



# season to taste

HOW I LOST MY SENSE OF SMELL  
AND FOUND MY WAY

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# duck fat and apple pie



IN WHICH I ENTER THE KITCHEN



INSTEAD OF WRITING A COLLEGE THESIS, I read cookbooks in bed. I flipped through culinary magazines and food memoirs, burying my head in the biographies of iconic chefs until the early hours of the morning. After obsessively researching recipes online, I kneaded bread dough on my kitchen counter and assembled fat cakes layered with fruit and cream. I cooked intricate Middle Eastern tagines and watched chocolate soufflés rise slowly in the oven. I was studying for my bachelor's degree in art history, but in my final years of college I thought of little but the stove. I knew what I wanted: to be a chef.

Once I baked a different apple pie each week for months, feeding an ever-changing group of friends with plastic forks and knives in a cloud of cinnamon and butter, until I perfected





the recipe. As a result, I won a small scholarship to the Culinary Institute of America, the finest school for aspiring chefs in the country. I wanted to escape term papers and deadlines, Michelangelo and Gauguin. I wanted to master the formal technique of boning a duck, chopping a carrot, and curing a cut of pork. The only thing standing between me and my starting date at culinary school was the required experience in a professional kitchen.

Upon graduation, I returned to my hometown and moved in with my mother and her boyfriend, Charley. After days scouring the Internet for job listings, I picked one of the best restaurants in the city. The Craigie Street Bistrot, a pint-sized establishment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was housed on the ground floor of a large apartment complex on a residential street near Harvard Square. I walked down a set of stairs to the dark-paneled entrance, opened the door, and poked my head inside. The dining room was light and airy. The scent of roasted chicken, which I had noticed as soon as I stepped out of my car in the parking lot, filled the room. A young woman was arranging flowers in vases.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m here to apply for a job.”

She smiled, but didn’t look up from the bouquet of lilacs. “As a server?” she asked.

“No,” I said, closing the door behind me. “In the kitchen.”

She glanced at me, taking in my white button-down shirt and heels. In a manila folder under my arm, I had my résumé and cover letter, which outlined volunteer work in Africa and cashier positions at late-night undergraduate eateries but held nothing close to the scramble of a line cook over the stove. She said she



would get the chef, gesturing to a table in the empty dining room, which looked naked without people or plates. I sat.

Tony Maws, the executive chef and owner, emerged from the kitchen a few minutes later. He wore a stained chef's coat and fat black clogs; a long and frizzy ponytail snaked down his back. His nostrils pointed upward in his sharp-edged nose, highlighting a set of deep brown eyes. Known for sourcing his ingredients from local farms and a rabid enthusiasm for "nose to tail" cooking, or the use of every part of a whole beast, including the unsavory offal bits like the thymus gland or stomach, Maws had just been named a "Best New Chef" by *Food & Wine* magazine, one of the greatest honors for a rising chef in America. I stood and we shook hands. He glanced at my résumé and raised his eyebrows.

"You have no experience?"

I shook my head.

"And you went to Brown?" He looked skeptical.

I remained silent.

"How serious are you?" he asked.

"Incredibly," I said in a voice that surprised me with its volume. He stared at me. I didn't blink.

"Okay," he said. "But you'll start from the bottom."

He meant as a dishwasher. Maws promised that if I could handle the dishes, in all their oily, stinking glory, then he would teach me to cook—and not in the casual, dinner-party, *Gourmet*-magazine style. He would teach me how to handle a knife, wrestle a vat of chicken stock larger than my torso, and clean pounds of wild mushrooms in buckets of water, removing dirt from their knobby contours, bathing in their scent of liquid earth. I could



never abandon the sink and the dishes, but in our ephemeral free moments I could learn How To Cook.

ON MY FIRST DAY OF WORK, I paused inside the walk-in refrigerator. The heavy metal door thumped shut behind me and I inhaled the sharp scents of garlic and onions, vinegar and salt, fillets of tuna and grouper. A lamb carcass hung from the ceiling, sinuous and pink. A vat of chicken stock cooled on the floor. Four bins of fresh specialty herbs were perched on a corner shelf waiting to be plucked, their exotic labels—lemon thyme, anise-hyssop, Moroccan mint—reminding me how far I stood from my mother's suburban garden. I longed to touch the produce.

It had only been two weeks since I'd donned a cap and gown to receive my undergraduate degree. At the restaurant, wearing the uniform white-buttoned shirt and a bandanna tied tightly around my curly hair, I was surprised to find myself in a world that didn't involve laptops or cell phones, one where I couldn't sleep when I liked or lose myself in the silent recesses of the library hour after hour. It didn't involve much thought or speech, only movement and speed. It was a world filled with boxes of foraged forest mushrooms, stacks of chocolate bars from Venezuela, and plates of quail so carefully assembled that they arrived in the dining room looking like works of art. There were knives so sharp I didn't feel the slice on my finger until blood began to run down my hand. There were sauté pans so old that they no longer dented when the volatile head chef slammed them against the counter. There were eleven-hour shifts and sweat soaking every inch of cloth on my body.

