



CONFESSIONS OF A SECRET GAME EATER

LEIGH NEWMAN

Reading line

This is the view from our family dining room: the blue-black Alaskan sky, a firmament's worth of stars, a mountain range or two or five (depending on the cloud cover), the frozen glint of the lake on which our house sits. And yet, in the four o'clock darkness, Christmas candles burning in our pinecone candleholders, this majesty takes a backseat to the real reason we live on the edge of half a million square feet of wilderness—the food.

In fact, the view across our multiple picture windows is blocked by our reflections, each a hovering, blond portrait of hypoglycemia. There is my father at the head of the table, his carving fork poised over five whole crisp-skinned wild ducks stuffed with apples and onions. There is my stepmother at the foot, her hand on a bowl of pearl barley. There are my two teenage brothers on the lakeside of the table, eyeing the gravy boat placed equidistant between them. And then, there is me and

Lawrence, my Manhattan boyfriend, the only boyfriend I have ever brought home to Anchorage, much less Christmas.

Lawrence is smiling at us, either unaware of the test ahead or pretending to be so. Thus far he has already endured a bruising sixteen-mile family “fun” cross-country ski trip, shot skeet and dug out a snow machine. He is a smart boy, a Harvard boy with a good haircut and a new shirt, who might impress many a family down in the Lower Forty-eight, but whose qualifications mean moose turds at this moment.

My father's carving fork hovers over the neat row of ducks: pintail, pintail . . . then plunges down on the mallard, which he deposits on Law's plate. “Watch out for shot,” he says, stopping to douse the duck in hot gizzard gravy.

Lawrence laughs.

“Shot will break your teeth. That's all I'm saying.”

Lawrence stops laughing and begins to dig through his duck with his fork, stopping only when he notices everybody watching. Then he cuts, oh so delicately, and chews, chews, chews . . . smiling at me all the while, as if to say, “Honey, you know about my broken-tooth phobia, second only to my broken-kneecap phobia and my phobia about running with a fork and accidentally jabbing out my eye, but I’m going to try this duck for you anyway. Just very, very carefully.”

Meanwhile I am thinking: If worse comes to worst, I’ll sign up for French conversation classes. I’ll learn to knit. Because there is life after a broken heart. And even though I don’t want to break up with this boy, if I have to, I have to. Dad gave Law *the mallard*, the filet mignon of ducks, prepared with the Newman family recipe, which dates back to my great-grandmother.

Lawrence chews and chews, a pensive yet indecipherable look on his face. Is he still considering the shot, or actually tasting the flavor of the meat?

My stepmother, an Ohio girl, appears to be sweating for him, perhaps remembering her own first bite of wild duck—a dark, soft, gamy meat that can taste livery if you haven’t grown up with it. My brothers eye the duck legs—puny compared to their chicken drumstick and thigh counterparts, but nonetheless juicy prized morsels that Dad used to strip from the bone and feed to me as a baby.

Lawrence chews some more . . . and swallows.

My family pauses.

“Great,” he says. “Can somebody pass the gravy?”

My family nods their approval, the highest praise you can get in this house, and digs in. By Lawrence’s second or third bite, however, most of us are done, our plates china wastelands of carcasses and skin, the tablecloth awash in juices.

Two weeks later, we are getting ready to fly back to New York. When Dad says that Lawrence will make a good Newman (I have not yet informed him that if we do get married, Lawrence isn’t taking my last name), I use the moment to casually suggest that Dad pack me my annual igloo cooler—this time with servings for two.

That is where Law discovers us in the garage: Dad and I standing in front of our three wall-to-wall freezers as Dad tosses out packages of hand-wrapped game and I squeal like a cheerleader over a chain of moose hot dogs.

“I fry these up for breakfast!” I holler. “With eggs!”

“That’s how to get the day started,” Dad says. “Protein. Right, Law?”

“Actually,” says Lawrence, “Leigh’s never made me moose hot dogs.”

The garage goes silent.

“Oh,” I say. “Sorry.” But my behavior does seem odd, even to me. Law and I have been dating for almost four years. What *have* we been eating?

Manhattan's East Village isn't a provincial place. There are Tibetan takeouts, a Ukrainian steak house, a Japanese fried-octopus pancake stand. My friends and neighbors have either traveled around the globe or were born around the globe. They are sophisticated types, more sophisticated than I am by far. They would be thrilled to dig into a bowl of caribou stew.

