# *The Write Place At the Write Time*


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Come in...and be captivated...

## "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.

"Sunflower Batik" Linda Woods Copyright 2008 Visit www.moonbirdhillarts.etsy.com for more of these exquisite works done by a previously featured photographer, Christopher Woods and his wife, Linda- they kindly lent this piece to The Write Place At the Write Time

## Bad Gifts

By Danielle Ash

At a recent dinner party thrown by my Algerian boyfriend's sister, where the dessert is made of prunes, apricots and a cinnamon sauce, the tea is drunken not without first inserting some species of nut, and the conversation consists mainly of politics, questions about Canada and the sister and her husband's infant child, sprinkled with a generous helping of awkward pauses in between; we stumbled upon the topic of bad gifts.

Oddly enough, this topic reminded me most of how culturally different me and these people are. I say 'oddly enough' because both of the times I have attended dinner there, I have been made aware of the difference by the fact that not only did I not know what it was that I was ingesting, but I didn't know how to ingest it, prompting direction from all parties present, and the fact that I listened to two languages spoken quickly without knowing what was being said, but 'bad gifts' is the thing that made me say, "Whoa! We sure are different!"

I can honestly say that in all my years of receiving gifts, I have never received one that made me think of what the f$%* the giver was smoking when he or she decided to make the purchase with me in mind. As I listened to the guests recount their stories of receiving eggs, milk and sugar from the Algerian country people, or framed pictures of Jean-Claude Van Dam and Rambo, I tried desperately to think of something that even compared to receiving such items.

The only thing that my mind could think of was the year I turned eleven. My parents had separated two years before and after a time of living in a women's home, with an acquaintance of my older sister, and staying with my grandparents to fill in the blanks between, my mother had finally settled us into a project of apartments on the outskirts of the city where she moved my brother and I in with her now-husband and his two children, my now-brothers.

I believe she was working at the time after collecting nothing but welfare and headaches from my distraught father who gave the promise of quitting the sauce and kicking the shit out of her a few years too late. So this particular year, I had my heart set on a CD player. I dropped subtle hints on and off and then came right out and said that that was exactly what I wanted a few weeks before the big day.

Recounting the events, I remember that I had informed any adult who was even remotely close enough to me to feel that getting me a gift on the

anniversary of my birth was something they should do. So my birthday rolled around and I was throwing a party with some of my friends whom unbeknownst to me at the time, I would be leaving as the feasibility of my mother driving us to our school every morning and fighting with our county's board of education over letting us attend even though we were far outside of the limits for that particular school was actually not feasible at all.

The morning of, I was getting ready to welcome my friends and show them my new life here on the wrong side of town. The projects were full of welfare moms, alcoholic fathers and f#$%ed up kids growing quickly into f$%*ed up adults, but the buildings were brand new, so the fact that I lived with the area's future wife-beaters, welfare collectors and all around bottom dwellers was unknown to me at the time. Actually, life seemed pretty good. I had made friends and there was a wonderful forest right outside the buildings in which the children of the buildings and myself had made wonderful tree forts and got together to smoke cigarettes. A fact that I could not wait to show my inner-city pals who had nothing of the sort and would gasp in frightened awe as I recounted how I had learned from my thirteen year old friend how to exhale cigarette smoke through my nostrils and blow smoke rings as though I were thirty-five.

So as I was getting ready and dreaming of the events to come, the introductions I would make, and the lessons I would give, my mother entered my bedroom with a sly smile on her face. "Hey Dani, can you come to the kitchen with me for a second? You're birthday present is there and it's too heavy for me to carry in all by myself." This was it! My mom had actually gotten me a CD player! Wait until my friends see me now!

I jumped of my bed and followed her to the kitchen, with an adrenaline rush that would allow me to lift a car with one hand effortlessly. I turned the corner and there sitting there in the middle of the small room was a shelf. It was made of a light coloured wood which I would soon know to identify as pine, (through events that will be explained all in good time), and had a white back. I'm pretty sure it had 3 shelves, but can't be sure as

and had a white back. I'm pretty sure it had 3 shelves, but can't be sure as my memory is foggy. "Where is it?" I asked not quite getting why I was standing here looking at an irregularly placed shelf when there were cords to plug in and CD's to listen to in a confined small space at an unhealthy volume.

