

Something is missing

It's Thanksgiving 2010 and I'm in a state of panic. I'm supposed to make green beans almondine for the family dinner but, staring at the green beans on the kitchen counter, I'm certain I didn't buy enough.

Did I have time to brave the store? How many green beans could people eat anyway? Had I ruined our meal before it even started?

Upset, I called my mother and rattled off my worries as I tried to break down the calculus of the recipe applied to a dozen people.

Finally, as I paused for a breath, she interjected.

"It'll be fine," she said. "And if there's not enough, after dinner go out in the front yard and check to make sure the Earth is still properly rotating on its axis."

In other words, calm down and have a little perspective. In the moment, I laughed.

Now, a decade later I'm thinking of my mom's words as I stare at the ingredients I've assembled. I'm trying to recreate a vegetarian version of a dish she used to make. Known in our family as "Betty's Meatballs," they were a favorite. I haven't eaten meat in more than 20 years, but sometimes I still crave them.

Something is missing, though. Fresh garlic? More onion? Freshly chopped herbs? I'm certain I've forgotten something essential, ruining the meatballs before I've even started.

I long to call my mother for advice but can't. She was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer in mid-February. Ten weeks later she was gone.

After her death, as my family cleaned out her house, it was my brother who whisked away her cookbooks and a beat-up recipe tin. Of her three kids, he's the one who likes to cook the most. Still, at times, the loss of the recipes feels like an added, fierce strike of grief.

Over the months, my mind keeps returning to the idea of Betty's Meatballs. Maybe, I could make a meatless version. Maybe I could recreate that past taste of home.

A few weeks ago, I texted my brother for the recipe.

His message back: Ground beef, tomato soup and rice.

I stared at the phone, frustrated. That's it? Three ingredients? What about measurements or cooking times? Surely, there had to be more to them than this.

Then again, my mother wasn't a fancy cook in the slightest. I'm not even sure she really liked to be in the kitchen. As single parent she relied heavily on convenience foods that were popular. TV dinners—the kind with little advent-sized slots for each portion—and Hamburger Helper were staples in our house, along with canned peas and sloppy Joe mix, Rice-a-Roni and mashed potatoes from a box.

Indeed, my mother was never really one for domesticity. Cooking, like dusting and vacuuming and scrubbing floors, likely seemed futile. This endless loop of slicing and chopping, sauteing and baking—when would it ever end?

Or perhaps I'm projecting my own complicated relationship with cooking onto her memory. I like to cook, but I think I share my mother's impatience for it. There's always so much to do but so little time. Even so, I wanted Betty's Meatballs again. But how?

What I remembered, specifically, was the sum of their parts: the crunch of the rice that studded the meat and the thick and hearty tomato broth.

How difficult could they be? I interrogated the internet. As it turns out, the recipe isn't unique. More commonly, they're known as "porcupine meatballs" and variations of the recipe abound.

Now, though, standing in my kitchen, I feel that same slight sense of panic that had overcome me a decade ago. There are so many ways to make them. Garlic powder or freshly minced bulbs? Fresh herbs or just a dash of pepper? Canned soup or a home-made sauce of long-simmering diced tomatoes?

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The author and her mother, Barbara Gallaway, circa December 1975.
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If anything, my mom's cooking style was unfussy so I decide to keep it simple.

I chop an onion, combine it with a quarter-teaspoon of garlic powder and a package of defrosted Beyond meat, the popular meat alternative.

The mixture makes approximately two dozen meatballs, which I then sear in olive oil. Next, I mix a can of Campbell's condensed tomato soup with a cup of water and a dash of balsamic vinegar, the latter a vegan stand-in for the Worcestershire sauce in most of the recipes.

I arrange it all in a casserole dish, remembering with a flash of nostalgia, the yellow and white flowered baking pan my mother used. I wish I had it now.

An hour later the meatballs are done and a richly fragrant aroma of onions, garlic and tomato fills my kitchen.

The result is better than I expected, if not exact. The crunch of the rice is just like I remembered even as the tomato sauce seems to lack something. A mystery spice she added? More onion? I can't decide.

Still, they taste like home. Imperfect, but satisfying.

My mother is gone, yet the Earth still properly rotates on its axis. Somehow. □

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