Spaghetti Sandwiches

On my nineteenth birthday, my mother and I stand side by side over a pot of steaming spaghetti. The kitchen lives permanently in 2006 with cherry cabinets, the occasional Tuscan inspired dish cloth and dim yellow kitchen lights which turn the large blue pot greenish. We toss the noodles in jarred Ragu sauce, the same brand my mother has insisted on all my life. At the circular kitchen table, we butter two slices of white Italian bread each and make spaghetti sandwiches inspired by my grandfather's habit of eating everything between two slices of white bread.

The bread is squishy; it sticks to the top of my mouth and makes devouring the sandwich difficult. The sauce squeezes out the back and down my hands, staining my fingertips orange. The noodles are soft, but bitey and slightly salty. After a long day, I find my heart and stomach full, sitting across the table from my mother, and indulging in a simple sandwich.

Two weeks later I ship out for basic training from Philadelphia. The drive isn't very long, the morning fog muting our usual chatter. I blame it on a mixture of nerves, early morning exhaustion, and an inability to broach the topic of my departure. I've been briefed by every family member who has served before me, and each of them concurred that "I'll be fine." Despite this, I can't stop the dread that slicks my palms, or the premature homesickness that makes my stomach ache. At the airport my mother squeezes me tightly on the curb as my younger sister and I disappear inside the terminal. Thanks to my newfound military status, my seventeen-year-old sister is allowed to sit at the gate with me. Seated on a bench together, we scarcely talk. I can tell she doesn't know what to say and I feel slightly embarrassed for not knowing how to keep from crying. In some way, I feel as though my inability to remain strong in front of her is disappointing. She should look up to me, and yet I cannot meet her gaze. When my boarding number is called, we hug strangely before I watch her scurry down the terminal to go back home.

I wish I could go with her.

When I find my seat on the plane, I begin to choke and sputter. No matter how I frame it, I do not want to leave my home, and I do not want to join the military. To hide my distress, I press my face against the chilly airplane window, hoping the coolness will dispel my panic. Through shuddering breaths, I try to prepare for the next eight weeks I'll spend at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. After two layovers and one silent bus ride, I step out onto the tarmac of the base. My gait is stiff from being curled up in small airplane seats all day, a trip that has spanned nearly twelve hours. My eyes stay glued to the concrete as I recognize the infamous black hats my father had spoken of with an uncomfortable twitch in his shoulders. I stick closely to the exterior of our crowds. One misstep and the black hats are in countless trainees' faces, brims tapping the trainees' foreheads, their screaming faces tinted red under the Texas sun.

On the pad we receive our gear: a black backpack, a reusable water bottle, a notepad, pens, a Basic Military Training textbook, nail trimmers, foot powder, trash bags and laundry bags, a reflective belt, a padlock, towels and a storage container. After, we are separated into lines before they rush us off to our squadron which is a large tan building lifted onto concrete pillars, with a drill pad underneath. When we pass the pillars and walk underneath the building, today's tears prick my eyes again. A large atrium houses a massive American flag, longer than a basketball court, which catches the light of the sunset.

My chest feels fuzzy, a combination of tightness and fluttering. The pride to serve my country, and the disgust to join the machine. I line up with my flight, sit down when told to, and pull a muddy greenish package from my supply bag.

My Military Training Instructor shouts at us, explaining how to operate the Meal Ready-to-Eat. I struggle with the thick plastic, my shaky hands and sweaty palms unable to grip it. Beside me, another MTI screams and spits at his flight, forcing them to shout "U.S. AIRFORCE" as they stand at attention, then sit down, then stand again. The sound echoes off the concrete ceilings, making my skull and spine vibrate. The clatter of their bodies as they hurriedly shuffle while their MTI spits at them makes my head feel clouded with noise. I had been warned about Basic, and yet the screaming and shuffling and sweating still shake me.

I try to breathe slowly and stop the fluttering of anxiety and vomit in the back of my throat, but my fingers are slippery and weak. As I fumble with the plastic, I become more and more fearful.

Tan boots stop beside me, "Trainee, do you need help?" I glance upward, unable to see the face of my MTI beneath the brim of his hat.

"Yes."

"Yes, *sir*!" He leans down, barks in my face, and tears the package open. When he hands it back to me, I notice the label—Southwest Beef and Black Beans. I dig through the package, grimacing. Inside I find some cheese spread and a meat stick.

I don't dare to touch the packet containing the actual meal.

