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Paramore: A Spiritual Food Affair

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Why is this night unlike all other nights?

(An excerpt from *Of Immigration & Alchemy*)

At Passover, it is tradition for the youngest child to ask, “Why is this night unlike all other nights?” A Sicilian kid could ask the same about Christmas Eve. I never understood why my whole family gathered the night before Christmas, rather than Christmas day. I didn't know what, 'The Feast of the Seven Fishes' was or that the evening even had a name, and I thought everyone ate Struffali for breakfast on Christmas day. Growing up I started to investigate my culture and found that there is reason to our rhyme. We eat fish one Christmas eve because our family originally came from a peninsula where fish was fresh and cheap. Struffali, the sweet, honey coated deep fried morsels of dough served every year, originated here, in Napoli. I am passionate about Italian food, but it is the reason for the ritual, not the recipes, that is most fascinating, - even profound.

The number seven is not an arbitrary number. It is the biblical number of perfection. Digging deeper I found out that three represents the Triune God, and that four represents the Earth. Numerically, $3 + 4 = 7$, but the deeper meaning is 'God & Earth', or “God on Earth.” Jesus Christ himself. So, Why do we eat seven different kinds of fish, and linger at my Grandmother's house late into the night? We are eagerly awaiting the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us, the birth of Christ. We are truly celebrating Christmas, in a uniquely Sicilian way.

Riesling & Relativity

His mom used to call him 'gordito', an affectionate term for small and fat, but that doesn't seem appropriate anymore. Set against broad shoulders and an angular build, deep brown eyes stare back at me from across the booth. The soft Latin flavor of his voice hangs from his lips seasoning the conversation, but is over powered by a sudden burst of bagpipes in the background. We both turn and watch as we are alerted to the presence of Irish step dancers, hearing the rhythmic tap of metal against wood in time to the music echoing through the restaurant. Straining to see past the crowd I make out the back of a dancer. Her shoulder length blonde hair falls in tight ringlets that bounce up and down vibrantly in time with her steps. The kelley green decor of McCormick & Shmick's has never been so apropos as it is today, St. Patrick's day. We return to our lunch and I notice that he eats with one hand and talks with the other. His demeanor is calm and quiet, but being Latino he uses his hands to convey the emotion and passion of what he's saying. I smile to myself at the idea of him forgetting the half panini in his left hand and accidentally launching it across the restaurant to emphasize his point. Being Italian myself, my words and my hands are so intimately connected that I can barely eat and talk at the same time. Listening to his stories about growing up in a Mexican home gives my hands a rest, and I am able to sit back and enjoy the sweet, young Riesling I am sipping with my lunch. Good conversation quickly eats away at our time and we learn first hand about Einstein's theory of relativity. It seems like only a few minutes ago we sat down, welcomed by bagpipers, but in reality, lunch has come and gone, our glasses have long since been emptied, and we are both late to wherever it was we were supposed to be.

Farmstead: Grade A

As a New Yorker I practically bleed pin stripes, and I'm very critical of three things when it comes to food: bagels, pizza, and delis. Farmstead Downcity on Westminster, while not exactly a deli, has been faithfully serving gourmet sandwiches to the Downcity population since it first opened its doors in 2008, and there has been no lack of media buzz surrounding the brand's dedication to "stinky cheese, fine wine, and good times." But being from New York, skepticism comes naturally to me. I have to decide for myself.

When my friends and I walk through the already open door of the Downcity location it is a Tuesday afternoon. The constantly changing menu is sketched out in brightly colored chalk on the blackboard that hangs adjacent to the counter. A sign scrawled on a paper bag is displayed front and center letting us know they are out of turkey, bacon & tuna. **Yellow Card.** We are disappointed, but still take a few minutes to choose between the remaining options, all of which sound delicious. We place our orders and look around. The small shop is full of interesting things to eat. They have a decently sized selection of gourmet sodas, snacks and desserts, and I wish I could try them all. A bacon chocolate bar catches my eye, and my soul yearns to try what sounds to me like the yin-yang of culinary perfection, but one quick glance at the price tag and the candy bar is out of my hand and back on the shelf. I am a college student - I cannot spend eight dollars on chocolate. Instead, I settle and grab a square of Blueberry Crumb Cake for a third of the price.

