

How Ramen Got Me Through Adolescence by Veronique Greenwood

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When I was in fifth grade, I developed an intense dislike of eating around other people. The cafeteria was a place of foul odors, gelatinous spills, horrific mixtures of chocolate pudding, fruit cocktail and ketchup consumed on dares, and I found myself fasting from breakfast, at about 6 in the morning, until 3:35, when I walked home through the woods from the bus stop. Each step up our hill, a narrow ridge in rural California, I fantasized about the big bowl of ramen I would make myself when I reached the top.

You could buy it in flats, at 25 cents a packet — my favorite flavors were beef (red wrapper) and pork (brown wrapper), followed closely by the mysterious spices of Oriental (blue wrapper). Chicken (orange) and shrimp (pink) lacked the savory punch of the darker flavors, but in a pinch they would do. The sight of those oblong packets nested together into a 24-pack brick aroused a feeling of warm contentment, as a survivalist must feel upon surveying his provisions before hunkering down in a bomb shelter. I would be fed.

Instead of eating during the school day, I read. Every day at lunch, when the other kids ambled toward the cafeteria, I went the other way, to the library. The school let you check out two books at a time, and at lunch break I took out my allotment. I read with my book hidden under my desk in nearly every class until the end of middle school. This is when I read “One Hundred Years of Solitude” (good), “Stones for Ibarra” (sad), “Midnight’s Children” (confusing), “Crime and Punishment” (perfect), “The Milagro Beanfield War” (weirdly obsessed with sex). The teachers didn’t bother me about it. I got high scores on homework and tests, and they had other things to deal with. The only teacher who extracted revenge for my reading was my eighth-grade English teacher. She took “One Hundred Years of Solitude” away from me and made me sit at my desk for the rest of class, powerless, alone, unsupported. I waited furiously for this time to pass.

At home, I assembled my ramen meal over and over. It was a perfectly self-sufficient food, and the kitchen was a private place, with a different kind of solitude than at school. With my parents at work and my sisters elsewhere, no one was watching. I put

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the water on to boil with a practiced hand. While I waited, I tipped a few dried noodles into my mouth — a crunch, a tiny bit of salt and the hint of something fatty, like an old French fry, dehydrated until it becomes something delicious all over again. Reading was not allowed at family meals, but at my afternoon feeding, I could prop my book against the bowl of noodles and read while I slurped.

Ramen was so critical to my sustenance that my parents turned to it to placate me on road trips. To them, it was a portable satisfaction system for someone who was hard to satisfy. “There was something about hot food, something about warmth, that you needed,” my mom says. Most of the time I didn’t want their help, didn’t want the vulnerability that came with needing anyone else. (Once, when someone sent me a love note at summer camp, I tore it up in front of all the others, just in case it was someone making fun of me.) But, trapped in a car, I had no choice. I remember on one trip, when I was almost crying from hunger and frustration, my mother leaping out of the car, red beef packet in hand, saying over her shoulder, “I need to go find some boiling water.”

For more than three years I ate a packet nearly every day, a thousand steaming bowls. I read easily hundreds of novels. My life had two poles: the reliable, satisfying bite of those shelf-stable noodles and the warm cocoon of the world’s books.

I *was* a survivalist. I was waiting to get to a place where there were other people like me and to figure out exactly what “like me” meant. This artificial diet, suboptimal for lifetime consumption but suitable for brief periods of duress, got me through the desert of adolescence. I was sure for a long time that my feeling of isolation was the result of growing up so far away from cities and universities and people outside of my family who cared about words and ideas. But I now think some flavor of that bunker mentality is a universal experience. When I encounter children with that haunted look, I have something to say.

Don’t worry, I want to tell them. You’ll find your people. For now, eat your ramen.

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