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Jell-O

Molly Galentine

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Seven blocks away from my apartment in New York is a small park, which is really just a triangle of space with a large statue of a sitting man. I like to sit next to him. His name is Peter Cooper. He has a long beard with glasses, which make him look both serious and kind. I think he was a good man because he built a locomotive and a school, was against slavery, and had a fondness for the telegraph. He was also the first to patent instant gelatin, where on the boxes he wrote, “Purity and Honesty.”

One day I found another girl sitting alone in front of Cooper Union, the university he established in 1859, which is located next to the park with the statue. I asked her if she was a student. “Yes.”

“Do they serve Jell-O in the school cafeteria?”
“You mean processed animal bones?” she said. “No.”
“Do New Yorkers hate Jell-O?”
“I’m from Oklahoma City. We hate it there too.”

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Instructions for molded gelatin, as eaten by Richard II, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Maria de Medici:

Scald two calves’ feet.
Take off hair.
Slit them in two, and extract the fat from between the claws.
Boil them, remove scum, and boil again (6-7 hours) before straining.
Let the product cool.
Skim fat.
Boil again, adding shells and whites of 5 eggs (to pick up impurities).
Skim again and strain through a jelly bag (must be made in advance).
Add flavoring, sugar and spices.
Pour into mold and pack with ice.

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At the turn of the century, my home state of Iowa was declared the largest consumer of Jell-O in the United States. It upset Utah. They retaliated. During the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, Utah made green Jell-O a mascot, calling it their state snack. They sold collectable pins of molds that opened up like lockets. Antique dealers now discuss the value of this item as climbing, due to its iconic nature.

My favorite kind of Jell-O is cherry, which is also the nation's top choice in flavor. I think it looks stately.

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Last week I visited Peter Cooper at the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. He is buried among men like Samuel Morse and Leonard Bernstein, and it took me a long time to walk along the plots, in order to pay respects to each notable individual. Joaquin Miller, the writer who created the poem for Peter's memorial stone left laurel leaves on the graves of similar men of fame, which is charming. But, I couldn't find any laurels in the city. I hear Joaquin was disliked in any case. An Indian shot him through the jaw with an arrow, and his wife filed for divorce, leaving Joaquin for a group of circus men.

I took pictures instead, taking digital frames in all kinds of angles. My grandmother always went on long walks in cemeteries, taking photos of gravestones, putting these images into binders.
When I was in grade school, she made an alphabet book for me where each letter began with a name from my family tree. It made me feel like a bead on a necklace. She told me that she could trace me back to the Mayflower, and that one of my ancestors was Mary Queen of Scotts.

Peter is Scottish too. We could be related.

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In the 1900's, Jell-O became popular because of its travelling salesmen system. But these men who hung up posters and went door to door were often in danger. Farmers shot at them, and in one case, didn't miss.

Today, we can study the effects and pathways of bullets using Ballistic gelatin, because according to specialists, it has the same consistency as human flesh.

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My grandmother bought a concealed weapons permit along with a super single six cowboy style 22 in the fall of '68, so that she could lean out the grain truck to shoot at corncobs while her husband worked the male rows. She would load the first round in the kitchen every morning, while making sure her son ate his cereal.

One day, she accidentally shot the dishwasher and covered the hole with a refrigerator magnet.

I used to play with these magnets, rearranging them into neat rows or plotting them out by colors while I waited for the Jell-O to sit. She was the only person who made it for me, as my parents
said it took up too much room in their fridge. My grandmother only knew how to cook three dishes: stew, coleslaw, and salmon patties. So, she always had space. My favorite magnet had a picture of a pecan that said, “We’re Nuts,” which my grandmother picked up in Georgia years ago when her husband took her on a trip. Sometimes he would open the door and poke at the film for me when I got too restless, but I was usually patient.

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I’m earthly and serious. My astrological map also says I’m a goat, because my parents had to schedule my birth around spring and fall. My grandfather insisted there was too much farming to be done.

My grandfather was often unaware of other people’s feelings.

Once, at a party, a waiter accidentally spilled a tray of Jell-O down my grandmother’s back, and my grandfather laughed. But this detail isn’t significant to my story, even though it upset my grandmother.

