

I listen to the voicemail that my prospective future therapist left for me earlier. Her message seems nice enough, but I'm not feeling a connection as I listen to her voice. I'm still miffed that my first and second choices weren't taking new clients when I called, and so now I'm being randomly paired with someone I know nothing about. I get to the end of the message, realize I was distracted, and replay it.

She's a very slow talker. Having been raised by a fast-talking New Yorker, I can barely concentrate on her words. They drip out of the phone's speaker one at a time.

*Maybe now's not the time to look for a therapist*, I think to myself as I delete the voicemail, *with the pandemic and all*. I'm not completely delusional; I know I have issues, and I know that professional therapy would probably be the next best step, it's just difficult for me to justify the time and expense. After 160 weeks of talking through my most recent trauma with my closest friends, I don't know how many more things there are to say about it. With all the times I've relived it in my mind, it certainly never gets any easier to think about.

I text the liaison who assigned this slow-talking therapist to me. "Can we keep looking?" It's the most polite way I can think of to decline this seemingly unfit pairing.

Finding a therapist who fits my personality, expectations, and needs has always proven difficult. I've spoken with several over the years, but I've never felt like I've gotten much resolution with any of them. The real bummer is that I know several therapists professionally, but I worry that I'd feel too ashamed to be completely vulnerable with a colleague, no matter how professional they are.

When I don't get an immediate text back, I fumble with my phone, trying to switch applications to get my recipe back up without touching the screen with my raw meaty fingertips.

I turn back to the intimidating whole duck on my countertop. I had vastly underestimated the time it would take to prepare my first Peking duck. Or rather, the amount of time I would procrastinate, waver and hesitate before gathering up the nerve to get through making the duck.

Much of that time was spent searching the internet for recipes. Or rather, reading a recipe, panicking, and desperately scrolling through more recipes in an attempt to find an easier one. Since I am a complete noob at cooking duck, my decision to make Peking duck was rather ambitious. I spent nearly an hour, reading recipe after recipe, looking for one that seemed feasible in my small American home kitchen. Well, there *wasn't* an easy one. Every recipe I read seemed to confirm that all those complicated steps were actually necessary, to get a satisfying result. And really, what's the point of cuisine, if not to be satisfied with the results? I certainly didn't want to go to all this work for a duck that was just ok.

I did eventually find a recipe that seemed simpler by comparison. Either way, the first step is the usual one: make sure the bird is clean and dry. A recent article comparing beef and poultry safety in the US comes to mind. The gist of the story was about how the beef industry, at the demand of US consumers, had raised its standards, managing to eliminate nearly all bacterial contamination of the steaks on shelves in US grocery stores. The US poultry industry went the other direction. Instead of raising their standards, poultry lobbyists managed to get us to accept that it's the responsibility of the home cook to decontaminate poultry products.

As a result, nearly all poultry in US grocery stores carries salmonella. So much so, that government guidelines advise us NOT to wash our poultry at all, lest the wash water splash

invisible germs all over the kitchen. Their solution? Just cook it to kill the bacteria. And then just eat it, along with all those bacterial toxins, which are released in even greater amounts as the bacteria die in the heat. Either way, gross. I carefully build a sort of lean-to tent under which to wash my duck.

Drying the duck is another annoying choice: either use a dish towel, and hope that my washing machine gets hot enough long enough to decontaminate it, or use cheap paper towels which may have been processed with chlorine bleach and formaldehyde.

I dry the duck with paper towels and try not to think about it too much. At some point during the first step, I've poured myself a glass of wine. Not thinking is easier with wine. If today goes like other days, I'll be opening another bottle at some point tonight. *But today is not like other days*, I think to myself as I stand back and take in the mess that just the first step has wrought on my kitchen. *Today is obviously harder than other days.*

The second and third steps aren't in every recipe, but I feel like they're important for an authentic result. I gently lift the duck's skin at the edge, my fingers slipping around on the slick surface. I loosen the skin and carefully slide a finger under it. I probe around, trying to gently separate the skin from the underlying meat.

After about 10 minutes of poking, I realize two things. First, my finger is numb; I must not have let the duck rest at room temperature long enough. Second, a chopstick or a spatula could be more effective at this task without the ick factor.

