

## Health Nuts

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**T**ough men stop come lunch to gobble our spud salads: Mutinous Mustard and Mad Mayonnaise. Construction workers, plumbers, they stop for a dose of Lunacy Noodles with Vegetable Sauce, say, or Brainy Burgers with Doodle Sticks. Maybe they're in the mood for some Touched Tofu? Some Cracked Cookies or Moonstruck Minestrone? We've been at it three years, a family-run funhouse, everybody snappy. When our daughters get off the bus, they help us till closing. We're adored, the charmed cheese. Vitamins, snacks, we stock them in prettified rows and dish out the best chow south of the Georgia line. We have a jukebox to play Loony Tunes off your quarters. We're good for a dose of hilarity. We give people cud to chew—that's organic cud, friend—and shit to shoot. My how we Chattahoocheeans love to gossip, to storytell.

Take yesterday. Now this is typical: Jeanne, the skinny chickadee from Floor One comes in orders a order of Booby Balls—that's our term for falafel smothered in our special tahini concoction. Jeanne was initially hospitalized through the power of her momma, Bakeracted and branded the drooling fool. Girl was too much of a slut's what we gather, chafed her momma's refined sensibilities. That's what started it, only Jeanne was a model crazy. She made it down to Floor Zero quickity split, but like many of our patients, once they're given the all-clear, it's vacation time's all it is. Soon they're back for some new little crime of smallness. Poor Jeanne, she'd been away less than a month before she up and escaped her Tallahassee halfway house, got bonkers in a crackhouse. As we get it through the trickle-down, Jeanne started smoking boric acid when the crack run out. That's what made her

Kooky with a capital K. Whereas before, she'd only been, now forgive me for saying this, but Slutty with a capital S, or to put it another way, an insult to her momma. Now she was unalterably changed forever for the worst, like way down deep in the DNA jungle of her girl's private soul, daffy, as they say, no lie.

So Jeanne comes in yester's prelunch, her pleasantly plump homegirl in tow. Dee preps Jeanne's Booby Balls at which this intimate-made Abe is proffered. Dee just looks at it, him, the dangle of his eyes in Jeanne's been-there-done-that fingers quite lovely still despite having rid life's cruel tides. "It's wet," Dee says. "Why's it to be wet?"

"I peed on it," Jeanne giggles, and Jeanne's homegirl giggles.

Dee pulls back the Booby Ball plate, sets it on the counter behind her. That's when Jeanne starts wailing out like a heartsick hound over she wants her Booby Balls. Everybody is looking at her, soaking up the details for the telling of a good tale on it later to whoever is willing to listen.

There's another customer in line, an older dude with a nose I've not seen the like of. It's a screwball nose, a S-nose, call it a snose over that it first goes one way then the other, makes you to think of a snake when you look at him. He is waiting to get his own order. "What's the deal?" says he.

"She pissed on her money," says Dee. "I ain't taking it. She's got to give me some dry money. Would you take a five dollar bill had pee all over it?"

"I'll wash it!" Jeanne shrieks. Jeanne's homegirl flops out her tongue and Jeanne rubs old Abe back and forth over the girl's taste buds, as if that will remedy the situation here. With tears in her eyes, Jeanne tries handing the bill back to Dee, who says, "I don't take no wet bills, baby."

That's when Mr. Snose, our Good Samaritan, offers to pay for Jeanne. She's a good-looking gal, Jeanne, a chickadee in all the right places. That's part of it, the why of how she ended up back here where her momma first put her, Bakeracted and branded the drooling fool. Once free, all male

no-goods—there's an endless supply of those—wanted a piece of her to chew on. I can't say I blame them. Like I say, Jeanne has got it going on in the body department. But Jeanne, poor gal, she likely thought she had not a thing to lose in the world. She give it up to whoever wanted a bite, have at it. When your All means nothing to the One whose All means All to you, you become worse than worthless, odious unto yourself. I understand that mental frame.

