

*Yael Goldstein*

## Tastes Like Regular

When she'd dream about the baby it wasn't like in one of those Mafia movies where the corpses are rotten blue and they grab for you with hands like claws, so you wonder, 'Why do all dead people have such long fingers?' The baby was blue, but a pretty, pale blue like you might paint a nursery, and maybe stencil in some fluffy white clouds to make it look like a sky, though why you'd want to make it seem as though your baby were sleeping out in the middle of the sky was beyond her. Frankie knew that people did this a lot, though. She'd seen it in magazines. The baby was a cheerful sky blue and it smiled and gurgled and was a whole, happy, alive sort of baby. Most nights, it told her not to hate Cody.

Cody had sent her one letter, soon after she started her job in the kitchen of Nethermede Academy. The letter hadn't said much, only that he loved college, was meeting fascinating people, taking all sorts of great classes; he told her about the classes in strange detail. It was because of the strange level of detail, more than anything else, that she knew he was folding her up, putting her away in a past that was barely his because it marked a time before his mind had been so "wonderfully altered"—his phrase—by courses like 'Love in the Byronic Age' and 'The divine concept in Islamic thought.' He was a new Cody now, he was saying, and the new Cody had even less in common with her than the old one did. It had been hard to fall asleep the night she got that letter. Her mind kept slinking back to that day halfway through her senior year when Cody, the smartest kid in their crappy Catholic school, Cody with the girlishly soft and smooth skin and the limpid brown eyes behind the perfect rectangles of his glasses, Cody whose mother was the assistant headmistress at Nethermede Academy, that bastion of privilege in their south Jersey town's unprivileged midst, Cody who would have gone to Nethermede himself instead of St. Michael's if he'd only been a girl, and was headed off to Yale in just a few

months—plopped down beside her on the school’s front lawn as if he’d known her all his life. In that cocky, jaunty voice that irritated her through third period every Monday and Wednesday, he told her how he’d come to figure out that her laziness was an evolved form of social protest, because he saw the way she got around to every page of the reading in the English course they shared. She got around to it, just a few weeks late, as though she were secretly trailing the class, waiting on corners, behind darkened car windows, to catch sight of where it would head next. He laughed when she told him just what she thought of the nun who taught that class, and in a hellfire monotone—a poor imitation of their principal, Father McMullin—he said, “You’re a wicked, wicked girl and that gift is from the devil.” All the afternoons they spent together after that first one were just the same: him saying crazy things, and her half-sneering but loving every word; she never wanted their conversations to end.

Once, when his parents were in Manhattan for the evening, he’d cooked her dinner, moving around the kitchen with ease, grabbing for spices, cutting away fat from a slab of pork, stirring, tasting, his long, lean body completely in charge of the space. When he put down the lid of a pan, and kissed her hard against the refrigerator, she could taste the briny sweat of his culinary know-how, his otherness, remoteness, his impossibility. Three months afterward, he’d come to her in the park and told her what his mother had arranged—the job in Nethermede’s kitchen, the room in the sophomore dormitory—and that was what she thought of. Of him kissing her against the refrigerator, and his salty knowingness sliding onto her tongue. And so, though she had fought bitterly, though futilely, against every other “obvious next step” Cody’s family had presented to her, the job as an assistant cook at Nethermede Academy—seemingly ill-suited though it was—pleased her. Of course, she suspected as little as he did, then, that she’d actually be good at what went on in a kitchen.

At first she was good because she loved it.

She loved how the billowing rolls of steam shined her face raw and new while she chop-chop-chopped meats and vegetables into perfect cubes. She loved the constant chatter of the other women on staff, their

jibes and insults and insights into one another's tragedies, from yolk in the egg whites to a son in the slammer. She wasn't exactly one of them, but she wasn't exactly not, either. Sometimes they even teased her in that gruff-tender way they teased each other, calling her 'Thanksgiving' because of her hair the color of pumpkin pie filling, and 'Over Spice' because of the freckles dusting her skin like way too much cinnamon.

