.

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My youngest sister, Caitlin, and I fought all the time growing up, as sisters do. I was the bossy oldest sister, and commanded her and Meaghan around all day, directing them to start their homework after school and turn off Total Request Live before mom got home, nagging them about snacks, flashing my intelligence and love for reading and politics around at the dinner table, teasing them for not following world events with the same rigor as me. But for some reason, whether it was age or birth order or just personality, Caitlin and Meaghan ended up with a much closer relationship than I have to either of them. This is a
reality that’s never bothered me. I just figured I spent so much time acting like a miniature adult while we were growing up that the two of them bonded over their mutual interest in salsa dancing while I was creating my own independent study in Shakespeare.

But now that we’re all grown adults, off in the world and into our careers, I am forced to see Caitlin in a new way, as a remarkably self-assured professional woman. And because her career is cooking, I am also forced to admit the ways in which she possesses much more knowledge than I do. Caitlin graduated a few years ago from the Culinary Institute of America and got a job right away at Disney’s Epcot Center, working in the catering department. She plans menus and creates dishes. Her specialty is Baking and Pastry, and she spends her days decorating magnificent wedding cakes, carefully sculpting hundreds of chocolate Mickey Mouse ears, blistering her fingers slicing 1600 lemon bars for a corporate event, and doing live cooking demonstrating at Food & Wine festivals. She’s been on the Food Network’s Dinner: Impossible twice, and once, off camera, was told she was working too fast. The host told her to slow down so he could yell at her—because it makes for better television.

What I’m trying to say is that Caitlin totally impresses me. I’ve always envied and admired her dedication in the kitchen, her passion for her craft that doesn’t end when she goes home at the end of a work day. But beyond my awe of her, a funny thing has happened since I’ve started writing this book—Caitlin and I have something to share now. Suddenly, I have something to talk to my whole family about—to anyone about, I’ve found. I never had a strained relationship with my family. We’re all very talkative people and have always managed to get by. But now we share a passion for food. My mother and I cook together and exchange recipes when I’m in New Hampshire. I email her for advice on the right amount of
cheese to include in a quiche. We both subscribe to cooking magazines. Even when we’re not cooking or eating together, we’ve found a way to connect through our shared passion for food.

In fact, every single time I’ve tried to explain to someone what I’m writing about, we’ve ended up sharing food memories for hours. In Mineral Point, Jenny took me for girl’s night out at the local bar to spend a few hours drinking beer with women who were otherwise strangers to me—potters and farmers and counselors—all of whom had food stories for me. One had been a vegetarian off and on because she’d grown up in Eastern Colorado, downwind of the cattle feedlots. At a writer’s conference this past summer, my roommate and I bonded over dinner as she taught me the nutritional values of cactus, and now plan to write a cookbook together. I’ve heard stories of mushroom hunting and fly-fishing and raw dieting. We all have something in common in the kitchen. We don’t have to have the same stories—the point of connection is that we all have a story. Food gives us common ground, a subject of conversation, yes, but also the foundation for friendship, the sharing of values.

And perhaps, most importantly, my new pursuits in food helped me discover that finding a kitchen community didn’t have to mean sacrificing these ideals. I found a new way into the family kitchen. I learned that people were interested in trying something new, in learning more, in hearing my way of seeing and thinking and cooking. I spent last Thanksgiving in Nebraska, my first major holiday with another family. I got to share in their holiday food rituals—almond champagne—and to hear their family stuffing recipes. Scott’s Mom made garlic steamed asparagus for the Italian in me.

About a month before the holiday, Scott asked his mom whether she’d like us to bring the turkey. *We know a guy*, he told her. She said sure, why not? And so, against all
Midwestern stereotypes, we ate a free-range, no-antibiotic, humanely-raised turkey for Thanksgiving in Nebraska.

