2006 First Place Personal Narrative

Avocado Pie

I have no trouble with the graham cracker crust. The unassuming little squares reduce beautifully under the buffetings of the food processor. Pulse, pulse and little crumbs mix with brown sugar and cinnamon, whirling around the plastic container. Melted butter is added next, though I spill a little on my hand in the process. I’m a messy cook, but most people who taste my pies would forgive me for it. The crumbs stick to me as I press the crust in by hand, licking my fingers to taste the proportions.

I try to make everything by the workmanship of mine own hands – well, pie crusts at least. The prepackaged graham cracker crusts I see in stores are insipid, oozing with bright preservatives and stale crackers, in cheap aluminum tins which make them crack past repair. Not only this, but I would miss the wonderful aroma of cinnamon that drifts up from the oven as I pull the crust out and set it aside to cool.

_I hope he likes it_, I think.

After a moment of serious contemplation, I retrieve the avocado and begin the fascinating process of discovering its secret fleshy parts. The best way to peel an avocado is to cut it longitudinally straight down the middle all the way around. You pull the two halves apart, then gently tap the pit with a knife until it is lodged. Twist it and the pit should come right out, just like a heart in that Indiana Jones movie. Then scoop the secret fleshy parts out with a spoon.

A lot of people, my mother included, do this wrong. They try to peel the outside first, which means that the insides just slip out all over the counter and it ends up a mushy brown mess. Remembering this, I splash a little lemon juice on my avocado to prevent browning. My mother never sprinkles lemon juice on them. I guess she doesn’t understand the remarkable preservative power of bitterness.

“What kind of pie are you making?” she says brightly, entering from stage right.

I do not answer. This is a manifestation of my unreachable self.
“Are you seriously using that avocado for a pie?” she says, grasping the situation.

“I seem to remember asking you to buy one for me,” I add, as curtly as possible.

“Well, yes, but I had no idea you were going to use it for a pie! I don’t think anyone will like it,” she adds in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Fine, well don’t worry about it. It’s not even for you. So do you just want me to pay for the ingredients, or are you not that kind of mother yet?” I add with a bitter smile.

She exits stage right looking unhappy. She can’t understand my taste, can’t understand my cooking. Well, she used to. I remember the first time I got to help with the chocolate chip cookies. I was at the age of accountability which finally made it acceptable to use dangerous kitchen utensils like hand mixers and knives. We only ever had dull bendable parodies of knives which could neither harm nor successfully cut anything. Now, to cut my avocado, I use my eight inch Chicago stainless steel chef’s knife. Its cruel length is honed to a precision point. Just like my unreachable self. To divide asunder filial attachment.

But on that first cooking experience, we weren’t using knives. Just the hand mixer to slowly mix the butter, sugar, eggs and flour. Ask any real chef and you’ll know you cream the butter and sugar together, then add the liquids, then the flour in halves. That’s how I do it now (I’m a real snob about cooking). But my mother and eight-year-old self didn’t care much for elitism and so we just added it all together in a big heterogeneous family mess. I think there was a faint hint of eggshell, more than one lump of brown sugar, and probably too much salt. But I was prodigiously proud of that first batch. My mother told me about the time when she made a whole batch of cookies just to eat. She tried to hide the bowl so her parents and seven younger siblings wouldn’t find out. But they did. I think I laughed at this story.

Now, however, never laughing is another representation of my unreachable self. Now I have a different recipe, none of that messy family recipe stuff with too much butter making the cookies turn to soup in the oven. My great new replacement recipe I too don’t bake. But I freeze it cold as a stone, cold as hardness itself, until I am ready to take it out and make the fabulous form-keeping cookies. Usually for friends. My family fears the wrath to come if they ever try to tamper or thaw that fearsome unreachable dough.
I plop the avocado in the blender, adding the lemon and lime juice. Then I puncture the can of evaporated milk and pour the creamy sweet liquid into the blender. Pulse, pulse and the secret fleshy parts of the avocados mix into a friendly green homogenous mess.

 Damn, I think (swearing is another representation of my unreachable self); I forgot to let the cream cheese soften. Oh well, like he’ll notice a couple of lumps.

So I put the cream cheese in the microwave to soften it a bit, and then beat it with the hand mixer. I hate that hand mixer, it is so weak. Eventually, though, it is able to break it down and I add the confectioner’s sugar. I secretly do not regret forgetting and wish the cream cheese would be more resistant.

Then I fold in the avocado mixture, about a third at a time. Inside the stainless steel bowl a delightful glossy sheen of green appears. It is smooth as silk. Smooth as silk pie.

I remember the first time I let Sam help me cook. We had decided to make chocolate silk pie. I thought it would be a fairly straightforward recipe; he’d be able to handle it with no difficulties. But he never cooked – his mom was the cook, no assistants required, and certainly none among her sons. So she made fabulous pies for her seven children every Thanksgiving, as he frequently reminded me.

