

Holy Basil, Center Me



Heather M. Surls

I want lavender bushes to remember California, and a miniature pomegranate tree right there, and sweet peas to climb up these strings and hide me from the world. Plant me a vrindavan—rows and rows of basil in these boxes, as many as will fit.



IT'S MIDWEEK LUNCHTIME. WHILE MY son eats peanut butter and jelly in his high chair, I sit beside him, making pesto sauce by instinct. No recipe, no measuring cups, just my hands, the blender, and the ingredients: bruised basil leaves, stomata gasping, leaving sticky life under my fingernails; creamy, wrinkled walnuts broken in my hands; parmesan cheese, salt, and black pepper; half a lemon squeezed, making a paper cut sting; a few cloves of garlic, divested of paper coats, sliced in; a smooth yellow-green stream of oil to make it blend.

When I pass jarred pesto sauce in the grocery store, I never buy it, though it is quicker and perhaps even cheaper. This is a deliberate choice. I don't do this because "homemade" is trendy or because I have something to prove. Some things in life we do not because they are convenient but because we must.

When I was little, my grandma grew basil in two cedar barrels on her back patio in California's San Fernando Valley. Every

summer she harvested it and made pesto sauce. We'd take jars home and eat it on spaghetti noodles with pan-fried chicken tenders on the side.

From the time I was a few months old, I spent days with Grammy while Mom worked. I have no memories, though, until my two sisters were there with me. After hugs and kisses (Grammy's cheeks smelled like make-up powder and felt like it too), we'd sit down to breakfast. Often Grammy had driven to Van Nuys to pick up bagels that morning. She'd warm foil pouches of cream cheese in her hands and spread it for us while we sipped on glass bottles of Mott's apple juice.

Until Dad picked us up (he was a firefighter in Los Angeles and worked twenty-four-hour shifts), we played with paper dolls cut from oversized books, folding the tabs of dresses over their shoulders. We dove into our drawer of Disney coloring books, spending hours coloring our favorite princesses with crayons and scented markers. We watched movies,

from *Winnie the Pooh* to the ballet *Swan Lake*. We played in the backyard, where Grammy had a rosebush for each of her grandchildren.

If we were around for dinner, there'd be baked salmon fillets with lemon pepper, bright peas (frozen, not from a can), steamed white rice, slices of white bread with butter. Sometimes we'd order El Pollo Loco: chicken blackened over flames, tortillas so pliable you could fold them up like tissue paper. And always there was dessert: a sleeve of Oreos or custard dishes packed with ice cream.

I remember the table—the embossed metal bumps on the base that I could spin with my toes. I remember sitting there while Grammy taught me how to twirl my fork full of pesto noodles, bolstered by a spoon beneath. I remember her Hummel figurines watching me from behind the glass doors of the hutch. They were her special treasures; after the Northridge earthquake, she tacked the hutch doors shut with blue goo so they wouldn't fall out if the world shook again. I used to think that maybe I could touch them someday when I was grown-up, but then I could only look.

OCIMUM BASILICUM, COMMONLY KNOWN AS basil, is a culinary herb often used in Italian and southeast Asian cuisine. Usually grown as an annual, this “king of herbs” thrives in warm summer temperatures. Sweet basil, the variety most commonly sold and grown in the United States, reaches between twelve and twenty-four inches in height. Other varieties include Thai sweet basil, cinnamon basil, lemon basil, and purple basil, each with its own color, leaf shape, and flavor profile. The herb may be native to India, where it has been grown for more than five thousand years.



“OH, YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR THAT STORY again,” Grammy said. “It's so old-fashioned.”

But I do. Please tell me again, so I don't forget anything.

Richard was a California boy who became a Navy corpsman after high school. Mary was a farm girl from Ohio who left her parents' home at eighteen to work on the west coast. They met one day on the Angeles Crest Highway, a narrow road that snakes up from LA into the San Gabriel Mountains. Mary and her friend, who were on their way to an Easter sunrise service, were hit head-on by a drunk driver, which threw Mary's friend through the front windshield. A couple of Navy boys stopped to help.

Though her injuries were not as severe as her friend's, Mary was admitted to the hospital right away. That night, Richard came to visit her, wearing jeans, a white V-neck t-shirt, and leather moccasins. When he got home that night, he told his mom, “Today I met the girl I'm going to marry.” They wrote to each other for a while, letters Grammy tells me are still in the house somewhere. “They're terribly unromantic,” she says.

