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# If You Don't Want to Talk About Food, Don't Sit Next to Me

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If You Don't Want to Talk About Food,  
Don't Sit Next to Me

Judith Lorraine Polk

**DEDICATION**

**To Jonathan Alan Scott**

## **ACKNOWLEDEMENTS**

**This book would never have been written were it not for the generosity of the State of Georgia's Seniors 62 and Over Educational Program.**

**To my son Jonathan Alan Scott for his continual support and encouragement.**

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## CHAPTER ONE

.....  
*Writing means you and the computer or you and the typewriter, and sometimes there's an enormous weight of emotion, which you have nowhere to take. I think it's a reason writers drink; you can get so incredibly wound up you're weeping and laughing. Writing is how I justify my existence. This is a basic hunger for most people; they want their suffering to mean something. You go through all these things and the idea it's utterly of no consequence is very difficult to work with.*

~ Robert Stone, 1937-2015

### INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

I was sixty-four years old when I walked across the stage of the Sidney Marcus Auditorium at *The World Congress Center* on Andrew Young International Boulevard in Atlanta, Georgia, to receive my degree, medallion, and toque from *Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts* (LCB). The famous culinary school in France and the LCB campus in Georgia were affiliated and a part of the same network of educational institutions, so I also received a *diplôme* from *Le Cordon Bleu International* during the commencement ceremony. Two schools on two continents, and I would be an alumnus of both.

I graduated Summa Cum Laude with a 4.0 cumulative grade point average. The second time I walked across the stage on January 19, 2008, was to receive an award in the form of a *Danbury Desk Clock*, for my Perfect Attendance record.

I just don't know how I did it.

Six months earlier I was waking up three times a night screaming in pain. The pain was caused by a viral skin infection commonly referred to as shingles. From what I've read, the early symptoms vary among shingle sufferers and can take the form of itching, tingling, burning or numbness, but, medically speaking, shingles only appear on one side of the body, right or left, and develop in stages: *prodromal*, prior to the rash appearing, and *active*, after the rash and blisters appear. I could tolerate the itching during the first stage, but the

pain that followed was unbearable. It felt like thousands of razor-sharp needles were piercing the left side of my torso.

Four Advil and the hottest water I could tolerate in the shower were the only things that seemed to help me. Sometimes I was in so much pain that I would grab the bottle of ibuprofen on the way to the bathroom and swallow the pills while standing under the showerhead. Then I would gingerly dry off, trying not to touch the infected areas. I would struggle back into my pajamas and crawl back into bed. The trick was falling back to sleep until the next time. And there was always a next time.

Neither the pain nor the lack of sleep kept me from getting up at 5:30 a.m. during the school week. Leaving the house early meant I could find a parking space close to the school. It also meant I would never be late for the line-up or my 7:00 a.m. class. At LCB you were counted as tardy if you weren't present for line-up. It was the school's slightly skewed version of, "if you're only five minutes early, you're already late." I might add that the academic version of the axiom worked like a charm on this older student.

Each class stood in a brigade-type line-up in the hallway outside of their designated kitchen or classroom waiting for the morning head-to-toe inspection. There were no exceptions to this rule. We may not have liked it, but following the routine five days a week was a small price to pay for the culinary education we were getting at *Le Cordon Bleu*.

## A PAINFUL UNRAVELING

The novelist Robert Stone battled his demons by giving the characters in his stories voices and then wings, so that his innermost thoughts and feelings were free to fly. Often using dark humor to get his point across, he wrote about his schizophrenic mother, the father who abandoned both of them shortly after his birth, his years in an orphanage, and his addictions with alcohol and drugs. I chose to fight my demons in private, never on paper, and seldom in person. When the blisters appeared, I never told anyone at *Le Cordon Bleu* that I had them, including my chefs, instructors, the Dean of Students, and classmates. The only people who knew were my husband and son. Unfortunately, neither of them could help me.

My husband, Dr. Robert Leonard Polk, was working in Los Angeles, California, while my son, Jonathan Alan Scott, was doing the same in Chicago, Illinois. And I was living in Stone Mountain, going to school in Tucker, Georgia, with shingles and a black cat by the name of Botrytis as the sole witnesses to my painful unraveling,

I preferred scrolling the Internet than making an appointment with a living breathing human being when it came to finding answers to medical questions. It wasn't that I didn't believe in doctors or hospitals—I did, for the most part. When I married for the third time it was to a doctor with a postgraduate degree in Business Administration. I just didn't seek medical doctors out when I was sick because individually and collectively they frightened the hell out of me. They still do. I wasn't a homoeopathist by any stretch of the imagination; just someone who preferred less expensive, less time-consuming, less evasive, and less intrusive ways of finding out what was ailing me.



I can no longer remember the name of the author or the publication venue of an article I read on the Internet during this period, but I do remember that the writer recommended that shingles' sufferers "listen to their bodies, get plenty of rest, and avoid strenuous activities during recuperation."

But, before I could even listen to my body, I had to calm the noise in my head. Before I could get any rest, I had to listen to my pain, which had an idiomatic mantra of its own. It was saying as clearly as it could, considering its tone deaf and stubborn human host: "You're getting older. Wake up and smell the stress." One thing I didn't have to worry about was finding time for strenuous activity. I didn't have the time to exercise. Period. I was in class five hours a day, five days a week, meeting with my tutor after class, sitting in on every master-workshop I could squeeze in, studying well into the night, every night, sometimes six to eight hours a night, and playing the proverbial culinary student's game of frantic catch-up during the weekends.

If I bumped accidentally into people who were discussing shingles, I'd eavesdrop on their conversations. The horror stories I heard made me sick to my stomach. I learned that people got the viral infection in their mouths, near an eye, on their genitalia, the bottoms of their feet and on their hands. I was fortunate in that my clothing covered the blistering rash, which wrapped around the left side of my torso; but the wide band of fluid-filled blisters on my back turned out to be the worst. They were the last to appear and the biggest. They would break open when I rubbed against them and then they would crust over until the next time I was careless.

I couldn't sit back in the driver's seat of my small sports car, a 2004 black cherry Mazda Miata convertible, so I drove crunched over the steering wheel. Even commuting six miles from home to school and back was painful.

I had the same problem with my Yard Master riding mower, but that didn't keep me from getting behind the wheel of it either, even during the summer of 2007. To start it, I have to stretch my left leg as far as I can to reach the gas pedal. The only way I could do that was if I braced myself by pushing against the back seat of the mower, which was not an easy task when you had blisters on your back.

I was sorely in need of a break from studying one weekend. I had two choices, clean the house or mow the grass. I'd been neglecting the lawn all summer and it showed, so Botrytis and I spent the day outdoors. I was still working outside when Irene Fowler, a neighbor, walked by. We stopped to chat, as all good Southern and transplanted Yankee women tend to do, when she started to cry. Irene told me that she had just been released from the hospital after being diagnosed with shingles. The stories I read about and the conversations I overheard were no longer just strangers' conversations and tales of woe. Then she showed me her right arm and the palm of her hand. It was like moving in for the kill. I started to cry when I saw her blisters and the same pain in her eyes that I saw reflected in mine. I could no longer remain silent. And so, as women are prone to do when we find a kindred spirit, we exchanged stories and any remedies, which would hopefully help to mitigate the persistent pain. Irene was lucky because she had her husband, Robert, and their beloved dog, Honey, to help her through the night: I was alone, in pain, a full-time student, and up to that point had kept quiet about the whole bloody mess.

### JOSEPH ADDISON'S THREE GRAND ESSENTIALS TO HAPPINESS

I knew before being accepted at LCB that my future was going to have to transcend cooking in a professional kitchen. Line cooks, sous chefs, and executive chefs, need strong bodies, fast reflexes, good hearing, 20/20 vision, and the kind of stamina a young woman or man has. No restaurateur or chef in his or her right mind would look at me now and not think: old bat, grandmother, social security recipient, retirement home resident, or any of the repercussions they think would entail hiring the elderly—sick pay, physical and health problems, one foot in the grave, “you’ve got to be kidding,” or to be fair, “I’m going to be old like that one day.”

