

How I Am Hungry



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

"Hey, baby," I purr into the phone nestled between my shoulder and my ear, "want to come over for dinner tonight?"

"Sure!" my boyfriend says, the sound of downtown traffic in the background. "I'll be by at 7:30."

"Sounds good. Don't be late!" I say, walking into the kitchen. "I haven't eaten yet." Behind me on the wall hangs a whiteboard; "2011 Resolutions" is written at the head of a list. Some of the entries—"Eat wild game," "Structure writing time into week," "Bigtime sensuality"—have bold black checks next to them, indicating goals already met in the first three months of the year. I pull a brown paper parcel out of the refrigerator, look up at the last entry on the list, unchecked: "Contend with hunger."

People sometimes talk about the "fat kid sensibility," the effect upon the personality that growing up chubby exerts. As a former fat kid I understand and agree that the extra pounds leave us kind, self-conscious fans of the underdog long after the baby fat drops. However, I posit there is also a "hungry kid sensibility," one that gets cultivated by having a limited amount of resources available. I was certainly raised with more than enough food—again, I was a fat kid—but something else was not enough; the small town in which I grew up, the life possibilities available to me

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within reach of my loving family were not enough to sate me. I would find myself full of longing for things I couldn't articulate, frightened by its intensity and the prospect I could live my entire life without sating it.

At the counter, I rub slices of lemon onto chicken wings, thighs, breasts. They slide off the chopping board into a pot as the rice cooker shoots starchy steam out of its vents. Standing at the sink, washing my hands, I hear my empty stomach rumble over the rush of water.

I grew up and the hunger remained. Buddhist philosophy teaches that all people possess within them an infinite number of desires, a vast universe of insatiable hunger. I have given the ol' college try to sate it anyway,

structured my life around fulfilling each momentary impulse. This is what led me to pack up everything and move to the Northwest sight unseen, to get baptized in a Mormon temple in proxy for 20 dead German men, to walk eight miles in a business suit to interview for a job I'd never get, to drink whole bottles of whiskey before nightfall, to scan house numbers in a bad part of town looking for a trick with condoms in my pocket and a monkey on my back. It is what has led me to stand barefoot in my kitchen tonight, pouring soy sauce and rice vinegar into a pot of chicken I will serve to my boyfriend. This is how I am hungry: urgently and bizarrely, with all the force of my life behind it, as though it is an emergency calling for swift intervention.

In my steamy apartment, the door buzzer rings. "Hey, baby," his voice coos into the speaker. I push the button, hear the lock of the door downstairs disengage, hang up the phone. Now he is in the doorway, his arm goes around my back, pulling me in for a kiss.

"Dinner's almost ready, handsome," I say as I pull away, "and just in time."

"Thanks!" he says, taking off his blazer, sliding a hanger into the sleeves. "You must be hungry."

"You have no idea."

The longing hasn't gone anywhere. I am hardwired to be the sort of man who, as an angry ex-boyfriend once put it, "always wants more—more food, more sex, more booze, more God." More life. The fact remains that my appetite, for its ferocious intensity, will not kill me. However, my frantic pursuit of sating it might. I have grown into a man who isn't willing to lose everything, and I have learned that this entails being willing to live with the hunger, to hear its anxious cry for what it is—not an emergency, but a suggestion. Necessity forces me to search for what it is at the root of this longing and to learn, day by day, how to live patiently with its loud cries without thrashing about violently to silence it.

Back in the kitchen, I spoon my Chicken Adobo over rice, garnish with lemon slices. I carry plates out to see my boyfriend sitting cross-legged on the rug, the low table brushing his knees. I sit across from him, set steaming plates down and realize that I am complete in this moment—fed and clothed, loved and loving, soberly contending with hunger. I bring a forkful of chicken and rice to my mouth, close my eyes as the flavors spread over my tongue, and smile. ☐

Email Nick at nickmattos@justout.com if you'd like his Chicken Adobo recipe.

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