But who in this unstable world wouldn't want what “terribly unromantic” turned out to be: a man who raised three children with you; a man who loved you so much he pierced your ears himself, using ice and a sterilized needle; a man with hands that steadied you on the Ventura beach as you watched the parasailers; a man who sat beside you as you lost yourself.

SO ABOUT THOSE HUMMELS. THE WOMAN who first drew them was named Berta. Her last name, Hummel, meant bumblebee, which is perhaps what people thought of her when they saw her playing outside, active and full of smiles, yet observant enough to put nature on paper.



Born in Germany in 1909—twenty-four years before my grandma—Berta studied art as a youngster and eventually as a college student in Munich. After graduation, she surprised everyone by becoming a Franciscan nun, which, in her mind, did not collide with her identity as an artist. She entered a congregation that emphasized art in education, taking the name [Sister Maria Innocentia](#). As part of her role in the convent, she taught art to school-aged children and painted pictures that were eventually printed on postcards and sold in gift shops around Germany.

In the mid-1930s, a gentleman named Franz Goebel found himself enchanted by the drawing of a German child on a postcard. Mr. Goebel was a porcelain maker and had the tools, expertise, and manpower to take two-dimensional art and bring it into painted three-dimensional splendor, which he did with the postcard children, after getting Sister Maria Innocentia's reluctant approval. Though made in Germany, Goebel's figurines became popular on America's east coast as German immigrants brought their "Hummels" with them—hand-painted porcelain children packed in steamer trunks and traveling across the ocean, good luck from the Fatherland.

During the Second World War, the Nazi party denounced Sister Maria Innocentia's art in one of their magazines and banned the distribution of Hummels in Germany. Sister Maria Innocentia was one of forty nuns who remained at the convent during the war, without heat and barred from their work in the community. From her cell/studio, she continued to draw and paint items to sell in order to support her sisters. (Ironically, the Nazis took half of the money from sales for themselves.)

I can see her in her studio, wimple and veil

set aside, plain cotton cap tied over her hair. She has the deep cough of tuberculosis and blows into her hands to warm them. She picks up a pencil and draws prayers into the faces of children she could no longer teach. The children of Germany, of which my grandmother, though born across the ocean, was one.

ELEVEN MONTHS AFTER WE GOT MARRIED, my husband and I moved to Israel. There, in a tiny village west of Jerusalem, it first occurred to me to make pesto sauce. As a twenty-two-year-old expat and newlywed, I liked the idea of doing something traditional, something that rooted me to my distant home. I could make pesto sauce to stay connected to my family.

In the produce store, I found basil for only three shekels, about seventy-five cents at that time. Each bundle was huge; it looked like the farmers had harvested whole plants and tied them up as bouquets. I marched to the counter, grinning like I held a bunch of roses.

I walked the basil home and hunted down a recipe, avoiding those that substituted parsley or other greens for one hundred percent basil. Grammy had never mixed her greens. I swapped walnuts for pine nuts because they were less expensive, and used cheap olive oil and parmesan cheese I'd ordered from the deli with my basic Hebrew. In a minuscule food processor, I made tiny batches of pesto in that kitchen no bigger than a bathroom. Spread on toast, it tasted like the sun, like California, like childhood.

After my husband finished his master's degree in Israel, we moved to Chicago for a PhD. Our parents were used to our distance by now, our globe-hopping and adventuring that rarely allowed for holiday gatherings. They were used to us making edgy decisions



too, so when we moved into a low-income apartment complex full of Burmese refugees, they took it in stride.

Our first full summer in Chicago, I joined many of our neighbors in gardening on the property next door where the church had torn up their back lawn to create a community garden. I planted tomatoes and basil and sweet pea vines like the ones Grammy used to train up cotton string on her back porch. The Burmese planted okra and roselle, a leafy plant that sprang from expensive seeds bought at “the Vietnam store” and looked like marijuana. They’d harvest its leaves and dry them on woven mats in the sun. Then they stored the roselle in the freezer to put in soups and curries throughout the bitter Midwest winter.

My sweet basil loved the oppressive summer humidity. Every few weeks I’d carry out a strainer and scissors to harvest it. I was pregnant, and it felt good to squat among my plants like the Burmese did instead of bending over. I listened to them chat in tribal dialects while I pinched the top sets of leaves from each basil branch. I learned how to say basil in one dialect and wrote an English transliteration on the chalkboard in my kitchen.

Mostly, we’d decided to live with refugees because we loved them. But we couldn’t afford rent anywhere else in our suburb either. Years of living below the poverty line began to take their toll on me—the counting of days and checking of bank accounts before rent was due, the stress of unexpected expenses, working freelance jobs while our baby napped, the day I decided to go to the food pantry to save money. Because of all the strain, I began to have regular panic attacks.

