

Making It Palatable

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It's my first pomegranate. She brings this round bruised-looking ball down into her basement bedroom. When she first shows it to me, it is already cut in half but she has returned the halves to the whole making it look like the hard, round orb it is. At first, it seems soft and organic but the way the color of its skin slides from dusty pink to dimpled red to dot-splatter reminded me of granite. A pretty, perfectly round rock.

She climbs up onto the bed where I am already sitting and holds the globe out in front of me. And then like magic, she pulls the halves apart. Inside it's rock again, now not granite but geode—an explosion of shiny stone. To cut the fruit in two—she has to tell me it was a fruit—she has used the knife without her mother knowing. She tucks one of her fingernails into the netting that holds the seeds. She flips one out and pops it in her mouth, getting no juice on her hands or her clothes or the lily-white bedspread.

I can't believe how hard this fruit is to eat. I can't believe how ruby-red the seed is. My fingernails are longer and sharp. I think I can get one out from the honeycomb webbing without dripping juice everywhere. I dig my twelve-year-old fingernail into that web and pop out one of the angular beads. I don't spill a drop. It's in my mouth now. I turn it over on my tongue, feeling its edges, the shape of the kernel just like a tooth, or maybe corn. I try not to bite down but it's tempting. It seems very juicy in there but the skin is thick and I can play the kernel back and forth against my teeth and cheek for a little while. Once I do succumb and bite down though, I will have to tell.

The rule of this game we've invented is that if you pull a pomegranate seed out whole, you have to put it in your mouth. If you eat the seed, biting through its glistening skin, you have to tell the darkest thing you know. I know that whatever secrets I know are way darker than any dark thing she knows. I keep that seed rolling in my mouth, tasting exactly like what a ruby jewel should taste like. As long as I keep myself from spilling any juice I keep myself from spilling any secrets.

I spill applesauce down my shirt trying to shape it into something palatable for Zoe. This little baby will not eat. She will not eat anything that isn't square so I'm always popping macaroni and cheese into the refrigerator in a Rubbermaid container. When it's cold and hardened, I pop it out of the plastic and cut the newly formed mass into squares. Everything has become a square—because she likes the pointy edges or because I am limited by my molding skills, I'm not sure. Mashed potatoes I take between my hands, pat into a square and fry. Cucumbers, cut down the middle, edged, and quartered she'll eat. It looks strangest on the meats—chicken squares, steak squares. I try to resist taking her to Wendy's daily for the pre-squared hamburgers. If you take the tops and bottoms off Wendy's fries, they are practically Pythagorean.

I wonder at her need for this distortion, this manufacture. She deems it safer because it's been gutted, rendered, turned inside-out by her mother. It has been vetted by an adult and now is deemed safe. Or the tastes are already too much to take in, let alone all the shapes and textures. Let's make it through savory, and sweet, salty and sour first and then perhaps we can move on to smooth and crunchy and balled-up and flat. She probably mostly likes it because I'll do it, letting me be pleased by my patient, considerate mothering. The time I spend transforming the food into something perfectly unnatural, let's me transform into a mother that I don't always want to be.

I roll the pomegranate seed from one side of my mouth to the other. I'm only twelve years old but I know the purpose of suspense. The story I had planned to tell isn't that good and I really don't want to tell it. But this pomegranate seed has busted, so I had better think of another one. It's important in this story that I tarnish neither my reputation nor the idea that Jodie is the most beautiful girl in the room. It's her job to be the most beautiful—she wears Jordache, she looks like Madonna with a bit of a more upturned nose. Everything about her seems to me to be perfect—her hair, her skin, her cheekbones. When I look at pictures now, she's

still cute, but not that much cuter than I was. She had one fewer bad perm than I did, fewer pimples, but overall we could have played for the same cuteness team. At the time, it was my and the sixth-grade boys' opinion that she was the most beautiful girl in the world. I would sit here on her bed and tell her stories all day long if I was allowed to be best friends with the most beautiful of all of us. It wasn't entirely a matter of my low self-esteem. At the time, I thought it was a most adult and considered stance. Objective. Also, she and I were teammates in the torture-the-boys game. She kicked the boys in the shins with her clogs. I scratched them with my long nails. Our boys-should-be-beaten belief trumped whatever beauty-is-power belief. At least through most, if not all, of the sixth grade.

