

We Were the McGill Girls

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We were the McGill Girls. The phenom that rose from the ashes of my parents' brutal divorce. Pulled tightly together, a mother and her two girls, arms interlocked and nestled in the sanctuary of our gray-shingled, raised ranch with foot-tall grass none of us knew how to mow.

McGill Girls had matching noses and a genetic compulsion to sing at full volume, our voices pouring from the open windows of Mom's honey car, her gold Toyota Corolla. We danced like blood-thirsty heathens to the COPS theme song then settled back down on our lumpy, torn couch to watch. We curated a library of inside jokes and disgraceful anecdotes about pubic hair and labia, our mother's failed bid to be prom queen and a familial proclivity toward Tourette's Syndrome. We were loud and inappropriate. We didn't care if people enjoyed us because we were the McGill Girls; we had each other. And we had something else too.

We had our mashed potatoes.

Cobbled together from our mother's childhood memories and a faulty-thyroid tendency to over salt, our mashed potato recipe was McGill Girls scripture. We prepared them fastidiously, and far too often, because they provided a comfort missing from our hangnail reality of imminent foreclosure and second-hand clothes.

McGill Girls had palates defined by a store-brand budget, so we only used russet potatoes. Yukon Gold or Red Bliss were all wrong in our estimation, the taste, the texture, the cost per pound.

We never peeled or sliced the potatoes because Nana taught us that the skins-on boil method produced the most flavor. Still, we would stab their brown dirty hides with forks to inflict small wounds and ensure even cooking. Once primed, we would stack the potatoes in our only stock pot and place it on one of the two functioning, uneven electric burners on our four-burner stove.

As the boiling water tossed the potatoes around the pot, we tested their firmness with our forks, waiting for that tiny window of perfection when the tines came out easily, but before the skins gave way and the insides turned mealy. Then under a cool tap, we'd peel the scalding spuds with our bare McGill Girl hands, cursing each time one broke apart in our fingers and left us with first degree burns.

As the oldest daughter, it was my privilege to do the mashing. Armed with our wood-handled masher, I'd climb on a stool for leverage, then plunge it into the pot with two hands.

My sister would start with the butter. At least one stick, more likely two, sliced into pads and dropped in for me to smash. Salt and pepper came next, the shake and taste.

Lastly, we added what would someday become our most controversial ingredient, one that would pit McGill Girl against McGill Girl on major holidays in the name of matrimonial peace. Two hefty scoops of light, sour cream. Mixed and mashed to perfection.

We'd feed each other samples from our finger tips. More salt. A bit more butter. Evening out the flavors

till we all agreed they were just right.

Our plates were appropriated with meager servings of canned corn and frozen peas, the only vegetables our mother liked, the only ones we ever ate, and an unremarkable protein, usually chicken, tough or burned, cooked with a level of care that correlated to its importance on the plate

The potatoes were the star, nothing else mattered. The creamy oversized mound made our plates complete. Us, too.

Our mother's boyfriend was the first one to challenge us. Sour cream didn't belong in mashed potatoes, he said. That wasn't how his mother made them. We were three against one so we would divide the cooked potatoes into two pots, only adding sour cream to the larger portion.

My husband was the second to complain. Sour cream didn't belong in mashed potatoes. He was a purist, potatoes should taste like potatoes. We were three against two and found a reluctant compromise in half the sour cream.

My sister's husband came last. No sour cream, just no. We were evenly matched then, the McGill Girls against the McGill Girls' mates and we caved like no one was looking. Drowned our potatoes in gravy. Called it a day.

When I learned that my first baby would be a girl, a daughter, I asked my mother if I could have our wooden-handled masher. She gave it to me without ceremony. It had been so long since our potatoes were our potatoes. She'd been using an immersion blender for years. I carried that masher with me like a promise. I would have a daughter; I would pull her close. We would be the next generation of McGill Girls.

Over the next five years I had two daughters. But we weren't the McGill Girls. And not because they didn't share my last name. After all, McGill Girl is a state of mind, not a name embossed on a birth certificate.

