Every family has a favorite story, the one everyone loves to tell. My family’s story is about pork chops. The story even has a name. In her best Yankee-does-redneck accent, my mother calls it “Jimmy Cahh-tah Poke Chops.”

With a name like that the story hardly needs to be told, and often it isn’t. Like so much in our family, it’s all telegraphed. We sit down to a midwinter banquet. Roasted olives and peppers, a whole stuffed bass, game hens so tender they must have been saints. In silence we savor our first bites. Happy sighs all around. And then the stiletto.

“Can you believe this is the same girl who dished up Jimmy Cahh-tah Poke Chops?” my mother drawls. All of us laugh, though my sister Susan shoots me a sly look of compassion.

Jimmy Carter: the peanut farmer turned president. The peanut sauce on those pork chops always distracted my mother. I could defend myself; I could explain for the millionth time that the peanut butter was never the point, that it is a common ingredient in Americanized Thai recipes, that at the age of eight, Skippy was the best I could do.

But.

I bear my mother’s barbs with good humor because I have no choice; humor brooks no impediment, certainly not truth. And I like to see my mother laugh, I like to think she finds it funny now.

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“What do you want for dinner?” my mother asks.

She lies on the couch, an open book facedown on her chest. As she sighs the book rises and falls. She wants me to think she’s been reading. She wants to believe it herself. But I’ve been to the kitchen; I’ve seen the lunch dishes still on the table. The dirty laundry spills down the basement stairs, where we threw it this morning, and the beds are unmade.

I know how she spent the afternoon. She lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling. Her glass of tea, the big glass I filled at lunch, is on the floor beside the couch, where she could easily reach it, but she hasn’t touched it. The tea is pale brown and there’s no ice left.

She turns her head to look at me. “What do you want for dinner?”

It’s a test, that question. I only know five answers, but there are seven days in the week. If I pick the right answer, Mother will get up off the couch. She will smile and put on her apron. She will pull out her cookbooks and make us a feast. She will let me peel the potatoes and she will laugh at the faces I carve in their skins. But as many chances as I’ve had to answer the question, I’ve never gotten it right.

“Hamburgers?”
“Had them last night.”
“Meatloaf?”
“Too hot to bake.”
“City chicken legs.”
“What else?”
“Macaroni and cheese?”
“That’s for Friday.”
“Baked—” I catch myself. “Mashed potatoes?”
“All right,” she says. “Now you need a vegetable.”
I only know three vegetables, and we had corn last night. I hate green beans only a little less than peas and carrots. But today I have an ace up my sleeve.

“Beets?” My voice is high and thin. It’s such a little word, I’m not sure she heard it.

Mother rises up on one elbow. My heart leaps. Who would have guessed the answer was beets? She’s going to smile, she’s going to put on her apron.

“You’ve been reading my cookbook again,” she says. She drops back to the cushions. “Just get the peas and carrots. And bread for your dad.”

I bring her a pencil and she writes out the list. She presses two quarters into my palm. “Take your little sister. Split a candy bar and bring me a Three Musketeers.”

We always go to the store in pairs. The oldest, Ruth and Karen, are best friends and always go together. That leaves
I bear my mother’s barbs with good humor because I have no choice; humor brooks no impediment, certainly not truth.

Barbara and Susan and me. Barbara is one year older than I am and Susan is one year younger. I am always paired with one or the other, and none of us likes it much.

I find Susan in Ruth and Karen’s room, going through their things. She dawdles all the way to Mike’s Party Store. She won’t walk beside me, and I have to keep looking back to be sure she is coming. The way home is no better. Susan still dawdles, and she complains that the bag is too heavy. I make her carry it four blocks, anyway. She’s seven; she has to start to carry her load.

Mike lets us buy on credit. That’s why we shop there. That, and we don’t have to cross any busy streets. If we had to cross a busy street, Mother would have to come with us.

Mother is in the kitchen when we get home. She watches from the window, and when we get to the back door she opens it for us. She carries the groceries into the kitchen, and we all sit at the table and eat our candy. Susan eats fast and runs off. Mother gets up to start cooking. I sit at the table and look at the windows.

Mother made our kitchen curtains, light blue gingham with cross-stitch borders. There are four curtains on every window, two near the top and two down below. Mother did the cross-stitch herself before she got sad. She made napkins to match.

In the winter the windows fog up and water drops roll down the glass. When we do the dishes we pull back the curtains and mop up the puddles.

Daddy eats quickly, he’s always starving. After he cleans his plate, he looks around at ours. Mother goes to the stove to soak up the grease with a few pieces of bread. That’s Daddy’s favorite.

After dinner Ruth and Karen wash dishes, and Mother and Daddy sit on the porch and listen to the ball game. Barbara babysits almost every night, so I have our room to myself.

Some nights I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling and try to feel what Mother feels day after day. Nothing ever happens. Sometimes I fall asleep, sometimes I cry, but most of the time I just get bored and get up.

