

# FINDING FREEDOM

A Cook's Story  
Remaking a Life from Scratch

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## BACON AND ICE CREAM

It was ten past three in the afternoon, the time of day I looked forward to the most. This was the hour each afternoon that offered a bit of much-needed semipeacefulness in the kitchen at my father's diner. It was the time of day when, for a split second, I could finally take a break. Over the past four hours I had flipped at least two dozen burgers, fried an equal number of clam baskets, plated a dozen meatloaf specials, and made a few BLTs, ham Italians, and egg salad sandwiches in between.

After the frenetic lunch rush ended, the grill was finally empty, the Fryolators idled hot and peaceful, and the ticket bar sat quiet and vacant of orders. Here it was, my chance to sit down, grab a quick bite, or take my first pee in five hours. But it was also the only moment quiet enough in the kitchen to get ahead with prep for home fries and bacon for tomorrow morning's crushing breakfast service. The ten-pound bag of pork on the counter was glaring at me impatiently. I pulled a fistful of the fatty strips from the huge bag and laid them one by one into four long rows on the giant griddle that sat center stage on the old diner line. I fried each length until it was just barely brown and stacked it between layers of brown paper towels to absorb the warm fat, then laid out four more rows again, then again, and again, and again. Every day it felt like an endless task, the sputtering grease pelting my wrists with tiny burns. I couldn't help cringing, even though I was well used to it by now. And then there was the smell of rendered pork fat that came with it. It seemed to permeate every strand of hair,

every thread of clothing, every pore: I flat-out reeked of bacon. God, I couldn't wait for a long hot shower, but that was easily seven hours away. I had more pork to fry and home fries to dice, and then a full fucking dinner service ahead of me.

After the last batch was tucked between paper towels, I twisted each of the four knobs on the griddle to the right and killed the ignition to the pilot lights below. I grabbed the grill scraper and, using it like a squeegee, began to move the puddles of hot grease down the perimeter of the grill, guiding the smoking liquid to the stainless-steel trap in the lower left corner below. Finally a clean grill, a still-empty ticket board, and a moment to sit. *Yes!* I walked over to the soft-serve ice cream machine that was tucked in the front of the kitchen and pulled on the lever, letting the soft and creamy vanilla squiggles twist their way into the sugared wafer cone in my hand. It took a lot of practice to twist a good-looking cone, but I was a pro by now, after all these years. And then you needed to know the difference between a small, a medium, and a large. It was important; it mattered. Believe me, I got bitched at more than once by my dad for making cones "too big."

"Why don't you just give the fucking place away?!" he'd yell. "How many times do I have to tell you?! Three twists around for a small, four for a medium, and five for a large. What do you want me to do?! Work for nothing?! One, two, three! That's three twists for a small! Four for a medium, and five for a large! *Get it?!*" His anger seemed so wild, so unnecessary, but not out of character. His lack of patience with me had become old news.

Meanwhile, my younger sister, Nina, had been dishing out parfaits and banana boats to her stoned friends through the dairy-bar window every day after school and ruining cases of whipped-cream canisters by doing whippets, yielding him net nothing. She was younger, so maybe he went easier. Or maybe he was worn out by his disappointment in me.

Finally I took a perch out back of the restaurant for my afternoon pause. Sitting on an overturned milk crate, I propped my feet on an empty plastic bread rack and lapped up the cold, delicious, and

perfect small one-two-three vanilla cone. I was far enough away from the kitchen to catch a breath, but close enough, still in earshot, to hear the ding of the call bell on the cook's counter should an order come in from the dining room.

I remember the first day I ever set foot into the diner. I was just five. En route to kindergarten one morning, my mom veered our old Volvo off our normal path to school. We bounced over a few potholes in the wide dirt parking lot before coming to a stop in front of the little diner we had passed many times before, perched on top of Knox Ridge. RIDGETOP RESTAURANT read the prominent sign on the front gable. BEST MEALS FOR MILES in dull brown and yellow paint.

“What are we doing *here*?” I asked my mother from the backseat, puzzled by the unexpected stop.

