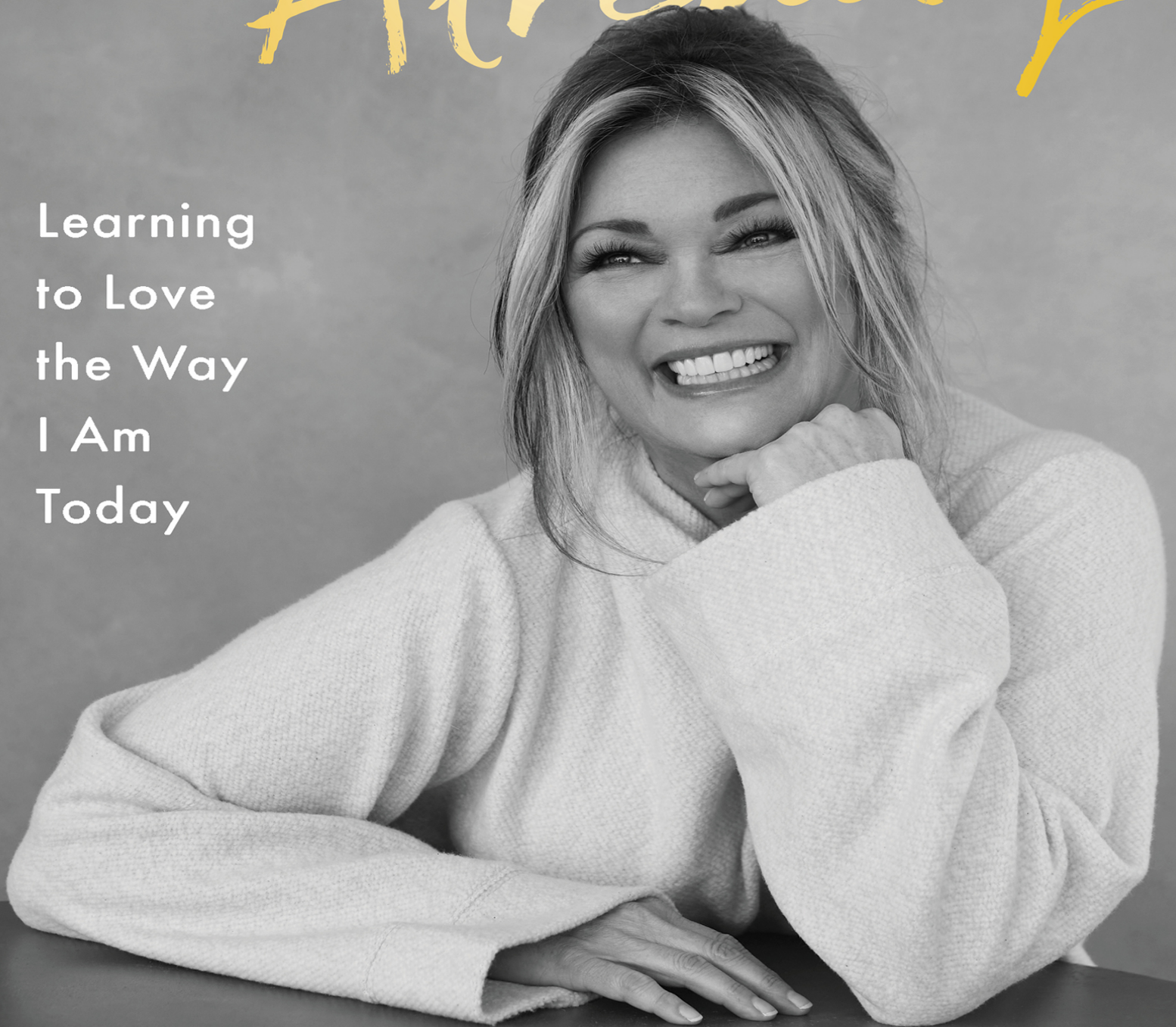


Enough Already

Learning
to Love
the Way
I Am
Today



VALERIE BERTINELLI

Enough Already

Learning to Love the
Way I Am Today

VALERIE BERTINELLI



MARINER BOOKS

Boston New York

Dedication

for you ♡

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A Note from Me

MAY 2021

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, after an online cooking demonstration, a friend of a friend reached out to me about a difficult situation. At sixty years old, she had finally met a man who, she said, was the love of her life and then he was diagnosed with neck and throat cancer. It had just happened, and they were gearing up to fight it. She asked if I could connect them to my former husband, Edward Van Halen, so they could get the latest and best information on where to go and whom to see for treatment. Ed knew quite a bit about this particular type of cancer from his own long battle with the disease.

I was happy to help.

But something about *my* tone of voice must have hinted at my own troubled state of mind, because at the end of our conversation, in a tone of voice that was slightly softer and more intimate than before, she said, “Hey, if you ever need to talk,” and she gave me her number. I thanked her, but I later wondered which of the issues bothering me she had heard in my voice, and I thought, *No way, I’m too private, I don’t know her that well, and this stuff I am thinking about is all too personal, anyway.*

Then I caught myself. I went on the *Today* show and sobbed my eyes out. I shared my heart on Instagram. Why was I putting up walls?