Take back in the day, this of the time those goosers, my peers, took live girls damward to learn the smooching business. That would be about the tenth grade, the eleventh grade, and the twelfth grade. All those grades passed me by like opened windows flapping gloriously, but I could not hear them, could not see them. I missed out on the fun stuff guys do as they grow up to be men of this world. I was like how I imagine Jeanne was before she knew she wanted to get high, a nothing human being who suppressed the desperate wanting. What I wanted, only, was for Momma to be happy. For that, I hid things from myself. I appeared healthy and happy, and I might even have believed that I was. The difference between Jeanne and I was many a man saw her, admired her, wanted quite clearly to partake of the livid wet thing her skin concealed, and with some effort, did so. Jeanne, I can be jealous of her in my times of weak nostalgia. Me, I was invisible those years of no return, daddyless, without a girl's crush, unwanted by all. What I knew of the gleaming windows were sharp flashes that burned me in my sleep.

Yet who is the wiser today?

Hell, I'm in foods!

It is me, against the boys who defiled the temples of their prey, who shines most happily and with a general bearing of peace and ease. By my own opinion, I would say so. It is me to live the happier of lives now. It's not so strange. Jeanne's window got bricked over, slam-dunked in her face. The many boys of yore now-drugged-out or drunked up, the plumbers and the concrete pourers, their windows too got slam-dunked. You go hopping through open windows it's

bound to happen. In my sizeable emptiness refocused, I've had to face things, "get over it," as I've heard so many say of the daily life dramas. My small-peanness, as I now understand it, was akin to a boulder I stood in the way of as it rolled over me. How else could I unburden myself? I stood in its way, the guilt roped about the shame not the least sigh giver, that tandem high-roller of serious dung. One need not wonder much as to the color of mine eyes.

Now, I was born in the Florida panhandle in a place made famous by a sprawling institution. My momma nursed there, "cared" for the crazoes, fed them drugs, and strapped them down in their beds when they got out of hand. She told me stories of it when arriving home from work, a real complainer, my momma, and tough, strong. My daddy, she always told me, had been a criminally insane patient, and there was a good chance I would grow up to be her charge. "Rat can't run from rat," she said. "All rat does is hide, like you're doing right now. When his rat's blood finds you, I'll commit you." It scared me. "You're crazy!" she screamed if, say, all I did was opinionate. It didn't matter what the opinion was. All opinions coming from me were out of the picture, her picture. My punishment more often than not was a physical thing, like push-ups and sit-ups. My momma was big on calisthenics and all things healthy. "Run around the block ten times," she'd say, or, "Drop down and give me forty." Other times when my crime was more severe, if I, say, made a facial expression of self-assurance, she'd suddenly pretend like I was more trouble than I was worth, like she'd tried everything, had done all she could for the rat that I was, but the time had come to send the rat to the devil. I'd be left alone to do as I pleased, which you'd think I would have liked, but I didn't. I felt slimy, guilty, rejected, worthless. She wouldn't acknowledge me in any way till I started begging. That little boy of twelve, I see him, I feel him, he breaks. The last drop of self-love he took it upon himself to try and stow away in secret is thrown out—that is his gift to her,

laid sorrowfully at her slender feet—and she stares down at him contemptuously, her arms crossed, waiting for him to try and hug her leg so she can kick him away. No, she will not consider absorbing him back into her loving fold till he says the magic words, till he delivers everything, all. “Stop mumbling!” she says. “I can’t hear you.” And the little boy declares it loudly: “I am a rat, Momma!” The special words have been spoken. What follows, the seal on the deal, the act, the what it is that’s got to be done for life to go back to normal, then happens, but I don’t want to think about that now. What I want to do is focus on the good things.

Me, now. Jumping thirty years up to now, to my life as I live it today, you will see a happily married daddy of two towheaded girls of nine and eleven. They’re the prettiest things you ever saw, just precious beyond belief. And my wife, oh what a beauty! My wife and I, throughout our fifteen years together, have worked hard in the pursuit of our dream. We have cut corners, denied ourselves the artificial pleasures that give people so much satisfaction in life: travel, education, things and more things: boats and guns and tools from Sears and rings. In fact, I’ve never worn a wedding ring, though I did buy one for Dee, got it for forty dollars at Cash City. Dee, like most women, and little girls too, I have found out, is a sucker for jewelry. But the two of us did some saving, Dee her money from secretarying at Chattahoochee Electric, and me, the money I saved, the bulk of it, came from years spent working for Harvey the Happy Plumber, everybody always asking me was I was Harvey, even though my name, you know, it was sewn into my shirts plain as day. We pooled our resources, Dee and I. We did what we needed to make our family life perfect. We purchased our dream, opening the first health food store and eatery ever to be opened up in Chattahoochee: Health Nuts.

