Our family home in eastern Canada was built by my great-grandfather, so by the time I was born, the kitchen had already seen three generations of family cooks and been the thoroughfare for a hundred years of household traffic. For as long as I can remember, it has been my most loved and hated room. The warmth, the talk, the action—all that was magnetic—but I loathed its lack of sophistication and its chronic chaos. As soon as I was old enough to crack an egg, I launched my efforts to shape it into the image of what I felt a kitchen should be, because ours was the furthest thing from it.

The kitchen had two stoves: our first electric model, the purchase of which coincided with my birth; the other, a wood-burning range, with piles of kindling and hardwood stacked alongside and everyone competing over who should get to sit on its open oven door, which we considered the best seat in the house. My grandfather, when he was in, had first dibs on it, a sort of unspoken privilege of his rank. Any other time it was bedlam: you didn’t dare stand up for half a second, because someone was bound to whiz in behind you and steal the spot.

On one wall pulleys rigged up a narrow wooden beam, which stretched the length of the ceiling above our heads and was constantly draped with drying clothes: icy mittens, someone’s long underwear, perhaps a shirt and a few tea towels. Every laundry day up and down squeaked the beam on the ropes, a wet pant-leg slapping you in the head if you didn’t get out of the way and a damp-wool scent mingling with the wood smoke and the aromas of baking. The floors were hardwood with a large, thick black rubber mat slapped into the corner below the sink to keep our legs from getting tired (my grandfather bought it, originally, to line a barn stall for a cow with sore feet), and at eye level, two wide windows provided a view across the field to the road, forewarning us when guests were about to land in the driveway.

In my early days workspace was wanting. There was only one short counter, about four feet long and a foot and a half wide, covered in ugly gray Formica that did a poor job of imitating marble. The cupboards above it—in reddish brown stained wood with cold, metal handles—were crammed to the gills with tins and jars and bags and bins right out of another century, so every search for a teaspoon or a saucepan lid became a grueling archaeological dig. Later, we ripped them out to install new pine cupboards and to extend the counter in a clumsy, crooked V into the middle of the room. The idea was to provide more workspace, but the new counter only did so in theory, because the instant it was built it was constantly heaped sky-high with dirty dishes and the compost pail and two weeks’ worth of mail and and, and, and on top of and.

Amidst all this was serious food production, always in high gear and alarmingly so during the harvest season, when for about six weeks the landscape around the house virtually emptied into our three deep-freezes. We packed them to the brim with blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, green beans, peas, tomatoes, peppers, cuts from an entire steer (called Roscoe), half a pig, shad, haddock, salmon, and gaspereaux. Occasionally, you’d come across dead songbirds stashed there, too. These were being saved for the taxidermist, a pursuit of my grandmother’s, which, for some reason, seemed normal to me at the time. Whenever birds crashed into the windows of the house, having mistaken the reflections of clouds and blue for real sky, my grandmother would come along, gently collect their corpses, slip them neatly into ziplock coffins, and freeze them for a man at the museum in town. “It’s the least I can do for these dear little birds,” she’d say. The cellar, too, we loaded with apples, squash, potatoes, turnips, beets, carrots, and jars of crab apple and high-bush cranberry jellies, dill pickles, mustard pickles, chow-chow, and raspberry jam, not to mention furnace wood, stacked in sturdy rows, with a place cleared nearby for chopping kindling—it was like the bowels of a ship setting out to find a new world.

For the 1970s, rural living or not, our lifestyle was eccentric and archaic. We baked bread (and this well before bread machines swept the continent). Back then it inevitably pegged
you as a draft-dodging, back-to-the-land sort, so I tried to keep the practice secret, along with the butter and yogurt making my mother engaged in. Needless to say, I was entirely tight-lipped about our rose hip extract for colds and our expeditions to gather coltsfoot leaves for cough medicine, as well as my grandmother’s headcheese and my grandfather’s carrot juice and cider operations.

Throughout my growing-up years, my brothers and I would have given our eye teeth to be allowed anything store-bought. When my grandparents on my father’s side came to visit, we begged for bowls of their All-Bran cereal, which we thought must be divine, since it came in a box. My big brother got very clever about trading his brown-bread sandwiches on the school bus for another boy’s baloney on Wonder bread. I, for years, was on a violent campaign for cake mixes.

It is not difficult to understand why absolutely nothing about our kitchen satisfied me as a child. The place was hopelessly opposite to the tidy temples of efficiency I coveted in magazines. In my most desperate moments, I marched into the kitchen with a pencil and paper and tried to work out ways to fix it, and I spent every sick day in bed drawing architectural plans with crayons. Futile. The room could hardly cooperate given its principal architectural feature: on top of everything else, the kitchen had seven doors, seven perpetually swinging doors that led off through the house in all directions like arteries from a heart.

