

NOURISHED

NOURISHED

A MEMOIR OF FOOD, FAITH,
AND ENDURING LOVE

(with Recipes)



LIA HUBER



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*For Christopher . . .
for always being willing to jump out of airplanes with me.
For Noemi . . . don't forget.
For my parents . . .
for teaching me anything is possible.*



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PROLOGUE



JULY 2012

They're not going to like the vegetables," the old woman in the corner of the hut mumbled through wrinkled lips and missing teeth. She was speaking in Kaqchikel, the language native to this region of Guatemala, but I understood her nonetheless. I was used to the skeptical, almost goading tenor of that sentence.

The other women, of varying ages, nodded agreement. I stirred the giant pot perched on a rickety propane burner and pretended not to understand.

I was in Guatemala as part of a team that had traveled there to build a house for a family, and since I was also a professional cook, they had asked me to make lunch for sixty elementary school kids. A soup was strongly suggested. Me being me, I dove into the task by researching traditional soups of the region and settled on a simple chicken soup. Knowing that malnutrition statistics were dire in villages like San Rafael, I also took it upon myself to go heavy on the veggies.

Of course, when I had left our team's compound to procure said veggies the day before, my armful of giant market bags had caused many to ask, "What are you doing?"

“I’m going to buy vegetables for the soup,” I answered. Inevitably, whoever they were would make the same face the old Guatemalan woman just did, shrug, and say in Spanish, “The kids aren’t going to like the vegetables.”

So now I knew that sentence in three languages.

When my husband and I had arrived in San Rafael along with our team, the social workers had taken us on a tour. I’d expected poverty. Over half of the people in Guatemala live below the poverty line, and 15 percent—like those in San Rafael—live on the edge of subsistence. That means homes cobbled together from sticks and scraps and corrugated plastic. It means no toilets or potable water. It means that most kids are out working in the fields by the end of elementary school in order to help the family survive.

What caught me off guard was that the people in San Rafael made money by growing vegetables—primarily squash, corn, and green beans—yet kept none of those vegetables for themselves. I watched as a farmer lifted boxes of pristine green beans off his donkey, and then I turned to the social worker. “I don’t understand. It seems like there’s plenty to have some for his family.”

“They have to sell everything they produce just to get by,” she replied.

Poverty is a tricky thing, and I’m not going to pretend to know how it feels to live each day on the brink of survival. But the wrappers crunching an inch thick beneath my feet and the sticky hands and faces of nearly every child I met were telling a story too. Surely the junk food that people were buying would cost more than what a farmer would make on the few handfuls of green beans that would feed his family.

The unspoken narrative came to the surface in that dirt-floored

kitchen with the grumbled sentence I'd heard in three languages. Moms were concerned their kids wouldn't eat the green beans.

A skinny, dirt-streaked boy appeared in the kitchen doorway and then scurried away—which, apparently, was a sign that the time had come. I ladled out bowl after bowl of steaming soup and sent it off with the helpers into the classroom.

Twenty minutes later, I realized I'd served well beyond sixty bowls. "What's going on?" I asked one of the helpers.

One of the women piped up from the corner with a wry grin on her face. "The kids are asking for seconds." Another woman stood up and took the ladle from me, shooing me out of the room in a manner that appeared brusque. But I knew Guatemalans well enough to detect a note of affection in her gesture.

As I walked toward the classroom, I thought about my own junk-laden childhood. When I was these kids' age, I would come home from school and polish off a bag of Doritos, follow those up with a half-dozen Chips Ahoy, and then not touch the carrots in Mom's pot roast. Our economic circumstances might be vastly different, but these kids and I could have been kin, judging from how we felt about vegetables.

The same went for the mothers grumbling in the kitchen. With their skeptical, almost antagonistic posture, they could have been stand-ins for any number of women I've met in the United States. They told me things like, "Of course you roasted a chicken . . . you're a chef. I'm more of a KFC kind of gal." Or, "Of course you made sautéed mushrooms . . . you're such a foodie. Our family's more Hamburger Helper." And on went the explanations about how they didn't have time or training or energy to cook with real food.

But I'm here to tell you that those excuses are a bunch of baloney.

(Which, by the way, I used to love. Fried.) Choosing root vegetables over something out of a box isn't about being a foodie. It's a matter of life and death. I know because fake, convenient, fast food nearly killed me, and real food not only saved my life but made it richer than I ever could have dreamed.

I walked across the cracked cement where the kids had been playing soccer and through the classroom door, expecting to see piles of soggy vegetables sitting beside the bowls. Instead I saw tops of heads as the kids all but lapped up the soup. They looked up with wide, wet smiles and I asked, "*Le gustan el caldo . . . le gustan chayote?*" (Do you like the soup . . . do you like the squash?)

