

## Clean Plate Club

K.N. Flora

One of the my favorite Youtube channels is *Binging with Babish*. Every week, a short clip from a movie or TV show sits in the middle of the stage area. Then, a deep, rumbling voice announces something like, “This week on *Binging with Babish*, we’ll be making the \_\_\_\_\_ from the 90s classic \_\_\_\_\_.” Then a handsome pair of forearms and an aproned trunk enter the shot, a stock of ingredients on the counter in front of them. In a recent episode, Babish recreates the banana pudding pepperoni pizza from the first season of Nickelodeon’s classic cartoon, *Doug*. As you can imagine, it was terrible—not quite a member of Babish’s “Clean Plate Club.” This exclusive club is filled with the greats like Chilean Sea Bass from *Jurassic Park*, Pasta Aglio e Olio from *Chef*, Pasta Puttinesca from *Lemony Snicket’s Series of Unfortunate Events*, and many others.

I’ve been thinking about the “Clean Plate Club” a lot these days because, for better or for worse, that’s the way I was raised. Two parents and five hungry kids were stuffed in one household, so you piled your plate with as much food as you could—assuming the others would do the same—and you ate it all. Heaping piles of pasta, mountains of mashed potatoes, half boxes of cold cereal. You ate until it hurt. There was no such thing as leftovers, and you certainly couldn’t depend on that food being there later. Whatever was in the refrigerator was fair game.

I live five states away from my family now and the only food my partner, Chris, sneaks from me are my Kalamata olives. Though, the trend was set early; I still lap up my food like it’s my last meal. At home and at restaurants, I will eat everything on my plate,

even if it hurts. And if I do ask for a to-go box, it's not because I couldn't finish. It's just that I don't want to disgust you or the servers.

My father visited last winter. He'd registered for a race in Myrtle Beach, then drove over an hour back northwest to Wilmington to stay the night with Chris and me. My dad's a marathoner. He recently qualifying for his fourth Boston marathon. He's nearly bald, by choice. He wears tight oval glasses, neon running jerseys both on and off the track, and he's runner thin—all lean muscle and pasta gut. It's his tradition to fuel up on carbs the night before he races, so Chris and I took him to the carbiest place we could think of, The Harp Irish Restaurant and Pub.

Harp a small place with a patio out front, and the inside is separated in half. One half, folded hot dog style, is a bar; the other half is tightly packed with tables. Booths line the walls. The three of us grab a booth in the back corner for privacy. Chris orders water; he still thinks he should behave in front of my dad. I order a Michelob Ultra. Dad orders a Long Island Iced Tea. He couldn't name what mix of alcohols are in it, but it's another of his pre-run traditions.

I scour the menu for something to eat. Harp is the carbiest place I know, which is a problem. I am on a diet, and I'm avoiding carbs. Everything on the menu is pasta or fried. Even the salads have fruits, or else the dressing is probably sweetened with who-knows-what. I finally decide on a salmon salad, with dressing on the side, thanks. Dad orders crusted and herbed chicken with a side of mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables. Chris, whip-thin, orders fries with curry dip. When the food comes, I hang onto Chris's every bite, wishing I had what he was having. My salad is pretty tasty, and I was right. The dressing is so sweet, I don't use much, but probably more than I should. Dad's also a marathon eater,

so he slurps up his food quickly, talking only when he wants to talk more about running. He shows me his GPS logs like I should be interested. He shows me his Garmin's sleep tracker and tells me he sleeps best right after a run.

I have been running too. I feel best after I run. Running is great. I have a run coming up in February. I'm real excited about it.

For never having talked to me much when I was a kid, he can certainly talk about running, and I don't mind too much. I feel fatigued by it, but also feel like I need to participate. To show off. To talk about my running stats. Not only am I glad that this divorced janitor/maintenance man has found his passion, I also feel like I have to keep up. I tell Dad how much weight I've lost. We talk about nutrition. We talk about how Alisha, my eldest sister, is also losing weight but she'd lose more faster if she didn't cheat so much. We talk about what Mom could be doing with her health and diet—how she needs to get out more often. It was not what I would have preferred to talk about, but it was something. Not long ago, I was in their shoes—am still in their shoes. My relationship with the right foods have improved, but I all the fucking time, I think of food.

Once, when I was nine, my mother left my dad, sister, brother, and me to visit a friend in Edmonton, Alberta Province. Around this time, my family lived on take-out burgers, almost exclusively. This suited us all as it was far tastier than anything Mom made, and Dad couldn't cook. I suppose Dad hadn't wanted to get out this particular night, or else wanted to experiment. In any case, I found Dad—chubby then—standing at the stove the night Mom left.

The kitchen in my childhood home was high-ceilinged and from it hung a wooden slat ceiling fan. The cabinets, the dinner table, the chairs were all wooden. Even the walls were covered with wooden paneling—not that thin clapboard paneling that decorated the walls of the trailer I lived in for a small time. This paneling was the expensive, thick, glossy stuff that felt warm to look at. Everything in the kitchen was a shade of brown from the wood except the white fluorescent light above the sink, the white refrigerator, and the white stove. The stove sat between two large windows, and there dad stood, boiling the only ingredients he had to work with: canned peas, canned corn, and pickle juice.

To cook at home was rare, but for Dad especially, so Alisha, Nathan, and I crowded him where he stood. Our noses scrunched with the pickle juices' tang, but this proximity to our father was rare. He was a hummingbird that'd chosen our tree to nest in, and we didn't want to scare him off. When the corn and peas were appropriately wilted, we grabbed our spoons, and ladled some of the stuff into bowls. Then, standing around the oven, we sipped on hot pick juice soup.

How much did we eat? Not much. We took one sip and our mouths wrinkled. We took another sip, then another to decide if the taste became more favorable. Dad probably ate more than his kids, but the taste hadn't changed for him either. I imagine he stared into the bowl, then looked up to see us kids spooning up some juice, then letting it fall back into their bowls.

"This is terrible," he laughed. He threw his spoon into the sink and put the bowl on the ground to share with the cats. Snuggles, a thin calico, sniffed at the contents and backed away as though she'd been swat at. What was in the sauce pan was flushed down the toilet. Then, we went out for burgers.

The bowl sat there for the next few days.

At Harp, I'm finished with my salad and still feeling peckish when our waiter asks us if we'd like to order anything else. *YES!* I want to scream. *Caramel cake or ice cream or a whiskey sour, whatever you have! I'll even take a baked potato you dropped on the floor, I'm just still so hungry.* No, we answer. Before our waiter takes our plates, I imagine taking Chris's curry bowl in both hands, and lapping the sauce out with my tongue like an animal.

Dad picks up our checks and we come back home. He sleeps on our futon. He gets up at 3 the next morning to concoct his pre-run juices. He swallows a plain bagel and a banana. He says goodbye with a short hug, then drives back to Myrtle Beach for his marathon. I love him, but I'm glad he's gone. I don't have to parade my weight loss anymore. I can struggle in private.