



Remembering Daddy

IF SOMEONE ASKED ME how I knew my Daddy loved me, I would probably describe the times he passed out bites of apples or candy to his children. We would gather in the den, and he would take out his pocketknife and peel an apple in one continuous spiral with the care that a sculptor takes with his clay. Then he would cut the peeled apple piece by piece and, with the tip of his blade, pass each bite to my two siblings and me in turn, with the love that only a man who adores both his offspring and fresh food could muster. He would perform a similar ritual with a large Baby Ruth, making sure he kept the portions perfectly equal.

Mother did most of the day-to-day cooking, the thankless kind no one gets excited about, least of all the cook, but when Daddy did the cooking, he handled food with reverence. I can still see him cutting up the potatoes for his French fries, a Saturday night special. There was no chopping board for his potatoes—no sir; he custom-cut every single fry as if it was the one that might be served to the President of the United States. Being a man of the South, he fried a lot; the fact that I never fry anything now doesn't reflect good eating habits so much as the truth that I simply can't fry as he did. Having tasted fried perfection, I won't settle for less.

On Sunday mornings, if Daddy got up early to fry chicken for Sunday dinner after church, he would make us critchie crunchies (surely he should have patented the recipe or at least taken out a copyright on the name). He would crack an egg into the hot grease after the chicken was pulled out and flick all the left-behind crumbs up onto the egg so that the dish was a masterpiece of beauty and flavor. If we didn't have a critchie crunchie, chances are we would get a drip-pie droolie, a soft-boiled egg with salt and butter.

If you wanted something really extra special with your eggs, he would scramble them with fish roe harvested in the spring when the herrings were running in the Roanoke River that flowed through town. Then you'd have the fish itself fried up real crispy later that evening for supper. Or when the rock fish were running, Daddy would make a rock

muddle. He would place the fish in the middle of his oblong pan and surround it with eggs and potatoes and onions placed just so and then covered with a lattice of bacon, creating his own still life.

On winter mornings, we were likely to start the day with biscuits left over from the night before (Mother gets credit for the biscuits) and sausage fresh from a hog killing. Daddy grew up in Farm Life, a rural community down east in North Carolina outside Williamston, our thriving town of seven thousand people, so he still got invitations to the hog killings and always walked away with at least a yard or two of sausage. He would hang the sausage links on a bamboo rod in our pantry beside the ham that would be hanging there in payment for his lawyering, from a farmer who had more money in the barnyard than in the bank.

And he might bring home souse and chittlins, too, the foods made from what's left of the pig just before they sweep the floor. They say everything from the pig is used but the squeal, and it's true. We always managed to have a pig's foot or two on New Year's Day along with the collards and black-eyed peas, to enhance our good fortune for the coming year. One time Daddy came home with an entire half of a pig (he must have kept somebody out of jail), which he proceeded to butcher on our kitchen table. I was thrilled to be able to take the pig's eye to my fifth-grade class the next day, suspended in rubbing alcohol in a Jif peanut butter jar.

Daddy always made it a point to come home from a killing with some cracklins, the crispy residue of rendered hog fat. Cracklins found their way into the cornbread we had on Saturdays at midday along with the greens and boiled Irish potatoes and baked sweet potatoes. But some cracklins had to be saved for the pot of squirrels he cooked every Friday night after Thanksgiving for our wild game dinner.

Through most of my childhood the game dinner was held at the town water plant. My Uncle Bob was the utilities manager for the town, so we had access to the cavernous plant, a place of intrigue and wonder with open space for indoor tag and creepy dark corners for hide-and-seek. In late November it was chilly, but not yet freezing cold, so the one pot-bellied stove served us fine, both for heat and as a cook-top for the squirrel stew.

Left: Cousin Sam and brother Chuck after a successful hunt for our game dinner.

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If there weren't enough squirrels on hand for the stew, my brother Chuck and cousin Sam would go out Thanksgiving afternoon and bag a few more. It was a hungry man who first thought of eating squirrels. After they're skinned, they look like nothing more than a small bag of bones.

