

## FROZEN FOOD

Long before it became fashionable among the liberal, antique-collecting bohemian women who would eventually become her best friends, my mother resisted prepackaged food. Other suburban mothers on our block were swept up in an exhilarating whirlwind of post-World War II prepared foods and ready-made meals, but my mother firmly resisted them. Given the option, she preferred to feed her family bubbling pans of macaroni and cheese with farmstand green beans glistening with melted butter—never margarine. In our home, fresh vegetables trumped frozen vegetables every time; macaroni and cheese was worth a greasy kitchen and the hard-scour-labor of pink Brillo pads. Store-bought cakes could not compare to a caramelized pineapple upside-down cake dotted with maraschino cherries fresh from the oven. Nothing could compare to fresh-made food. She shuddered when the garbage collector's kids next door smeared Wonder Bread with Miracle Whip—not even mayonnaise—and called it a sandwich. She was desperate to escape the working-class sensibilities that hovered around us, and her first course of action was to force us into a greater appreciation of the larger world via our stomachs. Outsiders were already suspicious of my parents' Czech cuisine: blood sausage, headcheese, and pickled pigs feet, just to name a few. That is not to say that she couldn't grill like everyone else on the Fourth of July, but while others preferred bottled brands, my mother's BBQ sauce was made from scratch, a vinegary sweet onion-and-tomato concoction that thickened for hours atop her stove.

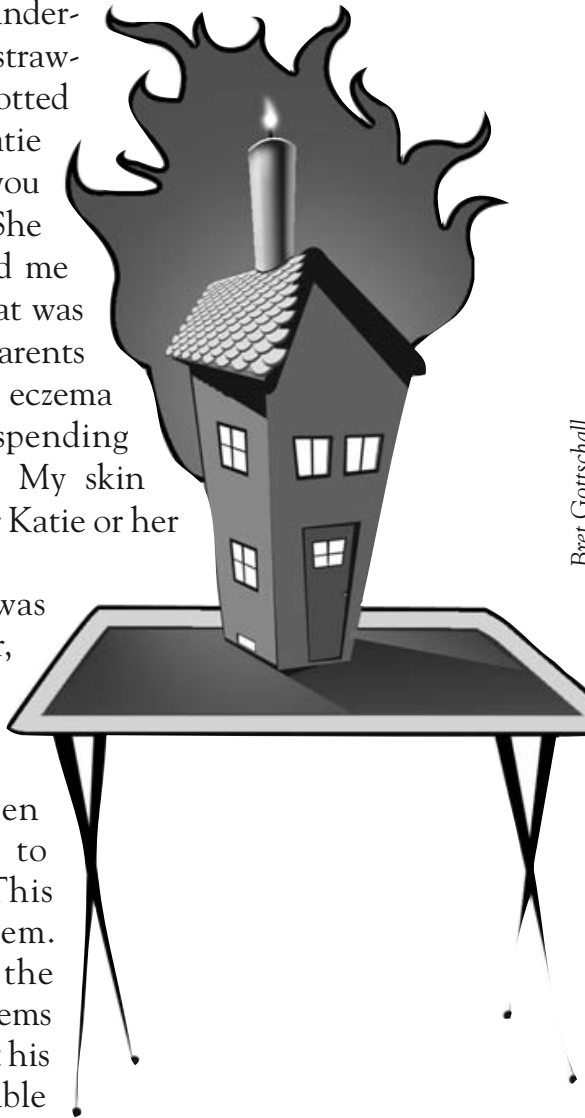
If, after a long day of cleaning and doing laundry, and with enormous guilt, she occasionally snuck in a side dish of Rice-A-Roni alongside the fresh kielbasa she brought home from St. Paul Sausage, she made up for it the next evening with a savory Swiss steak dotted with buttery mushroom caps and freshly mashed red potatoes. My father was the type of man who never complained, and my brothers gobbled down whatever she placed before them in order to get back to whatever it was they were doing before dinner. Our Blessed Mother hovered above the dining room table in a simple wooden frame, index finger pointing to her eternal flaming sacred heart. My mother was the only one who worried if the food was tasty enough for her family. Only in hindsight can I fully appreciate her enormous effort. In fact, for a brief time, I resented her ambition. As the commercials of the mid-60s made abundantly clear, beyond the dining room of our tightly packed ranch-style bungalow



in Hopkins, Minnesota, other mothers were throwing off their shackles and getting on with their lives: they had discovered Swanson Frozen Dinners.

