

8. The Jell-O Curse

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Allie Rowbottom's life is built on a Jell-O fortune, just like it was for the lives of her mother and her grandmother. But along with the wealth from America's most famous dessert, there came a curse. Now the most recent heir to the Jell-O fortune, Allie tries to make sense of her family history, and all the strange ways Jell-O showed up in their lives. In the process, she learns what the curse means to her.

PLUS: Household Name Uncut on all the weird things we used to put in Jell-O molds.

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Produced by Clare Rawlinson and Sarah Wyman with Dan Bobkoff and Anna Mazarakis.

Allie Rowbottom is the author of [Jell-O Girls: A Family History](#).

More episodes

Transcript

Note: This transcript may contain errors.

ALLIE ROWBOTTOM: To me it was just like oh, yeah Jell-O... Like that's a funny story that I'll tell people at parties or something about where I come from.

DAN BOBKOFF: Allie Rowbottom is an heir to the Jell-O fortune.

AR: My sort of odd and tangential claim to fame here is that my great-great-great uncle by marriage, uh Orator Francis Woodward, bought the patent to Jell-O from its inventor in 1899 for \$450 and then sold it for 67 million in 1920s.

DB: That's like a billion dollars today.

Money that's filtered down through Allie's sprawling family over generations.

And lately, Allie's become obsessed with Jell-O. How that Jell-O money shaped her family.

And how Jell-O, the product, has shaped America — with messages like this....

JELL-O AD: What's for dessert when a spouse needs cheer?

JELL-O AD: The men in my life swear by it!

JELL-O AD: Ask any little girl, when it comes to entertaining, there's nothing quite like Jell-O!

JELL-O AD: There's always room for Jell-O!

DB: From Business Insider and Stitcher, this is Household Name, the show about brands you know, and stories you don't. I'm Dan Bobkoff.

Today, one family's complicated relationship with Jell-O.

Jell-O money funded the life of Allie's grandmother. It funded her mother. Now's it's funding Allie.

And at the same time that money was providing what seemed like power and privilege, Jell-O kept turning up in weird ways, at pivotal moments in their lives.

It was something that brought Allie and her mom together, and pushed them apart.

Jell-O became this shadow they felt like they couldn't escape: A twisted metaphor for all the bad things that happened in their lives.

It might sound strange to find so much meaning in Jell-O. At least that's what I thought.

Stay with us.

ACT I

DB: In the late 1600s, a guy in France boiled some animal bones and skin and figured out how to extract the collagen. The jiggly clear substance became known as gelatin.

Jump ahead 200 years, and a self-taught engineer named Peter Cooper turned it into a powder that became a dessert when you added hot water. But it didn't catch on, and he started working on glue instead.

A half century later, a cough syrup maker in Le Roy, New York branched into foods, and added flavors like strawberry to the instant gelatin. His wife named it Jell-O.

But he couldn't get people to buy it either, so in 1899, he gave up and sold it to someone who finally turned it into a hit.

That guy was Allie's great great great uncle. Y'know - the one who bought Jell-O for a few hundred and sold it for millions?

From that point on, Allie's family was loaded. But they were never again directly involved with Jell-O's business or manufacturing.

For years, they stayed in Jell-O's hometown, LeRoy, New York. This is where until the mid-60s, the Jell-O factory turned those bits of old bones into a shiny dessert.

In that small town upstate, it was a Jell-O economy. The family's wealth put their name on buildings. Whenever one of their kids got sick, the local gossip pages would write about it. When it got cold out, a limousine would pick them up from school.

Allie heard the stories as a child, third-hand from her mother.

AR: And I loved hearing about the... the light elements of those stories. The feasts and servants and butlers and a limousine. (laughs)

DB: Allie's childhood was more station wagon than limousine, but that 1920s fortune still meant her mom didn't need a day job.

And as Allie got older, she wanted to understand where she came from -- where her money came from.

And so she started with the earliest inheritor in her family line: her grandmother Midge.

AR: So Midge was a young woman growing up in Le Roy, New York. My mom did always say that she had a very soft, even tone and that she really rarely raised her voice, which seems in keeping with her character. I've read a lot of her letters and they're very restrained. She had brown hair which she wore swept into a neat bun at the back of her head. And she wore very neat earrings and very fashionable outfits for the time. A lot of sort of trim waists.

DB: Midge's Jell-O money helped make her life more exciting than the average married woman in the 1940s and '50s. She met and married her husband Bob during a stint as a reporter in Honolulu. Then the two lived in Lima, Peru, for several years as he flew commercial planes around the world.