But I still had to earn my spot on the bed. Her mom did not really like me to come over because I might be a bad influence. We weren't Mormon like the rest of our neighbors. My parents drank wine. The wine was a large signpost that we weren't Mormon and an indication of our unstable status—that we could maintain this suburban family fantasy for only so long, that we could live in this suburb for now but were on the verge of transforming back to our hedonistic, non-suburban selves and would slide back down to heathenville. I wasn't sure what this heathenville was, possibly Denver or Las Vegas, but it made me feel like I was always grasping to stay in the Salt Lake, in the mountains, while the Mormon kids and their parents, kicked at my hands.

Food comes to the suburbs from everywhere. Pomegranates come originally from the Middle East—Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan. But, as most winter fruit, pomegranates in Utah find their way to Utah from California. You can get anything in Utah, especially if it comes from California. You can get sushi in the high-desert mountains. It's flown in every day from the distant southern seas as well as from closer, western ones. When I was pregnant with the point-edge eater, I wasn't allowed to eat sushi. The prohibition wasn't just against me, it's not recommended in pregnancy but I thought the edict, like all the other restrictions against eating and drinking, particular food and drink, sanctioned me particularly.

The chance of ingesting a tapeworm is the happiest bad end to an anorexic but contraindicated for a pregnant woman trying to grow an extra body out of hers. The larva

of the cestoda worm are invisible. They hide in the muscle of animals, turning fleshy food into poison and in turn, will turn you, fat pregnant lady into skinny, unpregnant lady in no time.

Even cooked fish, when you are pregnant, is recommended to be eaten only in small amounts. Fish, though potentially troubled by tapeworms, is, in its pure form, a perfectly perfect protein. But what looks like a piece of perch on your plate is really a square of PCB's, filleted to expose more C's than B's or with a pink-ginger sauce to showcase its P's. That coating of black sesame seed protects your tuna from overcooking on the edges but no arsenal of *Sesamum indicum* will protect you from the mercury that finally found a home in that fish.

So while I was pregnant, sushi had to be reduced to metaphor. My sister and I went overboard and made reservations at the most expensive restaurant in Salt Lake, the Metropolitan. For the dessert portion of the prix fixe, the pastry chef made a map of sashimi on a square dinner plate. He candied the ginger, making it as pink as pickled but somehow more sweet, candied. He sliced a strawberry so thin and so red, it marbled to become Ahi. The chef wrapped it in a grenache as thin and dark as nori. A thinly sliced mango became hamachi and bright green pistachio cream stood for the wasabi. The dish was all concept. It tasted fine—clean and simple and the pistachio cream offset the sweetness of the fruit in the exact opposite way the spice of wasabi sets off the sweetness of fish. A purely intellectual enterprise—we weren't surprised by the taste of chocolate. The mango did not even hint toward salty fish. And yet the act of substitution did allow for two senses to happen simultaneously—even as one ate, the visual component kept us in two places simultaneously—one at this fancy dining place eating dessert and another of the time when my sister and I were in NYC being fed slice after slice of Ahi, crunching salmon roe against the roofs of our mouth, taking dare-devil bites of wasabi that the sushi chef tossed our way, for free. Now, here it was no challenge to suck down the whole of the pistachio cream but our tongues burned a little bit anyway.

For Jodie, the substituted story had to be good then. I had to shape it into something she wouldn't notice as an untruth—a stretch—to keep me up there, high on that bed. The ruby seed had popped and I was going to want another

one and then I'd have to tell the real story and who knows what sort of gravitational force would take over in this basement room and drag me off of this canopy bed.

So I came up with a secret to bide my time.

"Have you ever been to school at night?"

"How could I? I live too far."

"It's not such a long walk."

Perhaps I did my part to lend some credence to the thought that my wine-drinking parents were more permissive than her Mormon ones.

"David White met me last time."

"David White?" I forgot David White was her latest favorite boyfriend.

