

Dinner From Dead People

The one thing that always makes food taste better is when it is taken away. To be able to stare at a meal and know that it will never taste the same again can be just as painful as death. Most times, it means death. Strangely enough, the only meals I have memorized are the ones that now go sour in my mouth. And I can still remember how good they used to taste before they tasted like the dead flowers on a casket. It is morbid, I know, but all loss of permanence is a death, even with food.

Gerald Bailey could hold bees without fear of them stinging him. They would land on his hand, and he would just watch them. The bees weren't scared of him either; he was like another flower for them. It is for that reason he tasted like honey. I was six when he died. I don't remember much, just standing in the small church staring at a black and white pamphlet with a picture of my great grandfather's face on it. I didn't cry, but I didn't feel as careless as the kids watching Veggie Tales in the other room. My mother must have been sad. I don't think I noticed it. I just know I held that pamphlet very tightly. I didn't speak very much or comprehend the funeral. I think that must have been when I stopped liking honey. It didn't lose its taste, quite the opposite. It began too sweet like it was mocking me for what I lost—like the bees had been closer to him than I ever could be. His name was Gerald Bailey, and besides that, I didn't know much more about him.

Phyllis Abbott was different; she did not go outside very often. Instead, she collected duck statuettes. She sat on her old couch from the '70s, happy to be with her husband, Clint Sr., in silence. She tasted like the relief of a 7up on a sick day. Her death was more complicated than

the first. She never knew my name, well maybe she did, but she always forgot it six seconds later. I think she only ever pretended to know my mom out of politeness. Sometimes I wonder if she even remembered her own husband. I knew this woman and the feel of her thin hair. I had a name for every knick-knack on her shelf, but by the thousandth time I introduced myself, the feeling of bubbly ginger ale she once gave me fell flat. I still miss the tickle. I suppose it wasn't her fault, but then who else could I blame. In her final days, I am told, she forgot who she was. She only cried and asked for her mother, a woman who was long gone. Did her mother ever give her 7up? Did it lose the carbonation the day her mother left her? Am I bound to repeat this cycle? Phyllis Abbott could not remember her own name, so why is it seared into my brain?

Clint Sr. fixed washing machines and dragged tractors. He never cooked or cleaned; he was the traditional all-American male. He was an apple, hard and crunchy but sweet on the inside if you gave him a chance. We heard about his death in Tennessee over a phone call. I say we, but I mean my mother. My father held her as she tried to choke out the words. The man who died had always scared me. He was rough and loud. He always made jokes that I could never understand, and with the amount of times he had injured himself, I was worried I would break him on impact. He never hurt me. I don't think he ever would because maybe that would mean something was wrong. He never admitted when things were bad, not even when his wife lost herself in front of his eyes. He only ever knew how to carry forward, just as he did when he was kicked off his land as a child and just as his life partner died in front of him. Looking back now, I should have enjoyed him more. He always asked for me to sit in his lap and would hand me an apple. He had a friendly smile, and though I did not understand him, his crunch is what made

him special. Clint Abbott Sr. died the only way he knew how, fixing a machine, seeming completely fine and healthy.

Merle Smith was a nurse. She worked from daylight to sunset, and every moment in between, she took care of her children. She did not believe in breaks. Just like her schedule, she had many tastes. She was morning grits and cinnamon toast. She was Coca-Cola and Rice Crispy cereal with a side of pecan pie. I was in high school when she died. We called her Mimi, and it wasn't until the week she passed that I knew she had cancer and was in critical condition. She didn't like to be seen as weak. She was just as strong as her meals. She raised me on sweets and butter, the southern way. I never had to sneak ice cream from the fridge; she would always give it to me happily. She made every Thanksgiving and Christmas meal and every meal like it was Thanksgiving or Christmas. She was so many meals rolled into one that it was apparent when it got taken away. I think this was when I realized how much I missed eating food. The whole world tasted different. I remember locking myself in the bathroom so I could sit on the floor and sob. I was supposed to speak at her funeral, but I could not even get out the beginning line of the poem. My dad hasn't been the same since. She must have made every meal for him growing up; it must be hard having everything you eat spoil in your mouth. Rice Krispies don't pop anymore, and the very idea of southern cooking just rots in my mouth. Merle Smith's cooking was inspiring, but then again, it's not hard to beat how things taste now.

