

I Don't Like Lima Beans: What cooking for a difficult human taught me about professionalism, patience and grace

By Elizabeth Fritzler

**Note: an abridged version of this story was performed live at The Moth storytelling theater in Denver in April 2024. It will be broadcast on The Moth Radio Hour in late 2025. This story was also featured on Medium.com's publication, Engage, in August 2024.*

The first time I met Jim, he asked me what I had cooked for him that day. When I told him I made salmon, he shook his head.

“Oh, that’s going to be a loser,” he said. “I don’t like salmon.”

Jim’s daughter had warned me that her father was difficult to please, but I was confident that I, his new personal chef, could make meals that would be both palatable and healthy. He was an eighty-year-old diabetic, and a lifetime of eating poorly had caused his eyesight to deteriorate, both legs to undergo amputation, and several of his fingernails to become infected. Desperate to stymie the diabetes, his seven children pooled their money and hired me to make and deliver his meals.

I probably would have turned this job down, but the COVID pandemic had put me in a real pickle. My mobile business was hanging on by its own infected fingernails (turns out no one wants you to cook in their home when there’s a deadly respiratory disease afoot), and moving into a commercial kitchen was too expensive. So, out of desperation—the place from which all the worst things come—I agreed to cook Jim’s meals in my home kitchen and deliver them once per week.

On that first delivery day, I put on my mask and gloves and rang the doorbell. A dachshund barked as if it were ready to bite my face off, someone yelled “Shut up, Charlie!”, and then a white-haired woman with purple-framed glasses answered the door. I assumed this was Jim’s girlfriend, Julia. His daughter had referred to her as Jim’s “paramour” in her emails, which led me to believe I was about to witness the fringes of a juicy scandal. Alas, scandalous it

was not. Julia was simply his live-in Polish girlfriend. I introduced myself and she showed me inside.

A gaunt man in a wheelchair was waiting in the hallway, both thighs wrapped heavily in bandages. I couldn't tell how much of each thigh was bandage and how much was swollen leg.

And then came his question about the menu and comment about my Loser Salmon.

I have thick skin when it comes to feedback about my food, because I'd rather a client tell me they don't like something than cancel their meal service altogether. I know personal preferences say nothing about my worth as a human, I can't please everyone 100% of the time, blah blah blah. But "that one's going to be a loser"? Seemed a little harsh coming from someone I'd just met. Was he this abrasive with everyone?

Adding to my surprise was the fact that I had emailed this man the meal plan a full week earlier with a request to tell me if he wanted any changes. I never heard back, so I went ahead with a menu I thought would be healthy but still appetizing for most people. Things like a chicken alfredo bake, spaghetti and turkey meatballs, and, of course, the Loser Salmon.

I forgot, however, just how picky some people can be. A friend once told me her grandma used to buy 10-for-\$10 McDonald's hamburgers, eat one, and freeze the other nine for later. My 92-year-old grandpa, who subsists on a diet of microwaved pancakes and Diet Coke, refuses to eat my mom's Thanksgiving turkey because she coats the skin with herb butter and he "doesn't want all that green shit on the turkey."

It was clear, standing in Jim's hallway with the dachshund still barking, that I was really going to need to temper my expectations about this man's diet. I would need to ask myself what someone who has spent his entire life eating canned vegetables and meatloaf from The Black Eyed Pea would be willing to try.

When I got back in the car, I took off my mask and gloves and wiped the sweat off my upper lip. What had I gotten myself into? I was fairly certain I just spent 4 ½ hours making food that was already rotting in the trash. I needed an Ativan.

The next week, I proposed chicken teriyaki with carrots and broccoli, Cuban rice & beans, and pesto pasta. While Jim actually answered the email this time, his curt responses still left me with some question marks.

“No beans and no pesto,” he wrote. And then, a few hours later: “I can’t eat black beans.” I asked if he could eat any other type of bean. No response.

This menu must have gone over okay, because Jim’s kids continued to pay for his meals, and one month later his daughter said meal service was working very well. This was surprising, since every dropoff day left me feeling like I was failing high school math all over again. Jim was finicky to a fault. He didn’t like the Swedish meatballs I made, for no particular reason. He liked my pomegranate pear salad, but didn’t want pomegranate because the seeds got stuck in his teeth, so essentially he just wanted some lettuce with pears and dressing. He wouldn’t eat any seafood except shrimp; he wanted fewer blueberries in the blueberry muffins (“Cut back on blueberries,” is all the email said); he wouldn’t try brussels sprouts since he had only ever eaten them boiled to mush when his mother made them and was therefore convinced the roasted version would be the same.

Every week, I would spend hours agonizing over a meal plan that might be passable, and every dropoff day, I did my best not to roll my eyes all the way in the back of my head as Jim berated the previous week’s meals. If I didn’t need the money so badly, I would have stopped cooking for him after Week 2.

The months passed, though, and after half a year of preemptive anti-anxiety medication every dropoff day, I was starting to get better at letting Jim’s criticisms roll off me. By this point, he had tried and liked enough meals for me to create a rotation I was pretty sure he wouldn’t throw directly down the drain. The dachshund still desperately wanted to maul me, and the emails weren’t getting any clearer, but I was learning how to stay afloat.

