

# Feed Me

## IF FOOD IS LOVE, WHAT IF MY DAUGHTER WON'T EAT?

by Lesley Quinn

*Rules for Dough:*

1. *Do not eat dough*
  2. *Do not favor the likeliness of its taste*
  3. *Roll it into a ball and throw it in the ocean*
- Molly Quinn, Age 8

**FOR MORE THAN A DECADE**, I struggled to get my daughter to eat. Born prematurely and weighing in at only one pound fifteen ounces, Molly threatened—for many months—to die any minute. From the beginning, every encounter with a scale was traumatic, each new pound a major milestone representing months of effort and vigilance. More ounces meant life had a slightly firmer hold on her; failure to gain meant Molly was slipping, and the medical professionals would scribble in her chart terms like “failure to thrive.”

“She’s gained only three ounces in a month,” scolded the first nutritionist, an earnest, young woman with a brand-new degree.

“But, see, she doesn’t *like* to eat. Breathing and swallowing is too much. I mean, it’s just so much *effort*; she actually works up a sweat. We both do.”

“You’re adding egg yolk to her baby cereal?” she asked, lifting my scrawny hairless infant off the scale like a raw chicken.

The young woman pulled out her calculator and began punching in numbers.

“Yes,” I said, pulling Molly’s tiny sweatshirt over her head. “And avocado, and cream, and a teaspoon of canola oil to her formula. I’ve tried every kind of fruit, every kind of meat. She won’t open her mouth. Or she won’t swallow. Or she vomits it all up.”

“You do understand, Mrs. Quinn, that if you can’t find a way to increase her calories by at least thirty percent, your daughter has no chance of reaching her genetic potential?”

“Genetic potential,” I repeated, stuffing Molly’s feet into her pink sneakers. This term sounded as bad as “failure to thrive.”

“**W**ell, she’s up four ounces this time, but she’s anemic,” reported our pediatrician at one of our monthly visits.

Every day was full of disappointment. I felt like Sisyphus, pushing a giant bottle of extra-strength Enfamil with Iron towards endlessly pursed lips.

As I devoted myself to getting my daughter to grow, the focus of my own life became narrower, the possibilities fewer. Instead of spending time with friends, I developed a passion for dark chocolate and designer ice cream and homemade shortbread. I ate everything and was numbed. For every pound Molly failed to gain, I put on two, and I didn’t care.

“You know, you need to take a little more responsibility here,” I told Molly



when she was eighteen months old. In response, she offered me a Cheerio on the end of her tiny forefinger. She finally had hair—fine and blonde like mine, but straight like my husband Dan’s. I swept her bangs out of her eyes and ate the Cheerio, to be a good example.

“I can’t handle this anymore,” I said to Dan in bed one night. I had a bowl of Rocky Road and a soup spoon. Molly was three. “I’m sick to death of being a mother.” This was not what I had signed up for, not at all what I had in mind. I wanted to be a nice, normal mother with a nice, normal kid. Instead I had this mess of a life, and I hated her and I hated him and I hated every perky mother I saw pushing a stroller down the

sidewalk with her adorable chubby child.

“So, you’re suggesting . . .”

“Let’s give her back and get a refund.”

When she was eight, I ventured into tough-love territory: “This is what we’re having for dinner,” I told her. “You’ll sit there until you finish it.”

“But, Mom, I’m not hungry,” she cried, waving her furious toothpick arms.

“Too bad,” I said, helping myself to another helping of pasta putanesca. “You have to eat to live. If you don’t eat, you die. That’s just the way it is. And can you get your hair out of your face, please?”

Years passed without noticeable improvement. Eventually, for my own mental health, I had to stop making her daily food intake my main mission in life. “I give up,” I told her when she was thirteen. “I’m worn out. If you want to eat, eat. If you don’t, don’t.”

That was when Dan stepped in—we were Pony Express parents and it was time for a fresh horse. He decided to spearhead a campaign to make Molly more self-sufficient, and the first order of business was to enlist reinforcements in the form of a new nutritionist.

“From now on our only job is to shop,” Dan reported after their first appointment. “Molly will give us a list of what she wants from the store. She decides *when* to eat. She decides

what to eat. Period. It's completely up to her."

"Fine," I said. I failed to see how this strategy differed from my own surrender in the face of defeat.

Two months went by, during which Molly's diet dwindled to: cheese pizza, Cheerios, white bread, white rice, and orange Fanta. Every week, the nutritionist made lists with Molly and documented promises.

