



“Mad Craving”

Craving: An intense, urgent desire or longing.

That’s what I get whenever I watch the Food Network. The second I saw Giada De Laurentiis add semi-sweet chocolate shavings *and* orange essence on top of her tiramisu, I grabbed my car keys and headed out the door. So what if it was ten o’clock on a Saturday night. I had to have something sweet, right then! It was hot - still nearly 80 degrees out – so I figured Ben and Jerry’s chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream would satisfy my craving.

Once inside a little Hollywood market with my ice cream in hand, I studied the people standing under the flickering fluorescent lights at the register in front of me. There was a tobacco-skinned man with a big gut about to pay for two forty-ounce beers, and a bleached blonde in Lucite stilettos, buying a hard pack of Marlboro 100s and strawberry gum. The tall lady right in front of me had a jar of Cheez Whiz and a bag of tortilla chips in her hands.

The line wasn’t moving. Beer Guy hassled the checker – something about him being over-charged. I zoned out and began staring at the neon-orange goo inside the jar of Cheez Whiz. *Who decided “Whiz” sounded appetizing, anyway? And why spell “cheese” with a z and no e at the end? How annoying. That’s not cute, just a step closer to a completely illiterate culture.*

There was only one register opened and it still wasn’t moving. Miss Stiletto heels began to dig in her rabbit fur purse, looking for change. I refocused on the day-glo orange-ness of the Whiz, and drifted off thinking about Debra, my best-friend from high school. Over twenty years ago, back in the 1980s, when we were both twenty, we moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Our first night in LA, after unloading our boxes, Debra got a craving for Cheez Whiz covered nachos.

There was no stopping her. I told her she'd have to eat them alone because I just bought a bikini and if I ate even one chip it would show. Not that Debra had anything to worry about. She was all long limbs and jutting bones no matter how much junk she ate.

We were opposites in every way: I was the short brunette (though my hair color varied according to my mood) to her towering blonde-ness; I was impulsive and she was tentative; I loved "the Ramones" and she loved "Spandau Ballet". I survived on avocados, tomato and sprout sandwiches, while she devoured brightly colored foods, like Cap 'n Crunch, Velveeta Cheese, Doritos and Cheez Whiz.

I coaxed her wild side out. "Ah, come on!" I'd beg, until she'd finally join me dancing on top of tables. But her heart was never in it - I noticed that whenever I was sober enough to see clearly.

She'd occasionally get me to think rationally. Whenever I was about to do something stupid – like get on the back of a strange man's motorcycle or dive into the ocean off a cliff of jagged rocks, she'd give me a certain sideways glance from a corner of one of her cat-like eyes and mumble, "You're gonna get yourself killed."

While I tanned beside our apartment pool, slathered in Hawaiian Tropic coconut scented oil, listening to KROQ as Moon and Frank Zappa's "Valley Girl" played over and over again – Debra worked. That made her snippy. She stopped speaking to me in full sentences.

"Wanna get dinner?" I'd ask.

"No," she'd snap.

"What about dancing?"

"Eh," she'd shrug.

Sometimes she'd just fling a utility bill on the table as I ate my bowl of granola, without saying a word.

The last full sentences I can remember her saying were: "I hate this damned city and its screwed-up traffic! I'm moving home."

The last communication I had with her was in a form of a letter. She let me know I owed her eighty dollars for the phone bill, and ended the note with: "Have a nice life... if you manage to survive." Ouch. She hated me for convincing her to leave home. Not that I did. I was leaving no matter what. She just decided to join me.

It was the one time she veered off her perfectly paved path into my bumpy terrain. But I guess she needed someone to blame.

Through other friends I'd heard Debra went back home and did everything right – returned to college, started one of those career thingys that strangely required people to strangle themselves in nylons or ties. And she married a real estate broker. Or, so I heard.

As usual, I did everything opposite of Debra. I avoided nylons and office cubicles as if they were made of radioactive substances. Instead, I danced in videos, went on auditions, painted on canvases, rocks, walls...whatever I could find. I danced my way through LA until I got bored and scraped enough money to fly overseas, where I hitchhiked through Europe. I danced my way across the continent. I perfected the art of surviving without ever getting a “real” job.

Then something happened that changed everything: My father died, leaving my mother alone. As a former flower child, my mom refused to work a regular job, because she said it would be giving in to the “The Man.” Mom stuck to her free-spirited principles until she could no longer pay for rent or food. So I had her come to LA and move in with me. For the first time in my life I needed to get a real job. So I found work teaching art to children. It's not exotic, but it pays the bills.

What's Debra doing now? I wondered, as the line moved forward. Knowing her, she must have a nice home with white carpeting, where she asks guests to remove their shoes. On vacations, she goes on cruises aboard ships that are basically just like floating versions of the same sort of hotels she probably stays at - the type of place where even while located in foreign countries, you'd never know it because everyone speaks perfect English and the hotel restaurants serve hamburgers with American cheese.