I never liked black beans, especially their texture and smell, so I don't bother with them. The cheese is thick, salty, and rubbery. I suck it out of the packet between bites of the meat stick, which is hard to tear off. I hunch over like an animal, alternating between cheese, then meat, until my jaw is sore from chewing. The scene is visceral. My hunger swarms and knots with my fear. *How quickly can I fill my stomach?* My eyes roll from side to side, spotting boots, scraps of MRE plastic, and saliva hanging off the other MTI's lips. In my frenzy I can feel one thing: I am hungry, hungry, hungry. Before I can scrounge for more food, ten minutes have passed and my MTI lets us know that our time is up. We run upstairs to our dorm, change, and lie down in our cots.

In the dark, I can still hear the male flight yelling. "U.S. AIRFORCE, U.S. AIRFORCE."

In week three, I have learned to fear the Dining Facility.

I stand at attention outside the squat, wide building, eyes pinned to the back of my wingman's head. Our chow runners are inside, announcing our presence to the MTIs. I feel bad for them but have somehow evaded being in their position in the last three weeks. I have never seen them at work, but I have heard the nervous edge in trainee's voices when they recount their days in the job. Announcing our flight's arrival to the DFAC seems simple, but I am terrified of the attention on them, the MTI who they present to in the DFAC, and his booming, scratchy voice.

When we enter the food line, we sidestep with eyes forward. MTIs stalk behind us, but the civilians who serve us food are kind. They smile when I remember to say, "thank you" as they give me a heaping scoop of powdered mashed potatoes and boiled chicken breast. I clutch my tray tightly, march to my chow runner, and right face to my seat. The MTIs sit at the center of the room, eyes roaming with intensity. I jump when one pounces on a chow runner who forgot to

move to parade rest before changing shifts. He barks at the trainee to present her AF 341 Excellence/Discrepancy Report, put it away, then take it out again.

Once seated, I keep my face inches from my plate. Three other girls sit with me, each shoveling food down. I have ten minutes to pick apart the chicken, avoid the slimy bits and try to drown any dryness in ketchup. Later during lights out, the girls from down South will whisper about the ketchup-loving freak from Pennsylvania. I pretend not to care what a bunch of small-town southerners think. They prefer gravy, but I find that the sourness from the ketchup makes the gristle from the chicken go down smoother. I gag on clumps of dehydrated potato quietly. I am more afraid of being caught looking at the clock than swallowing something unsavory.

After dinner, our MTI shows us the standard way to roll and store our shirts, socks, and underwear. It is proficient, with a purpose, and yet exceedingly unnecessary. Like everything else in the Air Force, your clothes must neat, clean, and wrinkle free. As my MTI finishes his demonstration, he asks us a simple question, "Why did you join the Air Force?"

Other women begin to recount tales of escaping from abuse, a desire to show their children they can do great things, or an overwhelming love for their country. My mind races to find some great reason to enlist. I need to get out of my parents' house. I need to find footing as a freshly formed adult. I need to make my parents proud. I need them to love me.

"Money. I'm poor. I want to go to school," I blurt out before I can stop myself.

The room seems a little surprised but moves to the next girl quickly. My cheeks begin to burn with shame. In fact, they're so cherry tomato bright the room begins to glow. I pinch my eyes shut. I am selfish, greedy, unremarkable in every way. *Why am I not a patriot? Why do I find an issue with becoming cannon fodder for my country? If I feel this way, can I still make my mother proud?* When I open my eyes again, my MTI is leaving the room, the girls are gathering their shower supplies, and I am standing alone by the bedside.

Before bed, we are told to eat protein bars and bananas to compensate for the protein our bodies need to recover from our nonstop training. Luckily, the MTIs do not pay close enough attention to notice when I slip my protein bar to another girl in exchange for her empty wrapper. The dried bits of artificial strawberry nestled between the granola remind me of the little red chiggers I saw skittering around on tan pavement. The dark chocolate drizzled over the bars is supposed to be nutrient dense and allow our tired bodies to retain some ability to bounce back, but I can't stomach the way the dry granola coats the back of my throat. As a consequence, I walk around with green-yellow bruises on my arms and legs. The other girls point out my sallow skin with concern, but to me, they are badges of my hard work. In order to push through each monotonous day, to feel like I am making progress, I need evidence of my courage.

