I grew up in Manhattan. Our apartment building was on a street that intersected Broadway, and when I was very young a pizza parlor opened on the corner. On certain afternoons, through some trick of glass and sunlight, the huge neon PIZZA sign was reflected on the ceiling of my brothers’ room, and if I lay on one of the beds, I could watch it appear letter by letter, then the whole word, then again letter by letter, each time in a different color. Not surprisingly, one of the first words I learned to spell was “pizza,” and I was as entranced by the rainbow of the word spread across the ceiling as I was by the guys in the pizza parlor, who could be seen, on a freezing winter day, stripped down to their undershirts in front of the ovens, while we huddled outside in coats and mittens, watching them swirl pale rounds of dough on fisted hands and send them spinning high into the air like so many giant, flattened tops.

Those immigrants, newly arrived from Sicily or Calabria, were also watching us, of course, watching the dark-eyed, dark-haired children who stared at them, as once more they plunged their hands into the dough and shaped and spun it, performing for us, showing off, as amused by our fascination as we were by their prowess with the toss. The rounds of dough grew larger with each successive spin in the air yet landed each time unerringly on those bare outstretched arms. And just before the serious business of spreading the sauce and sprinkling the cheese was about to begin, at the last, seemingly impossible, catch, the pizza-maker would glance up, casting a quick grin. A mute encounter, this—but an encounter, nevertheless—on both sides of the glass, a recognition. And in that recognition, something, I am sure, was exchanged; perhaps we offered them a reminder of what they had left behind in their original country, whereas for me they held themselves out like the open palm of the city itself. I see now the two sides of it, the reciprocity, but what most holds me to the memory is the vision of myself condensed or concentrated in my eyes, observing but not yet filtering, taking in whatever the city had to offer.

Right: The author and her brothers at the age she learned to read.
The kitchen table was blue. I know this not from memory but because my mother still has this table in her basement. When we moved from the city to the suburbs, she had the legs cut down to make a table for us to play on, and she has always kept it. It is small and square, a rich deep blue, the blue of Czech glass in the catalogs the shops send out at Christmas: cobalt blue. But the table is not really that, but a cheerful metallic blue, the sort of blue that would have recommended itself to my parents at a sale at Macy’s in the early 1950s.

I set the bowl down and began collecting the ingredients for a cake: Crisco, eggs, flour, baking powder, vanilla, squares of dark chocolate. Between jaunts to the refrigerator and the cupboards, I consulted the recipe in my mother’s worn copy of The Good Housekeeping Cookbook. The cover, brick brown and greasy in spots, was held together by masking tape, and the tape was dark and peeling. Opening the cover exposed the binding, a disintegrating mesh of canvas and cracked glue. I remember the feel of those thin pages.

My mother had one or two other cookbooks, more recent ones, which must have been given to her as gifts, but none of them, when held, offered the same Aladdin’s lamp sensation; none gave off the warmth and steam and promise of The Good Housekeeping Cookbook. The illustrations in this book I examined with some longing and some care. No dish I had ever seen laid out on the blue kitchen table quite matched the spectacular symmetry of those arrangements or the surprising brilliance of the colors, heightened by the gloss of the paper: the deep greens of the peppers, the sun-set oranges and reds of the carrots and melons.

But now, as I write this, I wonder: Did the cookbook really have color photographs, or have I parsed them there, figuratively, into the past, taking these illustrations from cookbooks in my own collection? Or were those photographs not in a book at all but excerpted from memory; were they actual meals that my mother prepared and served? Was she, in fact, the woman in the checked apron holding the ladle, about to serve the beef stew, with its rounds of carrots, its chunks of steamy potatoes, its ruddy cubes of beef poking through the sheen of gravy in the voluptuous enamel pot? Memory seems to stop here, to lean down and gather itself in folds as if nuzzling into that very apron, unable to reveal anything more. The truth is that I remember only a few of the meals eaten at the kitchen table, probably the most unusual ones: the first taste of cauliflower, served in a cream sauce; the intriguing combination of chicken liver, bacon, and rice.

As I did not do the shopping, I could not ensure that the ingredients specified in the recipes were on hand when I needed them. And so at an early age, I became the kind of cook who was willing to use butter instead of Crisco, cocoa powder mixed with butter instead of melted chocolate, even buckwheat flour for a chocolate cake, if there was no more standard white. Oddly, I don’t remember very clearly the results of those first excursions into the kitchen. I assume the cakes I made were edible and were eaten by various family members. But I have no recollection of how they were served—whether formally, for dessert, or casually, as a snack—and very little memory of how they tasted, though I do remember being praised for actually having produced something.

I began to expand my culinary experience, moving from baking, where I had already established a reputation, at least within my immediate family, to cooking. I don’t remember now who was coming to dinner that night; it may have been Aunt Charlotte, my paternal grandmother’s youngest and most vivacious sister. Memory conceals the face at the table, taunting me, but allowing me to place there whom I will. And so in the yellow dining room I envisage Charlotte, seated—or, rather, perched at the edge of her chair—the thinnest and straightest of my grandmother’s numerous clan, wearing a turquoise woolen suit with a jeweled parrot pinned to the lapel, and smiling generously as I took my creation from the oven and carried it to the table. It was a masterpiece: canned tuna fish mixed with canned cream of mushroom soup and milk, and the whole thing topped with grated cheese (undoubtedly American) and then with what was certainly the most recherché ingredient in my repertoire, crushed potato chips.