We weren't McGill Girls because I had stopped being a McGill Girl a long time ago. In the name of being a grown up, I dulled the sharp edges that made me, me. Metered my big feelings, dampened my reckless joy for life. Pulled on some business casual pants and comfortable flats. Erased my colors and filled myself in black and white. I became a carb-free, potatoes-less shell of a McGill Girl living in a house painted shades of gray to soothe my frayed nerves.

The masher had stayed hidden in the bottom of my utensil drawer, unused because its metal head scraped the sides of the Calphalon pans I'd gotten as a wedding gift. It stayed out of my sight, unable to point out that my life is not exactly what I'd planned, that I was not the mother I expected myself to be. Me, ushering my girls out of the kitchen so I could cook alone and fulfill my parental obligation as quickly as possible. Clean the kitchen. Check my email. Get them to sleep. Feel numb till tomorrow.

I was a bland McGill Girl on auto-pilot. A McGill Girl missing her secret ingredient, not sour cream, but hope.

Looking back, I can see that hope was the most important ingredient in our recipe all along. Hope that the IRS would finally take the lien off our house that my father left behind. Hope that I could earn good enough grades to get a scholarship to college, and after that a good job. Hope that my sister would find some peace in her angry heart. Hope that our survivors' mantra would prove true and one day we would have made it.

That was the folly of the first generation of McGill girls, our belief that you could make it. As a woman

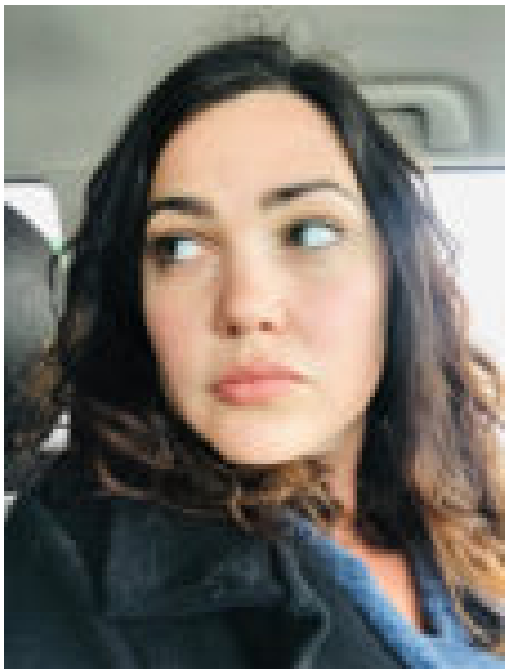
standing on the edge of a cliff that separates me from myself, I know now that there is no making it. There is no finish line. There is only a daily battle to confront yourself with the hard questions no one really wants to answer. For years those questions were buried with my potato masher in the bottom of the drawer. But I've dumped them all out and I am addressing them one at a time

I am excavating my McGill Girl, clawing my way back to myself, fist over fist, setting my life afire, ending my marriage, selling my home in pursuit of building what matters most to me now. A new generation of McGill Girls with a firm grip on their big emotions and on each other and who will demand sour cream in their potatoes if that's what they want.

I have moments of doubt, my heart pounds in my ears as I listen to the words of cynics who think I have all the ingredients needed for a content life: a nice husband, a nice house, a good job. They don't understand why I would upset a seemingly fine life in pursuit of something more. Definitely not for something as simple as happiness.

But last week, as my girls and I wrestled through a game of tickle monster on my bed, I pulled them into my arms and wiggled my fingers in their armpits and the folds behind their knees. For the first time in a long time, I felt like a McGill Girl. A reincarnate. My daughters' giggles bounced off each other's cheeks and echoed in my ears with a ringing certainty that I can take the best parts of my past and build their futures full of life and love. We will be great.

We will leave the big house and fancy pots behind and armed with my old wooden-handled masher, we will create a new recipe, pulled from the yellowed memories of the McGill Girls who came before us, we will make it our own and it will keep us full.



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