I also knew going into *Le Cordon Bleu* that I wanted to write about food. I wanted to walk across that damn stage one day and receive my toque not to be a professional cook, but to be a food writer who could also cook. Writing, I realized, was the only way I could handle the “enormous weight of [emotions]” that I had been feeling. As it turned out, my approach was ass backwards. I didn’t know I couldn’t write when I enrolled at LCB so going to culinary school with an advanced degree in History made sense to me. Getting shingles threatened all of this.

I knew I had to find something else just as creative to do with my life besides standing on my feet ten, twelve, fifteen or even seventeen hours a day cooking in front of hot grills and peeking into hot stoves, so I turned to the wisdom of Joseph Addison, the English essayist and man of letters for a fresh viewpoint. It was Joseph Addison, who wrote before dying at the age of 47 in 1719, that the “Three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.” I haven’t found the

quote in any of his “Miscellanies in Verse and Prose,” not yet that is, but I did find the quote on a number of Internet sites.

I found the first grand essential, *something to do*, at a culinary school in Tucker, Georgia, and the second grand essential, *something to love*, which, in my case, was food, when I was growing up with a cook who was also my mother. Then I needed to find the third one, *something to hope for*, which I did in Kennesaw, Georgia, when I started to learn how to write.

## COME HELL OR HIGH WATER

What I really wanted to do, as a young woman with no discernable talents, was to write a book or novel. At the time I didn't know fiction from nonfiction or flatulence, but the mere thought of being called a writer made me want to be one, even if it meant not having a place for my emotions. Come hell or high water, I was going to be a writer. I just didn't know how to do it, at least not then.

After a few minor literary detours all having to do with dainty and demure damsels-in-distress, handsome and virile knights galloping to the rescue on magnificent sweaty chestnut steeds, I found my way out of the dark literary closet I had been lurking in for so long. It finally dawned on me that every question I asked during this coming of age period had absolutely nothing to do with princesses, princes or even writing, but with food!

All my questions had the same general theme. "What did you order at the new restaurant?" "What did you make for dinner last night?" "Did you read the article about *amuse bouche* in *Gourmet Magazine*?" By way of explanation: any magazine article about French-inspired single bite-sized hors d'oeuvres has always interested me. I thought everyone was interested in them to the same degree I was. I was wrong.

What I was right about all along was that I wanted to learn more about food. Cinderella I wasn't. There wasn't a fairy godmother, evil stepmother, stepsisters, coach, castle, royal ball, or prince (charming or otherwise) in my future. Although, I did think that if I worked hard, one day I could, knowing my love for food and writing, be a food writer. And maybe along the way find an intelligent, gentle, kind-hearted commoner with a sense of humor who loved food as much as I did. Anyone moody need not apply, which is one of the reasons why I'm still looking.

Gastronomy (the art or activity of cooking and eating fine food and drink) it turned out was my real passion. I realized that I loved everything about food: I loved learning, reading and writing about it, as well as cooking, serving and eating it. One day I hoped to write and publish not a novel, as I once half-heartedly strived to do, but a cookbook; first I had to learn how to work alongside my mother, who was my first boss and as fate would have it my first chef in the industry.

## MY MOTHER

My mother, Esther Naoma Bartholomew Frank, was a fair-skinned redhead. I can only describe her in retrospect by paraphrasing something said about the Irish film actress, Maureen O'Hara's character in *The Quiet Man*, director John Ford once said: "That red head of her's [was] no lie." This meant both of them were stubborn and had tempers.

My mother had a stubborn German bent, an equally wicked German temper, and a sense of humor to match. Every time she told the story about how Kitty Martin, a buxom friend of hers, got a breast caught in a wringer washer in our basement, tears would trickle down my mother's face. Kitty was also the source of another story my mother told, but this one didn't have a vaudevillian, slapstick or happy ending. Kitty got her breast out in time and except for a few black and blue marks was unharmed. My father, Frederick Tilghman Frank, wasn't as lucky.

Kitty had a giant sour cherry tree in her front yard and, being a widow, she asked my father if he would take time out of his busy schedule to pick the ripe fruit before the pesky birds prevalent in Pennsylvania got to them. My mother, who knew by heart at least a dozen or more ways to use up sour cherries, free or otherwise, volunteered my father's services. My father fell twelve feet and landed on a hard, solid, concrete cement sidewalk. He broke his back and was in the hospital in a full body cast for months. His recovery was impeded by delirium tremens, commonly referred to as DTs. The fact that my father was a functional alcoholic didn't stop his friends from sneaking alcohol (or his beloved cigars) into his hospital room. My sister, Virginia, who is ten years older than I am recently told me that our parents started talking to each other while he was in the hospital. Something they hadn't done for years.

My mother rented a hospital bed and my father finished his recovery in their bedroom in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was up and walking with a cane in time for my sister, Shirley's wedding in 1956. I was one of her two junior bridesmaids; my sister, Frieda, was the other one. I was thirteen years old and Frieda was eleven. Our parents divorced after twenty-five years of marriage; leaving the two younger daughters who were still living at home without a father.

My mother was married to two different men, thankfully not at the same time, for a total of sixty-some years; loved all four of her daughters, although she was prejudiced beyond belief when it came to two of them. Examples flood my mind: none of them good.

Frieda, my younger sister, got a car for her high school graduation present. I got two pieces of monogrammed Samsonite luggage. Graduating from high school was nothing compared to our weddings—events that brought out the worst in my mother. Frieda wore a white wedding gown. My mother and stepfather closed the doors of the restaurant they owned, the Franklin Seafood House, and hosted Frieda's wedding reception. I wore a simple pink silk dress. My wedding reception was at the home of my husband's parents. The restaurant stayed open and my mother worked all night.

My mother will always be remembered holding a lipstick-stained cigarette. She smoked non-filtered Pall Mall, drank strong, black non-decaffeinated *Maxwell House* coffee and sat in one chair in her kitchen—the one with its back to the stove. I've been too close to the flame of my mother all of my life not to get burnt by the memories. She was a formidable opponent and somewhat of an enigma to her daughters.

She was often a mystery to her husbands as well. Severe menopause will do that, not to mention the hot flashes she went through for ten long years. If anyone alive ever



experienced even the nightmarish heat radiating from Dante's nine circles of Hell, it was my mother. Had Durante Alighieri inhabited the earth the same time as my mother, his writings would surely have benefited from her decade of misery.

I can still see her standing in the restaurant's refrigerated walk-in, where she kept the fresh seafood, butter, dairy, and other perishables. Looking back, I should have realized that my mother was one of the perishables too.

She was as famous for her frequent meltdowns as she was for her quick temper. During a heated argument with my stepfather late one night, long after her two young daughters had gone to bed, she hit him on his baldhead with a bank bag full of coins. The bag split open at one of the seams and coins flew through the air like miniature planes manned by tiny kamikaze pilots who had been chained to their seats by the country they loved.

The metal projectiles found new homes among the liquor bottles and bar paraphernalia on the glass shelves behind the long wooden bar. For months, Frieda and I would find coins in the oddest places, the top of the pinball machine for instance, which was on the other side of the long room and a safe distance from the bar. One day while we were dusting the shelves, we found a small fortune in one of the German beer steins my stepfather collected. No one thought to look in the steins since the hinged tops were usually closed.

The last thing I wanted to do was be like my mother or walk in her footsteps. The first time she said, "Judy, take this platter out to the dining room," I jumped at the chance, which is how I became a waitress. Learning how to cook would have to wait.

My stepfather, who at the time seemed a lot less complicated to me, taught me everything I ever needed to know (and then some) about the liquor-side of the restaurant business. The restaurant's kitchen, dining room and bar were the real training ground for the industry I would one day embrace and want to write about.

## CHAPTER TWO

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*There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.*

~ Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

### TURNING THIRTY

I graduated from high school the same year that Ernest Hemingway died; but even in my naivety I knew that there was more to writing than just sitting at a typewriter or for that matter bleeding. My writing skills, as fate would have it, improved over time, but like elusive night dreams that disappear before dawn, I couldn't find a way to make my day dream a reality. I married, had a son, divorced, tried marriage again and was rewarded with a redheaded daughter, which pleased my mother to no end. I was twenty-eight years young. The year was 1970.

Six months prior to my thirtieth birthday, I still couldn't put a label to the woman I was becoming. Outside of loving my husband and children, I felt lost. Then I heard about Lehigh County Community College, now Lehigh Carbon Community College (LCCC, pronounced L-tri-C) in Schnecksville, Pennsylvania. I decided to venture into a new world armed only with a typewriter and a desire to learn.

