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Lourdes Figueroa

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Real Pizza

By Lourdes Figueroa

“The diet is off.”

So Jack is off the diet. Is that what the doctor said? Yes, that’s what he recommends. I simply nod. I do not smile with him.

No more shopping at two different supermarkets in search of the special foods, buying regular cereal at one place and then paying for those odd, gluten free brands at another store. No more reading the label of every product I take to check its contents. No more dividing the groceries. Putting the regular things on the highest cupboards so Jack won’t accidentally get them when he goes around the kitchen looking for his special snacks. No more baking pizza with chewy toppings and plasters of hardened glue pretending to be cookies.

“I don’t understand. After all these months, just like that, we should take him off the diet?” I am perplexed, enraged, relieved.

The doctor explains the situation. “Although the gluten free lifestyle has produced improvement in Jack’s behavior, it is not significant enough.” I can feel my face turning red and my hands sweating cold. The doctor notices this too, and so he lengthens his explanation to keep me focused. “It is not worthwhile to have your son under those intense restrictions.”

No more awkward dinners with the family. Pretending not to notice my nephews’ and nieces’ petrified faces as I cut the vanilla cake at Jack’s ninth birthday party, dreading the moment when the cake would be served and eaten. No more acting as if I didn’t know what they were discussing in their youthful conversations, how the plastic plate probably tastes better than the cake and wondering why there weren’t two cakes, a real cake for everyone and one for Jack. No more vanilla cakes that are not real. Claiming their existence just by taking up space at the table.

“Since Jack’s degree of autism is not so high, it is not as beneficial to keep him on the diet. You see, it wasn’t playing a crucial part in his improvement.”

So the diet is off.

No more preparing a lunchbox whenever we go out on the weekends. Carrots in the small Tupperware with the red lid, fish in the long blue container, flavorless cookies in the Ziploc bag. No more explaining to the waiter that the “little man” doesn’t need a menu because he brought his own food. By the fifth time we went out in this style, I let Jack do the explaining. He was thrilled to tell anyone who would listen that his carrots were more abundant in vitamins, his fish richer in protein, and his cookies healthier. Silly inventions my husband came up with for Jack to feel better about his bland meals. But now he would be able to look at the menu again, not that he needed it. He always ordered the same thing: pizza.

“So he can start eating regular food now? Right away?” I ask, trying to forget all the culinary routines of the past year and looking forward to the possibilities of upcoming meals.

No more downloading online recipes. No more buying cookbooks. No more attempts to make gluten free food taste, or at least look, like a normal meal. To make the best gluten free pizza had been my mission for months. That’s how I had spent countless mornings, baking pizza. I often didn’t go to the gym, forgot to pick up the dry cleaning, and rescheduled dentist appointments and lunch dates with my friends to stay in the kitchen, struggling to make the bread crispier and the cheese less elastic. Trying to make a gluten free pizza look like food.

“He can go back to eating regular food right away. But with moderation, that’s all I am asking for. The transition should not be too abrupt.”

The doctor makes me stay for thirty-three more minutes going over Jack’s results, arranging the next appointment and other details. I just want to leave his office and prepare one single meal for the three of us at the house. I’m thinking rainbow pancakes with powdered sugar and scrambled eggs with sausages. A side of bacon for my husband and Jack. Fruit Loops for dessert. The diet is off. Breakfast for dinner. Why not?

As I drive home I pass by Anthony’s Coal Fired Pizza. I change my mind about the breakfast for dinner thing. I make an illegal U-turn and drive into the parking lot through the exit. I don’t care. The diet is off. The restaurant is packed, but I don’t mind. I wait for almost an hour before I get my large cheese pizza.

“Guys, I brought dinner!” My husband meets me in the living room. He is puzzled as he sees me holding the box with gluten rich pizza. “The doctor said the diet is off.” I’m beaming. “Let’s talk about it later,” I say quickly as I hear a door slam and Jack running toward the stairs.

“Is that pizza I smell?” Jack screams from the second floor. His question is redundant. He knows very well what the smell belongs to even though he hasn’t seen the pizza. Jack gets to the living room and opens the box I’m holding. He doesn’t give me a kiss or even say hello. But tonight I overlook his lack of manners.

“But this is-” he stutters.

“Yes. Real pizza. Now go wash your hands for dinner.” He runs off with no hesitation.

While my husband and Jack set the table, I throw the gluten free pizza I had baked that morning in the trash, curse it, take a minute to swallow my tears, and sit at the table with my boys.