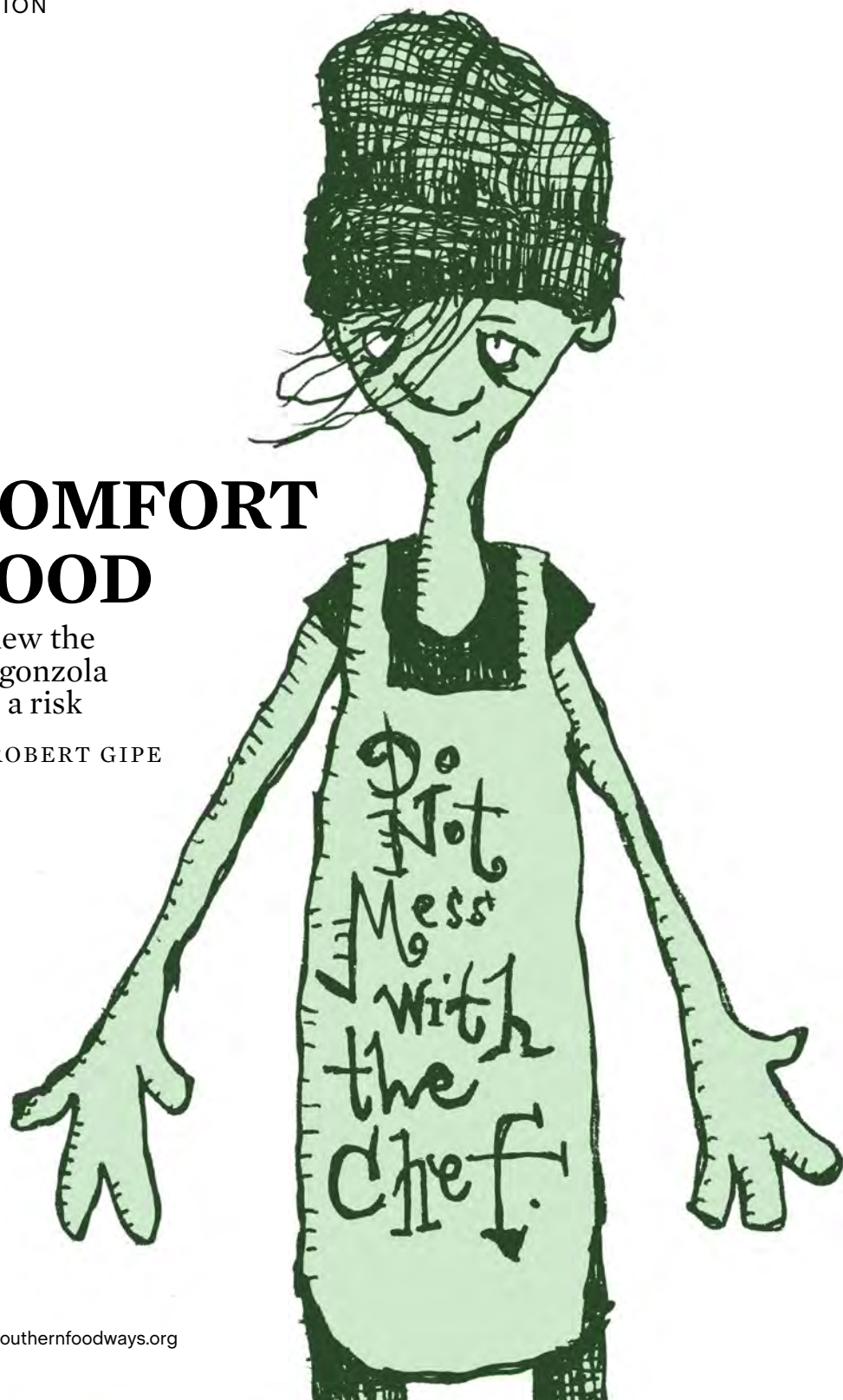


COMFORT FOOD

I knew the
Gorgonzola
was a risk

BY ROBERT GIPE



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MY MOTHER SAT IN THE FRONT seat of an Oldsmobile Alero in the carport of my great-granny Cora's brick house on the Long Ridge Trail, at the crest of Long Mountain, looking out over Blue Bear Valley and the town of Canard, a mountain community of rich heritage and crowded court docket.

My mother cried her eyes out, beat her hands against the Alero steering wheel, stopped every few minutes to scream. I was in the kitchen looking out the window over the sink, across the patio through the big fat mint and basil and rosemary I had growing in concrete planters, lining the edge of the cement slab of the carport.