Knowing I was right, a smile crossed my lips as Cheez Whiz Lady prepared to pay for her groceries. She handed the cashier her money and pulled a large swath of her shoulder length blonde hair behind her left ear, revealing cat shaped eyes. When she smiled, a dimple formed in her top left cheek.

Oh my God. She looks like Debra, I thought. My head started spinning and a wha-wha-wha sound reverberated through my skull - like I used to experience when I sucked on that lemon-scented gas at the dentist as a kid. I grabbed the lip of the counter to steady myself.

Cheez Whiz Lady grabbed her grocery bag and walked off.

It was my turn at the register. “Uhh... sorry, I changed my mind. I'm not going to buy this,” I said to the cashier, lifting my chin toward the perspiring pint of Ben

and Jerry's chocolate chip cookie dough on the conveyor belt. I then ran after Cheez Whiz lady as she walked out the door and into the parking lot.

"Debra!?"

She turned around. Her eyes scrolled up and down my body, stopping on my face. "Yeah?" Then, after what felt too long, her eyes widened in recognition. "Oh no way... Delilah?!" Her questioning face softened, and a huge smile lit up her eyes. "You look so, I don't know, normal. I didn't recognize you," she said as she reached out to hug me with her free hand. I hugged her back, relieved she was happy to see me.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Fine, great... But what in the world are you doing at this little market in Hollywood? Don't you still live in the Bay Area?"

"Weird, huh? Yeah, I'm just in town for the weekend, staying at the Standard Hotel and got a mad craving for nachos. Hey, walk with me to my car so we can talk."

"You still work for Micro Tech?" I asked. "Still married?"

Debra put her bag on the ground and leaned against a silver Honda Accord with a rental car license plate frame. "Where do I start?" She laughed, looking up at the sky. "Here's the short version: My husband became a sleaze bag, my mom died and I had an epiphany."

"Oh my God, I'm sorry." I shook my head.

"Yeah, I realized I'd spent nearly two decades in an office, communicating to people by memos and e-mail, working overtime; meanwhile, my husband was screwing around and my mother was dying of cancer. Not that I knew either. No one did..."

"Wow." My head swiveled back and forth so much, I felt like one of those bobble head dolls. "So now what're you doing?"

"Well, fortunately, I have enough in savings... so I've been traveling. Just spent a month in Marrakech, eating amazing food. That's why I got a craving for this American junk." She said pointing down to her bag of Chips and Cheez Whiz.

"Marrakech? As in Morocco?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's the one," she laughed. "I'm doing things the old me would've never done - experiencing life, that's what I'm doing. Ashrams in India, hostels in

Yugoslavia... I haven't stopped moving." As my mouth hung open, she continued. "Remember how you used to tease me, calling me Squirrel all the time? You said I was always such a good little squirrel, saving my nuts for the future." She laughed and threw her head back.

I nodded dumbly.

"So, anyway," Debra continued, "I'm only here in LA because I'm visiting this great guy, a journalist I met in Thailand. Right now he's in LA doing a story. So while he's out working, rather than pay a fortune to scavenge the Standard mini-bar, I came here. Hey, enough about me. What about you?"

"Well..." I started.

She put her hand on my shoulder, "Don't tell me... let me guess: You're a performance artist and your medium is Jell-O, specifically lime Jell-O because cherry would be too obvious. Or, no! I know! You're a roller skating Go-Go dancer? You play guitar in a punk band? Wait! What happened to your pink hair? That's why I didn't recognize you right away."

I winced and ran my fingers through my safe brown strands. "Yeah, my pink hair. The kids would love that if I still had pink..."

Her mouth dropped open and she grabbed my elbow. "You have kids?"

"Well, not my own. I teach art to kids at a nursery school – watercolors, paper maché, sand candles... I play guitar and the kids help me make up songs. It's not playing in a punk band, but it's a way to survive."

"Wow!" Debra shook her head. "Who would've thought..." Her cell phone rang. "Hey, Liam? You're done? Great, meet you at the hotel in ten minutes." She closed her phone. "That's my journalist friend. I've gotta get going. We're taking his friend's plane down to Buenos Ares in the morning. So..."

My stomach dropped. I tried to mentally absorb that take-no-chances-compliant-predictable-perfectly-pleated-khaki-pants Debra was going to be flying down to Argentina as I gather Popsicle sticks and glue for my classes on Monday morning. *How did this happen? My life in the last two years have become so predictable, the only things that seem to change are the channels on my TV.*

"Well, it was wild running into you," she said, handing me a business card. "Let's keep in touch. Check in with me through my blog, send me an e-mail. Next month I'm going to go live with a family in Egypt." She shrugged, as if to say, "Can you believe it?"

I shrugged back. I couldn't.

After a quick hug, she got in her car and headed west down Sunset Boulevard, disappearing into the traffic.

I looked down at the card she handed me. On it was her website address:
www.LiveNow.com.

I drove East up Sunset, toward my stuffy apartment, no longer craving anything sweet, but craving something else - something new, something different, something more... something much, much more.