One particularly gutsy boy raised his spoon like the Statue of Liberty raising her torch and declared, "*Rico chayote!*" (Squash is delicious!) Others joined in, and soon the whole room was chanting, "*Rico chayote, rico chayote!*" I hugged each and every one of those children—even the ones who thought hugging was uncool—and walked back to the kitchen in a broth-scented bubble of euphoria.

There, too, the scene had turned convivial. The women were slurping bowls of soup and chatting with one another and, miracle of miracles, they were smiling at me. One handed me a bowl of my own and patted the seat beside her. I took it, savoring the rich stock studded with chicken and squash (it really was good), the intimacy of being hip to hip, and the warmth of the bowl in my hands.

That pot of soup had nourished a roomful of children and then turned "us and them" into "we."

I never tire of seeing miracles like these happen. And they do, because food is so much more than just something we put in our mouths or use to fuel our bodies. It's a blend of memories, emotions, feelings, needs. There's a soul to food, isn't there? Fragrances

and flavors intermingle with our life experiences to become wondrously satisfying in ways that stretch far beyond the plate.

Or bowl, in this case.

For me, food went from something I didn't think about to becoming a pivotal part of my life. It was what brought me joy. It was how I healed my body when doctors couldn't. It was how I related to people and gained deeper insight into my life's purpose and the way I serve the world.

Let you think that sounds highfalutin, let me say that I'm not talking fancy food and foams and names you can't pronounce (although I did go through that stage on my journey). I'm talking real food. I'm talking real experiences. I'm talking a rustic chicken soup made on a rickety propane burner in a dirt-floor kitchen.

Who knows what will happen with the kids in that classroom? One bowl of soup probably won't change their lives, but maybe it will. If one kid—or one parent—notices how much better they feel after that bowl of soup rather than a bag of chips, it could have a ripple effect on generations to come.

Maybe she'll escape the disease that runs rampant among her fellow villagers, which would mean a step from poverty toward freedom. Maybe she'll gain the energy and vitality to step out in ways she never thought she could, modeling change and inspiring a brighter future. Maybe, just maybe, she'll find her life going in a delightfully different direction than she'd planned.

Can all of that happen to someone because of things as seemingly mundane as soup and chicken and vegetables? I'll let you be the judge.

PART I

SEEDS



Inside even the most minute, dustlike grain of seed is a living plant. True, it's in embryonic form, possessing only the most rudimentary parts, but it lives, and it is not completely passive. Thus they maintain their spark of life—dim though it may be—until conditions are right for them to complete their destiny as germinated plants.

THE NEW SEED-STARTERS HANDBOOK

“Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”

MARK 4:27

CHAPTER 1



THE SUMMER THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

JUNE 1991

My heart thumped wildly, thrumming in my ears. What in God's name was I doing? Above me the sky was molten black, speckled with stars as dazzling as diamonds. I had my unwrinkleable plaid blazer wadded up under my head as a pillow—my long, sun-bleached hair was stringy from the salt air—and I hugged my knees against my chest in the fetal position. I felt small, insignificant, and very alone. The water mirrored the heavens as the high-speed ferry carried me across the Ionian Sea to the island of Corfu.

But what exactly, I asked myself, was I speeding toward?

The short answer was Alexi, a tall, dark Greek man with mischievous green eyes whom I'd met the week before while vacationing on Corfu with my friend Andrea.

The long answer wasn't quite so clear.

The first night Andrea and I had spent on Corfu, we went to a bar where raucous Americans and Australians were slurring, groping, and for some reason breaking plates over people's heads. I'd observed from a distance atop a picnic bench, feeling like I should

want to participate (I was twenty, after all) but having no desire to. I knew that wasn't what I'd come to Greece for. Although if you'd asked me to pinpoint what I *had* come for, I wouldn't have been able to. History? Mystery? Something akin to culture? Whatever it was, I was sure it was not at that bar.

The next day, though, I got a glimpse. A man whom Andrea had met insisted on taking us to a souvlaki stand up the road from the beach for a late lunch. We trudged along the sand and turned up a one-lane road lined with souvenir shops. The road took us to a nondescript restaurant with four orange tables on the covered patio. I was unimpressed . . . until the owner, Alexi, rode up on a yellow motorbike and unfurled his long, swarthy frame. After verbally sparring all afternoon over platters of grilled marinated pork skewers, crispy fries, and a big platter of Greek salad, Alexi leaned over to me and said, "There's something I want to show you. Be ready tomorrow morning."

