JESSICA SOFFER

Tomorrow There Will Be Apricots

Contents

About the Book

Iraqi Jewish Cooking classes.
Taught by Chef Victoria.
203 West 112th Street.
Monday 7pm sharp.

Eighty and recently bereaved, Victoria is lonely. She needs to find a way to reconnect with the world and has always found that food brings people together.

She’s not expecting Lorca, a troubled teenager desperately hoping for a way to cook herself into her mother’s affections, to ber her first pupil.

As the two women form an unexpected bond, they begin to suspect that they are connected through more than a shared love of the smell of the skin of an orange and the taste of cardamom.

About the Author

Jessica Soffer is twenty-five years old and a recent graduate of Hunter College's MFA program where she was a Hertog Fellow, research assistant for Nicole Krauss, and recipient of the Bernard Cohen Short Story Prize. *Granta* published her short story, *'Beginning End'* in its New Voices series. She lives in New York.

Tomorrow There Will Be Apricots

JESSICA SOFFER

HUTCHINSON
LONDON

For my father, who taught me to sit still and imagine.

For my mother, who taught me to stop sitting around and to put my imagination to words. This book is because of you.

And for Alex, my heart.

Lorca

I WAS PRETENDING to read the paper. I thought that if I didn't say anything, my mother might stop glaring at me, burning a hole in my face.

I was home from school. I'd been sent home.

And though I hadn't gotten myself caught on purpose, as soon as Principal Hidalgo said "suspended," my first thought was of my mother waking to the smell of homemade croissants. I'd be in an apron, piling the hot pastries high in a breadbasket, just beside the cranberry-sage brown butter I'd whipped up. I was suddenly happy, hopeful, thinking of the time we could spend together.

Then I came home. The fact that she refused to look me in the eye made me feel more like a nuisance than a disappointment.

"Kanetha told your teacher that you looked drugged," said my mother, biting a nail, then examining it, the picture of calm on the couch, as if we were talking about leftovers. She had a green towel slumped on her head, and her long shiny legs were spotted with freckles I'd never have. I'd never have her perfect eyebrows either. They were like the feathery fins of her famous pan-roasted sea bass.

I went quiet. She did too. I had to remind myself not to say a word. I talked too much when I was upset. I had a habit of asking her if she loved me. She had a habit of not answering.

"Kanetha's a sneak," I said. "She writes equations on tissues and pretends to blow her nose during tests."

More words bristled against my tongue. My mother's silence baited me. I wanted to tell her that Kanetha didn't always wear underwear and that she flashed the boys during American History II. Kanetha Jackson, eighth-grade busybody. She said I'd been standing in the stall and not "making." So she'd kicked open the door with her neon sneaker. I hadn't even known she was in the bathroom. The stupid thing didn't lock. She found me with my skirt up, my tights down, my shoeless foot on the toilet seat, the paring knife to my thigh. Her lips were stained with fruit punch.

I wanted to ask my mother if she knew the paring knife was hers. The Tojiro DP petty knife, her second favorite. I'd taken it off the counter that morning.

"I wasn't drugged," I said. "I've never done drugs."

I held my breath and looked down at the obituaries. "Mort Kramish, Celebrated Hematologist and Master Pickler, Dies at 79." Still, silence. I could feel it without looking: my mother's low, growly simmer. I gave in.

"I'm fine," I said, wanting and not wanting her to believe it. "I won't do it again." I wanted her to ask me to promise. I waited for it. She swatted the newspaper out of my hands. It cracked as it closed against my knee. She stood up. Her hands were heads of garlic, tight to her sides.

"I could have left you in New Hampshire, you know. You could have grown up with nothing, no one."

She meant that she could have left me with my father. Sometimes, she called him pudding. "He's as useful as box pudding," she would say.

"I'm a good mother," she said so quietly it was like stirring the air.

"I know," I said. "You're a great mother. That's not the point."

Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop talking.

I was sorry and I wasn't. I had the urge to hug her and I didn't. I told myself to be less selfish. She was so busy. She

had a “staff of thirty-five and an untarnished culinary reputation to uphold.”

The towel sat like a turtle on her head, its feet pushing and bending her ear. She had perfect ankles. Her eyes were the color of ripe pine trees. She made no sound when she cried. Like women in the movies. I was a blubberer. Full of watery snot. Aunt Lou said that when I cried it looked like I was about to throw up.

I put my hand on my thigh, willing her to forget. The scabs were pomegranate seeds, tiny and engorged.

