



Good Read

To Have and Preserve

CHLOE BENJAMIN FINDS A WAY TO CONTRIBUTE TO
HER MODERN MARRIAGE—WITHOUT SACRIFICING HER VALUES.

I MET NATHAN when I was 21. I had just moved to Madison, Wisconsin, for grad school; he was handsome and inquisitive, a PhD student with a background in construction work and a study full of books. Three years after we met, he proposed during a downpour. In 2014, when I was 25, we were married.

I was the first of my friends to get married, but I had no doubts; loath as I am to use clichés, I knew Nathan was the one. Besides, I had always craved depth and security over experimentation and adventure, at least outside the bounds of my fiction. So the notion that Nathan would be my partner for life didn't scare me. But the word "wife" did. It made me think of outdated expectations and sexist magazine ads from the 1950s.



I wanted to find ways, however small, of holding our new family together, creating the pectin-like gel that would situate us between runny and rigid.

I grew up in San Francisco in a big, modern family with two sets of parents—one gay, one straight. My dad's house was the more normative: He was the breadwinner, and my stepmother, Ellen, managed the domestic sphere. My mom and her partner, Molly, took on similarly delineated roles—Molly worked full-time while Mom juggled acting with being the primary caretaker of us kids—but the fact that they were both women upended traditional narratives.

I had various models when it came time to create my own family. Nathan and I agreed that the allocation of responsibilities needed to be based not on gender norms but on personal preference and familial circumstances. Early in our marriage, while Nathan worked part-time and reassessed his career, my pay served as our primary income. Meanwhile, he did almost all the cooking; I contributed little more than my great-grandmother's party mix and tuna pasta, a childhood favorite whose slogan should be "It's better than it sounds." Nathan managed our home life, too. He knew when the cat needed a checkup, when the car needed an oil change or new winter tires.

As a fiction writer, I lived as much in my head as I did in our apartment. I frequently put the scissors in the snack drawer or the matchbook in the freezer, while Nathan puttered after me, moving things to their rightful locations and closing the cabinet doors I always left open. I was a city kid to the bone, more comfortable on sidewalks than on hiking trails, never happier than when I was curled under a blanket with a good novel. If I were an animal, we often joked, I'd be an indoor cat. Meanwhile, Nathan was passionate about the outdoors, and I could see his love of cooking came from his appreciation of nature: The wild ramps he picked in April were sautéed in butter and olive oil or turned into pesto.

AS I SETTLED into our marriage, I found myself wanting to make a similarly food-driven contribution. The instinct confused me. Was I betraying my feminism? After all, I loved my unconventional upbringing, and I took pride in having a modern marriage. Why did I care that I didn't cook? If Nathan enjoyed it, why not let him take the lead?

I found myself thinking about my own parents. I remembered how the making of food was an act of love as well as a way of carrying on family history. Tuna pasta calls up the few memories I have of the days when my mom and dad were still together. After my parents split, food differentiated their houses, creating distinct memories and traditions. My dad moved into a small apartment far from my elementary school. On those earlier mornings, we bought olive rolls brushed with salt, a special breakfast to eat in the car. Ellen, my dad's wife, once endeared herself to my brother and me by covering the table with newspaper and serving messy barbecued chicken we could eat with our hands. Meanwhile, my mom's partner, Molly, and I had "our" pasta recipe: penne with cream and scallions.

My parents each had an area of expertise, something I still associate with them. My dad specialized in fish and meat—tuna steaks and grilled salmon, pork tenderloins we bought at Roundman's Smokehouse on trips to Mendocino. My mom was a master of baked goods: From *The Moosewood Cookbook* and her secret weapon, *The Secrets of Jesuit Breadmaking*, she made Italian loaves studded with olives and Easter bread the color of egg yolks. I wanted a specialty of my own. Bread had always been my most beloved food, but in my early 20s, I went gluten-free to combat migraines. My experiments in gluten-free baking were so disastrous that I decided to stick with premade mixes. Still, there were several things a gluten-free lifestyle couldn't take away from me. They included fruit and sugar.

Two springs ago, my friend Rebecca mentioned that she was gearing up for canning season. Every June, she made her mother's strawberry jam. She swore I'd never tasted anything like it, that it was an entirely different species from what you bought in a store. I offered to help.

The first order of business was to pick the strawberries the same day as the canning. Lumps or soft spots didn't matter; what mattered was that the berries were ripe to bursting. We brought home four quarts and set up a workshop on my dining room table: two cutting boards, a bowl for chopped strawberries, another bowl for their toothy green leaves. We heated the chopped strawberries in a pot with what seemed like an illegal amount of sugar.

At first I was dubious: How could sugar and hunks of fruit become liquid? But liquid they became. We kept stirring, drenched in steam as the air conditioner fought its losing battle and the pot exhaled an aroma so intoxicating that to smell it felt almost like eating jam itself: sweet but not saccharine, clear as a soprano. When we added a packet of pectin, the mixture thickened, producing plump, glossy bubbles. We spooned a quarter's worth onto a small plate and put it in the freezer until it cooled, then nudged it with a finger. When it wrinkled, we filled our just-boiled jars.

I became hooked. I haven't always had success—my garlic dill pickles were too sour to eat, and I have yet to find a preserved salsa that doesn't taste predominantly of vinegar—but trial and error led me to a swoon-worthy version of apricot jam, in which lemon juice and not-quite-ripe fruit perfectly balance out the requisite ton of sugar. Every August, Rebecca and I can 25 pounds of whole tomatoes. Over the course of the next year, Nathan retrieves them, tightly packed in quart jars, to use in his pasta sauces and chili and soups.

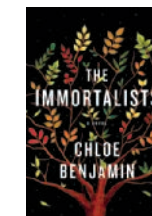
I LOVE FEELING PART of a tradition that stretches back generations; when I told my grandmother about my new hobby, she instantly recalled her own mother's canned jams and dilly beans. I love how it connects me to the outdoors: Every fall, I go to a nearby apple farm to collect 15 pounds of fruit—and pet the Black Welsh Mountain sheep grazing near the orchard—before returning home to make apple butter, as caramelized and thick as pâté. I love decorating the jars, finding printable labels and customizing them with the date and name of the jam, then tying a piece of baker's twine around the lid. I love giving them as gifts, knowing they'll be incorporated into my loved ones' breakfast rituals.

Perhaps most of all, I love creating something that will last. Though I was lucky to grow up in two loving homes, my parents' divorce showed me that families can be fragile. Subconsciously or not, I'm soothed by the very notion of preserving.

It was this instinct, I realized, that drove my desire to contribute domestically. I didn't want to replicate the strict divisions of earlier generations, didn't feel I would be a better partner if only I cooked. After all, canning doesn't represent a fundamental change: Nathan still makes dinner almost every night, and I still wash the dishes, the *Hamilton* soundtrack blaring. What I wanted was to find ways, however small, of holding our new family together, creating the pectin-like gel that would situate us in that middle place between runny and rigid.

Preserving, I've discovered, is not so different from writing. Both are ways of documenting. Now, tucked away in the guest room, is a box full of memories: a record of the past, kept in the present, to be enjoyed in the future—together.

AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NATHAN JANDL



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe Benjamin is the author of *The Anatomy of Dreams*. Her new novel, *The Immortalists*, is out now. Its television rights have already been sold. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

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