The Importance of Food

Jennifer List

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FOOD

"I'll be alone, dancin',
You know it, Baby,
Slow change
May pull us apart,
I'll bring us back
Together at heart..."

-"Don't You (Forget About Me.)"
Simple Minds

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When I lived with my grandmother, she took great pains to take care of my every need. Every morning she'd fix me a bowl of the lumpiest, stick-to-your-ribs hot cereal with fat juicy raisins warming inside of it, buttered toast doused with cinnamon and sugar, and a banana on the side, next to my calcium/magnesium pill and my multi-vitamin. And every morning as I rose, like clockwork she'd present me with a glass of the bitterest orange or grapefruit juice, to jumpstart my system.

I remember the day that she had to be at work an hour before I was to wake up; my banana, toast, bowl of Total, glass of juice, and vitamin tablets were already laid out on the table waiting for me, wrapped in cellophane. She had even had a hearty lunch and dinner prepared then stored in little tupperware containers in the refrigerator for my grandfather and me.

That night when she came home it was near midnight. I was still up doing my homework when she walked into the bedroom.

"Oh, Jennifer," she sighed, "I haven't seen you all day--you must be hungry!"

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They put me in the hospital because I had broken a promise--slipped back into the halls of anorexia once again.

In my hospital gown, I sat by the window, looking out across the river, watching the cars cross the bridge and then pull into the parking lot.

I wondered whether or not Toby would stop by after school to see me, and also why the damn heater was blowing cold air. I watched the traffic for hours, searching the parking lot for his car.

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My mother helped arrange my cousin’s fiancée’s bridal shower, even though Mom didn’t know her. I went with my mother that day to the basement of the Parkman Congregational Church to help her set up, and couldn’t help noticing that the two food tables were altogether larger than the one table allotted for gifts.

"Mom, what are we going to-- do?" I had asked.

"Well, we’ll probably have something to eat and then Debbie can open her gifts and then..." she trailed off, her mind obviously on something else. Maybe the spinach dip needed a spoon.

"Then what?"

"Hmm? Oh, well, we’ll probably eat again."

I remember looking at what my Aunt Jan had given Debbie: a homemade wicker basket filled with kitchen utensils, and blue-checked napkins, spices, and little vials of imitation flavorings. The card attached read: Debbie, I am so looking forward to our new relationship! I’m so happy to have you join our family.. Love, your new "Mom," Jan.

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One night when Mom wasn’t home Dad was lying on the floor, watching t.v. with my brothers. He looked up at me as I walked through the room, and said, "Jen, why don’t you go fix us a plate of ‘munchies’?" MUNCHIES is a daddish term, used around 7 o’clock at night, describing any form of junk food that provides enough crunch to cure boredom; Freud would say it was the way Dad was raised that made him munchy-hungry.

"Yeah, Jen," Jeff joined in, "go get us some chocolate chip cookies or something..."

"Why don’t you get off your ass and get them yourself!"

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Toby visited me every day at the hospital. He’d brought me magazines, and cheery cards, and sometimes some food from outside, because I only ate minimally from my meal trays. He’d sit there with me and talk to me until I finished it. We both knew I could finish, I was always hungry. I wouldn’t throw it up, like I would other things. I knew that if I did, even after he had left, it would somehow hurt his feelings.

"You’d better stop doing this to yourself, Jenny!" he told me. "If you’re going to do this, I won’t come over at all! You won’t see me."

That made me angry, and I was an old pro at converting anger into an appetite suppressant, just like that.

"I mean it, Jen, I won’t!"

Oh, don’t do that, I thought, then I’ll really fade away.

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I really hate the tea-party concept: fat, old ladies I don’t even know smoking their long, slender cigarettes, and pulling out photographs of their latest grandchild. What’s worse is when I’m related to them, don’t know them and think they’re smelly and fat.

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Just before I went into the hospital I was playing a little game with myself called "See How Many Days I Can Go Without Food." It was quite a challenge. I kept myself so busy keeping everyone else fed, that I actually got full watching other people eat. It was four and a half days before anyone even noticed I hadn’t eaten a thing.

When I finally did break down and eat, I felt so guilty about breaking my good record that I raced to the bathroom to get rid of it before any of it could digest. I vomited till I tasted the bitterness of bile. My father was standing outside the door when I came out.

"If you are just going to waste your food, why do you eat it?"

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I was six years old when my Aunt Nina graduated from high school. She, my grandma, and the neighbors had created a glorious array of food for her gradua-
tion party. I never understood why that much food was necessary, she was only graduating from high school, not the Chicago School of Culinary Arts.