There was an electric stove at the water plant for the venison Daddy fried and gravied up, country style. Our bread course was always soda crackers crumbled up and thrown in the pot liquor left from the squirrels—a delicacy known as chowder. Nothing else from the food pyramid was likely to appear at a game dinner besides meat and mushy crackers, although a new meat course emerged during my teenage years.

It seems a friend had killed a raccoon while he was out squirrel hunting and thought of Daddy because he knew he liked to cook. So Daddy decided to barbecue up the coon. It happened to be the same weekend as the annual ladies night at the Ptomaine Club, the hunting men's supper club. Daddy and Gabel Himmelwright, the local surgeon, decided it would be fun to fool their wives into eating coon, a creature only one notch above possum on the food chain. So Daddy mixed up his vinegar, salt, and Texas Pete sauce and basted and baked it until it didn't taste so wild anymore.

Gabel first offered it to his wife, Margaret. "Here, Peachy Belle, try this," he said, without telling her what it was. After Margaret had scolded him for using her pet name in public, she allowed that it was pretty good. Then Daddy offered Mother some, and she agreed it was tasty. Then the wives asked what it was. I've heard that some words flew that night that were maybe okay inside the Ptomaine Club, but they wouldn't have been proper elsewhere.

After Mother asked how he could have fed her such common food ("common" being the term used for anything low-class), Daddy pointed out that raccoons were the cleanest animals in the woods—they always washed their food. And why didn't she keep that question in mind next time she cooked a pork loin or added fatback to the boiled pot? After the platter was licked clean and everyone confessed pleasure, coon became an official part of the wild game menu each Thanksgiving.

It's no surprise that we didn't have a lot of fruits and vegetables at our late fall dinner, because family feasts tended to celebrate what was in season. Summers were the time when a riot of vegetables appeared on the table. Daddy had started a tradition before I was born of inviting all his family to our house on the Pamlico River for the Fourth of July. With most of the older cousins coming down the night before, that meant upwards of thirty people any given year in our little cottage, which he had hand-built as a young man.



Daddy in his "Kiss the Chef" Christmas toque.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MIRIAM SAULS

There would be bodies strewn on sofas in the living room and on pallets on the kitchen floor and on cots or in hammocks on the porch. And anybody not willing to work might as well stay home, because at 5:00 A.M. Daddy was handing out kitchen utensils to start the corn shucking and bean stringing and butterbean shelling and the peach and potato and cucumber and tomato peeling and the chicken frying.

The assembly line around the bushels of corn was especially lively as sleepy-eyed boys shucked and passed the ears to the next workers for silking and then on to Daddy to cut the corn from the cob for the big pot of stewed corn. An even bigger pot would hold the corn to be eaten off the cob. Daddy would have a particular look of satisfaction on his face as he cut the corn, because he was always anxious that the Silver Queen wouldn't be ready by the Fourth, though in my whole childhood, that never came to pass. He would walk around the rest of the day with corn milk splattered across his glasses and we would all marvel and see how long it would take him to realize his vision was blurred.

By then it was time to take a swim. We would load the vegetables in Elder Hall, our overflow refrigerator named after a rental-house tenant who had left a note on his door one day that said, "Be rat back," but he never turned up and neither did his back rent. So Elder Hall moved to the corner of our kitchen at Pamlico and cooled our bounty until it was time to start the pots boiling.

On those hot July days we had to have two seatings for dinner. The kids ate first with the grown-ups waiting on us, and then we returned the favor. The kids and grown-ups alike never failed to play "pig," the game invented at that very table, where one person puts a finger on his or her nose

and everyone follows suit until only the “pig” is left, still too absorbed in his food to see that everyone else is convulsing with laughter.

While Daddy and all my uncles took naps in the lounge chairs and hammocks in the front yard under the pine trees, with the river lapping at the shore a few feet away, Mother and my aunts prepared the custard for the homemade ice cream. There was always a freezer of vanilla and one of fresh peach and sometimes a third kind would slip in, like strawberry, if someone had frozen some berries in May. Daddy would have driven down to Earl Guthrie’s store to buy a big block of ice sometime earlier in the day, and the production would begin when the custard made its way to the front yard.

