

## LINDA CHRISTENSEN

*Family, 2023*  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

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### Meatloaf

Lessons from childhood

If my family's troubles began at a particular moment in time and could be attributed to a singular act—because isn't there always a precise starting point for everything that goes wrong—perhaps the demise of our family was set in motion with the meatloaf, with the last twist of the pepper mill and the final dash of salt before it was slipped into the oven. Though, admittedly, it is difficult to lay the blame of such a long, drawn-out dismantling upon something as seemingly inert as ground beef.

My father, being alone with me at suppertime for the first time in my four years of life, had been charged by my mother with feeding the two of us. Had she called out instructions before he dropped her off and said goodbye or had she left a handwritten recipe card in her minute scrawl that only she could decipher on the kitchen counter? Never one to follow directions, and prone to getting lost when attempting to do so, my father likely took the making of the meatloaf into his own hands. "Who needs a recipe?" is, I'll bet, what he concluded.

Even while in the army, having been drafted during WWII, sent to Amarillo, Texas, and assigned to train to become an airplane mechanic, and having absolutely no mechanical aptitude whatsoever, my father took the army into his own hands too, successfully transitioning from mechanic-in-training to draftsman, not that he knew much about drafting either. But he *was* artistic and highly skilled at exaggeration, able to effortlessly adjust the truth to meet his needs. Throughout his entire ninety-three years of life, he spoke like an expert on any topic, whether he knew a thing about it or not. So, in his resourcefulness, my budding-draftsman father got himself an unusual job for any army private and spent the entire period of his enlistment working as a forger, providing officers with leave passes that they weren't entitled to. But that's another story, and, anyway, what's forgery compared to being charged with feeding his little girl?

This is the story of the meatloaf, how my father made something so disgusting that even eager-eater me choked at the first bite, spit it out, refused a second and what came after. Perhaps I ought to have felt sorry for my dad, or at least, should now, in hindsight—my forty-one-year-old father had never cooked a meal in his life. That the meatloaf was burnt on the outside and cold and raw at the center were the least of its problems. It would have been impossible

for my mother to have written down what he made. Nobody could have. Over sixty years later, its vile taste is on my tongue still. Loaded with an unsavory combination of spices and who knows what else, all I have to do is think of it and I begin to gag.

Self-centered as only a young child can be, and despite knowing that she was otherwise occupied, I insisted on phoning. “Mommy,” I sobbed into the receiver, prone, like both my parents, to melodrama, “Daddy tried to kill me!” If she needed to breathe hard to get through the contractions during my call, she never let on. “Oh, sweetie, ask Daddy to give you a bowl of cereal, would you? Mommy’s got to go now.”

My father, just as disgusted by the meatloaf as I was, but also humored by his mishap, threw the whole thing into the incinerator down the hall from our Washington Heights apartment and then prepared two bowls of Rice Krispies—a sweet one for me and the other, without sugar, for himself. The next day we went to the hospital to meet the sister I’d begged for—thinking that she’d arrive in a smocked gingham dress and black patent leather shoes like mine. I’d expected a companion and was repulsed, though not as badly as by the meatloaf, upon meeting the squawking, red-faced baby.

Then, or shortly afterward, the life of our family began to change, and not in the way of joy as welcoming a new baby into a financially stable home ideally can. Only by looking back a long way over my shoulder am I able, finally, to dig through the wreckage of my past, to wonder so thoroughly and to ask the questions that, unbeknownst to me, have hung heavy on my tongue for decades.

Before my sister came along, there was ease in our family life. My parents delighted in me, and I shone in the light of their eyes. They whispered, but I could hear, “She’s precocious,” not that I knew what it meant, only that they were pleased. It wasn’t only my mother’s nightly songs and recitation of poems and stories that I loved best but the conspiratorial silliness that was often between us.

Most Sunday mornings after church, my father and I walked hand in hand up the steep outdoor staircase to Gideon’s Bakery, and with a cookie in hand, we’d head over to Fort Tryon Park, where I could skip to my heart’s content, allowing my mother the only time she’d have to herself all week. She’d do the *New York Times* crossword

puzzle or ogle at *Fashion of the Times*, dreaming of clothes she could no longer easily afford, like the gorgeous suit of hers that I ogled for years and that she finally gave me when I entered high school. The three of us were a cadre of city people who enjoyed many things New York had to offer a young family—the parks, art museums, the ballet, and in summertime, lemon ices from La Guli near my grandparents’ home in Astoria, Queens.

Did a second child plus a demanding, full-time job as secretary to the company boss, coming home at day’s end, week after week, having worked at least eight hours to, in effect, begin her second shift, during which she managed the household single-handedly, from food shopping, cooking and cleaning, and bathing and dressing the children to taking care of correspondence, meaning letter-writing—something people did in those days—clothes and gift shopping, etc., while my father, at the end of those same days, during which, as I later learned, he didn’t work with nearly my mother’s vigor, sat back in an easy-chair, years before the La-Z-Boy recliner became popular, yet a lazy boy, nonetheless, with his slippers on, smoking a pipe and reading the newspaper, so badly tip my mother’s balance that its loss became permanent?

