



homecoming *stew*

catherine jagoe

Yield: 6-8 servings

Time: 3-6 hours

Note: This beef stew is an English family institution.



It's one of your mother's signature dishes, now typically served when someone returns home after being away for a long time. Its flexible cooking time makes it an excellent choice when their arrival may be subject to delays. It can be kept warm in the oven for several hours and reheats well. It's tasty, nourishing, and deeply familiar. In essence, it's Irish stew, and your mother probably learned it at her in-laws' in County Cork, but there it was made with lamb instead of beef. The knives she uses to make it are from your father's childhood home, the Ferry House, in Currabinny, on the Irish Sea.

Two pounds beef stew meat. This you can purchase from the butcher's shop in the sleepy Shropshire town you grew up in. There are pale carcasses in the window, dangling from hooks. He will cut the meat for you himself, chatting as he wields his knives. He's the one person in town who goes to Spain frequently, as you have done ever since you first left home. He owns a house there now. His wife is tall and elegant, a friend of your mother's. When you were living in Spain and your parents finally came to visit, your mother was distant, locked in a private grief about losing her attractiveness (she thought) to

menopause. She's always been the most beautiful woman in the room. The butcher always sends his best to your parents, and he hands you the meat, wrapped in a white paper package. Once you get home, it opens to reveal gristly chunks of raw, fatty meat, oozing blood.

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You learn to make this stew by imitation, watching your mother cook. From the age of eight, you shop for ingredients and chop the vegetables for her. In the years when your family is still all together and no one has left, it's served on weekday nights, or as Sunday lunch if it's Holy Communion instead of just Matins. Your mother puts it in the stove before you go and it's ready when you all get back. This is my body, which was given for you. Take, eat, your mother says. Your mother is so busy running the household that she issues garbled instructions, mixes up the children's names with the dog's: "Isabel Thomas Rosalind Sasha CATHERINE! Go and get the milk from the letter box. Oh, for crying out loud! I mean the front door! And look and see if there's any post!" You are already trotting to the front door, anticipating what she meant. The firstborn, you try hard to be responsible, to clean, iron, bake, set the table, do the dishes.

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One large onion, one pound carrots, and five pounds potatoes. There are a lot of you. Go across the road to Leach's the greengrocer or to the new Tesco's

supermarket by the canal wharf. It wasn't there when you were young.

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After you children start leaving home, the stew becomes tradition at family gatherings on Christmas, Easter, or in the summer. The story of travelers, of empire, of colonialism is encoded in your family's DNA: Ireland, India, Malaysia, Egypt, Nigeria, Australia and New Zealand for your parents' generation; and now Spain, France, America, and Canada for you and your siblings.

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The meat needs to be browned first. Sauté it in an open frying pan in batches, preferably with lard or drippings from last Sunday's roast. After living in Spain, you will insist that olive oil is just as good and healthier. Cooking while your mother labors to read the day's mail, frowning and sighing because of her macular degeneration, you despise her kitchen: the mess and jumble, the sagging drawer that always gets stuck, the piles of newspaper and letters on the table, the battered, broken utensils, the grime in the drawers, the worn-down pencils and leaking pens and old rubber bands in cups on the sideboard, the electric stove that is exasperatingly slow to heat up and then burns things, the peeling no-longer nonstick coating on the pans, the assortment of non-matching crockery and plates, the ice-bound fridge overflowing with dubious leftovers, chunks of cheddar hardening at the edges, and pots of Greek

yogurt with no tops. Out of that fridge that offends you, your mother pulls those mugs half-full of solidified drippings and whatever she makes with them tastes divine.

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Your mother shines through cooking, enacting her love through food. The rest of her mothering you have a problem with as you reach adolescence and find home slipping away. Maybe that's why you develop anorexia and then bulimia: because of all the things you can't say about the rest. So you spurn the one thing she gives you in abundance. *No thanks, you say, I'm not hungry.* No, that's not fair, and not even right. Haven't we moved away from blaming mothers for mental illness? But still. Her cruelties, silence, scorn. Her unpredictable swings from dazzling warmth to icy hostility. Her inability, sometimes, to see or hear you. Your mother is uninterested in caretaking that does not involve food, and she never, ever apologizes. She says, wistfully, that she loved having you all as babies. "That was the best part." After that, she remarks, "Things got too complicated. I can't be bothered with all that psychological stuff."

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After the meat is browned, you need to prep the vegetables. Use one of those exasperating kitchen knives, worn to thin crescents by a century of knife-sharpeners, and a thin, scratched, too-small cutting board, if you can find one. If not, use the kitchen table. Everyone else

does. It's unfinished pine—an old farm table your mother bought at an auction. There is still a large dark indentation in the middle where you set it on fire as a child, by accident. Your parents were out for the evening and you were babysitting your three younger siblings. There was a power cut and you were afraid of the dark, so you lit candles. You used a lid from a yogurt cup instead of a candlestick, so wax wouldn't drip on the wood. When you shooed the younger ones up to bed, you forgot to blow that candle out. You never smelled the smolder.