People’s jaws dropped when they walked in for the first time. “Would you look at all these doors!” they’d exclaim. “How quaint!” I was not interested in being quaint for anyone, and I found this whole show-and-tell humiliating. I always tried to steer visitors out of the kitchen as quickly as possible, but no matter what tactic I employed, they’d come reeling back in through one of the many door options and start sniffing around again, wanting to learn where all those doors went; so we’d have to explain.

The main one opened into the front hall, where we kicked off our shoes coming in and checked ourselves in the mirror on the way out and where grown-ups milled around taking far too long saying good-byes. I began to wonder if it didn’t have something to do with the doorknob itself, because, without fail, whenever a visitor’s hand was (finally!) set upon it to leave, suddenly an uncovered topic of discussion would spring into their heads and they’d start down another tangent with my mother. It was witchcraft so tormenting I’m sure it’s what eventually broke the doorknob; today it still spins around and around without ever catching, like a mind gone mad.

Directly beside the hall door and perpendicular to it was the one to the dining room, where I once made my little brother act as waiter for one of my make-believe restaurant dinners to which I’d invited the entire extended family. Dressed in my grandmother’s high-heeled shoes, with a towel over his arm and a tea cozy on his head, he teetered in and out of the kitchen all evening serving my five grand courses—all of which contained cheese. I considered these to be posh events in our dining room, but we ate all our everyday meals there too because the kitchen had no table. Actually, my father implied that eating in kitchens was a vulgar modern practice, but that in no way altered my convictions on the subject: I wanted a table in the kitchen because that’s how it was in “normal” kitchens, those of the glossy magazines. They had slick, L-shaped cupboards with brightly colored counters dividing the workspace from the enchantingly named breakfast nook. Really lucky people, I observed, had bar stools so that they could eat right there, twirling around high up at the counter. Better still, some kitchens had a secret hatch door where one could pass food through from the kitchen and pick it up on the other side.

How I envied them all! But we had to do it the old way: cook in the kitchen and eat at the dining room table—the same table upon which my grandfather’s brother, Alban, had been operated on for a burst appendix more than half a century earlier. I occasionally thought about this during multigenerational family dinners: right here under our plates was where they’d stretched Alban out and held him flat while the doctor cut him open and tried to save his life. I couldn’t imagine what their next meal after that ordeal must have felt like.

Alban didn’t last long afterwards.

On the same wall of the kitchen as the dining room door was yet another, with the refrigerator and the electric stove (used only in summer when it was too hot for the wood fire) wedged in between. That led into what we called “the back room,” which had been many things over the course of its history and during my time was many other things all at once. In the early 1900s, my great-grandmother ran the community post office out of there (we still have the official stamp); later, it became a bedroom for various old people who couldn’t make it up the stairs anymore, including Aunt Essie, whose main claim to fame in family lore is that she made cornbread for the dog with dead flies in it (“for raisins”). When I was growing up, the back room housed our toys, a deep-freeze, the washer and dryer, and a shelf loaded into a warp with cookbooks and a cannery’s supply of mason jars. There was a two-hundred-year-old...
cupboard full of baking tins, including the duck-shaped one for birthdays, and sacks of various sizes from the health food store containing seeds, grains, cereals, and other ingredients largely unidentifiable by me. I used them anyway to play grocery shop, setting the ironing board up in front of the cupboard for a counter. “Yes, what can I get you, sir?” I’d ask my little brother, who’d come trotting in obediently with a basket. “Oh,” he’d say, mulling over the selection, “some dried beans, a bag of dulse, and a jar of wheat germ, please.” Barring the grocery game, the great virtue of this multipurpose offshoot of the kitchen was that it had the best view in the house, so at night we ran in there leaping over laundry and the flour pails to watch the sun set over the river.

On the third wall of the kitchen was a whole parade of doors. The first, leading into the pantry, swung both ways on its hinges because I had accidentally broken it bursting through during a particularly wild game of hide-and-seek. It was a strange little cubbyhole, that pantry, with its bouncy pine counter where we rolled out pastry and kneaded bread. On one wall hung a grey salt-box holding various lengths of salvaged string, and often there was cheesecloth, suspended from a hook, with cooked crab apples sagging in it while their juice strained through into a basin to be made into jelly. Behind the door was the medicine cabinet, stocked with Band-Aids, aspirin, iodine, Vaseline, barber’s shears, cotton swabs, and God knows what all. Underneath were a few odd books, one on how to get stains out of things and another on yoga, and there was usually a box of sesame snaps (the closest we ever got to candy bars) and several of rooibos tea, brought back from Africa by my uncle Freeman. The best thing in that pantry, by far, was out of my reach, and thank goodness, or they’d have been broken long ago: kerosene lamps stood on the highest shelf in the corner, and my mother would fetch those down only when the power went out in thunder and lightning storms or blizzards. One February (I think it was 1976), we needed them for a whole week. A storm known as the Groundhog Day Gale, which exceeded in intensity the famous Saxby Gale of the 1800s, wiped out power lines throughout our region, leaving most families stranded without light or heat. We had the wood stove, though, so as far as our kitchen was concerned, there was no storm at all. We just kept right on cooking as usual, and half the neighborhood moved in with us for protection. In the evenings, after dinner, I remember whittling kindling for entertainment in the mysterious mellow light of those oil lamps. They cast
great, slippery shadows over the walls and ceilings, making the house seem delightfully haunted, while my mother told ghost stories spooky enough to curl our toes.

