

## INTRODUCTION:

# Ignorance Is Bliss

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## THE SUMMER BEFORE, 2004

### **RECIPE:** *Torta della Stagione*

The sweet dough relaxed under the heel of my hand and settled into the form of a rustic rectangle. In the glass bowl on the counter, the sliced peaches helplessly surrendered their juice, releasing their natural tang into the mix of amaretto and sugar. An afternoon breeze, cooled by the coastal fog, gave a tease of freshness to a kitchen warmed by the day and the heat of the oven. I placed the peach slices, now slippery like baby golden fishes, onto the dough in a herringbone pattern and crimped up the edges, leaving the imprint of my fingers, a part of me. My mind and senses were totally engaged with my culinary endeavor; I was an easy target. My French lover approached as stealthily as a hairless cat, and as he pressed the length of himself against me, he found the spot below my left ear with his practiced tongue and whispered . . .

Okay, the peaches and the dough were real and it was freaking hot. But that summer I was wont to imagine a “what if” life. Just for fun, of course, because, I mean, come on, I had the perfect

life: hubby Jeff; three kids, Page (sixteen going on seventeen, just like *The Sound of Music*), Ross (thirteen), and Banks (twelve); Indy the dog, well past adolescence but not an old man; and our eighty-two-year-old cottage in the burbs of Marin County, California. It's just that it was summer, the season of daydreaming. Right? Wrong. The siren song of my imagination was really more like a muted shriek from Cassandra, trying to give me a place to escape to and hide from the reality that was crashing down. In a few short weeks, my firstborn and only daughter was going to start her senior year of high school. For the next eleven months, every occasion our family celebrated, from the World Series to Groundhog Day, would be *The Last Time!*

A huge ending was coming to a life near me, and I wasn't ready.

You're not ready either, Mom. Your child's senior year of high school will achingly drag on even as it flies by at warp speed. You will watch your seventeen-year-old act like a two-year-old one day and comport himself like an officer and a gentleman the next. You will be treated to three-dimensional Technicolor memories of your young motherhood and then catch a passing glimpse of yourself in the mirror and wonder who in the hell is staring back at you.

The summer before Page's senior year, I was pretending that my life was just fine, like it was just swimming along the way it had been since I took on the welcomed role of mother. I was oblivious to who I was and who I had become. It is easy to forget yourself. It is so busy being a mom. It fills up your days and allows you to live a life of triage, which keeps you spinning in place. You function on a "need to do it now" basis. The most emergent tasks get priority, even if those tasks are mundane. Field trip permission slip needs signing, don't forget to buy the



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cloves for the art project, don’t we have some foam core left over from last year’s Miwok poster? You can make lists and check things off, and one day tumbles into the next until finally you realize that this—your motherhood as you know it—is ending. If you allow it to penetrate, that realization comes to you at the beginning of your child’s senior year of high school.

I enjoyed three Goodbye Years, and they couldn’t have been more different from one another. I was a different person each time, too. But Page’s senior year was the watershed. Everything that came after led me down the path of discovery of who I am, and that started with the painful acknowledgment that I was

coming to the end of the most important chapter in my life. Being a mom. Or so I thought.

### **August 2004**

I am folding Page's laundry and I am weeping. Not a full sob, more of a tear-leaking, shaggy-breathing cry that in the past few months has come to be a frequent occurrence.

Jeff walks by, notices, and asks, "What's a matter?" How can he not know? It is the beginning of her senior year of high school.

"This is just so terrible," I say as I fold her panties in thirds, making another small packet to add to the stack of her clothes that I have smoothed and folded with absurd precision. "It's all coming to an end."

"Because she is going to college next year?"

"Yes," I say. Of course. Terrible. Our family of five is ending. It's over.

"Honey, you need to get out of the laundry room."