"I mean David Burris. We were trapped in the tire." Our school playground had huge tractor tires embedded upended in the sand for us to play in. They provided shelter and privacy to kids who really needed neither.

"We pretended we were trapped in a snowstorm. We had to keep warm. David lay down and put his head in my lap. It's usually the girl's head that sleeps in the boy's lap but not David. He kept his head there for a long time. We didn't leave until nine. It was cold by then. We could have stayed but we didn't have any blankets."

Jodie had to think about people in blankets. Under blankets. She popped another seed but didn't offer any stories of her own. I dug another one out of the comb and held it in my mouth as long as I could. It got warm but it was still intact and lolling.

Food, in the form of vegetables and meats, bread and cheese, comes to the restaurant intact. There deconstructed, re-shaped and delivered restructured, re-stacked and re-tact. Culinary seems to mean substitution and transformation. Lobster corn dogs seem to marry the highest and lowest of food cultures—until one remembers that there were rules in New England that prohibited feeding servants more than two pounds of lobster a day. Or that so many lobsters abounded that people called them bugs. Dogs and bugs. One hopes that a hot dog as far removed dogs as lobster is from bugs but one realizes that it's probably not the case. And should one mind?

To make a lobster corn dog, take a three ounce lobster tail. Turn it upside down and rub your finger along the ribbed underside. Feel the expanse of the ridges. Imagine how the seams bind the tail. Cut down the center of this

tail, make a zipper. Click the carapace back. The flesh will seem to pop out at you. Take it out of its shell and dip it into a wash of cornmeal, milk, tempura flour, salt and pepper. Then dip it again into a vat of smoking hot oil. Unlike your everyday corndog, these imposters come out all lumpy, more square than round. It takes an expert from Hot Dog on a Stick and a machine rounded dog to make perfectly symmetrical missiles of hot outer crunch, forgiving meaty center, as if they were never touched by human hands. Still, the lobster dogs are tasty with a smidge of wasabi ketchup on the end.

In eating the lobster corn dog, you bridge the gap between two worlds—the carnival and the Four Seasons. You are at once comfortable everywhere and nowhere. The reality of the situation is, you really like corn dogs. The reality of the situation is, you really like lobster. Wasabi ketchup? You can take it or leave it but the way the desires press upon each other: wanting to be at a carnival, tossing a ring over a coke bottle, wanting to order that bottle of wine from Bin 108, wanting to bite the burned cornmeal off the stick, wanting to the hard crunch of deep fry against the soft butter of lobster. For some reason, when you make a lobster dog, the resulting dog comes out looking angular than cylindrical. Transformation is just a kind of substitution—turning more and more into ourselves as we ask which one's the mask, which one's the real: Perhaps it is more a matter of the cornmeal reaching for its square kernel than the lobster trying to return to its shelled edges.

It doesn't matter how many pomegranate seeds she eats—she's not going to talk. Jodie is going to sit there and pick her pomegranate seeds and bite them thoroughly and give nothing up. It is her house. Her pomegranate. Her willingness as the most popular girl to let me, the non-Mormon girl sit on her bedspread gives her the prerogative. Her prerogative makes me paregoric. I eat the warm seed and then take another. I blather more story.

This time, I don't use names she knows. Although I'm not Mormon, I do go to church with some neighbors across the street. A really liberal church that sings Simon and Garfunkel songs instead of hymns. I tell her about the coffee in the basement. Shocking enough to a member of a church that frowns on either caffeinated or hot drinks—it depends who is drinking what when you get the low-down on the edicts. But coffee is both hot and caffeinated and therefore

strictly prohibited and to allow this in a church is the height of heresy—or at least a worth-noting phenomena. I over-stress her surprise a bit. She’s actually pretty sanguine about all the stories. Perhaps because they don’t really shock or perhaps because they’re too far-removed from her experience to bear on her existence at all. Or maybe the lie is coming off just as thought—ill-formed and overly detailed.

