

A Different Way
By Elizabeth Giger

I used to believe that in Illinois mashed potatoes came out of a box and biscuits came from a can, while in Texas actual potatoes were mashed and real hands kneaded flour into dough. My normal-life-stomach was filled with Hamburger Helper while my visiting-grandparents-stomach was filled with brisket and roasted potatoes. As a child, I paid no more attention to this oddity than I did to any of the strange things of the grown up world, such as why anyone without a parent around would choose to eat vegetables.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:10 PM
Comment: See End Note 1.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 11:43 AM
Comment: "potatoes were mashed" is a passive construction. That's not always a bad thing, but notice here that it's part of a compound clause in which the first clause ("actual potatoes were mashed") is passive and the second clause ("real hands kneaded flour into dough") is active. That's a bit awkward.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:10 PM
Comment: See End Note 2.

As I grew up, however, I not only noticed this disparity between the way my mom cooked (or didn't) and the way her mom cooked, but I began to resent it. This was my mom's mom, for goodness' sake. Why couldn't she cook like her, creating meals from scratch rather than relying on pre-packaged convenience? Did my mom not care enough about us to try?

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 11:47 AM
Comment: This is a little awkward. Consider rearranging so that the verb "would choose" is close to the subject "anyone":
"...such as why anyone would choose to eat vegetables if they didn't have a parent around to make them."

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:11 PM
Comment: See End Note 3.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 11:51 AM
Comment: These pronouns aren't clear.

When I wanted to learn how to cook for myself, college looming on the horizon, I went to my Gram. Not my mom. Any time we were in Dallas for a visit, I shadowed Gram in the kitchen, watching as she churned out cobblers and sourdough pancakes, eventually being allowed to help. Gram was patient with me, guiding my hands and giving instruction in a way that made it even harder for me to understand why my mom did things the way she did. I watched Gram cook as a way of loving others, as a way of providing good things for those she loved. I watched as homemade goods came to my college mailbox from Gram. Not my mom. And I wondered again why my mom didn't love me in this way.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:12 PM
Comment: See End Note 4.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:12 PM
Comment: See End Note 5.

Years went by in the same manner. My Gram cooking everything from scratch, always fearful that there wouldn't be enough; my mom doing the minimum to get by, asking my dad to take over the cooking the instant he retired. When Gram's oven died, with family on the way, she baked batches of cookies and even a pie in her toaster oven. My mom would have given up and asked for Little Caesar's. The seeming indifference hurt. So I drew even closer to Gram. Not my mom.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:00 PM

Comment: These are sentence fragments—in essence nominative absolutes standing in for sentences. That's not a disaster, but neither do fragments here seem to be an improvement over actual sentences: "My Gram kept cooking everything from scratch...My mom kept doing the minimum..."

Then one day, my mom made a comment. Just a throwaway comment. "When I was a child, nothing was ever good enough for your Gram. So I quit trying."

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:01 PM

Comment: I wonder if you could find a better, less conventional way to introduce this idea. This isn't bad, but this is a key moment of transition, and it may deserve something more compelling than "Then one day, my mom made a comment."

Oh.

The veil had lifted and comprehension so sharp I could taste it rushed in. My memories of all the ways in which my mom did love me through her cooking filled me to the brim. Making sure we had hot breakfasts before school, even while hating to cook. Putting thought into suppers that we could dip out of the crockpot when we were rushing to the next activity and she was teaching piano. Working hard to keep us healthy and sustained when the very act of cooking was painful for her. This is the way my mom loved me. It was different, and perhaps not what I had wanted, but it was still love, and it filled me up.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:13 PM

Comment: See End Note 6.

Jonathan Rogers 11/1/19 12:15 PM

Comment: See End Note 7.

Elizabeth—

I like the movement in this piece. You set up that contrast between your mother's cooking style and your grandmother's cooking style, leading the reader to believe that your grandmother had it right and your mother had it wrong, and then you hit us with this truth that things were more complicated than you

thought. (Incidentally, I like the way you frame it in the beginning as if it were a geographical—things work one way in Illinois and another way in Texas. It's adds a little nice little touch of child-like naiveté: the reader quickly realizes that the difference isn't geographical nearly so much as generational).

You were up against a 500-word limit here, but if you had more room to stretch your legs, I'd want to know more about how you processed the realization that your grandmother's style in the kitchen—which felt so life-giving to you—felt so stifling to your mother. If you choose to expand this piece (and I hope you will), that would be a good place to start expanding. That was the big question I was left with. When you only have 500 words to work with, sometimes you're just getting to the big question about the time you run out of runway!

Here are a few notes corresponding to my marginal notations.

1. You start with the phrase "I used to believe that..." When you do that, you are immediately taking the reader inside little Elizabeth's head.