We buy three sandwiches at \$8 each, and are immediately faced with another dilemma: where to enjoy our spoils. Due to the non-existent seating we find ourselves wondering down Mathewson Street to set up a hallway picnic at the Academic Center. First up, Cheese Monger's Famous Grilled Cheese. One bite puts your mom's grilled cheese to shame. Grilled bread, crispy on the

outside and chewy on the inside, cuddles a deliciously hot mess of gourmet cheese scraps, melted and intermingled to form a whole defiantly better than the sum of it's parts.

Next up, New York Pastrami & Cheddar. I wonder if Farmstead knew it would be going head to head with Carnegie Deli when it chalked out its menu today. Unwrapping the plain brown paper reveals a sandwich that looks delicious, but most assuredly nothing like something you'd find in NYC. However, the first bite blows my skepticism out of the water. The look is New England, but this sandwich is bursting with New York flavor; spicy pastrami, mellow Crawley cheddar, crispy red cabbage slaw and Baboo mustard makes this a home run, - right out of Yankee Stadium.

With such a strong starting line-up, its almost no wonder that the third sandwich let us down. When I read, *Jerk Chicken Salad, with jicama remoulade and greens* I was intrigued; the concept had such potential. I imagined chunks of chicken, heavily seasoned with bold Caribbean spices. What I got was barely seasoned chicken endowed with all the texture of mushy tuna salad. Couple that with the conspicuous absence of their trademark cheese- and you might have to take two points from Gryffindor.

Nonetheless, biting into my square of blueberry glory wipes the Jerk Chicken fiasco from my mind. I linger in post meal bliss. Farmstead has more than proven itself, possessing flavors that could hold their own in NYC, all wrapped up in that plain-brown-paper New England charm.

How the ~~Grinch~~ Freezer Stole ~~Christmas~~ Thanksgiving

Only in America could a ‘food’ product gross most of its profit off the national loneliness epidemic. Enter: TV Dinners. In the name of independence, millions of Americans sequester themselves from true relationships with others. Whether the collapse of the nuclear family led to the mass popularity of frozen dinners, or TV dinners catalyzed the deterioration of the family, is the chicken and the egg all over again. Maybe they are mutually exclusive. Who knows? But whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes, the Grinch stood there on Christmas Eve hating the Whos, and I am sitting here staring at a freezer burned box promising to deliver all the flavor of the Holidays with none of the emotional baggage.

God only knows what marketers were thinking when they named this dinner “Hungry Man.” The rampant feminism I’m spoon fed on a daily basis makes the brand name alone an immediate turn off. I’m a woman, and I’m not really that hungry. My “Roasted Carved White Meat Turkey” dinner is described as, “White meat turkey with home- style gravy, seasoned stuffing, creamy mashed potatoes and sweet corn” and it apparently includes an “apple cranberry dessert.” Flipping over the box I am outright shocked to read the conventional oven directions have a forty-minute cook time! Despite the temptation to microwave this sucker for eight minutes I decide to preheat my oven to 350 degrees. There is just no way this dinner will ever break through my skepticism if it has to endure the microwave.

Peeling back the plastic film releases a puff of steam assuring me my dinner is hot, if nothing else. I wish I could say that my patience was rewarded, but there is no way that microwaves could have made this caricature of Thanksgiving dinner any more unappetizing. Gelatinous turkey slices rest on grainy ‘mashed potatoes’, and box-style stuffing that is soft in some places and

crunchy in others; it is all slathered with a thick blanket of what I assume is meant to be gravy. The whole thing reeks of high sodium and food science. The only remotely redeeming aspect of the ‘main course’ is a tiny side compartment half full of yellow corn that tastes like it was put there by the Jolly Green Giant himself; sweet, buttery, void of all nutritional content, just like momma used to make.

The second side compartment boasts some sort of ‘apple cranberry dessert’, that is essentially microscopic bits of apple suspended in a matrix of runny cranberry sauce. It is so tart I can’t eat it without puckering. The kid in me is reminded of sour candies pumped full of citric acid, and I eat it all. It is so sweet that I know it will turn my stomach later, but I have always been a fan of Warheads.

The flimsy black tray makes its way to the garbage still full of ‘food.’ I’m tempted to say I’m disappointed, but this dinner has delivered everything it promised: a quick fix disposable meal to go with our single serving friends and expendable relationships.

