

Everything Bagel

By Ellie Yang

June 5th, 2022 was the start of my destruction. That was the day I watched *Everything Everywhere All at Once (EEAAO)*. It was a weird movie, and I almost gave up the first time I watched it. However, the more I watched, the more I felt connected to the mother, Evelyn, who is juggling between a tax audit, her laundromat business, father, daughter, and husband relationships, and her daughter, Joy, whom she judges, criticizes, and neglects. Because Joy never gets the approval of her mother, she invents a human-sized “Hail Bagel.” The bagel is black and sprinkled with sesame seeds, garlic, and onion flakes. It spins, emitting light through the hole, which makes people wonder what is on the other side of it. It isn’t a warm aromatic you-want-to-take-a-bite bagel. Instead, it makes us feel cold, distant, intimidated, and maybe even fearful. As the plot unfolds, we learn that Joy puts everything she cares about into it, “all my hopes and dreams, my old report cards, every breed of dogs, every last personal ad on Craigslist, poppy seed, salt.” As a result, nothing matters, so nothing hurts her.

Her nothing-mattered freedom resonated with me. Why do we care so much about others? Why do we need to live up to our parents’ expectations? Why do we have the urge to please others? I wanted that freedom.

At 4.37 pm, I downloaded the recipe for a New York-style bagel (“New York Style Bagels”).

Step one: Bloom the yeast by combining warm water and sugar, and let it rest for 10 minutes.

What does a black bagel mean to me? What do I want to throw into that enormous empty hole? I pace around the room hunting for things that bother me. The mask hangs on the doorknob, hidden from my sight. It's not even mine. My ex used to hang the mask on the doorknob and it was left there for almost a year. At first, I did not notice, and I did not bother to throw it away. Item number one. Or the tree in the living room. I don't even know the name of the tree. Generally, I love having some green in my apartment. I have two pots of grass for my cat, Luna, one chili pepper grown from the seeds, and two Echeverias, gifts from a friend. But it is the wrong kind of green: it takes up a large space, and its yellowish, half-dead leaves are a constant reminder that I am a terrible gardener. I don't know why I kept it. Anyway, item number two.

Step two: In a separate bowl, add bread flour, salt, and yeast mixture and mix with your hands. Turn the dough out onto a work surface and begin kneading for 10 minutes. Cover with a damp towel and let rise for one hour.

I started making bread after the COVID lockdown. Making bread not only solved my everyday needs but also kept me busy: checking the recipes, purchasing all kinds of tools and ingredients, and playing around with my timetable. If it succeeded, it was a reward; if not, it at least took away some of my negative energy. Kneading by hand was an exercise to me, and sometimes it wasn't enough: my pandemic uneasiness, my stay-at-home anxiety, and how-could-you-leave-me bitterness required a more intense way to vent. I even finished my first half marathon in May 2020. But this time I decided to save some energy and use KitchenAid to do the job.

Suddenly I realize that the meanings of the names of both ex#1 and ex#2 are related to light¹. What is my problem? Am I drawn to the light like a moth to a flame? Maybe that explains why I experienced a long period of darkness after the breakups. I was filled with flaming anger with nowhere to vent and if I did not run fast enough, it would catch me and burn me to ashes. I thought the recovery would get easier and become less painful. But I was wrong. I just pretended to be OK and never mentioned it to anyone. Excruciating breakups are my item number three and four.

Step three: Divide the dough into 8 equal pieces and shape each into a ball. Place them on a baking sheet and cover them with a damp towel for 10 minutes.

I was and still am juggling balls. I needed to keep myself occupied and distracted from ruminating about my sorrowful past. I lost my appetite for food and entertainment last year. After being told that I was not an ideal match for ex#2 in terms of economic consideration, my world collapsed. All I could hear was white noise coming from an untuned radio station. Something was cracking inside. Was ex#2 the same person I knew? What happened?

I am not a materialistic person. To me, money or consumerism is an invented concept bestowed upon us to keep us busy and prevent us from living a full life. I'd like to do things that interest me, though I have no idea what they are now. Ex#2 once told me money was not an issue. Was that a lie? My serenity and the motivation to be a better person disappeared without a trace. Internally, I experienced a violent EF5 emotional tornado, descended into the abyss of the

¹ Light is the basis of our everyday life. It enters the eye where it transmits the information through the retina to the central nervous system where the information is translated into perception and sensation. How we see light changes our perception of the world around us.

Maelstrom whirlpool, and was pulled into a black hole². I swore to myself that I would never put myself in the same position again. I did all the things No.2 asked me to do; wrote the paper, applied for a green card, learned a programming language, and took classes. The pain has kept me going till now. My biggest fear of incompetence and rejection should find its place there. Item number five for the bagel.

