

Also by Jonathan Safran Foer

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Everything Is Illuminated

Americans choose to eat less than .25% of the known edible food on the planet.

The Fruits of Family Trees

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I would often spend the weekend at my grandmother's house. On the way in, Friday night, she would lift me from the ground in one of her fire-smothering hugs. And on the way out, Sunday afternoon, I was again taken into the air. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was weighing me.

My grandmother survived the War barefoot, scavenging other people's inedibles: rotting potatoes, discarded scraps of meat, skins, and the bits that clung to bones and pits. And so she never cared if I colored outside the lines, as long as I cut

coupons along the dashes. And hotel buffets: while the rest of us erected Golden Calves of breakfast, she would make sandwich upon sandwich to swaddle in napkins and stash in her bag for lunch. It was my grandmother who taught me that one tea bag makes as many cups of tea as you're serving, and that every part of the apple is edible.

Money wasn't the point. (Many of those coupons I clipped were for foods she would never buy.)

Health wasn't the point. (She would beg me to drink Coke.)

My grandmother never set a place for herself at family dinners. Even when there was nothing more to be done — no soup bowls to be topped off, no pots to be stirred or ovens checked — she stayed in the kitchen, like a vigilant guard (or prisoner) in a tower. As far as I could tell, the sustenance she got from the food she made didn't require her to eat it.

In the forests of Europe, she ate to stay alive until the next opportunity to eat to stay alive. In America, fifty years later, we ate what pleased us. Our cupboards were filled with food bought on whims, overpriced foodie food, food we didn't need. And when the expiration date passed, we threw it away without smelling it. Eating was carefree. My grandmother made that life possible for us. But she was, herself, unable to shake the desperation.

Growing up, my brothers and I thought our grandmother was the greatest chef who ever lived. We would literally recite those words when the food came to the table, and again after the first bite, and once more at the end of the meal: "You are the greatest chef who ever lived." And yet we were worldly enough kids to know that the Greatest Chef Who Ever Lived would probably have more than one recipe (chicken with carrots), and that most Great Recipes involved more than two ingredients.

And why didn't we question her when she told us that dark food is inherently healthier than light food, or that most of the nutrients are found in the peel or crust? (The sandwiches of those weekend stays were made with the saved ends of pumpernickel loaves.) She taught us that animals that are bigger than you are very good for you, animals that are smaller than you are good for you, fish (which aren't animals) are fine for you, then tuna (which aren't fish), then vegetables, fruits, cakes, cookies, and sodas. No foods are bad for you. Fats are healthy — all fats, always, in any quantity. Sugars are very healthy. The fatter a child is, the healthier it is — especially if it's a boy. Lunch is not one meal, but three, to be eaten at 11:00, 12:30, and 3:00. You are always starving.

In fact, her chicken and carrots probably *was* the most delicious thing I've ever eaten. But that had little to do with how it was prepared, or even how it tasted. Her food was delicious because we believed

it was delicious. We believed in our grandmother's cooking more fervently than we believed in God. Her culinary prowess was one of our family's primal stories, like the cunning of the grandfather I never met, or the single fight of my parents' marriage. We clung to those stories and depended on them to define us. We were the family that chose its battles wisely, and used wit to get out of binds, and loved the food of our matriarch.

Once upon a time there was a person whose life was so good there was no story to tell about it. More stories could be told about my grandmother than about anyone else I've ever met — her otherworldly childhood, the hairline margin of her survival, the totality of her loss, her immigration and further loss, the triumph and tragedy of her assimilation — and though I will one day try to tell them to my children, we almost never told them to one another. Nor did we call her by any of the obvious and earned titles. We called her the Greatest Chef.

Perhaps her other stories were too difficult to tell. Or perhaps she chose her story for herself, wanting to be identified by her providing rather than her surviving. Or perhaps her surviving is contained within her providing: the story of her relationship to food holds all of the other stories that could be told about her. Food, for her, is not *food*. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joyfulness, humiliation, religion, history, and, of course, love.

As if the fruits she always offered us were picked from the destroyed branches of our family tree.