“You’ve always been like this,” she said.

My mother said I was sensitive even as a baby. After every fight, after she’d screamed, thrown a jar of niçoise olives against the wall, or poured — she actually did this once — a full bottle of thyme oil over my father’s head, she’d go to my crib. I’d be on my back. Everything right except for my tiny fingers and toes. They were curled into themselves as tight as fiddleheads. She had to uncoil them, one by one. My nails left mini purple crannies in the fleshy parts of my palms. She didn’t know where that strength came from in such a little thing.

“I hoped you’d grow out of it,” she said and I wished myself to be small again.

I could have been more careful. I should have picked a stall that locked.

Now she went to the freezer and for a second I was bolstered. I thought, *She’s about to forgive me. She’s about to take out puff pastry. We’re about to make cinnamon palmiers.* Instead, she grabbed a bottle of vodka and put it into her robe pocket. Whenever it seemed like she was going to scream, she didn’t.

“You have no idea,” she said. “This is so much more than I bargained for.”

Nausea pulsed in my throat. I’d never meant to be more than she could handle. I did her laundry. I folded her socks

into peacocks or hares. Civet of hare. Hare *à la royale*.

"I'm sending you to boarding school," she said. "Principal Hidalgo has a contact. There's a spot reserved for second semester, which gives you all of December to get your ducks in a row."

"No, I —" I started. Already, my mother's back was to me.

I wanted to sit down but realized I was already sitting. I couldn't breathe.

She grabbed the portable phone from the kitchen counter and dialed like this was all the phone's fault. She was calling Aunt Lou. She didn't say a word until she was in the other room. I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I would change. I bit down on my bottom lip until it almost popped. I shuddered. I noticed a spot on the couch that was darkened from where my mother must have been resting her head. I put my face into it. The dusty sweetness of her shampoo.

"Please keep me."

Just then, as if she'd heard me, my mother shouted from the other room, "And don't even think of hurting yourself while I'm in here."

The first time, I was six. I was making a cake for my mother's birthday and slipped on some grease when I was putting it in the oven. I seared both hands on the middle rack. For a second, the pain surprised me, took me, lifted me as if by a wave. I trapped the scream in my throat but tears busted out of my face. I was all shock until I heard my mother's footsteps and realized that I'd put out my hands to do it again, touch the heat again, be lifted again, when the rack collapsed. The undone cake splattered She called it thatsike vomit. There were fresh raspberries in the batter. She came in.

"Jesus, Lorca," she said, looking at the mess.

She acted like I'd gotten peanut butter on her blouse, just "Oh honey, get an ice pack." She had the obits in one hand,

a peeled carrot in the other. I wanted to ask her if she loved me. She yelled for my father. He'd been outside chopping wood. His front was covered in splinters and chips. He made me put my hands on the counter, show him the damage.

"Hush, baby. Hush-hush," he said. I didn't need his sympathy but he needed to give it. His eyes were watery, just looking. "Oh, ouch, baby."

My mother was gone.

"Don't worry," I told him. "I promise, don't worry."

He meant well, but I couldn't have cared less. In a moment, I was running up the stairs, pretending I had to pee, trying to remember how I'd done it. I was aching to burn my skin again. And again.

After that there were light bulbs, tire spokes, vacuums. There were car doors, glue guns, and broken bottles winking to me from the side of the road. There was the grill in summer that could stay piping hot well after dinner, well after everyone had fallen asleep.

Back then, I couldn't say what it was about. I couldn't wrap my head around the need, the craving. Now I imagine that if my mother had just taken out the ice pack, tucked it into a towel, and held me on her lap, rocking me, whispering in my hair, cooling my fingers, things would have been different. The pain would have subsided normally, been reabsorbed normally. It wouldn't have remained forever, hovering over me, terrorizing me like an angry wasp, cruising for the exact right second to strike.

My parents fought like crazy. For the eight years of my life that they lived together in New Hampshire, I remembered their voices going scratchy and dull as the sun rose. The fights weren't about me. They were about them, each complaining about the other. My mother called my father pappy, not like "father," but like "old fruit." My father asked my mother please not to be so cruel. He begged her. I

would listen carefully, waiting for them to mention me, to say my name. But they never did.

"How can you stand such a minuscule life?" she'd say.

"It's not minuscule," he'd answer, trying to whisper. "This is the country. You wanted to live here."