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Elitist is a word people have often leveled at me as an insult. I’ve been an intellectual, an activist and a vegetarian for large parts of my adult life, so I’ve gotten used to people’s misperception that I think of myself as somehow their moral superior. My old college friend Bob, the one who once told me I’d die young as a vegetarian, was one of a handful of people to tell me, either directly or indirectly that I was kind of a snob for being a vegetarian. Once, on a road trip back from New Jersey, some friends and I stopped at a McDonald’s to grab dinner. As I scanned the menu for the scant vegetarian options I knew must be there, somewhere, in the form of a grilled cheese or a baked potato, I listened to my friends order what genuinely sounded like delicious options to me at the time—milkshakes, McRibs, double cheeseburgers, fries. When it came my turn to order I sighed a little in frustration and told the cashier, “Just a side salad, please.”

Bob scoffed, barely attempting to hide it beneath his breath and rolled his eyes at me. “You think you’re better than us. You think you’re too good for this stuff, don’t you?”

I shrugged Bob off then, but the short answer is yes. Yes I do. And most dieticians, nutritionists, chefs and eaters agree with me. We don’t eat McDonald’s or Burger King or Wendy’s because we think it’s good for us—we do it because we don’t have any other equivalent options. We do it because it’s right next door. We do it because we can get a whole meal for the five bucks we’ve got left in our wallets. We do it on road trips, when there are no kitchens or grocery stores, when there’s no time for a sit-down meal. We do it
because we’ve only got five minutes to eat before we have to change uniforms and get to our second jobs. We do it because it’s the cheapest, the fastest, the closest. I was one of the lucky few who could afford to decide I was too good for that choice.

But I didn’t become a vegetarian because I’m an elitist. I want everyone to have the same options I know I’ve been lucky to have my whole life—the option to buy what you want, when and where you want, and the option and education to cook it so it tastes good and is good for you. I’m not naïve enough to think that’s the world we live in. I understand that people who think of vegetarians—or organic shoppers, or locavores, even patrons of Trader Joe’s or other natural-chain grocers—as elitist snobs think that way because in this world, organic, local vegetables are more expensive and harder to come by.

But the idea that I’m an elitist because I want healthy food is ridiculous. It’s misdirected anger. Be angry at the absence of grocery stores. Be angry at the proliferation of fast food restaurants. Be angry at the system that prevents low-income minorities from having the choice to buy organic vegetables instead of a bacon double-cheeseburger. But don’t take it out on the Eric Scholssers and vegetarians of the world.

Because I want everyone to be a part of my new world order. I want a system that allows anyone the option to buy organic, one that allows anyone who wants to eat meat a safe and humane way to get it, and allows anyone who doesn’t want to eat meat local, sustainably-farmed produce. I want a system where we all know where our food comes from, what it took to grow it, what produce will taste best because it’s in season and how to cook it when you get it home. I want a system where the good food costs less and where we all have a little more time to spend on it in the kitchen, or eating it with our families.
I want a world in which everyone, even if they live in Southeast D.C. or Roger’s Park, Chicago, can walk a few blocks to a farmer’s market and learn what I learned at the Ithaca Market: that food is the way we navigate our community. It’s our access point to the natural landscape somewhere just outside our city, and it’s our means to understand the rotating cycle of the seasons. It’s the fiber of our bodies, of our children’s bodies, and the pillar of our health. It’s the same thing my Nona knew when she made us all cram around the dining room table even if it meant dragging folding chairs out from the closet and bumping elbows as we passed the lasagna. Food is where a community comes together, and you shouldn’t be left out of that landscape just because of where you live, how much you make, or what color skin you have.

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I believe strongly in participation. Committing to make those food options available to everyone means, for me, investing in the options I have the luxury of being able to afford. It also means working for the political reforms that will be necessary to put farmer’s markets in all major cities, to grow food in backyards, to keep healthy food affordable and pesticide-ridden, antibiotic-injected food off the shelves completely. To me, that is a strong moral cause, an ethical argument in favor of eating meat—because only when we lucky few invest in this positive system, can we make it available to everyone.

But an animal still has to die in that system, and not everyone can stomach that. There is a deeper, spiritual question at stake in the discussion of animal death. Several major world religions advocate various principles of vegetarianism for spiritual purposes. Hindus, for example, abstain from meat-eating for three main reasons. The first is _ahimsa_, or the
principle of nonviolence. From this follows a necessary, but controversial idea that animals, as well as humans, are entitled to be protected from violence. Whether you follow this kind of diet because you’re Hindu or Jainist or just an animal-lover, the underlying idea is that all creatures have some degree of life and are endowed with the right to that life. From ancient times, humans have struggled with the idea of whether or not we are parallel to animals on some spectrum of existence. We’re just trying to avoid causing any more suffering.

