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Wild Honey, Locust Beans

If you live, as I do, in a world where an overabundance of food is more a plague than hunger, you might be given to scrutinizing ingredient lists, and so have seen the words “carob bean gum” before tearing the plastic wrapper from, say, an ice cream sandwich, or the foil from a tub of cream cheese. Small quantities of carob bean gum do the trick, and so this “natural stabilizer” appears at the ingredient list’s end, the part that even serious health food nuts expect to find uninterpretable (for me, it’s a list of plants I can’t quite place, and words I remember from high school chemistry). “Carob bean gum” sounds harmless, too, natural, salubrious, even—beans healthier than meat, carobs than sweets—and, indeed, harmless the carob bean is.

Such harmlessness is all most of us want to ascertain when we venture into the ingredient list’s largely chemical tail. I have never made the effort to learn what lecithin is, though I often see the word—ditto for guar gum, potassium sorbate, xanthan and xylitol. There is a limit to how much thought we can devote to the origin of our foods, to their ingredients’ history.

I do happen to know, though, about the carob bean, about the little seed and its sweet-fleshed case. Alternately called *locust bean* and *St. John’s Bread*, the carob is a hand-length, inch-wide, woody pod that hangs from the branches of the carob tree. In late August, pale-green carobs ripen to a dark, chocolate shade, ready to pluck from the trees and consume. Carobs are grown in California, but the species’ origins lie in the Middle East. Today, the largest producer is Spain, followed by Italy, Portugal, Morocco and Greece. Evergreen, drought resistant, and squat (botanists call it a shrub), only slightly taller than the olive tree, smooth of bark, wide and deep-green of leaf, the carob has held a key place in Mediterranean ecosystems since biblical times.

Its ecological importance notwithstanding, if my family had stayed in carob-tree-less New York, I would never have learned anything about the carob beyond its failure to be like chocolate. But when I was ten, we moved to an island in the Mediterranean where carobs abound, and I became invested in the carob quite literally. My father had inherited acres of land, all of which was farmable if irrigated but otherwise, it was a wilderness of thorns, scraggly pines, terebinth, and carob trees. Among this independently thriving vegetation, the carob alone produces something to sell, and for pocket money, each August I shook the pods from my father’s trees, piled them up in burlap sacks in our front yard, and sold them to a man who passed by our house with his little dump truck en route to the market in town. It was my first summer job, and the fulfillment of a dream—as a New York kindergartener, I had played not house but farmer, and I believed that this was a job that I could have, and I kept believing it as I read *Little House in the Big Woods,* kept reading books about self-sufficient families on the American frontier. I ended up a teacher, but still felt driven to the fields.

I wanted to work with my hands. I wanted to shake carobs off that tree. I loved climbing it, loved being alone inside its foliage. And I loved the way the carob tree depended so little on rain—I was attracted to the tree’s indifference to weather, to its freedom from need. I longed to need nothing but my own body, nothing but my muscles and the earth. Over the years in which typing and teaching have become all I know of work, memory has lent to the physicality of carob picking a certain Wordsworthian romance. I have learned all I can about the carob, for the tree has become, to me, a kind of symbol, a promise of something that I want.

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In 1988, I was a Greek-American ten-year-old, aware of Greekness as an abstract marker of my identity like my age, my gender, and a fondness for pizza, purple, and playing outside. My brother, five, knew fewer Greek words than I did, and as a result I could employ Greek to tell my mother things I didn’t want him to know. In 1988, my parents were enjoying their still-healthy middle age when my father convinced my mother (a Brooklyn-born Greek-American with Spartan roots) that we should all move to Cyprus, where he grew up, so that the children would *know who they are.* The move away from suburban Queens, while hard for us all, turned out to be hardest for my father, because as “native” a Greek-Cypriot as he may once have been, he left his birthplace at nineteen, and didn’t start learning to be a Cypriot adult until he returned, a forty-nine-year-old history teacher who’d quit his job for a dream.

Life was hard because we kids spent the first year reeling from culture shock, our tears putting a strain on our parents’ own efforts to adjust. We got used to our new lives, Dino and I—we learned standard Greek in school and Cypriot on the playground. We made friends, gained our new teachers’ favor, joined clubs, aligned ourselves with identity-supplying groups: Apollon soccer fans (Dino), and youth who rallied around our island’s national wounds (me). Asgata’s grassless soccer pitch, along with the empty hills where I ran, replaced, for us, the jungle gyms of Queens. We learned that while in America we had to wait patiently in line, in Cyprus we’d need to shove our way to a crowd’s front if we wanted lunch. We became, in sum, little Cypriots.