"It's like we don't even exist out here," she'd say. "How am I supposed to feel? How am I supposed to survive?"

In second-grade science, we watched water boil on hot plates. When the steam shot out from the beaker, I leaned forward onto the table. I let the heat lick my neck. It was so strong it made me gag. I nearly fell off my stool, reeling. The long corridor to the principal's office was quiet but for my footsteps on the nubby gray carpet and the wild sound of my pulse against the burn. I put my fingers to it. Blisters formed like uncooked egg yolks. Soon it would be recess. I walked faster.

My mother came and got me. She didn't say a word. I couldn't shut up.

I told her someone pushed me from behind.

Then I told her that I slipped and fell onto it.

Then I told her that I was reaching for something.

Then I told her my teacher told me to do it.

She was walking five steps ahead of me in the parking lot. Her bag was swinging against her legs. I was scrambling to keep up.

I told her it was an accident and she stopped, turned around, and looked at me. She said, "Ha," sarcastic, but also like she was expelling a popcorn kernel from her throat, and then she didn't say another thing.

If I had a dime for every time I told her that — it was an accident — I could buy all the cheese at Saxelby's. If anything could have made my mother happy, it would have been that. She liked the smelly kind the best, the kind that made your mouth pucker and buzz.

One winter morning maybe a year later, I woke to their shouting. I raced into the kitchen. My father's colorless hands were clenched as he slammed them on the countertop. He hit a green cough drop and it skidded and crashed into a million pieces on the floor.

"Enough," he said. "Enough, goddamn it."

My mother said my father walked out that time, the final time, because she had spent eight hundred dollars at the French Hen in Manchester — she'd special-ordered lox and toro and paddlefish caviar — and he wanted her to be miserable. And because she wasn't about to let him have the last word — "No way in hell," she'd said — *she* started packing.

I went deep into the woods behind our house and screamed until I was panting and lightheaded and falling on my knees. The trees were bare above me, reaching like roads on a map. My mother pointed out the redness in my eyes when I came home and I told her I'd been practicing headstands on the moss; the little vessels must have burst.

She was stuffing our clothing into garbage bags, telling me how she'd been wanting to dye her hair darker but my father had been against it. She pinched her cheeks in the mirror.

"Definitely," she said. "I'm definitely going to go dark."

I kept thinking that I wished I had a warm cat so it could sit on my lap. My mother was allergic to cats and she hated them. "You can't even fry them into an appetizer," she said. "So what's the use?"

She called her parents just before we left the house.

"Daddy," she said. I'd never heard her use that word before. "I am going to need some money. Lorca and I are making changes. We've had enough."

We drove to New York City from New Hampshire that day with my mother's pots and knives and induction pans seat-

belted to the back seat, and the garbage bags piled so high in the rear of the car that they blocked the sun.

I told her, “I have a book report due on Monday.”

She said, “This isn’t an issue of life and death.”

I told her she was right, remembering how she’d said “we” to her father. How that had flattered me. How I didn’t want to let her down.

Outside it was March gray, and the windows were fogging up. As soon as I started writing something in the frost, she switched the defroster on and off a million times. It made a whirring sound as if it were speaking French. She said there was no reason for us to stay in Cow Hampshire. She called it that, Cow Hampshire. It drove my father nuts. He grew up in Cow Hampshire. My mother said she wanted to be in the food world again, where Pizza Hut wasn’t considered gourmet. Find a life again. Put me in a school where all the kids weren’t related and where the parents had teeth. She kept giving me this look with her eyes like we needed to be hopeful but the sides of her mouth were quivering. I could see them.

“Do you love me?” she asked. “You know, everything’s going to be okay.”

If I said it wouldn’t, she would turn on me too.

“Everything’s okay already,” I said, holding my breath so my voice would stop shaking.

“Everything except your father,” she said. “He’s a wimp. Never fall for a wimp. Love someone stronger, or love no one at all.”

I nodded.

I kept the lox and caviar and toro in freezer bags on my lap; they looked like my stomach turned inside out. I pinched the back of my thigh until my face turned hot pink. I could see it in the side mirror. My mother looked straight ahead, her knuckles white, like tapioca pearls, over the wheel.

“Wimp,” she kept saying. “Goddamn wimp.”

I missed the rest of third grade.

We moved in with Aunt Lou, who wasn't my mother's real sister, because my mother was adopted and Aunt Lou wasn't. My mother liked to say that explained everything — even though they grew up in the same house on Long Island with the same mother and father who loaned them money, going to the same schools, eating the same gloppy dinners and Chinese on Sundays.