I have observed that what I think about comes to me. Whether I am thinking of something lovely (an old friend whom I haven't heard from in a while calls me the very day she is in my thoughts) or something troubling (worrying that I'm going to be late if there is traffic on the beautiful yet busy Golden Gate Bridge), if I think about it enough, it will arrive. And when we think about something all the time, we can't help but talk about it to our friends, which leads to more talking about it, and then later more thinking about what we have just talked about.

During my first Goodbye Year, I was constantly thinking and talking about the changes our family would experience when Page left for college. I created space for a terrific void, and I would find myself there, helpless against the pull of that dark



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place. I had spent almost twenty years massaging the idea that this was my life—mothering the ship of my family. I was at the helm, and I had control of the direction. But now that the thing that I of course hoped would happen for all of my children—a healthy and college-bound senior year—had arrived, I was overcome with melancholy and a powerful sense of finality and loss.

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During my last summer of oblivion there was a barely noticeable, nameless undercurrent of panic, denial, and fear swirling around me. Every mother I knew who had an incoming high school senior could feel it, too. Like the smoke of cigarettes vanquished with other vices of youth, it was formless and wouldn't

be contained in a jar to be placed on a back shelf. It would demand attention. Yet nobody talked about it, which made me feel as if my feelings of isolation and doom were my unique problem.

I remember confiding in a girlfriend (whose oldest was only an incoming high school freshman, like she knew anything about the depth of pain heading her way) that I was overwhelmed with sadness thinking about Page leaving for college.

“Oh, don’t worry about Page! She’ll be just fine,” she said.

As if I was worried about Page. She had her whole life ahead of her. I was worried about me. I felt as if the raspberry Jell-O that had held our family of five together was going to dissolve when she plunked her pack on the dormitory bed, leaving only a wet memory of the experience that had been “us.” My children’s forward movement was going to carry me into empty-nester status with the momentum of a rushing river. All I could hope for was a small spot on the sidelines where I could camp out and reminisce about the years when I was important, too.

What I now know is that your child’s senior year is a gift you can enjoy. Really! Sometimes that gift will feel like an unwanted series with a mean personal trainer, but you know the rewards are waiting for you. Or you can just stay Worried Mom, waiting for your daily texts from your college junior, scanning her Pinterest and Facebook posts, and worrying that your twenty-one-year-old was up too late this week. You think I’m kidding? This can be your next stage of mothering. Scary! I believe if you don’t address your relationship with your man-child or woman-child during senior year, you are going to find yourself in a big hole that will require a Herculean effort to climb out of. And after the years of this style of mothering have layered a coat of fat and blah on you, you might not find your way out.

**August 2012**

I haven't seen Billie since we met for a birthday drink on a rainy evening last November. It is a hot summer day when I run into her at Emporio Rulli, where JoAnne and I are looking for an iced coffee after our bike ride. Billie joins us at an outside table and within minutes tells us that her youngest, who transferred from a private high school in San Francisco to the local public high school during winter break of his sophomore year, had to take "three very elementary freshman courses and two PE classes to get up to speed with the curriculum." She puts finger quotes and an eye-roll on the word "curriculum." It was a "ridiculous waste of his time," as the city school was much more academically challenging. She thinks that her son would have done much better in the private school if only he had stuck it out, made new friends, "but what can you [meaning we, the collective of mothers] do?"

She told me this same story in November. Ten months have passed, ten months of life, experiences, revelations, and yet she is telling this same story. And it hurts her in every possible way. At least this time she doesn't break into tears. I don't know if I want to hug her or slap her. She asks about my kids, JoAnne's kids. Our husbands might as well be dead. Anyone listening to this conversation would know that we are. Life is buzzing around us, but here we are, old hens clucking about the kids. This is about as life-affirming as picking your own casket—you know, so the kids don't have to worry about it. 'Cause God forbid our children should have to function without us moms taking each and every breath in the service of their lives.

Am I picking on Billie? Don't I have compassion for my friend? As I suck down the last of my iced coffee, waiting for JoAnne's child-activity check-in to end, I'm trying to be kind



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and to find a generous thought for Billie’s mom anxiety. But it’s like having compassion for a ghost who has been haunting you for the past twenty years. I see me in Billie, the middle me, the lost me, the me whom I had to say goodbye to if I had any hope of getting back to who I knew I was, who I wanted to become.

