

## Family Sauce

“Everything starts with garlic,” Grandma Sally said as I stretched on tiptoe. As I balanced gripping the metal oven door handle when I was hip high to her. As she pressed her belly into the oven door rather than tell me to stop. As my bare toes crunched papery garlic skin that had fluttered to the floor with the linoleum divot in front of the oven.

“Even me?” I asked.

“You what?” she said.

“Did I start with garlic?”

She laughed her chipmunk laugh that wiggled her steely chin whiskers. She pushed wiry grey hair off her wet forehead with the heel of her hand.

“You, little one,” she said, sliding chopped garlic from the flat of her chef’s knife into warm olive oil. “You started with love.”

My Greek grandma. Mama’s mom. Frizzy cigarette ash colored hair (like a witch, my sister said when she was older) wrestled into a bun, dark eyes, 4’ 11”, body shaped like a pomegranate, flowered housedress in shades of blue: indigo, turquoise, sky; support hose rolled down just below her knees. Grandma Sally who smelled earthy like garlic, who smelled like starry skies.

“Be gentle with the meatballs, dear,” Grandpa Mike said, words thick with his Greek accent, and flicked his chin at the gob of meat in my girl hands. When he washed his paw hands. When he wiped his paw hands on a fresh white kitchen

towel. When he tied a bleached white chef's apron around his waist, knotted the strings in front.

"Be easy on the girls," Grandpa Mike sometimes cautioned Mama when he sniffed out her dragon breath brewing in the cave of her throat.

She'd squeeze her fists, leaving fingernail tracks in her palms.

Meatball mastery swam along the We Like to Cook chromosome from Grandma Sally, to Mom, to my sisters and me, to my kids. I inherited my grandma's recipe on a faded yellow index-sized card with her crooked, scripty handwriting, with smudges and food stains, with her notes that vine up the side of the 3x5 card. I hold that once lemon yellow card and can almost invoke her: steely grey hair, her head a halo of frizz, the way she'd push her tongue between her teeth when she was concentrating, her garlic smell that I didn't identify as garlic but as Grandma until I was in college, kissing a boy who tasted like her.

When I cook meatballs? I conjure her. With her little apprentice, me, at her side. Just like I cooked with my littles when they were little, and still love to cook with them now that they're grown. Family lore. Kitchen stories. The kitchen. Heart of the home. Where everything is cooked with love--even when the love is complex as family sauce.

#### Meatballs

Start with 1 lb. meat.

Lamb and pork. Or beef and pork. Or part bulk spicy Italian sausage. High fat.

Grandma Sally pinched and blended. Smoothed and spiked. Followed where scent and hands led her with “a little of this, a little of that.” More garlic. Sometimes orange zest. Sometimes fennel and you’d bite and taste licorice. Sometimes mozzarella, a small piece hidden in the center of each juicy meatball.

Grandma left bruises on Mom where they’d be covered up. She hit, slapped, pinched. My mom’s torso. Her thighs. Even though it was the 40s, some teacher, some priest, might have asked about the map of bruises if they were seeable. Only Mom and Grandma knew the purplish greenish yellowish blooms on Mom’s body. For years Mom was convinced it was all her fault, AllHerFault, AllHerFault.

After Dad left and Mom’s rage started running her, when she slapped with words over fists, spanked with wooden spoons and spatulas, when sometimes I wished she’d hit me so I could point to the bluish greenish watercolor body marks, so I could say, “Here.”

“I thought I was doing better,” she said, years later. “Not hitting you girls,” she said. “Everyone used wooden spoons,” she said. “I didn’t know better,” she said.

#### Meatballs

Pull out forks and set them aside. You’ll want them on the counter before you get your hands in the meat.  
Turn on cooking music.

For me it's opera. Even though I'm half Greek, I might be Italian. Italy is where I feel most at home, where locals speak Italian to me without asking: "Parli Italiano?" Where I get handed menus printed in Italian rather than English. Where I've ordered cappuccinos and been served espresso since it was afternoon and late day cappuccinos are for Americans. Straight up, no chaser espresso, for locals.