Repeatedly stabbing the chopstick in between the layers of duck reminds me of a video I once saw of a liposuction procedure. I have to be careful not to pierce the skin with all this poking,

because the third step is using a syringe to inflate the duck-skin balloon I've just created. Well, it turns out looking more like a duck covered in blisters than a balloon, but I assume some air bubbles under the skin are better than none. Besides, it's an optional step.

The fourth step is salting the duck all over. I'm not sure if this step is to pull the moisture out of the surface, or just to get the salt distributed through the skin. I think it's a bit of both. I've been taking the time to brine all my poultry lately, and it really does make a difference. I'm uncertain if iodized salt might have some sort of odd flavor or negative interaction, so I use pink Himalayan salt.

The salt needs to stay on the outside for an hour. I pour a second glass of wine for the wait. When I can't find a clean surface to set my glass on, I start tidying my cooking mess. My mom raised me to tidy as I prep, so the kitchen never gets overwhelmingly dirty. Avoiding overwhelm is basically my full time job nowadays.

I fill a pot with water as the duck brines. The fifth step involves basting the duck with boiling water. I'm somewhat exasperated that this step seems to undo the other steps (drying and salting). I'm even more exasperated at trying to find a sanitary way to dangle the duck as I baste it, dry it, and glaze it. I tie what I'd guess are the duck's shins together with twine. I just happen to have a cabinet knob right above my stove, so I hang it from that. I add ginger and scallions to the pot of boiling water. If my main goal had been for the delicious scent of cooking to fill my home, I could've stopped at this step and ordered delivery.

This fifth step also comes with options, which is stressful since I've never made this before. The recipes seem equally divided between basting methods. The most common method is to ladle the boiling water over the dangling duck, collecting it back in the pot to be scooped and ladled

again. The second most common way is to plunge the whole raw duck into the boiling water for 10 second water baths, followed by a couple minutes of cooling time, about 5 times. I choose the first technique, as it seems slightly less likely to burn me.

Basting with boiling water allows the fat to render somewhat and the skin to tighten and toughen quite a bit. After a few ladles, the skin is no longer stretchy and slippery. Instead, it has tightened up enough to expose a few feather quills still embedded in the skin. I remove the errant feathers with the same tweezers I use on my face, wishing I owned an autoclave or a second pair of tweezers.

After scalding this way, the duck's skin is taught and leathery. I pat it dry again and salt it again. The key to crispiness, or so I've read, is a very, very dry duck. This is where I start to make compromises in earnest. If I had started looking for recipes last night, I would've known that the duck was supposed to dry out in the fridge for one to two days as the sixth step. It's not going to in this case, however, because I intend to serve it tonight. I feel ok about skipping this step, as several recipes suggest turning a fan on the duck to dry it faster.

I'm not sure where the writers of these recipes intended the fan to be. I would guess later that they meant I could put a fan in my walk-in fridge, if I were in a restaurant. I lack a combination of fans and refrigerators that would work together, so I leave the duck dangling over the stove and angle an oscillating floor fan at it. This version of the sixth step has the undesired but reasonably predictable effect of blowing ducky water onto the wall behind my stove, but I don't notice this at first, because water is clear. But I sure will notice it after step seven, which I'm prepping the glaze for now.

After a while of swinging in the breeze, the duck looks pretty dry. Still hanging, I begin to brush-baste it in glaze I made from maltose, soy sauce, and rice vinegar. I let it dry in between coats. It's like painting a duck-shaped wall. I smile to myself, because when I first moved into this house, this kitchen coincidentally had duck wallpaper. *Duck-shaped is very different from duck print*, I muse distractedly, my mind wandering as I brush on layer after layer of the sticky brown goo.

As is usually the case when my mind wanders, I end up ruminating. *If I just made more money, I could afford to live somewhere with a real Chinatown, where I could stop by for a taste of this whenever I want. If I'd tried harder at studying Mandarin after graduating, maybe I'd have an interesting international job by now.* This relevant self-flagellation naturally devolves into rehashing all of my major life mistakes, perfectly preserved in my unforgiving memory. The associated shame is mostly irrelevant in this moment, but it's always poised to pop up like a jack-in-the-box. Past conversations repeat in my head on a carousel loop. At each revolution, I stretch my fingers towards the prized golden ring: *what words could I have said to change the outcome? What could I have done differently?* The memory knows better, and even when I find the perfect words, changing the outcome is always just out of reach.