Baking...is my release...

Frazzled: 1800 Grand Concourse. The kitchen floor beneath me trembles. *"Oh my Gosh, the D train is such an attention whore the nights it runs express."* I think to myself; it must be 8:45. I reach for the flour, the sugar, the salt. I search the disorganized kitchen for a measuring cup. This is what happens when you put 12 college students in a house. My internal monologue sounds like the intro to *Real World: The Bronx. 12 college students, 2 bedrooms, and a partridge in a pear tree.* There is no measuring cup in this kitchen... **Yellow Card**

Outside, the sun has faded from the city skyline. The humid air definitive of urban summer nights is not exactly helping my frustration. Bold Latin music, laughter, and light hearted chatter attempts to make its way in from streets outside, but it's all but drowned out by the slamming of cabinet doors and kitchen drawers. This culture of stoops and streets is usually invigorating to an extrovert like me. Just not right now. Right now all I care about is what happened to the damn measuring cup.

"What are you doing?" the voice is gentle, but concerned. I pause for a moment to see Jon standing in the doorway. For the past six weeks he's been the Yin to my Yang, and I've been the Bonnie to his Clyde.

"I'm looking for the stupid measuring cup. Do you know where it is?"

"No, I haven't seen it in a while. Why?" he says, "What are you making?" I mumble something about cookies, and compare the measuring cup to an elusive Pokémon.

"You don't have to compare everything to a Pokémon just because I'm from Hong Kong," he laughs and enters the kitchen, -Stage Left-, to join the hunt.

This is not the first time Jon's witnessed me crashing around the kitchen of the dilapidated church building we've called home this summer.

Since we started our internship with NYCUP, -The New York City Urban Project-, -Jon & I have spent plenty of time in the kitchen together, - and for quite a bit of it I have been frazzled. My mania leaves him unfazed. That's why I love him. We clicked instantly. We were passionate about food, social justice, and each other.

We continue our search for the lone quarter- cup measure the house once possessed.... to no avail. "We can use this," he suggests, holding up a flimsy eighth of a cup scoop, he's unearthed from a barrel of iced tea mix.

"Yeah, I guess..." my voice more defeated than anything else at this point, "You don't have to help me you know. Everyone else is outside dancing. I know you don't want to..." He looks me in the eyes, and hands me the flour,

"Where would I rather be than here with you?" I smile, and dig the flimsy plastic scoop into the flour.

Flour First, Then Salt, Baking Soda, Cha Cha Cha. "Wait. Where is the baking soda?" my sous chef asks. His question is answered by a loud "CRACK!"; My wooden spoon flying at the wall, "You've got to be kidding me!" I exclaim. Jon is now rolling with laughter,

"I'm KIDDING!" He says, "It's right here!" My eyes narrow. I'm torn between wanting to scream at him, and laugh at myself. I hate him. I love him. I laugh. Three, Four, Triple Step.

As Jon creams the butter and sugar together, I chop the toasted almonds into irregular polygons, and slowly stir them into the mix, - my bad mood dissolving with each stroke. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jon reach for the bright yellow bag of Nestle White Chocolate Chips. I hear the familiar 'pop' as white chocolate scented air escapes the bag, engaging my senses. The sound of each chip escaping and joining the party sounds like home. Coconut, Vanilla, Five, Six...

We round teaspoons of cookie dough that fall in line like soldiers on baking sheets. The oven is ready and waiting. We slide them onto the rack, and

close the door. The timer is set. I look at Jon. We smile. Seven, Eight, Rock-Step...

"Come outside. Dance with me." He insists. And how could I not dance with a man like that? I really don't know, but the unlikely truth is, I didn't. When I did reluctantly make my way outside that night, I danced with Charlie, Mike, Will, - everyone but Jon. Some of them were charming dancers, but to me, -unimpressive. I had already been dancing exquisitely all night, with the best partner I could ask for. We danced the, 'Where's the measuring cup?' Salsa, and the Baking Soda Bachata, but the most vivid, enchanting, dance, of that night, was the confectionary delight of the Coconut-Almond-White-Chocolate-Chip-Cookie-Waltz.

