

## *Chapter 2*

### CHRONIC CULINARY FATIGUE SYNDROME

*I*n my previous life as a hostess I did dinner parties on a regular basis, despite the fact that each episode left me a shredded wreck. For months afterward I suffered facial tics and blurred vision and felt stupid, my mind gooey as marmalade, with a shocking loss of energy requiring extended bedrest and daily afternoon naps. It was as if the effort had induced a chronic culinary fatigue syndrome.

While my guests were on the premises I felt occupied, infected by their presence, resenting them as if they were an invading army. Once they came through my door, I couldn't remember why I'd invited them and couldn't wait until they'd left. All I could think of from the moment they were crowding me in my kitchen, a glass of freshly poured, properly chilled Domaine Chandon in their hands,

smiling meekly as they struggled to relax, trying to act interested in the mess I was making of the stove, the countertops, my life, until the moment they were sitting at my table, ingesting whatever it was I'd thrown at them in my panic—all I could think of as I watched them chew, swallow, and attempt to keep the conversational flow going—was *How can I get them out of here? Sooner rather than later?*

And no one ever reciprocated. Despite what the etiquette books say. Either they didn't read them or they didn't care or they felt the discomfort behind my hard, frozen smile and chose not to invite it onto their own turf.

I justified this damage, launched a new undertaking, when my hunger for human encounters hit the crisis point. I'd wake suddenly from a long spell of total isolation, feverishly in need of social contact. I was like a hiker crossing the desert who forgets to drink until she's collapsed in a dehydrated stupor: My tongue was thick for lack of use, unable to concentrate on anything other than lingual communion; my mind was like an enraged beast. I had no choice but to cut it loose from whatever writing assignment it might be lashed to, and watch as it circled the room like a lonely child frantically wondering whom it might get to come over and play. By the time I actually gathered a group—something that can take months in the challenging minefield of Southern California's urban sprawl, murky social hierarchies, unpredictable work, vacation and baby-sitter schedules—I invariably overdid it. I didn't know how to act. I couldn't find the balance between caring and sharing and wanting to throw my guests off the deck.

The deck I refer to is two stories above the front garden. We used to dine there during the summer, before we found workers<sup>1</sup>

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1 Third World economic refugees who risked their lives illegally crossing the border, lured by the dream of a "better life." Little did they know their cheap and desperate labor would be providing that better life for us while they slept in converted garages in Compton and committed slow suicide with a steady diet of McDonald's.



willing to install a garden in the steeply sloping, multi-terraced backyard. I imagined more than one guest impaled on a wrought-iron trellis for failing to eat the last bite of hand-stuffed pumpkin ravioli or homemade saffron and anise ice cream.

Who the hell were they to push aside my passionate labors after what I'd gone through to get them and a pile of lovingly crafted food to my table? What would they think of my cooking if, once they were trapped by the trellis like specimen insects pinned to a display board, I scraped the remainders into their gaping, groaning mouths? Satisfied that they'd swallowed every last bite, I'd wash it down with a glass of arsenic-laced, entrée-appropriate wine and dessert them with brandy and an exploding cigar.

This was the vision that, with each event, began to unspool in my mind, replaying on my psychic big screen for days, weeks, even months afterward. I started to fear for my sanity and my guests' safety. Doubting my ability to curb this criminal intent, I stopped giving dinner parties.

Unfortunately, that activity ceased before I fully contained my need to plan events. I'd get a lively idea in my head—a fussy ladies' tea to celebrate the blooming garden, or a sudden urge to make cioppino for twenty—and I'd start collecting recipes and rounding up guests, reaping all the benefits of that animating exercise. Then, a few days short of the designated date, before I'd actually bothered with shopping and cleaning, the more mundane chores involved in the undertaking, I'd latch on to some perfectly plausible excuse to cancel everything last-minute. They all understood, rainchecks were graciously accepted, best wishes

given for my mother's speedy recovery from what toward the end had become a staggering list of maladies, including two pacemaker operations and an angioplasty with a bonus brain shunt (only one of which actually ever took place), that would have permanently felled a woman half her age and in far better health.

After too many rounds of baiting a withering list of sporting guests, even I grew tired of this game of catch and release. It was then I decided to abandon the mess and nonsense of the actual to invent perfect gatherings for the page.