It was my good fortune to experience frozen dinners with my best friend, Katie Federman, and her family. Katie lived with her parents and grandmother, a widow who occupied the oldest red brick house on the block several doors down from our house. I'd known her since kindergarten. She had mid-length strawberry blond hair and cheeks spotted with large, reddish freckles. Katie was a big cup of "whatever you want to do is fine with me." She was the first friend who allowed me to be the leader—something that was entirely new to me. And her parents actually liked me. Covered with eczema from head to toe, I was used to spending large amounts of time alone. My skin problem was never a problem for Katie or her family.

Katie's mother, Mary, was schizophrenic, and her father, Maury, had a similar, unnamed illness. My mother explained to me that sometimes people are "too smart even for their own good," unable to manage their own lives. This apparently was Maury's problem. He was a whiz at solving the complex mathematical problems that confronted him every day at his accounting job, but he was unable to gauge accurately the length between his driveway and the garage, unintentionally slamming his car into the garage door over ten times. A clumsy man, Maury stood over six feet tall, and wore large, government-issue horn-rimmed glasses. Mary was a bashful, petite, rosy-faced brunette, who honked uncontrollably whenever she laughed. For a time, the Federmans had their own trailer in the Pines Court Trailer Park just up the block from where we lived and halfway to Myrtle's house. How the Federmans met and married was



Bret Gottschall



unclear. After suppertime, we would see them holding hands and walking up and down the block, Maury talking a mile a minute and Mary gazing lovingly into his eyes.

“They are both children, when it comes down to it,” my mother said one day when she waved to them as they passed our house. “God bless Myrtle. If she didn’t put a birth control pill in Mary’s mouth every morning she’d forget.”

After Mary almost burned down their trailer twice, Maury moved the entire family in with his mother-in-law. Schizophrenia or certified

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geniuses were abstract concepts I could not fully comprehend. All I knew is that for the first and last time in my life, I had a willing audience. Wherever I led them, they followed. They listened and weighed my opinions carefully. In fact, most of the time, I could easily manipulate them to do

pretty much whatever I wanted them to do.

The Federmans lived in the basement of Myrtle’s house. For hours and hours, Katie and I could watch uninterrupted television in their basement. Unlike my house, where my older brothers controlled all television viewing, Mary and Katie went along with whatever decisions I made. Many afternoons, all three of us sat together on the couch watching the afternoon movie show hosted by Mel Jass. Mary sat on the couch smoking menthol cigarette after cigarette with the same drug-induced half smile on her face. The perfect tranquility of another adult’s nonthreatening presence was astonishing to me.

On several occasions, however, for no apparent reason, Mary would suddenly become agitated. She would stand up and start pacing the floor. She’d swing her fists at some imaginary opponent who suddenly threatened her. When she did, Katie would grab her mother by her flailing arms and yell at her to sit down. When Myrtle was home, we could hear her footsteps and the clump of her cane head towards the top of the basement stairs.

“Sit down, Mary, or I’ll come down stairs right now and knock you up the side of the head!”

This usually did the trick.

“Okay, okay, jeez!” Mary would tell her. With her lip pulled tightly into a childish pout, she would pull her blouse down over her exposed midriff, sit back on the couch, and light up a new cigarette.



When Mr. Federman returned home from his office, he often invited me to stay for dinner. Unlike my father, once Maury set his briefcase down, his ambitions stayed inside it. He would loosen his tie and roll his sleeves tightly over his elbows, and just like that, became a kid like us. “I couldn’t wait to get home tonight for dinner,” he’d gush, and lean so close into me I could see several dark hairs protruding from inside of his nose. With enormous fanfare, Maury opened the heavy tan-colored refrigerator door; I listened for the loud whoosh of the foamy seal being broken as icy smoke whorled out of the freezer. Katy and I gazed at the many wire shelves filled with layers of frosty, brightly colored boxes. For a very long time, we weighed our options: crispy fried chicken, Salisbury steak, and meat loaf, along with chicken, turkey or beef potpies. The unhurriedness of the moment was remarkable to me, the youngest of five children. So in these moments, Maury was more best friend than father, more maître d’ than patriarch. My father gave me undivided attention, but I was never left unsure that he was the parent and I was the child. With Maury, this line was blurred. He disappeared upstairs with our boxes to use his mother-in-law’s stove. With an enormous smile on her face, Mary gathered the necessary silverware and napkins, making our places at individual TV dinner stands near the television.