One Part Restaurant Review; Two Parts Romance

Tazza is like an old friend to me. I have regularly, -even religiously-, attended their open mic night on Sundays, losing myself in stiff drinks and local talent. Their Iced Coffee has been known to tempt more than one visitor to move to Providence. But tonight, I enter tazza, not for drinks or music, but food. Tonight I am a journalist first and foremost.

I walk into tazza with Jake on a Monday night around six pm. It is easy to understand why most Downcity restaurants close Mondays; -the place is all but empty. "Sit anywhere you like guys," the tired waitress calls to us from across the floor. We settle into the corner of one of the black plush booths that wraps around three tables. If there is one thing tazza is not lacking it's ambiance. Always trendy, and on this night, the low-key crowd makes it almost romantic.

I look up across the table to see that Jake is not across from me at all, but sitting caddy corner next to me in the crook of the booth. *Oh my.... this isn't just a food review... this is a date.* The realization hits just as our waitress sets water on our table. Her presence is abrupt, borderline irritating, interrupting my train of thought. Her face says, "I've had a long day" all over it.

"Can I get you guys sumthin to drink?" *I guess she doesn't waste time with introductions.* She rambles off the specials. I am barely listening and mumble back something about iced coffee. Despite being seriously distracted by the young man to my right, one of the specials catches my ear: a spicy black bean burger. He orders the Roasted Red Panini with onion-rings on the side.

The moment we place our order I lose whatever perspective I had left on the critique I should be constructing in my head. The quill dancing wildly across the parchment of my mind is not jotting down notes on ambience or wait times, - but on him...us...this. His eyes don't wonder around the restaurant, or stare blankly into space. They are fixed on me. Not on my lips as they stumble

over conversation, or my legs as I cross them to sit Indian style in the booth, but me. *How could anyone be so interested in what I have to say? In me?*

Our ‘aloneness’ is almost palpable and I wonder if he feels it too. I wonder if he is as surprised as I am by our accidental date. I wonder what he’s thinking. I wonder a lot of things... *I wonder... is this is what it feels like to fall in love?*

Our iced coffee arrives and after one sip my question is answered. This is exactly what it feels like to fall in love. Cold brewed iced coffee, mild in acidity, balanced in flavor, and sipped slowly, taken black. Love indeed.

“Wow. That *is* good,” He concedes. The subtitle reads, **Death of a Starbucks Snob.**

“I told you,” I smile and he smiles back. Sometimes I think his smile must trigger some kind of pulley system that makes my heart beat a little fast and time move a little slower. *He has no idea how charming he is.*

“Tell me more about your family,” he insists, and I oblige.

Time passes between ethereal sips of iced coffee and engaging conversation. I am hardly interested when our food arrives. Entrees are set on square white plates side by side. I suddenly realize I actually need to review this meal, and am acutely aware I’ll have to fabricate most of the details. *This may be my best review, and my worst article, yet.* I put on my columnist hat for a moment:

My spicy black bean burger is served open-faced with lettuce and tomatoes on a soft-floured roll, a dill pickle spear and a side of sweet potato fries. I try a sweet potato fry first. They are flat, thin, just barely crisp, and delicious. Even my beau, who swears he hates sweet potatoes in all forms, can’t seem to get enough of them. But my best adjective to describe the Black Bean Burger is disappointing. The bun is bready and overwhelming, and the burger’s consistency is so mushy that it squishes out the sides when you try to take a bite. **Yellow Card.** It boasts no real flavor profile to speak of and can barely be called spicy, let alone a burger. For almost \$13.00 the whole thing is forgettable

at best and more than half of it stays on my plate. Note to self: Next time, skip the special.

The Roasted Red Panini features grilled chicken and roasted red peppers held together by a matrix of melted provolone. Ringing in at \$8.95, it tastes exactly like you would imagine, and my only real criticism is it could have been served a little hotter. The onion rings are battered and fried to golden brown; sweet and delicious. On both plates the supporting cast outshines the star.

“How’s your meal?” I ask him.

“Great,” he replies with a coy smile, “but the food could be better.”

There’s that pulley system again...

After a while, who knows how long, our waitress circles back to check on us. She seems genuinely concerned with the amount of food left on our plates.

“Was your meal ok?” she asks.

“Yes..” We exchange flirtatious smiles and a knowing glance, “We’re big fans of the iced coffee.”