

The Ten Best Meals of My Life (Thus Far)

by Sonya Lea

This essay was originally in the Fall 2012 issue of the Cold Mountain Review, and that publication no longer exists online, so I've included it for the reader here.

1. Four years old. Oak trees, corn fields, white clapboard house. Aunts, uncles, cousins, a smattering of priests and nuns. The smoke from Kentucky burgoo and mutton, a barbecue tradition passed down six generations. Me in a starched smock sitting on a quilt on top of the hand-cranked ice cream bucket, holding the ice still with my weight while my grandfather heaves muscle into the turn. Granddaddy's broad laughter, my little body lifted from the wooden churner, the salty ice scraped away, the lid slid from the steel canister, the dasher raised for my tongue. Ambrosial, icy, crystalline, snow-colored, custardy. Being the first. Sweet reverie.
2. Fifth birthday party. We were poor, but I didn't know it. I had been at my father's college graduation the year before, along with my sister and brother, all of us pre-school. I'd observed my mother as she sat at the table without a meal. I'd already learned to leave food on my plate so my mother would eat. Somehow, my parents save enough to give me a party with birthday hats, and a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game, and a yellow cake with pink frosting that my mother hand-decorates with elegant cursive lettering and six plastic ballet dancer figurines. Somehow through a dozen moves around the world, through my parent's rancorous divorce, through their remarriage twenty years later, through the dancer's appearances on my own daughter's cake, through tornadoes and floods and ice storms, through my intentional and unintentional purging of moving trucks worth of stuff,

the figurines remain wrapped in tissue in my cedar chest, a reminder of a sacrifice made for splendor.

3. Not a meal exactly, but the beginning of a meal – a Dubonnet on the rocks, with a twist of lemon that my father orders at Hy's Steakhouse in Toronto the week of my eighteenth birthday. My first legal drink. He, a distiller, and me, a soon-to-be alcoholic, have a moment of conspiratorial adulthood, a chic cocktail break, as if this is the last dash of elegance before the shambles of disease.
4. My college boyfriend (now husband) decides to chill dessert in the freezer while he watches Star Trek. Lit freak that I am, I read Blake. We smoke hash. Hours later, in a desperate search for satiation, in a tear through his pathetic pantry, in a stoner's quest for munchies, we discover the forgotten confection. We sit on the linoleum floor, and we feed each other ripe strawberries and we lick whipped cream from our fingers.
5. The hamburger and milkshake my husband brings to me in the hospital after twenty-four hours of labor and delivery of our first child. His bleary-eyed devotion, my spent body, the baby's sweet sucking is as though we will all live on primal, milky sweetness.
6. A New Year's Eve party at our friend's stylish home; a gathering without the babies. I make a cassoulet, with garlicky sausages and sweet red peppers and plump beans and robust cumin and I stir it for most of a day and the cassoulet simmers in an earthenware crock a potter gave us at our wedding. It isn't the recipe, but the way the people swoon when the lid is lifted and the fragrance pours through the champagne-festive, snow-covered, firewood-crackling, hundred-year-old log house, that makes me want to cook for people the rest of my life.

7. We arrive on Thanksgiving Day at the Cliff House in San Francisco, on one of the last vacations we will have with our children before they leave home. The teenagers have each brought a friend. The six of us are seated at a round table overlooking the ocean. Outside, it is dark, and we cannot see the waves, but we hear them crashing against the rocks below. Though before us lay steaming plates of turkey and trimmings, though the restaurant is crowded and raucous and self-important, though the diners watch our family across the room, our children reach their hands to each other. They hold hands and offer gratitude in the way our family has come to practice gratitude: before the evening meal. Each one speaks of what they are most thankful for in this moment. My eyes meet my husband's eyes across the table. In a glance, we realize that these children aren't ours for much longer, if they ever were, and that out in the world they'll be okay. Really okay.
8. Cancer Center. Eight in the evening. My husband is receiving the final round of a heated chemotherapy that washes through his abdomen, deadening any microscopic cancer cells the surgeon couldn't scrape from his insides in a twelve-hour surgery. My father, who has come to be with us, sends me to the cafeteria. The food is not alive in this place, even the salad is a sodden, brown mess. I walk past the greasy sandwiches, the fried foods, the hot table where entrees sit in soupy goop. It has been nine days since my husband has had more than ice cubes upon his lips. I eye a doughnut. Looks like dinner. I eat it in three bites. I'm proud to be able to live on even this ridiculous repast. I'm alive. And strong. I think I can will his body and my own into existence.
9. We are seated at long wooden tables in a family trattoria in Italy. My husband is a few months out of this debilitating surgery for cancer. He is only able to communicate with his eyes. We are served polenta with three ragus – mushroom, marinara, and sausage.

Triangles we lift to our mouths and cry over. Because we are in a room full of Italians, because we have finally made it to Italy, because we have had decades of wishing to be here, because we can speak with our eyes, we are right at home. In Italy, it is as if our rational, vernacular selves have evaporated, and we are living on tears and elation and lenity.

10. At fifty-something, my husband and I decide to take a week-long spiritual retreat, to clear the debris in our lives. This is not as terrible of an idea as it sounds. By the second day, we discover the menu is vegan, and we decide to get off caffeine. Just to test ourselves, see if we can make it. Then, one morning breakfast doesn't appear. I drink glass after glass of cold water with lemon slices. This is a fast, and it comes as a surprise, not one I've carefully planned for and thus, think I can control. Two days without food, and I'm feeling clear, light, strong. Though I'd heard those words from others who fasted (and I had called them liars, ascetics and anorexics), I'm not prepared for how simple it is to give up food when others are sharing my experience. With no sense of when the next meal might come, I'm free to live in the sensation of hunger without attaching to what that means. My hunger seems to arise in my mind; my body isn't hungry. One evening a banquet is served. Everything that is offered is perfect and satisfying and nourishing. I'm hungry, really hungry, yet it isn't the meal that is perfection, but the way I have held my body with such tenderness during the absence of the meal.

Hunger arises. I am loved. I am love.