The next day I watched dawn crack on the horizon, spreading a sultry light as smooth as butter over the island. Alexi pulled up on his motorbike, and I climbed on and wrapped my arms around his waist. The wind whipped my hair as he steered up the main road past vineyards, orchards, and cemeteries, then through a little village. "I live there, with my family." He pointed to a whitewashed stone house on the right. As we reached the end of the village and began to zigzag up a steep dirt path, my nose tingled with dust and the scent of minty herbs. I could see snatches of turquoise sea between the gnarled trunks of ancient olive trees.

At the top of the mountain Alexi stopped the bike on a plateau hundreds of feet above the ocean. Bees buzzed in the wildflowers, waves rolled in like pinstripes on the sea below, and the air smelled herbal and fresh, like my mother's spice rack. I was taken aback not

just by the beauty but by a sense of peace like I'd never felt before. Then Alexi took me home to that little white house we'd passed in the village where his father, Spiros, was cooking lunch. I was cautious—surely I was but one of a long string of young foreign women who had crossed that threshold—but Spiros put me instantly at ease.

"Pastitsada," he said, pressing into my hands a bowl of long, thick noodles drenched in tomato sauce with shards of meat that smelled like gingersnaps.

We sat at the simple wooden table in the kitchen, Alexi at the head and Spiros and me across from one another. I twirled some noodles around my fork and brought it to my mouth. The sauce tasted nothing like the jarred Ragu I knew so well. It was rich and savory with a swirl of spices and a slightly sweet finish. I sucked on the noodles and, to my horror, found they were hollow. They flapped against my cheeks like Medusa's locks with a loud slurp-flap-flap, leaving tomato sauce all over my face. Mortified, I looked across at Spiros as I wiped away the sauce, but he just chuckled, his blue eyes twinkling.

When Andrea and I left Corfu for another island, I couldn't stop thinking of Alexi and his family. So at the end of the week on Santorini, when Andrea and I had agreed to part ways, she went north to Paris, and I got on a ferry, alone, to Corfu. And now said ferry was pulling into the harbor at 10:00 at night.

I hadn't even tried to sleep. I was too busy second-guessing my decision. Alexi didn't even know I was coming; what would I do if he'd already replaced me? There were umpteen other girls on Corfu who looked better in a bikini than I did (let's just say that I lacked on top yet was given ample provisions on bottom); why *would* he wait for me?

My legs shook as I hailed a cab and pulled my backpack over my shoulder. I felt queasy as the car wound up and over the mountains, through the olive groves and down toward the beach. I could see the lights at the end of the road; the restaurant was open, which was good.

We rolled closer, and I saw that Alexi was alone. The fluorescent light gleamed off his glossy black hair. He looked up at the cab with a quizzical expression. I rolled down my window, and he smiled a wide, genuine smile. He bounded toward the cab and my shoulders felt like they dropped about six inches.

That night, in the Kourtesis' home again, I lay awake trying to pinpoint what had drawn me back. I had just spent a year studying in Paris, the most beautiful city in the world, and while I'd enjoyed it immensely, my default state of being had been a sense of detachment and anxiety. On the other hand, during the week I'd spent on Corfu, I'd felt like I'd sunk knee deep into rich, fertile earth.

The next morning I awoke to Mama Kourtesi sitting on the edge of the bed, beaming down at me. She ushered the two of us upstairs to the kitchen and served us plates of fried eggs. A donkey's bray joined the tick-tock of the pendulum clock on the wall, and a breeze rustled the trees just past the lace curtains on the window. Still groggy, I lifted the fork and a bit of deep golden yolk dripped from a tine, as thick as cake batter. I'd never seen a yolk do that before. I'd never seen a yolk that color before. The edges of the egg's white were crinkled and browned like parchment. I took a bite and just about fell off my chair. It was rich and peppery, more like eating steak than an egg.

I had eaten plenty of eggs during my twenty years—most of them scrambled or poached—but the eggs on the plate in front of me bore no similarity to the hundreds that had come before them.

Growing up in the American Midwest, I was a meat-and-potatoes girl, quite literally. When my mom would serve the weekly pot roast, I would pick out all of the carrots and peas, pile them on my younger brother Russell's plate, and take his meat and potatoes when Mom wasn't looking. My parents had a beautiful garden, yet I refused to touch any vegetable in it except for raw carrots and cucumbers, and the chives that grew along the border.

Things didn't improve with age. As I alternated between putting on pounds and dieting—as young women tend to do—I was indoctrinated into the torturous penance of plain salads with lemon juice squeezed over the top, plates of mushy steamed vegetables, and a palate of white: mashed potatoes with no gravy, egg-white omelets devoid of yolk, plain rice. These were all fat free and, therefore, virtuous.

Coming from that background, I simply had no frame of reference for this flamboyantly rich egg on my plate that was, quite literally, dripping with pleasure.

"How did you do this?" I asked Mama Kourtesi. "How did you get these eggs to taste like this?"