Peel and dice the onion and sauté it in the heaviest, widest pan you can find that has a lid. Poach the onions, covered, for about fifteen minutes, stirring them occasionally, over low-medium heat until they're translucent; they shouldn't brown or burn. Seethe about the erratic stove and the lack of good-quality, clean pans.

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Every homecoming starts with expectations, excitement, longing, the hope that this time it will be different, that you've outgrown certain things. Sometimes you don't even make it through the stew before the clashes start. The conflicts can get bitter and enflamed: gay rights, women's rights, contraception, pre-marital sex, abortion. Often they're about remarks your mother makes (or doesn't) that you interpret to mean you're not valued or supported. You can feel yourself sinking, darkness closing in. You cry yourself to sleep. You end up having

to leave early, escape to safety. You hastily change plans, call a friend from college. You sit in the train as it pulls further and further away from home, toward London, feeling the trouble recede, become manageable, become something you can toss in a closet and shut the door.

At home, even now, you feel vulnerable, and the shell you've constructed for yourself crumbles. Within the walls of that house, the competent, steady, fair, and thoughtful person you're trying to become vanishes and you're recast in your old role, as prickly, caustic, moody, and withdrawn. You don't like this person. And neither does anyone else. Only in leaving do you recover your adult self-esteem.

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Peel several fat cloves of garlic—as many as you want—chop them, and add them to the onions half way through, but not too early or they will catch and burn, since the pieces are so much smaller. The garlic might seem routine to you, but it's part of the revolutionary nature of your mother's cooking. She started using garlic in the 1960s, when in Britain the majority viewed it with deep suspicion. People said it makes your breath stink. They didn't want to be like the French. Your mother did. Your mother served other weird foods, too: avocados, curry, rice, moussaka, courgettes, homemade vinaigrette instead of Wall's hideous salad cream. She gave fabulous dinner parties. To this day, even though she's spent very little time there,

she is entranced by France—the markets, the bread, the cheeses, the way food is a sacrament, the reverence for good ingredients.

While the onions and garlic are sweating, peel the carrots. There won't be anything as newfangled as a peeler in your mother's house, or if there is, it will be cheap and won't work well. Use one of those annoyingly blunt paring knives instead.

Chop the carrots into thick rounds. If you can find parsnips, do the same with those. When the onions look soft and wilted, add the carrots, the parsnips, and the meat. Scrape in all the meat juices from the frying pan.

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You come home from America for Christmas, bringing the man you're going to marry. Your parents have never met him. They offer to pick you up from the airport, which is an hour away from home. You arrive after twenty-one hours of travel, bleary but brimming with expectancy. You go through customs, butterflies in your stomach, wheel your luggage trolley out through the double doors and into the arrivals lobby. You scan the faces clustered around the barriers, drivers holding notices with surnames, families reuniting. People around you are exclaiming and squealing and embracing. Your parents are not here.

You feel hope collapsing into something flat and sour. You and the boyfriend sit down to wait. And wait. After fifty minutes, they show up, flustered

and apologetic. *So sorry.* They overslept. You try, you really try, to swallow your anger. But it comes bulging out in buried resentment. The visit limps along, going from bad to worse. You spend a lot of time crying in your room. That week, your mother holds a drinks party, but you are too distraught to attend. She is angry about this. She wants you to go down and be charming. The boyfriend is good at this. You can hear his genial voice in the hubbub. You feel like you have no skin, no shell. The idea of holding a drink and making small talk with strangers is excruciating.

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Sprinkle a big spoonful of plain flour over the meat and stir well. Unwrap a red-brown rectangle of Knorr beef stock and crumble it in your fingers. Note its simultaneously dry and greasy texture, its pungent smell, the way it clings to your fingers. Do not think about MSG. Your mother adds stock cubes to all sorts of things, and they always turn out well.

Go into the pantry and find a can of tomatoes to hack into bite-size chunks so they release their juices. It will take you a while, because the light switch is behind the fridge, and the lamp takes several seconds to blink on and is very dim when it finally does. Root through tins and tins of stale and fresh home-made cake—your mother always uses old biscuit tins for storage, having never really entered the age of plastics. There will be many packets of biscuits, opened and unopened:

gingernuts, McVities' digestives, shortbreads, Cadbury's chocolate fingers. Try not to tense when you walk into the pantry. You're no longer fourteen. It's not really a trap, and you won't go back to the time of stealing food and cramming the contents down your throat in longing and self-loathing. You will not have to kneel in front of the toilet, disgusted by the faint reek of urine and toilet-cleaner, and see traces of shit caught round the edges in places invisible from above. You're only going to get a can of tomatoes.