Once upstairs, we could hear Myrtle berating Maury with instructions on how to operate the stove, and then, after much loud shouting and banging of pans, he would reappear wearing a red-and-white checkered apron and matching oven mittens holding our now-steaming selections. Maury would disappear back upstairs to retrieve each dinner. Once we were secure in the basement, and seated in folding chairs behind our individual TV dinner tables in front of the television set, dinner time at the Federman’s was uncomplicated bliss. Unlike at my house, where nightly my mother raced in from work with shopping bags of vegetables that needed to be peeled, the Federmans were calmly dabbing their chins with paper napkins while watching the nightly news.

The most appealing aspect of the segmented tinfoil plate was that it was both efficient and practical, keeping gravy and sauces from oozing onto the corn on the cob or buttermilk biscuit. I knew I had tasted better gravy. I had watched my mother haggle with the butcher for the best cuts of meat; I knew how important good Bordeaux and fresh pearl onions were to creating a successful beef Bourguignon. (“Don’t let it clump or it will taste bitter,” my mother told me, shaking the flour thickener into the pungent, maroon-colored roux I was stirring furiously with a wooden spoon.) The TV dinner gastronomy was not fancy, but it was also not intimidating. Like the Federman family, its consistency never aimed higher than sustenance. It did not force you into uncomfortable



disappointment. All across America, a TV dinner tasted exactly the same each night.

Saturdays, the Federmans went to Burger King for lunch and brought to this the same intensity of spirit. This was before fast-food restaurants were on every corner; we had to drive all the way out to Southdale Shopping Center in Edina, which took twenty minutes. Mr. Federman took Burger King very seriously. “Mary Louise, how would you like your burger today?” he would say, bending down. I thought about our meals at home,

which, due mainly to the ongoing tensions between my father and my brothers, increasingly erupted into hysterical arguments. How many times had I wished my mother had Mary’s bubbly yet restrained energy? After she heaved the heavy, scorching-hot Dutch oven filled with Hungarian goulash onto the table and collapsed into her chair from exhaustion, her unhappiness or dissatisfaction with being a mother and homemaker was quite obvious. But at Burger King with the Federmans, the four of us sat at the counter facing the window and watched the cars pass by. The conversations were relaxed and unhurried.

“There’s a new Volvo,” Maury would say pointing to a white car as it zoomed by. “They are the most efficient and safe cars on the road today.”

Mary tilted her head in his direction and gave a big smile before dipping a french fry into the squirt of catsup Maury had lovingly squeezed onto her burger wrapper.

Katie would roll her eyes at her father’s comments and we’d both giggle. We always shared a large chocolate shake, taking turns sipping until the cup was drained. Unlike at home, where my three brothers ate meals with breakneck speed, and I hurried along with them before we ran out of food, when I ate with the Federmans I could taste every bite of my burgers, which as the ad campaign promised were *cooked to flame-broiled perfection*. On the drive back home, we’d sit close to each other in the back seat, contemplating our next move once we were back at home.

The Federmans’ basement had a large cellar, which they used to store canned goods and pickled vegetables. Katie and I went there whenever we wanted to get away from her parents. A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling. In the dark, the conversations were limited to several topics: the monster movies we watched every Saturday (we agreed that Dracula was the scariest, while we both felt the most sympathy for the werewolf) and what sins we had committed. Katie was sure she had not done anything that bad yet, and most of her sins, I had to admit, were



pretty wimpy: she had a bad thought about her grandmother; she said the word *shit* once; she had to tell a priest that her parents forgot about Good Friday and went to Burger King. My sins were significantly worse: I bit my brother Joe's hand so hard it bled because he had me in a headlock; I told a boy on the playground that my eczema was leprosy and then proceeded to rub my arm on his face until he ran away crying; I shoplifted a full set of press-on nails, which took me six trips to the Five and Dime, and then gave them to a friend at her birthday party.