Consider the walls down. Let’s talk. I have been on a journey with many of you since I was a teenager. I have dated, married, become a mother, divorced, remarried, battled with my weight, and struggled with my self-esteem and mental health. I have also become an empty nester, helped my mother and father through their golden years, and said tearful goodbyes to the people closest to me. I suspect all of you reading this book have gone through many, if not all, of these same issues. I feel like we have done it together as we have grown up.

For you, this book may seem like a new message from me. I see it as a deeper understanding of what I was and still am trying to achieve.

In the past, I have shared my efforts to lose weight and encouraged many of you to do the same. I set certain goals, believing that I would be happier once I lost those ten, twenty, or thirty pounds—or whatever the number was at the time. Then I hit a wall. I was about to begin 2020 resolved to lose ten pounds—the same ten or so pounds I had been trying to lose for more than forty years—and one day, as I embarked on the same morning path from bed to bathroom to scale, I stopped, looked at myself in the mirror, and in a “before coffee” moment of sanity, I said, “No. Stop. I can’t be doing this again.” And I didn’t.

I have come to realize there is no magic number. The scale doesn’t light up and set off bells and whistles the way a slot machine does when you hit the jackpot in Las Vegas. The thing I have been looking for can’t be quantified. I want to feel true joy inside, and that is very different from wanting to feel thin or see a certain number on the scale.

These days, instead of controlling what I put into myself, I am trying to embrace the many choices I have. My previous books have reflected the mindset of someone who always felt broken. I looked in the mirror and saw flaws and imperfections. I was always trying to fix something about myself. I was always telling myself “No” or “Don’t” or “You were bad today” or “You cheated.” Why couldn’t I see the best of me instead? Why couldn’t I see all the good things about myself? Why couldn’t I bring myself to say, “Yes!”

This book is about letting go of certain behavior that no longer serves me, recognizing that perhaps it never did, and trying to find new ways of channeling my thoughts and emotions. It’s about my efforts to, at sixty-one years old, set aside the landmines of denial, negativity, and self-hate and instead identify values like joy, gratitude, compassion, and forgiveness and try to align with them every day. As I will tell you more than once, these feelings don’t find you. You have to go in search of them, knowing some days will be better than others, none will be perfect, but that is life.

And this book is about grief—a topic I didn’t intend to write about and hoped not to, and yet it was unavoidable. Any search for joy has to include the reverse side of the picture, and that is grief. The two are partners in this dance of ours.

To write this book, I looked inside myself the way I do the fridge when I have an idea for a new take on a favorite recipe and I began to pull out ingredients. They weren't necessarily all the ingredients that I intended or thought I was going to use, so when everything was on the counter, my original idea took on a momentum of its own. It became a collection of thoughts, essays, and stories—roughly chronological but connected by the frazzled threads of my life—that eventually, after much pulling and tugging at my heart, made sense to me.

My hope is that they make sense to you, too. I wrote about the things that I have gone through and continue to deal with as I got to where I am today at age sixty-one, topics that I think will be familiar to many of you—being a mom, making midlife career changes, caring for aging parents, asking why the hell have I been so hard on myself for so long, saying goodbye to those I love, recognizing mistakes, and searching for meaning. Anything sound familiar?

I endeavored to share my experiences and thoughts about growing older with the emphasis on the effort to grow. I believe we are here to learn lessons. It's not all sunny days and roses. But there is enough warmth and perfume to remind us that life is a gift—and too short to waste.

You are going to find me frequently using the words “me” and “I” in this book. They appear far too often for my taste, but, hey, my name is on the book. What I would like you to do, though, is substitute yourself in various places. Where it says “me” or “I,” think of how these stories are like your own. Our lives may be different, but I sense that the situations we face and the questions we ask ourselves are very similar.

I draw strength from knowing so many of you are out there supporting me. You should know that I am there for you, too. I really hope this book provides you with the comfort I have found while writing it. Hug the people you love. And hug yourself. (Don't put it off. Do it today. Right now. I'll wait.)

This is a love story. I've tried to share experiences that have taught me about hope, joy, happiness, forgiveness, kindness, and love. Most of all love. As I move forward in life, I continue to learn it's only and all about love in the end.

Valerie

Valeri

Studio City, California

Learning to Love the Way I Am

My (Try) To-Do List

SEPTEMBER 2019

1. Drink a lot of water
2. Eat a big breakfast, an average lunch, and a tiny dinner
3. Eat more vegetables and fruits
4. Avoid processed food
5. Go for a walk, swim, or bike ride
6. Don't forget to stretch
7. Read a book
8. Go to bed earlier
9. STOP thinking negative thoughts about yourself and other people
10. Don't judge or compare yourself to others
11. Enjoy the little things in life
12. Begin yoga or meditation
13. STOP procrastinating—do not put things off
14. Live in the moment
15. Don't dwell on the past
16. Listen to peaceful music
17. Live in a tidy place
18. Wear clothes that make you happy
19. Donate or throw away things you don't need
20. Breathe
21. Exhale
22. GO OUTSIDE
23. GO OUTSIDE THE NEXT DAY AND THE NEXT . . .
24. Remember that the effort you make will be rewarded

Before You Begin, a Suggestion

Before you read any further, may I suggest making this snack and finding a comfortable place to sit down and enjoy the first chapter. You will understand why soon enough.