What’s more important is how the more I grew, the more he held my hand like I was a child. And how he would tell me that, during WWII, he spotted a German Red Cross woman running through the woods and had let her go.

This, I won’t forget.

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Spoken by Peter Cooper during a party in his honor, several years before his death:

Gallentine
I have endeavored to remember that the object of life is to do good.

Often, I think of his upright goal and imagine that, he too, must have been an excellent grandfather.

***

I used to fix my grandfather his drinks when he visited my parent's house. He liked 4 ice cubes in his scotch, and I'd place the same amount into my own glass, filling it with gingerale. After which, my grandfather would ask me to play piano, sing, or perform taps on my bugle. He wanted me to do one of these things at his funeral, but I laughed and said I'd be too sad, which is true.

In the hospital, my grandfather refused Jell-O. The liquids my father tried spooning into his mouth, I had to wipe off his beard with a paper towel. For days, he never opened his eyes, but merely reached for my hand. His skin was soft and had freckles, which were covered up by make-up during his visitation at the funeral home. Everyone said he looked nice, which was a kind thing to say, but not true.

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While inside Green-Wood Cemetery, I stood on Peter Cooper's gravestone and read Joaquin's poem, neatly inscribed into the rock in bold letters. I imagined the bones underneath the rock, still orderly and dignified, then pictured all the graves, peaceful people stacked like logs in a cabin. It made me feel relieved.

'Give honor and love for evermore
Once I left Green-Wood, rounding the gate towards the south, I heard a firecracker that was actually a gunshot. I say this, because the event doesn't seem real. Within the first couple of months of living in the city, I'd watched a man on a bike get hit by a taxi driver, flipping high into the air like an acrobat. But he magically stood up, and was okay. I had also witnessed a person get his wallet stolen. But the victim was a fast runner, and the chase ended with loud applause from those sitting outside a restaurant. I had thought that, in ways, people living in New York City were untouchable.

When I saw the gun, my intuition was to walk back to the cemetery, as casually as I had been walking towards the shooting, since I was worried I would be noticed if I broke out of my regular pace. I took a few steps. I'm not sure what this actually looked like: maybe a slow motion cartoon tiptoe. Or maybe my meander gave me a laid-back air, of one who had seen guns many times before. This was not a falsity. For years, I had shot round after round into paper targets back in the Midwest, under a bridge by some railroad tracks in a neighboring town, collecting the brass so that my father could melt the shells and mold them again. Before farming, he had gone to a gunsmithing school, which, he had told me once, were two of the best years of his life. One of my earliest memories was of him shooting a rabbit that was in my
mother’s garden. My father never had to aim twice. He said I had
good form too. I took my time to breathe deeply before becom-
ing as still and dead as ice, and I didn’t get too frustrated. I had
to control my body into accepting the heavy weight of the gun,
like a friendly expenditure, solid and unmoving. He set my rifle
out on display on a table at my high school graduation reception.
The only time I had shot at anything living was a pheasant, and I
missed, which I think made my father secretly happy.

I turned around. 15 feet in front of me a man was lying on the
ground. According to a bystander, he had been waiving a .357 in
the face of a plainclothes policeman. I watched the policeman’s
partner who was wearing green and didn’t look quite forty. She
covered her face with her hand, and walked slowly away from
the scene, while a girl not yet thirteen took a picture of his body
from the sidewalk, spilled and goofy. And then what? Nothing
much happened. Police cars came, they blocked off traffic, and I
became very hungry, spending the rest of the afternoon nibbling
carnitas at a tiny restaurant where they played television soaps in
a language I didn’t understand.

The next day, the New York Post described the incident. The po-
llicewoman had put a hole through his shoulder, and the angle hit
his chest, leaving a mortal wound. His name was Romero.

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I’m beginning to learn nothing goes as expected.

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In 1897, Pearle B. Wait took Peter Cooper’s instant gelatin and
invented flavored recipes. Two years later, he sold the recipes to
his neighbor Orator Francis Woodward for $450, who made target trap balls, a precursor to clay pigeons, and a form of coffee substitute nobody liked, but drank anyway.