The crazoes, those given passes to leave the nuthouse till curfew, visit us, bring us their Abes, Georges, and Andrews. They buy sandwiches and cartons of chocolate milk, them

from Floor One, labeled harmless by the folks in charge over there, the psychiatrists who are greatly influenced by what the nurses tell them. If a nurse don't like you, you might as well hang your soul out to dry, buddy. They'll drug you and belittle you and lock you up, and they might even, like my momma did to some such inmates, run off with your seed! Lucky for me, that is one story about my mother that has not yet been circulated throughout our populace.

Only today, that man comes back in, the Good Samaritan with a screwball nose. He devours a Sanity Salad and washes it down with a medium Loco Cocoa. He returns to the counter, says, "Let me see Jim."

"What you want Jim for?" Dee says.

I am in the office doing paperwork, but I can hear.

The man clears his throat. "I'm his daddy."

Call it horror, what I felt then. Momma, she told me my rat's blood would find me one day. By that, I thought she meant that I would go crazy, not meet my goddamn daddy in the flesh!

Now, it was me to throw together the Sanity Salad for him to eat, hold the cheese. He hadn't struck me in any amazing way, like what you hear about on TV, how long lost relatives recognize each other in crowds of strangers without even thinking about it. He was just a man, quite ordinary but for the snose on his face, a snose that was caved in at the tip with pink and green veins crackling out of it like lava. Not that there aren't plenty of folks around here with messed-up noses, just this man's nose, his snose, was not of the local variety. My first impulse, after hearing him speak that craziness about him being my daddy, was to close the door and hide under the desk. I didn't want to mess with this. Whatever it was about, I wanted it to go away, only before I could motion for Dee not to speak to me, to pretend that I'd gone out the back door to get some scallions from the farmer's market, she spoke up. "Jim, there's a man out here says he's your dad."

I went out there and we looked into each other's eyes,

and I still didn't recognize him from did. I said, "You made it down to Floor One, that it? I don't recall seeing you before today."

"I was released years ago," the man said all soft in the voice, and he said, "Your ma sent me a letter before she died."

My heart was beating real fast but I played it cool. I said, "You're crazy, you know that?"

"I'm a hundred and fifty percent serious," he said. "You wanna see the letter? I'm shy, that's why I didn't catch up with you. I'm off the booze though."

What does a man say to that?

"When were you released?" I said. "What year?"

"That would be nineteen eighty," the man said.

That was twenty-five years ago.

"I'm sorry, son," he said.

I said, "I ain't your son, you crazy bum. Get outta my store fore I call the cops!"

"Jim," Dee said.

"I didn't mean to upset you," the man said, and I about to popped a brain cap. I picked up the closest thing at hand, the plate he'd done ate his Sanity Salad off, and made like I was to bust it over his most-bald head.

He focused his eyes down hard on me.

"I will!" I shouted, raising it up to slam.

"Jim!" Dee said.

I was walking at him. He backed up out of the store, and it's a good thing he got away, cause I don't know what I might would've done. My heart was beating so fast. My heart never beats like this, not no more it don't. I figured in my head right quicklike that he was released when I was twelve. Twelve, I thought, and busted apart like a damn baby. I felt sorry for my wife seeing me like this, but what could I do? This man had come in here and stuck a fork in my heart. All this gooey goo was flying out of my heart where the fork went in. The goo kept flying and flying and I hid myself and cried. I needed it out of my system before the girls came in. I didn't want them to see me upset. When I left the office I

wore a smile. Poor Dee was glad to see me back to normal now, but she had a few questions.