"This is it," she said placing her hand gently on the top and rubbing it with a smile on her face. She must've seen the confusion because she explained that she had made this shelf all by herself, though under the supervision of her now-husband Dave, who is an extraordinarily talented craftsman. The fact that I must have looked crestfallen still haunts me to this day. My mother continued saying that she knew I wanted a CD player, but we couldn't afford one at the moment and I needed a shelf anyways. Although I was disappointed, to see her so proud of what she had accomplished, not only through building the shelf, but through leaving my father without a penny in her pocket, having no education with two kids and making it to this point where we were now safe, healthy and happy, I see now that that shelf represented much more to her than an article of furniture. It was a milestone.

Through all of the shit that my parents were going through, they still had time to instill in us values and principals and above all, politeness. So I gulped down my disappointment, gave her a smile and thanked her for her present. I see now that even though we were so poor we had to frequent the food bank for our meals and nothing was ever name-brand in our household, my mother had done a remarkable job of shielding us from the fact that we were poor. Money was never talked about around us children, and we never really knew how bad it was for my mom and my step-dad hence the fact that I was uninformed enough to ask for a costly CD player for my birthday. Throughout the years of a terrible rocky relationship between my mother and I, I realize now that not only did that woman do her job, she did so with a strength that makes me want to cry when I recount little moments such as this one.

So while at this party thinking of bad gifts I had received, I stumbled upon

this memory. It's funny how things can come back to you in a way that will change your perception of them forever. I went to a dinner party thinking of how tired I was from the amusement park I had been at all day, and how I had to do certain things during the week, and left thinking about how great of a job my mother did with things. At certain times in my life I hated her, and thought that I would never turn into her or be like her, but now I see that she was truly a role model and if I inherited any of her strength and resourcefulness, (and it's becoming apparent that I did) I will be a very successful woman.

In the wake of this memory, and the aftermath of its lesson, I will be calling my father to make sure that the shelf in question is still in use and safe. What my mother built for me with her own two hands that day, is a family heirloom. A reminder that no matter how bad things get, you can overcome them. And when my unborn child asks for some new-age costly gadget for his or her 11th birthday, whether I can afford it or not, I will go into the bedroom the morning of the day, and ask my child to come to the kitchen with me....

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The Kids' Table

By Linda Emma

The holidays are lurking again, hidden in the folds of a woolen scarf, its yarn a linking strand from Halloween to Thanksgiving, to Christmas. They skulk forth bedecked in trappings of color and cheer, awash in a festive mood of shortened days that grant a last gasping breath before the dark. Before the end.

Trepidation wasn't always woven into the fabric of our holidays. My brothers and I were wrapped into the season by virtue of our births: October, November, December. One, two, three. Our celebrations began early, lasted long. It was a time of festivities, of fun, and family.

Derived in part from my father's quaint notion that "there's always room for one more," our holiday numbers were ever expanding. When my brother's friend was included one Christmas Eve, because Dad insisted no one should be alone at Christmas –never mind that it wasn't technically Christmas; never mind that the boy was Jewish- I knew family, in his mind, granted an open-door policy for friends who were as close as. Perhaps that's why I had uncles and aunts who weren't, second cousins I knew as well as first, first, as well as siblings. We weren't a large family; it just seemed as if we were. And when one table couldn't fit us all, we added another. And another.

By necessity, there was a kids' table. I was always at the kids' table. The toddler sitting in the my grandmother's kitchen at Thanksgiving with the adults just a threshold away in the dining room; the little kid at the wobbly card table in my other grandmother's Easter kitchen; on another holiday, a teenager taunting my uncle with politics 180 degrees from his own, 90 degrees and six feet away from him –at the kids' table. Not quite close enough to touch, but I wanted to. It wasn't that I was necessarily ready to climb the next branch on the family tree; I just assumed that eventually I would have to. But when even after I'd had children of my own, and I was still ceremonially seated at the kids' table, I settled on the notion that I didn't ever have to grow up. Peter Pan.

Not me, not really. My brother was the one without care, with a life anyone would envy. Trips to Egypt and Australia, Thailand and India. Who knew a one-way ticket could mean once around the globe? He broke more than a few rules on his road less traveled. But the family rule he never shunned was the home-for-the-holidays mandate. He would be there.

So when Paul wasn't seated with us that one Christmas, perhaps we all knew he never would be again. And with that vacancy at the adult table, still there was no room for me. Was this, like so many of the enticements that had come before, only truly appealing because it was just beyond my reach?

