Mama: What Goes Around Comes Around. The Food Chain

SHE SAID, “EXCUSE ME, could you please pass the cranberry sauce?” I didn’t know her. I’d never even seen her before. But, that’s all she had to say, that’s all I had to hear, for me to remember, for me to panic. Sitting in that café with its one long scrubbed pine kitchen table, surrounded by neat little madams, resting on sturdy old chairs, sticking neat little morsels into their pinched little mouths, I passed the sauce.

Cranberry sauce, the ultimate symbol of home and hearth, celebrations and families, feeding and feasting: astringent, acidic, the color of bad blood, the consistency of spilled blood, congealed cranberry sauce. Unable to dispel the sounds and sights and senses of past horrors, I pushed my half-unate plate away, grabbed my purse, paid the bill, and left.

I remembered. I always remember. How she disgusted me. I couldn’t watch her. I couldn’t listen to her. Her chewing and blinking and fat oil-soaked fingers holding her stainless steel fork scraping against her yellow, crooked teeth filled with decades-old slivers of mercury and smacking, smacking thin lips never quite closing over the saliva-laden bits of food and chewing and stooped shoulders one higher than the other and humped back and ugly mole starting next to her nose and sliding down over the years to the side of her wrinkled, pockmarked double chin and chewing, chewing, and chewing, chewing and bits of drool spilling down her chin and chewing and swallowing and spitting and slobbering.

She took her final ride into the flames and we all (at least the six of us who survived without going crazy) filed quietly out past death’s blazing door and went our separate ways to our separate celebrations at our own tables with our children shuddering as we slurped our celebratory drinks of cocoa (made with one-eighth teaspoon of salt as was our tradition from childhood) leaving chocolate rings around our mouths and hot toddies (always remembering to impale a half slice of lemon over the edge of the mug and mixed according to the instructions written on the backs of index cards she filed away) and attacked the quiches (always spinach, a fresh grat-ting of nutmeg, one teaspoon of chopped chives, and the seeds and skin of one fresh red chilli pepper beaten into the basic mixture and left to sit for ten minutes) and cauliflower and mushrooms in white sauce (seasoned to taste with a dash of celery salt, two tablespoons of chopped chives, and two chopped hard-boiled eggs) made from the dog-eared, butter-encrusted pages of her cookbooks. Gulping and swig- ging we dropped our crumbs and spread oil stains and crammed fistfuls of venom into our bellies.

And then we knew, we all knew, as we had always feared, that she would never be gone. Never. Every day while we would hide under the covers and pretend I was somewhere else, someone else. Not in her house. Not at her table. Not eating her food. Not her daughter.

When I was younger I couldn’t bear sitting at the table with her. I’d eat my food, gulp, semi-swallow, choke, and run before she gathered the others around her and shoveled the salads and potatoes and beans into her sopping wet, liquid-lipped cavernous hole.

When I was older I couldn’t stand being in the same room. She’d suck. Suck, suck, suck all the rotten debris from between her teeth and consume it with a loud swallowing, gulping sound. Suck, slurp, glug, guzzle, grunt. She devoured my space, my peace, my oxygen.

Thank God it was all over now. Lying in the closed coffin so none of us would have to face her, look at her mouth and imagine it still moving with pieces of broccoli and tomato sauce spilling down her chin and chewing and swallowing and spitting and slobbering.

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