Her brother, Raynard, had more of a sense of humor than her. His laugh was intense, and he always sat next to his spouse during the holidays. He tasted like Christmas dinner. He didn't last long after the passing of his sister. I'm not sure, maybe it was a relief not to spend Christmas with that side of the family anymore. It saved us both from having to look each other in the eyes

and pretend like we didn't just lose the person that brought us together in the first place. I never knew his favorite meal; I just always saw him laughing and smiling at Christmas dinner. He always seemed like a cranberry sauce and ham kind of guy. Good thing I'm vegetarian, or else my winter season would taste dry. Raynard was a good person. I hope he never had to eat dry ham.

Barbra Bailey would watch old reruns of Shirley Temple and hand stitch her great grandchildren's blankets. She was petite but an expert in ventriloquism. She tasted just as southern as she was, creamed corn and mashed potatoes. On her especially active days, she tasted like homemade chocolate strawberry banana smoothies. I wore a black dress to her funeral; I remember because it pissed off my mom that I didn't shave my legs. Why should I have? It's not like Grandmommie would have been there to see it anyway. I think I knew her time was coming when she stopped cooking. Don't tell my Mimi this, but Grandmommie's cooking was always my favorite. Her house was really small, so whenever she cooked, it filled the whole building. She lived by a garden, so sometimes I would go out and pick the ingredients myself. Her vegetables and fruit seemed perfectly curated, like she had spent every second in her life training to make you whatever meal she put before you. I haven't eaten anything like her cooking since she died. Her recipes were long lost in some attic or sitting somewhere in a landfill. It's funny; I think if she could make me that meal one last time, I'd change my favorite food. Barbra Bailey is the reason why I can't have good mashed potatoes anymore, but I can't say I'm mad at her for it.

I've had eight deaths in my life leading up to now. If I wanted to, I could have a whole feast purely off of memory. All the meals that no longer taste the same could fill a room. It is

moments like this when I sit on my bed with someone I love and think that the taste of who they are will rot in my mouth one day. I will no longer have my dad's grilled cheese or my mom's sloppy janes. The very people who created my food palette will fail to exist as a whole. And though I mock her taste buds, my girlfriend's apple crisp and strawberry salad that she loves making will one day taste like the dirt underneath the casket she will eventually lie in. We are not immune to death, but neither is food. Once its creator is gone, it will never taste the same again for the rest of our lives. And when we die, the very meals that made us will die with us. Our only hope is that the recipe we once loved will be passed down, but even then the memory of who we were won't always survive with it. Will my little brother ever be able to stomach pasta, my birthday meal of choice, after seeing my still, cold corpse?

We are the foods that we eat. Our very essence is encapsulated in a ticking time bomb of flavor. It would be so much easier to go about life not noticing what other people eat, but that's impossible. My Mimi served pecan pie because she loved making pecan pie. It was who she is, and how was I not supposed to notice when she brought it to every holiday get-together? Of course, I miss the taste of pecan pie. I miss the crunch and the fresh out of the oven taste. Now I eat frozen pecan pie, and it doesn't taste the same. But I am so thankful I could have someone show me the pecan pie flavor to appreciate it properly.

When I die, these recipes will come with me. I will become another dead person with only the idea of food left for the world. As the worms eat my body, my family and friends will eat the foods I once made and know that no one on this earth made it like me. No one could make it taste the way I could. Maybe they'll be thankful for me the way I was grateful to my

family. Flora King Smabbott, they couldn't cook well, but it doesn't mean they didn't know how to give it flavor.