Step four: Poke a hole through the center of each dough ball with your pointer finger.

Stretch the center by twirling it around your fingers.

Pointing finger. Great. Just like my mother's. "Why you wasted money on buying me anti-wrinkle night cream? Mine is much better." I still remember how her mouth dropped. Not a sad face, but a disapproving one. I never got her present right. When I was in college, I bought her two pairs of shoes, and she never wore them even once. I complained to her, and her reply was either the weather was too cold, or her shoes were comfortable enough and there was no point in replacing them. I did not mention to her that it took me three months to pay back my installments. On a different occasion, I bought her a non-sticking pan, which she had been researching. It couldn't go wrong this time, I thought. Wrong again. She was unsatisfied with any housework-related gift and thought my intention was to keep her spending more time in the kitchen. I was speechless. How could anyone say something like this? Thank you would be enough, even if you did not mean it. I nearly lost all interest in preparing her any gift. The night

² The black hole is the opposite of light. I first learned this concept when I was in high school. Since then, I was fascinated but afraid of the black hole. I wanted to know what life looks like beyond the horizon of visibility. Would there be a way back though if I were to regret entering the horizon? Maybe Nietzsche was right when he said, "If you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you."

cream was the third blow. The idea of buying her something she could use daily was my friend's idea. Her mother was deeply fond of that gift and could not stop praising my friend. I admitted that I wanted that praise too. So, I forgot my resolve to not expect anything from her. Now she only gets flowers and cake. No room for being picky. Gifts for my mother, item number six.

Step five: Bring a pot of water to a boil. Drop bagels in one at a time and boil the bagels for 1-2 minutes per side.

The kitchen is filled with steam, and the average temperature is 3 degrees higher than the rest of the apartment. This is exactly what I felt when my mother was around, steamed. She was the oldest child of her family, and she had been taking care of her brothers and sisters since she was ten. I figured this experience explained her bossy attitude towards me and my father as well. Her way of showing love was to give you things that she thought were best for you without your consent. As a recipient, there was no nice way of refusing it without hurting anyone's feelings. That was the relationship between us, one pushing and the other escaping. As a result, I either turned to rebellion or accepted passively. I do not have any memory of her ever expressing her pride in me.

I can see this runs in the family. My grandmother was also a hard-to-please person. When her health deteriorated, my mother took the responsibility of taking care of her. She would spend her weekends making her a big dinner, cleaning her room, and even bathing her. My grandmother never thanked her for all her efforts; she did not like her cooking and always showed a grumpy face when we were there. I did not enjoy going there as well but was dragged there anyway. I thought my mother of all people should understand how ingratitude feels, but she passed on the suffering to me. I was a second-generation victim. So, I ran away.

There is one scene from *EEAAO* when Rock Joy shushes her Rock mother in the rock universe that left a deep impression on me. Joy wants her peace, but her mother cannot stop talking or questioning her choice. Even my patience was almost running out. Could you just leave me alone, and not talk? This was exactly what I felt about her mother and my mother. The movie has a happy ending. But I have lived long enough to know that does not happen in real life. I do not expect any fairytale style of change. Thus, my stress source, my desire of seeking approval, and my self-doubt make the list. Item number seven.

Step six: Brush bagels with egg wash, and sprinkle on your everything bagel seasoning. Place in the oven and let back at 425 degrees Fahrenheit for 20 minutes.

The wrinkled bagels rescued from the boiled water look soggy and pathetic. Nothing resembles the “Hail Bagel” from the movie.

I watched many sci-fi movies last year, trying to find some comfort in a different world. What if I could time travel? What if I could jump to a different universe where we live happily ever after? In a sci-fi movie, you always need to find some scientific grounding to support your story. So, I have heard of quantum physics or String theory many times. The most fascinating idea I have found is the “observer effect”. We all know now that light possesses both particle and wave properties. In the classic version of the double-slit experiment, light passing through two narrow parallel slits will produce a series of white and black bands, an interfering pattern, on a screen. I learned about this experiment from my high school physics class. However, after watching a video a month ago, the results of the variations of double-slit shocked me. If only one photon (a particle of light) is shot at the slits at a time, it still generates an interference pattern

instead of two bands like a single particle does. This means that even single particles can act like a wave, which is already strange enough. How could that be? A photon has to go through one slit or the other. What interferes with the photon in the first place? The answer is that the photon goes through both slits at the same time and interferes with itself. The scientific explanation is that all realities exist at once (known as superposition), which is described by the wave function, and the function collapses when the final result occurs (hits the wall) (["https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wave_function"](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wave_function)). If you want to know exactly which slit the particle passes through by placing a detector near the slits, the interfering pattern turns into the particle pattern of two strips ("Physics in a Minute: The Double Slit Experiment"). It is as if they are aware that they are being observed and the act of observing itself changes the outcome of the system. This is also called the "observer effect," which means the observation of quantum phenomena can change the measured result.