And yet when they come over, I greet them with a baked whole chicken and a green salad. It's not that I want all my Alaskan game to myself, or that I'm afraid of defending myself against PETA activists or vegetarians (a dark teenage phase I also went through, the thought of which still makes Dad teary-eyed). I am embarrassed. And I'm embarrassed for the reason that all well-adjusted, happy-looking adults are embarrassed—inside I am ten and I am standing at the Girl Scout meeting in the basement of St. David's Episcopal Church as fifty-odd parents and daughters stare in muted horror at me, my mother, and our bubbling Crock-Pot.

How did this happen? The year is 1982. My father and mother have just split up. My mother and I have moved five thousand miles southeast to her hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, a land of brick houses and sprinkled lawns, iceberg lettuce

and tomato aspic, the occasional exotic egg roll at the Chinese restaurant. Girls here go to girls' school. In the summer they go to sailing camps or French camps or beach houses where they swim in the ocean. What they don't do is spend their summers transforming old, moldy refrigerators from the Anchorage dump into "home smokers" in order to perfect a recipe for salmon jerky. They don't pluck ducks in the garage and win arguments with their dads over Mr. Duck's recent diet (fish? weeds? fresh gravel?) by yanking out the guts and opening the stomach with a fingernail.

They don't track wild sheep across miles of shale-covered ridges or stand in muddy rivers up to their armpits holding on to the rope of a floatplane while their dad sputters, "Watch the goddamn prop!"

This is why they are shiny and beautiful and perfect, with sticker collections and Rubik's Cubes and barrettes made out of braided ribbons that cascade into their shiny, long hair. And I am that girl in our girls' school with a practical yet traumatic pixie cut who plays "Frontier Homestead" behind the gym, harvesting onion-looking weeds for winter and living in a pine-tree shelter made out of boughs. Alone.

Needless to say, I would do anything to be shiny—an aspiration I do not commu-

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nicate to my mother. Somehow, though, she suspects my desire and enrolls me in Girl Scouts, an organization where I do moderately well. I have learned a little by this point. I know better than to bring up fishing lures or the mangy taste of bear meat.

The fateful night at St. David's actually begins quite positively. I am just like everybody else: my green sash covered with patches that I lied to earn. The parents clap. We take a bow. The potluck dinner begins, a great long buffet table of three-bean salads and chicken salads and deviled eggs with a saucy sprinkle of paprika. At the far end, a Crock-Pot bubbles out the rich, meaty smell of spaghetti. Everybody loads up and starts to eat. The cupcakes are going fast. So is the lasagna. I am hanging out with some very happening sixth-graders who go to another girls' school and thus know nothing of my reputation. We discuss Japanese jump ropes, Billy Joel, Skittles versus M&M's, the gross bloomers with elastic thigh-holes that we all have to wear for gym instead of shorts. Suddenly, by ones and twos, parents desert the buffet table, gathering in little powwow knots across the room. A communal whisper buzzes hither and thither: Is it true? It couldn't be.

Finally, a sweet, loving, brave mother approaches my mom. "Diane?" she says. "This isn't moose spaghetti, is it?"

My mother smiles, fingering her pearls. "Oh no. It's ground caribou *and* moose. Plus I add a little diced carrot for sweetness."

Fifty plastic forks hit the floor. Every-

body is full all of a sudden. They've forgotten to walk their dogs. Their daughters have lacrosse practice in the morning. Night, everybody!

"Why did you tell them?" I ask, once we are safely in the car. "Why?"

"Honey," Mom says, digging down into her well of experience as a social worker, peace activist, and mother who gives out mini-boxes of raisins on Halloween. "I thought it would be fun to share our experiences. Everybody is unique."

Twenty years later, I am standing in my one-bedroom on Clinton Street, the broken tiles in my kitchen floor actually clattering to the beat of the Dominican salsa from La Fama Records store downstairs. Law has moved into this happening pad of sporadic plumbing and loose wires, home to a refrigerator the size of a microwave with a freezer we call "the glacial cap." Massive ice formations grow in its dark interior, creeping ever outward until they overwhelm our supply of various game packages. I have been hoarding a package or ten, leaving about a millimeter of space for Law's frozen necessities. He has put his foot down. We are having people over. We are emptying out the glacial cap of all Leigh's Alaskan game and making room for a pint of Ben & Jerry's.