I started with the herbs. The restaurant had dozens of organic



herbs delivered to the kitchen each morning. There were familiar ones like basil, rosemary, and thyme; and then there were the exotic ones, ranging from pineapple mint to Syrian oregano. They were delivered from a local specialty farm, tied in tiny bundles and labeled by hand. It was my job to clean and pluck the jumble of leaves and stems and have them ready for dinner service. I bent over the tiny metal table in the back corner of my workspace—a crowded hallway in the shadows of a staircase—and pinched my thumb and index fingers over the rough branches to release as many leaves as possible. Each herb left its scent printed on the tips of my fingers. There was the calm, woody odor of rosemary and the cool tang to mint. They blended into a mash of forest green that reminded me of trips to the plant nursery with my father when I was young.

“The most important thing, Molly,” Maws repeated constantly, “is that you know the ingredients. If I hold up this chicory flower, you need to identify it in one glance. If I blindfold you, you need to know it as soon as it hits your tongue.”

I painstakingly cleaned and tasted the herbs whenever I wasn’t swamped at the sink with piles of dirty dishes. I tested myself constantly. I discovered that breathing through my nose, slowly and conscientiously, was the best way to understand the intricacies of such subtle flavor, which, Maws insisted, was the only way to become a chef.

One night in the small kitchen I watched from my perch at the sink as Maws prepared to butcher a thirty-pound fillet of tuna in the back hall. He held a long glistening knife, grasping it tightly by the handle with the sharp edge horizontal to the ground. He brought the blade sideways to his face and pressed his nose against the metal, sliding the knife slowly, painstakingly



lengthwise. His nostrils flared with each breath. *He even smells his tools*, I thought. *It's how he understands.*

I didn't spend my time with many knives at the restaurant. Instead, I was at the sink, spraying grimy sauté pans with the water nozzle. I constantly scurried to and from the bin where the servers wearing immaculate black aprons tied around their waists dumped the dirty dishes, lugging large stacks of plates to the electric sanitizer in the kitchen. I strained chicken stock and pulled delicate skeletons out of hundreds of fresh, glassy-eyed sardines. I stuck my hands into countless buckets of water and wild mushrooms—black trumpets, hen-of-the-woods, morels—to clean the slippery clouds of fungi. I sorted bunches of bright green arugula for the *garde-manger*, the line cook whose job was to make cold appetizers and dessert, and delivered them to his station, which always smelled of burnt sugar from the torched tops of his crème brûlée.

It wasn't easy. My arms shook with the strain of unaccustomed weight. My legs bore welts from hot sprays of oil, and my neck was constantly swathed in a thick layer of slime, the liquid detritus that clung to my body from the sink, from the fridge, from my late-night cleaning of the deep fryer. Maws expected perfection, and I was terrified of making mistakes. He exacted the best, though, and I spent my every moment in the kitchen watching. He moved with confidence and economy; butchered meat with swift, clean swipes of his knife; and could sear perfect fillets of fish using only the sound of its sizzle to gauge its progress. Maws plated soft poached grouper on an electric green sauce made from sorrel, scattering orange nasturtiums over the top like a painting. His flavors were bold, his concentration intense, and critics sang his praises. Only open for two and a half



years, the Craigie Street Bistrot had already been named “One of 5 Best Restaurants in Boston” by *Gourmet* magazine and the “Best French Restaurant” by the *Boston Globe*.

One late night in August I forgot to close the door of the refrigerator that held all of Maws’s confits, the slow-cooked cuts of meat cured in oil or fat. At Craigie Street they were mainly an array of heartier parts: chicken thighs, lamb and duck tongues, and hunks of pork belly, which I had already spent hours pulling apart that night, my arms submerged to the elbow in buckets of slick yellow fat. When a sous-chef discovered the door wide open two hours later and told the chef, I watched Maws’s jaw clench. The contents of the fridge were—*thank God*, I thought—fine. But I could have ruined thousands of dollars’ worth of food. My hands were shaking as I approached to apologize. I braced myself for the chef’s voluminous, vocal anger. But instead he just looked at me for a moment, his gaze level and serious.

“This is a restaurant, Molly,” he said. Disappointment dripped from his voice.

My guilt hindered my movements for the rest of the night, clumsily cleaning heads of garlic for hours in the back. At 1:30 A.M., after we had finished dinner service and my fellow dishwasher, Santos, and I had completed cleaning every crevice of the now empty kitchen, I heard Maws call from his office.

“Molly, come here for a second.”

“Yes, Chef?”

I came running.

“One of the trash bags split in the trash compound outside,” he said casually, not looking up from the papers on his desk. “We seem to have a maggot problem.”

*Oh, shit*, I thought.





“There are three five-gallon buckets that are . . . not pleasant. You need to bring them in and clean them.” He smiled. “Now.”

I cleaned out the buckets filled with juice from the torn bags of garbage, stinking of meat and milk and the sour stench of active mold, as the tiny white maggots writhed in the sink. *What am I doing here?* I thought as I scrubbed, breathing through my mouth and trying not to gag.

But I knew why I was there: to learn. I learned to listen to the sound of meat in the pan, to smell the endnote of the nuts toasting in the oven. I learned to judge by color and texture, to leave the safety of published recipes and instead operate with the senses alone. Maws could be tough, but he never failed to inspire. With his pleasure, the kitchen blazed—the fresh rolls perfuming the hallway with fresh butter and yeast. I tackled herbs and garlic, lamb’s tongue and rich logs of *pâté de campagne*. I peeled beets and shallots, chopped onions and churned bundles of arugula around the barrel-sized spinner again and again until they were clean and dry. I was learning the basics one by one. That was the only way to become a chef.