Eight years have passed since my first Goodbye Year, and as I look back on who I was then, read my journal entries, glance at photos, all I feel is gratitude for where I am right now.

For years, the first thing friends asked me when we got together was “How are the kids?” They were the common ground of our friendships. During my time as mother of teens, I would reply, “Constantly giving me opportunities for growth!” Yes, we would laugh and exchange stories of our teens’ mischief and malaise, bartering our experiences to pick up the better-feeling thoughts that we were not alone. Friendships with fellow moms were the mirror that we could hold up and see ourselves in. That in itself made them valuable. Yet now, some of those friendships have

fallen away because those same people couldn't keep up with the woman I was forced to become.

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But where was I to start reclaiming the lost me? Food. Cooking it, eating it, talking about it, and writing about it has been my life's central focus. Food brought me back to a core of me that hadn't seen the light of day in quite a while.

I've loved to cook since I was tall enough to reach the burners, and I've worked in restaurants since before I was the legal age to do so. We didn't have much in the way of The Law in my hometown, and when my neighbor Mitzie saw how at ease I was with a flame and knives, I got my first job: flipping burgers at her family-owned drive-in. I was twelve. It would be a few years before I'd get to work in the "front" of the house.

My restaurant experience gradually improved as I reached the height (or low, if you count the bawdy uniform) of cocktail waitressing at the Steak and Ale in between semesters at college. Food and restaurants were my touchstone as I leaped from Pittsburgh to Sedona to San Francisco. I met Jeff at his family's restaurant in San Francisco's sunny Marina district when I was interviewing for a job. I got that job and more. Within five years, we were married and opening our own restaurant, Mescolanza, in San Francisco's foggy Richmond district. A dozen years and three kids later, we decided to sell because the demands of a restaurant couldn't exist in the life we wanted for our young family. But by the time I was asked to teach Italian-cooking classes the summer before Page's senior year, I was ready to come out of culinary retirement.

“A cooking class? Who’d come?” I asked my slim friend. “I don’t think anyone is eating anymore.”

“No, people love cooking classes,” she said between sips of Diet Coke, “and you could make some money.”

Money, *hmm*.

“Write up a few ideas. I’ll tell the director you’ll be in. She’s working on the fall brochure now.”

I sat at my desk the next day and imagined fun-filled cooking classes targeted to my sophisticated clientele. *Spuntini* and *dolce*, little bites with a sweet ending—they’d love that. Small plates were all the rage. We’d start with *pollo con salvia*, petite chunks of pure white breast of free-range happy hen dusted with flour and roasted with a flock of fried sage. *Radicchio balsamico*, bright-purple cuts of vegetable sautéed with pungent olive oil, splashed with burgundy oak-aged balsamic vinegar, and wrapped in paper-thin leaves of baby-pink prosciutto, finished off with an emerald confetti of Italian parsley.

The next day, before I really had time to think any of this over, I printed out my ideas and headed to the community enrichment office. In my town we take our recreation seriously. Community enrichment is the second-biggest industry, second only to the K–8 school.

Even at a certain age, Priscilla, the director, still looked great in a tennis skirt.

“*Spuntini*, that’s a fun word,” she smiled, revealing perfectly brilliant white teeth. “Small bites. Everybody loves small plates. This is great.”

She liked the idea of cooking something from the cupboard, too. “Really fits in with our busy lives,” she said. But her enthusiasm came to a halt when she got to the gnocchi class.

“Hmm, carbs,” she tsked. “It’s just so, you know, starchy,” she

whispered sotto voce. “I don’t think this one will be very popular—no one’s really eating carbs anymore.”

I thought about the *panzanella* (bread salad) I had enjoyed for lunch and the *risotto quattro formaggi* (creamy arborio rice with four cheeses) I was planning to make for dinner that night.