Squeeze a generous dollop of tomato paste into the pan and mix it in. One of your mother's trademark secret ingredients: Italian tomato paste. It still comes in a black tube with a red cap, a tomato at either end, and the brand-name AMORE emblazoned down the middle. Because of course, this meal is about love—how could it not be? Even though this love is the complicated kind. Your mother has never said the words, "I love you." Her own mother doted on her, which she found foolish and irritating. The phrase is bandied around so easily in your new life, with your husband and son. But love is all the meals your mother cooks, each one a miracle of the loaves and fishes. From not very much on a tight budget, she conjures delicious food three times a day for her four always-hungry children and a large and unhelpful husband, whose cooking stretches only to making cups of Nescafé. Three meals a day for eighteen years makes 19,550 meals.

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You are still dazzled by your mother's creativity, her ingenuity, her hard work and persistence, her sheer grit. Your mother is a star, the star in the family. You tell the social worker and the child psychiatrist who interview you after you try to commit suicide at thirteen that when your mother is angry and distant, or locked up in her bedroom with a migraine, it's like the sun has gone out. Is it possible to be warm and cold at once? It defies the laws of thermodynamics and the human heart. At thirteen, you have concluded that the reason she doesn't seem to care about you is because you aren't worthy of love. You try to die by swallowing a bottle of aspirin. Instead, a nasogastric tube is inserted to pump your stomach. You have to swallow the tube, which you don't think is possible, but it is. It hurts. The feeling of warm water gurgling into your stomach is nauseating.

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Add two bay leaves and a spoonful or two of mixed herbs. The English herbs: parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Once upon a time, your mother was the center of your universe. You remember the way she bent over your bed to kiss you goodnight before going out to a dinner party. You'd never seen anyone as beautiful as she was, in a blue lace dress and lapis lazuli necklace. The waft of her Calèche perfume was ravishing. You remember the way she took care of you when you were sick, rubbing Germolene on your chicken-pox sores in the middle of the night; changing

the bed and putting on fresh, ironed sheets when you were feverish with tonsillitis; making a pitcher of hot lemon and honey drink to soothe your sore throat when you had mumps. The way you used to dance to music in the sitting room with her when you were little. The way she used to wrestle with your brother, squealing and giggling. Her sudden bursts of energy, scrubbing and hoovering and polishing until the house was exquisitely spick and span. The sage and the thyme will be two years past their expiry date, but you can cut some sprigs of fresh parsley from the garden, and rosemary from the giant bush, chest-high and flourishing by the kitchen window, as big as a hedge.

Add enough water to cover the meat, and a dash of Worcestershire sauce. This is a shibboleth ingredient, that marks out who belongs where. The spelling is not to be taken literally. You are only English if you pronounce it "Wustushuh." A dab of bacon fat or leftover gravy wouldn't go amiss, if there's any in the fridge. There usually is.

If there's red wine in the house, add some, although your mother would not. Your family can't afford luxuries like wine, let alone pouring it into stew. You can, though. Be grateful.

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For decades after leaving home, telephone conversations with your mother cast a pall over your day, your weekly lesson in not being heard. Once, you call her from a phone box in college. You are

in tears, going under again, and you are frightened. The world has turned dark. Food has suddenly stopped tasting; tea has stopped tasting. She is silent, icy. She says, "You're so utterly selfish. You think you're having a hard time? What about me?!" Two days later you are in the ICU, recovering from another suicide attempt. When your parents come to visit a few days later, she says only, "How could you do this to me?" You don't think about this until decades later, when you see a letter in the paper from a woman who drove three hundred and fifty miles because she got a call like that from a daughter in college. She says she "shudders to think" what might have happened otherwise. You didn't know mothers did such things.

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A grind or two of black pepper.

This is another thing that separates your mother from others: the pepper grinder with real peppercorns in it. In friends' houses, there are plastic shakers containing pre-ground white pepper, which tastes mild, stale, and sour.

Enough salt to fit in the palm of your hand. Half a teaspoon? A teaspoon? There are no measuring spoons in your mother's kitchen. You use actual teaspoons. For tablespoons, you use the round soup spoons inherited from your father's mother.

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The stew is cooking when you sit and cry in a chair in the kitchen for hours, while the family comes and goes around

you. You are twelve, fifteen, sixteen. Nobody says anything. Your mother is irritated that you are being so dramatic, self-indulgent. Nobody knows what to do.