MOLLY PROMISES TO:

- Eat one serving of fruit every day (kiwi, tangerine, six strawberries)
- Have a Luna Bar when she comes home from school (any flavor)
- Take a multi-vitamin with iron every morning
- Drink one glass of chocolate milk every day

Dan affixed these lists to the refrigerator door at Molly's eye level.

Molly ignored them.

After the next visit, Dan reported that we were to begin helping her make the connection between how little she *ate* and how weepy and fragile and exhausted she *felt*. Otherwise, we were to continue biting our tongues while we waited for Molly's own appetite and survival instincts to kick in.

Meanwhile, I added to my

already extensive cookbook collection. I attended a week of professional cooking classes at the Culinary Institute of America in the Napa Valley. I learned how to make fresh porcini raviolis by hand, and Mexican mole from scratch. I devoted entire Saturdays to preparing ever more complicated, multi-course meals for the other people I loved, complete with tiny dishes of honeydew sorbet in between, to cleanse the palate. When I sat at our huge dining room table watching our guests suck garlicky cioppino sauce from their fishy fingers, or scooping up seconds of paella, I experienced deep waves of satisfaction. I was a success at *something*.

When Molly refused it all, I practiced restraint.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"Okay. Do you want to sit down with us anyway?"

"Not really."

"Okay."

Another month went by. Molly's cheeks caved in, her complexion dulled, the circles under her eyes deepened. She began obsessively twirling the hair growing from the crown of her head until scores of little knots formed. She looked like a child raised by wolves.

Clearly, the new food strategy wasn't working. And so, despite my vows of detachment, I agreed to drive Molly to the nutritionist's office for the next appointment—my first visit there. In the waiting room was a stack of hardcover books written by the nutritionist herself.

The woman pictured on each of the book covers was gorgeous. "Is that *her*?" I asked Molly with a gasp.

"Yeah, that's her. She has shorter hair now, though."

One of the books was enti-

tled *Like Mother, Like Daughter*. I looked at Molly's jutting joints and sunken cheeks, at my meaty thighs and heavy hips, and I wondered who would ever guess this bony bird-child was in any way related to me.

"She's pretty," I said, wishing I had worn something more flattering than baggy elastic-waisted pants and a faded t-shirt.

"She's nice, too."

"I'm sure."

The office door opened, and in strode the woman from the book covers; only in person, she was more stunning. She had long slender legs and Soho-cool clothes, and impossibly thick brown hair in a stylish bob. She opened her arms and Molly threw herself into them.

"Oh, sweet pea ... it's so good to see you!" said the gorgeous nutritionist. "You wait here a minute while Mom and I talk in my office, okay?" Molly nodded and opened a teen magazine as I headed into the office.

"So, she's been eating only foods that are beige or white, basically," I said, cutting to the chase. "And orange if you count orange soda as food."

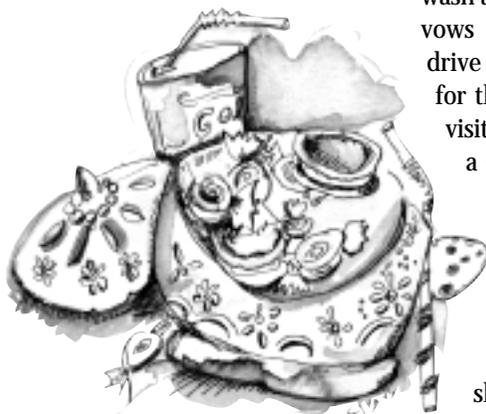
"Right," nodded the gorgeous nutritionist, taking notes, frowning.

"This plan isn't really working," I said.

"She looks terrible," she agreed.

We quickly concluded that it was time for renewed parental involvement, and then Molly was summoned. She collapsed in a heap on the couch, and I was excused.

While Molly and the nutritionist met privately to develop the particulars of Plan B, I sat in a neighborhood café with a latté and a giant chocolate chip cookie. At an adjacent table, a young mother was feeding her baby boy. I stared at them, spell-



bound. Chubby and cheerful, the baby opened his mouth wide in anticipation of the spoon. The instant he swallowed—before his mom had a chance to load up the spoon with more yogurt and apricots—he opened again. In imitation, she opened her own mouth, eyes animated and encouraging.

He wanted more and more and more.

She couldn't shovel it in fast enough.

This hungry boy, this cherub, was the very essence of robust babyhood. I was mesmerized.

