

Jane Student

Professor Savard

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### Dinner for Two

After an exhausting day of classes and work, I stood in the number 4 aisle of the Ralphs grocery store on my block and realized I couldn't remember walking in to the store or in to that aisle. In front of me, I saw rows and rows of chips. My hand reached out to pick up Sour Cream and Onion Lays – my brother's favorite – when I snapped out of my daze and realized I was not there that day to do the regular weekend grocery shopping. "Today is Monday," I told myself, "This is for Ali, for our one-year anniversary. This is important! Focus!" With my eyelids feeling heavy on my eyes, I struggled to get my mind to wake up enough to function properly. I had barely slept last night and had not eaten or drunk anything since sunrise on account of it being Ramadan, the month of fasting for my religion. I looked down at the crumpled piece of paper in my hand. The long list of words looked like gibberish to me, and I realized then how much I had to put my observational skills to the test in order to mimic a baked salmon recipe I had found earlier on YouTube. "I'm such a good girlfriend," I thought to myself, forcing my eyes open to wake myself up.

June 30<sup>th</sup> was my boyfriend Ali's and my one-year anniversary, and when Ali suggested I cook a meal for him to celebrate, I was absolutely terrified. Growing up in a privileged home in Pakistan, I had always had cooks to make special meals and had never really learned how to cook myself. I could already imagine the dramatic scenario like a

scene out of a movie. I would be in a stained and soiled apron with flour on my face, smoke would be coming from the oven, which would set the smoke detector off, beeping so loudly the neighbors start screaming at me through the walls. My boyfriend would be standing on a chair trying to air the apartment out; I would fall to the ground in disappointment and we would eventually settle for Chinese take out. This vision is what I expected and feared would happen if I cooked for Ali. However, I was determined to at least attempt to cook something for this special occasion, and so I gathered all my courage and promised myself I would do my best.

After browsing through what seemed like a million recipes on the Internet, I finally found a salmon recipe that seemed fit for the challenge. YouTube user Cathy0419's "Simple and Delicious Baked Salmon" recipe, unlike the others, did not appear to be rocket science. I grabbed my pen and an old receipt and wrote down the ingredients: salmon, capers, rosemary, extra virgin olive oil, lemons, salt, and fresh ground pepper. Getting to the grocery store was a daze, but once I looked at my list of ingredients in my hand, it all came back to me and I felt my mind and body spring in to action to accomplish my task. I followed the foul, salty smell of raw fish to the seafood section of Ralphs, and got the salmon, mentally crossing it off my ingredients list as I put the fish in my cart. After a few minutes, I had found everything other than the capers. I pushed my cart in to the spice aisle, and felt my stomach grumble as I looked through the rows and rows of tasty spices, all beautifully packaged in their cylindrical little containers. When I saw the squishy green buds that I remembered were capers, I immediately recalled their acidic and rancid taste that I hated so much. I contemplated whether I actually needed these or not, since I had never liked their taste. After I thought

about it and realized I had almost always seen salmon served with capers, I decided not to risk it and added the capers to my cart before heading to the checkout counter, ready to go home and get my hands dirty.

Upon my arrival home, I set the groceries on the kitchen counter, tied my hair up in a bun, and said out loud, “it’s going down tonight!” I took out a foil dish for the salmon, letting my hands linger on the cold foil to cool myself down a bit after sweating in the heat all day. As I washed my hands, my throat ached with thirst and I wished I could drink the water pouring out of the faucet. I turned off the water and carefully pulled the salmon out of the rough brown paper that it was wrapped in. According to the video, I was supposed to touch the raw fish with my bare hands, but I just had my nails done earlier in the day so I tried my best to avoid ruining them, but it seemed impossible to continue the recipe and keep my nails perfect at the same time. A decision had to be made, and it required an unfortunate sacrifice on my part. I took one last look at my perfectly painted French manicure, and with a sad sigh, thought, “at least when they get ruined, I’ll have proof that I have elevated to the status of a ‘great girlfriend’.”

After marinating the salmon in a mixture of frustratingly specific quantities of olive oil, salt, and pepper, I cut out individual sheets of foil to wrap the salmon in. I cut the fresh lemons into thin slices, my mouth salivating as their tangy, citrusy aroma filled the entire kitchen. Each piece of salmon went in a foil sheet with a strand of rosemary, three slices of lemon, and capers on top. I did not understand the purpose of the rosemary since it is not edible, though I have to admit the fresh, herbal smell really did uplift my spirit while giving the fish a very pretty appearance. After prepping four pieces of salmon

in this fashion, I opened the preheated oven, feeling a blast of heat on my face and hands as I placed the shiny, foil-covered dish inside.

The twenty minutes it took for the oven timer to ring felt like the longest twenty minutes of my life. The sun had set while the salmon was still cooking, and as I broke my fast and ate my first food of the day, I remember I could not taste anything I put in my mouth. My mind was completely on the salmon. When the timer finally went off, I started praying under my breath as I put the oven mittens on and took the salmon out. It was the moment of truth and I had absolutely no idea what to expect. This was the first time I had gone solely by observation, memory, and even a little bit of instinct in driving a task to completion. When I unwrapped the foil of the tester piece of salmon, to my surprise it looked mouth-watering! However, I did not let my excitement get the better of me and patiently let it cool for about a minute. Once the steam blew off I took a deep breath and took my first bite. To my even bigger surprise, that bite melted in my mouth like butter on warm bread and my experiment started to feel like a huge success. At this point, I still held in my excitement to make sure the entire piece of salmon tasted as delicious as that one bite did, so I moved on towards the center and then the complete other end of the tester piece of fish. With every bite, I tasted a new mixture of flavors and felt more and more sure that I really had succeeded.

Though I was certain of my opinion, I felt my judgment was obviously a little biased, so I left the final verdict to my significant other. When his highness finally arrived, there was a mixture of emotions in the room. He seemed hesitant to take his first bite. I don't blame him, but I was certain that some part of him was excited too, to see if I had succeeded or not in my first serious cooking endeavor. After he took his first bite, I

stared at him blankly and impatiently waited for my verdict. His eyes lit up in surprise and a moment later he grabbed my hands with his and, placing a kiss on each, said, “For the first time in my life I have *tasted* heaven. It is perfect!”