Hot Spinach and Crab Dip

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 8 ounces cream cheese
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- ½ teaspoon dry mustard
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 pound frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed very dry
- 8 ounces lump crabmeat, picked through for bits of shell
- ½ cup shredded Monterey Jack
- 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan
- 2 tablespoons panko bread crumbs
- Crackers, for serving

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F.

Melt the butter in a medium pot over medium heat.

Add the onion and garlic, season with salt and pepper to taste, and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 6 minutes.

Add the cream cheese, Worcestershire sauce, dry mustard, paprika, and cayenne pepper, and stir until melted.

Add the spinach and crabmeat, and stir until warm and bubbling. Stir in the Monterey Jack and Parmesan, and season with salt and pepper.

Transfer the dip to a small baking dish and top with the panko bread crumbs. Place the baking dish on a baking sheet and bake until bubbling and golden, about 15 minutes.

Serve hot with crackers.

The Clock Is Ticking

OCTOBER 2019

PURE FUN. THAT IS what I am experiencing when I make a cheesy spinach and crab dip on *The Kelly Clarkson Show*. I am glammed up for TV and leading Kelly and actress-singer Hailee Steinfeld through the easy-to-follow and oh-so-yummy steps of this dish. We also get a little dishy, and I tell the story of how I was once mistaken for Kelly's mom when I was in the audience of *American Idol*, and Kelly asks me about the correct pronunciation of Worcestershire sauce, explaining that she likes it in her Bloody Marys.

Suddenly, the two of us pretend to slur our words. We get very silly; though as we do, a little voice in my head reminds me to keep one eye on the dip and never stop stirring. That might be the secret to success in everything, right? *Keep one eye on the dip and never stop stirring*. Interpret as you wish.

With onions and garlic simmering in a pot, I add a block of cream cheese, cayenne pepper, paprika, mustard, pepper, some fresh crabmeat, spinach, Monterey Jack, Parmesan, and a sprinkle of panko bread crumbs. Once the ingredients are mixed together and warm, I transfer them to another dish that gets popped into the oven for about fifteen minutes. The finished dish gets raves from Kelly, Hailee, and the crew.

I leave the studio with leftovers, and the next day I take them to my son's house. I also bring some crackers and crudités. What twenty-eight-year-old guy keeps cut-up raw vegetables on hand? I also have an ulterior motive. It is October 2019, and Wolfie has been working on his first album, which does not yet have a release date, but he does have more than a dozen songs and I want him to put all of them on my phone so I can listen to them whenever I want, which will be practically all the time.

Yes, I am a proud mom—and for good reason. He has written all the songs and played all the instruments. I think the songs are amazing. I want the dip to buy me enough time to listen, get him to help me with the download, and ask all sorts of mom questions. When we inevitably get to the point where he has had enough of my prying, I will say, “How about that dip?”

The plan works. At Wolfie’s, I head straight to the kitchen as I usually do when I visit him. I often bring groceries or a meal to heat up. This time it is the cheesy spinach and crab dip. He has a sleek, modern kitchen that opens up to a living room and dining room. It feels like a bright, airy loft. I turn on the oven and heat up the dip. I wipe my hands on a dish towel that I half remember buying him a while ago and ask Wolfie what is new. He catches me up on this and that, then he casually says, “By the way, Dad is on his way over.”

“Dad” is my ex-husband and friend, Edward Van Halen—Ed to me.

“That’s great,” I say. “I haven’t seen him in a while. How’s he feeling?”

“He’s okay,” Wolfie says.

Wolfie explains that Ed had called while I was on my way over to his house. He was out doing errands with his assistant and asked if he could drop by for a visit. A few minutes later, as I am setting the warm dip on the kitchen counter, Ed knocks and opens the door. He stops a couple of steps inside after hearing Wolfie’s music playing on the sound system. His face turns into one big smile. “How about this kid?” he says to me as we hug. “I know,” I say. “My heart is melting.”

So is the spinach and crab dip. But Ed spots the bowl on the kitchen counter and suddenly this impromptu meeting of the two copresidents of the Wolfgang Van Halen Fan Club is paused. He walks over to the dish and smells it.

“What’d you make?” he asks.

As I answer, he pops a cracker with a giant scoop of dip into his mouth.

“Wow.”

He dives in for seconds and thirds, standing over the dip, elbows on each side of the bowl, as if he has taken it hostage. He doesn’t realize that he is hogging it for himself.

“Dad, it’s for everybody,” Wolfie says, smiling.

