

**FOOD WAS HER
COUNTRY** THE MEMOIR OF
A QUEER DAUGHTER

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Dagger Editions

A GIRL, WAITING

As a teenager, I went through a dessert-making phase as festive as it was grim.

My father had taken a job at Carleton University, and so we moved to Ottawa from Edmonton the day Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. The house was newly built, the land around it naked as a lunar landscape. We watched Armstrong hop around in his space suit, while Michael earnestly took photos of the TV screen.

Through an upstairs window, I spent hours watching our neighbours cavort in their backyard swimming pool: exotic English banter, blonde hair, good-natured mom and dad. The rest of my time was spent in the kitchen, baking.

The 1970s were a thrilling era of chiffon pies, extravagant parfaits, and endless variations on Baked Alaska. Not one to miss out on culinary history, I took it upon myself to make dessert for about a year's worth of Sunday lunches for my family.

My preparations began on Saturday, when I accompanied my mother on her weekend shopping trip to Safeway. I was a silent and slouching figure habitually dressed in beatnik black, in the backseat of our red Volvo station wagon. This mute arrangement suited us both, each too dispirited to entertain the remote possibility of civil conversation. As a teenager, I thought silence and depression were status quo and that hours and days of muteness between a mother and her

daughter was normal. I thought family was a desert you had to traverse to get to a place where people were curious, and got to know you, and where there was a *you* someone would want to know.

At the glittering supermarket, we immediately parted ways. Off I went to the baking aisle to ogle McCormick Cream of Tartar, Lyle's Golden Syrup and Nabisco Graham Crackers. I lingered over the triumphant inventions of the western world, most of them absent from my mother's pantry. After making my selections, I located my mother dolefully examining brands of liverwurst and pickled herring in the deli section. I dumped my items into her shopping cart, took the keys out of her purse, and didn't look back when she said, loudly and embarrassingly, in Ukrainian, *What is wrong with you?* I returned to the car. The names of those items were the blank verse of a culture — American? English? Normal? — I desperately wanted to speak.

To Mama's credit, I do not recall any of my ingredients, arcane as they were, getting tossed at the cash. Perhaps my mother was bemused by my eccentricity. Perhaps, of all the teenage peccadilloes I might have acquired (drugs, alcohol, an English boyfriend), this one was unbelievably benign.

I chose desserts only from decidedly non-ethnic sources, like *Betty Crocker* or *The Pillsbury Cookbook*. I adored the names of their creations: Tunnel of Fudge Gateau; Strawberry Chiffon Chocolate Pie. I basked in their confidence and scientific prowess: *Every Recipe Perfected For You in Our Test Kitchens* boasted, *Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book*. "It is our sincere wish that this cookbook may be of assistance to the women of Canada," proclaimed *The Blue Ribbon Cookbook*. Indeed, the good people at *Blue Ribbon* had taken it upon

themselves to instruct Canadian housewives on menu-planning. Every meal was to have one hot dish. Variety was crucial (“A meal where everything is whitish is unappetizing.”) Highly spiced foods and pickles were to be sparingly served. *The Modern Encyclopedia of Cooking* even instructed housewives on The Social Use of Food: “The dinner table is no place for any member of the family to air the grievances of the day, for the husband to take his wife to task for extravagance, for the wife to express her financial worries, for either of them to scold or discipline the children.”

My father was often belligerent at the table, and we kids felt no compunction in airing the grievances of the day. I was mortified by the plate of my Mama’s homemade dill pickles at every meal, the cold breakfasts, the whitish meals of perogies and sour cream. Dessert would be my corrective. Thus, on Saturday nights, while my female peers were going to movies, having sleepovers, or engaging in the sweet, awkward rituals of dating, or the sweaty exigencies of teenage sex, I, like some miniature gay man, made dessert.

My baking binges took hours, sometimes days. I was enamoured of complex, multi-valenced concoctions, preferably those, like my beloved Baked Alaska, which involved both baking and freezing. Extremes of temperature and flavour were my specialty.

