

## Table Service

1. I want to write my Aunt Jo a house; a suspended house that makes home buoyant instead of burden. I want to think she is beautiful and could smile without always crying. I remember her best when she is crying, when she is daydreaming, when she is night thinking, when she is forgetful, when she is drinking, when she is dancing, when she is afraid. She is the oldest woman I know who does not scare me and I am the smallest girl she knows who did not leave. I want to write her a house that doesn't smell like cigarettes and burning hair. I want to write her back into motherhood and understand why the mothers in our family learn to fear their children.
2. In the storage shelf above the washer and dryer machines, there sits an old cookbook, the cover worn and the color of lipstick, a small burn mark blackening the red, the binding nonexistent, the pages barely together: to even attempt to page through its brokenness would drive a woman crazy. *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook*: the oldest book in our house, passed down from my grandmother, the book of my aunt's childhood.
3. For a lot of Americans, the 1950s were defined by a return to "normalcy," a postwar time where comfort food was steak and potatoes, and the women's place was in the home. The creation of "Betty Crocker" gave women an example of how to exist in this cult of domesticity. She was the fictional, ideal mother and wife, and her message that women were "first and foremost, homemakers" was at the heart of her character. As husbands and sons were returning home from war, the women were preparing Betty's "Rich Golden Cake" and "Simple Popovers."
4. By the time I was two years old, Aunt Jo's three children had already been to jail twice. They abandoned her for heroin, turned translucent and mean, and became addicted to the

feeling of leaving. Her children's addiction left her sleepless. Her nights were defined by police calls and cancelling credit cards and missing wedding rings. I think she loves me most because my arms are not purpled with needle scars. I think I love her most because she used to give me Easter money and chocolate lollipops and never talks about God.

5. At the back of *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook*, there are pages full of shortcuts and tips for making a woman's life easier. In perfecting your homemaking skills—meal-planning, bed-making, home-beautifying—Betty insists that you will have a happy home. Betty says that coffee is always offered with dessert and that no more than three pieces of silver should sit on each side of the plate and that a full cookie jar is what makes a home “homey.” She gives rules for etiquette and recipes to fill the lonely woman's days.
6. When I was ten years old, Aunt Jo's eldest and only son, Chris, abandoned her even after getting sober. He, his wife and their daughter moved to North Carolina. I can't recall exactly why he left, something to do with not wanting his daughter to be around his youngest sister, Liz, and her new boyfriend. There was a fight and then there was Aunt Jo: torn between children and powerless to make him stay.
7. When making cakes, Betty says you must follow the blueprint. Each of her recipes has been tested not once but hundreds of times to ensure perfect cakes. Betty says that cakes are deliberately balanced chemical formulas.
8. With Chris gone, Aunt Jo had two girls left. Erin, the middle child, leaves eight years after Chris. When I say that her children leave, I do not mean that they grow up and move out and move on, I mean that they disappear. They tear up old photos and block phone numbers and never return to their mother. Aunt Jo's youngest, Liz, stays forever but

leaves every night with bottles of wine and methadone. She sprawls on the carpet and slurs *I love you* until the things she stole reappear beside her sleeping mother.

9. Betty wants to know if your table is attractive at mealtime. Linen spotless? Silver shining? Glassware sparkling? Table neat and orderly?
10. I have memorized Aunt Jo by her sun-spotted skin and rounded face. Her mousy, brown hair is always permed, and eventually she will need a new hip. She cooks ground meat for her dogs even though she is a life-long vegetarian. She's known for making jokes about killing her husband and often talks about a time when she had a face that made boys whistle and lower their sunglasses. She tells me stories about how she used to ride horses and how it made her feel light. She doesn't ride anymore; she doesn't think the horse could carry her.
11. Betty says: If you feel tired, lie down on the floor on your back, put your hands above your head, close your eyes, and relax for three to five minutes.
12. A few days after Erin left, my family and I drive to Aunt Jo's townhouse in Bel Air, Maryland because we want to give her something to host. My mom does her hair in the car and shakily draws on eyeliner. She scolds me for wearing sweatpants and complains that my dad forgot to pack the deviled eggs. We bring onion dip, vodka, and five-dollar scratchers. In the car, my mom grabs my wrist and says, *Don't you ever write me off like that, you can't write your family off like that*. I roll my eyes and promise I'd never leave like that, that I'd never manipulate our family's pain. Years later I would threaten to leave her just like that.

13. Betty says: For personal outlook: every morning before breakfast, comb hair, apply makeup, a dash of cologne, and perhaps some simple earrings. Does wonders for your morale.
14. We rarely use our “Betty Crocker” cookbook anymore. Sometimes, it’s brought out at Christmas time for its molasses crinkles recipe, for the sentimentality of holding an old book. The book is not my grandmother, but her measuring conversions are scribbled in the margins. I remember when I was very young and used to cry at my grandmother’s kitchen table while she sternly told my mother that I needed to finish my food. With my cheek pressed against the plastic, checkered placemat, my Aunt Jo would kneel beside me and slide the scraps of roast beef and carrots under the table to the dog, squeezing my arm and giving me a knowing wink.
15. Betty says that the entire atmosphere brightens when food appears.
16. Aunt Jo’s townhouse always smells like dog, incense, and baby powder. Her second husband wears his hearing aids at work and then takes them out when he gets home. Christmas candles burn in the living room and there is always a store-bought pie in the freezer. Cocktails begin at two p.m. and appetizers consist of clam dip and cheese and crackers. Hostess gifts are always fussed over: when we visit after Erin leaves, we bring chocolates and a violet. Aunt Jo traces the lines that pull at her forehead. Her eyes look so small, like time has shrunk them, her eyeliner harsh. I bring her a cold drink; the ice rhythmically clinks in her shaking hands. Her head is on a constant wobble as she wonders whether she will be forgiven for losing her children.
17. My Uncle Bobby, Aunt Jo’s younger brother, is the only man in our family that can really cook. He was famous for his honey mustard recipe and the way he could grill a burger

just right. He spent most of his life cooking in dive bars and the occasional sit-down restaurant. In the fall of 2019, Aunt Jo loses Bobby to alcohol and diabetes. He used to collect sea glass and sleep in an old Buick where the fabric seats held the scent of marijuana and salted pretzels. He dies alone, and the police find him days later. At the burial in Long Island, New York, where Aunt Jo and the rest of my mother's siblings grew up, Bobby's three children cry. His children rejected him over ten years ago. They bring a poster-board with childhood pictures and ghost smiles. They say he was a good father. They put a can of beer along with his ashes by the grave and they do not have enough money for a Church funeral.

18. Bettys says that it's the mother's job to organize the family to cooperate, to give each child a task.

19. The night before the burial, I walk my Aunt Jo to her hotel room because she is too drunk. At sixty-seven years old, she wonders if her children will come to her funeral. Will they walk through the graveyard and look down at a headstone and remember all the years lost? Her feet are swollen. Her frizzy hair holds onto remnants of the fluorescent hotel lights. She holds onto me and whispers her thanks softly. Walking down the hotel hallway, she thinks I am her child. She thinks I can clear her table, lick her plate clean, carry her into a new beginning. She sleeps heavy that night and wakes with lipstick across her teeth.