Aunt Lou lived on the Upper West Side in a two-bedroom that smelled of supermarket candles and dust. She'd been renting a room to a foreign student, and as it happened, he'd just moved out. I slept where he had, in a small dark room whose rattling window stared into the fluorescent-lit staircase of a building across the way. I found matchbooks and ginger-candy wrappers he'd left behind. Aunt Lou never cleaned. My mother slept in the living room, which was the kitchen, den, foyer, and dining room too.

Our first night there, I got up at three and went into the living room, where they were still talking, and asked if they were tired. They made a scene of hugging each other.

"Are you going to mother us already?" Aunt Lou said. "You just got here, for chrissake."

They laughed, the two of them. My mother could have said something in my defense. She didn't. I'd been about to offer to make her an *omelette au fromage* just the way she liked. I didn't. I told myself that living there was only temporary.

In bed, I chewed the sides of my fingernails until I tasted blood. I recited my book report to myself over and over until I fell asleep. *Bridge to Terabithia.* Leslie was the new kid too. When she drowned, it broke Jesse's heart.

That night, they stayed up till dawn, drinking glass after glass of red wine. My mother tried out the same recipe seven different ways, jotting things down and getting pastry flour on her elbows. Aunt Lou gossiped about the

wife of her boss and tapped her ashes into the pages of the *TV Guide.*

I woke up to the beeping sound of a truck backing up.

I said “Dad?” before I remembered where I was. My father had an old pickup so covered in rust that the rear bumper hung off like a broken jaw. When we left, the right headlight was smashed too. Everything he had was broken.

In the living room, there was a spatula wedged into the couch, the smell of butter and onion in the air, potato skins tracked onto the carpet, pans stacked above the lip of the sink. My mother shoved a steaming wooden spoon at me before I could say a word.

I tasted it. “More chives,” I said, hoping.

She nodded gravely.

For a moment, we were in cahoots.

My mother had gone to the best culinary school, won a James Beard, and had “quite a reputation” before she married my father and moved to Cow Hampshire. So when we moved to New York, she got a job faster than you could say *vichyssoise.* Head chef and creative director of Le Canard Capricieux. *Zagat* had given it a 27. That year, Gael Greene wrote that my mother had “restored the Croque Monsieur to its long-lost position of dignity.”

She found me a home tutor for the summer, a girl who insisted I call her by her first name, Neon. She smelled like skunk and she never stayed for as long as my mother paid her to. She’d say, “You know all this,” as she whizzed through the textbook pages.

I kept asking where I’d go to school in the fall.

“Sprout,” my mother said, “this is something I need to do.”

I hadn’t asked.

“Every woman should have a career. A life.”

I hadn’t asked.

“Your father made it so impossible.”

I didn’t want her to talk about him again.

“He demeaned my career. You can’t be a chef in New Hampshire. Everybody knows that. He knew that. But he liked New Hampshire. His roots. His roots. Blah-blah-blah. His stupid, trashy roots. It was New Hampshire or nothing. He kept saying I wasn’t trying hard enough.”

She would be just about yelling then. His roots were my grandpa, who lived in a home for the elderly, called everyone Linda, and smelled like scented toilet paper. I’d met him twice and both times my mother’s arms were wound so tightly around me that when I leaned forward to hug him, she came with me. She said he was uneducated, but I didn’t know what that meant.

“Do you think I didn’t try?” she asked but wasn’t really asking. “I tried harder than anyone.”

I nodded like crazy until it felt something like whiplash.

“It’s what I have to do for myself,” she said. “For women everywhere.”

She talked a lot about women.

“Here’s my credit card. I want you to sign yourself up for some ballet classes.”

“I just wanted to know where I’ll be going to school,” I said.

She threw her hands up. I tried to barricade the crying in my chest before it could get to my face.

The September after we moved to New York I started fourth grade at PS 84, where there were bars or chains on everything, a metal detector, and not a tree in sight. The security guard told me I better wear my red raincoat inside out if I didn’t want to be a target for the Crips, who were still active in the neighborhood, for my information. “Crisps?” I asked.

“Oh Jesus,” the guard said, shaking her head, putting her palms together in prayer.