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In August when the carobs turn brown, they may be ripe, but unprocessed, the carob is no treat. Nothing I know is similar to the ripe carob’s texture or taste. Woody fibers go down scratchy and dry. The carob’s syrup, tastier once extracted and poured over unsalted whey cheese, is aptly called *carob honey (haroupomelo*) because, like honey, it is sweet but has an added, incomparable twist.

In both Cyprus and America, I run, a little recklessly, with neither cell phone nor ID, without money or keys. Such untethered movement exhilarates me. Once, though, running from Asgata to Kalavasos, too early in the day, before the sun had sunk behind the hills, I reached a nearby village and, parched, could find no public water fountain. With no money to buy water, I had to request a drink from a woman I could see through the back door of a tavern standing at a stove stirring Greek coffee in an *ibrik*. This was the humiliation of need—abnegation’s failure, reliance on others, the inability to reimburse. She gave me water, and in return, I gave nothing but thanks. Before I reached home I was thirsty again, and I plucked a carob from its tree, dusted it off on my shirt, bit in, and tasted the disappointment that the carob’s sweet woodiness brings.

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Great hunger is, really, the only state in which humans eat carobs raw. Muhammed’s armies ate them when supplies ran low. A second-century rabbi named Shimeon bar Yohai survived on carobs for the dozen years he spent hiding from the Romans, against whom he had led a failed rebellion. Some Arab Muslims drink a sort of carob juice during the month of the Ramadan fast. Many Jews commemorate Tu B’Shevat by eating carobs—something to do with the patience needed to wait the long years that a planter must wait before a carob seedling starts bearing fruit. And St. John the Baptist, in his famed wilderness, lived on the fruit of the locust tree*.* Yes, the word in the Greek gospels is *akrides* (ἀκρίδες)*,* which can be read as *locust* the insect, but I side with scholars who read the word to mean *tips of the carob tree,* i.e. *carobs.* St. John ate not honey and bugs, but wild honey and locust beans.

When Nazi forces took control of Athens, they confiscated the Greeks’ supply of food. They seized fishing boats and livestock. In 1942, *Time* magazine called Greece the *hungriest country in the world.* A loaf of bread cost fifteen dollars, and those who survived did so by eating what the Nazis didn’t recognize as food: the conquerors’ potato peels, rat meat, shoe leather, carob pods. One survivor writes that during the Occupation, “Lemon rind was our lobster and carobs our caviar!” When I have mentioned my carob-picking to Greeks old enough to remember World War II, they have remember: *Carobs, oh yes, that’s what we ate in the Occupation.* Or they remember the stories – *what our fathers ate in order to stay alive through the War.*

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After the war, during my father’s childhood, carobs made up a significant part of the Cypriot GDP—after copper pyrites, carobs were the British colony’s largest export. They brought in more income than all other agricultural products, such as wine and citrus fruits, combined. Back then, Carobs weren't just an additive or health food product, but an important animal feed, a significant supplement to hay. But as the twentieth-century science progressed, the world’s demand for carobs fell. New, carob-free foods were invented to better facilitate milk supply in cows, sheep, and goats. The new use for carob as a kind of emulsifier required such small quantities of carob, it was not enough to keep prices high.

By the 1980s, once-agrarian Cyprus was a tourist economy, and the carob mill had become a carob museum, and the carob warehouses, had been turned into restaurants. Now, before dining, tourists gaze at the rusting W & T Avery scales imported from Birmingham, and at the great cylindrical separators, conveyor belts, crushers, and sieves.

The waiters, managers, and restaurateurs were grateful to have work, and were unafflicted by nostalgia for a time when those conveyor belts moved. My father, though, remembered fondly a time of bull-drawn ploughs, irrigation through long ditches from stream to field. Children dug them with shovels. His earliest photos are middle-school headshots, so I use images from old movies to imagine him in 1940s shorts and leather shoes, a long-sleeved undershirt and sweater knitted by my grandmother. He described to me the stone cisterns built in streams so that when winter rains swelled them, water could be saved for irrigation when the streams dried up.