“We’re going to visit Dad before school. This is where he works now. This is our restaurant. We bought it!” It was genuine excitement. My sister and I were speechless for a split second. Our eyes widened, and we squealed with delight. “What? We own a restaurant?!” It was as though we both simultaneously pictured all the free burgers, fries, milkshakes, and soft-serve ice cream our bellies could hold. We jumped out of the car and raced for the front door, trying to fling it open in our joy, but the big plate-glass door was heavier than expected, and it opened far more slowly than the speed of our pounding heartbeats. A string of bells tied to the handle clanged gently as we pulled it open with all our might, announcing to everyone that we had arrived. Inside we paused in amazement, taking in *our* new surroundings: before us was a long row of faux-wooden booths. The tabletops were adorned with paper place mats and simple tableware, red plastic ketchup bottles, pink packets of sugar, and stacks of assorted tiny jam cups. The smells of fried onions and bacon filled our nostrils. To our right was a tall breakfast counter, lined with wooden stools and topped by glass containers stuffed full of baked goods. A few patrons sat at the counter, quietly sipping their

coffee from shiny brown mugs and sucking on cigarettes. They noticed us for only a split second before going back to their plates of hash and eggs. I remember marveling at the thin plumes of smoke wafting from their lips and ashtrays, up toward the asbestos drop ceiling yellowed with nicotine stains, the pattern mimicking the shape of the breakfast counter below, representing years of loyal regular patrons.

We were greeted by a kind waitress wearing stonewashed jeans, a soft purple T-shirt, white leather high-top sneakers, and a frilly black apron. She had thick curly brown hair that stood tall and firm (Aqua Net, to be sure), her eyelashes were caked with blue mascara, and she had a Bic pen tucked behind her ear, her hairspray-drenched locks helping to keep it firmly in place.

“Hi there. I’m Viola. You must be Jeff’s girls,” she said in a bubbly voice as she bounded toward us. But before we could even respond with a nod, our attention was diverted by the familiar voice of our grandmother from behind the breakfast counter. There she was, her soft and sweet face coming into view through the haze of smoke.

“Girls!” she exclaimed with a chuckle as she motioned for us to join her behind the counter. We ran to her, eyes still wide, our backpacks swinging behind us. We each received big hugs and a warm kiss on the head.

“Let’s get you two a doughnut and a glass of milk,” she said as she whisked us away into the back. We pushed through the swinging wood door into the kitchen, and there he was—our dad. He was standing in front of a giant stainless griddle, a white apron around his waist, a large spatula in his hand, effortlessly flipping oversize golden pancakes high in the air, all the while whistling happy tunes through his teeth. Each cake he flipped made a *hiss!* and *splat!* as its uncooked side hit the hot grill. I liked it. He glanced over at my sister and me, and we were staring at him in honest amazement, our jaws slightly agape. We were mesmerized by the sight of this man, our father—there was something about him we didn’t quite recognize. His smile was so big that his blue eyes were squinted small enough so you almost couldn’t tell what color they

were. His dark blond sideburns stretched with his face, and his mustache twitched as he bared his big white smile, still whistling through his teeth. In this very moment his immense joy was overwhelming and obvious. It was rare, and strange, to see him like this—happy, whole. Look at me! Loving life! he said, without actually saying a word. It warmed me inside. “I didn’t know Dad knew how to cook,” Nina said without blinking, without moving or taking her eyes off him, her eyes large like a little fawn’s.

Farther down the vast line I could see my grandfather, fiddling away with something in a large Fryolator. His black-rimmed reading glasses were smudged with grease and had slid down to the very tip of his nose, where they miraculously managed to stop and stay. He was whistling loudly too, with joy. His tune would mingle with my father’s from the grill to the fryer, and back and forth again. From the hot oil we watched him pull one, two, three—six—piping-hot doughnuts and place them on a parchment-lined plate that my grandmother was patiently holding beside him. He turned in our direction, his white apron splattered with egg and batter, adjusted his glasses, and blew Nina and me a kiss, before dropping more raw dough into the hot fryer and resuming his joyful tune.

Gram stood before us now with the plate of freshly fried doughnuts. We each grabbed one and bit in. Steam rose from our mouths. The warmth, the crunch on the outside that yielded to the softness inside, the delicate hints of nutmeg and vanilla, and the subtle sugary sweetness. It was the best thing I had ever tasted in my entire life. We cooled our mouths with swigs of fresh cold milk in between. We were all so happy in this moment. It was poetic and romantic. What *is* this magical place?! I thought as I took my second bite.

“*This is our* restaurant,” my dad said out loud, glowing. And I was in love.