Tonight I go through Barbara’s dresser drawers, then I look under her mattress. She never hides anything, or she hides things better than me. Under my mattress I have the “T” volume of Mother’s Encyclopedia of International Cookery.

When we study a country in school, we look it up in the Children’s First Atlas and Book of Countries. At home I look it up in the Encyclopedia of International Cookery. I like to look at the pictures. I’m the fisherman coming home for my stew or the shepherd eating his pie. I’m the girl at the picnic, the one whose mother is smiling as she hands out the hot dogs.

Tonight I am looking up Thailand. All of the food words are weird: Mussels. Soy sauce. Curry. Goat. Goat?

But on the next page the people are smiling. The caption says, Thai Pork with Peanut Sauce.


Soy sauce. Mother brought some home once, after she and Daddy went out with the Gormans to eat chop suey. Ruth made me go to bed, but I stayed awake until they came home. The Gormans came in to play cards. I fell asleep to the smell of cigarettes and the sound of Mother laughing.

The next day Susan found the little packets of soy sauce, and she showed them to me. She broke one open and we drank it. Susan hid the rest of them in the back of a cupboard. “If you tell, I’ll say you made me do it,” she said.

Mother is lying on the couch asking, “What do you want for dinner?”

“Hamburgers.” I say. I don’t tell her that I’ve found the answer. It has to be a surprise. She writes out the list and I tuck it in my pocket, next to the words I copied from her cookbook.
I’m lucky today to be paired up with Barbara. She reads all the time: while she walks, while I get the groceries, even while she carries the bag home. She doesn’t care what we’re having for dinner.

Mike doesn’t have real pork, only smoked chops. They’re better, he says. He doesn’t have red peppers, either. “They’re just for show,” he says.

When we get home, Barbara heads straight upstairs, her nose in her book. I go in to tell Mother we’re back. She’s asleep. I’m in luck!

Behind the garage, where no one can see me, I tear the paper wrapper off the pork chops. Peewee grabs the paper and flops down to lick it. He’s a good dog. The pork chops are cold and slick. Back in the kitchen I put them in the biggest pan I can find.

I look for green onions, but ours are all yellow. One by one I cut them up, crying my eyes out.

Peanut butter is in the pantry next to the kitchen. Daddy built the pantry; it used to be a hallway. Now we have to walk sideways to get to the bathroom, but Mother doesn’t have to go to the cellar every time she wants something.

The cherry preserves that Mother made are down in the cellar. She says they’ll keep forever. They’ve been there forever already.

The soy sauce is still in the cupboard, but only five little packets are left. The rest have been torn open and emptied, and the empty packets lie on the shelf. What has Susan been doing? I bite the packages open and pour them into the pan. They don’t make very much.

Chicken broth. I know that one. There’s a chicken on the front of the box. I unwrap one square, then a few more. They’re very small. I get a glass of water, pour it in.

Ginger. I don’t know what that is.

Hot red pepper. Our pepper is black. I pour some in my hand, make a fist and squeeze hard. The pepper runs out of my fist into the pan. That’s my favorite feeling, slipping away.

I stir everything good, then lick the spoon. It tastes like poison, but I think Mother will like it.

I’ve seen Mother light the stove a hundred times. I love the poof! when it snatches the flame from the match. The flame is a bright pretty blue. It dances and hops until I put the pan on it, and then it goes flat.

We have assigned seats at the dinner table so no one will fight over who gets to sit next to Daddy. I’m down at the end, across from Susan, next to Mother. No one is talking. No one is eating. I am in big trouble.

Mother looks at Daddy as if he did something wrong. Daddy takes a piece of pork, a big bite of bread, a drink of water. All of us stare at him. “Hmmm,” he says. He takes another bite, bread, drink. “Do we have more bread?” he asks.

Mother takes his plate away. I follow her to the sink. “Mom?” I say.

“Get back to the table.”

“I made it for you, Mom. It has soy sauce.”

“I told you to get back to the table.” She scrapes the plate into the trash.

She goes to the basement and brings up the cherry preserves. She hands them to me, along with the peanut butter. “Take these to your dad,” she says.

“But it has soy sauce.” I say it again, “soy sauce,” as if it were “abracadabra.” She stares at me for a minute, and I think she’s going to get it. Then she runs a hand over my hair. She’s not mad any more, but she doesn’t get it, either. “Go sit down,” she says.

Mother cleans everyone’s plates, then puts the bread on the table.

“You can go to your room if you’re not going to eat,” she says.

I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling. It’s already dark and it only gets darker. I hear the trees against the window and Mark Gorman taking his daddy’s car. My body is heavy, too heavy to move, and I wonder if I’m hypnotized. At slumber parties, we always try to hypnotize someone, or make someone levitate. I think I could levitate now, except for the dark. I’m floating. I’m sinking and floating. I am the best swimmer I know; they call me The Fish. This is like swimming, like letting the current take you. I think I could lie here forever. I think that I will.