Before she started at Nethermede, she'd never been one for kitchens. If she thought of them at all it was as a place to run in and out of, grab a sandwich, call out to her father that she was off to somewhere she wasn't really off to. The place Cody where had squashed himself against her bony hips, swatted the unevenly cut bangs out of her eyes as though he couldn't wait to see the dull gray of her irises, and asked her to believe—though she didn't, really, not even that night—that he liked what he felt and saw. She had none of those taste-touch-shivery-warm memories of standing by a mother's knee, stealing spoonfuls of something piping and lovely. But she quickly came to enjoy the heat, the woman-talk, and most of all the possibilities lying around in the form of uncooked crates of everything under the sun that when put together made a meal, which in turn made the material of a human being. A whole rush of suspect information—from biology class? from TV? from Cody?—came at her when she cooked: of bodies making cells from the food she was preparing, so, that, in fact, she felt she was making those lithe, blonde-headed beings that strolled around the campus clutching field hockey sticks and calculus books. She was keeping them alive, these girls, and she loved them, in a way, for this.

Yes, at first she was good because she loved it. And then she loved it because she was good.

The switch happened suddenly, late one December evening, when a recipe appeared to her like a prophecy. A remarkably unimportant prophecy, but what other sort would come to her? Instead of the pale-blue baby rising out of her sleeping mind, there was chicken, peach jam, soy sauce, onions. Like any prophecy, startling and upsetting in its components, but compulsive and compelling in its entirety, at least to the prophet. She actually dreamed it. Dreamed it. Why, she had no idea, but

she was certain that she needed to make this dish. She felt chosen, even if only by the secret recesses of her own brain. She sneaked into the kitchen the following night. In the dark there was something supernatural about the tremendous vats and pans and pots, something witchy and thrilling. She kept the lights off, seeing only by what leaked in the window from the moon, weak and watery. It took her less than two hours, and would have taken shorter if she hadn't tasted four varieties of peach jam before settling on one; the jams were left over from the headmistress's tea a few weeks earlier, in honor of the parents' mass visit. Inspiration traced its snaky cause back to that event, no doubt, but where had it lingered until now? It was worth asking, because it *was* inspiration. Startling and right. The jam, the soy sauce, even the bird, had slipped their limitations, run off into the heat and knocked together gleefully into something else entirely. There was an erotic element in the synchrony of it, the parts disappearing into parts. When the rest of the staff started straggling in at five to start on breakfast, Frankie was still sitting there with her tray, marveling.

"Lordy, what is that?" Mrs. Robbins asked, sidling up in her tremendous magnificence, rolls of sensual flesh wrapped tightly in a white apron. She stuck her massive head straight down into the tray and repeated, "Lordy, what is that?"

Some globs of jam had separated from the soy sauce and sat like vibrant fat on the yellow skin. Wilted onions draped listless as worms. Frankie would never understand later from what hidden source of courage she got the notion to say—to order—"Taste it," nor why, after Mrs. Robbins went off for several florid minutes about how she wasn't going to put anything that looked like *that* in her mouth at 5 AM, she then picked up a fork and did.

Two nights later it was on the dinner menu. Frankie wasn't on dish duty that night, and so she stood toward the back of the dark-paneled dining hall, watching as her prophecy was speared delicately on hundreds of forks, and disappeared behind slick-balmed lips, past straightened teeth, into softly-speaking throats, and beyond. They took it in, each and every one of them. She could not sleep that night for all the new recipes that

were coursing in from God knew where.

There had been nearly two dozen requests to have Frankie's chicken again by the time Mrs. Robbins asked whether she had any more "damn weird concoctions" up her sleeve. When she handed over her neatly stacked pile of index cards, Mrs. Robbins cocked one slivery eyebrow, and with that roaring laugh, had said, "Girl, you been busy."

'Busy' wasn't the right word for it, though. 'Consumed' would have been better if it hadn't been so punny.