I was twelve years old when my dad first pulled me onto the line. I remember the Sunday morning clearly. I woke early, filled with butterflies

and excitement that I was going to work at the diner for the very first time. I jumped into the passenger seat of my mom's car and honked the horn impatiently.

"Come on, Mom!" I yelled from the side window.

"All right, all right!" she yelled back as she made her way through the front door. She got into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. "I can't wait for you to get a driver's license," she said, tired and slightly annoyed.

"Mom, I'm twelve. I'm saving for a bike." I rolled my eyes.

I had stepped in all those years ago to help my dad out at the diner, mostly because I needed the cash to buy that bike, then eventually to fill the tank of my Volkswagen Rabbit, or to buy Janet Jackson cassettes. I worked my way up the rungs of the line and learned every basic kitchen skill a cook would need to know: How to cook a burger a nice pink medium-rare. How to cook eggs—hard, sunny, over easy, scrambled, poached, and boiled. How to roast a chicken and extract every bit of meat from the carcass (we always saved and dried the wishbones—for wishes, of course, which Nina and I would duel over). How to perfectly bread and fry clams, scallops, shrimp, and fish. How to balance the ratios of mayo, vinegar, salt, and butter. I learned about timing and multitasking—minding the grill with a half-dozen burgers (in an array of different cooked temperatures) or composing chicken and egg salad sandwiches while warming stews in the microwave and monitoring the fry basket, just to name a few of the varied and simultaneous tasks I was charged with. Left alone in the kitchen without my dad to answer my many questions, I was learning how to use my intuition, to rely on it. To taste and test and figure out what seemed just right. All those years of experimenting—out of necessity—had started shaping me as a cook.

Now, nine years later, I was holding my own on the line, though not without its own sacrifices, evidenced by my quick ice cream break

before returning to another twelve-plus-hour-long shift. The cone was melting fast in the summer heat. I couldn't keep up with the vanilla custard dripping down my hand and onto my very pregnant belly. I was twenty-one years old; single, nine months pregnant, and fighting through a sixteen-hour workday. I was tired, uncomfortable, and particularly angry with my father, who had left me in charge of *his* diner while he was off manning a blooming-onion booth at a nearby county fair for Labor Day weekend. There was too much money he'd miss out on by not going—every year he'd sell through hundreds of pounds of fried onions and come home with garbage bags filled with cash—but to me it still made no sense. “What if I go into labor?” I asked him. “I don't care,” he had told me with the most sincere lack of concern over the phone earlier that day. “Lock the fucking door if it comes down to it.” My pregnancy was not only a major inconvenience to him, since I would need time off from work at the diner to have my baby, but a genuine embarrassment. “Do you see the problem I've got on my hands here?” he snapped at the Sysco salesman one afternoon, pointing squarely at me and my belly as I worked in the corner salad station. The disdain was no different from what he once showed toward the female kittens on our farm. They were useless creatures—it was just a matter of time before they got knocked up, forsaking their mousing duties and creating more mouths to feed.

I wanted to lock the door, go home, take a bath and a nap. But I didn't. I finished my cone, washed up, and went back to the kitchen. There was more work to be done for the following day, and with the baby due any moment, it was best to get ahead on prep. There were home fries to be made. And bacon.



## TAPIOCA AND KITTENS

Freedom, Maine, population 719, was the town you passed through when you were going somewhere bigger. A little town of nothing, a rural mix of farmland and thick woods. It didn't offer a lot—a church, a small general store with a couple of gas pumps, a sleepy post office that was open for only a few hours a day. At the center of town was an old shingled mill, sitting vacant and crumbling, overlooking the Sandy Stream. This mill was long ago the backbone for the town, harvesting power from the stream to grind grains like flour and corn. Eventually it would transform into a saw- and wood-turning mill, putting out lumber and shingles and handles for shovels and screwdrivers. The work of the mill came to a quiet halt in the sixties. It sat for the years that followed, the water rushing past it and flowing over the falls, forgetting it. It slowly faded and became the heap of crumbling wood and granite that I knew it to be in my childhood.