She glanced in question at Alexi, who translated for his mother. He shrugged and returned her answer, "She fried them in olive oil."

Olive oil and eggs—*just* olive oil and eggs—had produced *those flavors*? I was skeptical. To me, olive oil was just something that made you fat. Something to be avoided, other than the minute little drippy drops you occasionally needed in a pan or on a salad.

At first, my days in Greece were simple. The family didn't want to impose on me by asking for my help with the house or the restaurant. So I took long morning walks, winding down the mountain

past olive groves with black nets beneath them; past vineyards and fig trees; past meadows speckled with ruby-red ranunculus; past hillsides matted with wild herbs and dotted with grazing sheep. I'd pass chicken coops, donkeys, beehives, and kitchen gardens burdened with tomatoes, zucchini the size of my forearm, and glossy, black eggplant. As ordinary as these pastoral scenes were, they felt exotic to a girl from the Chicago suburbs.

In grade school I had a Greek friend, Liz, whose father owned restaurants. She used to bring fancy things like French dip in her sack lunch. But what I remember most were the pomegranates she'd occasionally pull out of her bag. She'd break open the leathery orb to reveal cluster upon hidden cluster of garnet-colored gems. I was mesmerized each and every time and hadn't seen a pomegranate since those grade school days. Yet on Corfu, they hung by the roadside as if they were just *normal* apples.

One night, as we were sitting outside with Alexi's friends listening to a band at the neighboring bar, I noticed a woman with thick, dark hair and come-hither eyes glancing over at Alexi. Over the course of my life I'd developed an uncanny knack at ranking myself in regard to the other women in proximity, a practical response to the worldview instilled by the magazines I read as a kid, which boiled down to something like, "If you're not attractive, no one will want you." All was well if I stacked up to be the prettiest or the smartest or the wittiest. But if someone else placed higher, I'd vex myself, thinking it inevitable that whomever I was with would want to trade up. To be perfectly honest, I played that way too. It's how I thought the world worked.

The night air was as soothing and rich as a cup of Greek coffee, and the waves lapped the shore just a block away. Yet I was obsessed with monitoring how much attention Alexi was giving the raven-haired vixen beside us. I even convinced myself that the conversations he was having with his friends—in Greek—were about her.

A half hour into the set, Alexi got up, grabbed a stack of plates, and whispered something into the lead singer's ear. Then he yelled "*Opa!*" and sent one plate after another crashing to the ground.

Convinced that he was showing off for the Greek woman, I stomped off to the beach in tears. How could he? Why hadn't he just let me go back to my family, rather than convince me to stay and then flirt with someone else right in front of me?

I trudged through the soft sand and sat on a log near the waterline, hugging my knees to my chest. Moonlight gilded the waves as I tried to dispassionately assess the situation. I wasn't unattractive; I was a bit plump for my average height, with long reddish-brown hair streaked blond by the sun and eyes that defied neat classification between blue, green, or gray. But I wasn't a raven-haired bombshell. No question, the prettier girl had won.

A few minutes later I heard the swish of sand. "Why did you run away?" Alexi asked, with that grand flourish of the arms that Greek men make.

"Because you were showing off for that woman!"

He scrunched up his eyes. "What woman?"

"The Greek woman, the one you were flirting with when you threw the plates!"

Alexi's face softened, and he nodded. The log jiggled slightly as he sat down beside me. I tried to scoot away, but he leaned close to my ear. "It is Greek custom," he whispered, "to break plates when

requesting a song from a band, as a sort of payment.” He waited until I met his eyes. “I asked them to play that song for you, Lia,” he said. “It was a love song.”

I looked out to sea again, feeling hollow. Was it really possible that he didn’t want to trade up to the prettier girl? That he was happy just with me? Alexi had just given me a gift and, rashly, from my own distorted reality, I took it and smashed that special moment to pieces. Even worse, I had no one to blame but myself.

One day not long into summer, Spiros had a heart attack. I will never forget being in the hospital room with him while Alexi and his mother discussed his condition with the doctor in the hallway. Spiros and I gripped each other’s hands and through both our tears I saw his fear and willed him comfort with all the oomph I could muster. His hands tightened on mine, and his eyes softened. I could see that it had gotten through. Neither of us spoke the other’s language, yet it was one of the clearest, most vulnerable expressions of love I’d ever encountered.

Once Spiros got home from the hospital, I was put in charge of taking care of him. We would sit in the living room on the chintz sofa with a deck of cards laid out on the lacquered wood coffee table in front of us. Spiros would grunt phrases emphatically in Greek and then motion for me to pick up the cards. I never knew what game we were playing or how to play it, but I always enjoyed seeing how happy Spiros was when he won, which he did every time, since he alone knew the objective of the game.

That was how he taught me numbers. He taught me vocabulary in the kitchen.