I had not yet resolved the uncertainties of my libido, was secretly worried about my profound disinterest in the junior high prom. It would be a quarter century before *Will and Grace* and *Ellen* appeared on my television screen. Were the assertive flavours and temperatures of Fudge Ribbon Pie metaphor for my unacknowledged desires?

The making of Fudge Ribbon Pie begins relatively casually, with the combining of unsweetened chocolate squares and evaporated milk. Butter, sugar and vanilla are stirred in, after which the mixture is cooled.

And then, all hell breaks loose. “Spoon half of the peppermint ice cream into a cooled pastry shell,” orders the cookbook, shrilly. “Cover with half the cooled chocolate sauce; freeze. Repeat with the remaining ice cream and sauce. Cover and freeze overnight.”

As if these hours of blending, rolling, baking, stirring, spooning, freezing, spooning and freezing again were not sufficient workout for a lanky, depressive teenage girl with hormones to burn, there was still the meringue: three egg whites beaten with vanilla and cream of tartar. “Gradually add 6 tablespoons sugar, beating till stiff and glossy peaks form,” demanded the cookbook in its relentless fashion. And then: “Fold 3 tablespoons of crushed peppermint-stick candy into the meringue.”

By then, my family had returned from church (I stayed in bed as they left, feigning a coma). My father, due to my utter lack of religiosity, was now shunning me. Mama heated roast beef, gravy and mashed potatoes in static, bristling silence, no doubt disturbed by my territorial incursion and its perceived critique of her cuisine. Roman, Mikey, Jeannie and Lydia were exhausted from a half-hour each way of fighting in the car, followed by ninety minutes of Byzantine Ukrainian Catholic worship, with its chronic standing and kneeling, its kissing of crosses and beating of chests. They were irritated and unsettled by a rambling sermon chastising them for every biological and psychological desire imaginable, delivered by a beet-faced priest desperate for his noontime glass of wine.

In short, my audience, as I removed the pie from the freezer, spread the meringue over the chocolate layer, sprinkled the top with a remaining 1 tablespoon of crushed candy, placed the pie, for reasons unknown, on an old, unfinished wooden cutting board, and baked at 475 degrees for 4 to 5 minutes or until golden, serving at once, was less than ideal. By now they were soporific from their whitish servings of perogies, roast beef on the side, pickles on the side of that. My father, a diabetic, and my mother, a devotee of Weight Watchers, eyed my pie with fascinated revulsion.

My siblings consumed their enormous slices of Fudge Ribbon Pie in silence, and then left the table without a word. What could they do? The pie's pop culture American flavours were delectable to them, but my mother's disapproval transformed it into contraband. Mama had long since disappeared from the kitchen. Only my father and I were left at the table. He, freed from his wife's watchful gaze, was digging into a second slice, smiling guiltily at me. I, coming down from the high of baking and serving, was left with an addict's aftertaste: pride mixed with shame; cold and hot, juxtaposed.

After my year of extreme desserts ended, I entered into a decade-long dalliance with heterosexuality. I went on a handful of dates with theatrical boys; boys who read Nietzsche; boys who sang in the church choir. One hundred percent of them turned out to be gay.

Who lives in silence and who gets to speak? I no longer disavow the girl who stood so silently and unhappily over the simmering pot of chocolate, waiting for the right texture to appear. I suspect the hot and cold temperatures, the desperate sweetness of those long-ago Sunday confections to be a language more genuine than speech.

Perhaps only my mother understood who I really was: a girl waiting and waiting, with regret and excitement — for subways and rented rooms, for cities and cabarets — for her life to begin.

MY MOTHER, MY MUSE

I want to come to your graduation, she announced when I picked up the phone. Skipping the formalities as usual.

Oh, Mom, that's OK. I mean, it's a small graduation and it's in January, it'll probably be raining, actually probably hail, maybe snow, it's been a bad winter...

I'm coming.

But Ma! I wasn't even planning to go!

None of the cool kids went to graduation, and if they did it was to protest art world elitism, or sexism, or capitalism, or all of the above. In any case, what would I tell her about my art piece?