My sister and I would parade past the old mill every Fourth of July in our retired dance recital costumes from the year before, and attend Sunday school just up the hill at the Congregational church each week. We ice-fished each winter and skated along the clear ice of Freedom Pond, which fed into the Sandy Stream, running past the mill and washing bits of it away. The sad and neglected structure listed dangerously to one side, its rusted metal roof warped from the many years it had been forgotten. It appeared as if it could collapse with a

single gust of wind. The only souls foolish enough to explore its rotting interior were a few of the local teenage boys who would mark the walls with their graffiti and piss, or throw rocks through the few panes of glass that remained in the dark holes that used to house windows. To me the building represented everything I thought Freedom was: If you stay here, you will rot. Freedom didn't lend a lot of promise. We were raised with unspoken reminders: If you wanted to be something or do something with your life, then you had to go somewhere else; you couldn't live out dreams in Freedom. You couldn't be successful in Waldo County; there was no good life to be found in Freedom. The mill whispered a ghostly reminder of what would happen if you stayed—You'll just end up like me, a crumbling junkyard that nobody cares about. If you were born in Freedom, you would most likely die in Freedom, and whatever you did in between wouldn't matter all that much.

The old shingled farmhouse we lived in sat at the end of a pothole-ridden dirt road, just three miles away from the mill at the center of our town. With twenty-six acres of farmland and woods to play in, Nina and I spent countless summer days from breakfast until dinner running wild through the seemingly endless pastures and wilderness. We both lived barefoot in the white cotton tank tops that came in packages of three—with ribbon straps and bows on the sternum—and faded jean shorts that my mom bought for us at JCPenney in nearby Waterville. On bright July afternoons we'd heist fresh cucumbers from our dad's garden and eat them then and there, cool, prickly and crunchy off the vine, while we tended to our daily chore of picking potato bugs off the plants one by one and drowning them in a Ball jar of gasoline. We made mud dams in the streams surrounding our house with the farm boys from next door and built elaborate stick forts in the sumac bushes. We climbed trees and collected abandoned bird's nests, caught frogs and tadpoles in the pond, which we stored in clear jars so we could watch them grow before releasing them carefully back into

our farm pond to become the strong and wild full-grown frogs they were supposed to be. We sang songs from *The Little Mermaid* at the top of our lungs in the middle of the field as if we were the only humans on the entire planet, and we sold fresh eggs and herbs by the roadside to the maybe six cars that passed the house each day. On rainy days we'd climb around the hayloft, building hay-bale forts, tormenting our cats with dress-up, or cleaning out our rabbit hutch, if Mom made us. It was simple, it was honest, it was dirty, and it was real. It was glorious.

Over the years we had everything from ponies and horses to geese and chickens, llamas, bunnies, and dogs—and barn cats, so many barn cats. It started with one cat whose outside duty was to keep the mice at bay. “Cats *not* rats” was the household motto. The single cat fast became pregnant, and there you have it: The cats started multiplying like, well, rabbits. On many occasions we found a clutch or two of surprise newborn kittens nestled in the warm hay at the back of the hayloft. We followed the sounds of tiny meows, sometimes for hours, until we joyfully uncovered the fluffy cluster of baby cats, their eyes like little slits, still tightly closed. It was like the most exciting Easter egg hunt you could imagine—black ones, buff ones, gray calico ones. Cute, sweet, fluffy balls of cunning fur. Our mom was kind and fair and would let us keep them long enough until their eyes popped open and they were on kitten chow, which meant Nina and I were already deeply emotionally attached to them all and past the point of giving them up easily. We made a FREE KITTENS sign out of cardboard and Magic Marker, which we hung reluctantly on our mailbox each time we had a litter. We'd give them names like Pumpkin, Panda, and Ritz and hope that our parents would let us keep our favorites out of each litter. We would beg and plead and show them off, shrieking and bragging.

“Mom! Look at this one. She is just the cutest! Have you ever seen a more beautiful kitten?”

“But, Dad! This one is smart. Look! He comes on command and knows his name. He's a keeper for sure.”

The odds of keeping them were slim, but we knew the best chance was to fight to keep the boys. Farm cats didn't get fixed. It was expensive, and we were told they weren't real pets. They were working animals with a job—to kill rodents. The boys were coveted because they didn't get pregnant; the girls were a liability, a major inconvenience. My dad made his opinion on this fact of farm life painfully clear on so many occasions, not a far cry from the way he felt about his own children.

