

## The Food Game

The porcelain countertop was higher than my head, but I was persistent. My little arms reached above and gripped the edging of the kitchen counter. I pulled and climbed, using my foot to push off the cabinet handle. With knees digging into the grooves of the surface, I balanced my small body and grinned. I had made it. I had not slipped into the sink, or nose-dived off the ledge onto the dingy linoleum. I had made it to the top. I stood and outstretched my arms again—reaching, reaching. My fingers fumbled over the cylindrical container in an attempt to grip it. I managed to secure the powdered ice tea mix and quickly ripped off the plastic top. I shrieked with delight. I proclaimed, in my excitement, “I found it! I found it!” My brothers came rushing into the kitchen from the living room. I immediately realized my folly. My covert operation had failed. My eldest brother, Scott, who stood at my eye level, snatched the container and its contents from my hands. My face dropped as I saw him holding the can of Chef Boyardee that had been hidden inside the tea mix. I cried, not because I was hungry, or simply because I was a child denied what I wanted. I cried because I knew I had lost that round of the food game.

Twenty years ago, my brother Sean, who is two years my senior, and I would visit Scott and our father at the house on Carver Street. My parents had separated, and Sean and I lived most of the time at my mother’s house. My father worked 3<sup>rd</sup> shift and so he slept during the days. We were basically left in the care of our teenaged brother, but still able to roam as we pleased. I spent the majority of my time barefoot, walking over the cracked cement of Northeast Philly. Scott acted as our surrogate parent. When I would inevitably step on glass, he would delicately remove the shards from my little feet. With

careful consideration he blotted up the blood and applied antiseptic cream. He also made sure that Sean and I had the opportunity to enjoy the sweeter parts of life.

We didn't have lunch time or snack breaks. When we were hungry we would rummage through the metal cabinets, or open the creaky refrigerator. My father didn't really grocery shop. When he went to the store he would purchase items for himself, namely Perrier mineral water and pre-cooked Perdue chicken patties. The only other goods we'd find were items purchased by our grandmother. Nanny was a meticulous shopper. She used double coupons on triple coupon day, scoring three bottles of identical shampoo. She always bought the same things: cans of alphabet soup, Vienna fingers, and stove-top stuffing. On occasion she would secure some choice items, like cans of Chef Boyardee, which Scott would promptly hide for himself. Since my father's house didn't contain much sustenance, it was Scott's survivalist instinct that compelled him to stash the better food.

As children, and later into adulthood, we didn't value food for its nutrition. Food was always a game of obtaining the tastier items—which to kids are cans of Chef Boyardee or sweet treats like candies. Since our households didn't afford for sweet indulgences, Scott provided us with the unobtainable. I remember sitting on the cement porch and watching as he engaged in cash games on the Polish family's steps. He and his buddies would sit and play Monopoly and poker. Scott is a terrific gambler, and I would peek across the street in anticipation of his victory. His cash spoils provided him with snacks, baseball cards, and cassette tapes. And while most teens would just indulge in impulse shopping, Scott would make sure to save a few dollars for Sean and me. He would stroll over to the house with a subdued smile:

“Here, take this and run over to Mrs. Chin’s and buy some candy and gum. Get the Sixlets and Double Mint and other cheap candies.”

Our eager hands would reach up, grabbing the singles and we would then race the few blocks over to the corner store. We carefully selected candies Scott would approve of and raced back home.

“Take a seat,” said Scott, a glint in his eye.

Sean and I stretched out onto the matted carpet. We dumped out our handfuls of treats, watching them spill over the floor with delight. The front door was left open, letting the daylight pour into the living room. Overwhelmed with excitement, we didn’t pay any attention to the brush burns forming on our knees. Propped up on elbows, faces inches from the ground, and all we could smell were the candies. The sticky, sweet aromas of mint, pirouetting with the chocolates and the fruity Twizzlers, wafted up to us, and we inhaled it all. The plastic crinkled as we un-wrapped packets of Sixlets. With each tearing of paper another delicious scent was revealed. Smiles plastered our faces. Grinning, Scott organized the candies, telling us the value of each.

“A Sixlet counts for one, a piece of gum is five, a Twizzler is ten,” he would list off. We would follow his hands, watching with acuity the way he dispersed the candies into three piles.