Possible Again

UNEXPECTED IMPULSES STRUCK WHEN I found out I was going to be a father. I began tidying up the house, replacing long-dead light bulbs, wiping windows, and filing papers. I had my glasses adjusted, bought a dozen pairs of white socks, installed a roof rack on top of the car and a "dog/cargo divider" in the back, had my first physical in half a decade . . . and decided to write a book about eating animals.

Fatherhood was the immediate impetus for the journey that would become this book, but I'd been packing my bags for most of my life. When I was two, the heroes of all of my bedtime stories were animals. When I was four, we fostered a cousin's dog for a summer. I kicked it. My father told me we don't kick animals. When I was seven, I mourned the death of my goldfish. I learned that my father had flushed him down the toilet. I told my father — in other, less civil words — we don't flush animals down the toilet. When I was nine, I had a babysitter who didn't want to hurt anything. She put it just like that when I asked her why she wasn't having chicken with my older brother and me: "I don't want to hurt anything."

"*Hurt* anything?" I asked.

"You know that chicken is chicken, right?"

Frank shot me a look: *Mom and Dad entrusted this stupid woman with their precious babies?*

Her intention might or might not have been to convert us to vegetarianism — just because conversations about meat tend to make people feel cornered, not all vegetarians are proselytizers — but being a teenager, she lacked whatever restraint it is that so often prevents a full telling of this particular story. Without drama or rhetoric, she shared what she knew.

My brother and I looked at each other, our mouths full of hurt chickens, and had simultaneous *how-in-the-world-could-I-have-never-thought-of-that-before-and-why-on-earth-didn't-someone-tell-me?* moments. I put down my fork. Frank finished the meal and is probably eating a chicken as I type these words.

What our babysitter said made sense to me, not only because it seemed true, but because it was the extension to food of everything my parents had taught me. We don't hurt family members. We don't hurt friends or strangers. We don't even hurt upholstered furniture. My not having thought to include animals in that list didn't make them the exceptions to it. It just made me a child, ignorant of the world's workings. Until I wasn't. At which point I had to change my life.

Until I didn't. My vegetarianism, so bombastic and unyielding in the beginning, lasted a few years, sputtered, and quietly died. I never thought of a response to our babysitter's code, but found ways to smudge, diminish, and forget it. Generally speaking, I didn't cause hurt. Generally speaking, I strove to do the right thing. Generally speaking, my conscience was clear enough. Pass the chicken, I'm *starving*.

Mark Twain said that quitting smoking is among the easiest things one can do; he did it all the time. I would add vegetarianism to the list of easy things. In high school I became a vegetarian more times than I can now remember, most often as an effort to claim some identity in a world of people whose identities seemed to come effortlessly. I wanted a slogan to distinguish my mom's Volvo's bumper, a bake sale cause to fill the self-conscious half hour of school break, an occasion to get closer to the breasts of activist women. (And I continued to think it was wrong to hurt animals.) Which isn't to say that I refrained from eating meat. Only that I refrained in public. Privately, the pendulum swung. Many dinners of those years began with my father asking, "Any dietary restrictions I need to know about tonight?"

When I went to college, I started eating meat more earnestly. Not "believing in it" — whatever that would mean — but willfully pushing the questions out of my mind. I didn't feel like having an "identity"

right then. And I wasn't around anyone who knew me as a vegetarian, so there was no issue of public hypocrisy, or even having to explain a change. It might well have been the prevalence of vegetarianism on campus that discouraged my own — one is less likely to give money to a street musician whose case is overflowing with bills.

But when, at the end of my sophomore year, I became a philosophy major and started doing my first seriously pretentious *thinking*, I became a vegetarian again. The kind of willful forgetting that I was sure meat eating required felt too paradoxical to the intellectual life I was trying to shape. I thought life could, should, and must conform to the mold of reason. You can imagine how annoying this made me.

When I graduated, I ate meat — lots of every kind of meat — for about two years. Why? Because it tasted good. And because more important than reason in shaping habits are the stories we tell ourselves and one another. And I told a forgiving story about myself to myself.

