

For reasons too ridiculous and complicated to explain, I happened to be alone on Valentine's Day this year, a day I have come to loathe

more than any of the marketing inventions we are forced to celebrate, as it is the one day above all others that takes the measure of a love life. As I said, I was alone. I shouldn't complain: I've been blessed with years when I was happy to have dinner across the table from a beloved, or open the office door on a riot of roses. But there have also been times when the holiday has passed in the fog of discomfort that comes of feeling alone—with someone, if you get my drift. This year I was grumpy and sorry for myself.

All strong and independent women know that they are not supposed to give in to these negative feelings, which are the quicksand of the soul. One wrong move and you're up to your eyeballs in the muck of existential despair—which, by the way, we were too old for the moment we left college. (Nothing brings on *weltschmerz* like coed bathrooms and cots and cinder block walls. We need to recognize that queasy, what-is-the-point-of-living condition for what it is: a problem of adolescent habitat. I'm of the school that believes in the power of decor: live nicely, feel better.)

I was doing all the right things, getting through this particular slough of despond, even making bold, powerful moves: new apartment, new kitchen, new curtains, new carpets, even a new coffee table. (You know how you can never find a good coffee table? Suddenly, everywhere I turned I was seeing fabulous coffee tables, which was really weird, and after I bought two, including one I didn't need and couldn't even use, more and more kept calling to me. I had to turn my back on them, and, of course, it was a matter of days before my sister called in despair because she couldn't find a coffee table for her living room, and all the ones I had seen had mysteriously vanished into that realm of perfect furniture that you will never encounter.)

Alone or not, a girl has to eat. And so, feeling the absurd need to be festive and in step with the world around me, I found myself shopping for dinner in the sort of fancy gourmet shop I normally avoid. (How much is that apple? Are you kidding?) This was going to be takeout all the way, as the kitchen was (and still is) undergoing renovation. That's my excuse. The kitchen, though designed to be a cooking machine, will be like the Ferrari that men buy to tool around town: a beast on a chain, never allowed to express its essential, rapacious self. I do plan to learn to do some serious cooking, someday. But let's face

it, I don't care how proficient you are, who cooks for themselves? The portions never come out right; the effort is exhausting; there is no audience, and cooking is a spectator sport.

However, I am serious about takeout. Microwaves offend me. "Prepared" food deserves a fine finish; it should be reheated on the stove top, slowly, with deliberate, caring strokes. I believe in eating takeout on a plate, which is how I justify my china fetish, and for the same reason I am the Queen of Trays. Genius is 90 percent presentation, to paraphrase someone. You must not give in to the undertow of lonely living, lest you find yourself feeding pigeons and taking in stray cats.

Outside the deli, I paid for a generous bouquet of flowers and asked the man to hold them while I shopped. I began to fill my little basket with a Valentine's Day meal (really no different from any other meal in content, but intention is allegedly everything), all the while stealing surreptitious glances into other people's baskets. Everyone I could see, except me, was preparing a feast for someone they loved. Carts were overflowing with heads of lettuce, loaves of bread, sides of cows. I became embarrassed by the pathetic emptiness of my basket. I added another plastic container of chef's salad with chicken and dressing; that looked so nice that I added two bowls of soup. Things were looking up.

Then I got in line at the pastry department. There was a run on chocolate-covered strawberries and heart-shaped tarts; the supply was dangerously low. Well, I wasn't about to get that debased. There

in the corner of the cabinet was a gorgeous, fluffy, nondenominational white cake smothered in coconut, just a little bigger than a cupcake. Okay, twice the size of a cupcake. But I swear it had a halo around it. I have never bought a coconut cake in my life. I went through my childhood refusing to eat it, bitter each time a mom dared to foist such a heinous concoction on the trusting, eager souls around the birthday party; but suddenly this seemed like the right time for coconut. I was so pleased with myself that I forgot to pick up my flowers on the way out.

Reader, I ate it all.



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