NATALIA GINZBURG

Natalia Ginzburg (1916–1991) is now valued as a major Italian writer of the second half of the twentieth century. She spent most of her life in the city of Turin, where she befriended the novelist Cesare Pavese and was married to Leone Ginzburg. Her husband, a scholar of Russian literature and a leader of the antifascist underground, was killed by the Nazis in 1944. She herself endured great suffering and poverty during the war, and raised her children by herself. After the war she worked for the prestigious publishing house Enaudi, married the scholar Gabriele Baldini, the model for "he" in "He and I," and began writing her books. Family Sayings, *an autobiographical novel, won the coveted Strega Prize.*

Ginzburg's deceptively plain style, with its homey domestic details, everyday images, and singsong speech, effectively conveys sophisticated ideas and mature wisdom in an unintimidating manner. In her essay collection, The Little Virtues, *the author writes about herself as if she were an ordinary girl, wife, mother, widow, with a peasant's stubbornness and endurance. Her aesthetic and humanist viewpoint seems to have been fashioned in the same crucible as postwar neorealist Italian movies. Even her writing gift is brought down to earth, as in this passage from the essay "My Vocation":*

> *When I write something I usually think it is very important and that I am a very fine writer. I think this happens to everyone. But there is one corner of my mind in which I know very well what I am, which is a small, a very small writer. I swear I know it. But that doesn't matter much to me. Only, I don't want to think about names: I can see that if I am asked 'a small writer like who?' it would sadden me to think of the names of other small writers. I prefer to think that no one has ever been*

like me, however small, however much a mosquito or a flea of a writer I may be. The important thing is to be convinced that this really is your vocation, your profession, something you will do all your life.

The following essay, "He and I," captures the seesaw of human companionship and love with a patience and sensitivity to interconnectedness that it is hard to imagine a male essayist attempting, much less equaling.

He and I

HE ALWAYS FEELS HOT, I always feel cold. In the summer when it really is hot he does nothing but complain about how hot he feels. He is irritated if he sees me put a jumper on in the evening.

He speaks several languages well; I do not speak any well. He manages —in his own way—to speak even the languages that he doesn't know.

He has an excellent sense of direction, I have none at all. After one day in a foreign city he can move about in it as thoughtlessly as a butterfly. I get lost in my own city; I have to ask directions so that I can get back home again. He hates asking directions; when we go by car to a town we don't know he doesn't want to ask directions and tells me to look at the map. I don't know how to read maps and I get confused by all the little red circles and he loses his temper.

He loves the theatre, painting, music, especially music. I do not understand music at all, painting doesn't mean much to me and I get bored at the theatre. I love and understand one thing in the world and that is poetry.

He loves museums, and I will go if I am forced to but with an unpleasant sense of effort and duty. He loves libraries and I hate them.

He loves travelling, unfamiliar foreign cities, restaurants. I would like to stay at home all the time and never move.

All the same I follow him on his many journeys. I follow him to museums, to churches, to the opera. I even follow him to concerts, where I fall asleep.

Because he knows the conductors and the singers, after the perfor-

M. F. K. FISHER

Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher (1908–1992) has an enigmatic place in American letters, being perhaps undervalued as a serious writer and overvalued, or at least overmystified, as a cult figure. Many regard her as the patron saint and paragon of modern food writing. She herself said, "I do not consider myself a food writer." Yet a good deal of her output was for magazines such as Food and Wine *and* Gourmet. *Certainly food was her primary subject matter, and her achievement was to use this seemingly mundane concern as a metaphor for the analysis of human appetite, disappointment, and rapture. Her most personal (and best) book,* The Gastronomical Me, *gives us glimpses of a rather hard life—the failure of her first marriage, the illness and death of her beloved second husband, the cowardly behavior of many Europeans during World War II—through the scrim of an education in eating. As she said once in an interview, "One has to live, you know. You can't just die from grief or anything. You don't die. You might as well eat well, have a good glass of wine, a good tomato." It is this stoical realism that fleshes out her epicurean search and gives it depth.*

Stylistically, Fisher had a taste for aphorisms, sentences of compressed wit that boldly cut through any dithering. Sometimes the reader is left hungry for more of her life—intentionally so. She practiced a discipline of restraint and omission, creating essentially an oblique, dignified, detached persona rather than a chatty, confessional one. Nonetheless, she could be disarmingly and alarmingly honest. Her very satisfying personal essays about cooking, which appeared originally in The New Yorker *and were collected in* With Bold Knife and Fork, *display a casual erudition and an anecdotal warmth. Fisher translated Brillat-Savarin's* The Physiology of Taste, *and her writing was increasingly informed by a historical perspective on food preparation.*

W. H. Auden once called her the best American prose stylist alive, a compliment that seems in retrospect more provocative than considered; but there is no question that her writing is of a very high order and gives pleasure even to those who don't especially care about food.