“Well,” I offered, “maybe by November someone will be looking for a potato.”

“Sure,” she humored me. “We can give it a try.”

She had a brochure to finish and a spin class to get to, so we shook on it. I walked out into the bright June sunshine knowing that she thought my Italian spud festival had about as much chance of success as, I don’t know, the Red Sox winning the World Series.

With that leap, I started spinning a little story. A story about a woman who, at midlife, launched a cooking-class business that led to a cooking show, fame, money, and happiness. (There was some *carpe diem*—implied eternal youth thrown in there, too.)

The five of us were going to Italy in July to visit relatives and eat (and drink) our way through Tuscany. I was busy with all the things mothers get busy with when their family is going on vacation. As with a satisfying but light beach read, I didn’t give my upcoming classes another thought. Anyway, September was so far in the future, it was hard to imagine.

But September did arrive, and with it reality. I saw the teasing announcement of my cooking classes in an email and decided I’d better pick up a brochure to see what in the hell I’d agreed to do. In my little town, we have to pick up our mail at the post office. Like Mayberry, but with foreign cars and better weather, my village has the small-town dynamic of “everybody knows everybody”—ergo, “everybody knows everybody’s business.”

The post office is the prime locale where the women of the town check in and catch up. (I did not say gossip.)

My mailbox was jam-packed that day. No surprise. The roll of mail—including a tube that contained Martha's and Oprah's magazines wrapped around *Sports Illustrated*—came out of the box like a birth. In the ensuing paper chaos, my copy of the color brochure slid to the floor. As I bent down to pick it up, Glenda surprised me with an enthusiastic hello. Everything Glenda says is enthusiastic. I think she got her big personality from growing up in Texas and winning beauty pageants starting when she was a toddler.

"I see you're teaching some cooking classes," she said, fanning herself with her copy. "They look *great!*"

All of a sudden it did seem a little warm in there, so I fanned myself with my copy, too.

"Thanks!" I said, trying to muster enough enthusiasm to match her *great*.

The post office was bustling that morning, and before Glenda had a chance to say another optimistic word, Tanya and Melanie were at our side. Hellos and how-are-yous all around.

"Toni, I saw your cooking classes in the fall brochure. I can't wait to take one." This from tiny, freckled Melanie, who loves all things French and Italian, maybe because she is of Irish heritage and, as she once told me, all the meals she knows how to cook are boiled.

"I was just saying the same thing," Glenda piped in.

"What cooking classes?" inquired Tanya as she tossed a long strand of wavy chestnut hair off her face. Tanya could be in a Benetton ad. She is all the beautiful genes of women from India, China, and Africa poured into one tall, supple body.

Melanie, in the know, filled her in. At this point, I was just a smiling spectator. Tanya was delighted to hear about the classes and said she planned to sign up, too.

This was nice. My girlfriends were so supportive. All four of us had a child the same age and had worked together for years. This felt great, just *great*.

After more hellos and goodbyes as busy moms came and went (they should put a bar in the post office), I headed home. In the solitude of my Trooper, I finally picked up my copy of the burnt-orange-and-umber brochure and opened it to the front page. There they were—my cooking classes. Sweet. The ladies of the recreation office were so kind as to place my classes in this very important spot. I proceeded to read the author/chef bio I had sent in with my class descriptions the previous June:

*Toni Piccinini is the original owner of Mescolanza, a San Francisco Italian trattoria, selected as one of the San Francisco Chronicle's "Top 100 Restaurants" and chosen by Michael Bauer, Food Editor, as one of the Top Ten Italian Eateries.*

That part was true. But apparently, in the interest of drumming up a little excitement for the classes, someone had added: *For those who don't know Toni, she is an energy-filled, fun, and vivacious culinary expert.*

Culinary expert! No, I'm not! *Oh, good Lord, what if someone signs up with a big soup spoon up her rear end and asks me culinary-expert questions? And if somebody—some stranger—does sign up, what is she going to expect? Julia Child?*

Or, worse, what if *nobody* signs up?