Because I was white and Jewish and the only white and Jewish girl going to public school in our neighborhood, they called me Latke, but not in a nice way. Everyone thought I was a suck-up because I started talking about Federico García Lorca when the teacher asked me to introduce myself. A boy named Jesús yelled from the back, “Does poetry make you horny?” Everyone was in hysterics. It didn’t help that I brought an artisanal-cheese plate for lunch and the *époisses* stunk up the entire cafeteria.

On the way home from my first day of school, I wore no raincoat even though it was pouring. I treated myself to a ceramic knife at Williams-Sonoma. You could buy two for twenty dollars. They were delicate but they had the sharpest little tips. I’d use them whenever my mother was out too late, didn’t ask about my homework, didn’t kiss me goodbye when I kissed her, didn’t notice when I made her four flavors of ice cream from scratch on her birthday, with everything organic.

Eventually my teacher, Mrs. Weiss, called, concerned, just making sure everything was all right at home. I should have known she would. Twice she’d asked me why there was blood on my spelling tests. It was from my wrists. “Change in altitude,” I’d lied, touching my nose. She was no dummy. She’d looked around for used tissues and asked if we’d lived on a mountain in New Hampshire. “Mmm-hmm,” I lied. “Absolutely.”

Aunt Lou grounded me, sent me to my room. “Why are teachers calling us?” she said, as if I’d revealed some big secret: we were breeding endangered species of birds or keeping human body parts in the freezer. It was her house and she had a point, my mother said, shrugging as she fingered the newest Mario Batali book. “Listen to your aunt. She’s doing us an enormous favor, letting us stay here. The least we can do is not be a bother.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Lou said, but I knew the pleasure was only with regard to my mother.

We never moved out of Aunt Lou's. Not after my mother got a raise. Not even after she got two. It didn't take me long to figure out it had nothing to do with money. I wasn't stupid. My mother loved that Lou waited up for her at night, a couple of glasses and a bottle of red wine resting next to her. It didn't matter what time my mother got home. Or what time Lou had to be all business in a skirt suit at the legal-secretary job she'd never leave. Lou would drink an entire pot of coffee just to keep herself awake and prepared for anything my mother might want to talk about. The thing was (the thing that nobody cared about so much) was that I was waiting up too. I wasn't tired. I didn't need coffee. And I would have made her *chocolat chaud* just the way she liked, with a hefty pinch of salt.

Things pretty much stayed the same from then on. There were good years and bad years. My mother was warm in flickers and then very cold. All the while, I waited. Hope was lit and hope was extinguished incessantly. On and off. On and off. But my urge was constant. Like a band of moths stuck between the screen and the window but in my chest instead. I wanted the pain. Wanted it. Wanted it. It was the only consistent thing. It helped me breathe and sometimes more than that. Sometimes it gave me breath. And peace and comfort and something to look forward to. *Come*, it said to me. And I did. I raced. *Come here and rest your head.*

If someone had cared to search my room, this is what she would have found: painter's razors in the cuffs of my old jeans, surgical tweezers — two pairs — tucked below the insoles of my old sneakers, lighters under my bed, and matches pretending to be bookmarks in a book that I hadn't touched in forever. With a flame, I could make leisurely circles around my bellybutton until I just about died.

Now, home from school because of Kanetha Jackson, I heard my mother on the bedroom phone with Aunt Lou.

"You're so right. I have tried my best. I've tried everything. I have to give up and let someone else step in."

I felt more exhausted than I'd ever felt. I lay down. I thought of myself at boarding school and of all the stalls that wouldn't lock. I thought of running three miles down a dark, windy road littered with wet leaves, just to get some quiet. Just to rip off my glove and make little cuts with a pocketknife on the tips of my fingers, like scoring dough. Then I thought of my mother, alone with Aunt Lou, who had no idea how to take care of her. I was the one who replaced her spices when they ran low. I took her hair out of the shower drain. I prepared a glass of cucumber water for her at night. It was always empty by morning.

I went into Lou's room with two cups of steaming tea. My mother was sprawled on Lou's dramatic bed amid one hundred rows of shiny, overstuffed pillows. Her feet were flexed and her hand was over her eyes as if she were blocking a glare. A sleeping mask was in the crook of her arm, defrosting onto the gold sheet. Wolfgang Puck was on TV, selling pans, aprons, and steak knives. I needed to convince her it was the last time she would have to deal with this. I wouldn't embarrass her again. But also, I needed to convince her that she couldn't live without me.

"Please don't start," she said before I'd opened my mouth.

"I brought tea," I said.

