



1st Place: Ashley Memory
Asheboro, North Carolina
Congratulations, Ashley!

How to Chop an Onion Without Crying

By Ashley Memory

Light a Candle. Strike a match to “Meadow Rain,” the celadon pillar candle you were saving for a special occasion. Relax as the soothing aroma of honeysuckle swirls around you. Muse on a memory of your son, when little, walking in a field of clover where you two imagined you saw little fairies—“lollygaggers”—rise in a mist.

Take a sweet onion in your hand, and marvel at the dry, papery husk. Think of the wings of a dead moth picked up by your broom this morning. Such a powerful force in life, such a fragile creature in death. This could be you. One day it will be.

Rub away the crispy layer, and reveal the smooth, sleek surface. With your sharpest knife, the 8” chef-style, slash in the direction of the grain. The way Jacques Pépin does. Within seconds, your eyes swell and burn. Try not to think of your son again and glance at your phone. Try not to wish he would call. Tears blur, sting, blur again. Remember that you need two chopped onions for your chicken parsnip soup, and the pot is still empty.

Drown it. You’ve heard that cutting an onion under water works. Of course. Water. Tears. Water doused with salt. Think of Shakespeare. *Look, they weep*, said Enobarbus, who addressed his master in *Antony and Cleopatra*, as the other servants sobbed before the fateful battle. *And I, an ass, am onion-eyed: for shame, transform us not to women.*

Wonder why men are ashamed to cry. The last time you saw your son he cried, but he dropped his head and turned away. You yelled at him for not being glad to see you. You treated him like a

boy, furious that he still smelled of beer after a late night with friends. He's 29. He's old enough to take better care of himself. Why doesn't he?

Position the knife on the wet onion. It slips and nicks your left thumb. Hold your thumb to your mouth. The cut hurts more than it should. It always does. Wish you could feel your son's pain. You know he drinks to soften the loneliness of New York City, where he moved to follow his dreams. Be glad you lost it. *If you are under control, says the old Zen master, you lose the danger of glimpsing an unknown realm.* You are a mother. Know you must always peer into the darkest abyss, eyes wide open. It's what mothers do. Hold a napkin to your face.

Freeze it. Slip the now ragged onion into the freezer. They say this will lessen the chemical reaction that irritates your eyes. While you wait for it to harden, meditate on the history of the onion, how, like cats, it was revered by ancient Egyptians. A symbol of eternal life, found in the eye sockets of the mummified Rameses. Laugh, thinking of the joke on the tomb robbers. Onions instead of jewels. Wonder what they will find and snicker about when you're gone. Your first four-leaf clover pressed in wax paper, broken clown toy from your grandfather, clay paperweight made by your son at age five. *Cat or dog? Dragon!* he shouted.

Think of the sermon from Sunday, how your pastor spoke of the exodus of the Jews in the Bible. How he lamented that everyone glosses over the Book of Numbers because they think it's just boring old lists. But the words in 11:5 roll like poetry: *We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.* Ponder the fact that your son doesn't pine for those elaborate dinners with onions and garlic that you cooked for the family. Instead he yearns for that silly tray of Kraft cheese sandwiches, each one cut into four little squares because a gang of eight-year olds invaded your kitchen and you didn't have enough on hand to feed every little boy a whole sandwich. Laugh. The miracle of the cheese sandwiches.

Take the onion out of the freezer. Put on a mitt. Chop, chop, chop. Sob, sob, sob. Pray, pray, pray. Will it take a miracle to chop two onions?

Wear goggles. Strap on the goggles your husband wears when he runs the belt sander. Tighten the strap. Raise the knife again. Think of the goggles your son wore on the swim team. An expert swimmer, he struggled instead against the riptide of high school. Like you. Think of the times you ached to fit in with the cool crowd. Your envy of the cheerleaders who pranced and chanted

with confidence. *We ain't scared and we ain't cocky, gonna ride over you like a Kawasaki, zoom zoom!*

The goggles pinch. Take them off. Reflect on the etymology of “onion.” It’s Latin, from *unio*, for “one” or “unity.” The root holds the onion together. Remind yourself you must not sever the root or all is lost.

Return to the field of the lollygaggers. Think of your son as he turned his hazel eyes to yours, and recall those seemingly nonsensical questions that you so relished. *Where do lollygaggers sleep at night? Is the sun my friend?* Remember what he asked you recently, words that could have come from that same child. *Are you proud of me?* Grope blindly across the counter. Where is the napkin? Find it and press it to your eyes. Forgive your son. Forgive yourself.

Recall what you read in the old farmer’s almanac. *The more often you chop onions, the less prone you are to cry.* Shake your head. Realize that the more often you experience joy, the more often you will cry. Reach for the phone. Call your son.

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