What is that old adage about being careful what you wish for?

We refer to it now as our winter of hell. My father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in April. His fighting spirit aside, the prognosis was grim. As the cold began to bear down so too the ravages of his illness. When my cousin made the extra effort to spend time with him because, as she said, "he was dying," it dawned on me for the first time that she was right. We spent a somber Christmas that year, my father's place as head of the table and patriarch of the family intact, but much diminished.

And then it happened. While my brother and I and our families were retreating up north, a desperate phone call, an urgent plea to get home. Not my father, but my maternal grandmother. Nana Josie had never been sick. She was a beautiful woman with thick, shiny, white hair, a full face with smiling eyes and a near wrinkle-free complexion. Pampered by my grandfather, we had all wondered how she would weather life after his death. At 94, she had thrived for nearly 20 years without him. Although her mind had begun to play tricks on her, it seemed to cause her little peril. Instead of calamity, her dementia returned to her her husband, her daughter, her brothers and friends, all in a new and insular world. In the final hours of her life, she took my uncle's hand and asked him to take her dancing.

Is there any sound more chilling than the blare of a telephone ring in the hours before dawn? Even a wrong number can render an otherwise peaceful night fitful and sleepless. Eight days after my grandmother's death we received the news that my father's mother had died. This is the death that is called a blessing. Nana Lucy had long ceased to be the independent woman who was my kindred soul with her jottings of poetry and prose. It broke my heart the first time she didn't know who I was. Her wake and funeral were only truly difficult because they had the heavy air of a dress rehearsal. My father paid respects to his mother in a morphine-induced haze.

My father was no more ready to leave this world than he was willing to excuse himself from the holiday table. He was not a tall man. However, any one of my brother's friends would still attest to his aura of authority and stature. A perfectionist to a fault, his concepts of right and wrong were absolute. Growing up as a teenager in that black and white world was

fraught with conflict, but his praise was earnest and golden. With his passing, the family lost a steady rudder, the table a hearty presence.

Today there are vacancies at that other table. There's even one for me. Perhaps my extended tenure at the kids' table imprinted its holiday appeal on my heart forever. In spite of the specter of those empty chars, I still love this time of year. And as much as I hate the notion of getting older, it certainly beats the alternative. Still, from my from my vantage point at the adult table, I can't help but look longingly over to that other side. Those tiny chairs do beckon with their fullness.

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Simple Times

By Pat Greene

When you grow up with six brothers you are bound to be always fighting with one of them. Looking back now, I wonder how we ever survived each other at all. It's a good thing we never had too much, in the way of anything, for this made us very astute in covering up for our little indiscretions against one another. Our poor mother was great at refereeing the battles and whenever she thought one of us was getting the upper hand, she would give him a good lacing of the sally stick across the backs of the bare legs. We would never fight in front of our father and when we were smaller, the very mention of our father, by our mother was enough to take the temper out of us and we very quickly came to our senses.

We were forever stealing from one another. The day after my confirmation, I put whatever few shillings I got for it, into one of them solution boxes for mending punctures and I buried it in a safe place down at the end of the haggard. When I went there the day after to check on it, it was gone. God forbid you ever had to get up from the table while you were eating your dinner, when you'd come back, it was gone and not gone; in where someone was hiding it from you either ... the dinner would be eaten

was hiding it from you either!....the dinner would be eaten.

I shared the same bed with my brother Philly and I blame him for the fact that I still cannot sleep more than four hours a night. It was a constant struggle every night for the covers and if that wasn't bad enough, around four o' clock every morning, he would break into a bout of talking in his sleep. I would lay there listening to him trying to decipher whatever silly notions were racing through his head.

Nine of us lived in a two up and three down cottage. There was no running water and from the time that I could first walk, it was my job to go down to Sarah's well, to draw home the water. Back then I used to hate to see anyone wasting water and I had more fights with my brothers over water than I did about anything else. We had a barrel under the chute at the back of the house, to collect rain water and this we used for washing ourselves.

Neddy, the oldest was the brain-box in the family and he spent his childhood laying above in his bed with his head stuck in a book. Derek, the second oldest was so quiet; you could not hear him behind a newspaper. Philly was just above me and like Neddy, Philly was a huge reader also, but Philly was more sociable about it and he would be reading and talking to you at the same time. Francis, the one just below me, we nicknamed "weasel" and he did have a bad temper but I always had a very soft spot for him. John, the second youngest went sleep walking one night and he fell down the stairs and for those few terrifying moments, while we awaited the outcome, the house suddenly erupted into hysterical laughter when we heard from the bottom of the stairs, "where are I?" Timmy was great at playing the baby of the house and if you looked crooked at him - he would cry.