After that first recipe they didn't come to her in dreams, anymore, effortlessly, gifted. Not that she sat down and thought, 'Now what would taste good with what?' She wouldn't know how to go about doing that. But she had to work for them, all the same. What she had to do was remember all the things she had been trying to forget. Like she would think of the way the sun had looked across Cody's manicured lawn – deep honey and slanting into evening—when she went tripping up it, oddly high, to tell him her father had ordered her out, calling her a 'filthy little slut' in a voice disappointingly devoid of anger. Thinking of the way the sun had looked, she would be led to that brief moment when she'd believed that Cody might belong to her after all, because now she belonged to nothing—and from there, crazily, magically, she would arrive at a pineapple cake that involved adding peanut butter to the batter at the last minute. Down in the laundry room late one night, sorting out the underwear that was still wearable from the ones too holey to do much good, she heard the drip of a faucet leaking into a plastic basin, and was assaulted by the memory of the drip of the rain from the roof gutter as she walked back up to the lopsided ruin of her house trying to figure out a way to tell her father she wasn't going to be a mother after all, that Cody and his family had taken care of that problem, without using the word that would send him beyond anger into a religious ecstasy of outrage. She felt the knowledge of what was coming slip into her skin, just as it had then, panic mounting steadily to the drip, drip, drip: the anger enlivening her father this time, so that he was truly present for once, the house occupied, even if only with the sound of his beer-hazed, bible-glazed voice flinging

out gloriously mangled epitaphs that would have been funny if they hadn't been so frightening: whore of babble-on and slaughterer of innocence. She heard the past drip inside the present and a dark slab of beef, browned tender and slightly bitter by vinegar and raspberries, was made manifest above a bank of washing machines.

The peanut-buttery pineapple cake, the raspberry-slathered beef, the dozens of other 'damn weird concoctions' that came spilling out of her processed past—these not only purged her of something, but filled her with something, as well. Watching them swallowed—taken in, taken on, taken away—she felt completed. She felt, bizarrely, loved. There was no other word for it. It was what she felt. Loved. And loving, too. It didn't matter that when she passed Cody's mother in the wind-catching colonnades, the woman said her name like it was something that had gone bad in the refrigerator. It didn't matter that just by asking how Frankie's 'little cooking experiment' was going, Cody's mother clearly conveyed how unimpressed she was, how glad that her son was a state away, and that he never thought of Frankie, never wrote to her. Cody never wrote to her, but still she felt loved.

She had heard that Headmistress Cullins had already circulated several memos about abuse of meal-plan privileges because so many of the faculty were staying in for lunch and then for dinner. She had heard that some of the girls had begun skipping their afternoon classes, needing the hours to digest after traveling through the hot food lines a third, fourth, or even fifth time. But even without these validations she would have felt that happy fullness. It came from seeing her recipes turned to food.

In the months that followed, Frankie began to wander around campus in breaks between the breakfast shift and lunch shift and dinner shift, instead of holing up in a corner of the kitchen, or racing back to her overheated room without a working window shade. When the weather turned warm, she began to eat her lunch outside on the picnic tables. She would watch the girls play sports, leaf lazily through textbooks, gossip in sharp-edged groups. She would smile at some of them—the ones who looked nicer—

and they would often smile back; a few of them even became unspoken friends of a sort, waving and calling out ‘hi’ when they passed.

One of the girls, a Miss Lindsey Pelham of Greenwich, Connecticut, student body vice president, captain of the field hockey team, and head of debate club, would actually come up to her from time to time and tell her in polished political tones (Lindsey’s father, Frankie had heard, had once been Lieutenant Governor of Maine) just how much she loved everything Frankie cooked. “Your tuna surprise is a vital part of the Nethermede community,” she’d say, and though there had been a time when Frankie distrusted the feral eagerness of the almost-pretty face, the bright smile that never faded but also never made it all the way to real, now she felt a bready warmth toward Lindsey Pelham. In fact, she was developing a similar feeling toward all these girls. It was a closeness she had no desire to act upon. She wanted to sustain them and watch them, but ask nothing in return. When she put it into words she knew it sounded stupid. But it was a nice thing to feel nonetheless.