AR: She had always wanted to travel and to write, and so the idea of living abroad with her dashing husband was, you know, obviously really fetching.

DB: But then she had kids, and her adventures hit a dead end: she found herself feeling isolated in Lima. She didn't have the support and status she got in LeRoy from her place in the Jell-O royalty.

So she and Bob left Lima behind and returned to their hometown — Jell-O's hometown — Le Roy.

In some ways, it felt sort of like a letdown. LeRoy was drab, suburban and snowy. But it was the easier choice. The safe choice.

AR: She was sort of a social butterfly. So she had a lot of girlfriends and... And acclimated.

DB: Midge's family was in LeRoy: her cousins, Her aunt. And being close meant they'd make sure to get that inheritance.

AR: So I think you know Midge made a sacrifice herself. She had wanted to travel, she had wanted to write, but moving back to LeRoy meant that she was in the society there.

DB: Also, her life in Le Roy looked a lot like what Jell-O marketing promoted back then.

AR: It was very wedded to the idea of the housewife and the strong American family where daddy goes to work at 9 a.m. every morning and comes home and has a martini in the evening and the kids all gather around the table and it's it's happily ever after with the white picket fence.

DB: Midge's husband was more of a beer-drinker than a martini kind of man. Midge would fetch him a bottle from the fridge when he got home every day — playing the role dutifully, if unhappily.

Meanwhile, Their maid was in the kitchen making dinner, sometimes pouring fruit into Jell-O molds.

Back then, Jell-O's makers wanted Americans to put all sorts of things in Jell-O.

JELL-O AD: Onions, radishes, carrots, peas.

DB: There was a Jell-O salad with mayo and anchovies.

JELL-O AD: Beans! Lima and string.

DB: A ham and celery loaf made with lime Jell-O.

JELL-O AD: Mmmm! Bright, crisp vegetables in cool, shimmering Jell-O! There's a salad for ya!

DB: What is going on?! That's not even the worst of them. It was definitely not America's finest culinary hour.

DB: What was Jell-O saying to women at the same time that Midge was in LeRoy?

AR: Oh so much about um where to stay physically, which is in the home.

JELL-O AD: Too late to make dessert. Wait! It's not too late to make dessert!

AR: Um and how to make it in particular.

JELL-O AD: Just add to milk and beat! In minutes...

AR: So I think especially because initially Jell-O was this mystery food. It was a scientific experiment in a way...

JELL-O AD: This terrific new busy-day dessert is ready to eat!

AR: I mean once we're talking about, um, the '40s and '50s, we're really talking about time periods that privileged, uh growth and um innovation.

JELL-O AD: Or let the children make it themselves... it's that easy!

AR: And cleanliness. So old recipes might be seen as dirty.

JELL-O AD: Creamy, nourishing... so delicious. J-E-L-L-OOOOO!

DB: It's as though the whole marketing campaign for Jell-O recipes was basically: you can hide whatever you want in a Jell-O mold. Old chicken? Wilted lettuce? Put it in some Jell-O! How nourishing!

AR: Jell-O really fit well with that identity in part because it literally is a food that you mold. So it encapsulates and contains what feel like messy ingredients. Like, um, shredded vegetables or leftovers or whatever. It can all go into the Jell-O and become neatly contained. And I think, you know, especially in an era of American History where we were really privileging sameness, um, a lot of people probably had to do a lot of stuffing and hiding of their own trauma.

DB: In the mid '50s, Midge and Bob took their kids to Italy. Allie's mom Mary was 12. And just like Midge had realized in Peru, Mary saw there was life outside their small town of LeRoy.

She loved being in exciting, new places, and she saw a future for herself that didn't look like the rest of the Jell-O aristocracy.

But while they were abroad: Midge found out she had breast cancer, and again she reluctantly returned to Le Roy. She had a mastectomy, but she remained ill – eventually bed-ridden.

And for months, no one in the family talked about the cancer.

Mary resented her mother for taking them back to LeRoy. Resented the sickness. It also scared her.

AR: There was a time, and it really shaped my mother's life as sort of the last time that she saw her mother, which was in the winter and her mom had been worsening. But I think people weren't really talking about it, and the family wasn't talking about it certainly, but it was it was happening.

DB: What was unsaid is that the cancer had come back. Midge was dying...and Mary wasn't prepared for it. No one was, apparently – perhaps most of all, her husband.

AR: Her mother came out of a bathroom on the first floor of the house and was very concerned. In the other room, Bob, Midge's husband, was calling the ambulance, and Midge was saying to my mother, 'please hide me. Don't let them come for me.' The subtext being 'if they come and take me I'm never coming back.'