The only way we know a human experiences pain is noise. We tend to make a lot of it when injured. Luckily for us, other humans can communicate with us to identify the source of the pain and to chart its progress. But does the fact that an animal can’t tell us it’s in pain lessen the suffering? Ethicists argue no—because an infant can’t do it either. A baby may cry and flail its limbs when it tumbles into the corner of the coffee table, but is this significantly different than the way a chicken squeals and flaps its wings when debeaked?

Most of us have seen an animal suffer, whether in the grainy footage of a PETA undercover video or in the whines of our pets as the vet performs a rectal exam, in the hiss and mewl of your cat when you accidentally step on her tail. I doubt future serial killers would find it quite so enthralling to inflict pain on animals if they didn’t feel the actions produced some sort of negative reaction. But the question of how animals experience pain and to what extent they do is a valid one for those of us who would like to minimize animal suffering.

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When I toured Bartlet’s slaughterhouse in the summer of 2010, I watched a cow get killed. I’d interviewed Bartlet the week before, and I knew his history. I knew that Bartlet
had been a vegetarian for a long time, for spiritual reasons. I knew that he started eating fish again while studying yoga and martial arts in India, as a means of strengthening his physical body for the mental struggles of meditation and enlightenment. And I knew that he’d bought the slaughterhouse as it was closing out of a desire to do good in the world. Back home in Wisconsin, he’d been frustrated with the lack of local, sustainable and humanely-raised meat. So he decided to make it available by running a slaughterhouse that would provide a place for animals raised the ethical way to die ethically, too.

I stood under the sign on the slaughterhouse wall that read *We Honor These Animals, for By Their Death, We Gain Life*, and I watched the invisible punch of the bolt gun through the steer’s head. I saw it crumple to the ground, then kick and thrash with what looked like a seizure, though I knew it was unconscious. But I didn’t get sick. I didn’t feel queasy, or terrified. Tears did not come to my eyes.

When I told Scott this story later, and he asked me what my emotional response was, my answer was a surprised, *well, not much*. I couldn’t figure it out. I walked into the slaughterhouse that day fully prepared to have a profound spiritual experience, to learn what it really meant that animals died for me to eat.

I figured out why the bolt gun didn’t hit me in the gut a few weeks later, when I re-watched the documentary *Food, Inc.* In the early moments of the film, the crew tours an industrial chicken house contracted by Tyson with the female farmer who operates it. She walks among the chicken, picking up the dead ones from where they’ve collapsed under the weight of their own oversized bodies, tossing them into the lowered bucket of a bulldozer. And the camera finds one chicken in the process of dying, its broken legs kicking wildly, its
massive chest rising and falling rapidly, trembling with the spasms of something, maybe a heart attack.

I burst into tears, right there on the couch of my apartment, miles and years away from this dying chicken. And I understood why. I didn’t feel this sobbing, tearing sadness in the slaughterhouse because there was no injustice to it. I stood and watched removed because I saw only the reality of life and death. But in the film, I saw a death that should not have happened.

The truth is we can’t know, and may never be able to, whether or not an animal suffers, or how. But I’ve seen the frantic kicking of a half-dead deer on the side of the road. I know what pain looks like because I feel it, and when I see it happen, I can tell the difference between the unavoidable and the unfair. It’s telling that even the U.S. Department of Agriculture (not exactly a bleeding-heart organization), in their laws protecting animal studies, defines a "painful procedure" as one that would "reasonably be expected to cause more than slight or momentary pain or distress in a human being to which that procedure was applied." We know it when we see it.