Before service began one night, I stood at the sink in the kitchen while the rest of the staff prepped at their stations for dinner. I had just finished filling the bottles of oil and replenishing the chef’s supply of butter when Maws arrived to take his spot. He looked over at me and smiled. His grin was broad, almost manic when paired with his chef’s knife in hand. The first orders of the night were just about to come, and he stood poised. Ready to cook. Excited to feed a crowd. “This is what I live for, Molly,” he said. “This is life.”

During those long sweaty nights, the act of eating had never been so satisfying. My appetite roared in the face of so much



physical work. It was a hunger I never experienced in the desk-bound days of school. I plunged my fork into the massive fritatas, bright with green basil and red peppers in the sunny crust of eggs, which Maws cooked for the meals shared by staff before the work night began. During service, the sous-chefs would hand me samples of butterscotch ice cream or sour milk panna cotta, whispers of sugar and cold that I ate between the clouds of steam released from the sanitizer with every load of dishes. I took small bites of crisp-roasted quail and creamy Macomber turnip puree, of a buttery rabbit sausage and the marrow scraped gently from inside the bone. I inspected the sear of hanger steak's flesh, exhaled the minted song of a sorbet.

Once, a young female sous-chef who wore her wispy blond hair tied back with a bandanna turned to me with a piece of toast. I felt tired and frustrated in front of the sanitizer after spraying myself in the face with the dishwater for the eighth time that night. "Molly," she called with a smile. "Would you like a snack?" She handed me a thick hunk of bread that had been slathered with foie gras: salmon pink and flecked with fleur de sel, a rainbow of ground pepper. I took a bite. It was smooth and fat against the flaky crust. It tasted of the earth, an intoxicating flavor that screamed decadence and delight, one that immediately took me back to a happy afternoon in Paris, when I first tried the goose liver pâté with my college roommate Becca.

One afternoon Maws arrived at the restaurant for prep wearing denim shorts and a ratty blue T-shirt. He looked alien without the usual baggy whites. Together, hunched over the table in the back, he taught me to clean the case of Georgian shrimp that had just arrived. We peeled the shells off their slick gray bodies, slit open their backs, and removed their delicate digestive tracts.

We kept them in a metal bowl resting in a box of ice, which soon smelled of seawater and fish.

“Seafood,” he told me, “is ideally kept at a temperature just a bit over freezing. The refrigerator is still a little too warm. Even those few degrees affect the taste.” I hung on to his words. I nodded.

He worked deftly, his fingers moving far quicker than I could coax mine.

“Do you read about food?” he asked me after a moment’s silence.

“Yes. Of course.”

He had never asked me a personal question before. I was surprised.

“What?”

For a moment every single name vanished from my mind. I tried to picture my bookcase. I began to rattle off a list of journalists, writers of essays and warm coffee-table books.

Maws looked at me. His raised his brow.

“Get your head out of the clouds, Molly,” he said. “Read about *real* food. Leave the romance for later.”

I bought myself a copy of Harold McGee’s *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* the next morning before I drove to work, ready to read about the chemistry of sauces, the evolution of bread, and the effects of temperature change while cooking fresh meat.

“That’s more like it,” Maws said with a pat on the shoulder as I reported my purchase back, heaving a stack of plates to the sink.

My nights in the kitchen flew by. For nine weeks, the unending parade of filthy pots and pans was sustained by quiet lessons

with the chef and a sincere hope for the future. I breathed in the potent scents of sorrel and garlic, mandarin and curry, tongue and jowl and thigh. I closed my eyes. I concentrated.

I arrived home in the early hours of the morning reeking of chicken stock and duck fat, my clothes stained with grease and crusted in melted chocolate. My body always hurt. It was an arthritic pain—especially my hands, from holding and washing so many heavy dishes, and my back, from lugging large vats of stock from the kitchen to the fridge and back again.

I loved it.

I had entered into a world that challenged me, that frustrated and delighted me, one where I could grow. I felt, for the first time, like I could see my future, like I *knew*.

WHEN I WAS SMALL, my mother baked strawberry-rhubarb pies. She used a recipe that once belonged to her own mother, handwritten on an index card stained with spice and time. I would sit on the kitchen counter and watch.

She would move quickly through the kitchen, gathering bowls and ingredients. A thin woman with her straight blond hair cut short, she chopped rhubarb, sliced strawberries, and rolled the flour-dusted dough with harried precision. I usually disliked my mother's speed, like when she took me to the mall and I had to bob and weave through the crowds in order not to be left behind. But I didn't mind it in the kitchen. Perched at the counter I wasn't underfoot. And I loved the cold, smooth feel of dough. I loved the salt-scented undertones of butter.

Stalks of rhubarb were handpicked on summer afternoons from our haphazard suburban garden out back. They were light



pink and speckled in green and lay waiting on the kitchen counter like a stack of alien antennae. Even when chopped and tossed in a bowl with strawberries and sugar, the filling didn't lose the harsh sour tang, which puckered my mouth when I plucked little mouthfuls and ate it raw.

I would watch my mother load bright scoops into a dough-laden pan, sealing the top crust to the bottom with a quick pinch of the fingers around the edge. I kept my eyes on the extra scraps of dough, making sure my mother kept a little pile off to the side. She always did. It was the most important part.

"Baby pies," my mom would say.

"Baby pies," I would repeat.