I had spoiled his plans, born a girl, a liability, a major inconvenience. Caught off-guard, he hadn't wrapped his mind around having a girl or a name to go with her. I was hastily named after a couple of Walton girls: "Goodnight, Erin Elizabeth." My father was the only son, flanked by two sisters, and his duty to make boys to carry on the family name held a heavy weight in his heart. His own father had put a great pressure on him to keep the family name alive. Instead he produced two soft blond girls who played with kittens. My mother told me about the look on my father's and grandfather's faces when it was announced that my mother had delivered a healthy baby girl. It was one of letdown and disappointment, and the inebriation that quickly followed for both of them was more out of sorrow than celebration, while she hemorrhaged alone in her hospital bed. It seemed to me the disappointment was a weight that my father would carry for years in his heart, most evident when Nina or I acted up. He would tell us that we were lucky to be girls because "If you were born boys, I would beat you with my bare hands right now." His words seemed to hurt just the same.

Yes, we were soft blond girls who played with kittens. And the kittens, in all their sweet and soft glory, taught my sister and me a lot. They taught us about fragility and how to care for something small and helpless. They taught us how to love and laugh. They taught us how to cry and mourn loss, each time we had to give them up, or even worse, if they died.

When I was ten, I watched my father place my favorite cat, Ritz,

who had been hit by a car on our quiet dirt road, in a pillowcase and walk toward the barn to drown him in a five-gallon pickle bucket full of water. The cat was doomed, and there was no saving him, but it was still inconceivable for me to understand finishing the poor thing off as mercy. Dad had learned about this way of living, or dying, from the dairy farmer next door. Mr. Connor couldn't keep up with all the barn cats and would frequently "keep things even on the farm." He would fill a burlap grain sack with a fresh litter of female kittens and dip the entire clutch in a trough full of water, drowning them while the mother cat circled, mewling with wild anxiety, knowing her babies were inside the sack. My father, taking a cue from Mr. Connor, was using the same technique on *my* cat. I couldn't watch, couldn't stand by, and couldn't understand the reasoning. I couldn't stop it either. I begged and pleaded, and realizing it would do no good, I ran.

I ran, sobbing, into the back field and hid among the tall strands of goldenrod, hoping that if I ran away, the trouble would too. I threw my body into the tall grass and flailed as if I were making a snow angel. I just wanted to move my body and release these wild emotions that I was feeling for the first time. The energy in the air had shifted. It felt gray and depressing even though it was summer and the sun was shining. I stared up into the sky, the smell of hay all around me in the field, like the day I had found Ritz in the hayloft, huddled in the nest of fur with his siblings. I understood why Dad had to do what he was doing—the poor cat was a mangled mess and in severe pain—but I didn't understand how it was fair. Why did Ritz have to get hit by a car in the first place? If there *was* a God, why was he taking his shit out on my little helpless cat? What kind of a God would do such a thing? This was bullshit. God was a kitten killer. What an asshole!

This was gnawing at me hard the next day during Sunday school at the Freedom Congregational. I sat through all of the hymns, singing alternate lyrics under my breath and sneaking in a few words for God, if he was even listening. As I looked around at everyone else sitting in the pews, singing along to all the lies that seemed so obvious

to me—“to give him the glory, great things He hath done”? I *couldn't* “Rise and shine and give God [my] glory”! I couldn't hold in my anger anymore. I lost it. I started preaching loudly that “God is *not* good!” He was a heartless man who took cute, soft, kind, sweet things from this world! My grand finale was lifting up my Sunday dress in protest, flashing my pale pink tights and underwear to the congregation. Granted, I was ten and therefore hadn't thought out the protest clearly, so I exited quickly to avoid waiting around for the reaction.

After the service my mother arrived to retrieve my sister and me. The story of my tantrum was recounted by my Sunday school teacher while I hid in the grass at the edge of the parking lot, plucking forget-me-nots. Nina was in trouble, too, for standing over the big forced-hot-air vent and letting her dress fly up and wild, flashing her undies for all of the congregation to see. We both had nicks on our behavior sheet from last week for breaking into arguments more than once. We couldn't seem to resist fighting each other, even under God's eye. I handed a fistful of little blue blossoms to my mother in some attempt to soften the blow that was about to come my way. Her cheeks were flushed with color; she pursed her already thin lips and glared at me for a moment in deep disapproval, which was sobering because it was so rare that she expressed anger. She didn't have to say a word. I knew she was pissed, and most likely embarrassed. She motioned for me with her eyes to “get in the damn car.” Nina and I got kicked out of Sunday school that day, for protesting against God, for bickering with each other, and for flashing our underwear for all to see. We were asked not to return until we had pulled it together. The three-mile ride home was quiet, and it was clear Mom was not pleased with us. But she also never made us go back to Sunday school again. Maybe it was because she was just too embarrassed that we had been such jerks. Or maybe it was because she also believed the whole God thing was a sham. She never prayed or sat through a sermon or spoke of the guy up above, but for some reason she wanted my sister and me to give it a whirl and see what stuck. Frankly, I think she was just using Jesus as an excuse to

celebrate holidays, and used the special occasions to make a nice meal and memory to go along with it.