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I explored religious, cultural and ethical dictums against eating meat to find some answers—to try and discover what about killing animals for food made humans so uncomfortable, to figure out whether or not, ultimately, I thought it was right. But what I discovered was that even philosophers had to draw their own lines. The rules created for us to live moral lives are always subjective social constructs designed to implement abstractions. Behind those rules lie the common values we hope we all share.
On the one hand, some of the ethical frameworks seem to espouse a duty or obligation to protect the voiceless among us. I’ve always supported the idea that just because something can’t speak for itself, doesn’t mean it shouldn’t have rights—the same notion makes me an avid supporter of wildlife refuges. I decided I do believe all living creatures have an inherent right to life, but I also know that we all die, every last one of us, whether we want to or not, and very few of us get to choose how that happens. Most of us try to minimize suffering and give thanks for the life that came before the suffering, and I was prepared to reconcile the thought that if an animal died with honor and as little conscious suffering as possible, eating its body could be a way to give value to its life.

In Montana, the night before I went hunting, when I spoke to the fly-fisherman about why I was writing this book, he told me he thought catching and eating meat the ethical, sustainable way was more honest and more morally correct than being a vegetarian. He said people who thought vegetarianism was the solution were willingly putting on blinders—unless they never drove a car, or bought a foreign-made article of clothing, or used chemically-produced body products, they were causing suffering, too.

_We all kill a little_, he said. _The least you can do is look at it._

~

Peter Singer, author of the formative text *Animal Liberation*, argues the utilitarian ethical approach to the consideration of eating animals. The mantra of the utilitarian is “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Acts that benefit large numbers and harm only a few are moral, while acts that harm large numbers for a comparatively small benefit are immoral. Much like the religious doctrines of spiritual retribution for immoral living, the principle of
utility in ethics is pragmatic. The act is judged by its consequences, not any inherent morality.

Since the ethical principle of utilitarianism is to minimize suffering to the absolute maximum extent possible without causing other suffering, eating animals is immoral. The eating pleasure of a few humans (because we have options for food other than animals and would not starve) does not outweigh the deaths of the many animals required. It’s the idea of an equal exchange—whether or not what I get in exchange for the death of the animal could possibly justify the fatality. In most of these discussions, philosophers agree the pleasure of a non-starving human was not justification enough. Here is where I have to disagree.

Because what I’ve seen of living animals on real, small farms and what I’ve learned about corporate connections, environmental degradation, and human suffering in the food system suggests to me that the way an animal is raised and killed for food implicates itself in much more than a meal. How the animal is raised impacts the ground on which it lives, the soil and the water and the air. This is the nature of the land, which touches the community of the farm and animal, not just environmentally, but economically. The practices on a farm and their pricing affect whether a community has enough jobs, which affects whether or not a person will be able to afford to eat. Whether or not someone will buy that animal to eat impacts the farmer and how much his workers get paid and their labor conditions. Eating an animal raised sustainably can have a serious positive influence on the eater’s health, preventing them from eating processed food, toxic chemicals, high fructose corn syrup. Raising an animal the right way can sustain the earth’s life; eating an animal raised the right way can sustain an individual’s life.
For some people, the question of whether or not to eat meat will always be a purely
animal-rights issue, and I can respect that. Some people can’t get their mind around the
death, and those people shouldn’t eat animals. But I can’t help but see the same question as
an environmental issue, a labor rights issue, a fair trade issue, an issue of our global
community’s economic, environmental, and human progress. Looking at all these ethical
instructions reinforced for me the idea that we all have to decide on the rules for our own
lives, and that we are all striving for the same basic idea—a way for humans to live in
harmony with the rest of the world. For me, eating a hamburger doesn’t have to run counter
to those ideals—it can be a way to invest in them, to practice them every day, with every bite
I take.

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One afternoon, on my trip to Africa with my mother, she and I returned to the Mensah
family house after a morning tour of Bechem’s School for the Deaf. We had no plans for the
rest of the afternoon, and as we lingered over fruit juice and cooled ourselves under the
ceiling fan, my mother remembered it was Monday.

“Adjoa’s bread baking day,” she told me. “Let’s go to the kitchen.”

We paced down the house’s single hallway, painted blue, through a screen door to the
outdoor back patio—a walled-in concrete-floored area where Adjoa did laundry, pounded
cassava, and stored the tin they were gradually accumulating for the roof they hoped to
eventually build. In the corner of this makeshift backyard, in a small room, separate from the
main house, stood Adjoa’s kitchen. We peered tentatively around the open doorway.
“Come in! Come in,” Adjoa told us, bare arms waving enthusiastically, white sleeveless shirt flapping. She hustled us into the kitchen but vehemently refused our offers to help, clicking her tongue and clearing a spot for us on a pair of wooden benches. I straddled a bench and sat and listened, as my mother and Adjoa chatted like old girlfriends, while Adjoa’s strong hands quickly rolled the batches of dough into loaves of bread for the oven.

