

Prologue

[LIVER DIAGRAM]

February 13, 2008

This is really not what it looks like.

The work is most often a delicate thing, and bloodless. In the year and more I've been doing this, I've gone whole days with no more evidence of my labors by evening than a small bit of gore on my shoes or a sheen of translucent fat on my hands and face (It's excellent for the skin, I'm told.) So this is unusual, this syrupy drip, my arms drenched up to the elbows, my apron smeared thickly with crimson going quickly to brown.

I reach down into the plastic-lined cardboard box one more time, coming up with an organ weighing probably fifteen pounds, dense and slippery dead weight, a soaked blood sponge. I slap it onto the cutting table with a sound like a fish flopping down on the deck of a boat; the risk of dropping it on the floor is not inconsiderable. The box is a deep one, and one of the times I reached to the bottom of it my face brushed up against the bloody lining. Now I can feel a streak of the stuff drying stickily across my cheekbone. I don't bother to wipe it off. On what clean surface would I wipe it, after all? Besides, it makes me feel rather rakish.

I take my scimitar from the metal scabbard hanging from a chain around my waist. For most work I use my boning knife, an altogether more delicate thing, six inches long, slightly curved, with a dark rosewood hilt worn to satin smoothness by all the fat and lanolin that has been massaged into it. That little knife cracks open a haunch joint or breaks down muscle groups into their component parts like nothing else. But with this heavy, foot-long blade I can, while pressing firmly down on the flesh with my right palm, slice straight through the liver in one dragging stroke. Thin, even slices. With the boning knife I'd have to saw away to get through that bulk of organ meat, making for torn, jagged edges. And you wouldn't want that. You want the blade to slip easily through. Smooth. Final.

More than a year ago, when I first told my husband Eric that I wanted to do this, he didn't understand. "Butchery?" he asked, an expression of mystification, perhaps even discomfort, screwing up his face.

His suspicion hurt me – there was a time, just a few years before, when there was no trace of it in his heart. I knew I deserved it. But it was just so strange to have to try to explain; strange to have to explain anything to Eric at all. I'd known him by then sixteen years, almost literally half my life. I knew him when he was a beautiful, shy, blue-eyed teenager in baggy shorts, a stretched-out sweater and worn Birkenstocks, with a dog-eared paperback jutting out of one rear pocket. And almost at the beginning I picked him out, decided he was the one I needed. It took most of a school year to snatch him up from

out of the swarm of pretty girls that seemed always to be circling – he so oblivious, he so sweet and gentle - but I managed it. God, I was invincible when I was eighteen. When it came down to it, I pretty much got whatever I went after. *Want, Take, Have*, that was my simple motto. And I was right - to take him, I mean. From the beginning we were interlocking puzzle pieces. From the beginning we nestled into the notion that our two lives were to be irrevocably woven into one.

I now slice off eight pretty burgundy flaps of liver. The cut organ releases a metallic tang into the air, and yet more blood onto the table. Changing out knives now, I delicately excise the tight pale ducts that weave through the slices. Perfectly cooked liver should be crisp on the outside with a custardy-smooth center. Nothing tough or chewy should get in the way of that sensual quintessence. Six of these slices are for the gleaming glass and steel case at the front of the shop; the last two I set aside, to wrap up and take home after work for a Valentine's Day dinner tomorrow. Once, I thought the holiday merited boxes of chocolate and glittery cards, but in these last few, eye-opening years, amid the butchery and wrenches of the heart, I've realized life has gotten too complicated for such sweet and meaningless nothings; I've even learned I'm okay with that.

Valentine's Day Liver for Two

*2 1/2-inch-thick slices high-quality liver, trimmed of
any tough veins or filament*

1/2 cup flour

Salt and pepper to taste

2 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon olive oil

Spread flour on large plate. Season liver slices with salt and pepper, then dredge in the flour, shaking off excess.

Set skillet over high heat, and add butter and oil.