This is what amazed me most. What does that mean to our daily life? Maybe our mind works like subatomic particles, containing all the possibilities. If you have a negative opinion of one person, as long as it only exists in your mind and you keep your mouth shut, nobody gets hurt. But the moment you speak that thought or share it with other people, your probability wave function collapses because you have an observer. You could neither take that back nor pretend nothing happened. Perhaps that was exactly what happened between me and ex#2. Ex#2 must have had this unsuitable thought for a while. I was misled by the happy-together appearance. Even I thought this relationship did not work for some time. The difference was I hadn't made up my mind and this thought never met an observer. However, the moment I knew this reality, our relationship broke down and real damage happened. F**king self-deception. Item number eight.

Step seven: Remove bagels from the oven, let those cool, and top with your favorite ingredients.

The moment I open the oven, the garlic, and nutty aroma immediately fills the room, as well as the heat. That is it. My version of “everything-I-want-to-discard Bagel” finally has materialized. I put one bagel onto a plate and stare at the hole in the middle, trying to throw eight of my least favorite things into it. All my sorrows, my disapproval, my emotional sensitivity, my lack of confidence, or my desperation for trying to prove my worth should be gone by now. Now is the moment I can turn black and become a villain in my version of the universe. I can finally fall back onto my back and feel relief now. Lying on the ground. I am reminded of a recent similar experience.

It was a windy night at Acadia national park. By the time my friend Emma and I arrived, it was already 1 am, and we had been driving for three consecutive hours. The destination was a parking lot by the beach where we chose to stargaze. Statistically speaking, it wasn't the perfect conditions for stargazing: a few days after the new moon, the forecast was 25% cloud cover. After 5 months of scheduling and canceling for the ideal conditions at Cherry spring park, this was the best place to observe the Milky Way. Both my body and mind suffered from extreme fatigue. I was so afraid that I would fall asleep during the complete stillness. However, the moment I stepped outside the car, I was fully awake: gusts of sea breeze brushed my cheeks; thundering sounds struck my ears as waves battered the coastal rocks ruthlessly; the salty and fishy smells filled my nostrils. I greedily inhaled the nostalgic beachy freedom and shook off all my fatigue. I put on my astronomy red light headlamp, changed the setting of my mirrorless digital camera, and set up my tripods on the top of the rented car. We did not consider the speed of the wind, and our portable tripod was not designed to withstand the wildness of sea winds. To

avoid unnecessary vibration, my friend and I had to use our hands to stabilize the tripod and took the 30-second-long exposure picture in turn. We aligned the camera lens with the direction of the wind. As a result, branches of pines surrounding the parking lot sneaked into the background of the picture. During my 30-second rest, I lay on the ground and stared at the inky sky. Pines danced with the wind in the distance like those in Van Gogh's painting. The dazzling stars were blinking at me and trying to signal the secrets of the universe with Morse code. The breathtaking Milky Way was winding forward and spanning the whole sky to demonstrate the grandiosity of the Cosmos. The intermittently uninvited passing meteors left behind a trail of the red or green flash, which added a mysterious atmosphere. Martin Luther King once said, "Only in the darkness can you see the stars." (Haven). It was true, the universe was playing a concert for me, and I was the only observer.

It only takes one observer.

As I peek through the bagel hole, imagining a bony, dry hand reaching outside the hole to pull me into the black hole of the bagel, a cat emerges. This is Luna, and I have been keeping her for three years. She helped me through COVID and two breakups. Her existence reduces my multiverse possibilities to a single reality.

The universe has existed for 13.78 billion years and will exist for trillions of years after me ("Age of the Universe - Wikipedia"). Our individual misfortunes disappear into the long river of history. Nothing I do will change history. Every mistake I have made will not matter. Oddly, I feel the weight on my shoulder lighten. Maybe we are insignificant. Maybe there is no meaning in life. Or it could be another human-created mind trap just like money. Maybe my existence is to become the observer of the world around me, to make the world real by shining my light on it.

Maybe I am light.

I look at my caramel-colored everything bagel again and take a bite. It crisps in my mouth, and the garlic flavor stimulates my taste buds. I feel warm and joyful. The bagel is too good to keep to myself, especially when fresh out of the oven.

At 7.49 pm, I am delivering my everything bagels to friends.

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