HOW TO FEED YOUR PARENTS

How to Feed My Father

My father's favorite food is biscuits and gravy. This isn't hard to figure out. He'll tell you, chin at an upward tilt, like a declaration of fealty. He loves biscuits and gravy.

I have never seen my father enjoy biscuits and gravy.

The ideal biscuits and gravy comes from his mother. She would make it for him when he was young. The biscuits need to have pearly, pillowy sides, tanned, crisp tops. They should buckle in your mouth, but not crumble into powder. The gravy should be white, splotchy. It should be like a cement mixture with a marshmallow bounce. Of extreme importance is that the gravy, while resting on the biscuits, should not soak in. The way my father describes the perfect bite of biscuits and gravy teeters on reverence for God.

My father was an ironworker. He worked long hours. He could weld two I-beams together upside-down, dangling eight stories in the air. He would sometimes come home with heatstroke. I remember him slumped in a bathtub full of icy water, shivering.

During long drives back from a construction site, he would stop at diners, order their biscuits and gravy, take one bite, and leave. He'd come home barking. No one could get this right, he'd say. It was like a plate of vomit. So bad that he'd rather starve. Fourteen hours of hard labor, boiling under the noon sun, a miserable stretch of highway, and biscuits not worth choking on. I chuckled to myself once when, after this rant, he warmed up a bowl of goopy leftovers.

When I was in my mid-twenties, I visited my father. He had a new girlfriend, Erica. Erica had thick, dark hair and a touch of adult acne along the side of her left cheek. Her primary goal in life was to get the government to acknowledge her and her eight-year-old son's Native American heritage so that they could live the rest of their lives on a reparations stipend. Her secondary goal was to feed my father.

Erica hopped up to me one day with a plan. She would make biscuits and gravy, my father's favorite food. She giggled to me as if she had uncovered this secret in his high school diary.

I warned her. I said, please, listen. I said, it's not his favorite food. He hates biscuits and gravy. Many people have tried to make it for him, and it can't be done. No matter what you do, he will not be satisfied. He will whine, he will complain, and no one will be happy. She thought I was joking. She said it'll be fine, she knows how to cook.

Erica was no master chef, but she knew her way around a kitchen. She even taught me an "easy cheesy baked cauliflower" recipe that I still mimic to this day. She taught my ex—an Alaskan, home-schooled woman who I had dragged with me for the visit—the proper way to chop an onion. Erica could cook really well.

This would not be enough, I told her.

She got mad at me. I remember her, ten years older than I was, stomping around the living room like I had stolen her favorite toy, dark hair hurricaning up and down as she tried to convince me that she knew what she was doing. She grabbed her purse and darted to the store for ingredients, determined now not only to gain my father's approval, but to prove me wrong.

Growing up, my sister and I visited my father every other weekend. We also stayed every other major holiday. If you've grown up with divorced parents, you're familiar with being a volleyball knocked between two homes.

My father, like any divorcee worth his salt, would shape us with stories about how our mother was a cruel witch. One of the stories he would tell is what I like to call *The Story of the Blue Shoes*.

When he and my mother were married, she loved making him buy expensive outfits. Dresses, necklaces, you name it. Half the time, she wouldn't even wear the stuff he bought her. She just liked having nice things.

At one point, she kept begging for these expensive blue shoes. In my head, I imagine them like Cinderella's glass slippers, powder blue, but with a flat heel. They didn't match anything my mother wore, he said. But he bought them for her anyway because, even though it drained his wallet, her eyes lit up when she talked about them.

When she left him, she took everything. All the beautiful stuff she adored, and more, was gone. An empty house. He had no idea it was coming. As he walked in the front door, he was greeted by bare walls and echoes. There was nothing left save for a single answering machine—to screen his calls—and a pair of blue shoes on the mantel of the fireplace.

She had left them there as part of her plan. In plain sight. The shoes she had pleaded for, now a symbol of her mockery.

The night Erica made biscuits and gravy, my father took a single bite and spit it out.

The biscuits were all wrong. The gravy was all wronger. It was like a soup, he said. Not even the dog would eat it. Why could no one make a decent, passable biscuits and gravy? He got up, fisting a beer, and paced the dining room like a lion, roaring about toastiness and coloration and how not to burn milk. We all sat, heads dipped, swimming in our own gravy of discomfort. My father stormed out of the house. I shrugged in embarrassment.

I remember the look Erica gave me. She stacked her and her son's plates with a ceramic clank, staring me down, eyes red and puffy. I had wronged her. This was *my* fault. She didn't look at me or talk to me for the rest of my week-long stay.