Then I was set up on a blind date with the woman who would become my wife. And only a few weeks later we found ourselves talking about two surprising topics: marriage and vegetarianism.

Her history with meat was remarkably similar to mine: there were things she believed while lying in

bed at night, and there were choices made at the breakfast table the next morning. There was a gnawing (if only occasional and short-lived) dread that she was participating in something deeply wrong, and there was the acceptance of both the confounding complexity of the issue and the forgivable fallibility of being human. Like me, she had intuitions that were very strong, but apparently not strong enough.

People get married for many different reasons, but one that animated our decision to take that step was the prospect of explicitly marking a new beginning. Jewish ritual and symbolism strongly encourage this notion of demarcating a sharp division with what came before — the most well-known example being the smashing of the glass at the end of the marriage ceremony. Things were as they were before, but they will be different now. Things will be better. We will be better.

Sounds and feels great, but better how? I could think of endless ways to make myself better (I could learn foreign languages, be more patient, work harder), but I'd already made too many such vows to trust them anymore. I could also think of endless ways to make "us" better, but the meaningful things we can agree on and change in a relationship are few. In actuality, even in those moments when so much feels possible, very little is.

Eating animals, a concern we'd both had and had both forgotten, seemed like a place to start. So much intersects there, and so much could flow from it. In the same week, we became engaged and vegetarian.

Of course our wedding wasn't vegetarian, because we persuaded ourselves that it was only fair to offer animal protein to our guests, some of whom had traveled great distances to share our joy. (Find that logic hard to follow?) And we ate fish on our honeymoon, but we were in Japan, and when in Japan . . . And back in our new home, we did occasionally eat burgers and chicken soup and smoked salmon and tuna steaks. But only every now and then. Only whenever we felt like it.

And that, I thought, was that. And I thought that was just fine. I assumed we'd maintain a diet of conscientious inconsistency. Why should eating be different from any of the other ethical realms of our lives? We were honest people who occasionally told lies, careful friends who sometimes acted clumsily. We were vegetarians who from time to time ate meat.

And I couldn't even feel confident that my intuitions were anything more than sentimental vestiges of my childhood — that if I were to probe deeply, I wouldn't find indifference. I didn't know what animals *were*, or even approximately how they were farmed or killed. The whole thing made me

uncomfortable, but that didn't imply that anyone else should be, or even that I should be. And I felt no rush or need to sort any of this out.

But then we decided to have a child, and that was a different story that would necessitate a different story.

About half an hour after my son was born, I went into the waiting room to tell the gathered family the good news.

"You said he! So it's a boy?"

"What's his name?"

"Who does he look like?"

"Tell us everything!"

I answered their questions as quickly as I could, then went to a corner and turned on my cell phone.

"Grandma," I said. "We have a baby."

Her only phone is in the kitchen. She picked up after the first ring, which meant she had been sitting at the table, waiting for the call. It was just after

midnight. Had she been clipping coupons? Preparing chicken and carrots to freeze for someone else to eat at some future meal? I'd never once seen or heard her cry, but tears pushed through her voice as she asked, "How much does it weigh?"

A few days after we came home from the hospital, I sent a letter to a friend, including a photo of my son and some first impressions of fatherhood. He responded, simply, "Everything is possible again." It was the perfect thing to write, because that was exactly how it felt. We could retell our stories and make them better, more representative or aspirational. Or we could choose to tell different stories. The world itself had another chance.

Eating Animals

PERHAPS THE FIRST DESIRE MY son had, wordlessly and before reason, was the desire to eat. Seconds after being born, he was breastfeeding. I watched him with an awe that had no precedent in my life. Without explanation or experience, he knew what to do. Millions of years of evolution had wound the knowledge into him, as it had encoded beating into his tiny heart, and expansion and contraction into his newly dry lungs.

The awe had no precedent in my life, but it bound me, across generations, to others. I saw the rings of my tree: my parents watching me eat, my

grandmother watching my mother eat, my great-grandparents watching my grandmother . . . He was eating as had the children of cave painters.

