



Salisbury Steak Day

by Michelle Strausbaugh

Breaded Fish, Potatoes, Flavor Fiesta Vegetables, Red and White Slaw, Peach Cobbler

They wake me up most days with a knock at the door. A blonde woman and her blonde daughter. A red-faced older gentleman. A man and woman in polyester suiting. A group of girls and their scout leader.

“Are you Michelle?” Surprised to see a woman in her early thirties in pigtails and pajamas. They hand me a warm Styrofoam clamshell. Consult a sheet of paper.

And then they are gone. Like handing meals out to prisoners in solitary.

This is so not what I thought Meals-on-Wheels would be like.

Most days just feel like I’ve got the flu, except that I’m also hungover, and I have jet lag, and I’m being slowly electrocuted. If I get up and do too much when I’m feeling okay, I lapse back into the worst throes of illness within a day or two. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, leaves a quarter of its sufferers homebound or bedridden. There is no treatment that has survived the few clinical trials science has bothered to muster. My remissions became fewer and shorter over the years until the deluge of relapse never ebbed. By the time my clinic referred me to social services, I struggled to cook or leave my apartment most days; laundry was impossible.

Salisbury Steak w/Gravy, Mashed Potatoes, Fiesta Vegetables, Perfection Salad, Rice Pudding

Lime green Jell-O with shredded carrots in a square of perfect right angles reminds me of elementary school cafeteria lunches or the many bland Baptist potlucks of my childhood. Why have *anything* with Jell-O but whipped cream?

“What can be so bad?” Chef asks the children on *South Park*. “It’s Salisbury Steak Day.” Shit brown and a perfect rubber oval in its Styrofoam pentagon. In the triangles above, the instant mashed potatoes are a starchy fluff, the vegetables soggy and symmetrical.

Turkey Tetrazzini, Peas & Carrots, Tossed Salad, Orange

What *is* the meat in this dish with the sticky goo vaguely reminiscent of noodles? I check the menu. So it’s *not* tuna?

“Gordon Ramsey should try Meals-on-Wheels,” jokes my internet boyfriend. I laugh. But I’m going to hell for complaining. Most Meals-on-Wheels programs serve the elderly exclusively. Those of us under 65 may live for decades waiting with hope for scientific serendipity to find and free us.

What *is* a shut-in?

It never required my asking before I was sick. There were church services on the radio for them. Some lived in nursing homes. Our Girl Scout troop visited them at Christmas. Otherwise, what was there to think about?

During my first stint homebound, I had visitors every day to my campus apartment. Animated discussions about Foucault and Edward Said, Monica Lewinsky and her interview with Barbara Walters, and tutorials to keep up with my Arabic and Hebrew.

They have kids and degrees and jobs, and my regular companions are illness, the internet, and the books lining the walls of my public housing studio for the elderly and disabled. Not that the books and I are on speaking terms much these days. I’m just too damn feeble.

It’s like finding out what happens when you die. After the initial flurry of concern, people move on with their lives—as they must. And the lacuna you once filled quickly fades. By rivers of overcooked Turkey Tetrazzini I sit and weep when I remember you, O Zion.

Sloppy Joe w/ Hamburger Bun, Potatoes, Sliced Carrots with Spinach Salad, Lemon Gelatin, Blueberries

Mmm. Slightly tangy red sauce with hamburger dumped over a bun.

The phone rings. A curt voice from a nursing home tells me she’s calling on behalf of my friend Maxine and hands the phone off. Dazed, Maxine stammers that she had a stroke several months back. The small talk is awkward.

“It’s like I’ve just been dumped here and forgotten,” she says at one point.

There is a physics of recognition hitting that place at the center of my breastbone and the rim of my eyes. We met on the bus when I was in college and she was working for a jeweler

downtown. She was the cutest older lady I'd ever known. Now we are like out-of-date iPhones or torn blouses. Shut-in and shut out.

Cheese Ravioli, Italian Blend Vegetables, Navy Bean Salad, Strawberry Cheesecake

The one day I leave my apartment for a fucking doctor's appointment and I miss the best Meals-on-Wheels day of all. Firm, lubricious pasta bursting with real ricotta. It will be six weeks or more until it comes again. I nearly weep from despair.

Chicken-Basil Sausage, Mashed Potatoes, Chopped Spinach, Cottage Cheese with Canned Fruit, Cookie

The quilt is tucked tightly around me. I am hungry for sleep and an end to the electrical pain crackling every nerve. Hungry for touch and the companionship of internet friends I am too sick to sit up and reach. When I am still shut-in more than a decade later, I will look back on this day when there had been no human contact for days except for two smiling ladies handing me a squeaky white clamshell filled with warm food.

I will remember their almost maternal regard. I will remember the juices from the sausage running onto the Styrofoam and the taste of gratitude. I will remember being remembered. Even if I'm only an address on a sheet of paper.