

The Year of the Pots and Pans

My 19th birthday. Or as I call it, the year of the pots and pans. Cause when your birthday gifts are pots and pans, you know you'll never be a kid again. And when you have to go to the store to actually buy your own presents, you know you'll definitely never be a kid again.

"I don't even get to unwrap the damn things?!" I ask jokingly.

"But this is not the kind of gift you unwrap, Mikey," My mother says... "It is the kind of gift you experience!" I wasn't sure what she meant. And I wasn't sure why she waved her hands across the air while she said it, as if she magically summoned the word 'experience' out of thin air. But see, I never had any sisters, so it's not like my Mother was ever able to express her love through fine fabrics, opulent outfits and golden collars. Instead, as a Mother of three rowdy boys, her instrument of love was the mighty wooden spoon, the ironclad cookware, the pasta pot in its stainless polish, the hearty 4-quart saucepan, and beyond. So, this was much more than a present. It was a shopping spree. And if William Sonoma understood that an 'experience' so symbolic in both my mother's life and mine happened on a December afternoon in their store on 7th avenue, they would make it into an overly sentimental advertisement.

I learned in the year of the pots and pans that cookware, well, isn't just for cooking. It's also a skillet of rare memories, raw moments, and poached time. For when you spread love through the kitchen, every utensil becomes a mnemonic.

“La Cruset?” I try to pronounce.

“No. No. Le Creuset.” My Mom says, expanding the ‘et’ for an extra three seconds with another odd windshield wiper hand motion.

“Ok-aaaaay,” I spit back at her, doing the same hand motion except ten times more exaggerated.

“See that one right there?” She points to a rustic red clay pot whose stained olive black surface made it look like it was slightly overcooked in the kiln even though it shined new. “I used to torture my sister with this one when we were kids. I was 12 and she was, she was a baby, like 6 years old. And Bubby wasn’t around so I would cook. ” She picks up the pot and takes off its lid, “That’s one spoonful of rice for me. And one grain of rice for you. One more spoonful of rice for me. And one more little grain of rice for you!” She laughs a sparkling closed mouth raised eyebrow laugh. “I tortured her.”

My jaw drops as I wobble my head in disbelief. Since when is my Mom this cruel? And this funny? “What! I would always end up feeding her! I just... made her work for it, that’s all.”

“What did she have to do... make sure she pronounced Le Creuset like she was the daughter of a French nobleman?! Le Creuset... Le Creuset...” I tease her. She rolls her eyes at me with a light smile.

“In the cart!” She exclaims like an excited drill sergeant. And in the cart the La Creuset pot goes.

It was rare to see my mother bouncing like this. Quite frankly, you would have better luck digging up a forest truffle than spotting my Mom outside the secluded island that was her bed. Don’t get me wrong, she is always stirring the storm, but it’s usually in a robe tucked tightly

beneath her comforter. For better or for worse, that's how it has always been. So, to see her like this is a treat that will only become more rich and more delicious.

As we pushed our shopping spree down the prairie sand panel floors of William Sonoma, we piled in more and more cookware, each grated with more and more savory memories. And with each item, I seemed to butcher another brand name.

"Wüsthof?" I question.

"Imagine it was a 'V' Michael, 'V!' Vüsthof!" She follows with an exploding 'ay-o-kay' hand gesture.

"A 'V'?" What is this nonsense?"

She picks up one of the paring knives.

"I held this one up to my Mom when I told her I wasn't going back to Fieldston when I was 16."

"You dropped out of school when you were 16?" I ask in disbelief.

She nods. Then she picks up the knife and points it at me.

"I'm never going back!" she shouts as if she was a soldier having a flashback. I take it from her hand.

"Yes you are!" I shout back.

She picks up another paring knife and we run around the cutlery sets jousting at each other from a safe distance.

"In the cart! In the cart!" She repeats with frantic excitement.

I put the paring knife and the matching set in the cart and we march on. And as we do, I try to make light of this new information. She dropped out of high school when she was 16? Did she never tell me because she feared I would do the same? Or did I never care enough to ask? How is it possible to spend your whole life sharing a hallway with someone but know so little about them?

I pick up my head and see a row of cast iron pans that look like they were chiseled from a meteorite. I look in closer to read one of the brand names. Finally, an American brand...

"Lodge!" I exclaim proudly, staring at Mom for her approval.

"Who cares Michael, they're cast iron pans! You just find the thickest, heaviest one!"

"Oh god damnit!" I respond with a sarcastic but poignant frustration.

"And you never, NEVER wash them with soap. Especially if you are with Italian people.

It'll leave you stranded on the streets of Rome!"

"You never got stranded in the streets of Rome?!" I reply, calling her out but questioning her at the same time.

"In the cart!" She quickly responds. Down it goes. And off we go, with the gap between the mother I know and the woman she is at an all-time high.

"Swelling Ankles?" I exclaim confidently.

"Zwilling Henckels!" She shouts. I burst out laughing. She gets it.

"I have no stories for that one...Back to the shelf!"

By the time we head to the register the cart is filled like the plate of an overly ambitious young boy at a breakfast buffet. The two of us are proud. When it is finally our turn to check out, I walk to the far end of the register to help bag my birthday presents. As my Mom takes each pot

and each pan and places them on the conveyor belt, she stares at me, smiling the most bittersweet smile I have ever seen. And as the cashier scans each item, my Mom's smile gets bigger and bigger, until it gets so big that a heavy, glowing tear drops straight down her cheek. And another one. And another one. Never a single sniffle. Just smiles and tears. We have spent the last two hours prepping for the most significant meal she has ever cooked. And that meal is my adulthood. And with each utensil, each mnemonic, she gave me the greatest gift of all. Not one that can be wrapped, one that can only be experienced.