In return for the extra food, the girl gives me extra Luden's Wild Cherry cough drops from the commissary and tells me about packet pudding—a mixture of hot chocolate powder, peanut butter, and very little milk. During our first round of Kitchen Patrol, one of the civilians told the girl about it. The mixture has a texture similar to wet concrete. Stress has altered my body's functions, forced my metabolism to soak up every nutrient it can grab and painfully constipate my organs. With the help of the mixture, my body finds its rhythm again. Soon, my entire flight takes to the treat.

It is the only sweetness I can savor in the DFAC.

During week seven, I have learned the menu rotations. Boiled chicken and mashed potatoes, square pizza, and rice with clumpy gravy, dry spaghetti and mixed steamed veggies. Every other day, the breakfast item switches between a miniscule pancake and deflated slice of French toast. I learn to love the two strips of bacon dipped in syrup. However, the rehydrated egg and cheese omelet still smells too much of preservatives and hot steam. Although the Air Force eats the best, the mass-produced meals cannot compare to the meals I have dreamt up in my head to pass the time.

When I stare blankly at my textbook, I daydream about the sweat on my forehead as I reduce tomatoes, oil, and vinegar in a pot in my mother's kitchen back home. Between bouts of stirring, I fold eggs, flour, and potatoes into a dough. The heat from the stove makes my cheeks warm, something I would have previously complained about. After hours of checking the sauce, I run a spoon to my mother to my mother's office, who nods thoughtfully as she tastes it.

"Look, she made homemade sauce. Isn't that great?" My mother gloats as I wave into the Zoom camera where she is talking to her boss. "Just needs some salt." She winks and pushes me back to the kitchen, where I resolve to labor harder for another second of praise. I starve for those moments, the smile and crinkle of my mother's blue eyes.

The urge is insatiable.

I need more.

Wednesday is pizza day. I hate the sauce and cheese, but the crust fills my stomach if I wipe it clean with a napkin and substitute the toppings with ketchup. As we file down the stairs for lunch, an MTI I have never seen before flails his arms and yells at us.

"Go back upstairs! Now!"

Chaos in the stairwell ensues as the lights dim. An alarm blares. We assume there is lightning in five, that we cannot be outside because of the weather. It is not until we retreat into our dorm that we hear the call of "ALICE ALICE ALICE." Girls whisper to each other, speculating what it could mean. My dorm leader tries to calm our flight, ensuring us that our MTIs will return with news soon. I pull my dorm leader aside, gut clenching with uncertainty.

Because I am a good student and have been reading my textbooks and know, I tell my dorm leader, "Hinson, it's an active shooter. We need to hide."

"It could be a drill. . . ," She begins, shaking her head.

"We should still hide."

My dorm leader sighs, nods, and informs our flight. We press ourselves between lockers and under cots. Our building is blast proof, but if someone were to get in, our M4s are nonfunctional. How ironic that in the name of safety our very own weapons lack the capability they were made for—to kill.

The walls are too thick to hear the popping of gunfire. In the silence we are left to imagine what could cause the alarm. I wonder if the gunman has passed the gates, or if his bullets have reached the training side of the base. *How much danger am I in? Does the gunman stalk the halls as we hide, or has he been struck down by the countless military personnel on base?* We wait for a long time, passing notes and whispering. Finally, one of our MTIs enters the dorm. He tells us that he heard something happened down by the base gate and that what is happening is real. In the darkness of the room, he pulls up a chair and talks to us. It is the first time he laughs softly with us and comforts our fears. To pass the time, we go around the room and talk about the things we look forward to after graduation.

Some girls look forward to seeing their families after COVID had taken their grandparents. Other girls miss the smiling faces of their children. We make plans to stay connected after Basic. One girl invites me to her first Hanukkah as a newly converted Jewish woman. Another one laughs as she tells the story of when she carried a pretend bomb out to an evacuation site during the drill when we were door guards.

She was so flustered and surprised, but when she said “Wiley, I still have the bomb,” I told her not to worry.

I would help her pass, even if all I needed to do was keep a simple secret.

When it is my turn, I tell them I miss spaghetti sandwiches with my mom.

My MTI crinkles his nose and my flight agrees that Pennsylvania food is gross.

They quickly move on, reminiscing about foods I have never eaten—hearty grits with salt, warm elephant ears from the fair, and crawdads fresh from the creek. But when I close my eyes and lean my head against the cool steel of the locker, I can still picture my mother, the soft halo of her curly white hair, the warmth from the stove, and the sauce dripping down her fingertips.