And my mother was completely bewildered by this and frightened, I'm sure. Um, and didn't know what to do. And so she said to her mother like, 'okay, I'll take care of you,' but then ultimately couldn't figure out what to do and just had her sit down. And then my mom ran and hid behind the tool shed in the backyard while the ambulance came and took her mother away.

And that was always told as sort of the last time that she saw her mother and her mother's last words to her being like, 'hide me.'

DB: A couple weeks later, Mary received a phone call from her cousin, telling her Midge had died.

AR: Everything fell apart. It was like a somebody turned off the lights and things just fell apart.

DB: Mary left Le Roy as soon as she could.

She wanted to escape the small-town life of Jell-O fame. To carve out her own path, on her own terms.

She went to boarding school, then Sarah Lawrence — a liberal arts college just north of New York.

But she kept having nightmares about Midge's death. She turned to drugs and alcohol to cope.

By 19, Mary ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Someone there asked her: what's your deal?

"Jell-O" she said.

AR: I think that loss and the turmoil that ensued felt like a curse to my mom.

DB: The Jell-O curse. That's next.

ACT II

AR: The first time I really remember my mom talking about the curse was when I was quite young, I think I was probably five or six.

DB: In Allie's family, there's been an idea for generations that all the family's problems came from Jell-O. A Jell-O curse! The men in the family had their idea of what it meant.

AR: Alcoholism, addiction, existential boredom. Uh, they, the family had a history of all of those problems and also suicide and early death sort of by mysterious causes.

DB: Mary heard about the curse when she was little. And at first it was like a scary bedtime story.

AR: She had learned as a child that the curse was specific to her family. Specific to the men in her family and how it haunted them because of the connection to Jell-O and the great wealth that Jell-O had brought the family.

DB: But then, after Midge died, Mary struggled with grief. A number of men took advantage of her vulnerability, abused her. And she eventually became addicted to drugs and alcohol. The curse started to feel very real to Mary. A curse that affected women.

And over her life, she began to see Jell-O and everything it represented as a kind of parable.

She could see it when she turned on the TV or opened a magazine and got a blunt reminder of where her money came from. The Jell-O ads made her cringe.

AR: So it seems like she's looking up at someone who's taller than her...

DB: Allie showed me some old Jell-O ads from this time. Around 1970. In one, a woman with coiffed auburn hair grimaces up at the camera, her hand over her mouth.

AR: And the quote at the top of the image is, 'This is the guess what happened when I backed the car out Dear pudding,' so the idea being that this woman messed up and needs to atone for it by offering her husband a slice of pie.

DB: Jell-O isn't alone here. It didn't invent sexism, and it was far from the only mainstream company with ads like this. But even so, something about these ads feels especially biting. Here's another one. She's holding a Jell-O cream pie, clearly to atone for the new \$950 fur coat she bought. You can even see the price tag on it.

AR: It's pretty egregious in terms of its sexism.

DB: When these ads were published, Mary, her mother, was in her 30s. Allie hadn't been born. Then, later in the '70s, Jell-O found a new face for the product...the always cheerful, friendly, and seemingly unthreatening...

JELL-O AD: Bill Cosby!

Why not make new sugar-free Jell-O instant pudding?

DB: Bill Cosby hawked Jell-O in the 70s. In the 80s. In the 90s. Even in the last 10 years. It's one of the longest celebrity endorsements in history.

JELL-O AD: How long has it been since your mom's fixed Jell-O pudding for you?

A long time!

How long?

DB: For a lot of that time, especially in the '70s and '80s, the ads were still about mom in the kitchen making Jell-O for her family.

JELL-O AD: Mom, you know how the kids love Jell-O pudding.

DB: Bill Cosby is at the kids' table. He's never the one making the Jell-O.

JELL-O AD: And you haven't made Jell-O pudding since...

Last night!

Last... whaaaat?

DB: But seeing him perched at the kitchen table in a woolen sweater was enough to reinforce those all-American family values. Those Jell-O family values.

JELL-O AD: Kids love Jell-O pudding. And you know it's made with fresh milk, so it's wholesome!

DB: Some of these ads felt like an extension of the Cosby show. Warm, suburban, safe and wholesome. We know now this version of Cosby was a fraud. We know now what he was really doing to women through those decades.

In her 30s, Mary had controlled her addictions and found some comfort and expression in art. She painted nude women with bold gestures and brushstrokes. But she never promoted herself or the work. She'd give away her paintings for free. After all, she had Jell-O money.