The first course I took at LCCC was a "Tell me what you're going to say, say it, then tell me what you said in three paragraphs or less," kind of English course. It's no wonder I go off on tangents and digressions when I write. I never know what to do or say or write after I've written the prerequisite three blocks of unintelligible bullshit.

I hated English classes in high school and thought that if I couldn't pass this English course, I just wasn't college material. It weighted heavily on my mind because this familial

departure if it would happen meant I would be the first person in my family to attend college. People in my family didn't become writers or doctors or lawyers or professors or professionals. These were people who for the most part never finished high school, yet still managed to become cooks, steel workers and factory workers.

If I wanted them to understand what I was going through, I knew that I would have to teach them the language of academia at the same time I was learning it. One of the first things I had to do was explain what *matriculation* meant. Of course, before I could explain the term, I had to go through the process.

I didn't matriculate at LCCC to spite my husband. I matriculated, late as it turned out, to prove something to myself. Attending college was a big step for me. I was going to be the first person in my family to do it and I wanted to do it right.

When I became, for better or for worse, a struggling part-time college student, I felt that I was walking on the right road or path for the first time in my life. Robert Frost would have agreed. "I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Attending any institution of higher education, I would later learn, made me feel the same way.

During this not-so-brief sojourn into the life of a community college student, when anyone, anyone at all, asked me what I wanted to be when I "grew up," I always said "a graduate." Six years can pass like a fleeting memory when you're hell-bent on doing what I was trying to do. At least it did for me.

One minute I was telling my mother I was thinking about enrolling at the local community college, and the next minute I was preparing to graduate. I think I was pressing

my graduation gown when my mother finally jumped on the bandwagon. But she jumped on it, feet first, and that was good enough for me. She even cooked the food for my graduation party.

Being young and dumb is one thing. Being older and dumb is another. I was finally going to be a graduate, but even I knew I needed more education.

My class standing at LCCC was 80 out of 804. This lukewarm distinction was my one and only admission ticket into a prestigious four-year college. I had no other defining talent than graduating in the top ten percent of my class. No honors or recognitions were bestowed upon me during this first graduation ceremony in 1977. Justifying my existence would have to wait.

## A FISH OUT OF WATER

Like a fish finding itself on land for the first time, I started to inch forward very slowly, armed only with my German stubbornness. I applied to Muhlenberg College, a Lutheran-sponsored college in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and was accepted. I could see the light at the end of the LCCC tunnel when the shit found the fan.

I was planning to plunge headlong into the maelstrom of full-time college life, this time as an English or literature major, when my husband was arrested on charges of indecent exposure. The first charge was summarily dismissed for lack of evidence, but a second woman came forward with the same complaint; he was arrested again, and this time the charge stuck.

The story was in all of the local newspapers. It didn't matter who you believed or whose side you were on. Anyway you looked at it—it was a horrific experience. There was an extended jury trial and Charles was found not guilty. By then I had told Muhlenberg College that I wanted to major in Political Science with my eye on law school. I know now that it was naïve of me to think that I could make the world a better place just by easing the pain of innocent people charged with the same type of crimes, but I had to try.

Not long after the trial, I caught Charles doing what I guess all sexual addicts do in cars. He had driven me to school and was waiting for me because we were going out to dinner to celebrate our fourth wedding anniversary. He parked in the back of LCCC while I went inside to take a final exam in Modern Math. When I finished early, I took a shortcut through the college to the parking lot. So instead of walking towards our car, I came up from behind it. We ended up surprising each other. Talk about wanting your “suffering to mean something”!

## TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

My favorite food writer, Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher, or as she's known in the literary and culinary world M. F. K. Fisher, was right when she said in an interview, "One has to live, you know. You can't just die from grief or anything ..."

I had a ten-year old son and a three-year-old daughter, both of whom needed a mother. I had a husband who I still cared about, and thought I loved, despite his failings, so I went back to doing the two things I knew how to do. I took care of my family and our home while I took college courses, this time at a four-year college as a full-time undergraduate student, knee-deep in strange sounding political science courses, some of which I never mastered.

One thing that didn't die was my desire to write. When I didn't get a computer for my birthday in June, I asked my husband to buy me one for Christmas. I'm sure that Santa Claus delivered a sleigh full of computers that year, but there wasn't one underneath our tree. There wouldn't be a computer underneath any of my Christmas trees until I could afford to put one there.

After I graduated from Muhlenberg College, I applied to law school and was denied admission. I had put all of my apples in one basket that first year and applied to only one law school. The basket's name was Temple University School of Law in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

My mother, who was by then comfortable discussing her third daughter's on-going if not erratic education, asked me what I was going to do about the setback. I told her that the only thing I could do was return to school, earn a second degree, and apply again.

## SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

So I went to graduate school. I picked Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, which, while not close to home, was still within driving distance of our house in Catasauqua, Pennsylvania. Because I had majored in Political Science at Muhlenberg College, I had to pick a related field of study or start all over again, so I found myself studying history—seriously studying history—for the first time in my life. The bulk of my writing was in the form of seventeen papers a semester, every semester, for the two years it took me to graduate.

I applied to more law schools and was rejected by all of them. I got a job in a criminal law office in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and worked there for a year. I added the work experience to my resume and applied to the next set of schools. This time I was accepted. I was looking forward to being a law student at California Western School of Law in San Diego, California. I also thought I was on my way to a lucrative career in law.

I had a recurring nightmare while I was in California that disturbed me. In my dreams I could see my law office reception room. Wooden armchairs lined the four walls but the chairs were always empty. The school didn't tell the incoming and eager first-year law students that they were planning to merge with the University of California. The deal they apparently cut involved getting rid of two thirds of the entering class at the end of our first year. I was one of them. I was "asleep at the switch" as Florence King, the American novelist wrote. When I woke up my nightmare had become reality.



## DIVORCE

Trying to take care of my husband, our daughter, and our home while crying ten times a day for a solid year took its toll on all three of us. I moved out of the house. I was just starting to find myself again when my husband had our marriage annulled in the Catholic Church. The thick white business envelope came in the mail and was a complete surprise. The fact that we were both Lutheran made it even more of a surprise.

The reason for the annulment of our marriage was ludicrous: “There is no common frame of reference.” What the fuck did that mean? We were married eighteen years and had a child together. I still have a *common frame of reference* about our marriage—and the Holy Roman Catholic Church—but they’re no longer complimentary.

We divorced and once again I found myself alone, this time broke, and unemployed. Our daughter, Christian, had sensibly decided to stay with her father, in part because she would have her own bedroom; he had more money than I did, her friends were close, and there were those cats. I was back in the city where I was born, living in a small one-bedroom apartment in the historical district of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The year although not terribly important to me at that point in my life was 1987.

I found a part-time job in data processing at a local bank, a part-time job teaching at a local college and a part-time job selling pantyhose at Macy’s Department Store. The bank put a freeze on all hiring, the professor who taught the course in the past decided he wanted to teach it again, the administrator took the course from me and gave it back to him. I was left with Macy’s as my only source of income.

When I couldn’t find jobs to replace the two that were taken from me, I decided to check out the Private Industry Council (PIC) in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I became a client,

and when all of PIC's funding (government, state and federal) dried up and they needed help writing client resumes, I was the first one in line to volunteer.

I loved everything about writing resumes. To this day, it is still the most creative job I have ever had. It wasn't long before they hired me as their first full-time resume writing specialist. I wasn't a food writer, but at least I was writing and getting paid to do it. Christmas tree or no Christmas tree, now I could afford to buy that damn computer.

My son, Jonathan, came to visit me in Pennsylvania right after I bought my first computer a Hewitt-Packard. He offered to teach me how to use it, but first he had to learn how. I found out later that he inadvertently changed some of the information in the computer's operating system. My long-awaited and newly acquired bargain-basement computer was dead in the water. Buying another computer was out of the question. I couldn't afford the one I just bought.

Since I no longer had a working computer, which I was planning to use to write my first cookbook, I went back to reading cookbooks, cooking magazines, and watching cooking shows. I lusted after Graham Kerr, *The Galloping Gourmet*, for a long time until he found religion, made disparaging remarks about butter, and embraced healthy cooking.

Like Julia Child I was, and still am, a firm believer in butter. During this period of discovery, I fell in love with food writers, an equal proportion of men and women, and subsequently food writing.