When all the little jars were scraped clean, his mother handed him a bottle of milk. He knew just what to do! He popped the nipple straight into his mouth and began to guzzle. A trail of tiny bubbles wiggled up the side of the bottle.

"Good boy," said his mother before taking a bite of her tuna sandwich with sprouts on wholegrain bread.

Her plump baby boy, her bottle-swilling fellow, was sated now, his eyes droopy and stoned. He wasn't confused about food; why should he be? When he's hungry, he simply opens his mouth. Food arrives there and he tastes it and he swallows it and after a while he isn't hungry anymore.

Simple.

For me, it has never been simple, not as the child being fed or as the mother doing the feeding. In my family, food was *complicated*.

My mother rationed. Worried about my pudgy folds, my lack of a waist, she offered me celery when my sister and the neighbor kids got Popsicles or cones of Jamoca Almond Fudge from hand-packed barrels from 31 Flavors.



"Just chewing celery uses up more calories than you take in," Mom said.

My younger sister Robin had a waist. And muscular legs and strong tan arms. She could swing like a monkey, limb to limb, from the top of the mulberry tree in our front yard, all the way down to the ground. I saw the blur of her through my bedroom window where I curled up on my twin bed with a new Trixie Beldon book. I loved Trixie because her waist was not as pinched as Nancy Drew's. Plus, she had a bad temper sometimes.

"You're not fat," chirped Robin through the open window. "You're just pleasingly plump."

"Shut up," I said, wanting to stab

her with a toothpick. She was faster than me, though. I'd have to pretend to be nice to her in order to get close enough.

"Go outside," Mom would say when she caught me reading inside on a sunny day. I'd drag myself out to the front lawn where I would continue to read until the grass made my thighs itch.

Summer was not a good season for stocky, thick-waisted California girls, especially on days that involved bathing suits. Mom let Robin get a bikini. I got a turquoise flowered one-piece with a blousy top, and a white, dotted-Swiss cover-up.

The first summer that cover-up did its job and concealed most of my thighs, but by the next summer, it

barely hid my butt. I wore it unbuttoned with feigned nonchalance, and kept it on while I baked on the cheap aluminum chaise longue. The nylon straps made basket patterns on the back of my legs. I read, or pretended to read, and watched Robin and her friends out of the corner of my eye while they leapt out of the deep end of the pool and sprinted across the hot cement to the diving board. I wondered what it would be like to spend an entire afternoon in a bikini thinking only about making bigger and bigger cannonballs.

"Come in," she'd yell to me.

"No." Because I'd have to take off my cover-up, and because there were boys over by the deep end. Instead, I'd smile with a look of casual superiority as I returned to my book.

Sometimes I'd raise one knee like Annette Funicello and examine my toenails.

At the first sound of the ice cream man, everyone ran with damp dollar bills. Robin usually got an orange and fuchsia Missile. I wasn't supposed to but I wanted ice cream—a Drumstick. The boys would surely watch me, repulsed as I crunched through the top layer of chocolate and nuts, into the soft cream, and finally into the chewy sugar cone. I would pretend I didn't care. I was invisible.

Becoming a hippie in high school is what finally saved me from the tyranny of waistbands. It seemed God had invented baggy overalls and Indian bedspread dresses just for people like me, and to thank Him, I

went braless in a tank top. I went skinny dipping at the reservoir with my girlfriends. I smoked joints and let bites of chocolate chip cookie dissolve slowly on my tongue and found the sensation unspeakably delicious. The disapproving voices and the memory of being a fat girl with a dripping Drumstick and an ugly bathing suit began to fade.

But I was never really free of confusion about food. It remained forever tangled up with shame.

When the time came for me to participate in the ancient maternal choreography of offering and receiving with my own baby girl, neither of us had instinct working in her favor. By the time I was allowed to hold my daughter, four months after her harrowing arrival, I could express only a single yellowish droplet from each of my sad nipples, and then only if I squeezed really hard.

For her, survival had nothing to do with her *mouth*. Nourishment came from an IV needle taped to her arm, a plastic bag of clear liquid hanging from a pole, or later, a narrow tube inserted through a tiny nostril into the gagging dark of her throat.