Meatball music: Cecilia Bartoli: Se tu m'ami Arie antiche and Mozart Arias.

#### Meatballs

Add:

1 C breadcrumbs or oatmeal or crushed Saltines or panko

½ C grated Parmesan

1T-minced parsley

1t ground fennel seed

Seven years old, eight years old, nine years old. I thumped my red plaid suitcase down the wood stairs. Fourteen thumps. Out the double wood doors. Three more thumps down the extra wide aggregate concrete steps. Past the madrone tree with its burnt sienna curly bark and inchworm-green underbelly. The smell of wet grass in summer, cool air in fall. Under slate skies, seersucker skies. Under apple blossom clouds, steel wool clouds.

Dragged my red plaid suitcase with the black piping across our gravel half-circle driveway that connected the dead end we lived on back to the street, like a lowercase b. My sisters bumped and thumped their suitcases too. Little sis so little. Big sis little too.

Behind the double shut front door of the double story house with the double bed my parents stop doubling in, Mama listened to Maybel Mercer sing “Ev’ry Time You Say Good-bye I Cry A Little.” Maybel Mercer stretched out cryyy.

Meatballs

4 cloves minced garlic, more  
½ C whole milk if needed. Whole milk. Because fat equals flavor.  
2 eggs, beaten

Three sisters divided the divide to the blue and white mailbox with the red flag sleeping on its side to Dad parked on the street. Dad with his red Mustang, blue Thunderbird, red Cadillac. Dad in his short sleeved white shirt, black slacks, dark glasses. Short hair. Clean-shaven. Mustache. Bald spot soft as worn leather. Dad who smelled like something I won’t be able to name until I’m older, until I start drinking myself.

Did he take our suitcases?

Dad. Hips to his car. Cigarette smoke curling in a helix. The outline of menthol Benson & Hedges in his shirt pocket. Dad. Not allowed on the property even though it was the house he and Mama built together.

What muscles do you build dragging suitcases?

Add

1 tsp salt and pepper  
Uncle Frank says Johnny’s Seasoning Salt but I read the ingredients  
Orange zest from one orange if it feels right  
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce  
Quantities are suggestions

After Dad left. After we went from five to four. After Mom went from cooking fancy dinners and mixing mean martinis (“Because that’s how your dad likes them,” she said. “Mean.”) After Mom switched from coaching, “I’m raising you to be senators’ wives,” to “Take care of yourself. You can’t trust a man.” After Mom married J. she substituted turkey for beef/lamb/pork. “Better for our hearts,” she said.

Turkey meatballs taste like disappointment.

Combine all meatball ingredients in a bowl. Use two forks, tines down, to slice and mix meat and cheese. Mix with your hands. If you don’t like the feel of the meat, wear gloves. The thin kind are best. Form meatballs the size you like. I prefer 2”.

“Don’t pat the meatballs,” Mom said in the years she attempted to teach my stepdad J. to cook, or to at least cook alongside her. “You’ll make them tough,” she said. “And who likes a tough meatball?”

Place all the meatballs on a large dinner plate. One recipe will fill one plate. Wash the fat off your hands. It will stick. You might need to scrape at it.

A July night. Sis and I at Dad’s, in the dark, in the guest room with its empty dresser and nightstands, with its matched set lamps, with its wobble mirror that shimmied if anyone stomped down the hall. Tucked under the scratchy orange bedspread stiff with polyester, stiff with disuse. It scraped my sunburnt skin. That queen-sized bed we shared when we visited the first and third weekends. Queen-

sized bed on top of the yellow and orange shag carpet that we were never to get dirty. No eating in the bedroom. No drinks. I always kept my clothes, first folded then wadded, in my suitcase--never the empty dresser.

“Do you think we were molested?” my sister asked.

My throat thickened in goo. Heart pressed to ears.

I scanned the dark of the bedroom.

“There was so much opportunity,” she said.