Ed laughs and steps back with another cracker full of dip in his hand. “Oh, sorry. But, Val, this is amazing.”

Ed and I stopped living together in 2002 and divorced in 2007. Both of us remarried, but in our own way, we stayed together. We have shared four decades of love, anger, frustration, friendship, and love. That is what has endured—the love. And that is the lesson I have learned and continue to learn, especially these days.

The same is true for Ed, who was diagnosed with tongue cancer in 2000 and has been battling different forms of the damn disease ever since. He has been having a particularly rough go of it lately. That is what makes seeing him eat with such relish a particularly joyous occasion. At sixty-four years old, he is still devilishly cute. But at this moment, what matters even more is that he still seems to like my cooking.

* * *

I first met Ed backstage at a Van Halen concert in Shreveport, Louisiana. My brother knew someone who got us VIP passes. Ed was shy. We said hello before the show and talked for a long time afterward until it was time for the band to get on their bus. The attraction was instantaneous and mutual. Some people observed that we looked remarkably alike, like brother and sister. Our connection was deep right from the start.

A short time later, I met him on the road when the band was still on tour, and I was even more smitten. He was adorable, introverted, and possessed by a vulnerability as prodigious as his talent.

For me, it was almost incidental that this twenty-five-year-old was already considered the greatest rock guitarist of his generation. It seemed overwhelming to him, though. At the time, Ed and his brother, Alex, still lived with their parents in Pasadena. They were too busy chasing rock stardom to get a place of their own. They weren't home that much anyway, probably because when they were, they had to deal with their taskmaster mother.

Mrs. Van Halen was a tough, demanding woman who wasn't easy on her boys, rock stars or not—and, in fact, she didn't approve of the lifestyle of a touring musician. But whatever issues they had were set aside when she put food on the table. Ed and Alex loved her cooking. She made all of their favorite Indonesian dishes—sambal chicken, *gado-gado*, *spekkoek*, and *pisang goreng*—and the beasts were temporarily tamed.

Food was something Ed and I responded to differently. Although he could enjoy a home-cooked meal, more often than not, he ate only because he got hungry and knew he had to eat to keep going. I ate because I loved food, and later on, I used food as a substitute for love. It was one of the reasons I took notice of the way Ed sat over the spinach and crab dip. He loved the way it tasted. I wanted to believe he was savoring much more.

When Ed's father learned we were dating, he told his son that I was only a teenager and way too young for him. Ed explained to his father that he was watching reruns of my TV series, *One Day at a Time*. In reality, I was two weeks shy of twenty-one years old when we got married and totally legal and perfectly in love. Ed felt the same way. We were portrayed as a mismatch: a bad-boy rock star and America's sweetheart. It made for juicy reading. But privately, Ed wasn't the person people thought he was and neither was I. He was shy, and I was loud. We got along very well when he wasn't drinking or using drugs, and I'm convinced we would have stayed together if not for some crazy, cliché eighties-style behavior.

Our split was hard and complicated by the fact that we had a child who both of us agreed was our best creation. While we often lived very different lives in the ten years after Wolfie was born, we never lived them separately. Wolfie kept us together and, more important, ensured that we remained a tightly bonded threesome. After we split, an ironic thing happened. Ed and I grew even closer together. We couldn't live with each other, but we found it impossible to live completely apart. I won't say we wrote our own happy ending. It was more like To Be Continued . . .

* * *

So Ed looks good, I think, after a careful and what I hope is an inconspicuous but thorough assessment. He's wearing a red knit shirt and khakis, and with his hair short, he resembles a golf pro more than he does a rock god, and I think that he would be thrilled with a superstar golf game at this point in time.

I sit down next to him and am inclined to put my arm around him and give him a friendly, affectionate squeeze, but as is often typical of me, I overthink this simple, natural, innocent gesture and sit there with my hands in my lap. I don't want to appear inappropriate, do something that might be

misinterpreted, or intrude on his space, though when Ed arrived, he gave me a kiss and a hug, and asked, “How ya doing?”

It was so easy and natural for him.

How come I am so weird and uptight?

I am sure it has something to do with my awareness that his second marriage is basically over, as he confided a while ago, and also with the fact that my own second marriage is in trouble, which I haven't told anyone. They are two unrelated situations, and there is no chance we are going to get back together. But I do know if one of us were to open up, the other would too, and I don't want to get into that. Not here. Not now.

I simply wish I was more comfortable letting him know how much I love him. The spinach and crab dip will have to suffice for now.

A year later, I will think how stupid that was. I should have just put my arm around him. I should have. Ugh. “Should have” is a terrible place to live.

Accidental get-togethers like this are more common than not for us. Other than Wolfie's birthday, though, we don't plan family time as much as we rely on it to just happen. I don't think either of us were ever good planners and we haven't improved over time. We also have our separate lives. It just happens that those separate lives frequently intersect. I think the last time I saw Ed was at one of Wolfie's band rehearsals four or five months ago when both of us showed up without knowing the other one was going to be there.