Once a Tramp, Always . . .

THERE IS A MISTAKEN IDEA, ancient but still with us, that an overdose of anything from fornication to hot chocolate will teach restraint by the very results of its abuse. A righteous and worried father, feeling broad-minded and full of manly understanding, will urge a rich cigar upon his fledgling and almost force him to be sick, to show him how to smoke properly. Another, learning that his sons have been nipping dago red, will chain them psychologically to the dinner table and drink them under it, to teach them how to handle their liquor like gentlemen. Such methods are drastic and of dubious worth, I think. People continue to smoke and to drink, and to be excessive or moderate according to their own needs. Their good manners are a matter more of innate taste than of outward training.

Craving—the actual and continued need for something—is another matter. Sometimes it lasts for one's lifetime. There is no satisfying it, except temporarily, and that can spell death or ruin. At least three people I know very well, children of alcoholic parents, were literally born drunk, and after sad experience they face the hideous fact that one more nip will destroy them. But they dream of it. Another of my friends dreams of chocolate, and is haunted by sensory fantasies of the taste and smell of chocolate, and occasionally talks of chocolate the way some people talk of their mistresses, but one Hershey bar would damn him and his liver too. (Members of A.A. pray to God daily to keep them from taking that First Drink. A first candy bar can be as dangerous.) These people choose to live, no matter how cautiously, because they know that they can never be satisfied. For them real satiety, the inner spiritual kind, is impossible. They are, although in a noble way, cheating: an *honest* satyr will risk death from exhaustion, still happily aware that there will always be more women in the world than he can possibly accommodate.

Somewhere between the extremes of putative training in self-control and unflagging discipline against wild cravings lie the sensual and voluptuous gastronomical favorites-of-a-lifetime, the nostalgic yearnings for flavors once met in early days—the smell or taste of a gooseberry pie on a summer noon at Peachblow Farm, the whiff of anise from a Marseille bar. Old or moderately young, of any sex, most of us can forgo the analyst's couch at will and call up some such flavors. It is better thus. Kept verbal, there is small danger of indigestion, and in truth, a gooseberry pie can be a horror (those pale beady acid fruits, the sugar never masking their mean acidity, the crust sogging . . . my father rhapsodized occasionally about the ones at Peachblow and we tried to recapture their magic for him, but it was impossible). And a glass of *pastis* at the wrong time and with the wrong people can turn into a first-class emetic, no matter how it used to make the mind and body rejoice in Provence. Most people like to talk, once steered onto the right track, about their lifetime favorites in food. It does not matter if they have only dreamed of them for the past countless decades: favorites remain, and mankind is basically a faithful bunch of fellows. If you loved Gaby Deslys or Fanny Brice, from no matter how far afar, you still can and do. And why not? There is, in this happily insatiable fantasizing, no saturation point, no moment at which the body must cry: *Help!*

Of course, the average person has not actually possessed a famous beauty, and it is there that gastronomy serves as a kind of surrogate, to ease our longings. One does not need to be a king or mogul to indulge most, if at all, of his senses with the heady enjoyment of a dish—speaking in culinary terms, that is. I myself, to come right down to it, have never been in love from afar, except perhaps for a handful of fleeting moments when a flickering shot of Wallace Reid driving over a cliff would make me feel queer. I know of women who have really mooned, and for years, over some such glamorous shadow, and it is highly possible that my own immunity is due to my sensual satisfaction, even vicarious, in such things as potato chips and Beluga caviar. This realization is cruelly matter-of-fact to anyone of romantic sensitivity, and I feel vaguely apologetic about it. At the same time, I am relieved. I am free from any regrets that Clark Marlon Barrymore has never smiled at me. I know that even though I eat potato chips perhaps once every three years, I can, whenever I wish to, tap an almost unlimited fountain of them not five hundred feet from my own door. It is not quite the same thing with caviar, of course, and I have dug into a one-pound tin of it, fresh and pearly gray, not more than eight or nine times in my life. But I know that for a while longer the Acipensers of the Black and Caspian seas will be able to carry out their fertility rites and that I may even partake again of their delectable fruits. Meanwhile, stern about potato chips on the one hand and optimistic about Beluga on the other, I can savor with my mind's palate their strange familiarity.

