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Lost in Translation

During the summer of 1975 in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Kochanowicz family of Shelby, North Carolina, introduced the Truong family, formerly of Can Tho, South Vietnam, and more recently of the nearby town of Boiling Springs, to an important American food group: Jell-O salad.

We were horrified, which was really saying something considering that this man, woman, and child had only

months before escaped from a country at war. Jell-O, jarred mayo, grated carrots, and a handful of raisins molded into a glistening, wobbly, neon-bright ring can do that: scare the pants off an unsuspecting Vietnamese refugee family.

My parents had met the Kochanowiczs at St. Mary Catholic Church, a minority institution within a vast landscape of Southern Baptists. Mrs. Kochanowicz wore her hair in a beehivey updo, and Mr. Kochanowicz favored plaid pants. They had two children, a daughter and a son, who were older than me but who never once teased me or called me names. The family lived in a house smaller than our riverfront villa in Vietnam but much larger than the trailer we now called home. I was seven years old in 1975, and those were the kinds of things that I found noteworthy. Still do, in fact.

We wore our nicest clothes to the Kochanowiczs' house, and we practiced saying their last name—ko-HAN-o-vick—out of respect for this family who had invited us so warmly and without artifice. There were probably casseroles on the table, the crunchy top promising what the gooey underbelly could never deliver. There might have been a pot roast, slow-cooked yet dried out. But like the victim of some early childhood trauma, I have wiped the slate, or rather, the Kochanowiczs' table, clean.

Except for one dish.

It flickers in my imagination like a Super-8 film: the Jell-O salad, aglow with artificial food coloring, beckoning from the center of the table. A silver-plated pie server cuts a slab, which hovers and then jiggles onto my plate. I know my mother is keeping a watchful eye on me, making sure that I, like her, take a polite bite or two. I avoid the bottom layer, opaque with mayonnaise and whipped gelatin, and go for the iridescent dome, flecked and studded with vegetables and fruits.

During the three years that we lived in Boiling Springs, our families ate many more meals together. With the Jell-O salad's repeated appearance at the Kochanowiczs' table, the Truong family was no longer horrified, just perplexed. The form said dessert, while the function said salad. Surely, no one would combine mayonnaise and fruit. (We hadn't been introduced to the Waldorf salad yet. These things take time.) My mother even explained that it was a kind of aspic, which to her Francophile tongue made a lot of sense but for me only added another layer of mystery.

The last time I spoke to Mrs. Kochanowicz was when I telephoned to tell her that my father had passed away. Though our families had lost contact over the years as we Truongs, like good westward-bound pioneers, moved to Ohio and then to Texas, it seemed only right that I should let the Kochanowicz family know. They had welcomed us to their table, which in both of our cultures meant that they had welcomed us to be a part of their lives. My father was also the one Truong who ate their Jell-O salads with a resolve that showed that he, at least, understood long ago what they were really about. —*Monique Truong, author of Bitter in the Mouth (Random House, 2010)*