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FOOD BY ARIA SELIGMANN

Oh, Joy!

Holiday reality bites.

No, I don't hang out with throngs of literati who descend upon unsuspecting restaurants to feast on seven-course extravaganzas all served with apropos wine, who then, with their combined wit, taste and talent, write up mouth-watering reviews.

Nope, I don't spend hours in the kitchen lovingly attending to the details of garnish and presentation. Not even close.

In fact, on this afternoon, I'm not even sure what day it is, having worked I don't know how many days straight to meet early holiday deadlines. All I know for sure is I'm famished and even if there were anything to cook in my house, I've got no energy to deal with it.

Fortunately, I only have myself to feed as my son's been deposited with his father. And judging from the utterly grateful look I received when I informed him the boy'd been fed, he's not faring much better this time of year.

Staples are long since gone. No frozen waffles, Go Gurts, boxes of Annie's cheesy bunnies picked up during the last grocery spree of some distant day. Apples are eaten up, and the bananas' brown spots have grown together like an even tan. Two oranges behind an empty rice milk carton in the refrigerator — why is it still in here? — have sprouted into the forest primeval.

That scares me. I back away from the fridge. I strain, wondering what we've eaten the last few weeks while juggling work, school, field trips, meetings, homework, playdates, more work, the flu, holiday shopping and holiday parties. I can't for the life of me remember a single meal I've served my son for the past month, yet somehow he's grown, and there have been plenty of dishes to wash.

A glance at the sink: grater, frying pan, spatula, reminds me of my recent two-hour latke-frying stint, but that was a Hanukkah obligation, not a meal.

A store run is clearly overdue, but hitting the Chopper on what may very well be a Sunday would do me in.

Wait, maybe it's not so bleak. There, in the cupboard corner closeted behind a cobweb is a half bagful of fusilli. There's even a can of tomato sauce that, with a little oregano here in this plastic bag behind the mini-marshmallows, might actually make it

edible. And here's a pot to cook it in.

But first I've got to wash it, as it contains leftover grits from ... I think it was only today I had 'em for breakfast. They're hard enough to pass for overcooked polenta. With a little sauce on top, it might not be so bad. Certainly faster than pasta. I spy a half-can of Spaghettios left over from my son's lunch.

I grow excited.

Maybe I can just spoon the Spaghettios over the top. That would save the time of opening a whole new can of sauce.

I mean, it could pass for an Italian dinner, right?

Let's doctor it up, I tell myself. I know there's mozzarella ...

I begin slicing it 'til my stomach interrupts, "No."

I put the white cheese brick back into the Westinghouse, fish around instead for some not-so-gross parmesan. There it is. But when I peer into the plastic container, the shreds are green.

I ditch the parmesan, enhance the Spaghetti polenta with the oregano, place it into the microwave and zap it for one minute.

Starving, I spoon some into my mouth, gag, and give up.

Back to the cupboard. As I scan the shelves: dried kidney beans, large pitted black olives, a half can of French fried onion rings, two-year-old emergency back-up Ramen, sprinkles, cupcake wrappers, I wonder how many other harried single moms allow themselves to sink to such desperate kitchen lows.

Oh, I hear you, that isn't fair, you say, I shouldn't be sexist because for every single mom there's also a harried single dad not admitting to his ex what he feeds the kids, either.

But what good is guilt? Does anyone provide three square meals per day for their family anymore?

Doesn't happen.

But miracles do. I spy the white plastic rectangle of a saltine package hiding behind the green tea.

Salvation.

As I fill the kettle, the phone rings.

"What are you doing for dinner?" invites a friend.

She's a full-time working single mom who's got two more kids than me — and her shit together.

Mumbling thanks, I hang up, resolving next year to do better.

EW

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