

How I Remembered Rachel

I'm terrible at buying Christmas presents. It's not for lack of caring; I'd like to think I'm a pretty sensitive and thoughtful guy, and I believe most of my friends would agree. However, those that do might tend to be the friends I haven't tried to buy Christmas presents for. Whatever the reason, I just don't have the knack.

To be fair, I've been pretty spoiled in this department. My family, you see, is a no-nonsense one. Buying Christmas gifts for my mom was usually a matter of having her drive my sister and me to the mall. As we stepped out of the car, we performed the yearly ritual that evolved as much by Mom's wishes as ours—we'd ask what kitchen utensils or appliances she needed this year. This formality didn't exactly get us in the Christmas spirit, but at least Mom got what she wanted and didn't have to drive us to a million stores. For several years in a row, what she wanted turned out to be wooden spoons, which seemed like a strange thing to want for Christmas. Now that I have my own kitchen to look after—I use "kitchen" in the loosest sense of the word, as I do for the "food" I cook there—I understand why she needed them. Even *I* use wooden spoons all the time, and it's hard to keep those buggers clean.

Still, I'm a nuclear engineering major, so spoon cleanliness comes in pretty low on my list of day-to-day concerns, unless of course that spoon is thirty feet long, made of stainless steel, and being used to circulate cooling water in a reactor pool. ("Not gonna happen," my textbooks tell me.) I only mention all this spoon business because this is a story about another Christmas present. It is also a story about my sister Rachel. Issues of spoon cleanliness are a little more important for her, because she wants to be a chef. Years ago I would have been tempted to add to the preceding statement "not that there's anything wrong with that," which would have given

away that I thought there was. I've learned a lot since then—about being a brother, about how cool chefs are, and, most importantly, about Rachel.

Rachel is sharp. She could have pulled in plenty of scholarships had she wanted to be, say, a biologist, which is what I had always pegged her for. She has a mind for details, which I lack. While I'd rather lean on my math skills and logical reasoning, Rachel is more the type who might be happy studying up on the steps of meiosis and mytosis. (I, for one, could never remember the difference, and you can't go back and derive it from first principles if you forget.) But Rachel's mind—and eye—for details manifested itself instead in the crafts. She's taught herself how to knit, how to sew, and how to cook. This last craft has proven to be her real passion, especially baking.

So she decided to go for it. She dipped candy at a fancy chocolate shop for four years, worked summers at the cream puff tent at the Wisconsin State Fair, and, much to my delight, enlisted my help in refining her apple pie recipe. She also suffered a lot of teasing from the jocks in her "Chef Foods" class in high school; most of her classmates did not share her interest in all things culinary, and they considered her a suck up. I'm sure her doting instructor—who is blessed with few students who actually want to learn about cooking and aren't just pre-calc dodgers—didn't help matters any by boasting daily about her star pupil's career choice. But, to many, a career in any kind of food service is nothing to boast about. It took courage for Rachel to forsake the advantages her academic accomplishments had earned her and start completely anew in cooking school. My parents picked up on that courage right away and said how proud they were of it in the "Parent Messages" section of our high school yearbook. Now that I've learned a little more, Lord knows I'm proud of her, too.

You see, a few years ago I read a book about being a chef—which brings me back to my penchant for bad Christmas gift-giving. Called *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, it was apparently the best of the then-current *New York Times* bestsellers by celebrity chefs. It sounded like a bit of an exposé about the food service industry but one that, at its heart, celebrated the joys of cooking. “How bad could it be?” I thought. Pleased that I had located a seemingly thoughtful gift so quickly, I bought it, wrapped it up, and gave it to her without a second thought. A couple weeks later, though, just before heading back to college for the spring term, I ran out of reading material and picked the book up off the dining room table. I wanted to hear a little bit about the life my sister had ahead of her.

About two pages into the tale, I was afraid that, if she ever actually read this book, she would be enrolled in a biology program so quickly I wouldn’t have had time to tell her what an idiot I had been. It was on that January day that I finally came to respect my sister’s soon-to-be profession. Anthony “Tony” Bourdain, the author of *Kitchen Confidential*, is a superb writer, and—deserving of the all the comparisons to Hunter S. Thompson I later read about—he describes the drug-addled, sex-crazed, injury-ridden world of New York City chefs in the ‘80s and ‘90s in lurid detail. This guy is badass, and I loved every word of his badass book. I just wasn’t sure my sister would.

Rachel is, in one (admittedly hyphenated) word, mild-mannered. Her eyes tear up a little when she gets yelled at by coaches or our parents. She rarely raises her voice or—her teachers used to lament—her hand. It always seemed all she could do to muster an embarrassed half-smile when friends of the family came into town and asked at dinner if she had “started talking yet.” And she would not, I assure you, have responded well to the stripping down Bourdain once had dished out to him by one of the instructors at his alma mater, the Culinary Institute of

America (CIA): “You are a shit chef! I make two cook like you in the *toilette* each morning! You are deezgusting! A *shoemaker*! You have destroyed my life...You will *never* be a chef! You are a *disgrace!*”¹ Etc., etc.