The day my husband told me how much it would cost to have the cyst removed from

his thumb—that’s when I broke. While preparing dinner with a big knife, I thought about cutting myself. I fled to the garden and crouched in all that green, beneath a towering patch of corn. Nowhere else felt safe.

MY SON HAS MET HIS GREAT-GRANDPARENTS four times. The first time I took him to visit he was two-and-a-half months old. I felt this ancient impulse to present my son to the man and woman who’d cared for me so much as a girl.

The next visit he was seven months old. He sat on his own for the first time, and Grammy and Papa got down on the floor with him. When he was one and a half, he broke a jar of cherry jam, poured water on the floor as he was trying

to help wash dishes, sprinkled salt all over the table, plunged his hand into Grammy’s menthol-infused arthritic lotion, and banged on the out-of-tune piano. I mopped up messes as quickly as I could, not wanting to worry my grandparents.

Instead of going out to eat, we ordered take-out so we could hear each other. Sometimes we’d order from one of the places we ate at when I was in college nearby. Those had been good days, when Grammy and I—the lefties—would sit across from Papa in a big booth, laughing about the size of her purse, looking at her latest gadget, chatting about my classes and activities and friends over BBQ chop salads and garlic rolls.

Grammy ate so little now—she could turn one meal into three. She stared, sighing, chewing, reaching for another sip of coffee. So many things bothered her stomach that it was hard to find fresh food in the kitchen. The next morning, I couldn’t find bagels for breakfast, not even in the freezer. I ate a bowl of cold cereal at the



table, where pictures of the grandchildren blocked the Hummels from sight.

OCIMUM SANCTUM, COMMONLY KNOWN AS HOLY basil, is grown in India for religious and medicinal use. Hindus revere it as an “elixir of life” and consider it the manifestation of the goddess Tulsi. Most Hindu families have at least one holy basil plant in their yard, planted in an altar-like container. Since the plant is considered holy, families place small lamps by it at night and tend to it with carefully prescribed rituals. Some even keep multiple Tulsi plants in their yards or on their porches, forming forests called *vrindavans*. Medicinally, holy basil can treat anxiety and stress, reduce inflammation, and cure stomach ailments. Also, among Hindu families, a sprig of the herb is often placed near the head of a dying person.

AFTER THE PHD, MY HUSBAND, SON, and I moved back to the Middle East for work, this time to Amman, Jordan. I learned the Arabic word for basil early on, in a little herb garden with a defunct fountain. I wrote it in the vocabulary notebook I carried everywhere, still not conscious of why I needed this one word to root me, again. Though this was our third major move in six years, I still hadn’t absorbed the fact that with moving comes grieving.

Our second year in Amman, I went to a nursery to buy plants. The Egyptian woman I spoke with helped me find basil plants in one gallon containers. When I got home, I sat on the back porch, digging into potting soil without gloves, clogging my fingernails with dirt, drying out my hands, rubbing my fingers on basil leaves, and feeling life enter my exhausted body.

A few weeks later, I learned I had mono,

which partly explained my weariness. I left my basil and tomatoes in a friend’s care, and we flew to America for several weeks of recovery. While there, I developed severe insomnia and anxiety, coupled with depression and adrenal fatigue. Something more than mono was afflicting me, that was clear. We were grounded in the Chicago suburbs, where I was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. My basil plants flowered and went to seed without me.

CHILDHOOD CURIOSITIES NEVER DIE. So when I heard that the world’s largest public display of Hummels is in Rosemont, a Chicago suburb just thirty minutes from where we were living, I drove to see them. Between the post office and a liquor store, I found the [Donald E. Stephens Museum of Hummels](#), home to 2,500 pale, rosy-cheeked, and smiling figurines.

The place reminded me of a jewelry store—the mirror-backed cases and laminate floor, absolute quiet save the air conditioner’s hum. I walked slowly, looking at each design, trying to remember which ones Grammy had in her hutch. I was in Grammy’s arms, pressing my nose to the glass, looking at the Hummels in knee socks and clogs, pinafores, head and neck kerchiefs, caps with feathers. How grown-up they had seemed to me as a girl.

Now, though, every one was baby-faced. Each figurine shone with youth and naiveté. And my face, reflected in one hundred mirrors behind them, looked older. Not old, since I was just thirty, but there were definite lines and gray hairs. My eyes, those windows to my soul, looked older. They weren’t Hummel eyes, each with a tiny, hand-painted spark of innocent joy.



