

MEAT

MARY EATS MEAT = MARY LOVES ME

by Mary Miller

GROWING UP IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI, I didn't know anyone who didn't eat meat. My father and brothers were hunters. They brought home deer and turkeys and sacks of doves, and my mother took pictures of the most impressive in size and number. In my father's study, deer and fish were mounted on the walls; turkey beards lined the shelves. My sister and I used to look into the eyes of each deer to determine which one we liked best, which would be our boyfriend, was the most soulful. We could never make up our minds and would always forget which one we'd chosen because their eyes seemed equally unique, equally soulful.

I never went hunting with my father. Because he has two sons, my sister and I were exempt from these activities. My brothers, regardless of whether they'd wanted to be outdoorsmen or not, and mostly they hadn't—they were musician-types—had no choice. On weekends, they'd set out before dawn. My mother and sister and I awoke late to an empty house. We enjoyed their absence, relished these days without men. We didn't have to watch westerns on TV; we'd go to Little Tokyo and my



mother would tell us to order anything we wanted: "It's on Dad." As the afternoon progressed, we watched the clock, anxious as to how much time we had left.

My father did take me fishing a few times, but I never caught anything. I'd hold the rod and think about the chocolate bars he would buy me at the gas station on the way home as a reward. I had no patience for it, was horrified by live bait. But mostly I couldn't see the allure of driving so far and staying still for so many hours when you could simply go to the store and buy a fish that had already been cleaned.

I knew my father had grown up doing these things in order to feed his siblings after his father left the family, that he was simply doing what he'd always done, the way he'd always done it, except now he had better equipment and paid a lot of money to belong to a hunting club. I thought about that, too—what was once a poor man's way of life was now a rich man's pastime.

After those few attempts at fishing, my involvement in my father's outdoor activities was limited to one: helping him get his rods ready for the season. This involved holding a spool of wire on a pencil as still and taut as possible while he reeled. It took forever and he'd yell that I wasn't holding it tight enough, that I was messing up his line.

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AS I GREW OLDER AND MORE SULLEN, I developed an increasing distaste for meat. My mother would have to remove my chicken from the bone because I found the bones offensive; I couldn't bear for my teeth to touch them. I refused bacon and pork chops and steak in addition to deer and dove, which hurt my father's feelings. He took it as a personal rejection. On the days I ate his bacon or hamburgers, he was nicer to me. His brain had settled on a simple equation: Mary eats meat = Mary loves me.

And so it became an issue much greater than whatever happened to be on my plate. Rejecting meat was a way for me to rebel against him for not knowing how to talk to me, how to interact with me. As a child, he'd simply had to love me, but as I developed into a young woman, he didn't know how to express his love. He wasn't like some of my friends' fathers who would hug them as easily as they always had, purchase their tampons, talk to them about boys. I remember the time one of my friend's fathers brought home a box of pads from the store. He placed them on the kitchen table and they sat there while we watched TV.

I tried out new phrases: "I don't like steak"; "I don't eat bacon." At night my father would tell my mother he didn't think I liked him. I didn't know what to do with that. I was the child. He was the parent. Of course I liked him, but I wanted him to be my father and he didn't know how.

For a time I stopped eating meat altogether. Over the years, I've been a vegetarian, a pescetarian, and other variations along these lines, but I've settled on something that feels much more natural: I eat what I want, when I want. When I'm with my father, I eat his food because I want him to know I accept him.

There are still so many things my father and I don't talk about, but we try. He sends me Valentine's cards he picks out himself, cards that say things he could never say. I like to picture him in the greeting card aisle at CVS, selecting the perfect message. I ask him about turkey season, or how many fish he caught. He asks what I'm working on, gives my ex-boyfriends mean and appropriate nicknames. And when I'm home and my father puts a steak on my plate, I cut a few small bites and chew the overcooked meat slowly, tell him how good it is. How perfectly it's grilled. When he makes breakfast in the morning, I eat his bacon and like it fine. Sometimes I eat two or three pieces so he'll know just how much I love him. ☹️

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