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Writing 5: Food for Thought

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Living with ‘Allergies’

We were at the local Papa Razzi in my hometown, an extremely fancy restaurant for a 5-year-old. Around the table sat my mom and dad, my little sister in a high-chair, and my Aunt Joan. Actually, she was my great-aunt, but we called her ‘Aunt Joan’ because she was closer to my family than my real aunts. Shortly after we finished the famous Papa Razzi breadsticks, the waiter came to take our orders. I took a brief pause from circling the word search with a red crayon to order my usual spaghetti and [singular] meatball from the kid’s menu, and then got back to determinedly circling. The waiter made it around the table and jotted down everyone’s orders, but he was not allowed to send his message back to the kitchen just yet. Joan made sure to pause him with a look, and told him in a practiced manner, “Make sure that there are no onions in my dish; I am very allergic to onions.” The waiter assured her that there would be no onions in her dish (in fact, it was most likely a dish that would never normally contain onions) and escaped to the kitchen. Joan had three specific allergies—onions, garlic, and mayonnaise—which she couldn’t handle whatsoever. I felt sorry that she was missing out on these food staples because I loved the unique and interesting flavor that onions and garlic bring to dishes.

Years later, I was shocked to learn that Joan was not actually allergic to these foods, she had just built up a severe dislike from a young age. I was surprised, and somewhat embarrassed as a young kid that she had lied to waiters and waitresses, but Aunt Joan told me that this was the

only way to guarantee that the nasty onion-taste, or even worse, the funky garlic-flavor, would not sneak their way onto her dish. Her dislike was this severe. I learned later that my mom had once attempted to sneak mayonnaise slathered on the skin of a roast chicken (just following the recipe, nothing malicious), thinking that Joan's reaction was one big farce, but after one bite Joan refused to eat another, fuming at my mom that she would try such a thing. My dad, who doesn't like mayonnaise, was blissfully ignorant of its presence, but *Joan knew*.

While most people would find it easy to quickly think up of their favorite foods, I find it much easier to think of my least favorite: bananas, cream cheese, yoghurt, raisins, and (*gasp*) yoghurt-covered raisins. I build my meals and snacks only based on the principle of avoiding these certain foods. This absurd aversion seems to suggest that I am one of those picky eaters, but I want to make it clear that I am not. I love [almost] all food. Growing up, I was that weird kid who would devour a plate of brussels sprouts, yet never, ever eat a single pretzel (I recently overcame my fear of pretzels). Shellfish, mushrooms, and every vegetable—foods that my young peers were reluctant to accept into their exclusive juvenile appetite—were all happily enjoyed by a young me; but never would I spread cream cheese on a bagel. It puzzled my parents and friends that I would draw such a hard line at the staples of a young palate, but that's just what I did.

In some ways, disliking food is just like an allergy. My body and mind reject the indescribable sickly-sweet flavor the instant that the slightest hint of banana passes my lips. To clarify, in no way do I mean to discount the experiences of my friends who have genuine food allergies; I know my revulsion to certain foods comes nowhere near to the anaphylactic shock they experience after eating nuts or other allergens. However, in my own selfish bubble, bananas evoke a quite similar reaction. My repulsion towards these foods overcomes just taste and begins to bleed into the other five senses. I have trouble staying in the general vicinity of the kitchen if

someone peels a ripe banana; the sickly smell overwhelms me. And similarly, if one of my sisters rips the top off a fresh cup of yoghurt, I hold my breath to protect myself from the gross fake fruity smell. The chewy yet also seedy texture of raisins disgusts me and has marred my relationship with other chewy dried fruits even if I enjoy their non-dried counterparts. And I cringe at the muffled squishing sounds of my mother mashing bananas to make chocolate chip banana muffins. The more I think about it, my dislike is an obsession.

I love salmon. I love how the pan-fried crust delights in a satisfying crunch when compared to the tender fish below. I love artichokes with their earthy taste and eating process which is just plain fun. And I love turkey noodle soup right after Thanksgiving: the soothing warmth and familiar taste reminding me of family and many Thanksgiving meals in the past. I excite at the thought of trying some new food that I have never experienced before, largely because there are so few that my taste buds have not yet discovered. However, there's no inkling of curiosity within me that wants to give bananas another shot. And barring severe long-term amnesia, I don't think I ever will. Purely scientifically, every molecule in my body has been ingrained with a personal vendetta against those of bananas and yoghurt, and you can't fight science.