The fondest memories my mother had of her own family involved cooking. My grandfather Walter was happiest in the kitchen. He made *frikadeller*, a traditional meatball dish from his native Denmark. He made thick rice porridge and rich curries, quick pickles and magnificent roast beefs. Around Christmas-time, he let my mother roll and bake the long rectangles of shortbread dough that they had brushed in egg whites and sprinkled with almonds.

My grandmother Marian baked loaves of bread, which transformed the house with their yeasty aroma when my mother and her sister, Ellen, walked home from school. From a recipe in her well-worn copy of the *Joy of Cooking*, she made tapioca puddings—"fish eyes in glue," she would say—and gingerbread, warm hunks of which were eaten with a scoop of fresh whipped cream. And there were the pies: sweet-scented strawberry-rhubarb in summer, cinnamon-spiked custard in winter.

Marian wasn't a warm woman. She lived behind what my mother felt was a thick veil of gauze. She was unable to express



the emotions that her children needed, especially after Walter died, when my mother was a teenager. But no matter what kind of pie she baked, my grandmother never failed to gather the extra scraps of dough. She would throw them into small glass custard cups, hugging thick lumps of butter, cinnamon, and sugar.

“Baby pies,” she would say to Ellen and my mother, who sat on the counter watching.

When the tiny pies emerged from the oven, bubbling and bronze, the girls would carefully inspect each one, deciding which was the biggest, jockeying for the best spot to put fork to flaky crust first. In their home in Westfield, New Jersey, my mother often felt abandoned and alone. But in those kitchen counter moments, filled with the scent of caramel and spice, she felt like she was noticed, even loved. She felt warm.

It was hard for me to imagine my grandmother baking pies. It was hard to imagine her as anything but old and a little bit scary. Marian was in the final, debilitating stages of Alzheimer’s by the time I reached elementary school. She lived far away in a nursing home in Hawaii, close to Ellen and her family on the island of Oahu. I visited her there one summer as a shy, frizzy-haired third grader. I walked in to her room with my two cousins, my little brother, Ben, and my mother.

My grandmother was balanced, birdlike, on her hospital bed. She looked small and confused. I watched the speckled light hitting the floor, listened to the whispering footsteps in the hall and the chatter of nurses coming in and out of the room. It was vacation; my skin was slick with sunscreen. I had recently discovered the joys of coconut milk, the terror of jellyfish, and flowers so lusciously scented it was almost too much to wear them in a lei around my neck. I couldn’t really understand why we were there



in a room that smelled of baby powder and lemon juice, salt and old age.

“Karen?” my grandmother said in a soft voice. She was staring straight at me. Suddenly, I was terrified.

“No, Grandma . . .” I said. “I’m Molly.”

There was a pause.

My mother cleared her throat. “Hi, Mom,” she said. “I’m Karen. I’m your daughter.”

My grandmother said nothing. She looked lost.

I had been warned that this would be a tough visit. “Alzheimer’s is a disease that erases memory,” my father had told me before we left. “It has erased almost everything for your grandmother, except for the distant past. It’s almost impossible for her to understand today.”

It was hard to imagine. The present was everything: the way my new plastic sandals clipped on the tiled floor, the way the ocean glowed blue outside, the way my mother smelled faintly of Tiffany’s *Eau de Parfum*. How could my grandmother think I was her daughter? I was Molly; my mom was Karen. And this strange, fragile woman on the bed? I only knew that her name was Marian, and visiting her in this home near the ocean made my lips taste vaguely of salt.

But the delicate cursive writing on the recipe for strawberry-rhubarb pie belonged to her, my mother insisted. “She invented the baby pie,” she said.

The custard cups my mother used for her own tiny pies were small and made of white-ribbed porcelain. She too filled them with small, misshapen rolls of dough, topped with plops of butter. They came out of the oven lumpy and bubbling, the dough bronzed in some spots and blackened in others, all pip-



ing the unmistakable scent of baked sugar. Just like our mother and her sister had, my brother and I would examine each, trying to decide which was the biggest and the best. The strawberry-rhubarb pies—sweet with a hint of sour, oozing pink inside a golden crust—were for everyone. The baby pies, however, were just for us.

On these days, the whole kitchen filled with the aroma of fruit and butter, pulling my father into the kitchen. The yelling matches between my parents that drove me to my room—and my brother to howl in response—seemed to melt away in those moments over the kitchen counter. Even Ben, whose diet consisted mainly of vanilla yogurt, loved the sound of his fork cracking crust.

YEARS LATER, when I was twenty, I spent three months in Katima Mulilo, a small town on the very northern edge of Namibia. An unlikely village carved from the Kalahari Desert, Katima Mulilo sat in a swirling mass of dust and heat hours away from the closest city in the country, an endpoint to the Caprivi Strip, the section of land jutting straight into the center of Africa. Dull brown sand covered every inch of the ground; gnarled shrubs emerged from the earth; small block houses interspersed with reed huts and charred communal fire-pits clustered along grainy roads. The world smelled of sweat and smoke. Even the sky felt brown.

I had come to Namibia with a small group of college students as part of a volunteer teaching organization. After a quick orientation, we had each been sent to our individual posts. I arrived in Katima Mulilo with three others to teach English and AIDS





awareness in the small, impoverished community. I spent my days in the classroom and my evenings attempting to connect with my “host mother” Mbula, a schoolteacher only a few years older than me. I shared her government-subsidized home with her and her husband, Bonnie, and their small daughter, Mary.

