

HOME ON THE HILLS
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by Dana Lise Shavin

My husband Daryl tells two stories: In the first, his grandmother makes a dish called organ stew—every part of a freshly slaughtered pig that formerly served a life-giving function (heart, liver, stomach, pancreas, brain, lungs) is brought to a rolling boil in a large pot of salted water. What isn't rendered chewable by human teeth is tossed into a bucket by the dining-room table, which, when full, is taken out back and fed to the surviving pigs. It's an endless cycle, a Draconian, pig-eat-pig kind of world. In the second story, my husband's father picks up a roast for dinner. Daryl hungrily pulls the foil aside to reveal, to his horror, a large, bald, crispy-toed possum, its tail dangling indelicately over the edge of the platter.

I tell one story: Every spring, my family gathers around the table and eats gefilte fish, washing it down with kosher wine. At the Passover Seder my husband and I host for ten friends at our tiny house in the foothills of the Appalachian mountain chain, I am the only Jew, and according to the friends, the indisputable winner of the "Repulsive Foods" contest. Every culture has its culinary embarrassments. Boiled organs and roasted marsupials are my husband's. A trio of whitefish, carp, and pike, simmered with tails, fins, heads, and bones, then ground and pressed into balls that quiver in a suspension reminiscent of hair gel, paired with a syrupy wine that coats the tongue like a cadmium oil slick, are mine.

Like the cartoon where a group of cows has suddenly been granted insight ("We're eating grass?!"), our friends blink unbelievably at the fish course of their very first Seder. Someone bumps the table and the white orbs shiver. A collective groan erupts.

There is more unfamiliar fare to come: After all, the Passover Seder uses food-as-metaphor to tell the Biblical story of the Jews' liberation from slavery in Egypt. Every bite we take during the two-hour service is a culinary sentence; every sip of wine a cloying exclamation point. Before the night is over, our friends will have burned their mouths on the horseradish that recalls the bitterness of slavery, joked that charoset, a coarse nut-and-apple mixture, really does taste like mortar, and nibbled uncertainly on saltwater-dipped parsley and matzo. These are buttermilk biscuit fans, more at home with pigs' feet and chitlins than bitter herbs and unleavened bread. I imagine that the recitation of the plagues [(frogs, flies, locusts, lice) reads, to them, more like a list of side dishes than punishments.

I'm partial to the story of Passover because exodus-cum-liberation is a mouthwatering combination. Nothing rivals the joy of leaving a place where you feel trapped for a place where you feel at home. This I discovered for myself when I left the suburbs and moved to the country.

I am a child of the brick-and-wood ranch house, of piano lessons and band trips, bat mitzvahs and shopping malls. Sandy Springs, a bedroom community of Atlanta, is where I lived until I left for college, and where, for as long as I can remember, I felt out of place. My favorite toy was a tin barn whose yawning front door opened flat, spilling forth a procession of plastic livestock and multicolored machinery, most of which I could not name. For years, I gazed forlornly out the dining-room window at the woody

ravine that flanked our house, mourning the horse pasture it was not and could never be. I disliked the shady stillness of our quiet neighborhood, the sleek cars and well-dressed joggers and manicured dogs on leashes. I wanted to live on a farm with a procession of livestock and mysterious farm equipment doing mysterious things to the land.

“Jews don’t live on farms,” my mother said.

And so I wandered.

From age eighteen to twenty-three, I lived in a dorm, an apartment, a quadruplex, a room over a garage, and a dwelling without heat or appliances that could only be classified as a hut. Finally, at twenty-four, I shed the shackles of my mother’s pronouncement, and moved, with three large, wooly dogs, to the Promised Land: a seventy-acre Arabian horse farm in Chickamauga, Georgia, snug in the shadow of Lookout Mountain. There were cows across the street, and four times a year, to my delight, my landlord revved up the tractor and massaged the fields, leaving undulations of hay in his wake. By day, I worked as a mental-health therapist. But by the light of the moon, I cleaned stalls.

There have been many liberations over the course of my life, as there are in all lives. There were cigarettes to renounce, men to leave, love to find, and marriage to embrace. Not so long ago, I purchased my own farm just three miles from the first one and left my mental health career in order to paint full-time. I suppose I could fashion an entire Seder around the specifics of my own emancipations. But the old one, seen through the fresh eyes of friends, still resonates.

Outside, a tractor groans to life, and I eat my carp and count my blessings.