It is said that a few connoisseurs, such as old George Saintsbury, can recall *physically* the bouquet of certain great vintages a half century after tasting them. I am a mouse among elephants now, but I can say just as surely that this minute, in a northern California valley, I can taste-smell-hear-see and then feel between my teeth the potato chips I ate slowly one November afternoon in 1936, in the bar of the Lausanne Palace. They were uneven in both thickness and color, probably made by a new apprentice in the hotel kitchen, and almost surely they smelled faintly of either chicken or fish, for that was always the case there. They were a little too salty, to encourage me to drink. They were ineffable. I am still nourished by them. That is probably why I can be so firm about not eating my way through barrels, tunnels, mountains more of them here in the land where they hang like square cellophane fruit on wire trees in all the grocery stores, to tempt me sharply every time I pass them.

As for the caviar, I can wait. I know I cannot possibly, *ever,* eat enough of it to satisfy my hunger, my unreasonable lust, so I think back with what is almost placidity upon the times I could attack a tub of it and take five minutes or so for every small voluptuous mouthful. Again, why not? Being carnal, such dreams are perforce sinful in some vocabularies. Other ways of thinking might call them merely foolish, or Freudian "substitutes." That is all right; I know that I can cultivate restraint, or accept it patiently when it is thrust upon me—just as I know that I can walk right down Main Street this minute and buy almost as many Macadamia nuts as I would like to eat, and certainly enough to make me feel very sick for a time, but that I shan't do so.

I have some of the same twinges of basic craving for those salty gnarled little nuts from Hawaii as the ones I keep ruthlessly at bay for the vulgar fried potatoes and the costly fish eggs. Just writing of my small steady passion for them makes my mouth water in a reassuringly controlled way, and I am glad there are dozens of jars of them in the local goodies shoppe, for me not to buy. I cannot remember when I first ate a Macadamia, but I was hooked from that moment. I think it was about thirty years ago. The Prince of Wales was said to have invested in a ranch in Hawaii which raised them in small quantities, so that the name stuck in my mind because *he* did, but I doubt that royal business cunning had much to do with my immediate delectation. The last time I ate one was about four months ago, in New York. I surprised my *belle-soeur* and almost embarrassed myself by letting a small moan escape me when she put a bowl of them beside my chair; they were beautiful—so lumpy, Macadamian, salty, golden! And I ate one, to save face. One. I can still sense its peculiar crispness and its complete Macadamianimity. How fortunate I am!

Many of the things we batten on in our fantasies are part of our childhoods, although none of mine has been, so far in this list. I was perhaps

twenty-three when I first ate almost enough caviar—not to mention any caviar at all that I can now remember. It was one of the best, brightest days of my whole life with my parents, and lunching in the quiet back room at the Café de la Paix was only a part of the luminous whole. My mother ate fresh foie gras, sternly forbidden to her liver, but she loved the cathedral at Strasbourg enough to risk almost any kind of retribution, and this truffled slab was so plainly the best of her lifetime that we all agreed it could do her nothing but good, which it did. My father and I ate caviar, probably Sevruga, with green-black smallish beads and a superb challenge of flavor for the iced grassy vodka we used to cleanse our happy palates. We ate three portions apiece, tacitly knowing it could never happen again that anything would be quite so mysteriously perfect in both time and space. The headwaiter sensed all this, which is, of course, why he was world-known, and the portions got larger, and at our third blissful command he simply put the tin in its ice bowl upon our table. It was a regal gesture, like being tapped on the shoulder with a sword. We bowed, served ourselves exactly as he would have done, grain for grain, and had no need for any more. It was reward enough to sit in the almost empty room, chaste rococo in the slanting June sunlight, with the generous tub of pure delight between us, Mother purring there, the vodka seeping slyly through our veins, and real wood strawberries to come, to make us feel like children again and not near-gods. That was a fine introduction to what I hope is a reasonably long life of such occasional bliss.