Through the next door (while I’m giving the grand tour) were the back stairs, very useful for when you couldn’t get to the front stairs and needed to dash up unseen by whoever was entering the house. My mother could see out the kitchen window when a car coming down the road was about to turn in our driveway, and she would bolt up the back stairs in a panic to fix her hair or change her trousers and then come back down the front stairs into the hall, cool as a breeze. As children we really only used those smooth, gray back stairs to slide down on our behinds; after we grew out of that hair-raising little game, they were a lot quieter.

The cellar was next, and that is one part of the house that did live up to its name. The floor was cold, bare concrete with an occasional dip where shallow puddles sometimes formed from moisture seeping up out of the earth. Cobwebs clung artfully to the beams; mice rattled connivingly in the walls; and a furnace roared hot by the woodpile, day in, day out. The resulting ambience meant that a trip to the cellar was like a dragon-slayer’s adventure, requiring no less daring and courage to undertake. I hated being sent down into its dankness to bring up a jar of pickles to accompany dinner. Worse was going into the cellar’s cold room with its bushels of apples, potato bins, and wooden crates of sand with carrots buried in their depths. The cold room had no light at all, so it was sheer torture to reach down in the pitch black into those primitive holds to pull out fruit or vegetables. My imagination ran wild: I never knew into what I might plunge my little fingers, with all around me the spine-chilling drafts and blood-curdling creaks.

On the last wall of the kitchen was just one door, entering into the “garage.” There was never a car parked in it in my life, but we called it “garage” all the same. I can remember a carcass hanging out there from a deer my grandfather had shot and various pelts, raccoon or fox, stretched the length of planks and nailed on to dry. Like all those other rooms, the garage, too, was an extension of the kitchen, with its own food-related enterprises going on. Whenever my grandfather’s fisherman friend brought in a catch, the two of them would line the floor with newspapers and gut the fish before stringing them through the eyeballs on a rod and hanging them in the tar-papered smokehouse out back beside the beehives.

My grandfather’s “bee equipment” (as we called it) was piled out there too. There was a large sieve to slice the wax into from the honey-heavy combs, a task my grandfather tackled with a long, curved hunting knife, dipped first in a bucket of hot water. While he was working, my brothers and I swarmed around the basin so we could reach in and snatch out honey-drenched pieces of wax, chew the honey out, then spit the dry wads of wax back into the sieve. After that, the combs went into a high white cask with a cage inside that spun the honey into the bottom of the vessel: We just had to turn on a tap outside, and it would ribbon voluptuously into our jars…then we’d go trampling back through the kitchen, leaving a trail of sticky footprints behind us.

So, that’s where all the doors went. You can imagine how the activity of those adjoining rooms cascaded into the kitchen while its aromas and clanging and chatter tumbled out. And you can understand why, by the time I’d grown up and moved out, I had completely given up on the place. No matter what changes were made over the years, the tinkering with the kitchen (you could never really call them renovations) never succeeded in taming it. That kitchen remained one uninterrupted whirl of thawing and rolling and stewing and clinking and sprouting and washing and ripening and rising and falling, which inevitably churned out a boundless, immortal mess. And, of course, amidst all that were lives, adding in their way to the craziness of it.

Now, thirty years later, there is talk of “redoing” the kitchen again, but I’m skeptical. Visiting the other day, I opened a cupboard and for amusement took inventory of the avalanche-in-waiting within: one pasta machine; nineteen bottles of assorted vitamins; a jug of molasses; bags of oatmeal, millet, brown rice flour, and whole wheat flour, each held together at the top with a clothespin; glass cleaner; a few boxes of Kleenex; two cartons of rice milk; a blow torch; organic ginger chunks; light bulbs; a bottle of gin; several plastic grocery bags squished into balls; five hundred picnic napkins; a box of papadums; salt-and-pepper potato chips; a jar of Orville Redenbacher popcorn; and, luckily, a “Brookstone deluxe fabric shaver.”

“Renovate away!” I say. At this stage of my life, it’s a comfort to know it won’t do any good.