That was emotional. I could close my eyes and picture myself on the side of the stage at a Van Halen concert and watching Ed play with the biggest grin on his face. The only time I saw his famous smile get bigger was when he watched Wolfie play. He poured all the pride he never let himself feel about his own ability into Wolfie. I loved hearing him say, “You're a beast. You're amazing.” He meant it.

In 2006, when Wolfie was only fifteen, he began jamming with Ed and his uncle Alex in 5150, Ed's backyard studio. A year later, Ed brought him into the family business. It was a helluva way for both of them to grow up; for me, it was a fast track to more gray hair and meant giving up the control I was used to as his mom. More recently, the two of them were spending nearly every day together. Wolfie was driving his dad to all of his doctor appointments, and when Ed was in the hospital, Wolfie visited him two or three times a day. And sometimes even spent the night.

I was so proud of the young man Wolfie had become. It was so fun to lean into Ed, and say, “Look what we did. Pretty good, eh?”

This kid, who was not a kid anymore except to the two of us, was the thing Ed and I got right. He was the best of both of us. He worked extremely hard not only to learn Van Halen’s songs but to perfect them, because that’s the only level his father would accept, and he did it playing bass, an instrument that was fairly new to him. From the moment I got pregnant, Ed dreamed of playing with the baby growing inside me. Girl or boy, it didn’t matter to him. He wanted to play music with this child. And he did. They played together on three world tours and two Van Halen albums. Ed was in heaven; I had never seen him smile so much. He was playing alongside his brother and his son.

Ed also taught Wolfie to ignore the naysayers and critics or give them the middle finger if he ran out of tolerance. I admired my son for never losing his ability to laugh off most things and shrug off the worst. He had more patience than either his dad or I had.

Starting in 2015, Wolfie began recording his own music. However, before he ever recorded a single note, he spent years practicing and writing. He explored the music inside him and brought it to the surface, sometimes with ease and other times it came out kicking and screaming. Even when your first and last names are synonymous with music, art is not easy to make, and in fact, having names that echo greatness may make it harder to create.

Ed and I were never happier than when we saw Wolfie dig deep into himself and the joy he got from playing us something he had made. I was transported back to the days when I volunteered in his elementary school classroom. He always wanted to show me his work, grinning as he said, “Look, Ma,” and eagerly waiting to get a hug. Wolfie’s dad saw and heard something more in his solo effort. To Ed, it was his own past and his son’s future. It was the passing of the torch, something he had started when he gave Wolfie a drum kit for his tenth birthday, then brought him onstage at Van Halen’s 2004 concerts for alternating guitar solos on “316,” a song that Ed had written years before and played softly on my belly all through my pregnancy. When Wolfie was born on March 16, it became his song.

Wolfie finished his solo album in 2018 and formed a band, intending to go out on tour. But his plans were put on hold after we got the news that Ed’s cancer had spread and turned into stage IV lung cancer. This was the

latest chapter in an ongoing story, but it was an ominous turn of events that made both Ed and Wolfie acutely aware that the clock was ticking. Most of us don't bother to pay attention. Once you hear the ticktock of mortality, you can't unhear it. It's not a bad thing. Neither does it have to be a depressing thing. It's a reminder.

* * *

All of us are mortal. Our lives have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's something that seems to happen without much consideration outside of life's biggest and unavoidable moments: graduations, marriages, breakups, birthdays, and deaths. For most of us, life is a gradual climb up a ladder. It's punctuated by different milestones, like turning forty, fifty, sixty, and so on. Our children grow up and move out and establish independent lives of their own. We become empty nesters and reevaluate our lives. We find ourselves taking care of our parents and, at some point, tearfully saying goodbye to them.

I knew this firsthand. I had experienced all of the above.

Inevitably, though, the ladder we're climbing will wobble. Nothing bad might happen, but later it moves again, this time a little harder—or maybe a lot harder, hard enough that you lose your balance. For Ed, the wobble happened when he was first diagnosed with cancer. Then it got to where he was holding on so he wouldn't fall off.

At that point, he knew the most precious thing he had and the only thing that mattered was time. Wolfie, though only in his mid-twenties, knew that, too.

I have the uncanny ability to not think about such things until I have no choice, then I can't not think about them. It's the reason both Wolfie and Ed keep some of the details about Ed's illness from me. They don't want me to worry more than I already do. So, although I don't know the extent of Ed's illness, I know it's serious, and seeing the way he scarfs down my spinach and crab dip, I want to do something nice for him.

"You should come over and I'll make you *bami*," I say.

Bami is basically an Indonesian-Dutch stir-fry with noodles, pork, and veggies. There are multiple ways to spell it—*bahmi*, *bakmi*, and *bami goreng*—and even more recipes than spellings. I bet every Indonesian woman has her own variation. I got mine from Ed's mom. After Ed and I

got married, he went on the road to tour the band's latest album and I stayed in LA. I had my work and career. I stayed with Ed's parents as a way to get to know my in-laws. They lived in a house that Ed and Alex had bought them.