Mrs. Robbins announced her retirement in May. No one was surprised when Frankie was named as new head cook. No one, that is, except Frankie. It was just two days before the end of spring term when Headmistress Cullins pulled Frankie out of the kitchen into a bright mid-morning sun, and told her the news in a stealthy, breathless voice, as though she were confiding that Frankie had been chosen as ruler of some small island country, or special envoy to Mars, rather than head cook at a second-rate boarding school. They were strolling together across the blooming campus—Cullins liked to walk while she talked—and so Frankie was able to turn her face away, hiding her reaction. She listened with only a small sliver of attention, gripped with the premonition that this unasked-for triumph would ruin her. When Cullins ran off mid-sentence to reprimand a group of girls straying too close to the off-limits utility shed, calling out over her shoulder that she and Frankie could “talk brass tacks” after the madness of finals had passed them by, Frankie took the long way back to the kitchen, lost in an anxious haze that did not lift

all summer.

Of course, without that anxious haze—and its meetings, planning, inventories, not to mention the hefty increase in salary—her summer would have been a terrifying and lonely blank. Instead, she was busy calling vendors and interviewing potential new staff, and she took no small satisfaction in her unsuspected talents for organization and efficiency. In early July, she moved out of the sophomore dormitory, into an apartment of her own. She liked living alone much more than she'd have guessed. She spent most of the summer decorating her three small rooms with furniture and art she picked up in yard sales.

On move-in day of fall term, she watched from the window of her private office as the girls piled out of weighed-down cars, letting their fathers drag the heavy baggage, while they themselves ran around hugging and kissing and shrieking like it had been 50/50 any of them were going to make it through the summer alive. Frankie thought of the stacks of recipes that had been piling up these past few months, itchy and impatient in the heat of a desk drawer, and realized what a relief it would be to cook them.

The relief lasted precisely two weeks. On the Monday morning of the third week of term, Cullins stopped by as Frankie and her staff were scrambling vats of eggs. “Some of the girls want an informal word,” she announced in the manicured voice she used when she wasn't being stealthy and breathless. Staring dumbly at Cullins' retreating back, Frankie burned a batch of toast beyond repair.

Later that night, Frankie pushed through the heavy double doors of the senior dorm's richly-paneled library, to find a group of ten students and five administrators sitting across from each other, waiting. She would have liked to move toward the red leather couches, where the student reps were arranged, neat as eggs in a carton, but the only seat left unoccupied was a wing-tipped chair among her bosses—was the chair, in fact, next to Cody's mother. Frankie looked at the expression on Cody's mother's face—the opaque indifference arranged to appear as something else, indefinable and

noble—and wanted to run. Instead, she took her seat, did not even flinch as Cody’s mother’s gaze swept across her, clearly registering and yet graciously ignoring, that Frankie was sweating profusely in a baggy suit she’d bought just hours before, thinking it would make her feel professional, when really it made her feel like an idiot.

Instead, Frankie focused on her friend, on Lindsey Pelham, who strode now to the center of the room, and positioned herself carefully, one hand resting on a narrow, varsity-sweat-clad hip, the other holding a pile of note cards, the light bouncing playfully off her smooth, blonde ponytail. Lindsey launched into a speech tracing Nethermede’s history from 1888 to the present, and Frankie soon stopped paying attention to the words, thinking instead about Cody’s mother beside her, and whether it had actually been *she* who’d called this meeting. It wasn’t until Lindsey’s voice reached a gleeful crescendo that Frankie snapped back into awareness, just in time to hear Lindsey keen, “Sure it tastes good, but so do candy bars and we don’t eat those for dinner.”

Frankie flashed a nervous smile into Lindsey’s perma-grin, as she contemplated the possibility that it was *her* tastes Lindsey was talking about.

“I mean, like, it’s hard? To stay trim?” Lindsey continued, her eyes now locked onto Frankie’s. “And it doesn’t help when all your food choices are like a million grams of fat? There are body issues to contend with.” Lindsey made this last statement with gravity, the smile flitting from her face for a moment.