“So to start, I am going to ante a Sixlet. Each of you put in one, too.”

The deck crackled as he shuffled the cards, demonstrating his skill by forming a bridge. We were entranced. And so, Scott taught us how to play poker, substituting candy for poker chips. Somehow food was always a game to us. We didn’t sit around complaining that we were hungry. We didn’t criticize our parents for not providing us

with home-cooked meals. We simply got creative. From time to time Scott would sneak into the kitchen, showing us how to eat my father's chicken patties without him knowing. He would take a knife and make a precise slit on the bottom side of the patty. He then delicately removed the inner contents, using the knife to scoop out the chicken meat. He would then put the disfigured patty back in the package, the untouched side facing up. We ate the coveted chicken, laughing at his furtive maneuver.

As adults, we viewed eating as a function. We ate because we had to eat, not because eating provided us with a sense of familial-bonding, or because eating well was inherently important. We never took eating too seriously—eating was the ultimate purpose of the food game. Get what you can, while you can, and eat it. It really made no difference what you ate, as long as it was food, and even better yet, a tasty food. We weren't raised to the sounds of a mixer. We didn't feel the warmth of the oven against our cheeks. We didn't see the process of chopping and slicing. Instead, we heard the sounds of a microwave's incessant beep. The whizzing noise as the dim bulb illuminated the spinning, glass plate. Food to us was something that was prepackaged and instant. We didn't leisurely stroll through the grocery store, comparing the nutritional content of items. We didn't mull over which item was "better" or why. Organic foods were thought of as something that pretentious people ate. And this way of viewing food lasted well into our adulthood, until our father was diagnosed with Diabetes.

When our father was diagnosed with Diabetes, food wasn't a game any more. Food wasn't a light subject that we goofed about. Suddenly, the box of Cheez-Its he pounded in one sitting wasn't amusing. And the package of butter cream chocolates, once admired as a terrific food game score, became the embodiment of our father's

impending, sugary death. I watched as my brother Scott ate an entire chocolate-layered Sara Lee cake, and as Sean gorged on a bag of Doritos. I saw my family slowly deteriorating. And then, every time my father reached for a slice of yellow cake, my mother would shout, “Joe! You can’t eat that!” He would scowl and walk away empty handed. Every time my brothers would guzzle Mt. Dew, or consumer a number of sugary snacks, I would ask them, “Do you want to get Diabetes, too?” They would furrow their brows and grumble, continuing to eat the unhealthy items. But I could see in their eyes that they were at least thinking about the food they were eating—an act we had never been accustomed to.

Twenty years later after first playing the food game, my brothers and I all work in restaurants. They are sous chefs, and I am their admirer. Recently, Sean and I hosted a lavish Thanksgiving party. He diligently filled the chaffing dishes with the spoils of his labors. I made Pennsylvania Dutch potato filling and chocolate crème pie. He blanched the broccoli and Brussels sprouts and roasted the turkey. We ate baby carrots marinated in honey and garlic butter. We ate fresh-baked breads. Our refrigerator now is stocked with spinach and assorted vegetables, with fresh fruits and home-made goods. At home, Sean frequently prepares savory dishes—succulents meats and creamy soups—all of which I eat heartily. At work, Scott, with his flair for artistic detail, prepares outrageously crafted cheeseburgers and masterful combinations of seafood—all of which I eat graciously. They have devoted their lives to feeding others, to nurturing and satiating. The other night at work, Scott smiled and called me over. I saw the mischievous glint in his eye. I watched as he delicately removed the inner contents of a

co-worker's dinner through the bottom of the food. His knife, making a careful slit, doubled to scoop out the soft filling of the pierogie and the chicken finger's tender meat.

“Look,” he said, laughing. “I’ve won. I’ve won the food game.” I stared at the food for a moment. I thought about my father’s Diabetes. And I thought about Scott’s recent Diabetes diagnosis. Then, my eyes looked up and met his grin. I laughed, remembering the food game we played as children. Scott’s silly parallel of the chicken maneuver done decades before was an acknowledgement of who we used to be. And even though we laugh, we are still inherently aware of how the game ends.