I never stopped cursing God for the death of animals on our little farm, though it also brought unexpected solace. It gave me rare glimpses into my father's heart, and showed me that he actually had one. The first tears I ever saw him shed had streamed from his eyes the day he had to put Ritz in that pickle tub. Tears streamed the day he dug the shallow grave in the back woods for our old Doberman after he collapsed playing fetch with my sister and me at our nearby swimming hole. He lay on the couch in grief for two days following the death of that dog. I remember thinking it could be possible he loved that dog more than he ever loved either of his own girls. He wept hard one late September afternoon when the local vet came to put our old pony down before winter. I could hear his sobs echoing in the distance as he walked off into the back pasture to try to conceal his sadness from us. I hid at the back end of the barn, peering from around the corner of the weathered shingled wall, watching his figure in the distance, witnessing his pain as he yelped, his anger as he shook his fists up toward the sky, at God, I imagined. His grief made my heart break for him, and it scared me at the same time because he seemed so fragile, emotional, and vulnerable. These were not the characteristics I had ever associated with this bear of a man. This was one of the rare, emotional moments that he hid, because he was raised to believe that men don't show emotions, and that emotion was a sign of weakness.

My understanding of my dad was gathered in the brief moments I saw of him between his comings and goings from the restaurant. The little diner he had bought and had been running for the past few years had been consuming him. Six days a week he'd rise at 5:00 A.M., well before us, and head up the hill to the restaurant to get the grill fired up and the coffee made in time for the first customers at 6:00. He'd arrive back home just before 10:00 P.M. after cleanup from the dinner

shift, well after our bedtime, with just enough time to get some rest before doing it all over again. This little restaurant that once appeared to be this bit of excitement and great joy was no longer that place. It was consuming him alive with stress, burning up his heart and soul. His smiles and whistles while working had turned into curses and cans of beer. How could this place that I had witnessed giving him so much joy for life be the same place that was now killing all the joy inside him?

It was becoming clearer that he was never going to be the soft kind of dad that I secretly wished for on more than one occasion. He would never be the dad who would lift you up high into the air, kiss you on the cheek, give you a big squeeze, and tell you that he loved you with all his heart. Instead he was unpredictable and explosive. You just never knew when he was going to blow. When he'd get pissed, his eyes would get big and his face red, his blond hair wild and wispy, veins popping at his neck, F-bombs frothing from his mouth. Sometimes he seemed happier after putting down a six-pack of Budweiser, or maybe three or four Absolut's with tonic and limes, but sometimes they just seemed to make him angrier. He didn't offer hugs, kind words, or tokens of affection. The closest he came was twice a year, in the simple form of a plain white envelope with a crisp fifty-dollar bill, one for my birthday and one on Christmas.

The evening of my Sunday school stunt, our family sat around our kitchen table eating my dad's meatloaf in silence. Sorrowful silence for me and my sister, still processing the fresh death of a beloved kitten; passive silence for my mother, whom I believed was still stewing over our behavior that afternoon, or perhaps it was over the six-pack of beer she watched my father put down while making dinner. I knew killing the cat hadn't been easy for my dad, and I imagined the beer was to drown his own sorrow. The air softened a bit with each bite, the familiar taste of the tender glazed meat mixed with a forkful of airy,



perfectly salted mashed potatoes. By the meal's end, the warmth of a home-cooked dinner had turned the cold silence into mild content. For dessert my mother had made tapioca, and the soft and creamy vanilla pearls were a salve we all happily gobbled up, curing whatever was momentarily ailing us all. Nobody could fix the fact that my cat was dead or that God was an insensitive meanie, but these were the grievances of a ten-year-old. I didn't know then about what greater injustices lay ahead, or that the faith I'd placed in my family would begin to erode too. But for now all it took was meatloaf and tapioca to soothe me.