One day, I stood outside in the driveway with Jim while we waited for his home nurse to arrive.

“How was the fried rice last week?” I asked.

“I don’t like lima beans,” he said.

Lima beans? I thought. What did that have to do with anything? I’ve never cooked lima beans in my life, let alone put them in a fried rice. What was he talking about?

“I don’t like a lot of things,” he admitted. “But it’s okay, we’ll get there.”

We’ll get there.

This was an odd turn of phrase. I wasn’t sure whether he meant “get there” in terms of a perfect meal plan, or “get there” in terms of healing his amputated legs and infected fingers, but I remembered that Jim’s daughter had told me in the beginning that her father was really living on borrowed time. She knew his diabetes was out of control, and it was too late to affect any long-lasting change in his health. I wondered why, if this were the case, she and everyone else wouldn’t just let the poor man keep eating the garbage-tier food he enjoyed with the time he had left. Why was I cooking for him? What was the point?

We’ll get there. It occurred to me, standing in the driveway, that maybe Jim didn’t know it was too late. Maybe he was in denial, or maybe none of his children or Julia had told him. Maybe he just didn’t feel like the end was near.

I thought about how my grandma, on her deathbed, looked me in the eyes and asked me if she was dying. In a room full of family members, perhaps I just happened to be the one sitting at the foot of her nursing home bed, directly in her line of vision. But that made me the right person to tell her the truth.

“Am I dying?” she asked me.

I couldn’t say yes.

“I don’t know,” I answered, taking her thin hand and long, red nails in my own. “What do you think?”

“I think I am,” she said.

“Are you okay with that?”

“Yes.”

Until that moment, she had only ever asked when she was going home, away from the nursing home. She would ask my dad this over and over, and he would sadly tell her she needed to stay because the rest of the family couldn't take care of her.

This was the last conversation I had with my grandma. I witnessed her move from denial to acceptance.

Maybe we're all trying to comfort ourselves when we feel death's inevitable looming. In denial, we ask the people we love to prolong their stay on Earth, because the hardest thing about love is that it will, in the end, be lost. In acceptance, we ask the people we love to confirm our fears, because we're no longer trying to stop that loss.

I began to see that my meal service was more for Jim's children than for Jim. Despite telling me her father was living on borrowed time, I suspected his daughter was in denial that he was dying. She hoped if he ate better, he could survive a while longer. He could continue living and she could delay the loss of her parent.

There in the driveway, I found myself again thinking of this dichotomy between denial and acceptance, between love's prolonging and death's surrender. Jim wasn't asking me to tell him the truth about his own mortality, but I hoped that when the time came, his family would witness and honor his acceptance.

When his nurse arrived, she steered his wheelchair inside, and I left in the late February cold.

A few weeks later, I was packing up the meals and texted Julia to tell her I was running late.

“Please don't come today,” she responded. “Jim died yesterday.”

I set down the boxes of food on the counter. This seemed so sudden. I had just seen Jim last week, when he had asked me to cut his carrots into coins rather than shredding them for salads. He seemed like his regular, cranky self. Now, seven days later, he was gone.

I offered my condolences to Julia, then put the food in the refrigerator and sat down. I had never had a client pass away before. How was I supposed to feel, other than shocked? I felt relieved that I wouldn't have to cook for him anymore, then immediately felt guilty for thinking that. I couldn't say I felt sad, not having known him all that well.

Being a personal chef puts me in a uniquely gray area of my clients' lives. I'm a service person—not quite a friend, not quite an acquaintance. I am a trusted stranger they let into their homes for multiple hours every week, sometimes for years, often when they're not even there. Since I started my business, I have struggled to balance friendliness with professional distance. I witness my clients' major life changes, from pets dying to babies being born to new disease diagnoses, but they generally get very little information about my own life. My role is to be a reliable source of physical nourishment for these people, nothing more.

I saw, then, that the professional distance I maintained made it hard to feel anything at all about Jim's passing, and my clients in general. Just as I was a fleeting presence in their week, they were a once-weekly thought in my own. Maybe I didn't need to be so guarded, so afraid of their judgment if they were to get a peek into the life I kept so hidden. Opening up would mean I could be more supportive in the face of loss, and maybe, if I dared, rely on them for support, too.

When I opened my email later that day, I had a message from Jim's daughter waiting in my inbox.

"Hi Elizabeth," it said. "Yesterday my father died. I appreciate all the help you have provided over the past nine months. Thank you for your carefully planned meals. It has meant a great deal to me and my siblings." She attached a photo of her, Jim, and her 6 siblings to the bottom of the email.

I haven't had any more cantankerous clients since that day in March 2021, but Jim taught me how to face criticism with professionalism and grace, and he was the true test of my

ability to stay grounded amidst vicious dachshund barking and baffling comments about defunct vegetables like lima beans.

And for whatever it's worth: those were edamame soybeans in the fried rice, not lima beans.