Back then there were no big birthday celebrations. You got out of bed that morning and your mother and whichever few brothers were still in speaking terms with you, wished you happy birthday and you thought it was great. You danced your way to school and it felt good to be a year older

than yesterday and you were looking forward to next year already. That evening for dinner, you got the extra spud and your brothers looked at you in envy. The ones that were still not talking to you, wishing that you would choke on it.

I don't know whether it had to do with the fact that we were poor and we never really had much to look forward to other than Christmas, but Christmas was a whole lot more than just special in our house. It was never that we ever got a whole lot from Santa either but whatever we did get, we cherished it and we thought Santa was a great man.

The weeks leading up to Christmas seemed to bring us all together and a truce would be called where no battle would be fought again until we were well and truly into the New year.

Christmas would start when we received aunt Birdie's card from England and she never failed to have it to us by the first week of December. From then on more cards would arrive each day and every day the house would look more like Christmas. Neighbors would visit every night and the talking about geese and turkeys and smoked hams would have us awake above in our beds every night, until the crack of dawn.

My mother would tell us stories of her childhood and how Christmas was celebrated in her house growing up. My father and my uncle Frank, who lived across the road from us, would play their accordions every night and on those dark nights when I would be walking home from the village, I would keep in step to the accordions and I would never have to think of looking behind me, for fear, a ghost might be following me. A few days before Christmas we would put a small tree up in the front window and next to the tree, a candle that my mother lit each night for to light the dark and lonely road for the traveler. The pictures on the walls were adorned with sprigs of red berried holly and the holy water font was filled with the new Christmas holy water.

Christmas Eve night, would see a procession of neighbors in and out of the house and each one of them had just seen Santa fly over the chimney. By ten o' clock, us children were above in our beds and if there was as much as a geek out of one of us, Santa would be taking whatever few gifts he had for us across the road to our cousins, Mary and Aggie. I would lay awake in my bed listening to every little noise around the house and always when I would think it was the great man himself, I would hold my breath until I would nearly smother myself. Then I would let out this almighty sigh that would always awaken Philly and he would think it was Santa and I would have to tell him to go back to sleep.

Christmas morning and Santa must have known that we were right devils entirely for he always brought us cap guns. The caps never lasted long but the guns would see us through to the spring and the fine day, where we could take off through the countryside again and the cock step in the evenings meant that we could stay out a little later. We would all rush home from mass in anticipation of the Christmas feast. On the way home, the ditches and the trees smelled of turkey and ham. The peas, the carrots, the parsnips and the turnips. The floury kerpinks, bursting out of their jackets. The steaming bisto gravy poured over the turkey and ham. We refused nothing and we left nothing on our plates. We even had room for the sherry trifle, (without the sherry), which was topped off with delicious whipped fresh cream.

Every Christmas night, on the wireless, Eammon Kelly would tell us his story of "Christmas Eve in Ireland". It was a story, very similar to our own Christmas but the great storyteller himself had a way of taking the ordinary and making it magic. My mother would always have a few bottles of stout in the house for Christmas and she would give them out to the handful of neighbors who came to visit. My father was never much for drinking at home but he always took one or two bottles of the stout.

St. Stephens's morning, all seven of us would get up early and throw the holly bush over our shoulders and set out to follow the wren. We would go

holly bush over our shoulders and set out to follow the wren. We would go from house to house collecting pennies and tuppences and sometimes fippences and on a very rare occasion, we would get a shilling. Sometimes of course we would get nothing and we would regret having sung the wren song for them at all. It was customary to capture a wren and tie him to the holly bush over your shoulder but we never once hunted for a wren and we never met another group of wren-boys that had captured one either.

*"The wren, the wren*

*The king of all birds*

*St Stephen's day*

*Was caught on the firs*

*Up with the kettle*

*And down with the pan*

*Won't you give us a penny*

*To follow the wren*

*If you haven't a penny*

*A ha'penny will do*

*And if you haven't a ha'penny*

*Well God bless you."*

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On the Other Side of the World

By Mark Barkawitz

Back in 1966, I was a fifteen-year-old freshman at a Catholic high school at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains in Southern California. John F. Kennedy, our first and only Catholic President, had been assassinated a few years earlier and Lyndon Baines Johnson was President, escalating a war in some remote place called Vietnam on the other side of the world. In three years, I, too, would be eligible for the draft. But at fifteen, three years was a lifetime away. And I figured the war would be over by then anyway. So I didn't pay that much attention to the war-time reality show that played-out nightly on the "CBS Evening News" with Walter Cronkite in black & white on our living room TV.