Ed's mom was a tiny, acerbic, outspoken Indonesian woman with very set ways that all boiled down to her way. She spent the boys' childhood trying to exert control, and I sensed that she regularly came out on the losing end of that tug-of-war. Though the boys respected her, they still did what they wanted. Now that they were grown up, she ran the house her way. She was a pack rat. She went to Costco and Kmart a couple of times a week and came back with more of everything. I was amused the first time I saw this, because it was only she and Ed's dad in the house, yet the shelves were stocked with rows and rows of canned goods, paper towels, and toilet paper. She could've opened her own store.

Or restaurant. When she cooked for Ed and me, she usually made *gado-gado*, a vegetable salad with hard-boiled eggs and a peanut dipping sauce; or a spicy chicken dish that I never got the recipe for and am still trying to perfect; or her bami. She might have had recipes lying around somewhere, maybe tucked in a drawer, but I doubt it. She just knew what to do. It's the place where I have finally arrived when I make my Bolognese.

While I was staying with her and Pa—we called Ed's parents Ma and Pa—I began to marvel at the coffee she made in the morning. I only call it coffee because that's what I saw her spoon into her French press, along with cream and sugar. The result was the most delicious cup of coffee I had ever had. I have tried countless times to replicate it and have never succeeded, which is why I have my reservations about calling it coffee.

Whatever it was, I relished that morning brew, which she served with a piece of buttered toast and a paper-thin slice of ham and cheese (I think it was a hard white cheddar). I have no idea what magical way she buttered that toast and layered the other ingredients, but it was perfection. I would let that first bite linger on the top of my tongue in order to enjoy the mix of sweet and savory as if it were the good-morning hug I was missing from Ed. I asked Ma to teach me how to make these things, not the morning toast and coffee, but Ed's favorites, her Indonesian specialties. She graciously agreed.

We started with bami. But I quickly realized that her method of instruction was the same as my grandmother's when she showed me how

she made gnocchi. It turns out that there is no difference between little old Indonesian women and little old Italian women. Mrs. Van Halen essentially told me to do a little of this and a little of that, and when I looked up at her with uncertainty about the next steps, she patted me on the back, and said, “You can do it.” I might as well have been a six-year-old going off the high dive for the first time.

Watching her make *ketjap sambal*, the sauce for the bami, was akin to watching Derek DelGaudio do a card trick. She magically mixed some soy sauce and brown sugar, then added a diced pepper into the simmering sauce as if she were sprinkling fairy dust over it. Once, we made *spekkoek* together. *Spekkoek* is described as an Indonesian-Dutch layer cake consisting of multiple thin layers of cake with alternating flavors like cinnamon and vanilla that are all drenched in butter. The list of ingredients includes egg yolks, butter, sugar, nutmeg, cardamom, ginger, cloves, and more butter. Every layer needed to be made individually, it took all day, and it was heavenly.

* * *

Before leaving Wolfie’s, I invite Ed to dinner the next day. “I want to make you bami,” I tell him. He responds with a grin that lights up his face.

“Bami, oh my God,” he says. “I haven’t had that in forever. You’d make that for me?”

“Of course, I’ll make it for you,” I say. “Do you want it with pork or turkey?”

“Pork,” he says.

“Do you remember the last time I made bami with your mom?” I ask. “It was Thanksgiving when I was pregnant with Wolfie. She came over to help me, and after a few minutes, she ended up shoving me to the side and making it herself.”

We laugh.

“It was delicious,” I say.

Later, before saying goodbye, I mention again that I am looking forward to making him dinner. It’s like I want to take both of us back to a different time. Past invitations have been cancelled for one reason or another. But this time I sense that I no longer have that kind of luxury, and I think Ed feels the same way.

Unfortunately, Ed calls a couple of hours before dinner and cancels. He says that he isn't feeling well and that he hopes I understand.

I assure him that I do understand and offer a rain check. Then I hang up the phone and cry.

* * *

The next time I see Ed is at Thanksgiving. I can't remember the last time he joined the usual roundup of family and close friends for this annual November feast, but he gladly accepted the invitation and was chauffeured over by his friend and golfing buddy George Lopez. The two of them are unlikely besties who bonded years earlier over their mutually masochistic enjoyment of playing eighteen holes of golf. Ed's caregiver, Leon, is also with them.

When they arrive, the house is bustling with people, including Wolfie and his longtime girlfriend, Andraia; my brother Patrick and his wife, Stacy; and several others, including Matt Bruck, Ed's longtime right-hand man, and Matt's mother.

Most of us are standing around the kitchen island talking and catching up, with the major topic of inquiry being Wolfie's progress on his debut album. Some people make brief sorties into outlying rooms to get snacks and check on the scores of various football games. A TV is set up in nearly every room, a tribute to my obsession with football.

Back when I was working on *Hot in Cleveland*, Wendie Malick once said, "Before we met, I had this impression of you as a sweet, timid little thing. But you're actually quite the truck driver." I can't deny it. I am kind of a bull in a china shop.