The neat row of eggs was moving now, mobilizing, handing out sheets of paper to Frankie and her employers. “Results of the Food Poll,” it said in bold, purple letters on top. There was a graphic of a turkey to the left of the heading, and a few hearts thrown in for good measure on the right. Below this were the numbers: 467 polled. 403 were in favor of a lower-fat menu, 60 preferred the status quo, and four Nethermede scholars had no opinion to offer either way. The paper trembled in Frankie’s hand, and she glanced up to see Cody’s mother noticing. Cody’s mother smiled in mock-sympathy and shrugged as if to say, ‘Go figure.’ Lindsey Pelham was still talking, describing the horror she and her classmates had felt, back home

for the summer, to discover how much weight they'd gained from Frankie's cooking. Frankie's colleagues gazed up at Lindsey with pride as she described her vision of an almost wholly fat-free menu. Frankie guessed at the words rattling around behind their admiring faces, words like 'initiative' and 'leadership.' To keep from being overwhelmed, Frankie turned all her energy to not noticing that the warmth that had been rising in her these past months had collapsed in a yeasty heap at her feet.

Lying in her narrow, creaky bed that night, trying to keep new recipes at bay, she found that she was not so much sad as furious—awe-struck with fury—at the arrogance of these girls, who seemed to think the world was an ordered place, so tractable they could turn their attention to the content of each molecule they put in their mouths. And, yes, part of her associated this with Cody's delusion, Cody's *plan*, of which she had not been a part. And maybe these thoughts together somehow led to her doing it. But she did not set out to do it.

It simply had to be done.

The blandness of the dishes pained her. Their lack of loveliness, of lushness, of sensation on the tongue. Who could put feeling into these slabs of thin-making nutrients? And so one day, passing by, without thinking, she poured some heavy cream into a bubbling pot of fat free split pea soup. No one saw. No one knew. No one was harmed. And it would not have mattered at all, except that this minor act is what opened the floodgates of inspiration. And what floods they'd been holding back! It was here, it turned out, that the full blush of her brilliance lay: in culinary deception.

Within two weeks she had over twenty recipes, building on a few simple principles she'd devised in her tiny wall of a kitchen late at night: ways to mask the taste of butter without sacrificing its richness, to add heavy cream to a dish without bringing forth that tell-tale consistency, to hide the signs that olive oil had been used in preparing a vegetable. It was wonderful to be giving vent to recipes again—wonderful in a vital, necessary way, not in the frivolous way of a mere pleasure. Wonderful also in a ter-

rible way. She was alarmed by how good it felt to be a demon crawled into private universes and thrashing around unseen—making their track pants bulge around the thighs, and their sweater sets bunch at the waist. The only way she could keep from hating herself for this delirious transgression was to not think of it as their universes at all, but only, usually, as hers, as Lindsey Pelhnam’s—who she could not help but notice took extra-large helpings at every meal.

Like all geniuses lucky enough to be recognized in their lifetimes, Frankie was being enveloped in sugary folds of legend: her exquisite control of the kitchen, the way she would prepare the stocks and bases for most dishes alone, undisturbed, in the wee hours of the night. Rather than suspect her for these quirks, they loved her all the more for fitting so nicely into the mold of the eccentric artist. She was surprised by how easy it was to slip into this role—to take credit for an accomplishment she had not actually accomplished. She felt proud of her nonexistent line of delicious fat free food, and sometimes, realizing this, she would grow frightened at herself.

One night, just days before winter break, Frankie was walking quickly across the darkened, wintry campus, past eerie outlines of red-bricked towers receding into fog, when she heard delicate footfalls following behind her. Just for an instant, she had the horrible thought that it was she herself, in her demonic form, catching up with her. She turned around hesitantly and saw that it was worse than the B-movie conjurings of a Catholic girl’s guilty conscience: it was Lindsey Pelham, running up on small, sturdy legs, tiny feet crunching dead grass. Lindsey’s cheeks were round and rosy with cold, but she beamed with good-will. When her neatly-groomed hand shot out and grabbed Frankie’s arm, Frankie found it difficult not to recoil. ‘No more,’ she thought to herself. ‘No more of this.’ Girls had been coming up to her all week to toss minty-breathed holiday wishes her way. It was trying. “I just want to say, like, thank you? For just, like, you know, running with it?” Lindsey drawled into the frigid air, eyes blazing with earnestness, perma-smile dazzling. “You’re so awesome, and your food tastes just like regular. I would’ve said something earlier, but

senior year is so crazy, with, like, college stuff, you know?”