Still, I try again. It was in the basement of the church while the adults were having coffee that a group of us kids snuck off into one of the Bible-study rooms. We goofed off on the chalkboard, drawing pictures of Jesus upside down, of two well-hung boy camels getting on the ark, of Joseph touching a very Mary’s breast. Then, we sat in a circle and pretended to drink coffee like the grown-ups. The girls mimicked the women by laughing too hard at the boys’ jokes. The boys mimicked the men by accidentally walking by the girls to pour more “coffee” and brushing against our sweated chests. I tell her about Stan, who got a little crazy with his walking by, a little forward with his brushing. He went so far as to stick out his hand when he passed Sarah. Sarah pulled her arm back in reaction. She kind of got him in the crotch.

“Got him?”

“Rubbed him. He turned around but we could still see it.”

“You could see it? What it?”

“He was wearing sweat pants.”

“What it?”

“A boner. You could see it. Joe told me later that it happens quick like that. The blood just rushes there.”

“Who is Joe?”

I swallow my pomegranate seed. “Just a guy from church,” I lie. “Give me another one.”

In the kitchen, necessity and invention are nicer ways of saying substitution. Yesterday, I was making chipotle ranch dressing for a southwestern salad. I had no buttermilk. But I successfully faked it with homemade buttermilk (milk & vinegar) a little mayo, scallions, lemon zest and garlic and a chipotle. The other day, my sister used Worcestershire rather than soy sauce for a pepper steak marinade to a less successful end. I’ve used baking soda for baking powder, mint for basil, chicken stock for beef all to varying degrees of success. My husband Erik tells stories of his grandmother substituting ketchup for tomato sauce for spaghetti. She

sliced hot dogs slices into Jello instead of madarin orange slices. The vegetarians have soy-matter for chicken nuggets. The carnivores who won’t eat vegetables have sausages molded into the shape of carrots and beets and broccoli. (Not really. Really, they just take vitamins.) You can use oil and water for eggs. Cornflakes for breadcrumbs. Milk for cream. Cream watered down for milk. Who really cares if you can’t taste the difference? Even if you can, the taste can be washed away. Erik’s grandfather dutifully ate every bite of the dinner Erik’s grandmother made him. He turned hunger into thirst. He chewed quickly, swallowed fast. Then, he would drink, slowly, sixteen ounces of Coke. He’d swish the Coke around his mouth, each pop of carbonation scrubbing clean his offended mouth.

She pressed me on who Joe was. I didn’t want to answer. But I wanted to stay in that cool basement bedroom, everything laid out in white. I wanted another pomegranate seed. The rules of the game were to tell so I told a cross-wise story and ate another bit of the fruit.

“He’s a guy from church.”

“I got that. Why is he telling you what a boner is?”

“I asked.”

“You asked?”

“I read it in a book.”

“What book?”

“One of the Judy Blume’s.” Or from Playboy. But I didn’t want to tell her that I’d rifled through my dad’s magazines. I didn’t even want to tell her my dad had magazines.

“And what did he say?”

“We played a game. We played Truth or Dare.” We did play Truth or Dare. Outside. Under his parents’ balcony.

“He said he’d tell me what a boner was if I’d tell him what a uvula was.” More show than tell. More dare than truth.

“He didn’t mean uvula, did he?”

“Well, that’s not what he thought it was. He was asking something else.” I opened my mouth, showed Joe the back of my throat. Close but no cigar.

“What else did he ask?”

“He asked if I’d ever been naked outdoors.”

“What did you say?”

“I thought we were playing story, not truth or dare.”

“You have to tell me. I gave you my fruit.”

“I have been naked outside.” I didn’t say when. I answered her question. I didn’t say what I answered and I didn’t tell her when.

“What else did he ask you?” She was leaning toward me as intently as he had when I’d showed him my uvula. I showed her the inside of my mouth too. As he had, she came closer. She, however, just looked.

I tried to show off the pomegranate—that I could hold it intact in my mouth—that I didn’t have to tell any more stories. But as she looked inside my mouth to see the seed, I tried to hide it against my tooth and I pushed too hard and it burst. Inside, the pomegranate berry had exploded. A little bit spilled out of my mouth. The thing nobody wanted: pomegranate juice on the white bedspread.