There was silence on the other end of the line. I realized my mother was crying, a rising liquid wave of helpless sobs getting louder and louder. I had never heard this sound from my mother before.

Had something terrible happened? I assumed she was lonely. My father had been travelling a lot. She'd started doing volunteer work with Vietnamese refugees who were arriving in Ottawa in great numbers. Maybe she was burnt out from that. And why wasn't my tato coming too? There was no way to ask. Personal, intimate speech was a language we'd never spoken.

I mentally planned a summit meeting with my roommates. Our filthy three-storey house would need to be sterilized from top to bottom.

Yeah. Sure. OK. Why don't you come?

I had joined the college's Women's Affairs Committee the day I arrived at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. It was as though a spaceship had picked me up at the Ukrainian church basement and dropped me off on another planet. A planet populated with art students, and even feminists. I could not believe my luck: that I did not have to create a feminist world on my own; that there were women who spoke the same underground dialect as me.

At the first meeting I attended, the committee was planning the year's activities. They seemed like remote goddesses, female students and faculty seated majestically around a conference table, stony expressions on their faces.

Can we have a potluck? I asked eagerly, now that I knew what a potluck was.

Oh. My. God, blurted a willowy, ginger-haired grad student named Susan. She seemed to be the ringleader. She gazed up at the ceiling as though contemplating a long, horrific procession of hummus, soybean casseroles and carob brownies: *Not another potluck,* she groaned.

I sank down into my chair. Apparently, there were far more serious issues to deal with. Our standard art history textbook was the 750-page Janson's *History of Art*. It named not a single woman. Coincidentally or not, almost all of the college's instructors were white men. I watched, fascinated, as the women devised a game plan to win this particular gender war: a yearly film series called *Lifesize: Women and Film*, a long-term strategy to bring in visiting women artists, and a plan to initiate a feminist art course that would, in just a few years, be part of core curriculum. Their sense of entitlement, even their rudeness, was thrilling.

The Women's Affairs Committee was badass. Legend had it that committee members had once snuck into the projection room before an art history class, replacing the usual images with slides of outrageous, explicit art by feminist artists. One day, a year into my studies, Harmony Hammond, a feminist artist from New York, spoke at the college. She brought hundreds more slides of work by feminist artists with her. By then I was a stalwart member of the committee. Susan and I sat side by side in a lecture hall as works by dozens of American feminist artists slid before our eyes, the click of the slide projector and Harmony's gentle voice punctuating our awed silence. There were breasts sculpted onto the walls of a kitchen, brightly coloured brooms cast in plaster as though they were important sculptures, and a grainy performance art photo of a woman scrubbing the floor of an art gallery. Those images changed everything. They gave me permission.

My graduating piece was a series of formal studio portraits of the women in my graduating class, accompanied by rather depressing statistics on women in the art world, and a poster I'd plastered all over campus: a mock job ad, with a cheery photo of me and my roommate Dave.

**The Art World.
It May Have a Place for You.**

It is not a place for everyone. It is a career for a very few special men and even fewer women with skills and a minimum of talent. Qualifications include: male gender and/or complete identification with masculine aesthetics.

That poster was the first thing my mother saw when she entered the college doors, the day of my convocation. She was wearing a silk dress and a mink coat. My friends who worked in the library beside the front door stared.

What's that. Is that you? she asked.

Yeah. Well, me and Dave. You met him at breakfast.

Dave. He's your boyfriend.

No. No. He's posing. It's like, a fake employment poster.

Hmph. Interesting.

And so, Mama sat with me in the audience at my neo-Marxist art school convocation with a Marxist feminist, artist Martha Rosler, as the guest speaker. My mother listened closely to Martha's address and cried again when Martha sarcastically congratulated all the women in my graduating class, spouting those very same art world statistics.

There was a reception afterwards, in a drawing studio. Artworks from the graduating class on the walls. Oysters and champagne laid out on a long wooden table. I introduced my mother to curious fellow students. She strolled around the room and carefully examined every art piece in the show, as though there would be an exam after.