## CHAPTER THREE

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*Writing is not necessarily something to be ashamed of, but do it in private and wash your hands afterwards.*

~ Robert A. Heinlein (1907-1988)

### TURNING THE RIGHT CORNER

I moved back to California, this time for ten years, and got a job as a contract employee at AlliedSignal Aerospace Company (AS) in Torrance, California. I worked as a security guard for one month for Wackenhut, the leading security company in the United States at the time. They saw something in me that I was still having trouble seeing in myself. You'd have to ask them what they saw. I'd have to ask them the same question. All I remember is that I couldn't or wouldn't ask them why they singled me out. They moved me out of the drafty guard shack into the warm corporate lobby. One day I was wearing a guard uniform, the next day I was wearing a two-piece suit, pantyhose and high heels. It didn't take me long to move to the security department, which was on the second floor, when AlliedSignal replaced their salaried employees with Wackenhut contract employees and I was put in charge of the security office.

My mother always said that one day the right man would walk around the corner, although she was vague about the man and the corner. Which corner? Where? When? What was the man's name? What did he look like? How old was he? She couldn't answer those questions. Neither could I. The corner as it turned out was next to my office on the second floor of the building I worked in at AS.

When Robert Leonard Polk, who had previously been vice president in charge of sales and marketing of AS in Canada and who had just moved back to California, had

difficulty with a lanyard I had given him for his security badge, I took it from him, unknotted it and put it back around his neck.

I said to him: “You need someone to take care of you.”

He smiled and said, “Yes, I do.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was about to get the job. We dated. Falling in love like dominos one right after the other. Like those domino competitions when incredibly sophisticated works of art topple in a very short time, captivating the audiences the same time they’re establishing new world records. I was so nervous when Robert proposed a year after we met that all I could do when he asked me to marry him was nod my head in the affirmative—this from a woman who since she learned how to talk has never been silent. I married the man of my dreams at the end of May 1997, three days before my fifty-fourth birthday. We honeymooned in Hawaii and life was good.

Six years later, Robert accepted a job with the federal government and we moved from California to Virginia. Moving from the east coast to the west coast in the winter is one thing; moving from the west coast to the east coast in winter is another. I’ve tried both. Ten years of not having to move or shovel snow rusted not only the dented red-handled snow shovels we still had hanging in the garage but my memory as well.

I was born in Pennsylvania, so I knew what snow looked like. I knew how beautiful it could look coming down and how heavy it could get. I knew how cold it could be. I even knew what color it could turn after dogs or exhaust fumes had their way with it.

Not long after we moved to Virginia, I was standing in front of a huge display of snow shovels at Home Depot thinking that there was no way it was going to snow, at least not yet, it was only December 4<sup>th</sup>. The next day it started snowing and didn’t stop. That

winter the little corner of the world we called home got more than forty inches of snow. The omnipotent weather people had to go back into the history books fifty years to find an amount anywhere near the accumulation we got. If there had been a pissing contest between the half-century accumulation and what we got in total inches during my first winter in Virginia, mine would have won hands down.

I broke a broom trying to sweep the snow off the long front porch of the model home we bought in a small subdivision in Ashburn. Then, I got the brilliant idea that I could melt the snow with my trusty hair dryer. That didn't work either. I went back to Home Depot and the pile of shiny shovels that was there the day before had disappeared. There wasn't a shovel to be had anywhere in the store. I finally found a store that had a few left in stock reserved for those of us who were in complete denial the day before. I bought two of them: one for Robert and one for me. I used mine a lot more.

## CLASSIC FRENCH CUISINE

Two and a half years later we moved again, this time to Georgia. It was 2005. My husband was the one who told me that *Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts* was less than six miles from our new home. It took me a year to get our home in Stone Mountain up and running, but not long after that I was at the front door of LCB. I wanted to attend the prestigious culinary school more than anything else in the world. Knowing this about myself didn't keep me from worrying that they had made a mistake and wouldn't let me in.

I still felt like an imposter, a lot like I did when I walked into the law school in California, although I didn't have the same kind of problems getting into culinary school as I did law school. Not knowing if I was or wasn't qualified continued to weigh heavily on my mind.

My first memory is of me standing in a kitchen with my mother when I was three years old. Sixty years later, I was still taking baby steps, but at least they were mine, and this time they were heading in the right direction toward a different kind of kitchen; in fact more than one kitchen. Since I had fallen in love with food, one of my dreams was to learn the techniques of classical French cuisine. Techniques that at one time you could only learn in France or from a French chef. I didn't have to buy a plane ticket to Paris, France. All I had to do was drive six miles to Tucker, Georgia.

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*If you don't want to give it everything you've got. If you don't want to put the life you're currently living and hopefully enjoying, or even love, on hold for at least fifteen months.*

*If you don't want to go against the prevailing wind—the one that blows a lot of hot air about you being too old to change careers or too old go back to school.*

*If you're going to give up your dream as soon as someone, especially someone you love, starts complaining, then all I can do is paraphrase something Harry Truman popularized during his presidency: "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen." It's as simple as that.*

I wrote the above "warning" in 2008 shortly after I graduated from *Le Cordon Bleu*. The words were true then. They're truer now. The message was originally intended for women friends of mine who not only believed the persuasive wind but thought that they were too old to do anything except attend church, babysit their grandchildren, and treat themselves to lunch courtesy of the Social Security Administration. I could never contribute to the conversations when we did get together because I don't believe in organized religion and I don't have any grandchildren. I do collect social security, but I've been on the same diet since I started cooking. In other words: I eat what I want, but I watch what I eat, so meeting them for lunch on a regular basis wasn't going to help my waistline or my credit card. Maybe they weren't looking for more serious intellectual stimulation, but I sure as hell was. Screw that old damn wind. Putting my thumb to my nose and wiggling my fingers in the general direction of my highly verbal dissenters, I went back to school; this time one with seven kitchens, less than six miles from my house.

## THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

On the first day of culinary school, I learned that I could still blush and that black or white were the only two acceptable sock colors we were allowed to wear at school. I found both of these things out when Chef Jeff Mekolites, a 1999 recipient of the Julia Child Fellowship Award, and one of the two chefs who would be teaching Skills I, told me to hike up both of my pants' legs so he could see what colored socks I was wearing.

I've been told by more than one professor in my life that I have a propensity for active rebellion; so it behooves me, at least now that I'm getting on in years, to lean on the gentler geriatric side of moderation than, let's say, start a rebellion or revolution. Although, keeping my mouth shut when something doesn't make sense to me still takes the same kind of effort. I've stood in line for a lot of things that made more sense. Socks still don't, especially if you have to hike up your trousers so someone can see them.

There would be a number of "firsts" during my first day of school, like finding out that I was comfortable for the first time in my life wearing a uniform. The last time I tried to bow to conformity in the form of clothing was depressing. I had two degrees under my academic belt, but when I found myself looking for a job during the early 1990s recession in Southern California, I had to put on a security guard uniform so I could pay my rent, utility, and heating bills. I wore it for one month, just long enough to learn that I never wanted to wear another uniform again. Suits, pantyhose and heels suit me a lot better.

Sitting in a room and looking like everyone else but still feeling like an individual was a difference experience, at least for me. I thought I looked dorkier than the rest of the forty-three or forty-four students (the count varied depending on whom you talked to), but I didn't feel as depressed as I did when I put on a guard uniform for the first time. On the first day of class the



students were all wearing the same garb: white skullcaps, white cravats, ill-fitting white chef's jackets, black and white houndstooth-checked pants, matching socks and black steel-tipped shoes or clogs. Even the chefs wore the same outfit, but instead of their pants being checkered, they were black, and instead of skullcaps they wore white conical and pleated toques.

The toque or chef's hat, as it's often referred to, has always fascinated me. My favorite version will always be the tall German-style, which is softly gathered at the top, but I like the formal pleated ones that Italian chefs wear too. The floppy and flattened berets of the French are my least favorite of all the toques, but it's amazing what food is made in the name of gastronomy by the very men and women who wore them and still do.

The legend that has been passed down for generations is the best part of the toque lore. According to the legend the chef's hat should have one hundred pleats, one for each way a skilled chef could cook an egg. The academic Ruth Edwards while believing the lore, nonetheless added an addendum in her book, *A Pageant of Hats, Ancient and Modern*, that "Today, noted chefs are seldom called upon to prove their prowess in this manner." I'd like to eat all one hundred of the egg dishes they could make and copy the recipes while I was doing it.