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I do see the dumb boy that I was, Lord have mercy. I'm eleven. I'm off the bus from school. I feed the rats in the large aquarium, then watch *General Hospital*. I do my homework. I read the instructions Momma has left me, what exercises to do, what record to listen to while I'm exercising, what chores to do before and after my shower, which is at five o'clock. Before showering, I clean the sinks, the toilets, the tiles in the kitchen, and the rug in the Peace Room. After showering, I begin dinner, putting the roast in the oven, if that's what's on the menu, or starting the soaked beans on the burner, whatever, making salads, peeling potatoes. When Momma gets home, I say, "Welcome home, Momma," and hug her, and kiss her once on the cheek, then return to the kitchen to check things, make sure all's in order, prepare our plates. By this time Momma has showered, and as we eat, she quizzes me on my day, and I ask her questions and she tells me about her job and we have a nice dinner. Then we watch TV, and I massage her feet, or maybe we play Scrabble. Sometimes we go in the back yard and play horseshoes or take a walk down to the river. When Momma says things to me that require a yes or no answer, I always follow it up with Momma. Yes, Momma, No, Momma, no variation, always Yes or No, Momma. I keep a straight face. Momma don't like no laughter. If I giggle or snicker, I have to do push-ups. Yes, Momma. She stands over me counting, and when I'm done, she's upset for the remainder of the day. I am afraid of her often, but mostly I want Momma to love me. I even, sometimes, as amazing as this sounds, giggle just to put myself in her brain. Momma knows when I do that. She has me run around the block ten times, rain or shine. Momma says I like to push her buttons. She says I try to get her goat and asks me please to respectfully stop messing with her.

Finally she reaches her limit. I have crossed the line so I cry out the magic words: "I am a rat, Momma!" I try to kiss Momma's hand after that, but she won't allow it. She pushes me away. She treats me mean. If we've already eaten, we wait until the next day to make things right, but if we haven't eaten yet, we do it now. Momma loads the rat trap with a piece of cheese. She lowers it into the aquarium. When a rat comes up for a nibble, down the bar slams, crushing its neck and making blood come out of its mouth. Mama pulls the struggling rat out of the aquarium and when it finally dies she pries open the trap and drops the rat onto a plate. She stabs the rat with a fork like you would a russet potato, this so that it doesn't explode while it cooks in the microwave. As the microwave hums, Momma heats up a can of cream of mushroom soup, without mixing in the milk. She pours this gravy over the rat, and I am not allowed to get up from the table until I have eaten the bulk of it, its legs, its tail, its eyeballs, all of its insides. The only things I don't have to eat are its bones and its teeth. Mama uses a nutcracker to bust open the head for me to eat out the brains. If I throw up while I am eating it, I have to eat that up too. When I'm finished, Momma says, "Now you're a good boy."

The world is home to a full variety of crazy folks, I know, but in Chattahoochee, we house five types: the Pigeons, the Nose-Pickers, the Seers, the Brainers and the Stovepipes. The Pigeons, they rock back and forth all day long on the benches jabbering. The Nose-Pickers pick their noses all day long or masturbate in front of people, not distinguishing the act from normal behavior. The Seers, as we call them, they see things that nobody else can see, like elephants walking down the sidewalk. The Brainers just seem like total geniuses but are in reality schizophrenic crackpots. The Stovepipes, last but not least, are the criminally dangerous ones, the incurable. Stovepipes are good at hiding their crazinesses. That's why we call them stovepipes, because when you look at a stovepipe what else can you see but a stovepipe? It is my

opinion that Momma was a Stovepipe.

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My daughters, God bless them, bounce into the store like two thin sticks of joyful butter. I lift them into the air, one by one, and hug them. Penelope is nine, Jurisprudence eleven. They are the loveliest little girls you ever laid eyes on, hands down. Good workers, too. After the hugs, I hand Jurisprudence the pricing gun. Penelope on the step ladder dices garlic cloves. "I'm going to go find that man," I tell Dee, my beloved, and she holds onto my arm tight.

She says, "Jim, you're not planning nothing, are you?"

"Course not," I say. "I just want to talk to him."

"Promise me you're not going to do anything to him. I still can't believe you lifted that plate up like that. What was going through my man's brain?"

"I promise," I say. I say, "If he really is my father, it's not his fault. I'm just something that Myrna stole from him."

"Jim, you're beginning to scare me."

"Don't worry your pretty little head," I tell Dee and kiss her and head through the doors into the sunshine raining down. Across the highway, the institution is lit up like a rectangle caterpillar. All them windows. All them crazy people with eyes that see. They look though their windows at the world out here. I wonder what the world looks like through their eyes. Does it have special colors that normal people like me can't see? Is the air swelled up with God's heartbeat? Can they see its pulse, hypersensitive as they are, the air shifting back and forth, grainy, pulling and blowing, blowing and shifting? That'd be enough to drive a man or woman crazy. My heart goes out to the people in that place. I cannot gaze at the institution without that my heart softens. What those poor bastards must go through every day of the week wins my sympathy.