I stood around awkwardly, covertly glancing at Martha Rosler, wishing I had the guts to talk to her. This was not a problem for Vera. She strode up to Martha, an acclaimed media artist, and asked her to take a mother-daughter photo. This was in the days when few people owned cameras. Martha had one slung over her shoulder. She complied good-naturedly but never sent the picture. Here's what I imagine it looked like: my mother in her best flowered dress, matching earrings and necklace, purse coordinated to her high heels, glaring proudly and defiantly at the camera. Her daughter in

an Indian-print tent dress, long frizzy hair and big glasses, an embarrassed smirk on her face.

After graduation, I moved to Toronto. It was the 1980s, the best and worst of times. In 1981, the bathhouse raids saw over three hundred gay men arrested, and thousands more demonstrating on the streets — the beginnings of Canada’s Gay Liberation Movement. In 1984, Brian Mulroney was elected prime minister of Canada and would soon defund almost every women’s, Indigenous and lesbian organization in the country. He also did his best to ignore the rising numbers of death notices with grainy photos of men in their twenties and thirties. By the end of the 1980s, over three thousand Canadians had died of AIDS.

Demonstration after demonstration. South Africa, Nicaragua. Abortion, AIDS, police violence. *Yes Means Yes, No Means No. Women United Will Never be Defeated.* “*El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido.*” *US Out of El Salvador. Silence = Death.*

But the times then were more generous with rebellious artists like me: there were publishers, collectives and film societies where a broke feminist/lesbian/socialist artist in second-hand clothes could thrive. Despite Mulroney’s best efforts, there were still government funding agencies that supported work critiquing the government. There were film and television institutions dedicated to women. You couldn’t get rich, but you could spend most of your days making art, if you were willing to move around a lot and eat a quantity of rice and beans. I survived via a crazy quilt of jobs, including a gig as a production assistant in a Jell-O commercial. After being relegated to the kitchen to cut cubes of Jell-O into exact one-inch cubes, I quit and joined a feminist video collective.

In the 1980s, I moved a dozen times. Home was my friends, my art, my political involvements. And whatever shabby shared apartment I could make beautiful with rugs, pottery, feminist posters and the bohemian aromas of veggie stir-fry and brown rice. For the godless community of lesbians and artists in which I thrived, *Diet for a Small Planet* by Francis Moore Lappé was our gospel. Mollie Katzen, author of the hippie-ish *Moosewood Cookbook*, was our Julia Child. In those days, a meal comprised of vegetables and brown rice was political. Lappé argued that it was more sustainable to eat plant-based foods, rather than, say, beef, which uses up much more of the earth's resources. After reading her book, I never ate beef again.

Which was just as well, because all my extra money went to film stock and videotape, not food. My work — low budget video documentaries and experimental narratives — began to take off. Boarding pass in hand, I ran off to screening or reading gigs: an audience of one thousand at an LGBT film festival in San Francisco followed by an audience of one at a gay bookstore in New York. A night with new filmmaker friends amid the eighteenth-century arcades of Turin, Italy, drinking Negronis; a lonely night in a hotel room in Calgary, munching Doritos from the mini-bar. (Fun fact: I came out in Calgary, due to a well-meant poster describing me as a lesbian filmmaker. I decided: *OK why not.*)

My work bombed, or it was loved and appreciated. Either way, I never gave up.

But I couldn't escape my mother. Just as she had appeared at my graduation, she popped up in almost everything I wrote. Knowing my mother was there meant the roots were always there. What I now realize is that my mother was my muse. A muse is, typically, an artist's source of inspiration and

the focus of the artist's work. The relationship between an artist and their muse can be transcendent, or it can be troubled. In my case, it was the latter, because my muse hadn't even agreed to the job.

DAMAGE CONTROL

I'm at the airport. What's your address?

Mom? What?

My mother, on the phone. No *hello*, no *how are you*. She didn't believe the phone required such niceties.

I'm coming to stay for a few days. What's your address?

A year earlier, my mother had been diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. After twenty-four radiation treatments, the cancer was now in remission. She was travelling across the country to see her far-flung children. No doubt she'd had some reckoning with her own mortality. No doubt she was worried if she gave me more notice, I'd say no.