I am also a diehard New Orleans Saints fan, and they are in one of three NFL games being played Thanksgiving Day, so I am among those who slip in and out of the room for updates.

It's on one of these trips that I run into Ed as he walks through the front door. I give him a hug and a kiss, and note that he looks good, no different than he had a few weeks earlier and maybe even a little better. I see a brightness in his eyes that conveys his happiness at being with us at the house. I am really glad that he has come, that he is feeling well enough, and that he is able to participate in the rituals of being together as a family—acknowledging our connections, re-establishing our ties to each other,

debating, reminiscing, laughing, and eating as much as we can possibly hold.

Ed is already smiling and nodding at people as I encourage him to settle in and remind him that I have made bami for him. He inhales deeply, savoring the various aromas wafting from the kitchen, and says that it smells delicious.

“I hope so,” I say.

* * *

The meal has not been without last-minute concerns. The pumpkin pie—Wolfie’s favorite—which I made the night before, didn’t turn out because I mistakenly used sweetened condensed milk instead of evaporated milk as called for in the recipe. When I cut a slice and tasted it early in the morning, it was way too sweet and just godawful.

In the morning, I make an emergency run to the grocery store and buy ingredients to make a whole new pumpkin pie, including a store-bought pie crust (no judgment, please—I am trying to save time). Back home, I am a blur of activity. I make the pie, get it in the oven, and start on the ketjap for the bami. Knowing the pie bakes for an hour, I set the timer, put the ketjap on simmer, and run upstairs to shower.

When I come back down, my heart sinks a little. The pie smells amazing, but I can smell the ketjap burning. I react by screaming a few choice words. Wolfie and my brother come into the kitchen to see what has happened, and I snap, “Couldn’t one of you have turned off the flame under the ketjap?”

They shrug.

“Oh, that’s what that smell was.” Patrick laughs.

“Yes, that’s what that smell was,” I say.

“Sorry. Guess you burned it.”

It’s lucky that I have enough ingredients to make another batch of ketjap. And this time I keep an eye on the simmer.

Such is Valerie’s home cooking, Thanksgiving edition.

* * *

By the time we sit down at the table, everything is on track. I kick off the feast with a toast to family, the blessing of food and health, and my beloved

Saints, who are in the process of serving the Falcons some Thanksgiving whoop-ass. The noise level swells as we rip into the meal. Everyone eats with a gusto reflective of people who have waited a year for this favorite meal. The turkey, which started off at twenty-six pounds, disappears off the platter. The mashed potatoes are a hit, too. I love the stuffing, and Ed is happy with just the bami.

Every time I glance at him, he is nibbling a little bit more. This is the magic of food and the reason I delight in preparing it. In the right context, like this one, food is more than a meal. It is a joyous ride back to tables of the past. One bite opens the door to a chorus of memories from childhood and family and special occasions. It is comfort and love.

Not all of our family holidays have been like this. At one New Year's Eve dinner at our beach house, my dad punched Ed. My then-husband, having imbibed a prodigious amount of Jägermeister, wanted to go for a drive. He was clearly not fit to get behind the wheel. But Ed ignored my stern objections, insisting that he wanted to cruise up and down the coast, and he rather gruffly pushed past me.

My dad stepped in front of Ed, said a few words with paternalistic authority, and attempted to take the keys from his hand. When Ed resisted, my dad punched him. The force of the blow cracked Ed's cheekbone. When Ed blew his nose, his entire cheek puffed up. Joyriding on Pacific Coast Highway was no longer an option. I had to take him to the emergency room.

After forty years together, we have learned to appreciate the good times and laugh through the more difficult moments. Both of us have remarried—Ed in 2009, and me two years later—yet one thing never changed. Every time we saw each other, we made it a point to say I love you. Now more so than ever.

I figure that this is what Ed wants to tell me when he pulls me aside after dessert, and says, “Hey, can I talk to you privately?”

Dishes are being cleared. People have spread out, literally, on sofas and chairs. They stare at the ESPN wrap-up show and talk about how full they are.

“Sure,” I say to Ed, looking around for a place where we can have privacy.

Every room is full, so we go outside and get into George Lopez's car. Ed sits in the driver's seat. I slide in the passenger's side, eager to get out of the chilly night air. A few minutes later, after warming up, Ed hands me a

small bag and tells me to open it. It's light. I open the smooth black box; inside is a small pendant-size bar of pure gold. I have never seen anything like this. It is mostly plain, but it has a small design on it that I assume was made by a mold. There's beauty in its simplicity and purity.

With tears in his eyes, Ed explains that he bought it the previous year when he was in Germany, where he went to get experimental cancer treatments to stop or slow the spread of his disease. He was collecting gold coins at the time, and this bar had caught his eye and made him think of me.

"I hope you don't think it's weird," he says. "You know, that I bought my ex-wife this gift and I didn't get my wife anything. I just love you."

I shake my head, knowing what he means and sharing that sentiment.

"I love you, too," I say, with tears in my eyes.