I walk along Main Street, looking for my supposed daddy, thinking I bet he's gone down to the river. I walk

that direction—it's the direction he turned when he left Health Nuts—and when I get there, sure enough, there he is, standing against the concrete edge of the dam, propped against it and looking over at the scenery, his back turned to me. Now he's got a backpack with him, and it's on the ground at his feet. He is smoking a cigar and has no idea that I am behind him. I say, "Daddy?" and he turns. "Son," he says. We look at each other a moment. He sees that I am not here to hurt him, so he holds out his arms. We embrace. After a moment we let each other go, and he says, "I was looking at that black snake, a water moccasin, I guess. Big ass sucker."

I look over at the sludge below. A huge cotton mouth lies over some sticks, but not so huge as to be extraordinary. "He's a fat one," I say.

"I sure would hate to get bit by him."

"You'd survive."

"Listen," he says.

I say, "I should apologize."

He says, "There was nobody to report her to."

"Don't worry," I say.

"I couldn't stop tripping. I checked myself in on my own."

"You were a seer?" I say.

"I reported her after I was out," my daddy says. "I know they got a file in there somewhere that says everything I said. All I wanted was to stop tripping, but when the trip eased off, I had all this other shit I was dealing with. Your ma was a complete crazy woman. I was at her disposal." My daddy's body trembles, jerks. He begins to cry a little and is sniffing, remembering those awful times.

"She was a very intelligent woman," I say.

"I'm not proud of it."

"She said you were a rat," I say. "She said that you killed an old lady and stole off with her ovaries. Is that true? Did you pour epoxy over them and try to make golf balls? She said you had it in mind to make a fortune off selling goveries."

"I saw dinosaurs. I was completely mad. I was living in prehistoric America. The shit I saw would knock your

socks off, son, but Myrna, I'll give her this, she made me understand that I was delusional. She was a talented nurse. Other people I have told this story to say it's cool, that I should be happy to have fucked a—wait, I'm sorry, I don't mean to be talking bad about your ma or nothing, but I don't think she should have done that to me, not while I was restrained."

"I'm fine with it. Go ahead."

"She used the situation to cure me. She was a genius and a maniac both at the same time. I bet that's why you're a successful man," Daddy says and laughs, and I laugh.

"Did you love her?" I ask him.

"Fiercely."

"Don't that suck?"

"Enormous."

I grab my daddy in my arms and hug him tight. Then I begin the telling. I tell of his grandchildren Penelope and Jurisprudence, and of Dee, how I started that crazy health food store with what Dee and I saved up from doing so much plumbing and secretarying. The woman who'd stolen his seed, my mother, had had her boobs removed during that last year of her life. When she died, my wife and I became about as high on the hog as we could ever hope to be, having inherited all her savings. I even have a boat now, I tell my daddy, and his face brightens because he loves to fish. We got a steady flow of cash coming in, I tell him, and say that we have a shed in our backyard that could easily be turned into a little bedroom if he wants to stay with us.

"I wouldn't want to put you out," he says.

"It won't be any trouble at all," I say, and I say, "I need me somebody to watch football with on the weekends and somebody to babysit the girls now and then. You do love football, don't you?"

"Aw, shit yeah. Bobby Bowden has got it going on, baby."

"You love little girls?"

"Aw, shit yeah," Daddy says.

"Bobby is a great coach," I say and can just hardly believe

that I am standing here talking to my flesh-and-blood daddy about Bobby Bowden and the Florida State Seminoles.

"Listen," my daddy says, "I've been married twice since I knew your mother."

"I don't care about any of that," I say.

"I look like a bum, don't I?"

"Yes, you do," I say.

Daddy laughs. "Thanks for being honest," he says, and he says, "I've sort of been meaning to get me a new wife, you know what I'm saying? I've noticed there to be quite a few pretty gals in Chattahoochee."

"Oh, they're all crazy," I warn him.

"Only a crazy woman could love me," Daddy says.