Later, Orator's son Ernest bought Amelia Earhart’s “Friendship” and built a private airport behind his first mansion. 60,000 people came to the opening to watch stuntmen contests that involved landing, eating a bowl of Jell-O, and then taking off, again, into the sky.

Peter Cooper would have been jealous. He built a flying machine that blew up in his face.

Pearle and his wife, May, filed for bankruptcy.

You can see photographs of all these historical figures at the Jell-O Museum in Le Roy, NY. The townspeople are very proud.

They will tell you that gelatin is even used in preparing silver halide emulsions, which is necessary in the production of photograph paper - along with numerous other facts you'll immediately forget.

***

In my apartment, I used blue sticky tac to hang a small photograph of my grandfather in his army uniform above the kitchen sink. He's located next to a postcard of Pollock's blotted Number Seven. Its painted design used to remind me of messy whiskers, but now makes me think of Romano and where he might be buried.

My grandfather's burial was in the winter. It was cold and snowing, so everything was sped up. In fact, I don't remember much,
except that the man who was chosen to perform taps played a recording instead, and my father cried. Afterwards, we went to the church, where there were egg salad sandwiches and mush of other things, sitting out on plates. It didn’t taste like anything at all.

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Jell-O is currently sold in flavors:
Apricot, Berry Blue, Black Cherry, Cherry, Cranberry, Cranberry-Raspberry, Grape, Green Apple, Green Tea, Kiwi, Lemon, Lime, Melon, Mint, Orange, Peach, Pineapple, Raspberry, Strawberry, Strawberry-Banana, Strawberry-Kiwi, Watermelon, Wild Cherry, Wild Strawberry

Recipes from The New Joys of Jell-O, published in 1975 include:
Alaska Surprise, Cool Cubes, Creamy Blue Cheese Salad, Dream Parfait, Fruit Delight, Frosty Mandarin Dessert, Jellied Ginger-Upper, Kicky Cooler, Pink Lady Pie, Pop Art Parfaits, Ring-Around-the-Fruit Mold, Winter Fruit Mold, Florida Seacoast Salad, Keep Fit Luncheon Platter, Sequin Salad

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When I got back to New York, I cleared out the contents of my refrigerator, shoving items into two big garbage bags, which I left in the corner of my room. I then walked to the nearest bodega, gathering celery, cream cheese, walnuts, grapes, and Bartlett pears in heavy syrup for my planned feast.

My friend came over to help me; she thought it sounded like fun and giggled at the voyeurism. I thought she made it seem normal.

It took all day for the Jell-O to set up, and we split a bottle of champagne between the two of us to pass the hours, but we made
an Easy Fruit Tart in a pre-baked piecrust with raspberry Jell-O glaze, a Jellied Waldorf Salad, spiked with a little lemon juice, a layered Under the Sea Salad, a Melon Bubble with Sprite, and last but not least, six cherry Jell-O cupcakes, with whipped cream.

We called friends and left invitations for a “tasting” on their voicemail inboxes, while listening to Willie Nelson sing “The Rainbow Connection.”

We thought it would be a party, but were disappointed when nobody came.

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When Peter Cooper died in 1883 at age 92, 3500 Cooper Union students marched alongside his body, casting flowers upon the wood of his coffin as he was carried towards Green-Wood Cemetery. Businesses beyond the East River were closed and draped in black. The flags on all public buildings, and on the ships in the harbor, were hung at half-mast, and the bells of every church were tolled. Such shared mourning had not been displayed since the funeral procession of George Washington in 1799.

And the church asked, “What comes next?”

And the students asked, “What comes next?”

And the factory workers asked, “What comes next?”

And the city asked, “What comes next?”

And the nation asked, “What comes next?”

***
It got late. My friend had to work the next morning and waved goodbye, taking a Tupperware of gelatin to share with her boyfriend.

I was sad to see her go.

I looked at the picture of my grandfather, and wondered if he was the reason I had a table full of Jell-O, noticing the similarities of our mouths, full and quiet. He looked like a person I might meet on the street, young and handsome with his tie tucked into his shirt. Never overwhelmed.

There was a pile of dishes in the sink, the garbage in the corner had begun to smell, and I could hear the toilet dripping in the silence.