It was only the occasional teenage blemish or age-related wrinkle between the skullcaps and cravats tied high around the necks of the students that betrayed their true biological ages. I had the rare distinction of being older than all of the students in my class, not to mention most if not all of the chefs in the school who taught the program, so when it dawned on me that I looked just like everyone else, it was the kind of epiphany I needed and could live with—at least for fifteen months.

Within minutes of mentally going through the alphabet and peeking furtively at the cheap metal and plastic nametags on the jackets of the students as I passed them, all of whom were in

constant motion and trying to do the same thing, I found my place in line slightly left of the middle between Tobin Osborn and Robert Rambo. Everyone in the culinary world knows that cream in raw, unpasteurized or even pasteurized but unhomogenized milk rises to the top. It never dawned on me that the process discovered by the famous French scientist Louis Pasteur could apply to culinary students as well, but the two men who flanked me would prove Pasteur right. Tobin would graduate with a 4.0 GPA and Rambo, we all called him by his last name, would graduate with a perfect attendance record.

While we were still standing in line, one or both of the chefs started yelling at a student near the beginning of the line. I'm Pennsylvania Dutch and we descendants of German immigrants are master yellers (did I tell you that?), but we don't take kindly to being yelled at or being anywhere near yelling when someone else is doing it.

Talking in line, we soon found out, from the ruckus going on somewhere between the B's and the G's, was not allowed. Talking back to the chefs we also learned in Skills I, the first class on the syllabus, was cause for expulsion. "Do it again and you're out of here," took on an extended life of its own, thanks in large part to the long-suffering and patient chef-instructors at LCB who gave some of their erstwhile students a second, third, and even "unheard" of fourth chance.

But, sooner or later, the original threats of do-it-again-and-you're-out gained momentum. The chefs' asked the school's Executive Chef, Todd Kazenske, to "Do the Math" and the student or students were more times than not out the non-revolving door of the prestigious culinary school. "*Adios Amigo. Don't let the glass-etched entrance door smack you in the ass on the way out.*" Some students despite being expelled tried to come back, but by then *Le Cordon Bleu*

*International* had instituted some stricter procedures and the rest of the doors of the schools in the system were closed to them as well.

Falling asleep in class was a major infraction as well, but instead of getting the proverbial boot, it came with its own peculiar form of comeuppance; at least it did if you had Chef Mekolites for an instructor. Have you ever been hit by a whole nutmeg hurled by a chef from the front of a kitchen? A lot of the younger students, who had just graduated from high school and were still burning their candles at both ends, no doubt one of the reasons they were falling asleep in class, found out, pardon the pun, the hard way. I had a candle, too, albeit a shorter and stubbier one than my younger peers. My candle was no longer as forgiving as theirs, but the wick worked and my candle could still cast a nice rosy glow, at least when I remembered to light it.

William Butler Yeats had his own theory about education. He wrote, “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” At the beginning of the year, a lot of the culinary students were just filling their pails, but in time found the spark they needed to light their own fire and embrace the food industry.

I wasn’t thinking about taking catnaps or candles or wicks or pails or even fires as I watched the first nutmeg sail over my head on the way to its first target—I mean, unsuspecting victim. I was wondering how I was going to survive the next fifteen months. In high school, I could walk out of an exam and remember most if not all of the test’s 100 multiple-choice questions and their answers. An occasional classmate would seek me out and we would go over the test together. Not sleeping the first three weeks of LCB changed all that.

## A COURSE CALLED FOOD SCIENCE

After taking the third exam in *Food Science* with Mr. Steve Wattrick, I couldn't remember even one question on the test, much less any of the multiple-choice answers. That's when I knew I was in trouble. I called my husband on my cell phone from the library, something we weren't supposed to do, and as soon as I heard his voice, I blurted out between sobs that I had flunked the test.

Mr. Charles Crisman, the librarian, who was listening to the one-sided conversation, chose that moment to take an interest in me. Pulling me aside, he said, "Mrs. Polk, you're an intelligent woman. Unlike some of your classmates in your Skills I class, you know that you need to sleep at night."

I don't know how I managed to get a passing grade on the test. I guess the information was locked in my tired brain somewhere, but the not remembering left an indelible mark on my psyche, so I went to bed at night, every night, and if I didn't finish memorizing everything, I got up even earlier the next morning so I could do it. I'm not a morning person by any stretch of the imagination, so getting up at the crack of dawn to study impressed not only my son, who knows me better than anyone, but also my husband, who understood my need for snuggling.

I hoped that what I was going to learn at LCB would put me one step closer to being a food writer and one step closer to doing something that would make me happy. I started school in August, but by October my husband was living and working in California. The life I was living and loved literally disappeared nine weeks after I started school. At least our conversations were "interesting" while he was still home. One night before he left I made him a big dinner. After we had eaten, I said to him, "I have to hurry and clean up, I still have six to eight hours of homework to do."

He looked at me like I was crazy and said: “Tonight?”

“No,” I said, “Next month.”

We communicated by phone and the Internet, successfully at first, but at least one time, near the end of the twelve-month program, around the same time that the shingles rash appeared, he called me “obsessed,” and in a furious e-mail wrote that he thought, “I was too busy working on my next ‘A’ to be concerned about our marriage, home, etc.”

I was still Pennsylvania Dutch. I was still a descendant of German immigrants and I still didn’t take kindly to being yelled at even on a computer screen. As recurring themes and omens go in marriages, this was not a good one, at least not for us.

With my husband working on the opposite coast, I could have reverted back to type and stayed up all night, but Mr. Crisman was right, and so was my husband. I was too intelligent for such nonsense. I was at *Le Cordon Bleu* to learn and I couldn’t do that if I was sleep-deprived or dead on my feet.

I wanted to be a part of LCB’s illustrious list of alumni so bad I could almost taste it. LCB alumni like Julia Child, Kathleen Finn, an American writer, Homaro Cantu, an inventor and chef, and Alfred Lunt, the director/actor spurred me onward. But, first I had to learn the more than four hundred and fifty proficiencies taught at LCB. The school was and still is famous for combining “classical French techniques and methodology with modern American technology and a contemporary philosophy.” You can look it up.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was in for the roller coaster ride of my life. I hadn’t forgotten that amusement park rides didn’t have feelings, but I had forgotten that they could cause them. The school did exactly what a roller coaster ride is designed to do. It made me feel brave and scared, both at the same time.

## MY FIRST MYSTERY BASKET COMPETITION

There were a total of twenty courses in the LCB curriculum. Most were three weeks long, but somehow the school managed to find a way to squeeze courses like Culinary Math and Introduction to Computers into the same three-week session. Two courses for the price of one: my kind of bargain.

Unfortunately, I knew I was going to have trouble with both the math and computer courses. I dreaded taking the math course, because I've always been math-challenged. Carl Sagan once wrote, "If you wish to make an apple pie truly from scratch, you must first invent the universe." If I wished to be proficient in the logic and philosophy of mathematics, I would have to go back to my mother's womb and start learning it in there.

I also thought I was computer literate until I found out that the definition changes as fast as computers and their range of skills do. I must have missed a number of these reincarnations. In the parlance of the betting world, "I lost a few," I had to take both courses. But, "I won a few" too: *Faits accomplis*, if you will. One of the first things I won was the Mystery Basket (MB) competition in *Skills II*.

My class had Chef Harry Haff as chef-instructor for a total of six classes. He was an expert baker and a wine connoisseur. He never lost his temper and he never yelled. When the day of our first MB finally arrived, I could have cut the tension in the kitchen with one of his sharp knives. Chef Haff approached me and said, "Listen to me before you look down and see what ingredients you're getting . . . you can do this."

To this day, I can't remember what else he said, because all I could hear was my heart pounding in my ears. I had been practicing at home how to cook Julia Child's *Gratin de Volaille* (Gratin of Chicken) so at least I had a game plan. A lot of the students in the kitchen that day

didn't have any kind of pre-test strategy going for them, so they had to wing the whole creative process once they got their three food items.