She sat up. I gave her the one with the nicer shade of brown. She took it delicately into her hands, as if she were very sick and frail, and sipped. Only I got to see this side of her, undone and vulnerable, slow-moving and weepy, a French lace cookie. In the world, she was something else entirely. She shouted orders at the restaurant. And as she walked outside she took long steps, so deliberate that each

time her foot came to the ground, people looked to see if she was signaling something important in the concrete.

But not with me. With me, she was different, softer, looser, which was only one of the many reasons I could never leave her. I needed to protect her secret side. If I couldn't, it might disappear, and then what? I wouldn't let that happen. That was my job as her daughter. That is what I told myself.

Now she smiled around the liquid in her mouth and I felt lifted. She could do that: make me feel like I'd lit up a room, if only for a second. Already I'd forgotten about boarding school. Now, remembering, I got a little frantic. I sat on the bed and put my bare feet next to hers so they were touching. I was casual about it, imagining that this was something we did often.

She moved away.

"Don't make me go," I said, only realizing once I'd said it that there was no way not to sound desperate.

"You're a danger to yourself and to others," she said, waving off an imaginary fly.

"I'm not —" I began, but stopped. I was better off quiet. If I'd learned anything in my entire life, it was that.

"You should see how they look at me," she said. "All those administrators with their ironed pants." She brought the mug to her face and inhaled. I waited for her to say something about the tea so I could run with it. I knew a lot about Earl Grey — she just needed to get me started.

"I had to give them comps to the restaurant," she said.

She shook her head. I dropped mine. I gathered my feet beneath me and made myself into the tiniest ball I could, wanting to intrude less on her space but not desert her. She didn't like to be alone. Sometimes, even when I'd made her mad, she'd ask me to sit by her — and then she'd pretend I wasn't there. A half punishment, really.

“Can’t I just see the school psychologist again?” I asked. I’d done it before, but it turned my mother into a nervous wreck. She kept wanting to know what the lady asked me, what I told her, what she said in response. I knew there was a secret I’d better be keeping; I just wasn’t sure what it was. So I told the lady next to nothing. “It was just a phase,” she’d said in the end, signing a paper for me to give to my teacher. “And I do think you’re so much better.”

“Just a phase!” I’d exclaimed in agreement.

“Lorca, Lorca, Lorca,” my mother said now. “If that worked, would we really be here again? You’re in eighth grade. This is not a joke.”

I had been so careful. I’d gotten away with it so many other times. Hundreds of times. Gajillions, it felt like.

“Yes,” I said, pretending it was nothing at all. “Sure.”

My mother ignored me as she looked for the remote. She turned up the volume on the TV until she wouldn’t have been able to hear me even if I’d shouted. She watched intently with her back curled, the tea hovering at her mouth. Aunt Lou’s room reeked of artificial vanilla.

“I’m sorry,” I said into the enormous TV noise.

“I’m sorry,” I said louder.

“Mom!” I said, but still nothing.

“I’m so sorry!” I yelled. “Don’t make me go.”

She must have heard me then, but she did nothing about it. And I didn’t dare touch her, not wanting to scare her. Then she lowered the sound.

She lay down. I did too, but her face didn’t get weird and melted like mine. Her internal structure was made of something stronger, something that made her beautiful even in the mornings, in unbearable heat and cold, when she was upside down.

“I could live with Dad,” I said.

She made a noise like she’d been punched in the chest.

“Right,” she said. “Because he’s so effective. He’d let you kill yourself, for chrissakes, while he was outside whittling

a goddamn tree into a stupid giraffe."

It was just a suggestion. I knew she was going to say no.

"Why is everything so hard for me?" she said and turned her head away.

The truth was, my mother was a magician. She could make herself disappear. If I had any hope of staying with her, I had to find a reason for her to come back.

There was one thing that made my mother truly happy: food. In New Hampshire, to save money, she turned off the heat and kept on the oven while she made four varieties of roasted beet soup. She wore pomegranate perfume. At the supermarket, she was like an ant building a hill. At night, she slept with yogurt and honey smeared on her face.

Food was my mother's life. Sometimes, I wondered if she'd married my father because of his last name: Seltzer. Her maiden name wasn't really her own. She was adopted. So she took a last name that represented the only part of herself that felt true: food. And seltzer was her secret to delicate crepes, the perfect French onion tart, and fried chicken that actually glittered.