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Daddy moves in. He's here all the way from California, and I am touched. Daddy eats with us at the supper table, us the big happy family, and he works at the store with us and takes the girls on drives and is a great personality. A great many stories Daddy tells, and Dee loves him, loves even his snose, it has grown on us, and it seems absolute craziness that this man could ever have been declared a loony tune. His name is Dan. Dan Hornstein. I'm a Glover, based on Momma's, what they call, maiden's name. Dan Hornstein and Jim Glover, that's us. It is nice having him around, makes us feel more like a family. That's what happens with people. They get together, next thing you know they're taking delight in each other, just being a family. A real family. A perfect family. A real perfect family.

We are out on the water in my boat, fishing, just me and Daddy.

I tell Daddy that Momma told me that my rat's blood would find me one day, but in reality it found me long ago, I say. My heartfelt prayer, that she kick the bucket, it was answered. Momma sucked a nut down her windpipe and suffocated.

“Damn. What kind of nut was it?”

“I don’t reckon I ever found out.”

“Well,” Daddy says, “I prayed the same thing against her. I bet lots of people prayed for Myrna to die, so don’t take it to heart, Son. Me, I’m pretty sure I’m up for the chopping block myself. I got a cancer in my brain, I can feel it.”

I think Daddy’s bullshitting me, trying to manipulate me into feeling sympathy for him, into being more generous to him and more all-around lenient. Of late, he has been dating Crazy Jeanne from Floor One, who is part Nose-picker, part Pigeon, if you know what I mean. They have been spending time together in the shed in my backyard. I’m pretty sure that’s against the rules of the institution and that Jeanne could get in trouble. I have expressed my disapproval to Daddy because Jeanne is one skinny chickadee who has had an awful time of it, just so many people have taken advantage of her—and besides, Jeanne, at least through my eyes, seems way too young for Daddy. Daddy says he just wants to protect her, that he likes her as a friend, that he would never dream of trying to impregnate her. He says they just play checkers together, and acts offended that I would suggest such a thing about his intentions. Really, I should be ashamed of my cynical mind always being at work, but I can’t help it. When Daddy says this thing about a cancer on his brain, I play along with it, even though I have my suspicions, and tell him I’m sorry. He asks what for? I tell him I don’t want him to die, that he’s my true blood father and I’m so happy that he’s come back into my life.

“I just want to be a good boy,” I say, and finally confess what I’ve never told a body before, the secret, how Momma would feed me up the most disgusting dishes. It wasn’t just rats, neither. I had to eat raw frogs and other creatures both vile and harmless: lizards, garden snakes. She once brought home a fresh dead infant bulldog, put it on a plate, stabbed it with a fork, microwaved it up, and poured butter sauce over it. That was the worst ever. It took me half the night to get it down. My favorite though, what I wished was the

only thing Momma ever fed me, was a yellow butterfly. She fed it to me off the tip of her finger, and I'll never forget the way it grabbed the tip of my tongue with its legs, very gentle, as if it understood that this was not my idea. I love that butterfly still, whenever I think of it, and that is why, on our menu at Health Nuts, we have Butterfly Brains, which is a butterfly-shaped omelet filled with garlic and sweet corn.

"That is the most amazing story I ever heard," Daddy says and is looking at me like, Is it possible to eat a baby bulldog?

"I swear to God it's true," I say, and Daddy stands up, causing the boat to wobble. He wants to embrace, which is a thing we've been doing a lot of lately.

"You poor thing," Daddy says, and we are hugging out here in the middle of the lake. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, son," he says, and I believe him. We both shed a few tears and when we sit back down and cast our lines back out, I feel so much better, I do. In fact, I cannot remember ever feeling quite so good as this.

Later, we are in his shed. Instead of saying beer-thirty, like people do, Daddy says, "Peanut-thirty," and brings out the huge plastic screw-can of organic nuts he's got, all the nuts of the rainbow. He bought the damn thing from Sam's Warehouse in Tallahassee, using my card, of course, and we reach in and fill our guts with all the finely salted nuts. I think I see a pair of black panties shoved under Daddy's bed, but don't say a thing. Instead, I agree with him that all that salt on the nuts is a great thing. Dan says they might even put more salt on the nuts. I agree, like father like son. Dan though, he only eats the almonds from the mix. He says, "I'm screwing up the nut ratio," and we laugh. It's just so delicious and so tasty, what else can one say? I reach in, grab a handful and slosh them back and get to crunching. "Pure protein," Daddy says, and we crunch on, just the two of us, crunching the nuts.