And did a collection of causes, like finding himself no longer *numero uno* nor even *numero due*, entirely unsympathetic, oblivious, really, to the pressure his wife was under, though privy to both her increasing mental instability and bouts of excessive drinking, unhappy in his work as a psychologist developing IQ and educational tests, and at odds with his strong-willed Italian-American mother who disliked my strong-willed Irish-American mother for one simple reason—she wasn’t Italian—lead to the beginning of the marriage’s unraveling? And did the weight of that slow, drawn-out failure—as he saw it yet *another* of his failures—contribute to my father becoming more easily irritated, to losing his temper with greater frequency and fury and often taking it out on me?

If I inadvertently touched his eyeglasses or got even close to where he’d set them down, he’d scream as if I’d tried to hurt him. When he was unable to find something, since he tended to lose not only his way to places but to his things—wallet, pipe, matches, whatever—he’d erupt into a human version of Mount Vesuvius, and a loud string of swear words in Italian and English, “*Vaffanculo*, God

damn it, Jesus Christ on the cross, *a puerca fa denda*, you *stronzo!*”—would be hurled at whoever was nearby—or at no one, his face getting redder with each spit syllable. Terrified, but also transfixed by his behavior, I’d be unable to move and would stand stunned, watching him rant, until my mother came in. “Go to your room,” she’d insist, exasperated by the behavior of her adult child. “Your father’s in one of his moods—*again*.” And his bad moods weren’t only scary, they were perplexing. I remember thinking, *My father doesn’t make sense*. Yet he was hardly always quick to anger.

Often, he was jovial and loving, a man who would sing and dance in his underwear while wearing a bowler hat, goofy as a circus clown, to get a laugh from his audience of one—me.

Following my sister’s arrival, due to no fault of her own, not only did my father’s unpredictabilities become more frequent, not only could he become confusing, but so did my mother, too. Some evenings she’d walk and talk funny and lash out at me or my father for no apparent reason. It took a few years before I made the connection between her shifting manner and the empty beer cans piling up in the kitchen wastebasket. I’d watch my parents closely trying to detect subtle changes—my mother’s words beginning to slide into each other, my father’s voice becoming louder. But as much as I hated to be caught off guard by their off-kilter behavior, it always came as a surprise. My disappointment when I felt one or the other of them drift away from me and become someone else was often crushing, so I did what children are inclined to do—I pretended. I made of our dissembling family a rosy picture and clung tenaciously to the good, elevated it in my mind in an attempt to cause what overwhelmed and confused me, what I couldn’t explain, to lose precedence, to fade into the background or even, upon occasion, being a girl with a vivid imagination, to disappear.

Our household was always in good form whenever guests came over, maybe not the moment before the doorbell rang, but once it did, I relaxed, knowing we’d all be on our best behavior. My mother was an excellent cook, and while she was busy in the kitchen, I’d be called on to perform my repertoire of memorized poems and songs for the visitors. There was a poem about a child at the seaside, another about the antics of four animal friends, and the

one that I found particularly curious told the story of a boy whose mother went missing. Turning on the charm came naturally, and it was pleasant to be the focus of the guests’ attention. I knew to hold the edges of my dress and curtsy, casting my eyes to the floor, when I was through.

One time, the guests were important people—my father’s professor and his wife, who’d flown in from Germany. When something in the kitchen went amiss, my mother called out to my father for assistance. Only later did she tell me that she’d dropped the chicken on the floor while attempting to move it from oven to platter—causing my entertainment stint to be required for longer than usual. I sang and recited, sang and recited, muddled through a few pirouettes learned in ballet class that I’m certain were ungraceful at best. When I ran out of material, I grew uncomfortable, but the focus of the esteemed adults remained on me, and I couldn’t let my parents down.

Ever the clever child, with an inkling that I was about to speak an unspeakable, I paused, looked straight-faced at the guests, asked, “Dr. Sonnemann, do you take your teeth out at night like my mommy and daddy?” The adults’ laughter prompted my parents to come running, surprised—but not entirely—to hear what had been so funny. Neither the professor nor his wife was wise to the chicken’s mishap, and my parents never said a thing to me about my indiscretion.

Patrice Vecchione’s most recent book, *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice: A Guide to Writing Poetry & Speaking Your Truth* (Seven Stories Press) appeared in 2020. Marcelo Hernandez Castillo said it “gives us endless ways to access our creative selves.” Her other nonfiction books include *Step into Nature: Nurturing Imagination and Spirit in Everyday Life* (Beyond Words/Simon & Schuster, 2015) and *Writing and the Spiritual Life: Finding Your Voice by Looking Within* (McGraw-Hill, 2001). She’s the author of two collections of poetry, *Territory of Wind* (Many Names Press) and *The Knot Untied* (Palanquin Press/Community Publishing). She is also an editor of many anthologies, including *Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience* (Seven Stories Press, 2019).