The praise the tuna fish casserole elicited seems, in retrospect, disproportionate. Nevertheless, the adults around the table showered me with compliments and proceeded to dine with gusto.

As I look back, I realize that the real triumph of that dinner had nothing to do with taste. That dish did not mark my emergence as a budding culinary genius, much as that seemed to be the import of the conversation around the table. Rather, I had learned to read.

Cooking and reading happened at once; they were complementary, like theory and experiment. Would dipping a knife into the chocolate batter and then drawing it, in swirls, into the yellow batter really produce a marble cake? Would adding the eggs one by one and beating after each addition make a smoother batter than dumping them in all at once? In short, was The Good Housekeeping Cookbook telling me the truth?

Cooking gave me a way to test the veracity of what I read; it was cooking that convinced me the printed word was reliable. There was as deep a pleasure in translating words into what they stood for—sift flour, measure salt, separate
eggs—as there was in initiating the chemical synthesis that ultimately produced something entirely unlike the assortment of ingredients I had started out with. Taking a cake from the oven with two proud mitts—that was a wonder, of course, but it was secondary to the greater wonder of seeing the results match up to what had been promised by the title of the recipe. If I followed the recipe for devil’s food cake, I did not end up with, say, tuna fish casserole. Things were what they were called. It was the discovery of Helen Keller at the water pump, of Oliver Sacks with his minerals: naming and knowing, naming as knowing.

Henceforth, my quest for print was rapacious. I read every word on the label of the cereal box—Special K, which seemed magically, or at least felicitously, connected to me through my initial—and every other label I could get hold of. I read the entire Sears-Roebuck catalog, at least until I reached the picture of the burro and fell to whining and begging for one, whereupon the well-fondled catalog was taken out of my hands. Little by little, I began to open the books that lined the living room wall, books whose words could not be translated into anything as tangible as what the recipes promised.

The trust in words that I developed as I rummaged in the kitchen cabinets seems now a necessary step for other levels of reading. The essential thing to have understood was that words could be depended upon to be consistently equivalent to the things they represented. In that back-and-forth connection the mind kept making between “flour” and a dry white powder stored up in a cupboard or “melted chocolate” and the dark sweet liquid formed from warmed cubes of Baker’s bittersweet, the fidelity of the equation was repeatedly confirmed. Reading was trustworthy; words—these words at least—were exact.

And from such humble beginnings other kinds of reading would later evolve: words that did not stand for ingredients or for any concrete thing at all but for ideas. Into that hidden world adults in their mystery represented, into the dangerous universe of abstractions, one could enter only if one had put one’s hand under the spout and, at some root level, known that what came out was water and nothing else. One could take the step toward the complex world of ideas that would later emerge from print only if one had grasped the stiff green knob of the sifter and had turned it, steadying the sifter against the bowl with the other hand, and at the same root level known that “sift dry ingredients” meant that one gesture and nothing else.

Several blocks farther along Broadway from the pizza parlor was Barton’s, an elegant candy store, what would now be called a chocolaterie. Visits to Barton’s were rare, extraordinary events and seem in retrospect visionary, paradisiacal. And just as rare as the moments when I stood in front of the glass cases on tiptoe, contemplating pleasure in all its depth and range, were the times when boxes of Barton’s chocolates appeared at home. One such miracle happened when I had the measles and was stuck for days in bed with a stack of “activity books,” trying to make the tails of my p’s exactly the same length as that of the model letter at the left-hand margin or trying to find the ten hidden words in the drawing of the fox and the rabbit. I don’t remember whether it was my mother or my father who brought the box of chocolates into my room, but I remember the box, which was about five inches square and an inch or so deep, with a delicate pink and chartreuse design against a shiny black background. When I left for college, I still had the box, which, long since depleted of its delicious contents, now held my life savings: seventy dollars and change, earned from babysitting.

Even at the age when I was learning to read, I disliked the uncertainty of the coated chocolates with their surprise interiors. I much preferred what was called a truffle, though it had little in common with the Parisian truffles I would taste years later. Barton’s truffles were creamy and melt-y tripartite little cubes, each section having a different degree of sweetness. Another favorite was almond kisses, which consisted of dark, sticky chocolate enclosing an almond, each candy individually wrapped in twisted cellophane. Almond kisses came boxed in a fine upright tin, also black with the same pink and chartreuse design. A box of them would appear years later on my older brother’s bedside table, and seeing it there in the hospital, I was beset by a feeling of envy for his role of chosen child, most beloved child, child dying and therefore freed of the responsibility of living, child most desired by the parents—mine—who would never love me as much nor expect as little as they did of him nor give to me a love as undivided as that betokened by that box of sticky, cloying candy.

But that had not happened yet. At Barton’s there was still the unadulterated pleasure of milk chocolate, buttery and sweet, unnecessarily sweet, extravagantly sweet, bliss in edible form. Years later, when I would discover Coleridge and read the lines referring to the milk of paradise, I knew I had once drunk that milk, and it was not milk at all but milk chocolate, the thick irregular chunks of it that could be had at Barton’s, along Broadway, when I was a girl.