I was sixteen years old. My skin was spotty. I was bony. I had on an apron my mother had made me in a class at the community college with **DO NOT MESS WITH THE CHEF. SHE DOES NOT CARE TO KNIFE YOU** silkscreened in Gothic letters. My mother cried because she thought I

was going to leave her. She cried because she was worried I was not safe. She worried I was betraying all that was sacred and dear. She worried that her only child was a thoughtless, shameless heathen about to kill herself on a lake many counties away, on a jet ski owned by a drug dealer from Hazard, knocked up and high on heroin. She worried about these things not because I was doing any of them but because I put Gorgonzola in the macaroni and cheese.

"It tastes like ass, Nicolette," my mother said after she spit the first mouthful into her hand. She threw the only protein she'd still eat to the floor, wiped her hand on her hoodie, and stomped out the storm door. "Like goat's ass," she said from the patio, and hightailed it to the Alero to drown her sorrows listening to Heart and Pat Benatar and eating barbecue potato chips.

I knew the gorgonzola was a risk. My mother depends on macaroni and cheese.

She has depended on macaroni and cheese since 2004, the year her mother, grandmother, and best friend all three died in the same July. Her best friend was a confidential informant who died driving home drunk from Dollywood. She was trying to get a tape of somebody talking about their drug deals when her tape player messed up and she flipped her truck trying to fix it. Momma's momma died from an overdose when the Tennessee man shooting her up put too much in the needle and when he seen what he done, dumped my grandmother's body by the river like she was a bag of garbage. Granny Cora—who was who raised my mother—she was the one made my mother go to school, took her with her where she went—to her anti-strip-mining meetings and visiting people in the hospital and sitting up with people at their houses when they were blue from losing their jobs or their husbands losing their jobs. Momma and Granny Cora sat up with people scared of getting robbed by druggies, or their check getting cut off, or bad ex-husbands and shitty ex-boyfriends showing up, or cops serving warrants or landlords wanting sex for rent or irate nephews-in-law demanding to see nieces hid in upstairs bedrooms—Granny Cora would go to all them people and take my momma with her.

Granny Cora didn't make the macaroni. She didn't much cook at all, but what she would do is take a brownie pie to people, when the emergency wasn't too time sensitive, and she had time to make it. Granny Cora loved sweet stuff. She'd take brownie pie.

Granny Cora was also the one drug my mom through the mountains, and named all the wildflowers and plants to her and showed her how to know the trees not just by their leaves but by their bark, too. And that stuff didn't much stick with

Momma, the names of things wasn't her thing, but she sure knew after her daddy got crushed by a piece of mine machinery run by a man out of his head on drugs, and after her mom crawled up in a liquor bottle and then got her life ended with the push of a syringe plunger, that her Granny Cora cared about her, and would be there for her. Until she wasn't. Until she died in a cave where she'd took me and Momma to talk about what we were going to do about Momma's momma, and wade in the water of underground lakes.

The only time my mother ever let her mother-in-law in Tennessee be nice to her was right after them three died. My father's mother was named Dorothy Bilson. She had a big smile, bright like Christmas toys under the tree, and she smiled it a lot, thought you could solve most problems with a bright smile, and sometimes, not for me, but for Momma, Dot's smile was too much.

I called my grandmother Bilson Dot. Dot lived in Tennessee, in a big house on a street full of hundred-foot trees in Kingsport, a factory town where she grew up her whole life. Her husband worked in the factory and died of cancer when I was real little and Dot was alone like that for years and years, which made her sad but also gave her lots of time to worry about her only son, my daddy Willett Bilson, which wore on Momma.

Dot was all the time saying she would love for us to move in with her, that that would suit her fine, and me and Daddy, we stayed there from time to time, and a lot of my growing up, I went to school in Tennessee, at the same city school in Kingsport where Daddy went. We lived on the edge of town, with Momma mostly, in a trailer by a creek with a bunch of other trailers.

Us living in a trailer park was not Dot's favorite thing we did, and she let me know from the time I was little that it

made her nervous and that she would worry a lot less if my daddy would let her help us find a place closer to her and her giant tree-lined street with its school-sized houses and its truck tire-sized Christmas wreaths made of real tree branches in every window with big red bows on them.

Momma went to Dot's house when she had to, but they didn't hang out and they didn't chitchat on the phone by the hour like sometimes Dot did with others. But when Momma lost all them people, she got so broke down she did let Dot put her up in her quiet quiet house with its good thick walls and its ancient creaky beds, and she let Dot feed her, which is where the macaroni and cheese comes in.

Dot liked to feed us, but she didn't much like to cook, but she did cook, and she used lots of butter and lots of cheddar cheese pre-shredded in ziplock bags and she fixed lots of Pyrex dish stuff from recipes she got off her friends and relations at book club and bridge club and Christmas parties and Fourth of July picnics, and so her refrigerator always had at least fifteen sticks of butter in it, and both crisper drawers crammed full of bag cheese.

