

# Com- fort FOOD

Their decades together  
were DEFINED BY DINING  
TOGETHER. For food writer  
and new widow MADELEINE  
GREEY, the taste of grief is  
*bittersweet*



# I won my man

through his stomach, starting with a quiche. I was 28 and knew little about baked eggs and pastry. I asked him for dinner and hoped the stained and tattered pages of my Harrowsmith Cookbook wouldn't let me down.

I followed the recipe religiously: beating up a big bowlful of eggs and watching with pleasure as the poured-in cream softened the eggs' yellow into a light, mustardy hue. It was thrilling and nerve-racking to cook for this man I barely knew. As I gingerly placed the uncooked quiche on the oven rack, its too-high contents splattered all over the bottom of the oven. Still, alchemy took place.

"That's sooo good," Don said after his first bite. "Real fine." Then he swiped a napkin at the crumbs on his moustache, grinned widely and added, "You know, Madeleine...real men don't eat quiche."

There wasn't a word he could say in those days that didn't charm me.

A QUARTER OF A CENTURY later, I'm at Don's side. He's wearing pyjamas and there's less than 150 pounds on his once robust six-foot frame. He's been sleeping in the TV room for weeks now. He can't stand the light. The blinds are drawn — day and night. He's propped up with pillows that do little to ease enormous pain. A small glass is in my hand and I'm begging him to drink just a sip or two of a smoothie. My sister has made it. She's moved in. Every morning she puts whatever Don asks for in a blender and whirls it into a loving mass of swallowable nutrition. He asks for peaches. It's August. Peaches are his favourite.

EVERY SUMMER, our family of four would drive three hours north of Toronto to our cottage. The kids scrapped and squabbled in the back while Don manned the wheel, talking about the pies he hoped to eat. Getting into "pie mode" was one of his most cherished summertime hobbies. Searching for them was part of the adventure. We went from Dwight to Dorset to Dwight again, touring Lake of Bays to find the perfect mouthful.

There was one pie that, in his words, "slayed" him. It was called Road Kill and, like Don, it was irreverent

and delicious. Loaded with raspberries, blueberries and blackberries, the cooked and smushed filling looked suspicious but gruesomely familiar to anyone who drives Muskoka highways in summer.

Two years ago, we sat in Sicily. "I could eat here forever," Don said, sighing as he tipped his chair back. He was wearing a baseball cap and there was not a single line of worry on his delighted face. He put down his camera and reached for his wineglass. He raised it to me, then to the scene: We were sitting on a secluded taverna patio that hung — no, floated — on the side of a precipice. I could almost touch the gulls suspended in the wind before us.

We didn't know there was a tumour growing in his liver.

Don twirled a forkful of handmade tagliatelle and waved it mid-air like an emperor's sceptre. Its cream and lemon sauce twinkled in the noonday sun. Behind him was a sea and sky of brilliant blue seared by sunlight and softened by ocean mist.

"This place is just too fucking beautiful," said my husband. "Promise me you'll make this pasta when we get home. Do you think you can do it, Mado?"

I thought I could.

I made notes, pages of food writer's notes that read, "fat swaths of lemon zest. Thick cream, Parmigiano-Reggiano melted inside. Scallops are golden, their crusts salty and sweet."

What I didn't write is now indelible: His eyes are the same colour as the sky.

On Don's 48th birthday, as usual, peaches were in season. So were wild blueberries. I'd never made a pie before but heard (somewhere?) it was easy. I cracked open *Joy of Cooking* and chuckled all the way through the



filling until I hit dough and literally crumbled. The recipe's obsession with chilled things — from butter to water to the finished disc of pastry — and that push and pull of rolling out something that obviously didn't like being rolled out was enough to make me scream. But I didn't. I just fumed and fumbled with the lattice top, picking up misshapen ribbons of dough and gritting my teeth when they disintegrated mid-air. I cross-hatched a sorry-looking lattice upon a mass of peaches and blueberries and prayed to the oven gods.

We sang "Happy Birthday" with the candle stuck in the pie hole.

Don took a knife and pretended to stab and crush the pie. We moaned. (This was a really old routine.) Then he dutifully cut it and served a piece to us each. My eyes were trained on his fork, his mouth and then his blue eyes, squeezed in pleasure.

"Beginner's luck," he proclaimed, reaching for another slice.

LATER THAT SUMMER, a neighbour with a pie reputation brings one to our door. By chance, it's peach — everything my pie guy could want. But Don's appetite has disappeared. The nausea and vomiting torment him day and night.

