

# (Un)Happy Meals

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**Whenever** we heard the word *layoff*, my siblings and I thought of the food we'd soon be eating: watered-down beef stews and jar upon jar of canned beans and tomatoes that had been put up at the end of the previous summer. Meals during a layoff or a strike were always an inferior imitation of the ones we'd been raised on, as if someone had replaced our mother's cooking with a cheap, generic version, all bland vegetables and thin broth.

Our mother was a fabulous farm cook, able to mix, roll,

and cut biscuits as easily as blinking. Her mashed potatoes made us feel so good we'd swear there was some narcotic in them, and her dumplings were so light and perfectly salty that we'd ask for them on our birthdays. Once, some kids from Indianapolis came to our farm and went home with a crock of our mother's chicken and dumplings. Their mother wrote to thank us and said, "The kids keep talking about your food! They won't eat anything now without mentioning the meals you made them." Our mother read the letter out loud to us,

then tucked it into her brassiere and said, “See, your mother’s famous in the city for her cooking.”

But all that changed during the layoff of 1980. Because of the energy crisis, fuel costs were high, and new construction was bottoming out. Management at the Celotex ceiling-tile factory laid off workers with the lowest seniority. The cutoff was thirteen years of service; our father had worked there ten years. No one knew how long the layoff would last, and our mother went back to work to help make ends meet.

**When I got** off the school bus in front of our house with my four siblings — Derrick, Darren, Dina, and Dana — I spotted our mother standing proudly on the front porch, dressed in her new work outfit. The McDonald’s shirt was short sleeved and made of rough polyester. We’d not eaten at many fast-food restaurants, and seeing our mother in her uniform made me feel as if we’d somehow been promoted from farm family to suburbanites. The five of us stood on a bald patch of ground as she modeled the outfit for us on the front porch. The circles under her eyes were so dark it seemed she’d drawn them on with makeup. It was early spring and still fairly cold, and I could see goose bumps on her fleshy arms. A gust blew off my hand-me-down cap.

“Well,” she said, twirling around, “what do you think? How does your mother look?” She smiled, exposing her new dentures. Our mother had grown up poor in Vigo County, Indiana, near the coal mines, where dental care was scarce. By the time she was thirty-eight, gum disease had taken nearly all her teeth.

“It’s pretty,” said Dana.

Mom stopped twirling. “Uh-oh, your mother got kind of dizzy, kids.” She had on mascara to accent her large brown eyes, and her curly hair was pulled back in a bun. She seemed excited about going back to work. Our father had taken on spare jobs auctioneering and hauling livestock to make up for the loss of his check.

“There’s stew in the refrigerator,” our mother said as she walked down the steps. We started to complain. “No, none of that. Your mother added some more potatoes to it. It’s good.” She gave each of us a kiss and said to Derrick, who was the oldest at sixteen, “Don’t let them drink too much milk. Let’s make it last.”

We all trailed Derrick inside. I went to the long window in the living room and watched our mother use a lint brush to tidy up her uniform before she climbed into the rusty station wagon. Dad would be home late after running a load of pigs from Wabash to Crawfordsville.

Dina and Dana set the table while Darren and I heated up the stew. Derrick was outside, feeding the hogs and piling bales of straw against the walls of the barn. (Dad had left him a note: “News says ice tonight. Put bales up.”) I looked out the window for Derrick, but it had already started sleeting, and melting ice trickled down the glass, obscuring my view. When Derrick came back inside, he was soaking wet. He stripped down in the pantry and darted through the kitchen in his white underwear while Darren threw yellow corncob

holders at him like darts. We all snickered.

At the dinner table Darren ladled stew into our bowls, and the steam rose into our faces. I was sad to see only two potatoes in my bowl. We slurped the broth hungrily until Derrick told us to slow down.

“This stuff isn’t any good,” our little sister Dana said, sopping up her stew with a slice of white bread.

“It’s fine,” Derrick said. “Just eat and be quiet.” Sleet pinged off the windows. He seemed ashamed. “Here,” he said to me. “Take some of my potatoes. I’m getting full.”

I didn’t protest.

After dinner we did our homework and watched an episode of *Alice*, a sitcom about waitresses who work in a diner. Alice set a slice of meringue pie down in front of a customer, and my mouth watered.

“Wish we had some of that,” said Dana, who didn’t have any homework but was writing out the names of the primary colors on lined paper.

We decided to make our own dessert: cinnamon toast. In the kitchen we set up an assembly line and quickly toasted, buttered, and applied sugar and cinnamon to five slices of bread. We’d wanted two each, but Derrick had told us to be frugal. We gobbled our toast down, grains of sugar falling onto the kitchen table. Darren brushed the granules into his palm and popped them into his mouth. Dina ate only half of hers, then offered the rest up for bid. Darren bought it for the price of doing her porch sweeping for one day. Tiny ice pellets pelted the roof and sides of the house.

“Sounds like someone’s throwing sugar out there,” said Dana.

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