Mbula, who had luminous black skin and a wardrobe of bright green and yellow wraparound skirts, worried that I would never find a husband unless I could cook, clean, and sew like a true Namibian woman. “I have a boyfriend,” I said in protest. It was true: his name was Alex. I had first noticed him—his hair, actually, which was a carrot red—in my high school English class. We were soon inseparable, a quiet relationship of skateboards and football games, pizza dinners and my first nights not spent alone in bed. We broke up for our freshman year of college, when I went south to Providence and he north to Burlington, Vermont, but were back together then, long distance only improving the butterscotch scent of his skin. “I love him,” I told Mbula.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Home.”

She shook her head.

“You need to learn to cook.” She gestured toward the kitchen, her throne. There, she lorded over pots and pans, providing for her family every meal of the day.

That summer she taught me to wield a needle and thread, and she laughed at the inept way I handled the bar of soap as I washed my clothes in their laundry bucket. She showed me how to make *n’shima*, or the gruel-like maize meal that we boiled in large stock-bottom pots and then rolled into potato-shaped patties using a special wooden spoon, which we ate for every lunch and dinner along with fried greens and the occasional gristle



of meat. The scent of her kitchen was jarring—the corn oil and mutton grease, the goat and kale, the unfamiliar porridge aromas of maize.

Every morning at 5:00 A.M., as the sun crept up in the incandescent desert sky, Mbula and I stood together in the kitchen and ate fried eggs for breakfast before going to school. Standing over the sizzling pans each day, I tried to control my anxiety.

A haze of disease hovered over the village. In Namibia at the time, 15 percent of the population was infected with HIV or AIDS. Wandering through the village on a Sunday morning, I watched men crawl out of the bars onto the sides of the streets before passing out, drunk by 10:00 A.M.; I passed lithe young women carrying sacks of grains, wrinkled grandfathers butchering meat in the market, and groups of children shooting basketballs in the school yard. The town was filled with the scent of boozy breath, rotting meat, and sand baking in the heat. Everything held the faint cloy of disease.

Teaching was an exercise in control—of the forty-odd children who piled in each of my classes, and of the panic I felt knowing how little could be accomplished in three months with few resources available. Between the ages of seven and fifteen, my students were lovable and enthusiastic, scruffy and haphazardly dressed. They looked at me with wide, often confused eyes. My American accent made English, the country's official language, sound as foreign as their local tribal dialects did to me.

I was often frustrated. Without training, I had no idea how to control a classroom. I had no idea how I should exact discipline, though I knew it wasn't by the force I saw from most teachers, like the afternoon I walked in on one large-boned science teacher



as she whacked each of my learners across the back of the skull with a wooden eraser. I often felt out of control.

But I taught as best I could, struggling through lesson plans and homework with the hopeful devotion of a twenty-year-old who had never failed. In the classroom we worked in ragged notebooks on letters and numbers. I had my students draw pictures of their future in crayon, which I taped around the room like wallpaper. Mpunga, who sat in the front row with a devilish little smile, wanted to be an astronaut. Sidney, often by his side, thought he might like to work for a newspaper. I read Dr. Seuss books out loud, slowly turning the pages, watching the children's eyes widen with the songlike language, the colorful illustrations drawing them close. I taught young giggling girls to use condoms on bananas and organized stacks of books into a library the principal was hesitant to use. When I walked home at night, I watched the bonfires of the camps where my students lived burning like fireflies in the distance, pinpricks on the ink-black horizon.

I didn't know that Mr. Liswaniso, the soft-spoken science teacher who sat next to me in school meetings with his hands quietly clasped, was sick with AIDS until after I returned to the United States. No one spoke of illness; the community did not yet want to publicly address its spread. He passed away six months later, but the image of his hands—like gloves, slack with time his face did not yet show—stuck with me. They were too wrinkled, too old, too worn for his body.

I took refuge in my friendship with Mbula. We sang songs by Celine Dion, Mbula's favorite, loudly together while cleaning the house, little Mary watching warily from the corner of the kitchen. We took trips to Mbula's mother's home, an apartment



in a tiny compound a mile of sand away. Once, I stirred and shaped the patties of *n'shima* all on my own, and they applauded me before we sat down for our meager supper.

But I cried at night, alone in my room, hungry and tired but unable to sleep. I could hear Mary wail, Mbula and Bonnie yell. There were no telephones capable of long distance in the house, and the only working computer with the Internet was more than an hour walk away. I missed Alex and my family. I pasted a smile on my face each morning, but I felt very alone. I couldn't eat eggs for years afterward. The scent of oil and butter and splattering orange yolk would immediately conjure the intense anxiety that clouded my gaze each morning over breakfast in Africa.

On a cool Saturday afternoon toward the end of that summer, I found Mbula in the kitchen.

"I'm going to make an apple pie," I said. I wanted to show her that I was not hopeless. I wanted to prove that I had a past and perhaps a future, too.

"Okay," Mbula said. She smiled, humoring me.

I walked to the grocery store alone, a few miles each way. I could feel the sun on my shoulders as I trudged through the sand, past young kids playing soccer and teenagers hanging out on the steps of a house near town. They called to me as I passed. I smiled.

At the store I bought a sack of apples—soft and slightly mealy—and a package of butter. I walked home with the bag under my arm and then dumped the contents on the counter. Later, with Mbula's help, I began to bake. It was my first apple pie. I hoped it would work.