Our high school was a football powerhouse. The all-male student body was dominated by crew-cut jocks. The president of the Pep Squad—who wore a white, cardigan sweater with a big varsity letter—led incendiary pep rallies every Friday afternoon before each fall game. But as a freshman, I was a mere five-foot tall and a whopping hundred-and-eight pounds. So even though I had been renowned as an-impossible-to-tackle halfback in weekend pick-up games, I didn't measure up to their minimum—much less standard—size for a running back. I knew they'd never give me the damn ball. So I didn't go out for their freshman team.

Besides, hair was also an issue in 1966. The Beatles had been on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and young Americans, like our Liverpool counterparts, had gone nuts over John, Paul, George, and Ringo. I'd played guitar since I was twelve and was the lead singer of a garage band called "The Bitter Ends". So a crew-cut—not exactly street cred for a rocker in those days—didn't work for me. It wasn't as if my hair was long, trimmed off my ears but boxed in the back instead of tapered like a military haircut. Admittedly, blond locks fell down across my forehead. But on the first day of try-outs for the JV track team, the coach singled me out among the other crew-cut noggins: "Barkawitz, get that hair cut by tomorrow or don't come back. Do I make myself clear?" He had. So I didn't go out for the track team either.

And I probably would've finished my last year in parochial school anonymously enough—a runt freshman unnoticed and unwanted by his school teams—if not for Father Cyrus and President Kennedy's Council on Youth Fitness. Father Cyrus was the head of the school, a Franciscan brother who taught Latin class with a knot at the end of his rope belt and a pair of scissors in the pocket of his brown cassock. The rope knot, which he twirled as he marched the aisles between our desks, was used to whack us in the back of the head when unable to conjugate a verb form in an otherwise dead language. The scissors were used to cut off a chunk of our hair when he deemed it too long, thus forcing the victim on an immediate trip to the barber shop to even things out. Before every Latin class, I used to soak my hair with water and comb it straight back, slicked-down tightly against my skull. By spring that year, I was one of only two freshmen with "long hair" who had somehow evaded the snipping sheers of Father Cyrus.

Then it was announced that all students were to take part in the late President Kennedy's fitness program. The coaches extended the running test from the school quad down the hill to the track below, two laps around the track, and back up the hill to the quad. All-in-all, about a mile. That year, I'd been riding the municipal bus the five miles between my house and school. But if I missed my bus, the next bus was an hour's wait. Heck, I could jog five miles in an hour. Even with a backpack full of textbooks. And then spend my bus money on a hamburger or chocolate malt the next day in the school lunch hut. So I was in great shape by the time the JV track coach and freshman football coach called my group of twenty or so freshman and sophomores—all in white T-shirts and maroon gym shorts that weren't long enough to cover my boxer shorts underneath—to the quad. Two of the guys in my group were renowned as the fastest on the JV track team. Both had been on the JV football team as well—quarterback and wide receiver. But this was my race to show them all. And I wasn't about to let the opportunity pass.

When the football coach blew his whistle and the track coach started his stopwatch, the quarterback and wide receiver led us off school grounds and quickly down the steep, dirt pathway towards the track below, where I

moved forward from the middle of the pack. By the time we finished our first four-hundred-and-forty-yard lap, I was the only one within striking distance of the quarterback and his wide receiver, who had begun to look back over their shoulders at me—the runt of the litter. I let them break the wind ahead of me, trailing them, pushing them until the final turn off the track and back up the hill. Without that backpack full of textbooks to weigh me down, I passed them both. Back up at the quad, the coaches were dumbstruck when I crossed their finish line a full seven seconds faster than any other freshman or sophomore in the entire school. Unfortunately, my victory didn't have the effect for which I was hoping. Instead of wanting me, the coaches now hated me. *Why didn't you go out for the track team, Barkawitz?* Oh yeah, the hair. I started getting dirty looks from the varsity football players, too, and that preppy Pep Squad president in particular. Maybe anonymous wasn't so bad after all?

