CIO CHE C'E (THAT WHAT IS)

by

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"What I remember most about Malkie was how talented she was with leftovers."

My cousin Irene's words stirred up a murmur in the living room. My mother was without a doubt a formidable force in the kitchen, particularly when it came to leftovers. She had an extraordinary flair for making something out of nothing, for taking yesterday's dinner and turning it into today's feast, a gift that most of her five children and fourteen grandchildren have inherited. I have since discovered—from my son, a chef who is studying in Italy—that my mother's style of cooking is referred to in Italian as *cio che c'e* (cho ke che), literally translated as "that what is." You take what you find in your larder and create an original feast. Nobody is the wiser.

It was the first night of *shiva*, the week of mourning. A *yartzeit* candle flickered near the window against inky December sky. Next to it, framed glamour shots of Mom from high school and college. In a matter of days, my mother had shifted from present to past tense. I touched the torn black ribbon that the rabbi had pinned to my chest. Ragged, like my heart. Earlier that day my siblings and I had formed a circle in Mom's living room while the rabbi led us through the *Kaddish*—which we would repeat every day for seven days. Now, seated on the living room couch that Mom had held onto since our childhood, I focused on the faces of my siblings—my harbor of safety. Clutching my husband's hand, my eyes grazed the collage of faces, people who had come to honor my mother's memory. Relatives. Neighbors. Friends. Voices formed a soft

chorus. Perfume comingled with the tang of cumin drifting from the kitchen where my sister's friends were preparing the evening meal. Mom, who considered herself shy, would have been shocked that her *shiva*, like a Pavarotti opera, had achieved standing room only status.

The room grew quiet. I wondered who was going to speak next. My mother's sister-in-law, Judy, in a thick Bostonian brogue, used Mom's Yiddish name. "Malkie wasn't just my sister-in-law. She was my friend. We went through a lot together, Malkie and I. She was always there for me, through thick and thin. And boy, could she throw a party. What a terrific hostess." Her painted lips clung to each syllable.

Judy's remarks called up images of Mom in hostess mode—black taffeta, rhinestone-studded apron snug around her waist, bow fanned out against her back. Marathon-style, she would cook, bake, and freeze for weeks in preparation for dinner parties, which were the talk of the town. Holiday meals boasted steaming *latke*s, homemade applesauce, simmering *tsimmes*, and mouth-watering pastries. We did not keep kosher, but she consistently turned out deli-worthy dishes. She made a mean brisket and could handily turn a homely head of cabbage into sweet and sour borscht or stuffed cabbage. Her beet borscht, adorned with potatoes and sour cream, was a tour de force.

Mom was into recycling and repurposing before these words joined the American vernacular. Juicy roast beef held together with string was next seen mixed with simmering vegetables in chop suey, served with white rice and crunchy chow mein noodles. Steamed green beans became one of the ingredients in mock chopped liver, slathered onto rye bread. Extra noodles ended up in soup or tucked into a warm, sweet *kugel*. Her signature dish was *junk soup*. She would efficiently gather odds and ends from the fridge, add beans, rice, or barley from the pantry, place everything in a soup pot with chicken stock, and simmer for hours. *Cio che c'e*.

Infusing the house with soothing, rich aroma.

An unfamiliar older gentleman cleared his throat and, in a thick Eastern European accent, described his stint as Mom's interpreter during one of her many hospital stays. She was lying in bed, repeating a Yiddish phrase that nobody could understand. Knowing he spoke fluent Yiddish, my older sister called him. When he got to the hospital, Mom was pounding her tiny fists against the mattress yelling, "*Ich broch nisht die alle tableten vus* the doctor *geibt mir. Ich broch nur yoech mit lokshen*."

He translated, "I don't need all this medicine the doctors are giving me. I just need some chicken soup with noodles!"

Mom often used the word *gemischt* when referring to her food—crafted from an unplanned assortment of ingredients. In the playground of her kitchen, she made everything from scratch, never used recipes unless she was baking, and even then substitutions ruled. If she didn't have vanilla extract, she would use almond. If there was no sour cream, she would substitute yogurt. If walnuts were scarce, she would use pecans. And she never measured. Her standard recipe guidance went like this: "Put in a fistful of this, a sprinkle of that, stir until it's the right consistency, and bake until it's the right color!" However, when it came to chicken soup, her recipe was sacrosanct, the ingredients were non-negotiable. Water, chicken bullion, chicken parts, a whole scored onion, a bunch of parsley, sliced parsnips, carrots, and celery.

By age ten my son had become quite curious in the kitchen. Mom was visiting and, while making soup for Friday night dinner, he sidled up to her. "Grandma what would happen if we put some rosemary in the soup and maybe a few more carrots and then made a pureed soup?" I could feel the torrent of emotion swelling in her chest. Like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, I could hear the word *tradition* rising up inside her. Many Grandmothers would have dismissed this request

with a firm *skedaddle*, but Mom stepped back, thought for a second. “Well, honey, why don't we give you your own pot? You can experiment and make any kind of soup you want.” She reached into the cabinet for another pot, placed half of the ingredients in her already simmering soup into his and, surrendering her hard-core soup stance, facilitated my son’s first *cio che c’e* creation.