Sometimes all that butter and cheese ended up making Dot's cooking kind of heavy, and sometimes it wound all of us up in the bathroom, which Dot's house had many of. But all that butter and cheese worked out perfect when it came to Dot's macaroni and cheese, which she prepared in layers and baked crispy brown on top and which tasted even better the next day out of the microwave. It was simple and pure and one of the first things I learned to fix when I started cooking. And simple as it was, Momma acted like it was magic, and made me make it for her. Momma said she liked my macaroni way better than Dot's.

When Momma came to stay at Dot's

in her sadness, she wasn't talking, which not talking was something she sometimes did, but that was the start of Momma going days when you couldn't even get her talking by provoking her. You could say her music sucked or make fun of her hair and she wouldn't even look at you. In them days she'd stay in the bed even when she wasn't sleeping. She just rolled over and faced the wall in this old bed Daddy's great-great-grandpa made, and she did that straight through Christmas and New Year's. And all she'd eat was a saltine cracker, one saltine cracker, and nibble it like a rabbit, staring off into something a thousand miles inside her mind.

When she did finally come out it was almost Valentine's Day, and me and Daddy were sitting at the little table in Dot's kitchen, the one with all the family pictures under glass, and we were eating ham and green beans and macaroni and cheese. And Momma come sit down in a Molly Hatchet T-shirt and her Foghorn Leghorn pajama pants, and she ate three quarters of a Pyrex of that macaroni and cheese and Dot rustled out another Pyrex and started making another one and for about two weeks, there was always macaroni and cheese fixed in Dot's refrigerator and Momma was always eating it.

And Momma gradually started coming back to herself and things got decently normal until I was in the fourth grade. We were living in Kentucky then, and I was going to the Pine Knot School in Canard County. That year they had a contest at Pine Knot School and every person in my grade had to dress up like an important product of the state of Kentucky. That year, Momma was involved in what I was doing in school. Me and her were sitting in the front seat of her Sentra in the dollar store parking lot when I told her about the contest. She thought for about a minute and said, "I

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think you ought to be a bag of Grippo's." She said, "What do you think?"

I saw how happy her face looked, so I said that was fine with me.

She went in the dollar store and got a bag of Grippo's barbecue potato chips and come out and sat in the car and crinkled the bag in her hands, turned it over and over. Then she went back in the dollar store and got glitter paint and white spray paint and a pack of markers and we went down to the Sears store at the old mall and found a nice refrigerator box which she used a big long piece of plastic wrap to strap to the top of the Sentra, and she brought me back to the house and we spread out a painter's drop-cloth and then that cardboard in the carport and had me lay down on it and she stared at me and pondered, and then she had me slip inside the box like it was a sleeping bag. Then she told me, "Get out of there," and spray-painted the whole box white. Then she sketched out with a pencil that whole Grippo's bag onto the refrigerator box. She got that

little dude with the skillet and the barbecue grill and the cursive Grippo's letters just right. Then she took out the masking tape and masked stuff before she got with it with the glitter paint.

Once she got it painted, she took the masking tape, and used a big fat marker to put the black line in and all the fine print on front and back sides and when she got done, I looked down inside her giant cardboard Grippo's bag, sure there were going to be giant potato chips inside. That's how good it looked.

There were seventeen kids in my fourth-grade class. When I got to school the next day, fourteen of them were dressed up as pieces of coal. One girl who lived with her big sister dressed up as a bag of pot. The other boy was strapped in a wheelchair and didn't know they were having a great products of Kentucky costume day. So I was pretty sure I was going to win that contest—especially after they sent the bag of pot girl home. Momma, who came with me to school, was sure I was going to win too, and

brought six yellow dollar store bags full of little bags of Grippo's, so she could give one to every person in class, all the students, and the teacher, and the teacher's aide, and everybody else their own bag of potato chips when I won that contest.

They had two assistant principals and one of the sixth-grade teachers judge us, and when this one lump of coal, not even the best lump of coal—he had gaps in his paint job on the half-wadded newspaper they'd used to make the coal—won, Momma went apeshit.

She said, "That right there is fucking bullshit," loud enough for all of them to hear it.

And when she asked how in the hell a wad of black newspaper could win over her daughter's beautiful and totally creative homemade potato chip bag, one of the assistant principals said, "Ma'am, Grippo's are not a Kentucky product. They come from Cincinnati."

Momma said, "What in the hell are you talking about?"

I turned around and bent over and showed Momma the fine print on my butt said Grippo's come from Cincinnati.