I made the crust with butter and flour, a few pinches of salt and water. Its texture was cold and smooth, reminiscent of my



mother's granite counter in Boston. I peeled and sliced the apples, which smelled sweet, like autumn. There was no cinnamon; only a strangely coarse cane sugar, but I didn't care. Mbula and I draped the raw crust over the pile of fruit, pinched the top layer to the bottom with our fingers. I felt comfortable for the first time in months.

The pie came out of the small gas oven bubbling its aromatic apple juices. Rich, candylike wafts filled the house, and I smiled so wide it hurt. It smelled so familiar, so reminiscent of home and family. I was pleased when Mbula leaned in to inhale over its bulbous top.

We ate the pie together. Bonnie, Mary, and the two fellow volunteer teachers who lived nearby crowded around the kitchen table with Mbula and me. Though Mary quickly found more pleasure in tossing the soft apple filling on the ground, we were a festive group. The flake of crust, the silken sweet fruit, and the scent of my past took on greater significance with each bite. The act of cooking and eating together breached a wide chasm. *I should have saved some dough*, I thought. *Mary would have liked that.*

I ARRIVED HOME from Africa unable to shake the anxiety. The depression so pervasive in that small community stuck with me, lodging in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't shake the memory of often joyless meals with Mbula and her family. I couldn't shake the sight of Mr. Liswaniso's hands. I couldn't shake the guilt I felt for having left. For months after, I had a hard time eating anything at all. Every bite felt like an accusation: *look what you have and they don't.*

I lost weight rapidly and soon my clothes no longer fit. My



mother began to look into nutritionists; my father asked me again and again what was wrong. I cooked constantly, feeding my family and my friends. I wanted to feed everyone around me. But I wouldn't eat.

I began to see a therapist near my school in Providence. She had a bob of snow-white hair and a collection of funky shoes. We talked about Africa. We talked about eating. We talked about control. We talked through my final year of college, through my breakup with Alex and my growing obsession with the kitchen. I never left behind my guilt, but I learned to manage it. I learned about food, and what it meant. For me, it was family and warmth, nourishment and hope. It was my past and my future. For me, it meant everything.

I thought about the fried eggs I had shared with Mbula and how they remained painful, soaked in all the sadness I wouldn't let myself feel. I could still smell the maize and booze of Katima, even as I inhaled the smoke of the grill on which my father cooked a steak upon my return and watched the ease with which it slid from spatula to plate.

I often thought about the afternoon of the apple pie in Africa. I thought about the emotion that had lurked behind each bite. The scent of the orchard, of baked sugar and sweet cream butter brought with it memories of home. It reminded me of love and then of guilt, of pride and longing and friendship. How can so much be contained in a simple bite of pie? I wanted to learn the art of the stove to get at so much more.

TWO YEARS LATER, there I was at the Craigie Street Bistrot. I spent my nights chopping and cleaning, tasting and smelling.



Even when I grew tired, when my back ached and I never wanted to look at, let alone eat, a clove of garlic or pat of butter again, I knew I was there for the right reasons. I knew I was on the periphery of that much more. Sometimes during dinner service I would steal away to the hallway dividing the kitchen and dining room and stand, for a few breathless seconds, at the pass. There, I could hear the clink of glass, the bursts of laughter, the soft chatter and background rifts of jazz music. On the edge of calm, on the edge of an air-conditioned cool, I could remain invisible in my stained apron and battered sneakers as I watched plates of bluefish and hanger steak arrive in front of dozens of well-dressed diners. I could witness couples holding hands and families giving toasts with glasses of white wine. I could watch a young woman gnaw meat off the rib bone with surprising grace and an older man wearing a bow tie take the first bite of pork belly and smile swiftly, contentedly into the air. Sometimes I needed proof that there were people out there. I loved my work, but after weeks of late nights soaked in grease, I could not completely suppress my frustration. It was difficult to clean mushrooms for three hours straight and imagine there was anything beyond wrinkled fingers and dirt-stained clothes.

One evening in July, I marched into Maws's office and asked him when I would be able to do something besides pluck oregano or peel garlic. I wanted to know if this would be worth it. Why didn't I just go to culinary school tomorrow?

Maws looked at me and said, slowly: "The only way to understand a head of garlic, Molly, is to work with it every day, taste it, feel it, smell it, grow with it through the changing seasons. Garlic in May is a different species from garlic in December. The only way to be a great chef is to understand your material, instinctively



and experientially from the bottom, no matter how long it takes.”

I sighed and nodded. I was frustrated, but understood. When I returned to the kitchen, to my piles of dirty dishes and recently delivered microgreens waiting to be washed, I took a few deep breaths and tried to remember my purpose, one that was larger than the immediacy of the sink. I had to concentrate on the important moments—like the day that a sous-chef blindly placed an oblong leaf on my tongue and I immediately identified its delicate mintlike taste as hyssop.

I STEPPED OUT onto the front porch of my mother’s home in Boston in running shoes and shorts on a drizzly morning at the end of that August and paused to look at the postdawn sky. It was dark and cloudy; I could feel the impending rain in the thick air. *I’ll make this quick*, I thought, sticking the headphones of my iPod into my ears. I wanted to spend the rest of the morning reading Harold McGee’s *On Food and Cooking*; my starting date at the Culinary Institute of America was approaching and I was already nervous.