Consider how that opening would be different if instead of starting with "I used to believe that..." you started with "In Illinois, mashed potatoes came from a box and biscuits came from a can. In Texas..." That opening throws the reader slightly off balance, inviting him into the confusion you felt as a child rather than pre-framing all this as a childish belief.

Instead of taking the reader immediately into little Elizabeth's head, consider first taking the reader to Illinois.

2. From the middle of paragraph 1:

My normal-life-stomach was filled with Hamburger Helper while my visiting-grandparents-stomach was filled with brisket and roasted potatoes.”

You're asking a lot of your reader here. Bear in mind that you haven't at this point explained that your grandparents lived in Texas. I was able to figure it out, but there's a limit to how much your reader wants to figure out.

Also, the first couple of times I read that sentence, I thought you were comparing the contents of your stomach to the contents of your visiting grandparents' stomachs. It took me a while to realize that you were comparing the usual contents of your stomach to the contents of your stomach when your grandparents came to visit.

I suggest that you frame that contrast in a much more straightforward manner: "Normally [fill in the blank] ... but when my grandparents visited from Texas [fill in the blank]..."

3. From the beginning of Paragraph 2:

“As I grew up, however, I not only noticed this disparity between the way my mom cooked (or didn't) and the way her mom cooked, but I began to resent it.”

In this sentence you do two things: you notice a disparity, and you resent it. How important is it that you both notice and resent? You can simplify this sentence quite a bit by saying

“As I grew up, however, I began to resent the disparity between between the way my mom cooked (or didn’t) and the way her mom cooked...”

You lose a bit of the nuance, perhaps, but what you gain in simplicity may make up for it. And I’m not sure you lose much nuance anyway, since resentment implies noticing. You can’t very well resent a thing until after you’ve noticed it.

4. From the beginning of Paragraph 3:

When I wanted to learn how to cook for myself, college looming on the horizon, I went to my Gram. Not my mom. Any time we were in Dallas for a visit, I shadowed Gram in the kitchen, watching as she churned out cobbblers and sourdough pancakes, eventually being allowed to help.

I found this passage a tad confusing. The phrase “college looming on the horizon” seems to restrict the timeline. I think of college “looming” for people in 12th grade, 11th grade, maybe 10th. Ok. You say you “went” to Gram to learn...but then you give the impression that what you really mean is that you paid attention to your Gram’s kitchen work any time your family went to Dallas. But the idea that you watched until she eventually let you help—that doesn’t sound like you’re talking about 11th and 12th grade. That sounds like a process that started when you were little.

5. From the middle of Paragraph 3:

I watched Gram cook as a way of loving others, as a way of providing good things for those she loved. I watched as homemade goods came to my college mailbox from Gram.

In these two sentences, you're asking the reader to watch you while you watch something else. Why not just show those things directly to your reader?

Gram cooked as a way of loving others, as a way of providing good things for those she loved. Homemade goods came to my college mailbox from Gram.

6. From the beginning of the last paragraph:

The veil had lifted and comprehension so sharp I could taste it rushed in.

The first issue is the fact you've got two images here that feel as if they're at odds. A veil is lifting, and comprehension is rushing in. "Rushing in" goes with opening a floodgate or breaking down a dam but not so much with a veil lifting.

But beyond that, I want to look at the grammar and sentence structure. In the second clause of that sentence, the subject is "comprehension" and the verb is "rushed in." It feels like it's a long way from the subject to the verb. If you want to keep both of those ideas--comprehension rushing in and comprehension so sharp you could taste it--you might do something like this: "...comprehension rushed in, so sharp I could taste it" or "...comprehension rushed in--comprehension so sharp I could taste it."

7. From the middle of the last paragraph:

Making sure we had hot breakfasts before school, even while hating to cook. Putting thought into suppers that we could dip out of the crockpot when we were rushing to the next activity and she was

teaching piano. Working hard to keep us healthy and sustained when the very act of cooking was painful for her.

Here is the beginning of another series of sentence fragments—this time, gerund phrases standing in for sentences. This kind of thing can work, but I think sentences would work better.

The most troubling thing about this series of fragments is that your mother disappears at this crucial moment when you're finally starting to see what she had done for you. This disappearance of the mother feels especially awkward in that first fragment, "Making sure we had hot breakfasts before school, even while hating to cook." There's nobody in the sentence to do the hating.

Once you decide to put your mother back into that passage, I think you will find that it gives you more occasion to think about what she actually did for you. (Reworking the passage also makes it apparent that you don't need both "hating to cook" and "the very act of cooking was painful for her.") Here's my stab at a revision, though yours will be better, since you actually know what you want to say about your mother:

My mother made sure we had hot breakfasts before school, even though she wasn't especially interested in eating a hot breakfast herself. All those crockpot suppers—they didn't represent laziness on her part. She put thought into preparing something we could dip out when we were rushing to the next activity and she was teaching piano. She worked hard to keep us healthy and sustained when the very act of cooking was painful for her.

Hope that's helpful—

JR