MID-CENTURY KITCHEN AD WITH THE MODERN FEATURES NUMBERED

AUNT BESSIE'S KITCHEN

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The future is stories we tell to amaze ourselves, to give hope to the desperate, to jolt the complacent.

—David Remnick, from the *The New Yorker*

IT WAS NOT AS SILLY AS YOU MIGHT THINK. All that advertising for the modern kitchen in the 1950s. Smiling women wearing heels and aprons, wholesome children in short sleeve shirts and ruffle trimmed dresses eagerly sitting at a kitchen table (eating in a dining room was going out of style), all-electric appliances, everything modular and "built-in" and in pastel colors. After the bloodiest war ever fought, it was the sunny story of the World of Tomorrow. It was convincing because we need futures to be convincing, more so when the Cold War and the Bomb were the counterstory, the upside down of it all.

We were not exactly the family being advertised to in1957. We were only three, living in the desert country of southern Utah and enjoying our first year of local television reception. We were learning to skip the dining room table in favor of TV dinner trays and "Gunsmoke" and, lately, news about Sputnik.

For weeks we had planned our Christmas holiday in southern California with Aunt Bessie and Uncle Ray. It would be my first trip to the overnourished child of postwar America, fattened when the country tilted to the west and federal dollars slid into California to subsidize our appetites for inexpensive agriculture and expensive national defense. We put our suitcases and tupperware containers full of crackers, fruits and cashews into a new Dodge with tailfins and drove west.

"They moved to a new house," my mother told me. "Bessie says it has a modern kitchen. I'd love a new kitchen, but that'll be the day."

My father drove us across the bottom of Utah and into the bottom of Nevada. We stayed a night and a day in Las Vegas, which was also a first for me. I was in a desert garden of swimming pools and blossoms of blinking night lights. The city played at being "a last frontier" where you could still get lucky. As it turned out, it was already on its way to excesses that would push the limits of the American dream of rags to riches.

Like California, Vegas cashed in on the Cold War. Within days of the first atomic weapons test sixty miles out in the desert — called "shots" and given names like Milkshake, Grable and Harry — "Sin City" was promoted as "The Atomic City." Weapons of mass destruction were an extravaganza more popular than Elvis Presley's first gigs. The Chamber of Commerce published a schedule of tests and detonations times, provided to them by Atomic Energy Commission as a PR campaign to convince us atomic bombs were not only safe, they were fun for the whole family. Hotels offered an early morning glimpse of a shot from north-facing windows and casinos hosted "dawn bomb parties." Cocktails had atomic names.

As my luck would have it, a shot was scheduled. My father was a pious and modest man, not given to cocktails or hotel parties, so we drove to Frenchman's Flat in the dark hours of morning. Families sat in parked cars and on blankets with "atomic box lunches," and television crews and journalists were there to show it all to America. "Look over there," my father told me, "Those people might be from CBS." At the time, CBS offered his favorite evening news program.

There was a sudden flash over the horizon. It didn't seem to have a shape, not an actual fireball that I could see, just an astonishing brightness. There would have been a mushroom cloud shooting out of the top of the light but that was hard to see in the dark. We stayed until after sunrise, and I could see remnants of the mushroom cloud miles up in the sky. Years later I read an account by a journalist who had come to witness a test. He described what he saw as a fiery creature escaping its underworld bonds.

Before we left Las Vegas, I was allowed to put a nickel in a slot machine. "Just this one," my father said, "you don't want to gamble away your future."

UNCLE RAY AND AUNT BESSIE lived in one of the villages of greater Los Angeles. The villages offered one of America's new ambitions — suburban respectability. The war had set aside the world of tomorrow but we were getting back on track. Their house had white stucco walls and a red tile roof, a wrought-iron gate and a border of tall, sword-like leaves along the street. Uncle Ray's car had even bigger

tail fins, and probably more chrome. Chrome was king in those days. Fifty or maybe a hundred pounds of it on a car you parked in your driveway as a visible marker of status in what most people (white people at least) agreed was the greatest economy in the world. The automobile had won the battle for our hearts and minds. The world of tomorrow would be accessible by car.

Uncle Ray had been a military engineer in the war. He ended up in the new aerospace industry which was now vital to our national defense against whatever the Russians might get up to. He managed people, which was another a new ambition in the greatest economy. Corporatism and productivity were exalted as a way to "lift all boats." It had lifted his boat higher than anything I had seen.

Aunt Bessie's kitchen was a domestic paradise. I saw "built-ins" and cabinets, large appliances with a touch of stainless steel, small appliances with polished chrome finishes and hints of aerodynamic contours. Displays and knobs rose from the stovetop like a car dashboard. Coral walls extended to sunny yellow countertops and fresh green floors, just enough nostalgic pastels to not entirely forget the past.

