MIKE BROIDA

6:00 a.m. Chicken

At twenty-five and with little direction in my life, I decided to volunteer in a soup kitchen. Several years after graduating college, things had fallen into a quarter-life stability: I was living in Boston, working as an administrative assistant at a nonprofit, making enough money to cover expenses and go out to dinner and drinking on the weekends, with maybe even the occasionally indulgent train trip to New York City. Life had fallen into a dulcet routine, working a nine-to-five at an inconsequential job while going out to bars and parties with an ever tighter group of friends who were also in similar straits: in their mid-twenties, white, liberal-arts grads, working some odd or low-level job, finding the decade filled with smaller apartments, fewer hijinks, and less love than copious sitcoms and HBO dramas had alluded to in regards to "starting out."

The first soup kitchen I contacted said they were full on volunteers for the season, and the second—a fantastically large soup kitchen and shelter that housed, fed, and gave services to a large portion of the city's homeless population, had me in for a volunteer orientation upon completion of a lengthy application. After, the harried volunteer coordinator sat with me for a few minutes, looking over the calendar packed with church groups and high-school classes and said, "Well, I can add you to the email list and maybe squeeze you in every other Friday to start. I'll let you know when." I eagerly agreed and never heard from them again. A few weeks later, I was bemoaning to a friend at a bar my inability to even be *allowed* to help others.

"What about Haley House?" she said.

I told her I'd never heard of it.

My friend was a divinity student and bread baker whom I often bribed with free beers to get her to hang out with me. "That's where I'm doing my field placement. You might like it, actually—it's a bit of a Catholic-Anarchist-commune."

"Really?" I said.

"Really," she said.

"How do I apply?" I asked.

She shrugged. “I dunno. I think you just sort of show up.”

The following week, I woke up well before the sun and rode my bike into the heart of Boston’s South End to get to the Haley House by 5:30 a.m. Squeezing through the crowded mess of orange and green chairs packed with sleeping, slumped-over men, I told the flustered-looking man in a bandana shouting out orders that I was there to volunteer.

“Excellent,” he said, “but you’ll want to change first.”

I looked down at my professionally bland sweater and button-down shirt and realized I probably looked more like a banker than a sous-chef. In the backroom, I stripped down to my undershirt and, apron-and-ball-cap-clad, jumped into the fray: chopping onions and potatoes, then hopping in to man the griddle for a giant-sized portion of ground beef squeezed out of a long tube, only afterward mentioning to Trevor, the shift lead as I had learned, that I was vegetarian. The meal was butternut squash soup, rice, ground beef with peppers and onions, and a frittata cooked in a shallow hotel pan. After serving the men and tagging in to do dish duty on the teetering pile of chipped and mismatched mugs and plates, I felt a hard tap on the shoulder—it was Trevor:

“Why haven’t you eaten yet?” he asked, only mildly concerned. Yet the sun was up and by my account I was nearly late for work Promising to come back next week, I sprinted into the backroom to throw on my work clothes before running up Dartmouth Street in order to only be the passable amount of late. Breakfast would have to wait until next time.

Soup kitchens, which grew to cultural prominence and widespread importance during the Depression[1], seem to carry much of that assembly line, crust-of-bread-bowl-of-soup, bowler-derby-in-hand mystique that one can pick up on the periphery or on TV over the years. To understand what a soup kitchen is means reimaging the place from the ground up, starting with “breakfast”: pancakes can be elegant but time intensive, with much the same going for any egg dish short of scrambled or frittatas. Baked goods or breads can be hard to come by except as sporadic day-old donations from local bakeries or groceries. At the soup kitchen, the tenets of a good breakfast are that it is hot, well balanced, copious, and mass-producible. The functioning ingredients are the often-bizarre odds and ends of just-expired food donated by grocers, the pallets of canned food from the local food bank, the few purchased staples, and three or four moderately skilled volunteers. The results are meals that much more resemble shoestring yet exquisite dinners: Garlic bread, fried eggs, sautéed mushrooms, onions, oatmeal, and often some sort of protein (more on the meat later), many varieties of “chili,” rice, and roasted vegetables, amazingly well-seasoned home fries, scrambled eggs (including batches with peppers or other vegetables), collard greens, tacos and guacamole (inspired by a half-crate of old avocados from Whole Foods), boxed mac and cheese with a spicy tomato sauce, curried chicken, bean stew with Swiss chard, and others. Meat, it became readily apparent, is the crux of the meal for most of the guests at the soup kitchen and always the fulcrum of any effort in the kitchen. The serving up of chicken (a crowd favorite) or beef or turkey or salmon or pork or, on one strange occasion, bison, often required a superlative effort. The desire was readily apparent: if you are reliant on one hot, nutritious meal to last you the whole day, then a scrap of meat was as desired as it could be elusive. Meat dishes could be chicken frittatas or pork chops or salmon patties (from canned salmon) or ground beef tossed into chili or stroganoff or long tubes of ground turkey quickly fried up into patties and served over rice, barbecue chicken cooked in the oven or strip steaks marinated in shallow hotel pans and cut into cubes to make for easier rationing.