Along one wall of the kitchen, two open-door ovens stood side-by-side. In the back of the kitchen, bags of flour lined an entire wall, stacked three or four high. Adjoa explained that she bought them in bulk whenever she was in Kumasi because she couldn’t get to the city too often. Her operation had become so popular she needed pounds of flour every week, making and selling more than 100 loaves of bread to individual families and businesses in the village. But we weren’t in the kitchen to cook, or to eat any of the bread. We were there for information.

All week, my mother had been worrying about Adjoa. Since her husband was new to his post at St. Joseph’s College, there had been some tension in the village, and while my mother lived with her, she watched Adjoa struggle to be accepted by the other housewives of the campus. In Bechem, Adjoa was the rich out-of-towner. My mother had completed her stint as a volunteer about a year before this trip, and since we’d returned to Bechem, my mother sensed something had happened, that the tension between Adjoa and the other women of the community had come to a head. Adjoa’s eyes had welled up with tears when she saw my mother, and Adjoa had refused to go to church on campus, choosing instead to walk the two miles into town for mass.
Mom told me that, in the year she lived here, she and Adjoa bonded in this kitchen, cooking together, that this is where they become more than host and elite guest, where they became friends. She knew if we visited Adjoa in the kitchen, she would talk to us.

My mother’s instincts were right. Petty dramas had played themselves out in the year since she’d left, in the form of rumors about Adjoa’s faithfulness to her husband. A young man that worked delivering meat pies for Adjoa had talked big to some of his friends about a (nonexistent) affair between Adjoa and himself, and people believed him. Adjoa was deeply ashamed but indignant that anyone would ever think so little of her as to believe him, and felt that a rift had been created that could never be repaired. She retreated into her bread-baking, had given up on making friends in Bechem, was waiting for Mr. Mensah to be transferred again. She sighed and looked up and my mother and me and shrugged.

“What more can I do?”

On this trip so far, I had felt such a rush of complex emotions that I remained quiet and distant most of the time. Torn between a writer’s desire to observe everything, to gather every last detail for future compositions and the stark sense of guilt that accompanies that desire when placed within the context of such abject poverty, I lingered back a few steps behind everything, watching and waiting for something to make itself apparent to me. I memorized—faces, smells, conversations. My mother encouraged me more than once to pipe up, to ask some questions, take some notes, but for the most part, I was paralyzed by the sense that such behavior would be somehow inappropriate, colonizing. But sitting there in that kitchen, watching a woman from the other half of the world brought nearly to tears by the carelessness of other people’s opinions, I felt a powerful connection. I had been Adjoa.
Who among us hasn’t had their feelings hurt by someone else’s thoughtlessness? For the first time in Africa, I spoke without being asked a direct question.

“You can offer them this bread.” I told her. “You can keep offering them this bread, until they take it.” My eyes were wet then and they are even now, as I write this. Because what I meant was that food had the potential to heal these wounds. I’d seen it over and over again my whole life, even without realizing it. Food can bring us together in ways we never imagined possible. Eating can bridge the distance between places and politics, cooking finds a way to unite unlike ingredients. At the moment you think you can’t reach the other— whoever they are, whether of another sex, another race, another country, or another life altogether—remember that everyone eats. The kitchen is a place where magic happens. We all sit down at a table together and eat.
NOTES

CHAPTER TWO

16 “Giant metal chutes”: The images described in this chapter are all taken from the film “Meet Your Meat.” Dir. PETA. <http://www.goveg.com/factoryFarming.asp>


CHAPTER THREE

27 “When Hurricane Floyd hit…”: All information in this chapter regarding Smithfield and Hurricane Floyd was taken from Jeff Tietz’s article “Boss Hog.” *Rolling Stone*. 2006. Reprinted: <http://www.truth-out.org/043009S#1>