When the butter foam has just subsided, add the liver slices. Sauté just until a crispy golden brown crust develops, about two minutes. Flip slices and do the same on the other side.

(Don't worry about undercooking them.

Overcooking is by far the worse fate for liver.)

Beef liver cooked like this – I keep telling people in the face of near-universal scoffs of disbelief - is one of the most, well, passionate things you'll ever eat. I don't know exactly why this is. It's sexy as hell, but difficult too. Somehow faintly forlorn, like there is no denying that something was torn from something for your pleasure.

Eric and I married young, but that doesn't mean it was precipitous. We'd already known each other for seven years by the time I donned that white organza princess gown, walked down that stone path on my father's arm to the bubbly notes of "My Baby Just Cares For Me." We could look right down to the bottom of one another and see what was swimming there, like silver fish flashing in clear mountain lakes. At our center wasn't sexuality or ambition, though we shared both. No, deep understanding, that's what we had. The nagging voice I've all my life heard in my head, the one people might call addiction or restlessness or waywardness, but which is to me almost an embodiment, some thing outside of myself— impish, far from benign, but also inspiring and not entirely unconcerned with my self-interest — Eric believed in it. He feared it sometimes, but he believed in it. In 2002, when I turned twenty-nine, and we were living in Brooklyn, and I was stuck in yet another in a long line of ill-paid, dead-end jobs, loving my husband — clinging to him, in fact, as the sole solace in a world that I figured by and large didn't have much use for me — but unhappy and beginning to feel I just didn't in fact have much of a talent for happiness, Eric understood that when the voice spoke to me I had to listen.

"I think I have to cook my way through Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking, Vol. I*, 524 recipes. In the space of a year. And I'm going to blog it."

"I think you should." He didn't even look confused. Eric could always divine for me just who I was and just what I could do.

So: I did this crazy cooking thing, and did it saucily, with style and courage. And I was rewarded. Suddenly, I was successful. A book deal, a career! Using the very stuff of my despair and frustration, I'd turned my life around, transformed myself from a depressed secretary to an Author. I was, I thought, just what I wanted to be - confident, brave and well-paid. I was congratulated on my transformation, and because I was now a confident woman, I accepted the congratulations. But privately, I knew that I owed it entirely to Eric. He'd seen me as better than I was, and had shown me the way to get there. If you'd told me then he'd not understand when the voice spoke again, that I was capable of doing anything that could erode the faith of this most loyal of men, I'd never have believed you.

But by the time I followed the whisper here, to this butcher shop two hours from my home in the city, I'd learned through bitter experience that I was wrong. It turns out that things, even perfect things, pieces that seem to fit, to work together, can warp and crack and change.

After slicing the liver, I go to give my hands a quick rinse in the utility sink at the back of the shop. On my left hand, my cutting hand, I'm wearing a curious uncured leather bracelet that wraps around my wrist, then meets in a single thin band at the back of my palm, a slit in the end of which encircles the base of my index finger. A few coarse, snow-white hairs cling to it, though most of the hide has been worn bare. People mistake this for some sort of brace or therapeutic wrap, a treatment for carpal tunnel or a sprained wrist, but what it really is, to me, is a reminder of what I've experienced these last years of marriage, obsession, butchery. I try to wipe some of the blood from it, but as much

soaks into the leather as washes away. Then I retrieve a china plate, white with small cornflower-blue blooms, like something you'd find in some quaint old home kitchen, and line it with an absorbent pad and a square of green butcher paper. I arrange the slices in an attractive floral pattern.

It was confusing and distressing to find myself, so soon after that whirlwind year came to a close, more or less where I'd been before. That wasn't really true, of course. I could not, without seeming churlish and ungrateful, deny my good fortune, the money and job offers and a book to write, the fans and friends and of course the devoted husband. Eric and I seemed calmer together after weathering what I'd spent the last year putting us through. I had every reason for contentment, pride, fulfillment. So why did it all feel like – I don't know, like cheating, somehow? If I pinched myself, I feared I'd wake up, disappear from this dream world in a puff of smoke.