As any good practicing Catholic knows, prayer follows the cathartic confession. And during one of our cellar conversations, we hatched a plan to conduct our own prayer vigil, to turn our cellar into a private chapel. We convinced Maury to drive us to Woolworth's and buy many candles of various sizes and lengths. My mother was right, Maury never suspected a thing—he merely drove. We bought six boxes of dozen votive candles, two boxes of dozen twelve-inch tapers, and a large box of wooden matches.

Back at the Federman's basement, we dismissed Maury and set about organizing our vigil. We placed a large ceramic statue of the Virgin Mary in the middle of one shelf and lit five or six votive candles in cut-glass holders in a circle around her. I lit each cobalt blue glass holder

with candles and the flickering flames licked the chin of Mother Mary. The room smelled of sulfur. I remembered my mother telling me, "If you want something big, or if you are in big trouble, pray to the Virgin Mary."

Taking my cue as priestess, I chanted a few bars of Latin I memorized from mass.

"Dough-me-noose-Nabisco," I chanted several times.

It was the only part I could remember, and suddenly I became self-conscious, recognizing that I was in the leader position, and I was expected to pull this off. Katie did not understand one word of Latin, and when I turned to look at her sitting on her knees next to me, she looked perfectly angelic, like the one that hovered above the two children crossing the bridge that hung above my bed. Her eyes and chin cast respectfully downward, her freckled palms lightly touching each other and held tightly against her pectorals. Then she glanced my way, as if she needed direction as to when to proceed, and as her guide, her leader, I was supposed to know what I was doing. The light from the candles danced on

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the ceiling and I remember thinking that God must have been listening to us at that very moment.

“We need to light more candles,” I whispered authoritatively in order to buy more time. We lit several more candles, this time the twelve-inch lilac tapers, which smelled like bathroom freshener. I raised my hands into the air like an eagle would spread her wings.

“Dough-me-noose-Nabisco,” I again chanted before opening another box of green votive candles. I tore the cellophane with my teeth and threw the box into the corner. Katie popped the candles through the cellophane by using her thumbs and then, following my lead, hurled the cardboard carcasses behind her, not caring where they landed. We lit every candle, each shelf had a flame, and the cellar light was incandescently white. We panted fast and hard. Katie’s face was bright red, and several times she wiped her forehead with her blouse, which she had yanked out of her pants. My mouth was salty from the moisture dripping from my nose, and I could feel the candle heat against my face. We sat on our knees, not sure what to do next. Then the ceiling caught fire.

The firefighters arrived rather quickly, saving the Federman house from being completely burned down, but I had been grounded for weeks and banned for an unspecified amount of time from visiting Katie and her family. I knew it would be a very long time before I could visit them or eat dinner with them again.

When I saw Katie in school, she acted as if little had come in between how she really felt about me.

“Hi, how are you?” she said smiling brightly, tilting her head and using her mother’s chipper voice.

While we both were painfully aware of what had transpired, even at that young age, I felt that Katie knew she would never judge me for it, in fact, Katie taught me a huge lesson in forgiveness that I carried into adulthood. I was too ashamed to keep eye contact, so I looked at my shoes.

“My mom told me to say hi to you,” she told me and touched my arm. At that moment, I imagined switching families with Katie just so I could see what it was like to live in the grudge-free environment that she grew up in, where everything was forgiven and forgotten. My mother told the story about my screw-up with the matches for years afterwards.

“Well, they were playing with matches,” she’d tell a total stranger she had just met in the grocery store, her voice growing louder and more dramatic to make a point, “And it’s a miracle she didn’t die and kill the entire family.”

I snuck out of the house after dinner one night just so I could walk by the Federman’s house. I could see the yellow glow from the basement



windows from half a block away. They probably just finished eating, I thought. As I stood gazing at their house from across the street, I thought how much I missed eating frozen TV dinners. Up until this moment, I could not find anything that gave me such instantaneous satisfaction. Even more so, I ached to be near the Federman family. When three of the four windows went dark, I thought how they must have been gathering around the television, or getting ready to play cards, or simply enjoying each other's company. 🎸

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