Pinpricks at the base of my neck. I snapped into my Athena self. Athena, goddess of war, shield up, spear arm cocked, owl on my non-spear shoulder. Athena who checked the perimeter. Who breathed like a stallion.

“All Dad’s drunk friends,” she said.

Owl perched on my shoulder, I blinked away the tiny dots slow waltzing in front of my eyes in the midnight black room.

“And family. So many males in our family.”

When she said family, my gut turned to throb. And I wondered, not for the first time, who it was. My body remembered. This bellyache. This ache that bloomed to an ulcer when I was eight. That bloomed to “Drink this pink drink pink drink pink drink and we’ll take x-rays x-rays x-rays.” That bloomed to chewing Maalox with every meal while my parents wouldn’t name what was wrong and I was pretty sure I was dying.

The first time I read that sexually abused girls are prone to stomach problems, I threw up.

Heat 4T olive oil. More. Arrange the meatballs in the pan, almost touching each other so they'll all fit. Go clockwise or counterclockwise so you know where you started, so you can turn them in the order you placed them. Add 1 C onion: minced or sliced in thin rings. As meat starts to brown, blend in 2T flour. Use a teaspoon to turn the meatballs. Not a spatula. I taught myself that trick so they'll keep their shape.

When my one sis felt unstitched and asked me to drive her to the psych ward at the hospital, I grabbed car keys and Marlboros and sped across town in my VW Bug. Our other sis took her before when she found her curled on the bathroom floor. Now me. When I spied the locked ward door I breathed to my toes to ratchet down vomit sloshing up my throat. I breathed and sent my sis nonstop love waves. Fierce love. Tsunami love. When thunder tears pooled in that soft spot under my eyes, I swallowed, hard. When the nurse with the granite colored ponytail asked about family history and my sis ticked off our family sauce, sometimes a dash of one ingredient, sometimes the roux: Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar, Schizophrenia—this last label with a question in her voice. Uncle Bill? She said, eyebrows tented right at me. Great uncle Bill. Who became homeless. Who wouldn't use family money, family kindness. Who let my uncle take him to dinner when he'd find him leaning into brick buildings. After dinner great Uncle Bill would wave my uncle off. "This is home," he'd say or something like that, arms wide to a Seattle back street.

Sis named those diagnoses. It sounded like too much. It sounded just right.

Be gentle turning the meatballs. Let them sear a little so they cook to pink on the inside. They'll finish cooking while simmering in the sauce.



What did I get from the family sauce? When I say my intuition's strong, that's acceptable. When I say I hear voices? When I say I wake up in the belly of the night to spirits. That I see. That sometimes feels like ancestors and sometimes like unpolished souls with strobe light flashlights? A woman at the foot of my bed in black heavy square glasses. A shape changing, female, male, neither, hair of feathers, large gold hoop earrings. Solid. Smoke. In the upper corner of the bedroom. What happens if I say those things? In another time I'd be the one the family tucks in a back bedroom. The family with a touch of tremor in their voices when visitors visit, when they're fingers crossed that the one will read quietly in her room, won't rock in her wooden rocking chair that whines against the wood floor. And I probably was in a past life. If I was lucky I was a medicine woman too. And those lives? They bleed through me.

#### Sauce

Once the meatballs are browned add:

5 C cooked, chopped tomatoes. If canned, fire roasted is best.

6T minced parsley

A bit of dried parsley if you get tired of chopping fresh

6 T minced green pepper that I always leave out because my husband doesn't tolerate peppers.

"You'll have to ask your next husband if he likes onions and peppers," my husband teases, each time I skip them.

"Two is plenty," I say.

"Two onions?"

"Two husbands."

Add:  
Basil  
Oregano  
Thyme  
Rosemary

In summer use garden grown tomatoes. Plus basil. Oregano. Thyme. Rosemary. For years I gathered garden grown from the garden my husband and I built from dirt on the south side of the house, with its stone retaining wall, with its yummy soil, with horse manure tilled in like Grandma Sally taught me, with the fence my husband sawed and hammered to keep in our family dog, Eddie. Named after my husband's dead brother. Eddie. The wonder dog who helped me raise my family. Who helped me raise me.