“Oh, I know,” Frankie assured her, putting her own chapped, ragged hand on Lindsey’s soft one. “And, anyway, I should be the one thanking you.” She almost meant it, and as she walked the rest of the way home, the night felt thick and cozy, a chocolatey darkness.

It was in this moment of triumph that came from almost forgiving Lindsey Pelham that she ought to have first sensed that the end was inevitable. Not because what she was doing was bad, or because sooner or later the girls—probably starting with Lindsey Pelham—would catch on that the food was affecting their bodies in inexplicable ways, but because ideas as grand as her recipes could not be contained. She belonged to them, and not the other way around. That moment of triumph, especially, belonged to them. Despite her efforts to keep them simple and believable, the concoctions were growing increasingly more elaborate, calling out for attention, for praise, for a final fall. Greedy, needy, they reached out to the larger world through the bellies of their audience, unconcerned for the artist who had brought them into being. But Frankie failed to grasp this and spent the first happy Christmas of her life that season, sitting alone in her apartment, savoring the memory of her exchange with Lindsey Pelham, listening to carols on the radio, and mentally charting out an entire holiday feast that hid its calories in well-placed pockets. The perversity of her obsession had become such that even if she’d known that Emily Martel, Nethermede junior, was at that moment waxing ecstatic about the marvelous low-fat food at her school, and that among those listening to this elegy was Emily’s aunt, a well-established food writer always on the lookout for a good story, she still would have enjoyed that evening for the simple fact that, creatively, it was one of her best.

In fact, on the first morning back from break, when Cullins burst in to tell her the news in her special breathy voice—her impending fame! big things! big things on the horizon for Frankie, she was certain!—she was still so caught up in contemplating the elegant guile of that holiday meal that her first instinct was to be as gleeful as her beamish boss. Fantastic,

she thought. She'd cook the meal after all, and this reporter would swoon —swoon on the pages of *Gourmet Food* magazine. Only slowly did it dawn on her: the damned reporter would actually want to watch. To see her in action, to know her recipes. The full genius of her deception would be laid bare.

Oddly, even with this curdled knowledge clogging up her mind, she didn't panic. For two weeks, she waited calmly for the answer to arrive, as sudden and right as her first prophecy. The day before the reporter was due in her kitchen, she realized it never would. She was going over produce receipts in the back office when this truth descended on her, and as soon as it did she lunged for the door, scattering papers as she tripped across the linoleum floor. Caring, worried eyes followed her out of the kitchen, out of the dining hall, out into the east-campus cloister where she finally paused, bent-over double, sucking air in quick little slurps. The staccato clops came almost instantly, and she knew without looking up whom they heralded. In this moment, no one other than Cody's mother could have appeared, the avenging angel in cultured pearls, a drab air of glamour, a fake frown of concern.

"Are you all right, dear?" Cody's mother asked, as Frankie straightened herself out with some effort.

"Coughing fit." She marveled at the calm in her voice. Artifice had eased into her lungs, even. "Ground pepper."

"That sounds unpleasant."

"Yeah."

Frankie glanced nervously over her shoulder, toward the expanse of rolling hillside where she wanted to be wandering, alone. Cody's mother had inched closer to her, though neither of them had said anything in several long seconds. The blonde mat of a head was turned from her, watching a group of girls gossiping in a tight circle a few yards away. Frankie wondered for a moment if she'd been forgotten, pinned against the wall. She moved toward the left, easing away, but Cody's mother caught her eye and held it.