If I were normal I would have:

1. called Principal Hidalgo;
2. begged to be forgiven;
3. promised to see the school psychologist twice a week (and promised my mother I would not say anything incriminating about my home life);
4. written a note to Kanetha Jackson that looked identical to a sincere apology for having scared her;
5. composed a speech explaining that kids went through phases, tried things, stupid things, and after screwing up and learning valuable lessons, they returned to normal — like I would — and then recited that speech to my mother and Aunt Lou.

Instead, I went to bed early. I was hopeless. Earlier that evening, I'd made a wild mushroom quiche, just to see if it could prove to my mother that I was worth keeping around. I made the crust from scratch. When she removed a woody thyme stem from her teeth, she didn't even say anything. She didn't have to.

Because of a gnarly herb, I was still going to boarding school.

I tossed and turned. My mother and Lou were watching television in the living room, but not really watching, and they didn't turn it down.

Aunt Lou said, "Nance, these things happen for a reason."

And I heard my mother say, "What reason?"

Aunt Lou liked that phrase. She said it a lot. When she was angry — like if she lost her MetroCard or dyed her hair and it didn't come out right — she closed her eyes and took a deep yoga breath. She called it that. She'd taken one class twenty years ago, but she acted like it had changed her life.

"Everything happens for a reason," she always said with her back very straight, her thumbs and forefingers curled into Os. "Everything happens for a reason."

And then, because I'd been practicing listening for years and years and years, I could hear Aunt Lou whisper, "Shhh." I could hear the sweep of her hand running up and down my mother's back. My own back began to itch. I tried to do the same sweep for myself but it was physically impossible.

I looked at the cut on my thigh, and the guilt made me sick. I flipped onto my stomach and shoved my face into the pillow.

When Aunt Lou had nothing to say to my mother, she played a game that she'd learned from me.

"If you could eat only one thing for the rest of your life, what would it be?" she asked now.

“Country bread, buttered, with heaps of black truffles.”

“If you were on a deserted island, what item could you not live without?”

“A paring knife.”

“If you could have lunch with anyone, who would it be?”

“Julia Child’s husband, because she obviously didn’t drive him nuts,” my mother said.

“What is the best thing you’ve ever eaten?”

Poulet rôti. I was sure that my mother was going to say the poulet rôti from L’Ami Louis in Paris because she’d sat next to Jacques Chirac there and he’d said that since she was a chef, perhaps she would cook something for him. And so she did. She went right back into the kitchen and whipped up something fabulous. After that, they used goose as well as duck fat when frying their potatoes, because it had been her way.

I mouthed *Poulet rôti* into the pillow. But my mother was quiet. She could have made conversation, little noises while she was thinking. But she didn’t. Lou didn’t care.

“Masgouf,” she said. “From an Iraqi restaurant that’s closed now.”

I sat up. I opened my mouth. I almost yelled, *What?* But she was still talking.

“I went there with her dad years and years ago.” I imagined her jerking her thumb in the direction of my room. “The company was like watching paint dry, but the food was fantastic. Out of this world.”

“And?” Lou said.

“And,” my mother said, “I went back a couple of years ago, just to see, and it was closed up. Totally empty and sad. One silver tray sat in the middle of the place, I remember. Broke my heart to pieces.”

“Masgouf?” Lou said.

I was already out of bed, sockless and by the bookshelf, zipping through the index of *The Joy of Cooking*, then *Cook Everything*, then, finally, *Recipes from All Over.* I found it.

“‘Traditional Iraqi fish dish, grilled with tamarind and/or lemon, salt, and pepper,’” I whispered, shocked.

“It was heaven,” my mother said. “Literally heaven. I’ve tried to replicate it, I can’t tell you how many times.”

For a second, I saw spots. I would have bet my life on it — on the poulet rôti.

“You know how they say that life imitates art?” my mother said. “Well, life imitated masgouf. The fish was so good, so tender, and we ate it with our fingers. For a little while, I convinced myself that life could be so simple.”

Which meant happiness. Masgouf was my mother’s happiness.

Suddenly, I felt like I’d missed everything. Had I never asked her? Had I never asked her directly the question of questions, about her favorite of favorites? Maybe not. Maybe I’d just assumed. What else had I assumed? Was it just to Lou that she told the absolute truth? Maybe with me, she gave the answer that required the least fussing on her part. When I’d asked her more about L’Ami Louis, she’d said, “*Vanity Fair* did a brilliant piece on it. Have a look at that.”