We couldn't talk to anyone in the kitchen during the competition except our partner and then only to confer with him or her. They couldn't cook or taste our food. They were there strictly as a buffer against the ensuing chaos. I had the best buffer in the culinary world that day. I will always be eternally grateful to Robert Joseph Wilson, or Joe as we called him, a gentleman and great cook, for his support and friendship.

I could have prepared *Gratin Aux Fruits De Mer* (Gratin of Creamed Salmon or Other Fish) if I had gotten salmon, like Joe did, but I was praying for chicken, a white potato and a green vegetable. Along with the salmon, Joe got wild rice and a raw vegetable. He told me when we compared notes after the MB as well as years later that the vegetable wasn't something he was familiar with and had never cooked before. He did remember that he ended up grilling it.

Such is the life of a culinary student. Years after successfully navigating, marginally surviving, or even miserably failing the first mystery basket, you're still commiserating, complaining, or gallantly trying to pat yourself on your back. We had two hours to produce the meal and the clock was ticking.

When I finally got the chance to look down at the tray Chef Haff had given me, I saw half of a chicken breast, a large Idaho potato and a stalk of broccoli. It was a mystery basket dream come true. But, before I could start cooking I had to write up a menu and submit it to Chef Bruce for approval. I knew that in addition to the protein, starch and vegetable, I had to come up with a sauce to go with the entree.

Because I can be a smart-ass, I wrote my menu in French and included English subtitles for the benefit of my two chefs. I don't read, write, or speak French, so I had to memorize all of

the foreign words, which described the dish I wanted to duplicate, prior to the MB. Getting the ingredients I needed reminded me of a quotation I once read, “Success is simply a matter of luck. Just ask any failure.” I had no control over what I got in the way of ingredients for the MB, so luck was going to have to do more than lend me a big hand that day.

When I took the menu to Chef Bruce for approval, he demanded to know what my sauce was. I told him, “It’s Béchamel and it’s in the gratin.”

He frowned at me and said, “This is an ambitious menu.”

With as much bravado as I could muster up, considering I was figuratively if not literally paralyzed with fear, I told him, “I’ll make you proud.”

While I was arranging my *mise en place*, I saw Bruce take my menu across the crowded testosterone and estrogen-induced kitchen and show it to Chef Haff. I was in the eye of the tornado, but there was no way I was going to get sucked up in the funnel. I received the highest score that day. On a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being the highest, I received a 97.

Chefs Haff and Bruce took the first point off because I hadn’t served the entrée in the proper dish. The fact that I couldn’t find a gratin dish in the huge kitchen, which looked like it had been stripped of everything except the industrial dishwasher, didn’t faze them in the slightest. They took off a second point for my tourné potatoes. Tourné potatoes are tricky little bastards. I did find out later that I was only the second student to ever attempt tourné potatoes in that kind of competition. I wasn’t *meshugga*, although some of my classmates told me later that they thought I was crazy for even attempting it.

“Tourné” refers to a vegetable cut that measures two inches long and has seven sides with the ends tapered in an elliptical shape (think miniature football-shaped vegetables). This knife cut is the only cut that has a knife named after it. Tourné, which translates from the French as



“turned” or “to turn,” is taught, I firmly believe, for the sole purpose of driving culinary students crazy, or as one student put it, raving into the night bananas. To this day, I still can’t turn out a perfect tourné potato. The chefs took the third and final point off of my score because I hadn’t put the broccoli in an ice bath after I blanched it. Plunging the vegetable into ice water would have inactivated the enzymes so the true color held. “Were they watching that closely?”

During the hectic two hours of the practical, one of my classmates decided to present her dish on a paper plate. Don’t ask me why. Instead of putting the plate on the table while she waited to hear her team called, she put the paper plate on the grill. The plate caught on fire. Paper has a tendency to do that. Chef Bruce seeing the flames from his vantage point, rushed into the kitchen, grabbed the plate and threw it on the floor, food and all, stomping out the fire in the process.

The student yelled at him, “That’s my presentation plate.”

Chef Bruce calmly replied, “Not anymore.”

I put my gratin in the oven a little later than I wanted to or should have. Because I was worried that it wouldn’t bake in time, I put it on the bottom of the oven and jacked up the heat. I turned my back on the stove and when I turned around again a student, who was watching me out of the corner of her eye, was reaching across the space between the table next to me and the oven I was using. There were only two reasons why she would be doing this, either she was going to turn the temperature of the oven down or worse turn the oven off. I’d never seen her before, even in the hallways, so I discounted the second reason, which left the first one. She was probably planning on using the oven as soon as I finished and wanted it at a lower temperature. I didn’t know her name, what class she was in or for that matter what she was doing in that

particular kitchen besides trying to pass the MB, but I yelled at her nonetheless. “Don’t turn the oven down, I present in fifteen minutes.”

I could have flunked the MB when I opened my fat mouth and yelled at her, but my newfound luck was holding out. There were more accolades to come, but this one was one of the best and the most memorable.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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*Cooking is hard work and demanding. It was then, and it still is now. What began as hard work became creative work. There is something about the South that stimulates creativity in people, be they black or white writers, artists, cooks, builders or primitives that pass away without knowing they were talented.*

~ Edna Lewis (1916-2006)

### A COURSE IN ADVANCED BAKING & PASTRY

The memory of a test I took in a course called *Advanced Baking and Pastry* was centered around another young lady, this one couldn't have been more than 18 years old and was in my class, although she disappeared for good shortly after the class. She was absent the day we took the test in question, so the whole class had to wait until she came back to school and make arrangements with Chef DiFonzo to take the test. She said that she was going to take the exam after class, which meant we wouldn't get the test results back until the end of the next school day, but for some reason she decided to take the test during one of our infrequent breaks.

I asked her, after she told me that she took it, if she thought the test was difficult. She said that she thought it was easy. Was I just being paranoid? At the end of the class, DiFonzo started to hand out the tests, calling out the individual's names and grades until the latter reflected poorly on the student: Worthy 91 . . . Boggs 87 . . . Franklin 81. I stood with the rest of my classmates in the middle of the kitchen impatiently waiting to hear my name and grade. I thought that the test was the hardest one I had taken in any of the twelve classes so far, bar none, but I didn't think that I had flunked it. "Why wasn't he calling my name?"

I was getting more paranoid by the minute when the chef passed out the last of the tests, this one to the little girl. Later she told me her grade. If my memory serves me correctly, and it doesn't always, she got either a 56 or a 65.

The chef still hadn't called my name. I was melting down internally. Then Chef DiFonzo turned in my direction, walked towards me, smiling the whole time, and said, "And the first 100 goes to Mrs. Polk."

The baking and pastry chef started to say, or at least I think he was going to say, "Do you realize how hard it is to get a 100 in this class?" He changed his mind about the same time as the announcement hit me. It was a great moment because it has always taken me a while to learn things, depending on what they are, of course, like the intricacies of French *patisserie*, but eventually I do; except maybe for math and some political science courses. All of which may explain why I go half crazy in-between the learning, memorizing, and regurgitating of massive amounts of textbook material.

## THE FIVE MOTHER SAUCES

One thing it didn't take me long to learn was that every time the French add a new ingredient to a dish, the dish changes its name. For example, Béchamel sauce, which is made with butter, flour and milk, takes on the name *Mornay* when you add cheese. Toss in cooked onions instead of cheese and it's called *Soubise*. Mix in tomato puree and you've just made *Sauce Aurore*. Add a dollop of mustard and viola *Sauce a la Montarde*. And of course, if you add heavy cream, the French call it like it is, *Sauce Supreme*.

A mnemonic device, which the chefs taught us for remembering the five mother sauces, (Béchamel, Espagnole, Tomato, Hollandaise and Veloute) was BETH V. I remembered the device by thinking of a struggling culinary student named Beth and then asking myself the following question, "Oh, dear me, what was her last name, I think it started with a V?" Culinary students will do almost anything (including going without sleep) to absorb the massive bulk of information fed to them. This technique helped me.

Hollandaise sauce, on the other hand, which doesn't need to ever change its name, at least not as far as I'm concerned, is as Julia Child once wrote, "probably the most famous of all sauces." Because Child was such a perfectionist, she was compelled to warn the American housewives who she was writing to and who were destined to read her first cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, or *MtAoFC*, which is the title her devoted fans prefer, that the sauce is *also* one of the "most dreaded, as the egg yolks can curdle and the sauce can turn."