As for potato chips, I do not remember them earlier than my twenty-first year, when I once ate stupidly and well of them in a small, stylish restaurant in Germany, where we had to wait downstairs in the tavern while our meal was being readied to eat upstairs. Beside me on a table was a bowl of exquisitely fresh and delicate chips, and when we finally sat down I could not face the heavily excellent dinner we had ordered. I was ashamed of my gluttony, for it is never commendable, even when based on ignorance. Perhaps *that* is why I am so stern today about not eating many of the devilish temptations?

There is one other thing I know I shall never get enough of—champagne. I cannot say when I drank my first prickly, delicious glass of it. I was raised in Prohibition, which meant that my father was very careful about his bootleggers, but the general adult drinking stayed around pinch-bottle Scotch as safest in those days, and I think I probably started my lifelong affair with Dom Pérignon's discovery in 1929, when I first went to France. It does not matter. I would gladly ask for the same end as a poor peasant's there, who is given a glass of champagne on his deathbed to cheer him on his way.

I used to think, in my Russian-novel days, that I would cherish a lover who managed through thick and thin, snow and sleet, to have a bunch of

Parma violets on my breakfast tray each morning—also rain or shine, Christmas or August, and onward into complete Neverland. Later, I shifted my dream plan—a split of cold champagne, one half hour *before* the tray! Violets, sparkling wine, and trays themselves were as nonexistent as the lover(s), of course, but once again, why not? By now, I sip a mug of vegetable broth and count myself fortunate, while my mind's nose and eyes feast on the pungency of the purple blossoms, and the champagne stings my sleepy tongue . . . and on feast days I drink a little glass of California "dry Sauterne" from the icebox . . . and it is much easier to get out of bed to go to work if there is not that silly tray there.

Mayonnaise, real mayonnaise, good mayonnaise, is something I can dream of any time, almost, and not because I ate it when I was little but because I did not. My maternal grandmother, whose Victorian neuroses dictated our family table tastes until I was about twelve, found salads generally suspect but would tolerate the occasional serving of some watery lettuce in a dish beside each plate (those crescents one still sees now and then in English and Swiss boardinghouses and the mansions of American Anglophiles). On it would be a dab or lump or blob, depending on the current cook, of what was quietly referred to as Boiled Dressing. It seemed dreadful stuff—enough to harm one's soul.

I do not have my grandmother's own recipe, although I am sure she seared it into many an illiterate mind in her kitchens, but I have found an approximation, which I feel strangely forced to give. It is from Miss Parloa's *New Cook Book,* copyrighted in Boston in 1880 by Estes and Lauriat:

> Three eggs, one tablespoon each of sugar, oil and salt, a scant tablespoonful of mustard, a cupful of milk and one of vinegar. Stir oil, mustard, salt and sugar in a bowl until perfectly smooth. Add the eggs, and beat well; then add the vinegar, and finally the milk. Place the bowl in a basin of boiling water, and stir the dressing until it thickens like soft custard. . . . The dressing will keep two weeks if bottled tightly and put in a cool place.

On second thought, I think Grandmother's receipt, as I am sure it was called, may have used one egg instead of three, skimped on the sugar and oil, left out the mustard, and perhaps eliminated the milk as well. It was a kind of sour whitish gravy and. . . . Yes! Patience is its own reward; I have looked in dozens of cookbooks without finding her abysmal secret, and now I have it: she did not use eggs at all, but *flour.* That is it. Flour thickened the vinegar—no need to waste eggs and sugar . . . Battle Creek frowned on oil, and she spent yearly periods at that health resort . . . mustard was a heathen spice . . . salt was cheap, and good cider

vinegar came by the gallon. . . . And (here I can hear words as clearly as I can see the limp wet lettuce under its load of Boiled Dressing): "Salad is roughage and a French idea."

As proof of the strange hold childhood remembrance has on us, I think I am justified to print once, and only once, my considered analysis of the reason I must live for the rest of my life with an almost painful craving for mayonnaise made with fresh eggs and lemon juice and good olive oil:

Grandmother's Boiled Dressing

1 cup cider vinegar
Enough flour to make thin paste
Salt to taste

Mix well, boil slowly fifteen minutes or until done, and serve with wet shredded lettuce.

Unlike any other recipe I have ever given, this one has never been tested and never shall be, nor is it recommended for anything but passing thought.