My father and Erica broke up at some point, outside of my peripheral. I often wonder how she looks back on that awkward dinner. Does she talk about it? For that matter, does my father? Is Erica just another one of his terrible biscuits-and-gravy

experiences, added to his ever-extending list? When she left, did she leave behind any shoes?

One of the things I never understood about my father was why he kept trying to eat biscuits and gravy. Why did he keep talking it up? Then spitting it out?

The simple truth is that only one person knew how to feed my father. My grandma.

I never got to try grandma's biscuits and gravy.

How to Feed My Mother

My mother's favorite food is homemade noodles in broth. These noodles are not Italian. They're long, flat, thick, and bob a little like a jellyfish. The broth is light brown. It's nothing like ramen or pho. The cultural origin of this dish is one of my life's unsolved mysteries.

The tricky part is that my mother hates noodles.

My mother isn't a cook. When my sister and I were younger, my mother would make us spaghetti because it was cheap and easy. Even then, she wouldn't eat alongside us. I recall many nights where she would skip dinner just because she couldn't even stomach the idea of swallowing a piece of pasta. You could taste her displeasure in the result. Her spaghetti was awful.

When I was a teenager, my mother went on a date with a tall, scrawny man with damp hair. Because he believed in "traditional romance," he showed up to our house in a two-dollar suit and drove her to the nicest Italian restaurant he could afford. She liked the date, hated the food. She ranted about pasta and noodles all evening, about how it's all just flavorless, chewy clumps of boiled flour. My sister and I pretended to listen while watching *Family Matters* and *Step by Step*.

On weekends when I came back from visiting my father, something would stir in my mother. I could see the agitation, physically. Sourness would coat her tongue. It would be her divorcee duty to remind us how our father was the devil. One of the stories she would tell is *The Story of the Blue Shoes*.

When she and my father were married, he was always telling her what to wear and how to dress. He liked to show her off to his friends, to gloat about the expense of her outfits and jewelry. She usually preferred jeans and a t-shirt, and that's how she had dressed before they got hitched. But, no. Not anymore. There were specific guidelines on how a wife ought to dress and act, how long her hair should be, what she should wear on her feet. She played along. It mattered so much to him, and she only wanted to make him happy.

He bought her a pair of expensive blue shoes. They were hideous. They didn't match anything she owned. He made it a point to constantly remind her of how much money he had spent. She felt equally guilty wearing them—risking grease and grass stains—or not wearing them at all.

When she finally got the courage to escape, she packed as many boxes as she could fit into her father's truck. Her father insisted on taking the furniture as well, since he had paid for it. But she couldn't bring herself to take those ugly blue shoes. They would mock her, reminding her of the leash her husband had tied around her neck. She abandoned the blue shoes on the mantel of the fireplace.

She had left them there as a last-minute decision. To be rid of them. The shoes he had forced on her had become a symbol of her freedom.

I'd only ever seen grandma's mythical homemade noodles in broth one time, when I was fifteen or sixteen. My grandparents lived several hours away. I remember my mother coming back from Sacramento with a round plastic container of the ale-colored liquid, white strips floating like satin ribbons. She hoarded it. This was her special food, the one she used to eat as a little girl when she was sick or sad. Maybe she had even eaten some after leaving my father, I don't know. Over the next few days, she ate it all by herself.

My mother would always joke that the noodles were a secret recipe. Every time she tried to get grandma to make more, grandma would become too busy, or forget an ingredient. When my mother was feeling especially hungry for them, she would try her own hand at it using scraps of info pooled from her older siblings. Just like with her spaghetti, the noodles were awful. "Give me the recipe," my mother would whine over the phone. But even when grandma complied, the results wouldn't taste right. My mother accused her of sabotage, but grandma insisted with a Christian smile that, no, that's how she usually makes it... she thinks.

Sometime in my twenties, I visited my mother for a week or so. As a birthday present, her soon-to-be third husband, Alex, contacted grandma himself. He pleaded for the recipe. After a full day mixing flour with water and boiling bones, Alex surprised my mother with noodles that were too soft in broth that was too salty. My mother couldn't finish her bowl. These tasted like normal noodles, and she *hates* noodles! They both got angry at each other. I would have told him not to even try, but I had wizened up a bit by then—a lesson learned from Erica.

Year after year, someone would attempt noodles in broth. My sister, my aunt, my mother's husband. No one ever got it to my mother's liking. The simple truth is that if a noodle wasn't grandma's noodle, it wasn't a good noodle. And grandma was no longer around.

Much like my father, my mother is impossible to feed. I don't think it can be done. Anyone who tries, fails. The way they describe their favorite dishes isn't an invitation or a request, it's a masked lament. Maybe they've both been starving for a long time. The secret ingredients have expired.

I never got to try grandma's noodles in broth, either.