Said a Seattle housewife last week: "We spend at least 50% of our waking hours in the kitchen. It would be silly not to make it one of the nicest rooms in the house."
— "The Kitchen Comeback," Time (1954)

Accent dishes with rolled edges and pitchers with drooping spouts and curving handles sat on countertops. Organic and nature-based shapes that had congealed from the singular image of the mushroom cloud and popular imagination of what radiation could do. It was the Atomic Age, things were melting.

There was a small table where Bessie and Ray ate with their children, Todd and Caroline. The children were encouraged to imagine whatever they wanted to be and to feel that it would actually happen. This was the opposite of an old-fashioned story of rising above your situation. In this story, the future was meant for *them*. They only needed to apply the doctrines of acuity, prudence, discretion and discipline. I began to understand that Todd and Caroline's future was a vision of abundance in the promised land of capitalism and democracy. It was a future only possible in America. While it was arguable whether or not there was a future at all in a world with nuclear weaponry, a modern kitchen where the family could gather at around a small table seemed to be as good a shelter as any.

“Nobody has a kitchen like this back home. It must have been expensive,” my mother said. “You and Ray have done well for yourselves out here in California.”

Aunt Bessie demurred, “We wouldn’t want to appear to be living grand or anything, but Ray and I agree it’s been worth the expense. This modern world is complicated and I do save time and work around the house these days.”

“It’ll be the day when we have anything like this,” my mother said. She felt that all the magazine, and now television advertisements of the modern future didn’t apply to her in the remoteness of the empty West. Her sister encouraged her to think otherwise, “There are so many new things today, something for everybody.”

“There’ll be more to come, for sure. That’s the future now,” Uncle Ray interjected. He had an engineer’s confidence that any inconvenience to everyday life could be met with a new everyday technology. It was a deep faith in self-improvement and limitlessness. He enjoyed his morning cup of coffee from a mirror-chrome finish “King of Automatic Coffee Makers” and his toast popped out of a matching toaster.

ROCKET TO MOON, DISNEYLAND

DISNEYLAND opened two years earlier. Uncle Ray and Aunt Bessie took us there. Tomorrowland pointed the way to a future of inventions and space travel and nuclear-powered everything. It included the Rocket to the Moon building. We sat in movie seats and blasted off. We watched our departure from Disneyland on the lower screen and our arrival at the moon on the upper screen. It was a 10-minute trip to where no man had gone before. Outside the entrance Uncle Ray pointed to

the 75-foot TWA Moonliner rocket, “I don’t think TWA will be flying us to the moon ahead of the Russians.” That was a confidence of doubt. Sputnik had put such things into question, barely two months earlier.

“Give credit to the Russians,” he continued, “but if it’s a race to space we better stick to real science and engineering. The government was asleep at the wheel and this Sputnik thing getting up there first should never have happened. Now we have to spend money, a lot of money, and put the best people on it.”

For my father, the world was more about godliness than engineering. He thought our trouble was a moral crisis. He hated “Godless communism” but distrusted his own government. Yet he deferred to Uncle Ray, the expert on national defense. “I suppose you’re right. We won’t be watching from comfortable seats like those inside that moon rocket show. As much as I don’t like all this government spending, you’re probably right about this one.”

Uncle Ray continued with his tone of voice for when he thought what he was saying should already be obvious, “And that’s true if there’s going to be any kind of land of tomorrow.” Uncle Ray, the rocket engineer, I thought. He was one of those who would send us into the Space Age. I was a space-age boy.

Aunt Bessie and my mother wanted no more of space travel or Russians. They wanted to see The House of the Future, another attraction of Tomorrowland. Long before Dustin Hoffman’s character in *The Graduate*, the college graduate Benjamin, heard it from middle-aged Mr. Robinson, it was all about plastics. The futurist house rose on a central pedestal with its four wings of synthetic materials cantilevering outward. Promotional material promised “The future may come in mass-produced, no-upkeep parts that you arrange to suit the whole family.”

Inside, everything was in bright colors. An ultramodern kitchen included an ultrasonic dishwasher that was “safe for plastic. There was a bedroom for the parents and two small bedrooms side by side for the boy of the future and his equally futuristic sister. “We should of thought of this for you two,” Aunt Bessie teased Todd and Caroline.

Todd, who was already sure he could be anything he wanted to be, suggested to me, probably insincerely, that we go to Frontierland. “There’s a desert there, with piles of big rocks. Isn’t that like where you live?” Caroline giggled. “Mom says she would never live there again. It’s the sticks.”