*Duck print walls...uh oh*, I think, my eyes refocusing on the wall behind the duck. This is when I realize that I probably should've turned off the fan while glazing. The entire surface of my stove, and much of the white wall behind the stove, are splatter-painted with cooling, sticky brown sauce. I sigh in frustration, chastising myself for not predicting this. In hindsight, there were so many ways I could've protected those surfaces, sparing myself the effort of scrubbing solidified sugar off my stove later tonight. *Sorry, future me.*

I leave the fan on a little longer to re-dry the glossy glazed duck. Instead of the traditional 24-48 hours drying in the fridge, this duck gets a grand total of about 2 hours of drying time, but I swear the fan helped.

The raw, dried out, basted duck looks just like an already roasted duck. According to step eight, that means it's time to actually roast it. If I had the perfect setup, this step would have involved hanging it in a drying chamber over a wood fire, and occasionally poking the fire to rile up the coals. How romantic. Since my kitchen isn't quite set up for this, I shove a half-full, pint-sized beer can into the duck's cavity, and stand it upright in a deep roasting pan in my oven.

I sip the other half of the beer, mainly to delay opening another bottle of wine. It's both difficult to admit and easy to beat myself up over the amount I've been drinking. It doesn't help my ego that I've been collecting all my bottles and cans for recycling in my basement for the past eight months. Our city has a curbside recycling pick-up program—or rather, we did, and we will again some time in the future. Eight months ago, someone tried to recycle a lithium battery, and the facility went up in flames. One simple mistake, and suddenly the whole city's recycling stops for the span of a human pregnancy.

Being able to see all the bottles and cans I've emptied over the past eight months all at once, filling nearly an entire room, weighs on me. Especially when I realize that I did a 66 day sobriety challenge during that time. I can convince myself that a large percentage of the cans are just sparkling water, or diet soda. The bottles, though...well, there are countless glass bottles down there, and only an extremely small percentage once held hot sauce or ketchup.

I've certainly emptied a lot of wine bottles this year. For the past 3 years, to be honest, ever since the phone call. Before I got the phone call, I was hopeful; excited for my future even.

Before I got the phone call, I would drink wine to have fun with friends, rather than to ease my constant anxiety.

Four years ago, I was offered my dream job. After nearly a decade of running my own business, I was burned out and ready for something new. I had reconnected with an old colleague of mine on a recent European vacation, and by the time I'd returned home, he was recruiting me for a position in his expanding company. There are fairly few good jobs in my field (which is why I'd started my business, not because I wanted to). This job felt heaven-sent; the perfect job description, in Europe, doing work I love that makes a difference in people's lives. An exponential difference, in fact, as I'd be training new graduates in an uncommon technique, so that they could go on to improve more lives than I could on my own.

The process of an American business owner hiring an American employee to work in their European business is much trickier than most people realize. Notarized copies of things like degrees and transcripts aren't sufficient; original documents had to be apostilled and FedExed overseas. We had to prove that there were no locals who could perform the job in place of a foreigner. Not to mention, this was a completely new position within his company, so the complete job description had yet to crystalize. The whole recruiting and hiring process took about a year.

During that year, I closed my small business down to prepare to move. When the lease on my house ended, instead of signing a new one, I decided to buy a small, vintage RV. I wanted to spend the rest of my limited time in the States traveling. I got to visit many friends and family whom I'd not seen in a long time, and the freedom of a six month road trip was an inspiring experience I think everyone should have at least once.



By the end of that year, I was almost set to emigrate. All the legal legwork had been done, and I finally had the contract in my hands. I let the hiring manager know I'd take the weekend to review the contract and get it back to them by Monday, although to tell the truth I could barely wait that long to start my exciting new life.