As my son began life and I began this book, it seemed that almost everything he did revolved around eating. He was nursing, or sleeping after nursing, or getting cranky before nursing, or getting rid of the milk he had nursed. As I finish this book, he is able to carry on quite sophisticated conversations, and increasingly the food he eats is digested together with stories we tell. Feeding my child is not like feeding myself: it matters more. It matters because food matters (his physical health matters, the pleasure of eating matters), and because the stories that are served with food matter. These stories bind our family together, and bind our family to others. Stories about food are stories about us — our history and our values. Within my family's Jewish tradition, I came to learn that food serves two parallel purposes: it nourishes and it helps you remember. Eating and storytelling are inseparable — the saltwater is also tears; the honey not only tastes sweet, but makes us think of sweetness; the matzo is the bread of our affliction.

There are thousands of foods on the planet, and explaining why we eat the relatively small selection we do requires some words. We need to explain that the parsley on the plate is for decoration, that pasta is not a "breakfast food," why we eat wings

but not eyes, cows but not dogs. Stories establish narratives, and stories establish rules.

At many times in my life, I have forgotten that I have stories to tell about food. I just ate what was available or tasty, what seemed natural, sensible, or healthy — what was there to explain? But the kind of parenthood I always imagined practicing abhors such forgetfulness.

This story didn't begin as a book. I simply wanted to know — for myself and my family — what meat *is*. I wanted to know as concretely as possible. Where does it come from? How is it produced? How are animals treated, and to what extent does that matter? What are the economic, social, and environmental effects of eating animals? My personal quest didn't stay that way for long. Through my efforts as a parent, I came face-to-face with realities that as a citizen I couldn't ignore, and as a writer I couldn't keep to myself. But facing those realities and writing responsibly about them are not the same.

I wanted to address these questions comprehensively. So although upwards of 99 percent of all animals eaten in this country come from "factory farms" — and I will spend much of the rest of the book explaining what this means and why it matters — the other 1 percent of animal agriculture is also an important part of this story. The disproportionate amount of this book that is

occupied by discussion of the best family-run animal farms reflects how significant I think they are, but at the same time, how insignificant: they prove the rule.

To be perfectly honest (and to risk losing my credibility on page 13), I assumed, before beginning my research, that I knew what I would find — not the details, but the general picture. Others made the same assumption. Almost always, when I told someone I was writing a book about "eating animals," they assumed, even without knowing anything about my views, that it was a case for vegetarianism. It's a telling assumption, one that implies not only that a thorough inquiry into animal agriculture would lead one away from eating meat, but that most people already know that to be the case. (What assumptions did you make upon seeing the title of this book?)

I, too, assumed that my book about eating animals would become a straightforward case for vegetarianism. It didn't. A straightforward case for vegetarianism is worth writing, but it's not what I've written here.

Animal agriculture is a hugely complicated topic. No two animals, breeds of animals, farms, farmers, or eaters are the same. Looking past the mountains of research — reading, interviewing, seeing firsthand — that was necessary even to begin to think about this stuff seriously, I had to ask myself if it was

possible to say something coherent and significant about a practice that is so diverse. Perhaps there is no "meat." Instead, there is *this* animal, raised on *this* farm, slaughtered at *this* plant, sold in *this* way, and eaten by *this* person — but each distinct in a way that prevents them from being pieced together as mosaic.

And eating animals is one of those topics, like abortion, where it is impossible to definitively know some of the most important details (When is a fetus a person, as opposed to a potential person? What is animal experience really like?) and that cuts right to one's deepest discomforts, often provoking defensiveness or aggression. It's a slippery, frustrating, and resonant subject. Each question prompts another, and it's easy to find yourself defending a position far more extreme than you actually believe or could live by. Or worse, finding no position worth defending or living by.