Momma said, "Bullshit. My aunt sent Grippo's every week to her son in Iraq and every week to her nephew in Afghanistan. And she had her whole house painted UK blue. Inside and out."

And when they all just looked at Momma, she said, "Come on, Nicolette," and took me by the hand and got her six yellow dollar store bags of Grippo's in the other and went out to the car, told me she wasn't never going back to that school. And she never did. She didn't go the next year when we had another costume contest, where we dressed up as famous Kentuckians. She just put me in an old man's suit and put gray shoe polish on my cheeks and told me to tell them I was Harry Dean Stanton and dare

them to say a word about it. She didn't come when my group won the young problem solvers competition in eighth grade. She didn't come when I won the quick recall contest in ninth grade. She didn't come when I won the pastry-making competition or the entrée competition or the pumpkin roll competition this past year in culinary. She didn't come this past spring when I went to prom with a girl from Tennessee and puked my toenails up and got my ass kicked by some boys from Turtletop.

And none of that bothered me. Until it did. Until this past spring, when I made it all the way to the state culinary championships in baking. I'd turned the apple stack cake recipe my aunt Tilda gave me into a lemon curd poppyseed stack cake that was pure beautiful, and once again I was sure I was going to win, but then a girl from my own school accused me of stealing her recipe which I know for a fact she got everything she ever made off television, but they took her word over mine cause her daddy was a bigshot at the plant and her mother went to Nashville to pay three hundred dollars to get their hair cut. Three hundred for herself, and three hundred for that girl, and three hundred for that girl's sister. Every time they got a haircut.

And when I went home and told Mom, she said, "I don't know why you fool with that stuff," and unwrapped another oatmeal creme pie and went back in her room to watch Japanese cartoon movies.

And that made me so mad. And that was yesterday. But I swallowed my mad and got up early this morning cause these women in Berea had heard about me and my cooking and they had introduced me to this hot woman who was making her own Gorgonzola cheese from her own cows somewhere down that way and they were having a big dinner and there were going to be cookbook writers and

chefs from big restaurants there, and all of them would be talking about how Appalachian food had been under appreciated and how now was our time to step right into the light, right onto the center of the world food stage. And the Berea women who were organizing this thing wanted me to be a part of it, and not just me, but some of the others who were in my culinary club. And they acted like this thing might lead to jobs for us, or at least work, and maybe in time the chance for us to do our own thing, maybe the chance to make Canard County a food mecca, a place where people who knew the difference came to eat—come to our town to eat our cooking to see what the new face of Appalachian cookery looked like.

I thought about all that looking at the gob of spit-out macaroni and cheese my mother had left on Granny Cora's kitchen floor and I marched out to the carport and banged on the car window and when Momma wouldn't roll it down, I banged on it some more, and when she still wouldn't roll it down, I banged on it some more, and when she did finally roll it down and said, "What?" like she didn't have no idea what I was doing out there, I told her what I just told you all—about the Berea women and about the woman making her own Gorgonzola cheese and how this might lead to a job for me and how it might make Canard County a place where the leading industry was something besides jury duty, and I worked myself up pretty good, thought I give a pretty good speech, and at the end of it, I said, "And all you got to say about it is that my macaroni and cheese tastes like ass?"

Momma started the Alero. She rested her arm in the open window said, "How much does that dinner cost? I might want to go."

I said, "I can get you a ticket, Momma." Momma said, "That ain't what I asked." I said, "I don't know how much it costs." Momma said, "It's on their website." Momma backed the Alero out of the carport.

I grabbed hold of the door handle. I said, "Momma, where you going?"

Momma said, "That garglezola macaroni, or whatever—it's real tasty. That cake—it was awesome. But baby, I don't know who you're fixing for. I don't know them."

I said, "Momma, you don't know who fixes hardly any of your food."

Momma said, "Cooking for strangers is fine. I don't have a problem with that."

I said, "What then?"

Momma said, "Who you cook for is who you are. Even snooty Dot knew that."

I said, "I know that, Momma. You think I don't have sense."

Momma said, "I think you got more sense than the rest of us put together."

Momma rolled up her window. Then she rolled it back down.

She said, "What's that girl's name said you stole that recipe?"

I told her.

"And her momma's name?"

I told her. And when she asked where they live, I told her that too.

Momma said, "You care if I go beat their ass?"

I said no.

Momma said, "Give me twenty dollars." I did.

"All right then," Momma said. "Have fun in Berea. Leave me some of that macaroni."

And then Momma was gone. And I went back in Granny Cora's house and cleaned up the floor and put tinfoil on my macaroni. And then I called my friend Pinky to take me to Berea. 🍷

Robert Gipe is the author of the novels Trampoline and Weedeater. He read this story at the SFA Summer Symposium in Lexington, Kentucky.