That worry passed as people—moms—did enroll. And what I got from the experience was nothing like the fantasy I had been fabricating. It was so much better. We shared the months of senior-year milestones together, and the classes and camaraderie kept me afloat. My first six students were friends, five of whom lived in my neighborhood. Which gave me an equal mix of ease (they were my friends) and unease (these “students” were my friends). How was I going to become this other personality—this knowledgeable cooking-class teacher—with women who knew me as, well, me? The teacher had a lot to learn.

The night before my first class, I was sorta-kinda ready. I had stopped by my friend Tabitha’s house (mansion) to familiarize myself with the layout of her fabulous kitchen. Tabitha, like many of the mommies of my town, opens her home to end-of-the-year class parties, book talks, and countless fundraisers, and had graciously offered her kitchen as the venue when she found out about my classes. The kitchen in my house (cottage) is one of my favorite places to cook, but if anyone other than Glenda, Tanya, and Melanie enrolled, the phrase “hands-on cooking class” would take on a new meaning. So I had gratefully accepted Tabitha’s offer.

My next task, with Page’s assistance, was to get the recipe cards done.

“How can you wait until the last minute to do this?” Page asked as she helped me cut the cards and punch the holes for the brad. (I did manage to get to the craft store during the week, and wow—who knew there was so much variety in the world of brads? I selected bronze sunflower September-themed ones for this class.)

“I don’t know, honey,” I said as I admired my prettily fastened cards, “I don’t mean to; it just seems that something comes up every day that’s more important.”

“You need to learn how to manage your time better.”

*Well, maybe I would if all I had to take care of was myself,* I thought but refrained from saying out loud. Instead I went back to thinking about my fantasy life: Food Network star with paid assistants who would happily punch the holes in my recipe cards and make me a cup of tea.

The opportunity to teach those cooking classes launched the evolution of me. They reminded me that I was more than just a volunteer mom, dedicated to the service of my children. It didn’t happen in one day, or even one year, for that matter, though Page’s senior year surely forced the issue. The classes also allowed me to see my fellow moms as women.

Those combined experiences have given me the grace of wisdom that I want to share. So here’s a handbook of what to expect when you’re expecting your first—or last—birdie to leave the nest. Twelve months, twelve little DIY projects, with seasonal recipes to help you reclaim the You of you and send your baby on his or her way. Think self-help cookbook! I’ll hold your hand through the college application process, the rejections, the acceptances, and that final goodbye when you leave your child at the threshold of the dormitory and your new life apart begins. But before the school year starts, you have the last summer. Make something sweet.

## ♡ THE RECIPE

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### *Torta della Stagione* (Seasonal Fruit Torte)

This torte is great as a dessert, a morning pastry, or even a late-afternoon snack. Like the last summer, it's all good.

### WHAT YOU NEED

1 8-ounce box cream cheese

½ cup butter

1 cup flour

½ cup sugar

Best-of-the-season fruit (apricots, plums, peaches, pears, or apples)

Fresh lemon juice

Liquor of your choice

### INSTRUCTIONS

This short crust is so simple, *semplice*.

Mix room-temperature cheese and butter together till they fluff a bit, then sprinkle with the sugar and flour. Instant dough!

Press the dough flat with the heel of your hand, and place it on a piece of parchment. If you press it thinly, the *torta* will be crispy. If you leave it a little thicker, it will be soft. Whatever you like. That's the point. It's summer—be flexible.

Now slice the seasonal fruit of your choice and let the slices

rest in a little sauce of sugar, fresh lemon juice, and a liquor of your choice. I like amaretto with peaches.

Arrange the slices of fruit on the dough. Drizzle with the sugary-liquory sauce. Crimp up the edges to hold in any juice that might bubble up.

Bake at 400°F until it smells right. Or you can look at it. Okay, let's say twenty-five minutes.

Cool on a rack. Slide parchment to cutting board and cut into squares.