The question of which people to invite occupies us for some time. I find something wrong with everybody, plus multiple problems with our apartment. There is nowhere to eat except the coffee table

(a sixties pebble-covered street treasure), which wobbles under the pressure of an ashtray. I kick the table to demonstrate said wobble.

This is one of those terrible relationship moments for Law, I suspect, one in which he thinks, “What happened to the girl who once invited the bouncer over? What happened to the girl who used to make people dance on the bed if there wasn’t room in the living room?”

In thirty seconds, I have built up this evening into epic mental proportions. Either our friends will be rendered speechless with admiration for my game dishes—and thus Alaska and thus me for being such a kick-ass outdoor girl. Or they will smile, slip their napkins over their mouths, spit out contents, and confirm that not only is game kind of gross, but I am too. Geography gives us our food, our landscape, our language, our politics, our history. I can’t imagine my mother without her Baltimore pearls and a tray of crab cakes in the broiler. My dad, for all his Alaskan mannerisms, is still a country boy from Chico, California, who dreams of owning his own flock of pet sheep. I’m from two hugely different places, as well as a few other cities before we moved to Alaska. The question where are you from? always sent me into a panic. And after several more Crock-Pot episodes, I chose to present whichever past and place seemed the most palatable to the asker. The flannel-wearing West Coaster heard that I was from Alaska. The East Coaster in head-to-toe seersucker heard Balti-

more. But I always had the vague, queasy feeling that my conversation mate would bust me on a detail—a name (Baltimoreans love to play who-do-we-know-in-common) or a geographical fact (Alaskans always match the river to the fish story). I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was a bit of a fraud in either case. And this was why I chose to live in this great loud honking island. Nobody asked; nobody cared. Everybody was just from New York.

But try explaining all that to your boyfriend who just wants to have some friends over for dinner. I finally agree to the meal and stack the invite list with safe bets: a Spanish friend (ordered cockles once), a non-cooking friend (sick of takeout, hopefully), and a neighbor who scarfs down *chicharrones* (deep-fried pork rinds) from a Dominican fry joint on Clinton.

The night begins with a showdown at the freezer. When I’m cooking for Law and me, I stick to the easiest dishes, like salmon fillets and moose hot dogs. But as I chip through the ice all I find are the choicer, gourmet items that require more elaborate preparations. We have two mallards, two moose steaks or possibly caribou steaks, two caribou backs or ribs . . . or possibly sheep ribs or backs, a lump of elk muscle from Dad’s trip out West, and two more red meaty things—maybe sheep, maybe goat, maybe dog, what do I know, Dad doesn’t label his game. He knows what it is.

A real Alaskan (this is an official title

in Alaska, Real Alaskans versus Outsiders from the Lower Forty-eight) would know how to transform the frozen lumps into one of my favorite comfort dishes: roasted goose, duck with apples and onions, caribou stew, rare caribou steak with sizzling pan gravy, barbecued duck, microwaved bloody-rare duck (no joke), grilled Dahl sheep with rosemary, fried halibut, halibut stew, grilled king salmon or red salmon or silver salmon, salmon chowder, salmon quiche, salmon patties, salmon jerky. Cooking in Alaska goes hand in hand with citizenship. The most macho bush pilot in town will get misty-eyed over his recipe for panfried trout.

I, of course, have to call up Dad. Package by package, we go through the inventory, me saying, “Well, it’s brown, or kind of red, and skinny, and has a bone in it,” and Dad saying, “Sounds like a rump roast, I must have given you one of those. Or maybe it’s a back strap.”

After about an hour, we’ve both had it. “I tell you what,” he says. “You just soak whatever it is in a vat of soy sauce and slap it on the grill and serve it. That’s what you do.”

“Dad?” I say. “I don’t have a barbecue. Or anywhere to put a barbecue. I live in an apartment.”

My dad is quiet on the other end, maybe

staring out at the great family grill that rivals the size and altitude of the mountains behind it, wondering what an apartment looks like, how his little girl ended up in New York, why she couldn’t just get herself a floatplane and a house down the street like all his other friends’ kids.

I am quiet too. I am thinking of the period from age fourteen to age eighteen when I would arrive in Alaska to visit

Dad, separated from my life back East, miserable, anxious, lonely, confused. I’d hide at the next-door neighbor’s. Their daughter, my own age, was the Alaskan version of a Shiny girl, with a pickup truck, a snow machine, satellite TV. My dad’s way of dealing with me was to throw on some chest

waders and storm into my room, offering fishing, caribou hunting, and rare duck, all of which I sneered at.