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Prep the potatoes by scrubbing them in cold water at the sink. You need lots: a big one per person (two if they are small), plus extra for the super-hungry. Jab a fork into their mute, resistant flesh.

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You are still stewing about your mother, it seems. Steam is rising but there is nowhere for it to escape. Forty years later, you see a therapist who tells you he's going to try an experiment. He will play your lawyer and in order to make a case against your mother, he wants information. What did she do or say to harm you? This exercise creates tension in your lower belly, your unprotected abdomen. You feel protest rising, and self-condemnation. What right do you have to criticize a woman who worked so hard, had so much on her plate, was doing the best she could?

Your mother often says that the nuns used to make fun of her at school. They called her "the Tragedy Queen." She says this with amusement, jestingly. You wonder now: What was her private tragedy, and did anyone listen to it? Did anyone help her? When you try to probe how things were for her, growing up, she says only that her mother and father had eyes only for each other. You feel a pang.

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Use the brown earthenware

casserole dish. It's stored above the jerry-rigged wall cupboard full of pots of moldering homemade jams. Most of it is damson jam your mother made from the trees in the garden. It is thick, purple-black and full of stones. There are also quince jellies, strawberry jam from church fêtes, rhubarb jam from her friend up the road, blackcurrant jelly, and gooseberry jam, also from the garden. Your mother never, ever throws a jar away and the garage is full of bags of them (you never know when they might come in handy).

Ladle or pour the stew into

the casserole dish. Set your oven to 300°F/150°C and put the casserole dish on the middle rack. Place the potatoes around it. If you're in a rush, two hours on a higher heat (up to 400°F/200°C) will do. If you are not, cook for six hours. It tastes better if cooked long and slowly. Keep the lid on at all times. In the timing of meals, your mother is erratic and headstrong. If you need a meal to be at a certain time—earlier, perhaps—you're out of luck. She isn't wired to take other people's wishes into account. There are to be no short cuts. Lunch is not a sandwich, and it is never bought. Lunch is a sit-down meal at a laid table and it is cooked. Not surprisingly, lunch frequently happens at 2:00 p.m. or later. If you get hungry earlier, eat cake or bowls of cereal with sugar sprinkled on top. Or sugar butties: white bread and sugar sandwiches. Christmas dinner happens at 9:00 p.m.

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One Christmas, your mother mentions casually that on your first day of school, she forgot to go and pick you up. Eventually the teacher had to call and ask her to come. "It happened more than once," she says. "I just had so much on." You do not remember this. But now that you have a child yourself, some things start to make sense: why you get so angry when your mother is late, for example. Why it's so hard to let go of your resentment when it happens. Why it makes you so sad. Not showing up to fetch your son from school would be unthinkable. A child might very well conclude she wasn't worthy enough to be remembered. That she didn't matter.

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Ladle the stew onto baked potatoes,

cracked open and steaming. Mash Kerrygold butter into the potatoes along with the gravy from the stew. People will eat every scrap. The skins are tough, crunchy, and satisfyingly nutty, with a deep flavor.

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For fifty-nine years, your parents never separate, except for one week every spring when your father goes camping. Two of their children move to America and one to Canada. Only one stays nearby. This sibling is fiercer, and gives as good as she gets.

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Serve the stew with a bowl of Birds

Eye frozen peas. Pull out a one-pound package from the freezer, boil a saucepan of water, and empty them in. They only

take five minutes to cook. Strain them in a colander and pour them in a serving dish. The bright green complements the reddish brown of the stew and the white of the potatoes, the golden butter. Two days before your wedding—which is held, of course, at the church next to your parents' home—the clan is gathering. Your siblings are traveling home from their far-flung locations. You are chopping the onion for the stew that will be served that night when a man appears on the doorstep selling photographs. He has taken an aerial photograph of the house: Would you like to buy it? Yes, you say. It's a picture of the little town from above: the mere, the church, the "cottage" where

you're standing now, the castle-turned-bowling green, the canal, the narrow lines of cramped houses, the high street, the surrounding fields. It's stunning how green England is. Green and gold. You will hang the photo in a bright gilt frame upstairs on the wall in your house in America—a bird's-eye view of your childhood home.

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The stew migrates to America with you, but here you only make it a couple of times a year, on winter nights, when you're feeling content—strong enough to deal with the memories its cooking scent unleashes—and no one is going anywhere. 🍷



Catherine Jagoe is a translator, poet and essayist who has published eight books. Her creative nonfiction has received a 2016 Pushcart Prize and notable mention in *Best American Essays* (2019). Her poetry collection *Bloodroot* won the 2016 Settlement House American Poetry Prize. A new volume of Uruguayan poetry, *Voice and Shadow*, co-translated with Jesse Lee Kercheval, has just appeared with Diálogos Books.