The little kids would crank the freezers first while they were still easy to turn, and we would work our way up the muscle ladder until we got to whoever was feeling most macho that day to do the final arm-aching churns. Small cousins would take turns sitting on the freezers to keep them stable, rotating when their cold little bathing-suited bottoms couldn’t stand it any more. Meanwhile Daddy kept the freezers supplied with rock salt and ice chips. When the crank wouldn’t budge another inch, the beaters were carefully removed to great oohs and aahs. The toughest thing in life at that point was deciding whether to have Aunt Marie’s chocolate cake or Aunt Grace’s pound cake or Aunt Emma’s orange blossoms or Aunt Nell’s cookies, and of course which kind of ice cream to try first.

After the satiated relatives drove off, we settled in for the rest of our idyllic summer. Daddy would drive the hour to town to work on Mondays and Fridays, and we would fish and crab and swim and water-ski the days away, only stopping long enough to eat a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. We would walk to Miss Annie Moore’s store for dip ice cream and stand in front of the cooler, holding our breath, praying that the drop of sweat dangling from the tip of her nose in the one-hundred-degree store wouldn’t let go as she got to our cone. We only went back to town when it was time to put up pints of corn and quarts of tomatoes and jars of pear preserves for the pantry shelf, and my favorite bread-and-butter pickles. The hardest thing of all was waiting several days for the pickles to “strike” before we could open one jar and taste Mother and Daddy’s handiwork.

The corn and pickles made their next appearance at our Christmas feast. On Christmas day we had at least one and sometimes two other families of relatives at our dinner table. Preparation began early, not just in the day, but in the week, because Daddy would save every scrap of bread for days leading up to Christmas so his dressing would have a

variety of colors and flavors. He might even throw in a few cheese tidbits. According to Daddy, hens were best for the turkey dinner; toms were too tough. He would dress “Lurkey” (as he called the turkey) and put her into the oven in time to move on to his next work of art—seven dozen eggs’ worth of eggnog for the party that would begin around 11:00 A.M.

Not only did Daddy’s brothers and sisters and all my first cousins attend, his cousins and their children and all our neighbors dropped by, too. So our house was a swarm of folks, drinking eggnog and eating fried peanuts and Christmas candy and date bars and “moons”—nutty shortbread cookies—as all the kids showed off their toys. I could never understand how some of these otherwise dull neighbors became so lively until I was old enough to look at the eggnog recipe.

Take a dozen eggs, separated and brought to room temperature; a dozen tablespoons of sugar; a pint of whipping cream; and a pint of corn liquor (Daddy always increased the recipe six- or seven-fold; he would use apple brandy for added flavor for at least one of his pints). Beat the egg yolks till creamy, slowly adding the alcohol to cook them, then add in the sugar slowly. Set the yolk mixture aside and clean bowl thoroughly. Beat egg whites to stiff peaks and set aside. Then whip the cream till firm. Fold the whipped cream and egg whites into the yolk mixture and blend well. Serve with a sprinkle of fresh nutmeg and prepare for nirvana.

After the morning crowd cleared out, the table was cleaned of party food and set with the silver, crystal, and china. And after a sumptuous Christmas dinner, the storytelling began. There was always the latest funny thing Cud’n Fanny Mert had said and how long Uncle Henry might have to stay in the hospital, and talk like that, but the story we asked to hear again and again was the one about our great-grandfather John coming home from the Civil War.

John Manning was “mustered out” in Wilmington and walked the more than one hundred miles home to Martin County, where he passed the home of his sweetheart, Sarah Margaret, whom he had left behind several years before. Finding her rocking on the front porch as he passed her house, he nodded and said, “Hey, Miss Sarah Margaret, I’m home.” And she said, “I’m glad, John.” And he said, “See you Saturday night.” And she nodded, and that was it. As we shook our heads at the subtlety of it all, it was time for dessert—coconut cake and wine jelly and whipped cream. Even the children were allowed to sample the wine jelly, and we must have cultivated a taste early, because it appears without fail at all family Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners to this day.