The next morning, I received a text from my colleague, who had barely been in contact since introducing me to his HR manager. The text asked if I'd signed the contract yet. I responded that I was about to, and he asked me to wait until he had a chance to speak to me that evening.

My colleague called me that evening while I was driving home. I was surprised to hear him sounding a little tipsy. When he started the conversation by expressing how glad he was that I hadn't signed the contract, my stomach tightened with dread. I felt the notoriously familiar electric buzz of adrenaline shooting through my arteries to my fingers and toes as he started explaining the situation.

He had just discovered evidence that the HR manager (the one who had been working on my recruitment) was embezzling from his company. He wasn't just rounding the books down or skimming the registers; he'd emptied their accounts. There was just enough capital left that my colleague was able to stay in business by downsizing. After downsizing and with a much constricted budget, the new position I was being recruited for had no funding at all, and probably wouldn't ever coalesce.

I was speechless after the phone call. If I had been holding my phone instead of in hands-free mode, I might've smashed it on my dashboard, or thrown it out the window.

I sat in shock as the reality of the situation began to sink in. I began to tally my losses. In the span of one day, the dream job that I had dedicated a year to planning for and thought a sure thing had ceased to exist entirely. In the span of one day, I'd gone from having a bright future full of adventure and meaningful work, to being unhoused, unemployed, and lost at sea.

The HR thief disappeared after being caught. *That criminal has my address, my social security number, and my literal college degrees that used to hang on the wall in my office, I thought. What's he going to do with them?*

What was I going to do, for that matter? I had closed my business. I had told friends and family from coast to coast that I was moving to Europe. I had sold or donated all my furniture and appliances. I was broke from closing my business and traveling for half a year, and now my financial lifeline had snapped.

For the rest of that year, I haunted my temporary home like a phantom, going through the motions of a life that wasn't supposed to be mine. I felt like the embezzling manager had stolen my identity—not in the classic sense of taking out loans in my name, but in the sense that I didn't know who I was anymore. Most days, I'd look at my to-do list and get too overwhelmed to do even one thing on the list.

That devastating phone call was 3 years ago now. Still, every time my phone rings, I feel the prickles of stress sweat start immediately. Still, I live in this temporary home, doing meaningless and annoying temp work to eke out a meager living. Still, I'm not quite sure how to pick up the pieces of my life that I discarded along that path.

When I was first being recruited, it was a big decision to shut my business down. I had bootstrapped it myself, and had just reached the point of profitability when I got the offer. After some profound soul searching, I had come to terms with the reality that I never wanted to be a brick-and-mortar business owner in the first place, and that it wasn't something I enjoyed or wanted to continue being. I also finally admitted that I disliked the nature of the work I did in general. As the cherry on top, I had even sustained a major injury that made the type of work I was doing before excruciatingly painful. After losing nearly everything that I had worked my whole life for, what was I supposed to go back to?

I still can't answer that question. Every day, I wake up hoping to figure out what I want out of life now. Every evening, I'm too emotionally exhausted, and having lots of wine sounds like a better idea.

I turn on the oven light and peer through the glass window, regretting that I don't have a convection oven to continue the drying process while cooking. *Maybe it won't matter*, I think without genuine optimism. I've already accepted that mistakes were made, and that this probably won't be the most traditional of Peking ducks.

I am very glad I chose the deep pan, since 45 minutes into roasting, the pan is nearly full of rendered duck fat. When I poke a thermometer through the taut skin to take the temperature of the breast, I half expect the duck balloon to audibly pop. Instead, a stream of liquefied duck fat squirts out so forcefully that it takes a parabolic arc down to the drip pan. The fat stream isn't slowing, so I stab the duck in the butt and ankles several times to allow more rendered fat to drain from the bottom. I turn the heat down, hoping that it will keep rendering the fat without cooking too much more.

Later today, I'll be serving a Peking duck that took a whole day to prepare, but tastes just ok. Still, I'm proud of myself for the attempt. Despite not being sure of what the outcome would be, I dedicated myself to researching, learning, and taking each step necessary to complete a very complicated recipe. Tomorrow, perhaps I'll have the energy to tackle my to-do list. If my therapist liaison texts me back with more options, maybe I'll even get two things done.