Waiting in the café with my latté while Molly was meeting with the gorgeous nutritionist, I watched the young mother with her sleepy, well-fed boy, and I thought about sitting in our kitchen twelve years earlier, when Molly was not quite a year old. *I'm holding a beautiful Japanese teacup—turquoise porcelain—containing rice cereal with homemade applesauce, strained carefully, no cinnamon. And a rubberized baby spoon. A cute bib with panda bears is snapped into place, plastic*



keys are ready for distraction. I breathe deeply to stay relaxed, lighthearted. Music is off, TV is off: no distractions for my baby's fragile nervous system. I smile. Here we go, time for lunch, cheerfully, cheerfully. A little smear on her lips so she can taste. Yes? Is it good? No? Try a little more, just open your mouth a little, just a little bite. It's good. Look, Mommy likes it.

No? Okay, we'll try oatmeal with pear. Another translucent turquoise teacup, some oatmeal with lots of pureed pear this time. Pear is promising; usually she'll eat a little pear. Okay, here we go. Cheerful, smiling. Mmmmm. Isn't this great, isn't it so yummy? Open up, see? Like this. Open? Okay, let's play with the keys. As soon as she relaxes her jaw, in goes a bite. It sits in her mouth. I stroke under her chin to encourage a swallow. Yes. She swallowed. Open again, please. Please. Just a little so I can wedge in another spoonful. Delicious? Yes? I hum quietly; I pretend not to be waiting to pounce with a loaded spoon. I get one in, half comes back out. It's okay. We have time. A half-hour goes by, I distract, I pursue, I cajole, I sneak, I pray, I strategize. One more tiny bite and the little cup is finally empty.

Victorious, I reach for the clipboard to chart our successful 50 cc's of pear and oatmeal. I can't wait to tell Dan.

But then I hear the moist gurgle.  
Oh, no.

As I turn to look, up it comes—gobs of oatmeal, saliva, pear—pouring onto the Panda bears like hot lava.

Slowly I begin to scrape the goo off the bib with the translucent



teacup, the same volume as before I started an hour earlier. My baby looks at me. I breathe deeply and flip the pencil over to erase the 50 cc I just logged. My heart races, something dark and buzzing starts up in me. I concentrate on the teacup sitting on the table. I try to breathe. The thing in me continues to rise. Inside, the 'help me' voice becomes smaller; the dark thing rises. Suddenly, I stand. I take the cup and pull my arm back like a quarterback, cocking the spring. It snaps and I let go and the cup flies like a bullet. It hits the wall heater with a crash. The turquoise cup shatters into a hundred pieces. Pear and oatmeal sizzle and drip down the hot face of the heater until they begin to solidify.

In the silence, the hum of the refrigerator kicks in.

Molly stares at me and after a few moments, she starts to cry. I cover my face with my hands and smell bile and pear. I bend to pick up the porcelain shards, but decide to leave the pear and oatmeal to burn, dark and ugly—where they will stay for the next three years, until we move from this apartment.

I pull her gently from the high-chair and stroke the back of her head. Please, I whisper to her. It's okay to be hungry. Please want some of this food. Please, please want some of me.

I finished my cookie and my latté and returned to the nutritionist's office for Molly. The three of us met for a few minutes to review the new game plan: there was a new list of foods from which Molly was to choose, including things like raviolis and Chinese dumplings. Also, Molly announced, Dan and I were to police

this new agreement and, in general, do more to encourage her to eat.

"You guys should be saying things like, 'You may not leave the table until you eat five more bites,'" Molly scolded. "Say 'You can't have dessert until you eat all your vegetables.'"

"Okay," I nodded thoughtfully, as if this new idea of hers was fresh and promising.

I wish the story ended with Molly, now sixteen, happily joining us at the family table, eager to dive into a plate full of fabulous nourishing food. But in truth, every day is still a struggle: What did you pack for lunch; what are you having for breakfast; did you have a snack when you got home; you absolutely must sit down with us for dinner; did you take your vitamin?

There is no end to this in sight.

But at least now, I see a child whose face is a little softer, whose knees and elbows are somewhat less pointy, a child whose dark brown eyes occasionally sparkle.

She's here: seventy-three hard-earned pounds on a four and a half foot frame. For now, and as long as is necessary, I'll continue to feed her.

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Her travel nonfiction has been foisted by her mother upon unsuspecting acquaintances, like the UPS delivery person, and published more recently by the *New York Times* and *Skirt! Magazine*. She can be reached at [lesley@qua.com](mailto:lesley@qua.com).

"You know what I've discovered, Mom?" Molly asked recently. "If I don't eat, I never get hungry. And also, I lose track of myself. Eating helps me remember who I am." We celebrated this epiphany with a chocolate cake.