And then it hit me. If I wanted to make my mother happy and remind her why I was essential to her happiness, all I had to do was find the recipe and make the dish. It would make things better. I could be worth keeping around. I could give her the one dish she had loved the most, that had given her the most happiness.

A couple of years ago, I’d been all bustling like this. We’d had two blizzards and it was only December and my mother said if it snowed one more time she would skewer herself on a butterfly knife. That’s when it occurred to me that we could move to California, and for about ten seconds, I felt like a genius. We could have avocado trees and Honeybell orange juice every morning. We could drive up the coast on weekends and be treated like royalty at the French Laundry. She could open a new kind of bistro that married

haute French cuisine with New American. Alice Waters would make us brunch at her place and would be blown away by the dessert that my mother baked with four varieties of heirloom plum. But then, California had been a ridiculous idea. She would never have left Aunt Lou. It would never be the two of us. Another option would have been to move to Florida, which was like California. But the problem with that, of course, was Bubbie. They didn't get along. My mother always said, "I need her like I need a sharp stick in the eye. Not a creative bone in her body." And yet, every week, Bubbie called once, twice, three times and left messages on the machine — especially now that Pops was dead. My mother would make a face like someone had just caused her soufflé to drop and she'd say, "She doesn't understand me. She never could."

My mother had not tried to find her biological parents. She hadn't wanted to, Lou said. Lou had offered to help, said the two of them could run away and find them together. But my mother said no. She must have been so angry at them. People always said, "I would never want to be on your mother's bad side." Meat keeps cooking when you take it off the flame; my mother could turn herself off in an instant.

Lou had admitted to me that she thought it was better this way. "We'd miss her," she said. "Wouldn't we? If she found her parents, we wouldn't be the most important people in her life anymore. They'd be shiny and new and we'd still be us."

I'd always had stupid ideas, until now. This was something brilliant. The masgouf was perfect. Simple. It wasn't ridiculous. It was doable. And it could make her happy. I'd been suspended indefinitely, meaning at least through winter break, which started in two weeks. That gave me plenty of time to get my ducks in a row. Just like she'd said.

That night I fell asleep scheming — and in my dreams, I wasn't acting alone. Blot, a boy who worked at the bookstore on Eighty-Fourth, was my sidekick. I'd never said his name out loud but if anyone had bothered to ask me if I was into someone, I would have said easily, "Yes, actually. I'm into Blot." Just thinking it made me feel like my insides had been replaced with rhubarb freezer jam — sugary and squishy and all pulp — except at my throat, which got tight and dry, like an overdone English muffin.

In my fantasy, we wear brown leather backpacks and canvas sneakers and race through Central Park and Times Square at night, popping into Middle Eastern restaurants, shoving little bits of this and little bits of that into our mouths and jotting things down on yellow notepads. Our bags bop along like happy toddlers on our backs and when I get home late in the evening, flushed, spent, my mother wants desperately to know what I've been up to. I tell her it's a surprise, and she says, "Really?," like I'm doing her a favor. She is both patient and proud. She holds my face to get a good look at me and I'm the one who drops her eyes first, blushing. I've done good and we both know it.

Victoria

I ASKED JOSEPH if he wanted to go for a walk. It was Friday, and he'd been in bed all day, hands folded over his chest as if he were napping beneath some enormous lemon tree. He shook his head, shut his eyes, and cinched his mouth. His skin, which used to look like it was preserved with olive oil, had become matte and flaking. His blue saucer eyes were milky puddles, and his silver beard, once dense as a broom, was a light dusting of powdered sugar.

"No," he said. "I'd never find my way back."

I'd wanted him to say yes. I'd mouthed *yes* before he'd said a thing. I wanted to ask him if he planned to stay in that bed forever. I wanted to ask him if I seemed like a spring chicken. I'm fifty million years old. But look at me. I'm up. I'm at 'em.

I thought, *If he loves me enough, he'll get up on the count of three. If he wants to go on living, he'll feed himself on Thursday. He'll get dressed. He'll rinse a glass. He'll walk fifteen steps. He'll ask for the paper. He'll pee standing up. He'll turn off the light. He'll grip my shoulders and say exactly this with an ironic grin: "I love you so much that I cannot live without you. So I won't die. I'll live so we can live together."*

I looked at him now. I loved him so much it made my hands tremble.

I used all my strength to sit him up and pour water into his mouth. I grunted but hid it with a cough. It would have killed him to see my face wincing as I moved him from the