If as a beleaguered culinary student or a fledging apprentice you've never had your Hollandaise sauce turn *green* in front of a chef who tends to holler in frequencies only dogs can hear (and in rare cases some culinary students) you missed out on a traumatic but memorable rite of passage.

I don't know why some of the chefs at LCB hollered. None of the students as far as I knew were hearing-impaired. I don't think the chefs knew why they were hollering for that matter. But, when they did, as was the case with Chef Scott Bruce and Chef Andrew Miller in a course called *Introduction to Garde Manger*, it was almost always in tandem and they were invariably looking at me when they did it. It has to be said though that they also followed my class's training and academic progress with sustained interest and were there to root us on when the twelve students who remained from the original forty-three or forty-four crossed the stage to receive their own toques.

There are all kinds of chef personalities in this world, but you don't have to attend culinary school or work in the industry to see them in action. All you have to do is turn on your television set or laptop and check out the food shows or clips put on by Food Network. You'll find every conceivable kind of chef on it from the laid back Jamie Olivier to the articulate Ina Garten and Mario Batali, the bubbly Rachel Ray and Giada de Laurentiis. The "I love to wiggle around in my kitchen and bat my eyelashes" Mrs. Neely, the truly talented Bobbie Flay, and the volatile Robert Irvine. There are plenty more. All you have to do is grab on to one of their coattails and you'll learn a lot about food. I did with Emeril Lagasse as my tutor.

Hollandaise sauce when it's executed correctly becomes a perfect blend or *emulsion* of egg yolk, clarified butter and lemon juice. Child took the classic French technique she learned at *Le Cordon Bleu* in Paris one step further and made the sauce virtually foolproof by adding cold butter to the clarified butter. *Ghee*, which originated in India, although the best that is commercially available today comes from Holland, is the East Indian form of highly clarified butter.

The sauce recipe Child created, and the one I wanted to use in my first cookbook, appeared in her first cookbook. I also wanted to emulate her writing style, which she described in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* as, “an informal and humane tone that would make cooking approachable and fun”. Trying to do the same thing with my writing gives me migraines.

What might look like a form of thumbing her nose at her classical training, Child included a recipe for Hollandaise sauce in *MtAoFC* that called for the use of a blender as opposed to a copper bowl and whisk. She included the “newfangled” recipe in large part because the American housewives, who she wanted to reach with her French-inspired cookbook, were using the very same equipment back in the states. She wrote somewhat apologetically, “But as the technique is well within the capabilities of an 8-year-old child, it has much to recommend it.” I’d really like to meet *that* eight-year-old; if, as an adult, you want to make it the French way, you have to follow her techniques.

### MS. CATHERINE TAYLOR

The next to the last course at LCB was “Restaurant Guest Services.” The class was held in *Lumière*, the school’s in-house restaurant. The Front of the House (FOH) as the restaurant was called was basically a bigger although not busier version of my mother’s dining room. At least I knew what was expected of me there – or did I?

My French-born instructor for this particular phase of my culinary education was Catherine Taylor. When Ms. Taylor got excited about a subject, any subject, she would talk so fast I couldn’t understand a word she was saying. She called me Mrs. Polk, Judy, or Mademoiselle, but I could never get myself to call her anything but Ms. Taylor; surely not Catherine. She was everything I wanted to be when I was growing up: the detailed list of which women never forget no matter how old they are. She was smart, sophisticated and worldly. She wasn’t a chef, but she knew a lot about France, French food and the service-side of the industry.

One Saturday afternoon hoping to recapture a semblance of normalcy—by then I had come down with shingles and was in considerable pain—I ventured out to explore a farmer’s market at the school, which was being put on as a fundraiser by one of the student associations. This was the first time I was at a school function and out of uniform.

The market was well under way by the time I got there. The atmosphere was buzzing with the sound and activity of local supporters of the Slow Food Movement and the grounds were dotted with honor students, all in uniform, who were schlepping between the vendors, trying to be useful. I was there to check out the food. There were jars of pickles, jams and jellies mixed in among the freshly harvested fruits and vegetables. A couple of food stands rounded out the market and while I wasn’t hungry, I bought something to take home from each stand.



I spotted Catherine at one of the produce stands flirting with one of the young farmer's who was there hawking his seasonal wares. I moved into place, what I thought was a respectable and safe distance from the two of them, and listened in on the conversation—by now an old habit. They were discussing the color of eggplant.

Not getting the answer she wanted from the young man, she asked him another question: “What is this color?” pointing to one of the nice, sweet, shiny Georgia eggplants resplendent in a display basket on the wobbly Costco beige plastic folding table.

He replied, “Purple.” Catherine knew better.

Then I heard a familiar greeting. “Mademoiselle?”

I snapped to attention, turned towards her, bowed my head slightly, and responded in kind, “Yes, Madame?”

I knew from being in her class and the tone in her voice that she wasn't looking to engage me in idle chatter. Ms. Taylor, I soon found out, was struggling with the French name for an equally French vegetable. For some odd reason, she couldn't remember the French term for eggplant. What I loved about her was the fact that she knew if she asked the right person the right question she was sure to get the right answer.

Hanging on to her every word so I wouldn't miss anything transported me back into my culinary student mode. There was no way I was going to flunk this test. I was after all her student and I was being asked a foreign language vocabulary question.

Thank goodness I remembered the 1989 American comedy-drama, *Steel Magnolias*, and, what I thought was, a memorable scene in the movie. It would be hard to forget it. In the scene, Shirley MacLaine was in a locker room full of unclothed and partially clothed very (very) young and very (very) good-looking football players.

I can successfully duplicate a lot of the French dishes I read about, that is, if I have all of the techniques down pat, the right equipment, and the same quality ingredients, but I can't pronounce a lot of the French culinary words I encounter when reading menus, cookbooks, or magazines. Apparently, I'm not alone. A number of my classmates slaughtered the same foreign terms over and over again.

In the movie, Olympia Dukakis' character, Clairee Belcher, was trying to figure out the color of the football jerseys her team was wearing, so she asked her neighbor, Quiser Boudreaux, a simple question: "Would you call this color "Grape" or "Aubergine?"

Shirley MacLaine replied, while on the air with her life-long friend, who was also the radio station's new color coordinator, "Shut Up!! ... All they care about is touchdowns and injuries. They don't give a damn 'bout that grape shit."

I smiled at Ms. Taylor and listened as she asked me the same question she had asked the young man. I repeated what I had remembered from the movie, substituting eggplant in my mind for grapes, and said: "Aubergine."

She smiled at me. Two seconds later I was forgotten as she turned back to the young man who once again had her full attention. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the LCB chefs who had been listening in on the exchange, smile and nod to me in agreement. I had just passed my first remote oral spot quiz.

## THE BOH OR BACK OF THE HOUSE

I spent the last three weeks in “Restaurant Practical,” the kitchen, or as it’s called in the trade, the Back of the House (BOH). This course was a lot harder than Ms. Taylor’s FOH because in addition to the pain, I was battling fatigue, a chronic symptom of shingles. I spent my days and nights fervently praying that the pain and exhaustion would go away just long enough for me to finish what I had started, but they never did.

The last three weeks at LCB were the worst. It felt like I was waiting for the train from hell to arrive while dreading the boarding. In my case the train, which took a year to get to the depot, was going to carry me to my final course in LCB, a three-month long externship in the industry.

Despite the shingles, I learned a lot about cooking in a restaurant kitchen. We were told as a class in the BOH that we had to choose two stations during the course, in what was called a classical/modern kitchen brigade. We were also told never to take anything for granted. This advice my class would find out was worth its weight in gold. Each station had at least two students working it at any given time. You were either happy with your station mate(s) or you weren’t. It didn’t matter a rat’s ass if you liked them or not, you still had to work with them five days a week until the rotation was over.

I applied the ad hoc advice of never taking anything for granted when it came to picking out the first of the stations I would work in the kitchen, Cold Appetizers. In Cold Apps, I made such things as: Tomato Chutney, Fresh Mozzarella, and Vichyssoise, a cold potato and leek soup, and a grilled mixed vegetable gratin. The dishes may require heat, in any or all of its myriad forms, as I learned in two other courses I took, *Garde Manger I & II*, but the food is always served cold.