New developments since the writing of this book: Several major agri-businesses have successfully sued the Environmental Protection Agency, challenging the EPA’s legal ability to mandate that a meat producer obtain a Clean Water Act permit before polluting waterways with manure: <http://civileats.com/2011/03/24/the-epa-cleaning-up-crappy-water-since-1970/>

29 “Sodexho, the 22nd largest employer in the world…”: All Sodexho information from the “Clean Up Sodexho” advocacy campaign run by the Service Employees International Union: <http://cleanupsodexo.org/>


CHAPTER FOUR


“The Center for Science in the Public Interest recently released a chart…”: View the chart on the Center’s website at <http://www.cspinet.org/reports/chemcuisine.htm>

CHAPTER FIVE


“In the 19th century, bison were hunted…”: Historic information on buffalo hunts in this chapter gathered from William T. Hornaday’s The Extermination of the American Bison, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.

“Michael Perry has written that the land…”: The original quote is “The land takes you back. All you have to do is show up. Finding your place among the people, now, that’s a different proposition.” Population 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time. New York: Harper Perennial, 2002. 111.


CHAPTER SIX


“A series of polls conducted…”: The polls on the distribution of housework were in a series of surveys conducted by *the Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University on contemporary issues. The pertinent findings to this chapter were reported by Richard Morin and Megan Rosenfeld in the article “With More Equity, More Sweat,” on page A1 of *the Washington Post* on March 22, 1998. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/gender/gender1.htm>

CHAPTER SEVEN


CHAPTER NINE


“the nutritional requirements of modern humans were probably established…”: All information on the evolution of the human diet in this chapter Neil Mann’s article, “Dietary lean red meat and human evolution,” European Journal of Nutrition 39.2 (2000): 71-9.

CHAPTER TEN


“most animals were not designed to eat corn…”: Pollan, Michael. The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals. New York: Penguin, 2006. 77-79.

“The government began stabilizing the price of corn.”: All information in this chapter on the history of corn and American agriculture also comes from The Omnivore’s Dilemma, p. 48-56.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Recently, a friend sent me a chart…”: This chart was made by Phil Howard, an assistant professor of Community, Agriculture, and Recreation and Resource Studies at Michigan State University, for GOOD magazine. It appeared in the March/April 2008 issue of GOOD and can be viewed online here: <http://awesome.good.is/features/009/009buyingorganic.html>

“Horizon Organic’s large-scale, industrial dairy…”: Information on Horizon’s practices and the reaction from organic consumer organizations can be found in the
article “Suppliers of organic milk draw criticism” by Mark Chediak of The Orlando Sentinel. <http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2006-08-17/business/ORGANIC17_1_organic-milk-organic-dairy-aurora-organic> The article mentions that the USDA is investigating possible violations; none were found. The practices described in the article are within current USDA regulations.


CHAPTER TWELVE


CHAPTER THIRTEEN

154 “On his (recently-canceled) television show…”: This description refers to the pilot episode of Jamie Oliver’s “Food Revolution” from ABC studios.

Update: Thanks in part to Oliver’s winning of the 2010 TED award, ABC has renewed the show for at least a second season! Visit the show’s website here: <http://www.jamieoliver.com/us/foundation/jamies-food-revolution/home>

CHAPTER FOURTEEN


CHAPTER FIFTEEN

177 “...Janet A. Flammang suggests that second-wave feminists...”: This is my own summary of just a part of Flammang’s point, found in her book The Taste for Civilization: Food, Politics, and Civil Society. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.


CHAPTER SIXTEEN


193 “In 2010, Denver’s nonprofit urban gardening...”: All information in this chapter on the DUG projects originally came from the article “Denver busts urban farming stereotypes” published on the website of Grist in June 2010. The article was written
by a team of researchers whose work has now been developed into a book on urban farming entitled *Breaking Through Concrete*, forthcoming in 2011 from UC Press. Read the original article here: <http://www.grist.org/article/2010-06-07-denver-urban-farms/>


CHAPTER SEVENTEEN


CHAPTER EIGHTEEN


“…the utilitarian ethical approach to the consideration of eating animals…”: This chapter includes my paraphrasing of Singer’s well-articulate, complex argument, which can be found in its entirety in his book, Animal Liberation. New York: Random House (1975).