"Did I tell you Cody's coming tomorrow?" She placed the words in

the air with a determined lightness, as if Cody came regularly, as if it hadn't been a year and a half since Frankie had even heard that name spoken aloud by anyone other than a jolly, dreamed, baby-blue corpse. "He's going to help Andrew set up the new computer lab. These long winter breaks—he needs to do something useful, doesn't he, or his brain will atrophy. I thought you ought to know in case your paths cross."

Frankie was walking across campus from the parking lot when she saw him. She was very consciously thinking about the beat-up car she'd bought recently, trying to remember the name of the mechanic one of the other cooks had recommended. Cody was sitting on one of the benches near the entrance to the main building—the building where she worked, though perhaps he didn't know this. She recognized him even though his back was to her, and even though his shoulders had grown broader, and it appeared as though he'd put some sort of product in his hair to make it look purposely unkempt, though it was hard to be certain of the new hairstyle since his head was bent down. He was lost in a book as usual. She wondered if it was the sort of book he used to read—the long treatises on the possibilities of artificial intelligence that would get him giddy for hours, or the crackpot political conspiracies he'd order on the internet and chuckle over, but then infuriatingly refuse to share with her 'for her own safety'—or whether he'd developed entirely new interests in college. She was surprised by how much she wanted the book to be the battered copy of *Ender's Game* he was constantly carrying around back then.

They were alone on the usually teeming campus. The students were just climbing out of bed, and her staff was fussing over vats of eggs and steaming griddles, no doubt wondering with some alarm where she was. She had never been late to work before, but that morning she'd sat in her car for close to ten minutes, torn between driving off into God-knows-where and never returning, going back upstairs to simmer into a sticky residue beneath the covers, and coming to see her downfall through to the end. Now, staring at Cody's changed back, she thought she had clearly made the worst of the three choices.

She stopped walking and stood about ten feet behind him, unseen. She had become ensnared in a memory that also involved staring helplessly at Cody's back. It had been the last time she'd seen him, the night before he left for college. They were broken up by then, though they'd never officially ended things, just as they'd never officially begun. For a few months she had been let, implausibly, into his world, and then she was out. By the time of this memory, she hadn't seen him in weeks, and was already living at Nethermede. She had fallen asleep early in the evening, but had woken up a little before eleven, terrified and emptied. It was the first time she'd dreamed about the baby. He had been nice about it when she called, telling her sure, sure, come on over, no problem, my parents are already asleep. But when she arrived, he gestured toward the gray-spread bed, mumbling to make herself at home, while he plopped back down into his desk chair, and didn't move again until morning. She watched him all night, as he worked away at some mysterious task. Self-contained, unconcerned, cut off from her by the soft strains of Latin dance music pulsing from his computer. She hadn't even known he liked Latin dance music.

"Something's burning," she thought, sniffing at the frosty air and imagining a kitchen thrown into chaos in her absence. It was a good smell—smoky and robust on the cool breeze—and it took her a minute to realize it was in her mind, a meat stew with rosemary, thyme, and the burnt hint of cinnamon, that had been conjured by her remembering. Seconds later, she found herself behind him. She was too close for him not to have noticed, but he kept his head down in the book. She thought of putting her hand on his shoulder—it struck her as a mature and poignant gesture—but she couldn't bring herself to touch the old army jacket hanging loose around his frame. Finally, she cleared her throat. He turned toward her, and she saw that the book in his hand was unfamiliar, a bulky hard-back with a vibrant blue cover. She was glad she hadn't touched him.

"Aren't you kinda late?" His face was the same: the luminous skin, slightly blued by the cold; the long-lashed eyes behind rectangular frames, with one reddish eyebrow lifted, as though he were a naughty boy who'd been caught in the act; the slightly full lips twisted in a smirk that was

undeniably sweet, but no less a smirk for that.

“I’m the boss. It comes with certain perks,” she said, pleased by the flippancy of her tone. She tried to stop herself there, but the next remark came tumbling out of its own accord, sounding altogether too urgent. “Were you waiting for me or something?”

“Maybe.”