I gave my mom directions, hung up the phone and immediately started yanking posters off the walls, and photos off the fridge door. I planned to, metaphorically at least, return to the closet for the duration of my mom's visit.

The doorbell rang ferociously, and I ran down the narrow stairway of my flat to greet my mother. Grrrlfriend, my cat, got there first. I opened the door and Grrrlfriend did her usual welcoming, repetitive meowing. My mom kicked my cat aside, handed me her bags and strode upstairs.

I had been up all night working on a grant application for a new film, still in in my wrinkled T-shirt and sweatpants from the day before. I gave my mother my bedroom, promising to make up the bed after I'd done my laundry. My mother got settled and came into the kitchen, high-heeled shoes clacking on the linoleum.

I handed her a steaming mug of coffee.

What's all this? she said, hand gesturing imperiously to the kitchen table, covered in piles of paper and dirty cups.

I just finished a major grant application! I paused, waiting for an expression of congratulation.

When are you going to get a job?

Ma, this is my job.

Why didn't you become a journalist? You're such a good writer. You're wasting your talents! She sipped her coffee thoughtfully and added, *It's a sin.*

I went out and stood on my tiny fire escape, absorbing the news of my sinfulness.

That afternoon, I set about organizing and loading several weeks' worth of laundry onto the back of my bicycle. I secured a bulging garbage bag with bungee cords and headed to the laundromat four blocks away. When I returned, my mother was cleaning my stove. Back turned to me, scrubbing mercilessly, she said: *Don't think you're going to be riding that bike forever!*

But I love riding my bike. And it's great exercise, it's healthy, it doesn't pollute.

What about when you're in your forties? Your fifties? Your sixties!

I slipped out of the kitchen, feeling suddenly mortified about riding a bike.

I had no idea arthritis would someday make my mother's predictions come true. She was just trying to warn me, but perhaps she envied me as well. She had gone from dutiful daughter to wife in her twenties. She'd raised six children and helped her husband succeed in his academic career.

She'd never ridden a bicycle.

My mother was low energy and rather sullen during that visit. Nonetheless, on her second day there, I invited Haida

and Penny for a salmon dinner. I wanted my mom to know me better, to know my community. She said she wasn't feeling well and stayed in her room. We had a desultory meal. Haida and Penny left early.

That night, as I scraped food from plates and fed scraps of leftover fish to my loudly purring cat, I wondered if it was time to have a frank conversation with my mom, if only as a form of damage control. My first book, *The Woman Who Loved Airports*, was about to be published. It was a thinly fictionalized collection of stories. My mother was in it. So was a succession of women lovers, and tales of breakups and loss. New to the autobiographical mode, it hadn't occurred to me to consult with my mother on her presence in my stories. There would be no book if I had.

I ran water for dishes, hands stirring the warm soapy water, too preoccupied to notice that the cat had jumped on the counter and had eaten an entire half filet of salmon.

I woke up early the next morning and put away the sleeping bag and the foam pad I'd been sleeping on in the living room. I made coffee and went to the bedroom with a cup for my mom. The door was open. She was getting dressed. I remember noticing how skinny and pale she was.

I placed the coffee on the bureau. *Mom.*

She was putting on pantyhose. She didn't turn around.

Mom. I'm a lesbian.

NO. It wasn't an exclamation. It was a firm rebuttal.

She grabbed a towel, wrapped it around herself and ran out of the room. Like a character in a slapstick comedy, I chased after her, shouting: *You can't even say the word, can you?*

My mother had locked herself in the bathroom.

I jiggled the doorknob. *Mom!* I was scared. *Mom?*

Silence. The sound of running water.

The door opening. Her face, wet with tears.

Yes I can! she exclaimed. *Lesbian! Lesbian! Lesbian!*

She slammed the bathroom door shut.

We left it at that. My mother knew. I could put the posters back up on the wall. Even so, I was disappointed. What did I expect? *I'm so glad you're a dyke! Let's have a party, with balloons and cake!*

It took me years to realize that this voluble, tragicomic response was my mother's first attempt at solidarity.