

About My Mother

Excerpted from *Silence of the Bunnies* by Dan Stark

I grew up in an extremely tight knit family, and my family helped shape much of my personality. My way of looking at things logically was a result of my father teaching me math and chess. My creative side resulted from trying to survive my mother's conversion to health foods.

Eating healthy foods is good but boring. Coping with someone who has embraced health foods as a way of life is another matter. For a child who dreamt of ice cream, Hershey bars and candied popcorn, it was a struggle for the things that made life itself worthwhile. I fought to avoid having what I ate control what I did. I remember the request to spend the night at a friend's house:

Q: "Can I go spend the night at Billy's? His mother said it was okay." Billy was really cool and this visit would immediately raise my stature at school.

A: "No, you know that you can't. They don't eat healthy and I'm not going to have you eat junk."

Q: "Well then, can he come over here? His mom said that would be okay too." I had done my homework. This time I thought I had her in a corner.

A: "No. Billy wouldn't enjoy what we eat, and besides, if he came over here, they would expect you to go over there, and I don't want you to do that because you would eat junk."

Game, set and match.

I should confess one inaccuracy in the reference to her as “my mother.” More accurately, she was “our mom.” I have an older brother and sister. Yet, while our experiences were similar, mine hit at a younger age. When wonderful chocolate was banished from our house and replaced with that most insidious, foul-tasting imposter, carob, my brother and sister were older and had enjoyed chocolate birthday cakes for most of their formative years. Not I.

I was eleven years old and becoming more anxious about social acceptance, when my mother surprised me at my birthday party by bringing out a carob birthday cake. She of course promised that it would be “just as good” as the chocolate ones she had made previously. One taste was enough to convince me that I was going to gag and die. Even if I didn’t, my friends would all be convinced that I had known about this and led them into a trap where they would gag and die.

How could a woman who was so warm and loving be transformed into Attila the Hun when it came to food? You think I exaggerate? Let’s start with breakfast. One cannot mention the word in my family without two feared words coming to mind—egg drink. That was the concoction made daily by my mother for which we could have had her hauled away for abuse. It was made with a raw egg base, into which would be poured all sorts of healthy powders —dolomite, carob, calcium, or frankly anything that had received a favorable write-up in Prevention magazine. This was then mixed together in a blender with water, or milk if the latter was starting to go bad. It produced a brown-looking drink, with a brackish head of foam. It chilled the soul to look at it, and scarred the soul to drink it.

My mother always was looking to improve it. In fact, our liberation from egg drinks came the day she decided to add the egg shells along with the eggs, in order to increase the calcium content. Why not? It would all go through the blender. The usual decibel level at the breakfast table went off the charts, and my mother finally agreed to taste her own drink to see what all the fuss was about. She immediately pronounced it undrinkable and asked in complete and maddening sincerity why we had never said something about it.

The idea of a breakfast drink itself wasn't bad. We had to have something to wash down the vitamins we consumed. We had over a hundred a day. My personal record was swallowing seventeen at one time, but my sister topped me, emptying a Dixie cup nearly full of pills into her mouth, which she downed with an orange juice chaser.

I should mention before we move to lunch that this all happened in the 1960s, before health foods had really hit the big time. My mother was a pioneer and was probably one of the first to read Rachel Carson's great book *Silent Spring* about the overuse of chemicals. She approached diet with a religious fervor, and she didn't give a hoot what others might think.

Which brings us to lunch. That was the worst meal of the day because, as a teenager, I did care what others thought of me. How lucky the kids were who were allowed to purchase their lunches at school and blend in with everyone else! It was a little awkward to bring a lunch, but you could get away with it if it was cool stuff, wrapped in some simple aluminum foil or something. You were lost at sea, though, if you showed up as I did with a large brown bag packed with one freakish looking thing after another.