“I’m sorry, I mean, you’re a great cook, but you just can’t beat mom’s cooking,” he said.

So I ended up making the whole pie, even taking over the melting of the chocolate which I had assigned him. He couldn’t figure out my imitation double boiler trick. You place a bowl (preferably stainless steel or glass) over boiling water which gently raises the temperature without burning it, and without having to buy an expensive double boiler. He didn’t see why I couldn’t just put it in the microwave. I guess he doesn’t understand the remarkable power of gentleness in tempering chocolate. Well, he does, but expects me to use it. I tried to delegate it to him, choosing to microwave chocolate at home where I refused to use any gentleness.

But the pie turned out rather well. His mom gently scolded me for making a pie which violated her diet.

My mom isn’t on a diet. I bet she lacks the will power. She who had endured as a student teacher the intense intemperate glares of a resistant eighth grade class while four months pregnant, then moved in with her hostile Lutheran in-laws while her husband tried to make enough to buy the house. She who had faced poverty, pregnancy and persecution with the same silent stoicism.
But that junk isn’t important now. Right now the important thing is that she isn’t on a diet, doesn’t make fabulous pies (her pastry recipe calls for too much water, making a tough, unrollable dough. Do I tell her? Not a chance), doesn’t ever gently scold. As I sink deeper into my unreachable self, she just questions my cooking taste and my actions, always looks on the verge of tears, and leaves notes on my bed for me when I get back from Sam’s house well past midnight most nights of the week telling me how concerned she is.

Using the reserved amount of the cream cheese and sugar mixture, I pipe HAPPEE BIRFDAY SAM on the surface of the gelatinous green sea. It is an inside joke – an allusion to Harry Potter. I set the pie in the fridge until after church.

Three uncomfortable hours later and I’m wondering when I can go deliver it. I had thought I would just wait till she had to go visiting teaching, take cookies to a new sister’s house or head to one of the many meetings she attended as Relief Society President. Then I would avoid the confrontation. But alas, it appears that she has no intention of leaving, so I quietly grab my pie and head for the door.

“Where are you going?” she quietly asks.

“Wherever I want!” is my defiant answer.

I answer in like manner to almost any question - a representation of my unreachable self. I notice that she is getting that nervous look (fidgeting hands, wrinkled brow and clenched jaw - an attempt to bite back the terrible helplessness) she gets every time I head to the door angry and with no apparent destination.

“Who is that pie for?” she asks, still quiet, “Another pie for the Prices?”

“Yes. If you want me to pay for the ingredients, just tell me how much or just take it out of my savings account like you will anyway. It’s Sam’s birthday and he doesn’t think it’s nasty. Some people appreciate my cooking,” I say, staring her down.

She walks upstairs. I have defeated her once again. Somehow it doesn’t feel as good as I thought it would. It never does. So I speed on my way to Sam’s house. I walk to the door, pie in tow. I ring the doorbell, putting on my best smile, the one I use to tell people that despite appearances, I’m a happy person. I have to use it with Sam since I’m supposed to be completely recovered. He can’t know that I haven’t conquered my
unreachable self, which it lurks underneath the gelatinous green sea of my surface like the bitter lemon juice in my pie.

He answers the door, surprised but silent.

“Happy Birthday!” I sing out to fill the emotional void.

I hand him the pie and the war book I bought for him. He loves war books – he reads them as addictively as I do novels. To each his own. He eyes the pie warily.

“What is that?” he asks.

“Avocado pie,” I say brightly.

“I don’t even like avocados,” he says, “I thought you knew that.”

But he invites me in, setting the pie on the counter uneaten, as I suppose it will remain till one of his siblings is adventurous. I guess what I thought he wanted wasn’t really what he wanted. I guess all my creativity and perfection couldn’t fill in the gap, couldn’t reach the distance between us. I guess the unwritten notes I leave on his bed each time we talk (help me, save me) fall to the ground like my mother’s notes to me, shredded by indifference and lack of understanding. I feel like the floor has come out from under me, but I keep my plastered smile.

Pulse, pulse. Check it. I am I am I am goes my unreachable self, one heartbeat at a time, reminding me of all my bloody imperfections circulating my body. Reminding me I am alive. I know now that I cannot be more than my unreachable self, and silently I plumb the depths, sinking further. Denying the reaching hands though I reach myself. I sink past my glossy chocolate silk pie, my replacement affections poured into its shell. I sink past the chocolate chip cookies warm and melting on the counter with old affectionate conversation, now stale and past repair. I wonder if anyone likes avocado pie, and if I would like them back. No, my unreachable self tells me as my graham cracker crust of an ego crumbles.