As a writer I could reshape reality with the clay of language. Who needed the tangible world when there were words? Food and entertaining was an area in which I could sound authoritative, intimate, and truthful while perpetrating pure fiction. No one checked. Everyone took my word for it. Why would I lie about anything as sacred as the pleasures of the table?

In print I could correct my mistakes, make it sound as if I were a successful, gracious hostess. I seduced my readers with lies, let them make what I considered miserable fun. If I couldn't do it anymore, let them fall for the promise of my spring supper-on-a-terrace fantasy, let them suffer the same hangovers of anger, physical ailments, and mental dissolution I had when I believed in such blather.

In writing about instead of doing dinner parties, I hoped to understand the love/hate relationship with entertaining that ruled my life. That was ten years ago. While I still wait on that order of enlightenment, no one has ever questioned the truth of my entertaining tales.

I was confident that amongst those friends and acquaintances who might suspect I'd given up hosting, people who had experienced one of my events firsthand, none were ever going to write my



editor to set the record straight. Everyone I knew was too busy to do anything as mundane as write a letter to the editor and/or read my articles in the first place.

My husband was thrilled with my decision. He loathes home entertaining. After an excruciating workweek, he welcomes the empty quiet of an uncelebrated weekend. He sees dinner parties as an uncomfortable extension of the itch-inducing office politics he endures during the week. As far as he is concerned, people bring their agendas along with a decent bottle of wine. No one ever accepts an invitation until they know who else is coming, and then they arrive with excuses for why they are late and have to leave early.

Once they were here, within the privacy of our home, sitting at our table, eating our food, sharing our oxygen, they seemed so unavailable to us that I might forget everyone's name mid-meal and suddenly find myself grazing in a herd of "dear." Everyone became "dear" this and "dear" that, though there were a number of more piquant, less polite terms I would assign when replaying the event in my mind.

As for my dear husband, he claimed immediately after such events to develop a sourness in his throat that lingered for days, weeks, sometimes even months, a bitter reminder of the frantic activity leading up to and including the night's revelries. I began to suspect that the overtime assignments that Somebody—for that is his name when it is just the two of us at home—pulled at the last minute, leaving me to host solo, reflected his own depths of discomfort with the idea of having a few friends over for an evening of good food and fun. Thus arrived the end of our actual DPTE.

I have never had a bad time or an uncomfortable moment when my parties were confined to the page. Editors and readers envied my ability to regularly round up a convivial crowd. My imaginary guests were impeccably well behaved, admiring, attentive, and sweet. We had a shared history as cozy as a down comforter and a future as bright as the spring dawn. And while I never named names, I did enjoy the company of the occasional bona fide, albeit minor, celebrity and/or otherwise social notable. Doctors and lawyers, as well as artists and best-selling authors (who, save for *moi*, isn't these days?), were sprinkled about my fetes like croutons on a Caesar salad—the really good kind, the ones I make from cubed organic ciabatta bread tossed with shredded parmigiano-reggiano cheese (aged for at least thirty-six months) and slow-baked in a low oven, 250 degrees, on a cookie sheet, until the cheese filaments jacket the bread in a tender, golden regard. But no one ever had a better time than I, the greatest time-saving hostess trick being to make it all up. One need never break a sweat throwing an imaginary party.

Then Richard Cronenberg came along.



## Red Onion and Roasted Garlic Marmalade



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6 medium red onions (about 2 lbs.)

1 head of roasted garlic

1/3 cup olive oil



½ cup organic chicken or vegetable broth

¼ tsp. salt, or to taste

5 tbsp. balsamic or red wine vinegar

¼ cup brown sugar

Thinly slice onions crosswise into rings, then sauté in a noncorrosive medium saucepan with the oil until soft. The large pile of onions you began with will soon cook down to a more manageable mass. Add broth, vinegar, salt, and brown sugar. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until thickened and most of liquid is evaporated, about 1 hour. After you get the onions cooking on the stove begin squeezing the garlic cloves from the roasted head. Add these to the onions about half an hour or 15 minutes before the cooking hour is up. Store covered in refrigerator for up to 1 week. Serve on anything that makes sense.