To this day Chicago is mysterious to me, an onion patch of paradoxes. So beautiful in spring yet so bone ugly in winter. So tall downtown yet with a short city’s complex. So culturally rich yet so suburbanly satisfied.

I apologize to all Chicagoans and Chicago lovers, I truly do, but please don’t get me started on Chicago pizza.

When Mars and I arrived in the Windy City—as our entire troupe of friends insisted on calling it a thousand times before we left and for years afterward—we were invited for a special dinner at Betsy and Lara’s apartment in Ravenswood, a North Side neighborhood. They were a friendly lesbian couple Mars and I had met at the Newtown Alano Club, which had recently moved to a new space on Clark Street, and they insisted on introducing us personally to Chicago stuffed pizza.
Well, we certainly loved pizza—the lovely crisp crust thrown over the head of a practiced Italian and caught on a fist, the chewy mozzarella, the tomato sauce dripping down your forearm as you folded a hot slice and took that first anticipated bite. It was a staple in New York. You could consume four food groups while walking from Ray’s to the subway on 96th Street.

*Chicago-style* was waiting for us when we arrived at Betsy and Lara’s. The elaborate confection on the dining room table had flaky crust, four different kinds of cheese—including gruyere, Lara told us proudly (gruyere, for God’s sake?)—and mouthfuls of tangled spinach.

After years of living in Chicago and bitterly missing New York pizza cut in adult-sized triangles, not forty-two kiddie-sized squares, I realized that I had to start thinking of both deep-dish and thin-crust Chicago pizza as a different genre altogether. Pizza cake, for instance; pizza crackers might be another possibility. My mother used to make us English muffin pizzas. A spoonful of Hunt’s from the can, a paper-thin slice of mozzarella, and a sprinkling of dried oregano—yum. I was open. I was an adventurer.

But that night the two of us were bereft.

There was nothing to do but hang together. And punt.