

Emerging Women
THE LIGHT OF WINTER, THE FEAST OF LIFE

By Sophia

It is this time of year that we tend to overindulge with food. Overeating is on the menu and it is with gusto that we eat forbidden fruit that is often something that should not pass our lips. Cheese balls are my favorite and so my mom makes sure that we go shopping together so that we can replenish our homes with this all so wonderful, tasty, fattening food. It is also the time that we give food as gifts, and this is a very ancient custom. OK, not all of us get fruitcake (thank goodness) but in our culture we all understand the special meaning of this festive cake gift, especially if it is from someone who always gives it. My husband can eat it and so this is an estimation of what a hardy individual he truly he is, I guess.

Not only does he devour festive baked goods, he also gathers allot of information on festivals and ancient cultures. (Much of which can be found in his book, *Global Ritualism*, Llewellyn, 1994) From him I found out that feasting, food-giving and special sacred foods have been a part of this winter holiday time, whether you call it the Winter Solstice, Yule, Christmas, or Hanukah, for thousands of years. Why? Well, this is the dark time of year, the time when food was most scarce in ancient farming cultures. It was known that after the Winter Solstice, the rebirth of the 'sun/son,' that warmer times would be coming. So food at this time symbolized life, the renewal of love, the banishing of the dark and of death.

It is no coincidence that this time of year is set in Capricorn, ruled by Saturn. In fact, the Romans celebrated this festival as

Saturnalia, the feast of Saturn! Well, we all know about Saturn, the grim old man of the planets, the symbol of solidity, darkness, endings, and so on.... So, light comes from darkness, solar energy, the key of life, is locked in food. This food is stored away, in the darkness, to feed us at our time of need. What could be more life affirming than the sharing of this food in the spirit of joy and renewal and fellowship?

This leads me to a story I want to share about food, love, death, and the spirit of renewal that so sums up this time of transition for me. This is time to remember those we love who have passed on and that we all too will pass away. Yet, it is how we live and love (and eat!) that is important, this is how we affirm life, especially in the depths of winter. This is a story about Gary whose spirit will always be with me, especially at this special time.

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Conversation changed between us, never leading to where one expected. After the teddy bear made out of flannel tiger-print cloth arrived, I knew he wanted that bear to remain in a way that others never forget, so when I held my bear I knew that he had made me something that was half him half me. His teddy bear collection matched my collection of tigers. One toy, two people. Sharing toys brought new meaning to us. We started to evolve.

I moved closer to him, maybe a year left. We talked of things I did not understand like blood counts and T-cells, part of an unknown vocabulary a different language, We also had our familiar language; Food. Yet, food was no longer mentioned in a way that made sense, it was the language of food that no longer did what it was suppose to do. The memory for him sustained him and I ate for us both.

"I am dying," he said.

"I know I whispered."

" Eat for me."

And I did, I ate what he could not. I would run to the fridge looking for what he desired and we would chose together and I ate. I gained twenty pounds over this, as if my weight gain would solve his loss of food.

"I do not want to die, eat for me."

Another trip to the kitchen, chips turned out to be one of the more popular splurges. A distinct flavor, no seaweed in them. After living in Asia for 4 years I could do with chips like these for a few years. Most of all, the crunch you could hear over the telephone was completely satisfying.

The smell of food made him sick with nausea and longing. The phone was safe and no eye contact, that was even better. Once Gary and his mate came over for dinner and we entertained them. Spaghetti was on the menu and Gary taught my son the wonders of raw spaghetti. Cracking it between your teeth was still one of his favorite treats. He showed me another catalog of dishes that he had ordered out of a catalog. If the food was to be denied and substituted with 'Ensure' and medical food-like goop, then he was at lest to have the dishes that he wanted. No one person or disease would deny him, he was going to have at lest that. He'd collect the whole set of them. Someday he would go into remission and be able to eat and party again.

Once, when he was feeling better, a few of us got to come over for the last Christmas Brazilian bash that he had. He watched us eat it all. It was a Brazilian national dish served one day of the week in Brazil. I do not remember the day of the week or the name of the dish, but I remember the dish and the smell of the food and the

amazing taste.

"I don't drink anymore, try this one," he said.

It was vodka and something and coconut milk. Oh so deadly.
"Sinful," I responded.

"It depends on who you drink it with."

We laughed out loud, out of control, when he stuck a paper umbrella in my drink.

The next time I saw him he was smaller and as big as the spaghetti that he had chewed on with my son four months earlier. We talked about the funeral plans, what to serve what to eat.

"Too bad I can not be there to join you, I'll be detained elsewhere."

He casually moved to another room, looking for a chair, to catch my breath as well as his. Our plan was not working. I was gaining, he was losing, surely this situation needed to be changed if this was going to work out. Two months latter, in Swedish Hospital, I clearly failed. I did not need to eat more.

"What do you think of my new figure?," he asked us.

"It is to die for," joked my husband.

And we all died laughing. No longer does food matter. It's too late and the dishes at the funeral were beautifully displayed in a row. Remnants of what we could not have and what we enjoyed: Food.

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And so, this final food held his spirit; it was what he wanted us to

eat, it was memory and sadness and a celebration of this remarkable light that is now burning elsewhere. For me, his spirit still shines within food, hiding until I taste the memory and then, there he is; the kindness and the laughter and the love. In this way the seeds of life lie quiet in food in the darkness of winter, released into our hearts, filling us with the joy of giving, just as the sun again begins to climb and warm the earth, preparing us for a new year of renewal.

(Final note: I urge you to continue the ancient tradition of Yule; give a gift of food to local food banks or give a donation of money or time to the Chicken Soup Brigade (in Seattle, other AIDS fighting organizations elsewhere) 206-328-8979 to help them feed the very ill this holiday season- Thanks!)