Then one day while standing in line at the lunch hut, I noticed peppy President Preppy in his cardigan sweater talking to some of the varsity football players and pointing—at me. I paid for my chocolate malt with my bus money, but when I turned around, a crew-cut, offensive lineman in a letterman's jacket blocked my exit to the quad.

"We wanna talk to you, Barkawitz."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Don't ask dumb-ass questions, dumb-ass." He grabbed the malt out of my hand. "Just move." He indicated that I walk ahead of him towards the side of a building where the half-dozen varsity football players—likewise in letterman jackets—awaited me.

I nodded, took two steps ahead of him, and ran like hell! The half-dozen-or-so varsity football players jumped out to block my exit but I juked around their grasps like a Heisman halfback and kept running—with them

chasing after me. Because the campus was built on a mountainside, I ran up one stairway, then down another. When a senior blocked my path, I vaulted over the handrail and zig-zagged back up the hill between bushes and trees like a flea on a dog, dodging an offensive lineman here, a defensive back there. As I ran through the quad again, more upper classmen jumped out to block my path or tackle me, but fearing for my life made me just that much more illusive. I ran back through the doorway of my classroom, but before I could get out the other side, the square, fuzzy head of a big-ass, varsity football player appeared in the glass on the other side of the door. I stopped, tried to catch my breath, and turned to face my pursuers, who rushed through the doorway, knocked desks aside, and gang-tackled me onto the floor in the front of the classroom, piling on top until they crushed all the air out of my lungs. As they held me down, peppy President Preppy in his cardigan sweater took the chocolate malt from the crew-cut, offensive lineman, stood over me, and poured the half-melted malt in my hair. A couple players made sure to rub it in. They all had a good laugh. As the lunch bell rang, they joked and hurried off to their classes, leaving me alone on the floor with my chocolate-malted hairdo. But at least they hadn't cut my hair. Or kicked my ass. And while I was still sitting on the floor, Father Cyrus walked in for Latin class. He stared down at me and the mess on the floor.

"Class is about to start, Mr. Barkawitz. Go clean yourself up." And that was all he said to me about it.

At the end of the school year, I was still one of only two freshmen with "long hair." But I retired as lead singer of "The Bitter Ends" anyway, when my voice changed during a growth spurt that summer. I transferred to public high school for my sophomore year. But in those days, even the public schools made us get haircuts. Even so, as the draft drew nearer—apparently, three years wasn't a lifetime and Uncle Sam wanted me—my hair grew longer and I began to pay attention to the nightly newscasts on the black & white TV in our living room, where GIs attempted to juke incendiary explosives and tracer bullets in some remote place called Vietnam on the other side of the world.

A Connecticut Greek in King Aglo-Saxon's Court

By Amanda Halkiotis

I wake up each morning in my Brooklyn apartment with the nervous glee of a refugee who still can't believe her luck. After so many years, still so grateful at having survived the ethnic fumigation of her Connecticut hometown.

I didn't grow up the same as all the other kids in my town, I knew that much by third grade. Take lunch, for example: simple enough, routine enough, right? Oh no, not when you weigh forty-five pounds and possess a genetically-rendered appetite which can only be comparable to that of a tapeworm victim. I'd bring in leftovers from last night's dinner and it would take up half the table: a couple of lemon-soaked drumsticks, a wedge of semolina to sop up any excess, an extra thick slice of chocolate zucchini cake. You know, so the meal had some vegetables. Meanwhile my classmates had bologna Lunchables and miniature boxes of HI-C. And while once in a while I'd envy Matt Cook's snack-size tube of Pringles or Catie Connelly's expert array of Vienna Fingers, I munched along content, oblivious to my classmates crinkling their noses at the forkfuls of feta I swallowed right along with cucumber slices in a homemade salt-and-vinegar rub. To me comfort food still means roast potatoes and spinach pie.

And God, if the students at Washington Primary couldn't handle our Greek-American conventions, those kids' parents were even worse to my mother. Soft-spoken short-haired undersexed soccer moms who pursed their lips at how much me and my sisters ate at birthday parties. Like we cared. We knew we were different, okay? I mean, we were the kind of girls that pulled the heads off of our Barbies and then hacked at them with safety scissors. We had the attention span of a gnat's life and wanted to learn how to do everything now, even if it meant eating the blue Play-Doh or painting our fingernails with permanent Sharpies. We fastened the ends of our hair

underneath our chins and staggered around the kitchen reciting, “four score and seven years ago...”