Food is a fast maker of friends, and over hundreds of chopped onions, peppers, and tomatoes, part of the appeal of coming to shift every week was not just the volunteering but seeing these strange and new friends where, in the furor of the morning, you might go from scrubbing pans to chopping a crate full of potatoes to jointly ripping apart partially thawed donated chicken breast from a frozen block at six in the goddamned morning to the point that your fingers go numb. At the Haley House, breakfast shifts were led and planned by two “live-ins”: one to manage the eating area where the guests waited and the other to take charge in the kitchen with the motley assemblage of volunteers: over-eager college students, parolees, the formerly homeless, professionals (like me) schlepping in before work, neighborhood residents, and the odd retiree, resulting in a kitchen staff

1 http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1660.html

that crossed every boundary imaginable—race, creed, age, sex, wealth, orientation, among others. My shifts included Boston College girls, a Puerto Rican social worker, a health care consultant, an émigré from east Africa, army veterans, an ex-con who had become a baker, and an existentialist food blogger, all led by a big-hearted Jamaican woman.

At the time that Haley House started, in 1966, Boston was not a pretty place, and the South End was known as a rough-and-tumble den of boarding houses, a far cry from the wealthy residents who now fill its elegant, trendy row homes. The ragtag soup kitchen was modeled on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, with a healthy dose of Anarchy: communal living, charity, the minimization of capitalist influences, which eventually morphed into the live-in program—people eschewing the traditional notions of jobs and money to work in the soup kitchen in exchange for room and board. The Christian anarchism can still be felt, where during a breakfast shift the only rules are that a meal is served around 7:10 a.m. and that health codes are (mostly) obeyed. Where more rigid organizations might have firm rules about interacting with guests, giving of gifts or assistance, the manner that a meal is handled or produced, Haley House leaves it to personal conscience. Coming from a tightly structured and monitored nonprofit world, leaping feet-first into minor anarchy was as mildly terrifying as it was liberating, when asking the policy of, say, getting seconds, and having the shift lead shrug and say "I dunno, what do you think? Do we have enough?" Or showing up to a shift, asking for a task, and being shown a bin of potatoes and simply being asked to turn them into a "dish."

Through the fall, as I began to learn where the knives and cutting boards were, as I figured out how to cook on a griddle, as I became efficient washing dishes on a three-sink system, I quickly realized that I looked forward to my 5:30 a.m. shift at the soup kitchen more than I did just about anything else, including my job or drinks with friends or sleeping in on the weekends or even ice cream with cute girls. What had started as an imagined form of penance, falling on the sword one morning a week in order to give back to my community for some imagined or real debt, had morphed into what one of my friends referred to as "type II fun," the sort of activity that's enjoyable for its sense of accomplishment and exhaustion in the end, the same way that hiking up Mount Katahdin might be fun. I soon found that there was a primal satisfaction in feeding others, the sort of instinctual pleasure that feels bone deep: to provide nourishment and caring for others, especially those who had little for themselves. Even amid the minor self-indulgence of my daytime life, to feed others for no other reason except for the pure communal boon of it was an endorphin-like high. To work in a commercial kitchen—even a shabby, makeshift one inside an old row house—was baptism by fire, sharpish knives, and soapy water.

While the breakfast shift would run until about 10:30 a.m., I would always have to leave a couple hours early to run up the road to work. I imagine I felt much the same high as early morning runners, passing all the people just starting their day and eventually getting to my desk slightly dazed and jittery after three or so cups of soup kitchen coffee but unequivocally buoyant. I never told anyone at work about my early morning exploits, and it felt like a delicious secret that, even before 9:00 a.m., while most were just getting going, I had already done something deeply productive and worthwhile. The early morning breakfast adventures also gave an unanticipated jolt of perspective—as urgent as any copying job or spreadsheet compiling might feel, it certainly didn't hold a candle to the beautiful mania of trying to feed eighty homeless or low-income men when the grill suddenly shorts out. As deeply important as the work might have been at that small nonprofit, it did not compare to the fathomless import of feeding those who cannot feed themselves.