Then there is the difficulty of discerning the difference between how something feels and what something is. Too often, arguments about eating animals aren't arguments at all, but statements of taste. And where there are facts — this is how much pork we eat; these are how many mangrove swamps have been destroyed by aquaculture; this is how a cow is killed — there's the question of what we can actually do with them. Should they be ethically compelling? Communally? Legally? Or just

more information for each eater to digest as he sees fit?

While this book is the product of an enormous amount of research, and is as objective as any work of journalism can be — I used the most conservative statistics available (almost always from government, and peer-reviewed academic and industry sources) and hired two outside fact-checkers to corroborate them — I think of it as a story. There's plenty of data to be found, but it is often thin and malleable. Facts are important, but they don't, on their own, provide meaning — especially when they are so bound to linguistic choices. What does a precisely measured pain response in chickens mean? Does it mean pain? What does pain mean? No matter how much we learn about the physiology of the pain — how long it persists, the symptoms it produces, and so forth — none of it will tell us anything definitive. But place facts in a story, a story of compassion or domination, or maybe both — place them in a story about the world we live in and who we are and who we want to be — and you can begin to speak meaningfully about eating animals.

We are made of stories. I'm thinking of those Saturday afternoons at my grandmother's kitchen table, just the two of us — black bread in the glowing toaster, a humming refrigerator that couldn't be seen through its veil of family photographs. Over pumpnickel ends and Coke,

she would tell me about her escape from Europe, the foods she had to eat and those she wouldn't. It was the story of her life — "Listen to me," she would plead — and I knew a vital lesson was being transmitted, even if I didn't know, as a child, what that lesson was.

I know, now, what it was. And though the particulars couldn't be more different, I am trying, and will try, to transmit her lesson to my son. This book is my most earnest attempt to do so. I feel great trepidation as I begin, because there is so much reverberation. Putting aside, for a moment, the more than ten billion land animals slaughtered for food every year in America, and putting aside the environment, and workers, and such directly related issues as world hunger, flu epidemics, and biodiversity, there is also the question of how we think of ourselves and one another. We are not only the tellers of our stories, we are the stories themselves. If my wife and I raise our son as a vegetarian, he will not eat his great-grandmother's singular dish, will never receive that unique and most direct expression of her love, will perhaps never think of her as the Greatest Chef Who Ever Lived. Her primal story, our family's primal story, will have to change.

My grandmother's first words upon seeing my son for the first time were "My revenge." Of the infinite number of things she could have said, that was what she chose, or was chosen for her.

Listen to Me:

"WE WEREN'T RICH, BUT WE always had enough. Thursday we baked bread, and challah and rolls, and they lasted the whole week. Friday we had pancakes. Shabbat we always had a chicken, and soup with noodles. You would go to the butcher and ask for a little more fat. The fattiest piece was the best piece. It wasn't like now. We didn't have refrigerators, but we had milk and cheese. We didn't have every kind of vegetable, but we had enough. The things that you have here and take for granted . . . But we were happy. We didn't know any better. And we took what we had for granted, too.

"Then it all changed. During the War it was hell on earth, and I had nothing. I left my family, you know. I was always running, day and night, because the Germans were always right behind me. If you stopped, you died. There was never enough food. I became sicker and sicker from not eating, and I'm not just talking about being skin and bones. I had sores all over my body. It became difficult to move. I wasn't too good to eat from a garbage can. I ate the parts others wouldn't eat. If you helped yourself, you could survive. I took whatever I could find. I ate things I wouldn't tell you about.

"Even at the worst times, there were good people, too. Someone taught me to tie the ends of my pants so I could fill the legs with any potatoes I was able

to steal. I walked miles and miles like that, because you never knew when you would be lucky again. Someone gave me a little rice once, and I traveled two days to a market and traded it for some soap, and then traveled to another market and traded the soap for some beans. You had to have luck and intuition.

"The worst it got was near the end. A lot of people died right at the end, and I didn't know if I could make it another day. A farmer, a Russian, God bless him, he saw my condition, and he went into his house and came out with a piece of meat for me."

"He saved your life."

"I didn't eat it."

"You didn't eat it?"

"It was pork. I wouldn't eat pork."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"What, because it wasn't kosher?"