Some of the foods that are of passionate interest in childhood, as potently desirable as drink to a toper, with time lose everything but a cool intellectuality. For about three years, when I was around six, we sometimes ate hot milk toast for Sunday night supper, but made with rich cocoa, and I would start waiting for the next time as soon as I had swallowed the last crumbly buttery brown spoonful of it. I am thankful I need have no real fear of ever being faced with another bowl of the stuff, but equally happy that I can still understand how its warmth and savor satisfied my senses then. I feel much the same grateful relief when I conjure, no matter how seldom, the four or five years when I was in boarding schools and existed—sensually, at least—from one private slow orgy to the next, of saltines and Hershey bars, bite for bite.

There is one concoction, or whatever it should be called, that I was never allowed to eat, and that I dreamed of almost viciously for perhaps seventeen years, until I was about twenty-two and married. I made it then and ate every bit of it and enjoyed it enormously and have never tasted it since, except in the happy reaches of my gastronomical mind. And not long ago, when I found a distinctly literary reference to it, I beamed and glowed. I love the reality of Mark Twain almost as much as I love the dream image of this dish, and when he included it, just as I myself would have, in a list of American foods he planned to eat—"a modest, private affair," all to himself—I could hardly believe the miraculous coincidence: my ambrosia, my god's!

In *A Tramp Abroad,* Twain grouses about the food he found in Europe in 1878 (even a god can sound a little limited at times) and makes a list of the foods he has missed the most and most poignantly awaits on his return. It starts out "Radishes," which is indeed either blind or chauvinistic, since I myself always seem to eat five times as many of them when I am a tramp abroad as when I am home. He then names eighty separate dishes and ends, "All sorts of American pastry. Fresh American Fruits. . . . Ice water." Love is *not* blind, and I do feel sorry about a certain lack of divinity in this utterance, but my faith and loyalty are forever strengthened by items 57 and 58: "Mashed Potatoes. Catsup."

These two things were printed on the same line, and I feel—in fact, I *know*—that he meant "Mashed Potatoes *and* Catsup," or perhaps "Mashed Potatoes *with* Catsup." This certainty springs from the fact that there is, in my own mind and plainly in his, an affinity there. The two belong together. I have known this since I was about five, or perhaps even younger. I have proved it—only once, but very thoroughly. I am willing to try to again, preferably in "a modest, private affair, all to myself," but in public if I should ever be challenged.

We often ate mashed potatoes at home. Grandmother liked what my mother secretly scoffed at as "slip-and-go-easies": custards, junkets, strained stewed tomatoes, things like that, with mashed potatoes, of course, at the head of the list as a necessity alongside any decent cut of meat. But—and here is the secret, perhaps, of my lifelong craving—we were never allowed to taste catsup. Never. It was spicy and bad for us, and "common" in bottles. (This is an odd fact, chronologically, for all the housekeepers of my beldam's vintage prided themselves on their special receipts for "ketchups," made of everything from oysters to walnuts and including the plentiful love apple.)

I remember that once when Grandmother was gone off to a religious convention, Mother asked each of us what we would most like to eat before the awesome Nervous Stomach took over our menus again. My father immediately said he would pick a large salad of watercress from the Rio Hondo and make a dressing of olive oil and wine vinegar—a double cock-snoot, since olive oil was an exotic smelly stuff kept only to rub on the navels of the new babies that seemed to arrive fairly often, and watercress grew along the banks of a stream that might well be . . . er . . . *used* by cows. When my turn came, I said, "Mashed potatoes and catsup." I forget exactly what went on next, except that Father was for letting me eat all I wanted of the crazy mixture and I never did get to. Ah, well . . . I loved watercress, too, and whatever forbidden fruits we bit into during that and similar gastric respites, and I did not need to stop dreaming.

My one deliberate challenge to myself was delicious. I was alone, which seems to be indicated for many such sensual rites. The potatoes were light,

whipped to a firm cloud with rich hot milk, faintly yellow from ample butter. I put them in a big warmed bowl, made a dent about the size of a respectable coffee cup, and filled it to the brim with catsup from a large, full, *vulgar* bottle that stood beside my table mat where a wineglass would be at an ordinary, commonplace, everyday banquet. Mine was, as I have said, delicious. I would, as I have also said, gladly do it again if I were dared to. But I prefer to nourish myself with the knowledge that it is not impossible (potato chips), not too improbable (fresh Beluga caviar). And now I am sharing it with a friend. I could not manage to serve forth to Mark Twain the "Sheep-head and croakers, from New Orleans," or the "Prairie hens, from Illinois," that he dreamed of in European boarding-houses ninety years ago, but mashed potatoes *with* catsup are ready to hand when he says the word.