As a child, I would have much preferred to climb a tree than to stand by my mother’s side in the kitchen. I had no appreciation for her culinary genius and no clue what I was already learning by osmosis. On baking days, the scent of sugary yeast sprinkled the house like fairy dust. We would come home from school to freshly rolled pastries lined in perfect formation on paper towels. Hovering while Mom counted and stashed them in shoeboxes, layered in between waxed paper, we would feast on the sweet cinnamon goodies left behind.

Food was love in our house, though Mom did not cater to food whims or preferences. Her stock reply to “Mom, what’s for dinner?” was “I do not give out menus.” We each got to request our favorite meal on our birthday and every so often she treated us to what we called the *Leave it to Beaver* dinner: roast beef, mashed potatoes, and peas. Those were the nights we transported ourselves to Mayfield referring to Mom and Dad as June and Ward.

Two things happened in junior high that awakened a spark of recognition about the quality of food in my mother’s kitchen. I went home with a friend one day after school. She lived in a large house set into the hillside. By the time we climbed the countless steps leading to the front door we were panting from starvation. Her elderly mother greeted us and once inside, I noticed that all the curtains were drawn. My friend put her finger to her mouth, instructing me to be quiet. She silently beckoned me into the kitchen where she climbed onto the counter and reached for a can of Campbell’s minestrone soup.

After opening it with a metal can opener, she slid two soupspoons from the silverware

drawer. I followed her to her room where we sat in the dark eating cold salty soup straight from the can—a strangely intriguing after-school snack. I felt like a foreigner in an alien food culture.

That same year I reported to my mother that we had learned to make pigs in a blanket in my Home Ec class. When I described how we'd opened a can of Vienna sausage and wrapped them one at a time in Pillsbury refrigerator dough, the word *goyishe* escaped from her mouth before she said, "They call that cooking?" My mother, who avoided head on collisions, picked up the phone to dial the school principal. It was only after I threw a fit that she relented.

When I was sixteen, after reading *The Jungle,* about the meat packing industry in the early 1900's, I came home from school and announced, "I've become a vegetarian." My siblings followed in suit and soon Mom had four plant-eating children. True to form, she went to work in her kitchen laboratory experimenting with meatless *cio che c'e* dishes. "Idiot soufflé" made with leftover bread, cheese and veggies became a staple at dinner parties from then on. The Berkeley food revolution was in full swing and Mom opened her arms to our foodie *mishegas* with grace. Mounds of fresh fruits and vegetables replaced compact bags of frozen peas and corn. Wonder Bread gave way to freshly baked whole grain bread. Velveeta and prepackaged Monterey Jack stepped aside for an array of cheeses from all over the globe and the aroma of Peet's coffee made Folgers fade into the distance. Through all of this, Mom's chicken soup recipe never varied.

The front door opened letting in a shriek of winter cold. I pulled my gray wool sweater across my chest. I glanced over at the rabbi, tears clinging to the corners of her eyes. Looking around the room at all the people who were grieving the loss of my mother, I realized how many people my mother had touched with her kitchen know-how, which was about much more than food. Mom had spent her teen years in Boston as a pioneer-in-training—preparing to make *aliyah* and live the life of a *kibbutznik*. Beneath the elegant veneer a no-nonsense pioneer spirit

dominated her everyday life. I could see her in cashmere and high heels rhythmically massaging yeasty dough, holding the *hak messer* to make fresh chopped liver, shaping matzo balls for Passover soup. Fortunately for my father, chief chaos creator, Mom was well equipped for the full ride with her something-from-nothing prowess. His fickle income demanded it. Besides her stunning ability to make a three-dollar dress mimic couture and green plastic look like jade, Mom managed to put a fabulous meal on the table every night without fail. Even during times of financial drought, when the five of us kids could be found scrounging around in our piggy banks in search of quick cash for our reckless father.

The rabbi asked if anyone else had words to share. I thought about what a magician my mother had been and, in my mind, gave her an A+ for resourcefulness, even though she and I did not always see eye to eye on culinary etiquette. Shocked when I treated dinner guests as guinea pigs, she told me it was one thing to dash out leftover-inspired meals for the family but another thing to fly by the seat of my pants for a dinner party.

Despite our differences, Mom taught me about making do with what I have; making something out of nothing; making order out of chaos. And now I was going to have to make do without her. If she heard my thoughts, she'd shoo me away and say, *Honey, I lived through the Depression. This is not magic; this is just what we did.*

When I was a young mother, Mom would call to boast about her latest meal creation, often tossing in a soliloquy on a recent retail bargain. In the middle of riding herd on my children, and trying to craft a meal for them that would be worthy of eating, I'd listen with half an ear and growing irritation. Returning the handset to its cradle, I'd think, *Doesn't my mother have anything better to do?*

Now that Mom is gone, I cherish the minutiae and yearn to call her each time I score a

fantastic bargain or achieve a top-flight something-from-nothing dinner.

Cio che c'e.

That what is.

Mom's cunning sleight of hand.