This advice applied to the second station I worked in as well, which was the Bread Station. We couldn't afford to take anything for granted in this station, that's for sure. For example, if we didn't check to see if the preceding morning, afternoon, or evening class had left any corn muffins, foccacia, hard rolls, hoagie rolls, lavosh or biscuits, we had to make them ourselves, before the doors of the restaurant opened, so we could fill the restaurant's bread-baskets. Today, a lot of restaurants charge you for bread in the form of appetizers like flatbread, crostini, and foccacia. At *Lumière*, you got a variety of bread in the basket and they were all free.

The worse thing, at least according to Chefs Cristian Adasme and Christopher Thompson, who taught the BOH, was "to assume you had *something*" only to find out, when either of the chefs or the student expeditor asked you for it, that you had run out, or perish the thought, didn't have it to begin with. "SHIT HAPPENS," we were told, so we made copious "To Do" and grocery lists. Try making *Lemon Pecan Bread* without fresh lemons, shelled pecans, granulated sugar or all-purpose flour.

During the last class in the BOH, the chefs gave us a short break so we could beg them to sign our chefs' jackets. I still have mine. It's preserved in a four-foot by four-foot custom-made wooden window box with a Plexiglas cover, which also holds my degree, diploma and toque as well as assorted school-related memorabilia. The museum-quality memorabilia box and its contents will hopefully outlast me—as they should.

After we said goodbye to the chefs, the students regrouped at a restaurant in Tucker to say goodbye in style before we went our separate ways. We had spend a whole year together, five days a week, and we were feeling separation anxiety before we even sat down to eat or drink. We only had one weekend, one lousy weekend, to retrench before we had to start our three-month-long externship and the weekend was only getting shorter.

## MY EXTERNSHIP

I was fortunate in that I wasn't going into a strange kitchen like some of my classmates were for their externships. I was doing mine at two of my favorite businesses in Atlanta: *The Cook's Warehouse* (all three locations) and *The Metrotainment Bakery*. I was looking forward to learning about the retail and bakery sides of the food industry, but struggling with shingles complicated everything.

I would report to Metrotainment Bakery in the morning, learn the ins-and-outs of commercial baking, leave, drive to one of the three Cook's Warehouse locations, and assist the visiting chef who was there to teach one of the many diverse cooking classes held at the stores. If I was lucky, which wasn't often, I only had to work at one of the sites on any given day. The "shorter" days were the closest I came to getting a break in my otherwise hectic schedule.

Three minutes is a long time to tread water. Three months seemed like an eternity. Unfortunately I no longer had the stamina to tread water for even three minutes. I remember one particular night when I was at the *Cook's Warehouse* in Decatur assisting a somewhat demanding chef. While I was trying to make sure I did everything expected of me, and more, if I physically or professionally could, a quivering voice inside of me was silently praying over and over again, for five long hours: "Please let me go home, please let me go home, please let me go home."

I felt like I was a fugitive from a brick and mortar prison. Fortunately the silent plea never escaped its human prison and the chef instructor and paying students never suspected that there was a *felon* lurking among them. It was the worst night of my externship. I was thankful for the umpteenth time that my rash wasn't visible or on any of my extremities. I didn't want to infect anyone. If the varicella-zoster virus had shown up on either of my hands like my friend,

Irene, and I couldn't use them, even for the simplest prep work, or on either of my feet, and I couldn't stand for long periods of time, much less five hours, I don't know what I would have done.

I knew a lot about food going into LCB, but I knew a lot more coming out. I was more determined than ever to write, but instead of a cookbook I decided I wanted to write a book about my experiences at LCB. It took me two years to write *Translating Le Cordon Bleu: If I Can Do It, You Can Do It*. The manual admittedly had a long title, but considering my age when I started at LCB, it said what I wanted it to say. After filing all of my rejection letters away, ostensibly for posterity, I started to work on my second book, which I hoped was going to be, pardon my hubris, "extremely funny."

I was thinking of Nora Ephron's "deceptively light ... distinctive, engaging and simply hilarious" writing style while I was working on my second book. She'll always be one of my favorite screenwriters and novelists. My book was going to highlight the pivotal food moments in my life, much like her *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts On Being A Woman*, but I titled mine, *Getting Rid of Bob & Other Food Stories*.

Then I lost my sense of humor, as in "vanished" and "nowhere to be found." I had lost it for shorter periods in the past, at least two, but this time losing it was a doozy. I didn't write anything except e-mails for three very long and unproductive years.

## EPILOGUE

**My literary prose hovers somewhere over creative nonfiction and fantasy, but it never strays far from the subject or language of food. It's taken me three marriages, two children, and a stint at *Le Cordon Bleu*, to get to the point I'm currently at when it comes to cooking. After my 2015 graduation from Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, I'm going to pursue writing on a full-time basis. Hopefully my literary and culinary personalities come together in a peaceful coexistence. I could use the peace and quiet.**

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## AN ANNOTATED OUTLINE

My book is a work in progress. Any future plans include adding additional stories from the courses I took at *Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts*, all of which, from beginning to end, were:

1. Introduction to Culinary Skills I
2. Food Science
3. Introduction to Culinary Skills II
4. Introduction to Baking & Pastry
5. Introduction to Garde Manger
6. Introduction to Computers
7. Math Concepts
8. Purchasing for Hospitality Operations
9. Meat & Seafood Identification & Fabrication
10. Food & Beverage Cost Control
11. Wine & Beverage
12. Advanced Baking & Pastry
13. Principles of American Cuisine
14. Hospitality Career Management
15. Hospitality Supervision
16. Principles of International Cuisine
17. Advanced Garde Manger
18. Restaurant Guest Services
19. Restaurant Practical
20. Externship

My cooking skills have fallen on hard times since my husband moved to Virginia four years ago and, as I write this, Omaha, Nebraska. I started at Kennesaw State University almost three years ago, but I hope to get a job in the food industry after graduation and include stories about it in another book.

Another idea I had involved a lot more work. I would like to take my memoir and turning it into two books. The first creative nonfiction book would be the memoir and the

second one, strictly fictional, would be a fantasy novella with visits from M. F. K. Fisher. I would also include a visit from Alice B. Toklas, Julia Child, and maybe one from Ernest Hemingway because he loved food and wine so much. The movies made from screenplays and novels that have inspired me in this endeavor included visible ghosts, invisible ghosts, or at the very least the voice of a ghost. The movies are: *Midnight in Paris*, *Angels in the Outfield*, *Field of Dreams*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Ghost*, *Beetlejuice*, and *Heart and Souls*. What I found rather odd is that none of them were food-centric. I would like to change that.



## Judith Lorraine Polk

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A certified culinarian with strong verbal & written communication as well as organizational and time management skills seeks a writing position.

### Education:

#### **Kennesaw State University - Kennesaw, Georgia**

Master of Arts in Professional Writing

MAPW Degree Pending May 2015, Summa Cum Laude, 3.9 GPA

#### **Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts - Atlanta; Tucker, Georgia**

Associate of Occupational Science Degree in Culinary Arts

Graduated January 2008, Summa Cum Laude, 4.0 GPA, Perfect Attendance Record

#### **Seton Hall University - South Orange, New Jersey**

Master of Arts – History

#### **Muhlenberg College - Allentown, Pennsylvania**

Bachelor in Liberal Arts - Political Science

#### **Lehigh County Community College - Schnecksville, Pennsylvania**

Associate in Arts - Education

### Summary of Qualifications:

- Strong writing and research skills
- Proficient Computer Skills: iMac OS X Version 10.8.4 and MacBook Air, Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Numbers, Pages

### Writing Experience:

- Currently working on a memoir titled *If You Don't Want to Talk About Food, Don't Sit Next to Me*
- Currently working on a creative fiction novel titled *Dinners with M.F.K. Fisher*
- Wrote *Translating Le Cordon Bleu: If I Can Do It, You Can Do It* – (280 Pages)
- Wrote and published ***Point of View***, a subscription-based culinary newsletter (three years) in Virginia and Georgia
- Free-lance columnist - Wrote weekly full five-hundred word column, ***Polk's Pen***, about community events for Sunday edition of *The Californian* (three years)
- Edited *My Mother's Cookbook* (677 Recipes)
- Wrote cookbook reviews for *Le Cordon Bleu* bookstore
- Resume Writing Specialist for the *Private Industry Council (PIC)* Allentown, Pennsylvania

### Past Affiliations:

**Slow Food USA**