She had these weird little green cakes with dainty pink and yellow sugar bows and flowers on them.

"What are those?" I pointed to one.

"Petite-Fours. Go tell Grandma we’re going to need some more of them. And keep your hands off of them!"

I learned that when it came to social gatherings, fellowship is in direct proportion to a plate full of fried chicken, cocktail wiener, and fruited strawberry jell-o like a baby clings to a security blanket...

"Grammmmmmmmmmmmmm!" I hollered through the house, "Nina won’t let me touch her pinafores!"

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On the ninth day at the hospital, Toby called me to say that there was no way he could get out of work to come up and see me, but he really wanted to. I could feel the conversion happening already.

"If you get better, I promise I’ll come see you," he said.

"No, you won’t," I bitched.

"You don’t want to get better, do you? I care about you, why don’t you care about you? Don’t you want to marry me any more?"

"You know I do, Toby," I felt like I was breaking at every joint, tearing in every muscle when the tears came.

"Then why do you do this to yourself? You have such a beautiful body, this isn’t the way to keep it that way!"

"I know."

"Now stop crying... Come on... Listen to me, Jen--I want you to put your hand on your stomach..."

"Do what?"

"Just do it, okay? I want you to think about what’s going to happen when you’ve got our baby growing inside you. You’re not going to starve it, are you?"

"No," I sniffled.

"If you’re gonna do that to our kid then I don’t even want to have one--"

"NO, I told you! I’m not going to do that."

"And how do I know that, Jen?"
"Because it's part of you, and I would never dream of hurting you!"
"Well, you'd better think about that because you obviously don't know how much your being like this hurts me..."

When the food came, my body ached and called me a real bitch for putting it through such abuse. The food smelled so wonderful, so rich, so willing to nourish my body. I wanted it, especially when all the tests they were giving me made me feel like a goddamn lab rat. Too many people were poking around. Too many. I reached into my nightstand and pulled out an antacid tablet to gnaw on.

Later on a nurse came to pick up my tray. I had never seen her on the floor before.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked.
"Starved," I said.

Something I could never agree with was the way manufacturers capitalized on flavoring foods to taste like other foods. You can start with your taco and pizza flavored tortilla chips, your Count Chocula Chocolate Flavored Cereal, and your Hubba Bubba soda pop. Of course there are always the old watermelon Fun Fruits, which really aren't even bits of fruit at all; they're fruit flavored fruit substitute.

My personal favorite is the cherry-cola flavored bubble gum. It starts with the cherry-cola, which was regular cola until it was flavored with maraschino cherries, which once were normal cherries until they were soaked in maraschino liqueur, which is supposed to taste like the juice of a marasca cherry.

If we simply eliminate the middle man, we can return to eating real foods like cheese instead of "cheese flavored", chocolate instead of "chocolate coated", and butter instead of "buttery tasting."

As soon as Dr. Kelly and my mother left the room, a nurse came in with some flowers and placed them by the window. The card read "Jenny, I love you, get well soon and come home. Toby."
The nurse pulled back the curtain, tugging it along the ceiling track. At least everything looked the same. In the new open space I felt utterly exposed.

"If I would have known you were going to cry over them, I wouldn't have brought them in," she said as she let the rail down and sat down beside me on the bed.

"No, it’s... It’s not just that."

"Oh, your test?"

I pretended not to hear her, but flinched when her icy fingers picked up my wrist to examine my I.V.

"It happened to me, too."

"It did?" I choked.

"Yeah, but for different reasons. Hysterectomy to get rid of cancer--"

I didn’t really see how that was much different. All along it was me playing the surgeon on myself by not eating.

"You can still adopt, you know. That’s what my husband and I did."

I looked over at my flowers. Roses he had given me. She put the railing back up, not even caring whether or not the delicate tubing ripped out of my arm. She looked at her watch.

"Another hour and they’ll be coming to do another blood test."

"More bloodwork?" I groaned, not moving my eyes from the deep scarlet bouquet. So fresh, they hadn’t even bloomed. I inhaled their perfume.

"Hemoglobin count. Doctor’s orders."

I wondered how a rose might taste.

"...I know," I sighed.

I stayed two weeks in the hospital, and then I decided I needed to get out. Two weeks was enough. I got out by their rules, which meant eating, and putting on weight. In more ways than one, I vowed never to return.

I wanted to go home, where I belonged, to Toby. There was so much we needed to talk over.

Besides, I couldn’t have stayed much longer in there: hospitals have such shitty food.

Jennifer List