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Left, the author with her mother, Phyllis Eastwood. Right, Ms. Eastwood. All photos courtesy of the author

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FOOD FAMILIES

When There Was Nothing Left to Do, I Fed Her Ice Cream

For my mother, food was always for growing, cooking, and eating, not worrying about

by *Sarah DiGregorio* • July 24, 2012

Cape Cod, where I grew up, is practically the ice cream capitol of the world, and my mother took full advantage of her adopted home. Unlike many women, my mother had an uncomplicated relationship with ice cream. She loved it and she ate it often, sometimes as a meal. She never missed an opportunity for soft serve, always chocolate-vanilla swirl. Her favorite summer lunch was a mud pie cone from the Whistle Stop in Monument Beach. That's what growing up on a farm in Kansas will do for you: Food is for growing, cooking and eating, not for worrying about.

The very idea that any woman would feel guilty about food was weird to her. Of course, it was easy for her to say, since she naturally hovered around 100 pounds. She looked at me like I might be adopted when I started hating my inner thighs—she claimed that, as a scrawny teenager, she would have given anything

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for her thighs to touch at the top. (She was probably the first woman in history to actually wish this.) She found any talk of dieting or aging boring and maybe even morally suspect. As woman after woman wailed about turning 40 or 50, she would quietly ask, “What’s the alternative?”



The author with her mother

She treated her cancer with the same pragmatism. She swelled with fluid; she shrunk to bone; she shook uncontrollably. If there was nothing that could be done about it, we didn’t talk about it. What was the alternative?

We never managed to acknowledge to each other that this was not going to end well. Her silence on the matter was a non-acceptance, a refusal to go gently. It was also her deeply ingrained, farmwoman way of coping—and she was a master of coping. She could cope anyone under the table. If today was a day that demanded the insertion of a permanent catheter into an artery above her heart, the better to mainline chemo, well, that was just what we were doing today. Maybe we could stop for ice cream after. Meanwhile, I became an expert in magical thinking, a maker of

deals with the universe.

So at the end, when there was nothing else I could do, I sat by her bedside and fed her Hoodsie Cups, half chocolate, half vanilla. After all her other pleasures—even reading— abandoned her, this one remained. I’d get an armful of the single serving cups from the hospital refrigerator and just keep spooning them into her mouth, stashing the empties under the bed so she wouldn’t see how many she’d eaten. The ice cream acquired an imaginary power, like a garland of garlic or a nightlight. I thought it probably wasn’t possible to die mid-bite.

About two weeks before she died, an occupational therapist came to her room. “I see you were a children’s librarian,” she chirped, consulting the chart. “I am a children’s librarian,” replied my mother. “Well,” said the therapist, flustered, “I see your daughter has been feeding you. Do you want to work on eating on your own?” “I like her to feed me,” said my mother. “But I can actually do it myself.” To my surprise, she then demonstrated that she could.

Even after I knew she could do it herself, I couldn’t stop dishing out those Hoodsie Cups, like they were some kind of sweet miracle drug, and she never stopped me. I loved the reassuring schliiick of the cardboard lid lifted from the plush ice cream underneath, the miniature wooden spoon that came with each cup.

I don’t know if it made my mother think of the big, creaky wooden ice cream

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maker she grew up with, packed with rock salt and chunks of ice. I don't know if it made her remember taking turns cranking the iron handle in the sticky heat of a Kansas summer, afternoons heavy with the hum of cicadas. I don't know if it made her remember that barely frozen sweet cream, of licking it directly from the paddle. It's one of the many questions I never asked her, one of the many things I'll never know. But I hope it did.



Phyllis Eastwood



Sarah DiGregorio

Sarah DiGregorio is a senior editor at Food Network Magazine and a freelance food writer. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Village Voice and Saveur. She lives in Brooklyn, loves hot sauce and hates the R train.

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Lisa Baxter · ★ Top Commenter

This moved me. When my husband was dying with leukemia, and food no longer had any appeal for him, I used to make him milkshakes with heavy cream and premium

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