SOMETIMES I ASK MYSELF HOW I ENDED UP with PTSD. Sometimes it feels like my soul just saw too much too fast. There have been too many people, languages, and cultures, too many heavy stories, and like it or not, I was not able to absorb their weight along with my own wounds.

And so my soul feels old. And sometimes I wonder if this change is permanent or if old souls can become young again.

Lime wedges beside chicken tacos from the taco truck. Bean seedlings in a plastic punch glass, cotyledons shriveling as leaves open their hearts to the sun. Roselle leaves darkening, drying on plastic mats near a brick wall. Cilantro and basil on top of steaming pho. Tea in glasses with stories in languages I don't understand.

A field of belly-up melons near Tel-Aviv. The desert momentarily frosted with grass. Buses running within Jerusalem, the one that blew



Maybe grief is green, the color of the things I've lost.

Furred tomato leaves brushing my sundress-bare arms. Cool grass over the leech field in my parents' yard, thick as doll's hair. Blankie, big hole in its middle, hidden under my pillow. Pesto sauce on noodles, Grammy's hand on mine, twirling a tight haystack with spoon beneath. Sweet asylum under my hand.

up and killed someone I knew. Neon lights ringing minarets across Amman. Sage for my stomachache. The Midwest woods where I climbed, branches combing demons from my mind. Basil left on the back porch.

Basil basil basil basil. Holy basil, center me.

AFTER GRAMMY AND PAPA MOVED INTO assisted living, I flew from Chicago to Los

Angeles to visit, though I was still weak. My sister had looked me in the eyes on Skype and said, “I think you should come as soon as you can.” When I stepped into the memory care unit, my heart dropped when Mom pointed to Grammy, slumped in a wheelchair with her arm in a sling, her hair grown out, in front of a too-loud movie.

I hurried to her, knelt on the floor, and smiled into her eyes. “Well, what are you doing here?” she asked. In a sunny visiting area, chatter flew. Grammy tracked our conversation while trying to drink coffee, but she couldn’t put the cup down because her thumb and index finger had a deathgrip on the handle. When she tried to speak, just phrases came out, incomplete sentences, followed by frustrated sighs. Papa sat beside her, present, but I could see sadness in his slumped shoulders, how he drummed on the table as she labored over words, how his eyes pierced mine while she was searching.

Later that day, we left Grammy to zigzag the San Fernando Valley, hunting banks to cash bonds to pay for their care. I closed my eyes while we drove. My mind was still fragile; I couldn’t process all of the sights and conversation and emotions without getting panicky.

The next day my sisters joined us, and that made it easier. They made jokes while painting Grammy’s nails, which I’d never seen with dirt under them. Grammy even made us laugh when she noticed that three of us were wearing knit headbands. “Don’t we look like a cult,” she pronounced matter-of-factly.

At four-thirty, they brought Grammy’s dinner: ham, mashed potatoes, defrosted veggies, and broccoli cheddar soup. Mom began feeding her, but I soon asked for a turn.

It was slow work, a little like getting my four-year-old to eat. She obviously did not prefer the vegetables. “Eat your vegetables,” I told her with mock sternness. “I’m sure you’ve said that to me before.” She looked at me with a smirk and a glimmer in her eye, like she’d been caught, like she remembered exactly the days I’d sat in the wooden highchair near the Hummels and pushed peas onto the rug.

And a hint of sad, too, like, “How did you get taller and stronger than me, and how did we get here so fast?”

BUILD ME A REFUGE HERE (WHEREVER I’M living now—do you know where I am?), a shelter from the bombs outside and the politics, and the armored vehicles at every intersection. I want lavender bushes to remember California, and a miniature pomegranate tree right there, and sweet peas to climb up these strings and hide me from the world. Plant me a *vrindavan*—rows and rows of basil in these boxes, as many as will fit. Here’s a wind chime to hang, and nestle these Hummels under the branches like gnomes.

I will sit here cross-legged on the tile and harvest my basil. I will mince it by hand, and the garlic too. (No electricity—I don’t want anyone to find me.) I will put my pesto sauce in jars; I will bottle the sun and send it to you by air mail. Perhaps it will revive you like cordial, or at least it will restore your memories. If that fails, I’ll break off a sprig for you to put on your nightstand where they tuck you in alone, familiar pictures on the unfamiliar walls. And then I will hide my face in my knees and wait for whatever’s next.

Basil, root me, lest I spin off this fast-spinning world. ❖