In Boston, since 2011, homelessness has increased 13.6 percent[2]. While Massachusetts has a robust safety net and is a national leader in *housing* the homeless, at least temporarily, in shelters[3], the city has become more dependent on the services that help those people—like Haley House. On the front lines are the "live-ins," the nine or so people who agree to live in the soup kitchen's upper floors, which resemble something between a bachelor pad and a tree house, and in exchange for room and board, they take turns running the soup kitchen programs part-time. As a group,

2 http://www.bphc.org/whatwedo/homelessness/emergency-shelter-commission/Pages/Annual-Homeless-Census.aspx

3 https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2015-AHAR-Part-1.pdf#page=30

they have the moxie and overwhelming exuberance of an amateur circus troop, and, individually they have the big, elastic heart of an Italian grandmother after her progeny has returned from summer camp (the constant question being, "have you eaten yet?"). Live-ins come from all walks of life, though many are wayward and recent college grads. There are no requirements except a general acceptance by the community and the mission and the commitment to good food and feeding others for, ideally, two years or so.

"My family keeps telling themselves that I'm 'taking a break' from getting a 'real job,'" One live-in, Cara, told me. She had taken a circuitous path after graduating from a nearby university, including public-school teaching, and volunteer "corps" traditional nonprofit administrative work, before finding the maddening grind of capitalistic bureaucracies insufferable and, thus, coming to live at the most communally interdependent and anarchical enterprise north of New Bedford.

"I'm not sure how to tell them that, you know, I think this might be *it*," she added.

Trevor, the wild-eyed guy who led my first shift and had worked in a restaurant previously, ran his shifts like an aspiring Michelin chef and would always pause after food service and say: "sssssh, you hear that?" to which we would all stop scraping, chopping, yawing, laughing, and scrubbing to listen: the ambient silence broken only by the clatter or silverware, plates, and chewing.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

While one live-in led the kitchen, another sat and drank coffee in the seating area, doing what has long been referred to as "vibing," or sitting and being in community with whichever men had come through the door. At first, I thought vibing had to with keeping the peace or listening to complaints. Once, when a group of Quakers had come through to pitch in on a shift and there were literally too many cooks in the kitchen, Trevor said I should grab a cup of coffee and sit with the guys. At the time, I was crestfallen—it felt as though I was being sent to the bench for no reason. After all, wasn't I there to *do* something? To *help* people? That meant washing dishes or chopping vegetables or burning my fingers on the cantankerous grill. I passively refused and just hung around the kitchen until I finally found something to do, but at the same time, I later realized, I was afraid to do the simple thing that Trevor had asked of me, that as hard as it was to wake up well before

the sun or wash dishes or prep food or burn my fingers, it was so much harder to sit down across from a man of vastly different experience and culture than me, from his upbringing to his skin color to his day-to-day life on this planet, and engage him in genuine and open conversation. What could I even say?

Soon, vibing became the most important part of my shift each week: once the meal was ready and the men were served their first serving, I would grab a plate and pull up a seat at an empty table. Many men kept to themselves or seemed preoccupied with the challenges of the day, where a "Good morning! What's going on today?" was met with only grumbles or off-putting huffs, and in these moments, I tried to content myself with only being present. Other times, men were eager to have someone to talk to, and we talked about family, soccer, movies, painting, a secret fight club on the North Shore and a good way to make a couple hundred bucks in a pinch, immigration, homelands, The New Jim Crow, serving in the military, best spots for panhandling, the Soxs, the Pats, the Celtics, and some of the men I came to know as even friends: Mino, George, Old George, Brother Jay, Fred, Ray-Ray, Gary, Emile, William, and Keith, among others. A soup kitchen is, by its nature, a transitory community—people come and go all the time, pulling themselves up or getting knocked back down or catching a bus to another town or just stopping by to say hello, and as a result stepping into a soup kitchen means meeting a group of people who have few if any expectations. It means joining a community always excited to see you without reservation (short of coffee and a hot meal) and are never sore or surprised at how frequent or intermittent that time might be, and somewhere in this are the loose ties that food brings, those of brotherhood and humanity and family.

In August, I left Boston and, after sweating out Thursday morning breakfast shifts for quite nearly a year, I left Haley House as well. I live in Baltimore now, and I have found that among my college-educated toolbox, the ability to find like-minded people to drink with in basement bars is pretty well honed. Perhaps we attract each other. I have yet to find another soup kitchen. To find those people who are different, elusive, or marginalized, to bring them together over bitter coffee and hot food—perhaps that is something only appreciated at six in the morning, when you are elbow deep in a bus bin of warm water

with some other volunteer you just met, desperately pulling apart raw chicken that needed to be in the oven five minutes ago—and to realize this is a genuine and good thing, to realize that you still have these people and a whole day ahead of you.