Pick fresh herbs. Since I was a girl I've plucked herbs, rubbed my fingers together and smelled them. Especially rosemary. That sweet smell reminds me of Grandma Sally and her magic garden, her delicious, soul-healing meatballs. Grandma Sally who loved me fierce. Whose muscle hands never hurt my sisters or me. Who taught me to dig, plant, water, weed, pluck, eat. Who brewed herb remedies. Who lay on blankets in the yard with me and pointed out cloud shapes: arrows, wings, dragons, hearts. Who taught me Greek words and reminded me to be proud of coming from a land of honey sun and glacial blue skies. Now, I squint through the sunflowers, taller than me, and ask my long dead grandma to be at my elbow as I mix and combine, ask her if orange zest was a standard ingredient, ask her if she ever tossed in pancetta, if she poured in a two or three count of red wine.

Keeping adding  
1t sugar  
2 bay leaves  
1T Worcestershire sauce  
Sea salt and fresh ground pepper  
Red wine  
Stir with a wooden spoon

“Is there wine in that?” Dad asked about everything I cooked because, it’s true, I add wine to plenty of dishes.

“I left it out for you,” I said.

After Dad went from being a wet drunk to a dry drunk, he wouldn’t eat anything that had touched alcohol. On my fourteenth birthday he’d checked into a treatment center. It wasn’t my birthday present, him going to rehab, it’s just how I remember it because he didn’t pick my sisters and me up for court appointed Dad Time and I’d finally decided to tell him. I was pissed for the times he didn’t pick us up, for all the times he did pick us up then slept off a hangover on the couch while we watched Bonanza and Bewitched endlessly, eating potato chips and candy from the candy drawer--a lousy substitute for true sweetness. Fuck fake okay-ness. At fourteen my voice could be a fist. Sometimes.

“I have to tell you something,” he said before I could spit out *I’m pissed*.

“I went to rehab,” he said.

Father Sauce  
One part Vodka  
One part rage  
Mix with silence that scorches like dragon breath  
A sprinkle of kicking doors  
Add sunglasses on overcast days

Beat at full speed with hangover couch sleeping during visitation weekends.  
Serve with a side of his Family First mantra, which turns out to mean his second family.

The first time I went to therapy I was 28 and widowed.

“Who’s the drinker in your family?” my new therapist asked and my heart whapped my throat.

“What?” I said, trying not to barf up shame.

“How’d you know?” I said.

“We’ll get to that later,” she said.

Once everything’s in the sauce bring to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer.

“He stopped drinking when I was 14,” I said.

“A lot happens before 14,” she said.

Slow cook the sauce. As the sauce simmers, with tiny bubbles pop popping, I lean over the stove, wave my hand in small circles, circling the scents. Tomatoes. Basil. Oregano. Thyme. Rosemary. Stiff bay leaves with their curved edges. Orange zest. Fennel. Smell the wine, oak smell, fermented smell that reminds me of picnics and slow dinners and weddings. Smell how the ingredients have been rearranged by heat, by combining, by love. Wonder at how the family sauce I came from flavors the

family sauce I've grown. What have my kids sipped? Which flavors blend with their own? Which do they turn away from?

Tuck away Grandma's once sunflower yellow now butter colored recipe card with her fingerprints in olive oil, with her fingerprints in me.

Simmer one hour.

Simmer one lifetime.

Serve with fresh pasta and heaps of fresh grated Romano. Basil sprigs too.

Serve with warmed Italian bread. A crust with bite. Tender on the inside.

"Are they as good as Grandma Sally's?" I ask every time, every time my husband and kids bite into my juicy meatballs even though Grandma Sally died before they met.

I ask.

Because they love me? They say, "Yes, Love." And "Of course, Ma."

The best meatballs? They're the ones that open with a little fork pressure. Malformed. With cracks where the flavors brew. Meatballs that break on your tongue and wash you in love.