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Get Thee to a Bakery

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” my wife says.

It’s a sunny Saturday morning, early September. I’m climbing a ladder leaned up against the house. It’s that time of year. The air has begun to change; it’s both crisp and faintly rotten-smelling. Where we live we are rich in cottonwoods, proving that riches can also be a curse. Trees with big leaves, cottonwoods start unleaving early in the fall. Our cottonwoods are mature, tall beasts. The eaves and gutters on the house are already full. Up on the ladder, I’m on clog patrol.

“Really,” she says.

I tell her I’m being careful.

Some year ago, Lowell, one of her pals from work, fell off a ladder and broke his back. Then Bill the neighbor down the street fell off a ladder and hurt his shoulder. My brother said once, right in front of my wife, he thought a person ought to be required to get a license to climb a ladder, much like they need a license to drive a car or carry a gun. Ladders, he said, are that dangerous. He was kidding, but only just a little. Around that time our father, standing a rung higher than he thought he was, stepped prematurely off a ladder into low mid-air and collided with the cement floor in the garage. For weeks he was black and blue and walked with a limp.

My wife points at my feet. “In flipflops, no less.” She shakes her head and stalks back in the house

“When I’m done here,” I say after her, “I’m going to reward myself with a piece of pumpkin pie.”

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One of America’s greatest gifts to itself, pumpkin pie can be traced to the Plymouth Plantation, where the original locals turned the pilgrims on to pumpkins. *What’s Cooking in America* traces pumpkin pie lineage to Plymouth, describing a primitive confection of

stewed pumpkin and a hollowed out pumpkin shell filled with honey, milk, and spices, cooked in ashes.

Food historians point to how quickly pumpkins and pumpkin cooking proliferated back in Europe. As early as 1651 recipes for pumpkin pie were already being published. I give you Francois Pierre la Varenne, for example, and his *Le Vrai Cuisinier Francois*, with a recipe for Tourte of pumpkin. “Boile it with good milk, pass it through a straining pan very thick, and mix it with sugar, butter, a little salt and if you will, a few stamped almonds; let all be very thin. Put it in your sheet of paste; bake it. After it is baked, besprinkle it with sugar and serve.” I would eat that.

The Colonial Williamsburg Journal reports that the first American cookbook was published in 1796 and includes two recipes for a pumpkin pudding, one remarkably similar to the pie recipe used today: “cooked with cream, eggs, sugar, mace, nutmeg, and ginger, and baked three quarters of an hour.” This recipe, the Journal notes, anticipates “the one on the label of the Libby pumpkin can.”

Early in our marriage my wife the purist stated her intentions: she would make pumpkin pie from an actual pumpkin. While I know I should have been seduced by her desire to do so, I was not. I am a can man. My mother got her pumpkin from a can. For me, until recently, her pie was the gold standard.

“I know about pumpkin,” my wife said. “In Italy we have pumpkin ravioli. Pumpkin is not just an American thing.”

What can I say? I stand by the can.

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This time of year if you know the poem, you want to quote it. “Margaret, are you grieving over Goldengrove unleaving.” I would say this line to my wife today--she knows and loves the poem--if it weren't for the ladder and the part about grieving.

Of course she's right about one thing. (Correction: she's right about *many* things.) Climbing a ladder in flipflops adds idiotic to reckless. I tell myself I'm careful. When I climb down from a ladder, I try to clear my mind of everything but this: Step. Step. Step. A slow, deliberate descent. This morning, half respecting her wishes, I climb down and

walk around the house to the garage, thinking about autumn and wanwood leafmeal and about pumpkin pie. I take a seat by the back door and tie on a pair of running shoes I've disgraced by wearing them when I mow the lawn.

When she comes out to check on me later, I'm up on the ladder by the front door, dragging damp leaves into a pile along a length of gutter, leaning as far as I can safely lean to reach a clot of leaves. I straighten up, hold out a foot. "See?"

"Better."

I ask her what the word for nutmeg is in Italian.

"Don't lean so far," she says. "That's how you fall."

One of the ways, I think.