Sometime after New Year's Day we began our drive back to the sticks. But I had seen the beginning of the Space Age. I knew a rocket engineer who drank his coffee in a modern kitchen. This time, crossing the great American desert, I imagined our car was a jet fighter. The tailfins were like stabilizers.

Somewhere in Nevada my father waved his arm skyward, "For all we know they've got another damn satellite up there." Little did I know that Sputnik, launched into orbit just months earlier and already crashed back to earth, would be a humbling blow to the tailfin dream of the 1950s. It was a dream soon to be accused of frivolous engineering, toys and gewgaws. Some would rue that our national will had softened into little more than amusement.

"MRS. MODERN'' AGAINST ''MRS. DRUDGE'' 1939 WORLD'S FAIR

THE KITCHEN CAME OUT OF THE CLOSET at the 1939 World's Fair. A daily dishwashing contest was staged by Westinghouse as the Battle of the Centuries. "Mrs. Modern" and "Mrs. Drudge" squared off in front of an audience. The contest was be scored on three criteria: the time needed to wash dishes, their cleanliness and the condition of the contestants at the end.

A theatrically exited announcer provided a blow-by-blow narrative. Mrs. Modern stood calmly next to a new front-loading dishwasher, Mr. Drudge worked frantically over an old-fashioned dishpan and sink. "Dishwater is splashing all over, it's even getting on me. It's dangerous near that dishpan!" exclaimed the announcer. Mrs. Modern and her state-of-art, all-electric dishwasher prevailed — "The contest is over! Mrs. Modern looks as fresh and neat as when she stepped

into the ring." Mrs. Drudge, of course, appeared exhausted, as was American life without a modern kitchen.

Mrs. Modern against Mrs. Drudge was an intramural competition. In 1959, domestic paradise got tangled up with dangerous geopolitics. Containing Communism was an existential showdown and the kitchen had a part to play.

The American National Exhibition in Moscow featured a" Miracle Kitchen" with a planning center, closed-circuit TV, microwave oven, mechanical maid and Richard Nixon. Nixon invited Nikita Krushchev to visit the exhibit. It turned into a Cold War debate while a woman in heels and apron worked the appliances (the Russian news media said she might be a spy).

NIXON AND KRUSHCHEV IN THE "MIRACLE KITCHEN"

"I want to show you this kitchen," Dick said to Nikita. "It's like one of our houses in California. What we want to do is make life more easy for our housewives." He was confident America would bury the Soviet Union in a democracy of consumer goods affordable to everyone. An endless parade of better washing machines, better refrigerators, new gadgets and gizmos for the home and office. Engineering would support politics and totalitarianism would melt away. Uncle Ray probably agreed, though I never had chance to ask him.

Dick played to a television crew filming it all, "You may be ahead in some things, like your rocket thrusters, but we're ahead in colored television."

Nikita was unimpressed. "Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism." He spent most of his time on television trolling Nixon.

THE LAST TIME I sat in Aunt Bessie's kitchen was her funeral. Uncle Ray had proceeded her, as they say in obituaries, by several years. Our romance with experts, management and corporatism was dying. America had suffered a flattening or exceptionalism thanks to the Vietnam War, civil unrest, cities on fire and police brutality brought to us at home on television. Bit by bit, it was like we had come to the end of the future of who we once thought we were.

Caroline made us coffee in the kitchen. It was nothing like the one in my memory of my first trip to California. “Mother finally let me redo the kitchen a few years ago. I just did it bit by bit,” she said. The kitchen that challenged popular attitudes toward the domestic role of women, family life, consumerism and political ideology was gone. A kitchen island had replaced the table for four. Caroline’s husband leaned against it with his coffee and toast. He was some kind of manager of finance and funds. “Financial management is forward-looking, you know. People can’t sit back and see what happens,” he told me. He hoped I was planning for my retirement. “People won’t have a good future if they don’t plan.”

Quaint as it may seem, the kitchen was once a bridgehead of modern domestic thinking, a springboard for the reorganization of space and domestic labor in the home. It was a testing ground for new materials and technologies. That, at least, has not changed entirely. Microsoft has a project team looking into what might be brought to market for the kitchen in the next 5 to 10 years. That might include recipes projected directly onto countertops (no need to fuss with index cards or cookbooks), an oven that can be remotely programmed from a smart phone and a microwave that reads a product’s bar code and knows how long to cook it.

The future is not a given. When it fails us, we create a new one that separates us from a past future. Newspapers and on-line magazines run stories and photo essays about the World of Tomorrow that feature a world adapting to extreme heat, cold and rising seas, and struggling to find a way to live sustainably.