Take one box (4 envelopes) of gelatin and dissolve in a pint of cold water. Once dissolved, add 1 quart of boiling water, 2 cups of sugar, 1 pint of sweet white wine, the juice of 4 lemons, and 2–3 cinnamon sticks, and bring back to boil. As soon as it boils, remove from heat and let it sit a few minutes. Remove cinnamon sticks and pour into container to chill. Serve with slightly sweetened whipped cream.

Now that would be enough food and entertaining for most anybody for one day, but not Daddy. He brought all the relatives back for ham biscuits and home movies in the evening, which meant that as soon as he and Mother had stood up from the dinner table, she started mixing lard and flour and buttermilk and rolling out biscuits, and he started slicing the country ham. And if there was leftover eggnog, everyone got jolly all over again.

It must be said Mother was a good sport about these gatherings. All the guests were Daddy's family. She was an only child and didn't even have any first cousins, so she had to learn early to cope with this big crowd. It wasn't that all these relatives were strangers to her; in fact, she and Daddy were kin, so she had met them all at childhood family reunions. But this kind of food in large quantities and entertaining in bulk was a learned response to life with Daddy.

In later life, Daddy was appointed District Court judge, a job that allowed him to slow down professionally. His district happened to cover five counties in eastern North Carolina, low in crime but high in seafood. After an hour of court cases in Hyde County, he would take off his robe and go fishing with the sheriff for the rest of the day. It was not uncommon for him to come home with a mess of mackerel or a bushel of oysters or scallops after a "hard day's work." The ensuing feast would renew your faith in the justice system.

In his seventies Daddy was diagnosed with cancer. Like many Americans by the 1980s, he had changed his eating habits—less fried food, less beef and pork, less eggs and cheese and salt. He had done all this to protect his heart, and he was totally outdone when it was cancer that got him instead of a heart attack—all that deprivation for nothing. His loss of appetite at the end was as disheartening to the family as his general decline. But the cancer had given him time to write his own funeral service. A friend of mine came up to me afterwards and said, "I've never laughed so much at a funeral"—a fine testimony to his humor and creativity.

I went through years of boarding school and college and graduate school tempted to disown my rural heritage, but I never really got over wanting to be at that game dinner or around that Christmas table. The Fourth of July festivities eventually wound down as the aunts and uncles got too old to travel and cousins spread out across the country.

But before I knew it, I found myself entertaining scores of friends on the little Christmas-tree farm my husband and I bought (with Daddy's help) right after we got married, inviting them out to cut a tree and feeding them venison stew by the barrel and cakes made with persimmons from the tree in front of the house.

And when my kids attended a Montessori School, where they were invariably fed ethnic food by classmates' mothers every time a Hindu or Muslim or Jewish holiday rolled around, I realized that although I had moved only a hundred miles from where I grew up, my heritage was just as exotic as theirs. So I fed my kids' classmates venison stew at Thanksgiving and in early summer took them on field trips to the vegetable stand out in the country to choose cabbages and squash and tomatoes to cook up with a pan of cornbread.

I spent my young adult life lamenting the fact that no one in my family was artistic. It slowly dawned on me, however, that I had grown up in the shadow of an artist—one who didn't paint or write or sculpt but who cooked and held feasts and told stories. As a child, I'd been transfixed by Daddy's tales. Stories and food, love and self-expression, were bound together and led to my becoming a "good knife-and-fork girl," Daddy's highest compliment, and a writer, my profession. Today, when I prepare my holiday feast with a passion for what will be served, when tales old and new are told around the table; when I write a story inspired by the particular brand of quirky humor that surrounded me as a child or when I interview an old-timer who's passionate about his ways, I give silent thanks to the man who taught me not only how to hear stories but also how to prepare a meal that inspires their telling. And when I see hunters in their camouflage suits on a crisp fall day in rural North Carolina, I don't think they are cruel or mindless. I know that before the day is over there might be a work of art placed in front of a child who will someday recognize it for what it is. ◉