Starry eyed and vaguely discontented, and with too much time on my hands. It was exactly the wrong time for the phone call I got that summer of 2004, a year after my cooking project ended, as I was putting the final touches on my very first book. A call from someone I'd not heard from in years, a half-remembered murmur coming across the line, sparking uncomfortable memories, of a handful of long-ago late nights I'd nearly succeeded in forgetting. "Hey, it's me," he said. "I hear you've been doing well for yourself. I've moved to New York – let's get lunch sometime."

I realize that this could all look a little incriminating, a woman in a butcher shop in upstate New York, covered in blood and completely unruffled by that fact, wielding knives casually, lovingly manipulating offal with gore-begrimed fingers. No, I'm not a lover caught red-handed in the middle of a crime of passion, or a psychopath in the midst of a ritual dismemberment. No humans were harmed in bringing you this scene, but still, I get why it would all make some folks, well, speculate. Speculate, maybe especially, about my expression, which betrays more than just the professional indifference I'm trying hard to project. If you look closely enough, if you get past the (formerly) white apron and the blood and the big knives bristling at my hip and up to my eyes, I'll confess you might see something a bit unnerving there. A secret glow in the eyes. A little thrill. As my friend Gwen would say, "Makes a girl wonder where she's hiding the bodies."

It's a difficult thing to explain, made more difficult still by a phenomenon I've noticed many times since starting work here: it turns out it's very hard for people to listen clearly to a woman holding a butcher knife. But, truly, the glint in my eyes is not about violence or vengeance or cruelty. The joy I take is not – well, not *only* – in the power I now have to hack and cut and destroy. It's about something else, something delicate and calm and ordered.

Just as Tinker Bell led Wendy astray from time to time, I've followed my inner whisper right into all manner of scrapes and heartbreaks these last years. But I trust it, because I've also followed it to my apprenticeship. My haven. My butcher shop. I spend my

days now breaking down meat, with control, gentleness, serenity. I've craved certainty in these last troubled years, and here I get my fix.

I wipe my hands on a hand towel I grab from the bin and bring the china plate with its glistening offal rosette up to the front of the shop. As I do I feel an insistent beelike hum at my left butt cheek – the Blackberry tucked into my jeans pocket. I only get phone service at the front of the shop; the walk-in coolers at the rear block the signal. Though I do, if I'm honest with myself, still feel a small adrenaline-stoked surge in my chest whenever I feel this, I ignore the buzz, and instead hold the plate up to Hailey, who's ringing up a couple at the cash register. "For the case," I mouth at her.

She nods. A line is forming, the beginning of the afternoon rush. "Can you put it in for me? There should be room on the top shelf."

"Um, where?"

"By the oxtails?"

I slide open the glass door of the case, bending to rearrange the crowded array of meat to accommodate its new addition. It's full to bursting already, with dry-aged steaks and unctuous Berkshire pork chops, heaped bowls of ground lamb and rows of spice-spiked homemade sausage. I thought it beautiful the first day I entered this shop, nearly a year and a half ago. Now, as a contributor to it, I find it more beautiful still.

As I close the door and straighten up, I find myself eye-to-eye with one of *those* women. They come into the shop every now and again, these women, with their raised eyebrows and sourly flared nostrils, as if they're walking into a refugee camp latrine. Vegetarian or merely squeamish, forced by whatever circumstance into a clean-smelling but unapologetic temple of meat, they exude supercilious disapproval, as if this place I have come to love is a barely endurable abomination. It's all I can do to be civil, honestly.

"Hi, whaddaya need?"

"Two boneless skinless chicken breasts, please."

These women *always* want boneless skinless chicken breasts. "We've only got bone-in, sorry."

The woman sighs noisily at this affront. I try, not entirely successfully, to repress a roll of the eyes. Of course, I could offer to bone them out for her, I now know perfectly well how to remove the breastbone and cartilage from that insipid slip of white meat. But I am offended by the very notion of skinless boneless chicken breasts, and the boring stick-like women who eat them. This is why I don't work the counter; my people skills leave something to be desired. "Well, that will do, I suppose," she mutters. I turn to one side to reach for a pair of latex gloves.