The neighborhood was empty as I began to jog down the street. Even the local high school down the block, in its last week of summer vacation, was quiet. I ran on the sidewalk, bypassing the red pickup truck that was always parked in my way, and sidled up to the corner apartment complex, which bellowed the soapy-fresh aroma of laundry from its street-level vents. I loped up a small hill, around a wooded corner, and then paused at the intersection. Glancing up, I noted the warning of the blinking neon hand signal across the way. I only hesitated for a moment before crossing the four-lane highway.



I didn't see the small Ford four-door as it sped through the light, which had just turned from red to green. I didn't feel the crack of my body against the front bumper. I didn't hear the sound of bone against glass when my skull shattered the windshield. I don't remember flying through the air, as I ricocheted off the car and onto the hard sidewalk nearby. For me, the world shot straight to black.

According to the police officer who first arrived on the scene, I lay conscious but unmoving on the concrete sidewalk until the ambulance arrived. The Ford driver, a twenty-three-year-old recent college graduate on his way to work, hyperventilated into a brown paper bag nearby.

My parents sat next to my hospital bed for the next four days. My mother said that I was confused. I didn't understand what had happened and I spoke like a child, calling out, "Mommy, I hurt," when she walked into the Intensive Care Unit that first morning. I swore a lot and thought that the hospital, Beth Israel, was a synagogue. I recall hazy images of doctors' white coats, the sound of cartoons on the television above my hospital cot, and the hard chill of bedpans. The ligaments in my left knee were torn, my pelvis broken in two places, and my skull fractured. Knee surgery came later. A bright strawberry bruise stained the side of my face and neck for weeks.

I lived in my mother's living room for the next month. I lay on a bed that had been carefully hoisted downstairs by my brother and by Alex, who had driven down from his home in Vermont when he heard of my accident. I couldn't move; everything hurt. I took pills—big ones, small ones, pink, blue, and purple ones—every few hours, which made me groggy and disoriented. It was impossible to fully focus my eyes.

And what my family found most disturbing: I wouldn't eat. My mother constantly tried to feed me. She brought milk shakes and smoothies to me in bed—a desperate attempt, she said, to get some calories into my broken body. “No,” I would moan. “I can't eat.”

THREE WEEKS AFTER the accident I returned to the hospital for knee surgery. The morning was sunny and clear. As I hobbled from the car to one of the Deaconess Hospital's hilltop buildings, I could feel the coming autumn in the cool breeze. I wasn't yet used to my crutches and they dug into the soft flesh under my arms like wire.

I had just barely emerged from the fog of head injury. The weeks since the accident crowded into my memory, fuzzy and incomplete. I had lain on the bed in my mother's living room day after day with limp legs and gyrating spirals of pain. Sometimes my mother and sometimes my father sat by my side, regularly in each other's company for the first time since they had divorced seven years before. While they were at work, friends came. Alex, who extended his trip home to help me pass the days, spent a lot of time watching movies next to me as I slept. I was lucid when awake, but barely. I acted loopy like a drunk, stubborn like a preteen.

In the first hours after the accident, my family had not known what to expect. When my father, a doctor, had raced into the Intensive Care Unit after hearing the news, he saw me lying on the cot with needles in my arm and monitors blinking behind. I looked to be in one piece, but he knew bleeding, broken bones, or punctured lungs could be lurking beneath my bruised skin.

With one glance at the full-body CT scans, hung on the wall by another physician, though, he felt relief. My injuries had been rendered visible by the ghostly black and white of film, and he knew that though it might take a long time, my broken bones would heal. My knee could be fixed. Physically, my family knew that I would be all right. And despite the fact that they listened to me tell the same story over and over, cringing because each time I thought it was the first, they knew the effects of my head contusion would soon fade.

It took two weeks for me to regain control of my mind. When I did, it was sudden. The world came into focus one morning in mid-September. My pelvis and head both ached and, for the first time, I wondered why. The fog had burned off.

*What is going on?* I thought.

Alex came over later that afternoon after a day away and though I sat in bed as I had for weeks, he found me different.

My eyes were focused and my voice was drawn. Alex held his body stiffly, which seemed both familiar and distant. The last time I saw him was fuzzy in my mind.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Okay.” I waited a moment. “I hurt.”

He looked at me with surprise. My strange giddiness of the previous weeks had evaporated. I was coherent and I was depressed. It was like I had just woken up.

I couldn't believe that an entire month had passed. It shocked me that my body was so delicate, that an event so violent could have come so close. I was surprised to find that I wasn't immortal, that the mobility of youth was permeable, that it was no longer mine.

It almost felt good to be hobbling into surgery those weeks

later. At least I was moving. At least there would be change. They would fix the tendon and ligament, the ropes of fiber and tissue running up the outer edge of my left leg that had been mangled in the accident. When the car tore into my side it had yanked my knee in at an unnatural angle, like a marionette at rest, like a linebacker struck from the side. “We really only see this injury in football players,” my doctor had said with a little sigh.

I breathed easily as I lay on the hospital cot. When the gas mask covered my mouth and the anesthesia began to flow, I slid smoothly toward unconsciousness. It was only later—after the five-hour procedure, after the plastic surgery stitches closing the eight-inch incision that would glow in reds and whites for years to come, after the fog of my imposed sleep melted away—that I really felt the pain.