Ed reiterates that he was thinking of me, not his wife, Janie, when he was in Germany, and it confused him and made him feel guilty, which he wants to talk about, though, as I suspect, what he really wants to talk about goes much deeper, because how can you not want to go deeper and cut right to the core of what really matters when cancer is ravaging your body and destroying your sense of tomorrow?

For nearly an hour, we sit in the car, inches apart, and open our hearts to each other, sharing our feelings about each other from the start of our relationship to the present. He wants me to know that he messed up and that it is too bad. I agree but acknowledge that I contributed to our troubles, too, and that I am also sorry. It seems odd to be having this conversation now, but I have a simultaneous sense of why not now. And if not now, we may run out of other nows. We waited long enough to get to this point, which is this: the only thing that matters is love, and the two of us love each other.

Crying, Ed goes on to talk about his current relationship, his fears about the progression of his illness, an upcoming back operation, and eventually his appreciation of the bami I made and all the memories it brought back. I realize how much he needed to get all this information and emotion out of him, and how important it is to me, too. I keep my eyes locked on his. I want him to know that I am there for him, always. He is looking for inner peace. He is very brave. He is also scared. And he is just so very, very vulnerable and human.

I don't remember when or how we stop crying, but we do. So many times like this one I have worried that the pain and the tears won't ever end, but they do, and I never remember how or when they did, only that I felt

better afterward for having allowed myself to face that situation. Ed seems to feel the same way. We have forgiven each other for the mistakes we made and the pain we caused each other over the past forty years. It's a relief—and freeing. Nothing is left between us but love—and Ed's smile.

A moment or two of quiet follows as we sit there. I feel a deep and profound sense of peace between us. It makes me think of a photograph I have inside the house—which is actually three photos framed together; there's one each of Ed, Wolfie, and me when we all were two years old. The three of us look exactly the same. And I'm the one with the shortest hair.

Ed might be having a similar thought because, before getting out of the car, he says, "Boy, we did make a great son, didn't we?"

I take his hand and hold it tightly in mine. "We did," I say. "We sure did."

* * *

I am drained and a little disoriented when we walk back inside. Ed doesn't stay much longer. I pour myself a generous glass of white wine and let the night wind down, saying goodbye to people with hugs that are a little tighter and stronger, and appreciating the coziness of my home.

Leftovers are packaged up and put away in the fridge or given to others to take home. The dishwasher is already humming away. I rinse the overflow of dirty dishes and let them sit on the counter; I will deal with them in the morning.

I wish I could be like this more often: sitting with myself and accepting what is, even if it's messy, instead of trying to solve every problem completely or numbing myself with food when I can't or feel overwhelmed.

I am exhausted, but it's a good tired.

I got through it.

This is the real dessert of Thanksgiving. Maybe dessert is the wrong idea. Maybe it's the gravy on top of the whole experience.

The walk upstairs to the bedroom is the last mile of a daylong hike. As I get into bed, I notice several books about forgiveness in the stack on my nightstand. How to forgive. Learning how to forgive. The blessing of forgiveness. The lessons in all of them lead to the same place, and I realize that it is surprisingly easy to forgive someone when you love them.

* * *

At the end of December, I spend a few days with Wolfie and Andraia at our old house in Park City, Utah. Wolfie and I have talked about this trip for several years. Ed and I bought this old 1890s mining shack when Wolfie was a preschooler and we sold it about ten years later. We always harbored some regret about doing this. In early 2019, Wolfie found the house listed on Airbnb, which he immediately showed me, and said, “I really want all of us to go there again. You, me, Dad, and all of our friends. People can come and go. It will be like old times.”

I loved the idea. We all did. As a result, I did something that I never do: I planned ahead and booked the house over Christmas and New Year’s.

When it is time to fly to Park City, Wolfie tries to back out. Ed has to have surgery and Wolfie wants to be there with him. I tell him that Ed’s caregiver will be with him and that Park City is only an hour’s flight from LA should he need to go back, and that, as his mother, I am concerned about him. I can see he needs some time away to relax.

I am right, too. As soon as we are in the house, I notice Wolfie’s shoulders relax and hear him breathe easier. He laughs and jokes more. He makes fun of the pleasure I am having being back here. I can’t help it—and don’t want to. I can feel our past in the air. Even though the house appears to have been redone more than once since we were last here, it’s like we hung our memories in the closet when we left, and they are still there.

When we lived here, the tiny house had an open floor plan and a prominent quirk: the floor sloped. The whole house was on a slight tilt. Wolfie was able to push one of his Matchbox cars from his bedroom and watch it roll all the way to the front door. I hear him telling Andraia about it as well as some other stories of the times we spent here. He was a little boy then and only thirteen when we sold the house, but I can hear him recalling so many details with such color and humor that I can’t help but smile. Apparently, we did a few things right as parents.

He and Andraia want to go for a walk into town. I follow them outside and stand on the front porch, watching them walk down the street. I breathe in the fresh mountain air; I love it. This house always had a happy vibe, and I am glad to see it’s still present. Later that night, we FaceTime with Ed and let him know how much we wish he could be with us.