“Ex- Excuse me? “

I look up from the tray of breasts to see the customer’s suddenly stricken face. She brushes a finger fitfully up against up her own cheek. “You have a –“

I remember the bloody streak on my face and realize with a certain savage glee how I must look to her, bloody and wild-haired under a wide-rimmed leather hat. I want to bare my teeth and hiss vampirically at her. Instead I pull off the gloves I’ve just put on.

“Actually, I’m going to let Jesse help you,” I say cheerfully, nodding to a tall, bespectacled boy behind me, who’s just pulled on his newsboy cap and is washing his hands in preparation to return to the counter after his lunch break. Then I hold up my hands to her, turning them back to front so she gets a good look at the brown gunk under my nails, stains and unidentifiable bits of goo stuck to my skin, the blood-stained leather band around my wrist. “I’m a little messy right now.” I grin toothily, just to provoke a shudder, then turn on my heel.

As I throw the gloves into a garbage bin with a snap, the Blackberry in my back jeans pocket buzzes again. I pull it out, not worrying about the grime I just tried to scare a customer off with. (my PDA, like my hat, my sneakers, and my iPod - currently resting in a dock balanced atop the cryovac bags, blaring Modest Mouse – gets coated with meat schmutz as a matter of course. Even the facets of my engagement ring are clotted with bits of flesh and fat.)

An email. Eric, of course. “How’s it going?” he writes. The meat I bring back home when I return from Fleisher’s, the butcher shop where I’ve trained and worked, helps, but after more than a year, my husband still doesn’t understand what it is I’m trying to do here, what I’m finding that’s so important. He gets lonely. So do I. Still, I elect not to answer; not now.

Instead, I take a break. It’s 4 o’clock, and there’s a fresh pot of coffee, our third of the day. Since I started cutting at Fleisher’s I’ve become a coffee fiend. It’s not just that the caffeine keeps me spry during the long hours on my feet. It’s also that the heat warms fingers icy from slipping into the freezing crevices between muscles, and the moments spent loosely cupping the mug between my hands seems to soothe my hands and wrists, so often swollen from gripping the knife, working it into joints then twisting to open them up.

I pour myself a mug and clasp it between my palms, leaning up against the table opposite the stove in the kitchen. Something on the stovetop smells wonderful, heady with garlic. The soup of the day. I peer into the pot, then grab a ladle for a taste. Spice and rich pork. Posole. Warms to the core, reaches where even the coffee doesn’t, in this place that must of necessity remain nippy all the time. Resting against the counter, thawing my hands, I stare, dreamy with weariness, at the lion’s share of liver still sitting on the table a few feet away, smooth as a river stone though of a more vivid color.

Those familiar with grisly 19th century British history might know that one popular theory among Jack the Ripper armchair criminologists posits that the killer was a practicing butcher. I have developed a small addendum to this hypothesis. I am by now fairly confident that should I want to surgically excise a streetwalker's liver, I could manage it. I will even confess that I can sort of imagine the appeal. Don't get me wrong - I'm not getting behind slashing prostitutes' throats and rummaging through their innards as a valid lifestyle choice. But in a weird way, I sort of see the butchering part of what Jack did as separate from the killing, the frenzy, the rage. And I see it as maybe containing the tiny kernel of sanity still left to him. Maybe it was his forlorn way of trying to fit the pieces back together, or at least understand how they once fit. I look at that crosscut organ sitting on the table, its workings so mysterious but its dimensions so satisfying, dense and symmetrical and glassy-smooth, and I feel a sort of peace, a small piece of understanding.

My hands are blue with chill, my lower back throbs and my left wrist aches, and in the cooler in back is a towering stack of pork sides waiting to be broken down before closing in three hours. I am far from home. I smile into my cup. Right where I want to be.