

Chapter 11

GARLIC MAKES US INTERESTING

Recipes. I once followed them exactly, blindly, putting my faith in the author, known or not. I collected them freely, like rubber bands or those little cards with extra buttons and yarn that come with every piece of clothing you buy, believing fully that I would someday get around to using them. Like the newspaper clipping for tortilla soup that's anchored to the refrigerator door beneath an Edvard Munch *The Scream* magnet. It symbolizes the thousands of recipes that beg me to save them each day. If I dare to rescue one, the clipping screams, every recipe will be there for years. Years! And for years I will feel guilty for not making them.

It's dangerous burying oneself too deep in recipes. It can take years to climb back out. And no matter how many you make, you can never satisfy certain hungers. Sometimes you end up consuming yourself instead.

I finally realized I couldn't save every recipe. I had to admit the braised lamb shoulder with olives wouldn't provide the perfect welcoming note to the table some winter night, because we don't have winter nights in Los Angeles. Stewed meat dishes make no sense in this desert climate. When it's cool enough to stand at the stove, Somebody is working late or is out of town, and spur-of-the-moment dinners aren't done in my L.A. So I think and write about cooking more than I actually do it.

Still, there are recipes that haunt me and that I can't help but make in my mind, like my mother's garlic-cream cheese dip. She served it in a fluted and etched crystal dish, a fixture on the white damask tablecloth when we were still a family that entertained. I have never made this recipe, I have never even physically tasted it since I left my mother's house, but the thought of its lingering pungency floods my senses as I roll a plump clove in the rubber peeling tube, remove its crisp, translucent outer sheath, and drop the ivory crescent like a talisman into my palm. It was a tongue-searing unguent that both excited and calmed me when, as a child, I licked it off a finger furtively dipped into the mixing bowl.

I see my mother forcing this garlic through a square metal press, the mordant juices dripping onto the white knobs of cream cheese. She scrapes the mashed garlic remains from the press's bowl, its stench blooming as thick as a swarm of summer gnats, and mixes it into a cup of mayonnaise and a stick of room-temperature butter, stirring by hand, pressing hard until it is lump-free, the wooden spoon leaving ridged traces in the thick yet pliant blend. She wipes the spoon clean with the firm pad of her finger, flicks the last bit of dip back into the bowl, and hands me the spoon to finish with my tongue. The lush paste looks as bland as our suburb, but overwhelms me with a fiery and seductive foreign zest.

“Enough?” she asks.

“More” I say.

Fresh garlic was a foundation of my mother’s kitchen before she abandoned it, an inheritance of her French ancestors. She sprinkled French words throughout those days, as spirits needed lifting, and she used garlic to the same effect. She made garlic bread with thinly sliced cloves tucked into the buttered cuts in a long loaf of San Francisco sourdough, real sourdough, the stuff that got its tang from the sweat of North Beach’s Italian bakers. Other mothers slapped slabs of spongy, tasteless white bread they called “French” on the table, slathered with jaundice-colored supermarket spread, or pretty but tasteless prepared loaves painted in a too-bright yellow wash and dusted red with paprika that looked like clowns’ rouge.

A clove of garlic went into her salad dressing (only inferior families bought bottled), and minced garlic topped buttered steaks before they were slipped into the broiler. A side dressing of raw mushrooms cooked down into a sop of garlic-infused meat flavors. Mother would never have agreed with Mrs. Beeton’s warning against garlic. Mrs. Beeton blamed it for inducing too sound a sleep, “so sound that you do not wake till an hour after your usual time in the morning, and then you feel half stupid, your head aches, and the taste in your mouth is abominable. Should wholesome food produce such symptoms? Certainly not. . . .”

We savored the abominable, reveled in our mother’s garlic dishes, and for all the garlic in our house, no one ever complained or teased anyone about a smell, even though we teased each other about everything else—the clothes we wore, things we said, friends we made, as if nothing else mattered; the only true good was garlic. Neither did anyone run for the mouthwash, which we didn’t have, or mints, which we never kept, lest they wipe garlic’s comforting

afterglow from our mouths. Garlic was a secret, shared pleasure we never discussed, because we treasured it so.

Garlic made us interesting, if only to ourselves, set us apart from our neighbors whose houses held no special odors, were nothing more than common shelter for their benign, boring, blank breath. And when this mother became another mother and stopped making her garlic dip and her garlic bread, stopped putting out the damask tablecloth and using the good crystal and china, we remembered her garlic recipes, made them and tasted them in our minds.

*W*ednesday morning, 7:00 AM, I wake to the sound of the phone ringing. I jump out of bed to answer, in hopes that it's the bee man. It's Kathleen.

"My dad went into the hospital last night," she says, emotion tearing at her voice. "He's got pneumonia."

"I'm sorry," I say. And I am—but not just for her father.

"I've got to drive up to Santa Rosa," she says.

"Of course," I say. I mentally reset the table for the loss of two more guests if Kathleen and her husband do not come, and one unwelcome relative if Hunter does.

"But only for a few nights," she says. "The doctors believe he'll be fine. I just have to see for myself."

"I understand," I say.

"I hope to be back by Saturday."

"Of course, I understand," I repeat, even though I don't. Why does anyone's father have to go into the hospital with pneumonia the week before I've scheduled a dinner party? Pneumonia and