To her credit my mother tried. She did. At first, at least. She pulled our hair into French braids so tight our scalps ached all over by three p.m., double-knotted our Easy Spirits and served us a full breakfast of Corn Flakes and Juicy Juice before waving good-bye to us from the driveway as we boarded the bus, a proud first-generation American mother. We came home scrape-kneed with notes from Mrs. Caceci how we talked out of turn and made every lesson into a comedy act. Especially history.

Come on, we were freaks among WASPs, couldn’t fool anyone into thinking otherwise, and no amount of good intention could change that. They’d claimed this soil centuries ago and wouldn’t give it up, least of all to a loud, bilingual newlywed brunette couple from the suburbs of Boston. They wouldn’t let us settle in easy, not them, and I began to realize that our loud, boisterous, colorful personalities of me and my sisters, translated to poor breeding in the eyes of these prim, cold, conservative families who locked their doors at six p.m. and didn’t share rides home. They didn’t want us, plain and simple, and as a kid who ran around in circles just to get exhausted enough to fall asleep at night and forgot what happened the day before anyway I didn’t really care. But by middle school, it hurt.

In college I would learn about microcosms and paradigms in my literature classes, culture clashes and how new experiences don’t have to be difficult. I would read *The Namesake* and develop a soft spot for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. I’d morph into a Young Adult, hybridizing my two simultaneous childhood selves: the wound-up smartass who didn’t really know that much after all and the submissive second daughter of an ever-obedient housewife. But back then I didn’t have any sort of outlet. I just felt weird day in, day out, with no way to change it or find my own way. So I fought back in the only way I could figure out for myself.

By high school I had a reputation for my argumentative nature and flaming

By high school I had a reputation for my argumentative nature and flaming Meditarranean temper; it wasn't too big a stretch to add the eyeliner, the henna tatoos, the Tori Amos CDs jostling around in my Dickies satchel. I mean hell, I wasn't going to get laid that year anyway. Why bother to make friends? I mean, who cares after years and years of cultural ignorance, religious intolerance? Like I gave a shit by that point what anybody thought anyway. F#$% those f&*^ers for making me feel fat just because it was the 90's and at the peak of heroin chic and I couldn't fit into the clothes at J. Crew and American Eagle. Hello, they don't build my people like coat racks. We have curves. Our parts jiggle, thank you very much. Get over it.

Then the SATs came like an overdue period: laden with chronic stress, fatigue, and heavy disruption of overall biorhythmic functions. I slept more and ate less, or sometimes vice versa depending on my study schedule. College applications shortly ensued. And those elusive little questions some middle-aged secretary shoved in the back corner of an Ivory Tower knows whether or not the institution has filled its diversity quota. And although I know I'm not Latino or Pacific Islander or Alaskan Native, how the hell could I check off Caucasian? I felt insulted and confused and overlooked. Where's my little white box, Eastern-European? My grandfather's island is closer to Egypt than it is to England. Or Caucasia, I'm pretty sure. So where's the place on that application for me to express my culture and religion and language and how I've never been back to the Old World but nevertheless I have olive oil in my blood, not Coca-Cola? In the end I checked off "other." Sometimes I still do.

I have, however, stopped feeling guilty.

Yes, my culture gave me an amazing, refreshing world view, an identity I can be proud of and live up to, sharing this rich heritage with any middle-America individual who thinks a home-cooked meal means getting up from in front of the TV to add water. I get that. I've had a hard time realizing the exclusivity of my situation, and I hated it long before I could appreciate it.

But that didn't stop me from getting the hell out of that town. I graduated

college and moved into a neighborhood inhabited by Hispanics in a city colonized by the Dutch and connected underground so many years ago by the Irish and Italians. I got a job in a resource center at a nonprofit where I learned terms like “cultural competency” and “self-identify” and “acculturation”. In a new century in New York I can evolve into someone self-actualized, a modern Greek Goddess with a thin layer of sophisticated urban chic, a yes-girl in the office but still with her own personal bottom line. Someone who no longer has a moral dilemma about lining her books up on a shelf because their meanings now all coexist in her mind, the Good News Bible and the teachings of Saint John Chrysostom along with Kerouac and Sartre and even Vonnegut. Someone who no longer believes in checking boxes on job applications because she can’t fit her whole story inside.

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