

## Serving Suggestion

### Grandma

"This is just a suggestion," Grandma whispers with an eyebrow raise, during our cracker snack time in her yellow Formica-laden kitchen. "But you need to eat without your fingers ever touching your lips." Even though it is snacktime, it is always china plate time with her. I pop white crackers into my mouth, then follow up with a cheese piece. She says that is not ladylike. "It is not ladylike to place a whole cheese piece in at once. When you are older and eat in front a man, on a date, my suggestion is to smile a bit while your fork enters your mouth, and chew completely before talking. And I know you like hearing yourself talk, but don't let every thought you have come flying out of your mouth." I ask, "So what should my date eat like?" She explains that while need some manners, they don't have to worry about their countenance like we do. Implying that "we" is all women. We must keep both attractiveness and manners in mind. She serves the crackers with a wooden-handled cheese slicer, and suggests that I serve cheese only this way, because the slices are thin, and less fattening. Her willowy, cat tail reed body was dutifully bound to food but also restriction. From the farmland of Oklahoma, she prided herself on frugality and living "close to the bone" - prairie dust and endless vegetables being the only things in abundance. "This is one snack is not in the recipe box," she says, pointing over to a scratched wooden index card box with over 100 recipes in her penciled careful cursive. She tells me they are for me, when I marry, on repeat, over and over, every visit. Each card has a serving suggestion at the end: Serve hot. Serve with sprinkled cinnamon. Serve with an olive on the top. A dollop of whipped cream. A sprig of mint. Serve with a smile.

### Mom

The aisle with Rice-a-Roni and boxed au gratin potatoes was the one we visited every trip to her favorite grocery store. It was in the very middle of the store, where the "dollar-stretching deals" were lined up. You could actually have a mini Dollar Store feeling inside one aisle of a larger grocery. Mom said that most of the grocery stores had all their items of various prices scattered through the store, so that women (I never saw men shopping, except for a single milk carton, and never with a cart) would impulse buy. It made my mom angry that she had to look so hard for all the deals, in every store but that one. And her coupons! The pennies saved! That was a laborious task, but she had a rhythm about it – taking them down from the fridge magnet in their worn envelope, putting the ones in front with items she really needed, tossing the ones that were expired, then carefully placing the envelope in her purse so they would stay flat. In the aisle, I would try to get her attention, to ask what I could reach for, but she would be squinting at the expiration dates on each coupon, as if she hadn't looked several times already that week. She had this frugality worship etched into her from childhood and was convinced of the premise that one could save themselves wealthy. I loved being a grocery helper – picking up the ketchup bottle if it was on a low shelf and listening carefully to which one to select. Since I couldn't read well enough to go by name. I felt so important reaching up to the correct Rice-a-Roni on sale box, the flavors indicated by color, a small rectangle of green or blue or yellow imposed upon the San Francisco red background. Chicken. Beef. Broccoli Cheese. 39¢ Rice-a-Roni and Betty Crocker Potatoes Au Gratin made it to our basket every time, coupon or not. Two words that I could not yet read appeared next to the potatoes photo: "Serving Suggestion".

## Dad

Grocery visits with dad were like a running commentary on consumerism and cultural inequity and nutritional science. He did the shopping when mom got a real college degree and a real job. I asked him exactly what “Serving Suggestion” meant on the cover of boxes, like Jiffy mix, with a melted butter pat, and even pasta with a steaming tomato sauce over it. As if we might think the box contained butter or marinara. The food industry folks had to make it clear, I figured. Seemed like it was two words claiming the obvious. He responded, “That is designed for women to get ideas for presenting food. Also, lawyers were hired to make sure no one thinks the photo is how it will come out in the end.” I thought, “Really? They think that women need little cute suggestions to make food presentable, as my grandma sweated to do with things like actual salty bacon carefully sprinkled on top of a bowl of steaming peas?” Dad said I was smart to ask and to see through the advertiser’s attempt to create appeal through photogenic product promotion and eye-catching hunger-inducing pull. Or something like that. Dad couldn’t help himself, using big words and letting me swim in them, often understanding a sliver of the word’s meanings. We had some money now, I guessed, because he was out of school and teaching at a college, but we still went to the cheap aisle of the grocery stores. And no restaurants. Those were for extravagant money-wasters. Those were places that people went who were obsessed with Presentation. Plating. Serving Suggestions.

## BFF

Bicycle sweat, inside jokes, and Mary Jane taffy coat our skin and glue us together. Summer is endless and we don’t know the day of the week or the time of day. We follow sunlight – using our bicycles as wings to chase it. We eat sticky sno-cones and call it lunch, from our saved-up allowance or stolen coins from my brother’s jeans on his bedroom floor. Sometimes we high-tail through the alleys and the low-income housing burrows that we have been told not to venture into. Or we pedal through the cemetery and sing loud camp songs. And often enough we land in the air-conditioned *Crate and Barrel* to pee and watch the beautiful people talk about color palettes for their kitchen. Enormous heavy tables show off their wooden glory and showcase serving suggestions of plastic fruit. We have questions. Why there are three forks at every place setting. Who needs matching napkins that are thicker than the fabric of our shorts? What could possibly live on this tiny plate? How could a glass that narrow hold much of anything? Back on our bikes, we fantasize being the creator of such a table of delight and indulgence, a serving goddess, while also whispering how pretentious it seems, and vowing never to wait on a husband. Vigilance against the seduction of food prison and wifedom, while also dreaming of that perfect life, on our bicycle ride home.

## Monks at the Silent Retreat Center

Tiny bowls of dal steam up into our faces after an arduously long morning of following pathways of air into my damn nostrils and focusing more than I ever have on my knees and my nasal passages. Simple lentils, with no serving adornments. Not a single sprig of parsley. Nor a cracker. 3 hours and 17 minutes of butt on the floor and the anger and hunger rising up in me wants a food item with crunch. My nervous system is on fire and wants to devour something, or run the 1.3 mile to the road to escape this deafening silence. Crisp, clear hunger pangs shimmy up through my organs as I hover over the smell of so much nourishment in one single bowl. Crunch deprivation. Just bread in round loaves thickly sliced without machinery in the center of each wooden table. No words. No eye contact. Dal and noses. Cravings come and go, for a peach, a date, a scoop of ice cream, sugar in my green tea! But no, lukewarm water and the same tea all day long, with that acrid smell of rotting twigs and no caffeine apparent to me even though it promises such. Serving is simple. The only suggestion, in serving, is to be simple and frugal, but not my mom's kind of frugal. And eating here is more like Grandma's words of advice. Small bites. Chew thorough. And dad would love the absence of corporate powers and packaging waste. Service and serving in their right place.

Me

My current kitchen is a rebellious altar to failed attempts at veganism, thus, chunks of orange colored tasty cows in the fridge door, and that vegani-ish palate-rejecting soy cheese. The serving of solo food is on un-matching plates and bowls from the thrift store, with a side of full control: dollops of wasabi or portioned olive oil, and measured precision-cut quiches from Trader Jo's. Other times serving is full of wild abandon: Eskimo Pies standing over the sink, or broiled portabella on a towel with no silverware, in front of Rachel Maddow. Vestiges of calorie-counting days of long ago lurk and threaten to stir the complacent gods of eating disorder recovery. But there is no homage to grandma, no austerity of lentils, and not one linen napkin. Most often there's a conglomeration of Luna Bars, an ancient blender, vegetables daring to rot in fridge drawers, and always popcorn. Always. It is loud, served wild, frugal, and indulgent all at once.