They had started walking together, in the wrong direction, away from the building, her job, the office where Emily Martel’s aunt would be expecting to meet with her in less than two hours. The progression of her feet felt beyond her control. She glanced down at his, and noticed they were clad in a pair of those sleek two-toned sneakers that the prep school boys wore when they came to campus to visit their girlfriends.

“I hear you’re a minor celebrity these days,” he said very loudly. “Kind of the Mario Batali of Nethermede Academy.”

“Something like that.” She’d recaptured the flippant tone, giving not the slightest hint that she’d never heard of Mario Whoever before this moment. She could almost imagine that her voice was coming out of slick-balmed lips, on a peachy-blond head.

“My mother said you’ve got this interview or something this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“You nervous?” He punched her on the arm, but the contact was so tentative she wouldn’t even have known he’d done it if she hadn’t seen the movement out of the corner of her eye.

“Nah.”

“Bet the reporter is. Discovering the next great unknown is nothing to sneeze at.” They’d reached a tree whose branches cascaded wide and low, creating the sense of an enclosed space, especially when it flowered in spring and became dense with leaves in the summer. Now it reached down to the ground with skeleton fingers, but it was still a favorite spot for the girls to congregate. Frankie had never been so near to it before. She leaned against the misshapen trunk, regarding Cody. He was mocking her, she realized. He was mocking her, and all her old shame came tumbling back,

as thick and full as in the days right after, and those terrifying nights when the baby would come and try to talk her down. The air between them filled with the scents of every dish she'd made in working through their memories, and it was as if their entire past sat between them in the form of these scents, ghosts of tastes. It made it possible for her to tell him.

"I'm in big trouble," she said.

He gave her a look not unlike the one he gave her that first time she announced she was in trouble.

"Not . . ." he started to say.

"No. God, no." She spat this angrily, but the idea of it bound her to him more tightly, and made her eager to have it all out.

"I didn't mean—So what, then?"

She was silent for a while, thinking how to explain what it was she'd done—how to get in the memories, the need, the doughy heap of love collapsed around her feet. But she knew that none of that actually mattered.

He continued to stare at her, his face an exaggerated blank, and so she said, "You know all that low-fat food I've been cooking?"

Just saying it made her stomach clench. She was struck with the certainty that if this were a movie, she'd be the villain. She tried not to picture all those trusting girls, with their trusting mouths, and their spreading hips. A hint of a smile was twitching onto Cody's face. She was grateful not to have to spell it out, but she almost walked away when he lost control of the twitching and let out a low cough of a laugh.

"It's not funny," she protested. That it obviously was a little funny—what absurd villainy!—only made it worse. She was feeling truly ill now, as if all the illicit calories and fat molecules, the secret, stolen difference between the reported and the eaten, had been pumped directly into her stomach. She wished she were in a kitchen, where everything made sense.

"Marx meets Martha Stewart. Leave it to you to wage a private class war with a twist of *Cosmopolitan*."

"I guess I'll be fired," she said, though given what she'd done, losing her job seemed the least of her worries.

Cody stopped laughing abruptly, and stared down at the ground.

“Look,” he finally said, without lifting his face toward hers. His voice was tight and high, just like the last time he’d given her this line. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

She expected her reply to be hot in her mouth, and dense. But instead the words were weightless, frothy, and rather than escape on her breath they slid in soft peaks down her throat.

“I don’t need you to tell me anything,” she said.

He glanced at his watch, and then at her just long enough to mutter, “Well, Andrew’s expecting me in the computer lab.”

Something inside of her was stiffening like egg whites. It was with an unfamiliar remove that she noted that it was not just his voice, but everything about him that was just as it had been the last time: his shifting eyes, the nervous dance from foot to foot, the fear she could feel rising off him like steam, as if her disordered life had just been discovered contagious. All of it was just like last time, except that his discomfort skimmed over and off her, and she wanted to relieve him.

She smiled and told him to get moving, and as she watched him go, a recipe materialized under the tree with her. It was an almond meringue, light as air, and pure as light.

On the pages of *Gourmet Food* magazine, Emily Martel’s aunt would soon call it ‘heavenly’; most others would call it the defining dish of her career.

Frankie would always call it her second prophecy.