

How I dreamed of going to the cupboard and finding a box of cookies or a carton of Ding Dongs. A bag of Doritos, Cheetos, Fritos—anything in the *-itos* family. A candy bar I didn't have to split five ways. A new chip had hit the market recently. Pringles, they were called. Potato chips packed in a tennis ball can. Genius! And super greasy. I wished Mom would get us some Pringles. She didn't.

Mom grew up on the reservation, and kids there didn't get snacks. A Sioux child living on the rez in South Dakota was raised on lunches of boiled potatoes; dinners of lard biscuits dunked in elk brine. In between, there were no snacks—there was no money for snacks. No cultural inclination. If my mom had wanted a snack, she'd have been told to go outside and find herself an acorn. This deprived childhood turned her into the mother I knew: a scrimping, saving, scratch-cooking, recycling, canning, no-snack-buying parent.

We got what she'd gotten: squat.

Mom's idea of a "snack" was saltines. "If you want a snack, make yourself some peanut butter crackers," she'd say.

Time to party, baby! Remember that commercial—the one with the good-looking teenagers, dancing and rocking out to some Bobby Sherman, passing around a sleeve of saltines? Me neither.

We didn't get any of the good stuff. No Bugles or Cheez Doodles. No Oreos or Chips Ahoy or Pop-Tarts. I dreamed, *fantasized* about chocolate Pop-Tarts; just seeing the dark brown package on the grocery store shelves made my mouth water. But we were a low-income family with seven kids. How could Mom justify buying a box of Pop-Tarts when there were only six in a box? One kid would be left out. And buying two boxes was out of the question. For one, we couldn't afford it, and two, twelve is still indivisible by seven. Here's the math: seven kids equaled no Pop-Tarts.

Once in a while, when things were flush, Mom would buy us a bag of potato chips. One bag of chips (store brand) for seven kids. When word spread that Mom had come home with the semi-annual bag of chips, things got crazy. My brothers and sisters and I raced to the kitchen, and the more aggressive of us jumped on the single bag and fought over who got to hold it until somebody ended up in tears—yet another reason Mom avoided buying chips in the first place. "You just fight over them anyway!" she said. *Well, of course we fight over them, Mom, we're starving for some saturated fats! Our skin is drying out!* We were all hovering around the twentieth percentile for weight.

Mom fed us, sure; not enough to plump us up, though, because she had a frugal trick up her sleeve. She bought foods that were technically edible, but that none of us would put into our mouths. That way, we'd never run out of food—a very strange and twisted Catch-22.

Example: puffed wheat cereal.

I guess that technically, puffed wheat was edible. But just barely. And I suppose this nasty, beige, food-like product was better than nothing, but again, just barely, because if you thought about it, puffed wheat *was* practically nothing. It had no flavor. No weight. It was like packing peanuts, except it lasted longer. We always had it in the cupboard. Because *nobody ate it*. Puffed wheat sat in our house for months before Mom would consider throwing it out.

I tried to eat it, I really did. One morning, I woke up hungry and hoping that a miracle had taken place in the night, and I'd find a box of Lucky Charms or Trix or

Cocoa Puffs in the cupboard, but of course, I went to the kitchen and found the exact opposite: our heritage box of puffed wheat. The same box I'd seen up in the cupboard every day since the beginning of the school year. It was now May. This box of puffed wheat was like a cobweb. Everyone saw it, everyone wanted it gone, but nobody did anything about it.

I had no choice on this morning but to eat the puffed wheat. Almost no choice; it was puffed wheat or oatmeal. I hated both, but at least with the puffed wheat I didn't have to boil water. I hoisted myself onto the kitchen counter, and from a kneeling position, whacked the box of cereal on the high shelf until it wobbled and fell onto the counter. I dropped to the floor, and held the box at arm's length, gazing dejectedly at the low-budget picture of dried wheat turds on the front ("enlarged to show texture"—*why bother?*). I felt sorry for the poor sap whose job it was to make puffed wheat look appetizing. That was basically impossible.

I opened the box, and when I did, a strange thing happened. In nature, it might have been a beautiful thing, a firsthand, up-close illustration of the miracle of life; educational and full of wonder. In a cereal box, not so much.

A moth flew out.

I moved my face out of the way before it had the chance to fly into my gaping mouth, then closed the flaps and tossed the box back in the general vicinity of the other semi-edible food items: the ancient box of baking powder and the orphan packets of plain-wrapper gelatin. Somebody else could deal with that crap.

Heaven was spending the night with my best friend Vicki Derfler from two houses down. Vicki was an only child (no competition for snacks at her house), and walking into her mom's pantry was like walking into a convenience store: candy, cookies, pudding cups, Twinkies. My beloved Ho-Hos and Ding Dongs. Hawaiian Punch. Every snack chip and cracker imaginable. Beef jerky. Beef jerky! You may be wondering, *Was Vicki's dad a surgeon? A lawyer?* No! He was a mechanic! But the Derflers had beef jerky! Our frugal Native American mother never bought beef jerky. A shame, too: salted, dried beef—it was the food of her people!

In Vicki's freezer, ice cream was always in supply—sometimes two flavors—fresh and delicious. Mom bought us ice cream a few times, and the result was predictable: within hours of its purchase, it was ninety-five percent gone. Pounced upon. My siblings and I couldn't leisurely wait a day or two to enjoy our favorite dessert. The ice cream entered our house and we ate it when we had the chance. At the end of the evening and the ice cream dogfight, the container of leftovers, what now amounted to melted mucus, was returned to the freezer, and the crud left clinging to the sides remained for the next year or two as a goopy, discolored, coagulated goo, covered in ice crystals and freezer burn. And no matter how old, if there was anything resembling a carton of ice cream left in the freezer, we didn't dare ask Mother to buy more.

Months later, I'd be standing in the kitchen with the freezer door open, looking at the same furry carton of ice cream I remembered from before. "Mom, can we throw this ice cream out already?"

"Oh, let's keep it. There's still some left," Mom would say distractedly, sincerely, as she stood at the kitchen sink and scrubbed the dinner pans with an S.O.S pad and her bare hands.

When the cardboard packaging finally started to disintegrate, and the colors on

the box began to fade with time, Mom might have thrown it out. Might have.

And the saddest thing in my childhood? It wasn't my parents' divorce, or having to change schools because of the split. It wasn't the experience of me and my siblings huddled together in the upstairs bedroom, praying—shoulders touching, heads bowed—for Mom and Dad's terrible marathon yelling and arguing to stop downstairs. The saddest thing in my childhood was powdered milk.

I'll tell you about this disgusting moo juice. It's poverty in a box: dehydrated milk flakes that when added to water make a weak, thin milk-like product. Way worse than soy milk or almond milk, any day of the week. I'm not sure this beverage is even around anymore. The state of California has probably banned it, like it has foie gras and plastic grocery bags.

If "Nothin' says lovin' like somethin' from the oven," then powdered milk says, "I kind of wish we'd have stopped at two kids."