Carob picking was work I did with my father, labor being my favorite way to spend time with a parent. We were no farmers. Both of us made a living teaching English in the afternoons, as foreign languages are big business in a tourism-based economy. The carob harvest supplemented our teachers’ salaries modestly—one year’s labor buying the family’s groceries for a week. In a photo of me up among a carob’s branches, I’m wearing a flimsy purple tank top that had caught a branch and torn at the shoulder. I am posing with a four-foot cane of bamboo clutched in both my hands, torso stretched along the trunk. I remember what it felt like to push my weight against the wood, reaching up, my feet seeking higher holds; I remember knowing that as I stretched my bamboo cane into the branches trying to knock the carobs from the tree, I could at any moment fall onto the clods of dried up mud below, or onto a stone. It was the only time I’d tried to feed my body by putting my body at risk.

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During Great Lent, Orthodox Christians read the lives of saints and martyrs, men and women aflame with yearning for truth, for Christ. The highest honor is the “crown” of martyrdom, choosing Christ over life. As a foretaste of this crown, Orthodox Christian Lent has strict rules of fasting—not total abstinence from food, but close to it, with meat and dairy forbidden throughout (like contemporary veganism), and oil permitted on weekends only (weekdays, we mostly eat boiled beans with only lemon and salt). An exercise, our theologians call it, a lesson in how much a body can do without—a way to learn from hunger. My mother had me fast from meat as a child, and when I was a teenager I volunteered to give up dairy, too. I never stopped missing milk, never understood how ascetics and anchorites shed the human taste for comfort, the drive to self-protect, to self-preserve. How, I wanted to know, did ascetics free themselves from need? What made a martyr yearn to die?Who could promise to leave a world as sweet as ours?

I saw a martyr leave the world. I was seventeen, and picking carobs, and when I went inside for a break, I saw a man be killed on television. He was Tassos Isaac, and he was protesting the military occupation of northern Cyprus by riding his motorcycle into the forbidden zone, past the Green Line. It was a risk the Cypriot President had warned was too great, but the thousand bikers didn’t listen, they rode across Europe and into Europe’s last divided city. Isaac was stopped by the ultra-nationalist group the Grey Wolves. I had gone inside for a glass of water and the biker protest ride was on TV, and I stayed and watched, until I was watching the body of a man be pounded with wood clubs and stones, his skull crushed, his bones all broken, in a cloud of August dust among the sage brush, low thorns, dry grass, fence wire. Since that day I think about carob together with risk, with freedom—from occupying troops, and freedom from the need to stay alive.

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Unaware of my metaphysical associations with the tree, or of my longing after courage and self-reliance and working with my hands, our fellow villagers thought it odd that my dad and I, the returned Americans, bothered with so outdated an enterprise as carob-picking. Aside from my old uncle Yorko, and one or two very poor families, my father and I were the only ones who picked. Theio Yorko’s fields lay a few hundred yards from our house, and when I woke up around dawn, his long cane would already be clacking against the branches. For seventy years he’d gathered carobs. We were competitors in a way. I envied the old man’s piling of carobs outside his house, sack by sack, day by day. I observed his progress daily, after lunch, when I drive to the city to teach my couple of hours of English.

Most land-owning Cypriots pick olives, not carobs, from the village land they’ve inherited, as olive oil is both useful and expensive. Olive trees are almost as drought-resilient as carobs are, and a few trees had survived on our land. A few days in the olive grove can yield the hundreds of dollars’ worth of olive oil consumed in a Greek household each year. But the work of olive-picking failed to satisfy: the gentle, attentive combing required by laden olive branches gave none of the release which the carob tree affords. I loved to lift a long bamboo stick into the air and thwack the branches knowing the crop would land on the ground, unharmed. I let my father pick olives alone.

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An Asgata woman, a distant relative, once told me that when her family went out to pick carobs, she cooked in the fields. As a boy, my father used to carry lunch to my grandfather and the hired men, but this woman saw no need. Her people carried with them the cured meats they kept in a barrel covered in salt. At noon, she would pick vegetables that grew next to the carobs grew: zucchini, tomatoes, green peppers, eggplant. Then, with dead, dry carob branches snapped into sticks they’d make a fire, fry it all up, as fresh as can be, then sleep in the carobs’ thick shade and later, rested, climb back up with their canes and get to work.

Back then, they had none of the plastic sheeting that, today, we spread over the prickly weeds below, so that the carobs fall down in a heap and can be slid into empty paint buckets, then poured into the burlap sacks we would load into our battered pickup truck to bring back. No, they didn’t have plastic, and when I insist to my father that surely they could have used old sheets, he looks at me, puzzled. In an economy of preciousness, where for every thread an hour picking cotton or feeding silkworms could be traced, clothes were handed down from generation to generation, and there was no such thing as a sheet too old for a bed, there was no such thing as trash. The carobs fell onto the ground and with their hands the laborers bent down and gathered handfuls from among the dusty thorns. Even the burlap sacks sometimes cost so much the poorer landowners had to lease them from wealthier men.