"It's like you have a fall wish," she says.

A fall wish. Maybe so. Whenever I'm up there, I think about stretching out the lean a little too far, the ladder sliding away and out from under me, leaving me dangling by one arm from the gutters or, worse, falling to the ground like an over-ripe fruit. In the plunge, would the ferns and hastas break my fall? I imagine myself landing safely, a soft bounce on a cushion of green leaves and fragrant mulch and dry cottonwood leaves.

"Nutmeg in Italian," she says over her shoulder, "is *noce moscata*."

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This time of year Costco cranks up the pumpkin pie assembly line. From September to Thanksgiving, you can get an ample pie, a full 12 inches in diameter, with a deep rich filling and an adequate crust. It's the only time of year we buy a pie.

In bouts of parsimonious trimming every other day or so, often at night an hour or so before bed, we shamelessly indulge in narrow slivers and slices of pie. She leaves the crust; I eat everything. A pie lasts ten days to two weeks. Then we go back for another. It's seasonal. We tell ourselves we would be crazy not to enjoy one, or many, much like when we are in San Marino in November, the month of the dead, we eat *piada dei morti*, a round honey-glazed "bread of the dead" made with flour, grape must, walnuts, almonds, dried fruits. A *piada dei morti* lasts about as long as a pumpkin pie. We can't eat just one.

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For me, after pumpkin, what makes pumpkin pie a pumpkin pie is nutmeg. *Noce moscata*. Noce, nut. Got that. What's moscata?

Nutmeg is a spice with a long history, whose place of origin is the Banda Islands (aka Spice Islands) in Indonesia. There are early references to the Romans using nutmeg as incense, to the Byzantine monk St. Theodore the Studite in the 8th century encouraging monks to sprinkle it on pease pudding (think bean soup), to people in Elizabethan times using it as a defense against the plague. In the 19th century nutmeg was believed to induce abortion and psychosis. Something as powerful as nutmeg also acquires minor curative capabilities: relief from pain, help for insomnia, a digestive aid. It's good for brain health, good for skin and for circulation, a remedy for bad breath. And, briefly noted: from earliest recorded history to the present, nutmeg is valued as aphrodisiac. The UCLA Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library notes references to nutmeg in the Kama Sutra. In a 2009 Urban Dictionary entry we learn, thanks to nutmeg, no doubt, that "pumpkin pie is the best aphrodisiac" (this according to an field scientist whose screen name is MyDickCostTheLateNightFee.)

Nutmeg, I learn, came to Italy through Venice, from the trade routes into the Oman city of Muscat. Hence, moscata.

The Italians put nutmeg in ravioli, in tortelli; in my wife's region it's in passatelli, which is a breadcrumb, egg, parmigiano mix extruded into delicate fragrant worms you eat in broth or lightly sauced. I recently scanned recipes for ragu Bolognese in *La Cucina Italiana*. In almost all entries, nutmeg is an ingredient. In Italian cuisine, writes Cristina Gambarini, and most especially throughout Emilia Romagna, "la noce moscata trovò la sua terra d'elezione." Roughly translated: Nutmeg found its home.

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I might fall. I won't fall.

I just might fall.

“We are all one little slip,” our neighbor says one day, “a thoughtless moment, a stupid move, a lapse in attention, from real trouble.” It’s not Bill the neighbor who fell off the ladder. This is another neighbor, whose husband has reached falling age. His falls are of the perfunctory variety, ordinary moments of imbalance and crash in the kitchen or bathroom. Then again, no fall is ordinary. A fall fractures our illusion of continuation, also an ordinary thing. I can still do this. I still can climb the ladder. But maybe I shouldn’t.

The cottonwoods, then the maples, then the apple trees will fill the gutters with leaves through December.

I probably shouldn’t.

Today, putting away the ladder and thinking about pie, when I consider falling I picture the pre-Raphaelite Ophelia. That’s sort of how I would like to go: down into a bed of ferns and hastas, into wanwood leafmeal, or better, down into a large pumpkin pie, with the fragrance of nutmeg rising around me, lifting me up toward heaven.