Bread should be flexible. Most is. Well, my mom made her own dark brown bread, sometimes with virtually no flour, and it did not bend. If you got it the first day or two after it was made, it crumbled into a million little pieces when you bit it. It was like a building collapsing. The sandwich infrastructure would crumble into your hands, followed by the one to two pounds of meat or other ingredients that had temporarily been placed in between the slices.

After the second day, I would remember wistfully when mere teeth could put a dent in the bread. It would become so hard that you could only hope to take a bite by putting your full weight and strength into the effort. Generally this didn't work. When it did, the breakthrough would be so violent that the sandwich contents would end up exploding into the air. This was just the sort of display

a teenage boy did not want to make of himself during the part of the day when others were acting cool and pursuing their hormonal instincts free of such embarrassment.

Dinner was special. It was a time when the family assembled together almost without fail. My father would come home for family dinner, even though he would have to work after we went to bed. We were expected not to be off with friends. Our dinners frequently were blessed with wonderful food as well. My mother was a great cook when she allowed herself to be, and she cooked meats and made salads with such skill that it would make your mouth water. But there were also those dark days of chicken liver and broccoli. No waste was tolerated, so we sat at table until done. In rare cases, when I was still at the table well after bedtime, my mother would feel sorry for me and permit me to go to bed, provided I promised to finish what was left for breakfast. It sounds worse than it was; given the alternative to eating your leftover dinner was an egg drink, this wasn't all bad.

I wasn't brave enough to enjoy being different. Teenagers like to fit in, not explain why they seem weird. I had no choice. My diet forced me to use humor and creativity to try to come up with reasons why I wasn't as strange as I seemed on the surface. It didn't matter that I didn't succeed. It was the practice that taught me to think fast, think differently, and to use humor as a defense. I am not suggesting that you do this to your own kids, but it's something to think about.

Food was merely a vehicle used by my mother to keep us glued tightly together. While I resented its use as a wall to keep others out, I now recognize the magic of using something, anything, to keep tight bonds within. In addition to strange food, my mother dished out love and interest in us in portions so large that they would fit comfortably into a Dickens novel. There was a total commitment to our well-being that seemed so natural, but was in fact exceptional. Even now, I am not surprised when my mother, who suffers more than I from the ravages of age and health, looks at me with loving eyes and tells me she would give anything if she could have my Parkinson's disease afflict her rather than me.

I sometimes sit beside her when I visit and make her laugh and smile. I can get away with a lot now, because her body has betrayed her, despite all that health food, and she cannot smack me. Despite her health problems and her oft-expressed desire to not continue living in her present condition, she refuses to eat anything but health foods. She is willing to travel thirty minutes to a pizza parlor solely because it uses whole wheat crusts, passing along the way about three or four hundred pizza places that make pizza far better.

When I look back on these experiences with the benefits of age, I realize the importance of her actions had little to do with food. Instead, what I will remember is a love so strong that it caused her to torture us with what she thought was best.

Postscript: This once vital and vibrant woman died November 10, 2004, after a long convalescence following a stroke. I have a marvelous mental image of her in Heaven, sitting and watching her children and grandchildren playing on Earth below. She is wearing her favorite forty-year-old bathrobe, covering a shirt I wore to summer camp as a teenager. She has a candy bar in her hand, and there are more candy wrappers on the floor. She is saying to God between mouthfuls, “Why didn’t you let me know that sugar was Your true gift to mankind? Boy, this is good. Gabriel, can you pass that box of M&Ms?”

Don’t worry about a thing. Pop will do fine. This week we’re showing him pictures of pots and pans and explaining when they were invented and what they’re used for. He’s shown some interest in the cast iron skillet and said with some basic re-design work, nothing fancy, it could be turned into a very useful tool for housing nuclear devices. As for food, you don’t need to worry: each day we visit a different fast food establishment. Burger King is the current front runner because Pop liked their fries better than Wendy’s, but this is a crazy world where anything can happen.

Goodbye. I will cherish my memories of you as long as I live.