I like to imagine the entire village out picking carobs. During British rule throughout the first half of the twentieth century, no one was allowed to pick carobs until a specific date – August 20th my father thinks – to ensure that everyone was present in his own field, preventing early birds from harvesting other people’s crops.

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After Cornell, when I’d returned to Cyprus and commenced the same low-paying ESL job to which my once-a-principal father had descended, the other teachers laughed when they heard how I spent my mornings.

“Do you know what Joanna does in the morning before work?” one asked a similarly amused colleague. “She runs. And now that carobs are ripening, she climbs into trees and collects carobs.” In Greek, it all sounded silly. The odd American, trying to revive the old ways of Cyprus. Charming. “Did you read about it in a book? Will you write the first carob novel?”

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The Prodigal Son yearned, in his hunger, to take the food from under his herd’s snouts, and I learned only in adulthood that this food was a mess of carobs. Many translations give Luke's word, *keration* (κερατίων), as “pod,” which could mean any kind of peas or seeds. Gospel Greek is legible to me, so I return to the Luke’s original words as if reading it myself could unlock a secret the translators withheld:  καὶ ἐπεθύμει γεμίσαι τὴν κοιλίαν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν κερατίων ὧν ἤσθιον οἱ χοῖροι, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐδίδου αὐτῷ. *And he wanted to fill his belly with the carobs that the pigs were eating.* The words for belly, *kilía,* and pigs, *chíri,* haven't changed over the millennia, and I picture the youth in his mud, sporting a once-stylish, now- tattered robe and no shoes, holding his rumbling tummy, drooling as the chubby swine gobbled their sweet, sweet carob feed. He’d become the butt of the other swineherds’ jokes. I imagine him with his bindle of gold setting off for a new country. We had the same reason for leaving our parents’ houses: we wanted to leave behind the bodies from whom our own bodies come – for they are the bodies that remind us of our dependence, of the self-reliance that can never be.

When the prodigal “came unto himself,” gave up drooling after carobs and went home, he intended to become a servant at home. By folly he’d forfeited his birthright. He had taken his fortune into his hands, and lost it.

I suspect that my affinity for carobs belies the secret hope that I can still go it alone, that I could strike out on some frontier and turn my body’s labor into food, without help. I talk a lot about community, about helping others and accepting their help, but a part of me – proud – resists.

I know, even, this: that carob trees *do* depend on rain, and what is more, they depend on the absence of too much. Plentiful rains would kill them. And martyrs? They are free of the need to go on living, yes, yet they are in fact the antithesis of self reliance. Tassos needed the unity of Cyprus more than he needed life. St. John, all need, stepped into the desert, naked, looking for his God. Without humiliation, St. John took God’s handouts, and ate that wild honey, ate those locust beans.

My father moved to Cyprus so that his children would *know who they are.* I have a knowledge, now, that I wouldn’t have if we’d stayed. But it isn't what my father had in mind. I know that I’m a Greek, yes, a Greek-Cypriot in fact, but my fantasies of peasantry are waning, as are my prodigal hopes of independence. I’m a Greek-Cypriot but I'm not a farmer of the early 1900s. I’m an educated New Yorker, an American whose food is earned by sitting at a teacher’s desk. I can’t take care of my body’s needs with just my body. I won't ever be a martyr for an independent Cyprus—I won't even be much of an Orthodox Christian if I keep on resisting humility, resisting the humiliating truth that every breath I take is a gift.

After college, I decided to live in Cyprus forever. I wanted to give up the privilege of an American life. But I was no less privileged in Cyprus. And though it might be an excuse for what I still suspect is giving *in*—relinquishing something I thought I needed, letting my patriotism slide—I have come to suspect that my ideal of the carob’s independence has nothing more to it than the Prodigal’s belief he could make it on his own.

I am subject still to nostalgia’s sweet deceptions, to the ease with which I remember as perfect my father’s hardscrabble past. How powerful it is, this play of desire and memory—how persistent and how physical a draw—for when I return to Cyprus each summer, now, it is not the view of mountains, sea and sky that brings me tears of joy, but the scent of carob—sweet and rich and warm—mixed with wildflowers, thyme, and drying hay.