What I wanted, but was too afraid to say, was: I want to go home! Home by then was Baltimore and field hockey practice and smoking Marlboro Lights in the back of a convertible, flying down Roland Avenue. I had watched and learned. I had turned myself in a Shiny girl, down to the complexities of her school-uniform shoes—L.L. Bean bluchers, duct-taped around the toes, stomped down on the heels.

Dad doesn’t mention this time period

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on the phone now, just as he never brings it up when I visit him as an adult and can't fly-fish for trout properly or name the variety of whales surfacing across Cook Inlet from the plane.

"I tell you what," he says. "Whatever game you've got in that freezer, you just chicken-fry it. Chicken-frying can save anything."

Three hours later I'm hunkered down with bag of bodega flour and a cast-iron pan. Our three guests are oozing off the sofa, due to the three bottles of wine I've opened—yet another tactical decision: drunk people love food. Any kind of food.

Over at the stove, I repeat my dad's mantra—"butter never hurts"—and set to work, first dredging the defrosted package of moose/caribou/sheep meat in a mixture of flour, oregano, salt, and pepper, then transferring it to a hissing, hot panful of butter. The flour poofs. The meat crackles. Plumes of carbonized smoke burn a permanent grease cloud across the ceiling. After a minute's searing on either side, I have six sizzling steaks of unidentified meat.

A slip-slap of the spatula. Meat on a funky fifties platter. Steak knives in hand. The coffee table is now bedecked with place mats and candles. "Caribou's on!" I say, picking a species.

We sit on the floor, chins to the coffee table, and dig in. In one bite, I am transported. That hunk of bloody game has morphed into a tender, musky slab

of meat, its juices sealed in by a buttery, blackened crust, its taste infusing through me both as taste and as memory—summer barbecues at ten at night, the sun still shining, Dad at the grill, me *dying* of hunger at the picnic table, the last calls of the loons on the lake.

I am so busy eating, in fact, that I fail to look up for the reaction of our guests. The non-cooker has cleared his plate. The Spaniard comes in second. The *chicharrones* neighbor eats merely half his steak, despite its fried attributes. Law is still chewing; the man is a slow eater. Besides, his opinion doesn't count. He loves me. He will pretend if needed. "So?" I say.

"Delicious. No kidding."

"*Delicioso*. What do you call it? Venison?"

"Nobody ever gives you meat in New York. It's always like three strands of pasta and some bagged salad."

I delve no deeper as to whether everyone is just being polite or has actually enjoyed the food. I wish I could say that was because I didn't care what anyone thought, because I had been—in one brief dinner—cured of all latent insecurities. The truth was that I did still care, just not enough to waste time interrogating people while there was still game on the coffee table. I speared the half steak left by Mr. *Chicharrones* onto my plate and gobbled down every dark, savory bite. I have a defense for such crass behavior. The Alaskan rule is: you hunt it, you eat it, except for the horns, guts, and hooves. I am Alaskan enough to do just that. 🍴

Duck à la Newman

Note from Nana Newman, 1947: First be sure the birds, preferably mallards, are plucked, cleaned, and suitably presented in plastic BY THE HUNTER before admittance to the kitchen.

- ~ Stuff the body cavity of 4 wild ducks with chunks of apple, onion, and a stalk of celery.
- ~ Sear the ducks over a hot flame on the stove until the skin starts to brown.
- ~ Turn the duck breasts side up in the pan.
- ~ Add 1 whole medium yellow onion in between each duck breast.
- ~ Add one small can of orange-juice concentrate.
- ~ Add sweet vermouth until the liquid comes $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way up the sides of the ducks.
- ~ Add a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of soy sauce, maybe more.
- ~ Smear the breasts with chutney, fruit jelly, or jam.
- ~ Put 2 to 3 cloves on the breast of each duck and grind on a liberal amount of fresh pepper.
- ~ Add 1 cup of water.
- ~ Cook at 350° in a covered pan until the meat is about ready to fall off the bones, but hasn't quite. Brown the skin by uncovering the pan and increasing the heat 10 to 15 minutes at the end. Watch this; it is easy to burn at this stage. Separate the juice from the fat and serve with cooked barley.

Note from Dad Newman, 2002: You can also use domestic ducks, but cut off all the fat and extra skin that you can, and brown them longer at the beginning and end to burn off some of the extra fat left. Cooking time is usually a little less too, because they start off more tender.