My sister and I decide to serve it up anyway, as two colleagues have come calling. They haven't seen Don since The News. They look like him, and we joke that here are three photographers with the same handsome, greying beards and balding heads under one roof and no one is carrying a camera.

The room pulses with terror.

But bravely they sit, these three friends, one dying. They eat pie. Does anyone taste it? They smile and say kind things. Three hearts crack open



**BUT BRAVELY THEY SIT, these three friends, one dying. THEY EAT PIE. Does anyone taste it? THEY SMILE AND SAY KIND THINGS. Three hearts crack open in my living room.**

in my living room. My sister and I skitter around aimlessly, picking up crumbs, wiping counters.

Still, something stately resides in my husband. I look at him from the corner of my eye and see him waving the pie on his fork with panache.

HE TAUGHT ME to cook by never touching a whisk, following a recipe or questioning my infinite authority in the kitchen. Years into our relationship, his bachelor's repertoire of recipes had been vanquished. He liked to laud me by saying, "Food always tastes better when you make it, Madeleine." It was a cop-out compliment, but I bought it, graduating from quiche to grander things, collecting more cookbooks than one house could ever store and using more pans and pots "than any normal person" (according to he who did the

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## COMFORT FOOD

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dishes). Don was my beloved guinea pig and endless inspiration, willing to try anything and never at a loss for cutting opinions.

During restaurant reviews, he was my Designated Eater, keen to oblige and quick to order. But he never learned to pace himself, lunging for and demolishing the breadbasket, downing overly rich bisques or choosing the most ample of appetizers. He was always full by the time the entrée arrived.

"How is it?" I'd ask.

"Good."

"Give me a break. That's not an answer. Tell me what it tastes like."

"I forget."

"Take another bite and tell me."

"I'm saying it's good. It's your job to find the words."

So I did, sitting in my home office most afternoons, deleting and re-writing while my better half went on so-called errands that always seemed to happen around lunchtime. Don specialized in lunch. He could write a book about his finds, but preferred to do research only, sourcing out the city's finest butter chicken roti, all-you-can-eat sushi or, more remarkably, simple sugar cookies with sprinkles on top. Restaurants sent him daily updates on their lunch specials around 11 o'clock; he was usually in the car before noon. When he'd return, I was often in the kitchen developing a new recipe for dinner. He had to taste it all. And I had to ask his opinion.

"You wouldn't ask me if you wanted a lie, would ya?" he'd say, spitting out the gristle from a short rib. "You know I don't like these cheap cuts. What is this slop, anyway?"

Our years, our decades together were defined by food. Each evening was a hallowed experience called dinner, and when unexpected guests dropped by on a particularly good weekday feast — the table laden with Thai curries, sticky and jasmine rice, along with plenty of veggie stir-fries — Don would

announce, "We eat like this every night."

Just about.

And even more when we travelled. Thus, *börek* became synonymous with Istanbul and blood orange juice the quintessential taste of Morocco. Food was more than just our daily bread; it was our lexicon, and the longer he knew me, the more weight Don gained. He blamed my food assignments, and I scorned his inability to pace himself. In truth, we were simply partners in crime lighting each other's passion, reveling in all the textures and tastes that came our way.

HIS SLATE BLUE eyes are open and he's staring somewhere. He keeps flailing his arms. They jump out from his chest like apparitions. He's still strong. So strong he can roll and thrash around on the floor in a morphine-induced delirium and three crying women can't contain him. Finally, we hear a siren and up the stairs walk four firefighters. They enter into this early morning scene saying hello with such grace it sends shivers up my spine. They speak to my disoriented husband in deep, strong voices and gently roll him onto a blanket and carry him like a stork's parcel, from his beloved couch to the safety of a hospital bed nearby. Behind the doors of our TV room are my children, 21 and 17, trembling. Nobody knows what to do or who they're to be.

"It's blocked," he rasps out to me a few hours later.

I am sitting at his side. My chin rests on the cold gurney railing. His voice is so frail and feathery thin I have to hold my breath for fear of blowing his words away.

"What, babe? What's blocked?"

He rolls his head back and forth on the pillow. "Can't get through," he says. "It's blocked ahead. But I have my passport...it's in my bags."

I tell him it's safe ahead. I whisper that the road is clear. I've seen him pack his bags. I know he's ready.

"You can go now," I croak. Then I taste the tears. **M**

Web throw goes here