As angry as I get at the thought of some French chef reducing my sister to tears, I’m more disgusted by the teasing she endured from those family friends who always found her quietness so amusing. Their questions about whether she talked yet were never directed at her, and I always wanted to get up and yell “Can’t you see she’s sitting right there?!” But, I knew something they didn’t. My other response, which I also always held back, would have been quieter, befitting of its status as truth that felt a lot like a secret: “She talks to me.”

Although my sister and I never hung out together around the house much, our family took a lot of long-distance road trips—you know, the kind of vacation where you load up the minivan and hit a half dozen national parks in about eighteen days. I look back fondly on those vacations for many reasons, but perhaps most of all because—especially when we’d sneak off for a few hours to get a break from our parents—those were the times when Rachel would open up. The two of us would talk, joke, gripe, and commiserate for hours. I started to see a person with opinions, a person with some sass, a person who might just stand up for herself. But put us in a room with a bunch of folks from church or a couple dozen relatives and she would revert back to “girl who never talks.”

Imagine my panic, then, when I finished reading this book—a Christmas gift I had given her—about an industry that, in my head, seemed poised to chew my little sister up and spit her out, possibly into someone else’s food. I got caught up in a wave of misguided, older brother-style overprotectiveness. I did whatever I could to dilute the future effects of what I imaged

¹ Bourdain, Anthony. *Kitchen Confidential*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 42.

would be a devastating introduction to her chosen field. And I secretly hoped she would never get around to reading the book.

My last mistake—at least for this story—was how much I underestimated her. She read the book. She carried on. She endured the advanced jock mocking of “Chef Foods II.” She reached down and found the voice needed to shout out the chocolate and cheesecake orders of drunken revelers at a couple summers’ worth of noisy music festivals. She stood up to her bosses at the chocolate shop and got them to cut her hours when she got a job across the street as a baker’s apprentice. And, about six months ago, she headed off for her first semester of cooking school—at Bourdain’s alma mater no less, where she pulled down a couple of scholarships, including the “Cream of the Crop” scholarship for future chefs with book smarts.

I got the title for this essay from a song my dad likes to listen to. It contains one of those lines that takes on personal meaning despite whatever it means in the context of the song: “I still remember Rachel / Soft as a velvet gown.”² I see now that my unnecessary worries over the effects of some silly book came from a somewhat false memory of my sister. Ironically, it was a memory all those people who teased her about being quiet might have had. They saw her as timid, shy, passive: soft. And soft, *Kitchen Confidential* taught me, was the one thing a chef couldn’t afford to be. Chefs need to be hard, like the tough-as-nails Bourdain and his ilk. Chefs need to keep it together when aging Frenchmen try to make examples of them; they need to keep it together when faced with an impossibly difficult string of orders on a busy night; they need to keep it together when a pie—or hand—gets burned or when a soufflé refuses to rise.

So is my sister a Bourdain-esque gunslinger who will strike terror into the hearts of her crews? Well, no, at least not yet. But what I had forgotten about my sister during my fit of worry was her strong spirit, which once only I and a few others had known about. It’s been

² Cash, Johnny, et al. “Welfare Line.” *Highwayman*. New York: Sony, 1990, track 8.

slowly emerging in recent years for the rest of the world to see. My best friend caught a glimpse of it the spring after that fateful Christmas; he ran into her around town while home for the weekend and called me up to report his findings. “Damn,” he said, “your sister got sassy.” Whatever she said to him, he definitely had it coming. He had been president of the “Does Rachel Talk?” society for years. She had apparently had enough and informed him in no uncertain terms that, yes, she does. I’ll never be prouder of her, at least until she owns her own bakery or shows up on the Food Network or something.

I’ve eaten at Bourdain’s restaurant twice now, one of those times with Rachel. I never got a look at the chef who taught me to respect my sister’s career choice—just like I’ve never told her that at one time I didn’t. He was probably off working on his new book or out yelling at culinary students somewhere. I know he does visit his alma mater from time to time. In fact, I have direct evidence, in writing. My sister, you see, is not so bad at giving Christmas presents. Few other people, for instance, know me well enough to guess that—despite my disdain for the rest of his music—I hold John Denver’s *A Christmas Together with the Muppets* in high regard. And only one person knew how much I would treasure an autographed copy of *Kitchen Confidential*.

Perhaps I’m making too much of what was really just a celebrity book signing, but I wish I had been there to see my sister shake the scarred hand of Tony Bourdain, somewhere on the campus of America’s elite culinary training ground. I was there in spirit, though, because he had just signed the very same copy I had given to her three years before. When she came back to Wisconsin, she returned it to me with her familiar quiet confidence. Wherever her culinary life takes her, that’s how I’ll always remember Rachel.