The pain began in the deep snaking hole where the doctor had pulled and prodded and reattached the tendon and bone that had receded up my thigh. It was immediate and intense and soon it expanded everywhere. I couldn’t think beyond the screaming of my toes, the tension in my neck, and the nausea in my stomach. It was excruciating and encompassing, and my memory of that time is framed in a shade of burning red. The medication, handed to me in small paper cups by the nurses throughout the night, did not cut the debilitating ache. I listened to my father yell in the hallway. There had been confusion over my prescriptions and he was angry. He yelled at doctors, nurses, and orderlies. He was angry that I hurt, and that there was nothing any of us could do. I hyperventilated when I tried to move my leg.

“Breathe,” the nurses said. I tried.

But after a week of thick beige curtains, thin polyester blankets, and a frequently replenished stream of gossip magazines



read to me aloud by my mother, the raw edge to my panic began to fade.

I went to my father's house in New Hampshire to recover.

It was there that I was finally able to focus on the world around me. I lay in a bed with a soft green cover. The television mounted on the wall in front of me was large. I watched *The Princess Bride* one afternoon and didn't fall asleep after five minutes. I even remembered it the next day. Things were looking up.

But the reality of my situation soon sank in. I was lucky to be alive. I was lucky to have family close by. But with a smashed pelvis and recently sutured leg, I lacked all mobility. I remained completely dependent on my family and friends, and I had never felt so low. I couldn't recognize my own voice, dark with a baritone sadness. I certainly wouldn't allow myself to think about Maws in the kitchen of the Craigie Street Bistrot, or my impending starting date at the Culinary Institute of America. They were too far from the immediacy of my pain. I wasn't ready for fear.

But I soon realized how much more was gone.

My stepmother, Cyndi, who was perpetually calm and composed except for the first time we tried to wrap my bandages in plastic so that I could take a shower and we both ended up in tears, baked an apple crisp one afternoon in early October.

My best friend was there for the weekend. Becca had come bearing books and CDs, bravely cheerful in the face of my deepening depression. Ever since we first met, as pale and frizzy freshmen in college, she has been a skilled administrator of comfort. Once, on a bone-chilling winter weekend we had taken a road trip to Montreal. It was the week before Alex and I got back together after our painful break. Becca led us to La Chronique, a restaurant with white tablecloths and dim, sparkling lights, one



evening. We had dressed up for the occasion, and I felt elegant in my high heels and fitted skirt.

Our waiter uncorked a bottle of white wine that smelled fruity and young. I had only recently begun to explore flavors unfamiliar to the safe suburban diet I knew, and as I sipped, breathing slowly in and out, the depth of flavor surprised me. We ate salmon and seafood risotto, which was rich and creamy, and monkfish and duck ravioli, laced with the deep undertones of foie gras. With each course, with each bite, with each giggle emitted for no reason beyond being young and full of life, my anxiety melted. Before dessert, our waiter placed a small plate in front of us both, each with a different kind of cheese. Becca's came bearing a small craggy round of bleu, while mine held the more familiar wedge of brie, which oozed from beneath a pale yellow crust. I inhaled over my plate. I leaned in to sniff over hers. I had never before tried any kind of mold-encrusted cheese. It smelled rich, pungent, like milk gone wrong. I made a face.

"Just try," she said.

Gingerly, I took a nibble. Again, I was surprised. Both tangy and smooth, the flavor danced in my mouth.

In the years since Montreal, Becca and I had eaten our way through Providence, Paris, and Prague. We ate Parmesan-rich risotto and delicate lemon tarts, puffed carrot soufflés and gooey cheese crepes. She introduced me to truffles and pâté. We spent a year sharing a kitchen and a fridge, learning how to cook as inventively as possible together on a student budget. There were four-layer banana-chocolate cakes and fresh pasta doused with sage and butter we browned into a deeply fragrant sauce on the stove. The joy I experienced in food had arrived in tandem to our friendship. We had eaten a lot together.

That afternoon at my father's house in New Hampshire, Cyndi had baked her apple crisp because she knew I loved the dessert so reminiscent of fall. For over a month I had had to be coaxed and cajoled into eating and my stepmother hoped that this would help. When she took the crisp out of the oven, one room over, everyone began to exclaim. "That smell!" they said. "It's delicious!"

I sniffed. *What?*

"The crisp," said Becca, pointing toward the kitchen.

"What about it?"

"Can't you smell it?" she asked.

I sniffed again. *I must not be in the right seat*, I thought. *There must be something in my way.*

I inhaled and exhaled.

"The crisp?" She pointed.

"What?" I asked again, like I couldn't hear her words.

For me, there was nothing.

Soon Cyndi brought the steaming pan into the family room. She held the fresh baked apples, ripe with cinnamon and sugar and spice, close to my face. I leaned over and inhaled. I could feel the heat on my chin and in my nose. The air felt different, thick and humid. But there was no scent.

"I can't smell." I said it softly.

There was silence. I remember the silence. It was white hot and long. No one said a word.

"I can't smell a thing."

When I took a bite, concentrating intently on the food in my mouth for the first time since before the accident, I mainly registered the texture. I could feel the softness of the baked fruit and the crunch of the crinkly top. But the flavor? It tasted of nothing



but a dull sweet, a muted sugar. The cinnamon, the nutmeg, the lemon had vanished. The honey was unattainable and the oats, gone. Where was the rich cream of the butter?

“I can’t taste,” I said.

Later that night, Becca and I sat among pillows and blankets on my bed. My leg in its brace fanned out in front.

“What if I never smell again?”

