

The Bachelors

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MY FATHER MIGRATED FROM Cleveland to San Francisco in the mid-1960s with several boyhood friends. A decade later, my parents played occasional weekend tennis with my “uncle” Vic and his wife at Mountain Lake Park. Uncle Vic would bring us *piroshki* in thin

paper bags, purchased from Russian bakers in the foggy avenues where they lived with their son in an Edwardian walk-up. The smell of the ground beef and onions wafting through the steam always made my mouth water, and the doughy pocket left a greasy stain. While our parents remained on the



image info

courts, we climbed rooftops and ran—just my older brother, our young friend, and me. There was a rope swing that swept over the lake from a muddy bank, but nobody jumped in or swam; it wasn't that kind of water. Sometimes we ventured across the street to a mom-and-pop corner mart for ice cream. Pulling apart the plastic seam around an IT'S-IT, I would rotate melting mint or cappuccino on my tongue before crunching into the dark chocolate-covered cookie. It is mostly the freedom of those long afternoons that I remember, playing together outdoors for hours, never bored, our parents always trusting in our return.

In the early '80s, newly single, my father kept a nearly empty refrigerator at his apartment in the Cow Hollow neighborhood. Among the dill tomatoes, horseradish, and Gatorade, there was gefilte fish swimming in gelatin in a jar, the cold, colorless substance sticking to the pockmarked whitefish. Aside from fried hot dogs and root beer floats, salami and eggs were about all he knew how to make, which we ate on chipped, metal-rim dishes after the divorce. Sometimes he took us to Original Joe's where we watched the line cooks move fast pans over the flames from our counter stools. Otherwise it was Tommy's Joynt on Van Ness or the Jewish deli on Polk where I'd order a block of cream cheese wedged between two halves of a bagel. For my father: corned beef on rye, a little yellow mustard, but otherwise dry.

After high school I held a summer job working the register at a shop selling souvenir t-shirts at Fisherman's Wharf. It's mostly the smell I remember. Sea lions basked on the docks, their fetid scent mixed with the aroma of steaming crab set alongside the sourdough bowls, a tangy delicacy to which I sometimes

treated myself. In the early mornings, the restaurant owners hosed the sidewalks, all the detritus from the asphalt accumulating in gray puddles in the gutter, then washed down among the sewer rats, which scurried under the grates.

I continued to live with my father for a couple of years after college, serving potato-and-egg skillet and coffee in a carafe to yuppies who inhabited the neighboring Marina District. On Saturday nights they frequented bars and hollered from motorized cable cars that ferried them along Union Street, claiming territory no longer mine. Later, I waited tables at Uno Pizzeria on Lombard, packing leftovers into a cardboard box to take home. With my brother long gone, I often sat, alone, on the metal slats of the fire escape. A cluster of yellow windows glowed from Pacific Heights like fishing boats bobbing in the harbor. While my father watched weekend sports from the swivel chair at his desk inside, I'd listen to the echoes of a foghorn lullaby, bidding my time.

Soon, I made my own migration. It was Uncle Vic who introduced me to the Mission District, including its culinary delights. In this sunny southern neighborhood across the city, cathedral bells chimed and green parrots hung upside down from palms lining Dolores Park, where children licked tropical popsicles purchased from a *paleta* vendor. He took me to a taquería, speaking Spanish to the ladies in line while I slurped *agua fresca* for the first time. Like my father, I still didn't know how to cook. After moving, I subsisted on grilled open-face tacos topped with melted cheese and avocado—newfound comfort food devoured on the front stoop of the Victorian flat I rented. My roommates said I ate like a bachelor. ❖