Then, she married. And at 40 years old, she got a surprise. She named her Allie.

DB: What was your mom like as a mother?

AR: She was very present, and very childlike with me. Which you know seems almost kind of strange looking back on it, I think. Like when I look at old movies or whatever I'm like... uhhh I don't think I'd be that kind of mom..

HOME VIDEO: Should we sing Clementine? Yeah! Oh my darlin', oh my darlin', oh my daaarlin' Clementine...

DB: You can never really know a family from the outside, but when I see some of her childhood videos, I see a happy kid, and a loving mom singing to her child in the bathtub with a puppet on her hand.

HOME VIDEO: Whoops, I got wet. Woah! I got wet again! Oops! Wow! Oooh! I got wet!

DB: But Allie sees something different.

HOME VIDEO: Oooh, she's good at it!

AR: And I notice this in a lot of my childhood videos...She's acting. When she's talking to me, like she's created a persona, and that's where we meet.

HOME VIDEO: Do you want me to take that little dead mouse and bury it and then we'll have a service? Yeaahh. Alright.

DB: In another video, it's Allie's first birthday party. Mary's sitting next to a plastic white picnic table. Allie's perched on her lap. They blow bubbles together, Allie giggles.

HOME VIDEO: [giggling]

DB: And just to their left, on a platter, a lime green Jell-O mold glistens in the sun.

DB: What's your first memory of Jell-O?

AR: My first memory of Jell-O— it was at... I don't know if people are familiar with the grocery store chain Stop and Shop, but they had a salad bar that had Jell-O in it and cottage cheese and whipped cream and cantaloupe melon and other things I'm sure but those were the things that my mom and I were selecting at the time... which I realize now... she must have been on some kind of diet...

DB: Jell-O followed Mary and Allie throughout their lives. And weirdly, Mary and Allie seemed to follow Jell-O.

AR: During my adolescence my parents divorced, and my mom was again struggling to find her footing and, we started Weight Watchers together.

WEIGHT WATCHERS AD: Give in! Give in! Give in to the taste!

AR: I'd already had some struggles like in my very early adolescence with restricting what I was eating, but I think, I don't know, like I had sort of yo-yoed and she was like worried for some reason and she was going to do Weight Watchers. So she was just like why don't we do it together?

DB: It was her idea.

AR: It was her idea. So as in a lot of things at that time, I was like fine. I feel betrayed by the fact that you've told me to start Weight Watchers. So I'm going to start Weight Watchers, but then I'm going to get better at it than you are and so it felt like I've got to get my number smaller than hers.

DB: So Weight Watchers assigns points to foods. Except there are a few foods that are zero points — you can eat as much as you want. One of those was sugar free Jell-O.

JELL-O AD: Oh, fruit and sugar free Jell-O gelatin...

AR: We would just put it in the bowl on the table in between us and eat it together with spoons...

It was it was kind of an interesting time with us making Jell-O together because it was at once this sort of bonding experience, but it was also like bonding over this ultimately destructive act. Like we were both trying to change our bodies as a way of feeling better about ourselves. And Jell-O... Also, it doesn't really fill you up. It's not nutritious and it tastes horrible. (laughs)

JELL-O AD: Jell-O gelatin!

DB: This started when Allie was a teenager. By the time she got to college, the mini fridge in her dorm was stocked full of sugar-free Jell-O cups. She refused to eat almost anything else and before long, it turned into a full on eating disorder.

AR: And that was a horrible, horrible time. It was a time that was really fraught for my mom and I and then ultimately she gave me an ultimatum and I went into treatment when I was in my early 20s.

DB: What'd she say to you?

AR: She said no more money if you don't go to treatment.

DB: And that worked.

AR: It did. Yeah because I didn't know what I was going to do otherwise.

DB: Eating all that sugar free Jell-O — sometimes only sugar free Jell-O — was a habit that helped enable Allie's disorder. But it was the threat of losing the Jell-O money that compelled her to seek treatment. And it paid for that treatment.

That Jell-O money her mom was threatening to cut off was paying her rent and other big costs.

Then, once she was better, Jell-O money would allow her to become a full time writer. She didn't need a day job to pay the bills.

So it's no wonder she didn't want to give up that cash, even if it was a little cursed.

DB: The idea of weight was such a big thing in your life. What do you think that came from?

AR: There's this idea, at least for me and my life, of what happens when you are not for whatever reason allowed to speak of your trauma and how it becomes important in situations like that to shut off the body. But then also give yourself something else to focus on. Like I think at that point in my life, like my parents were getting divorced and it was pretty messy and I think I was also on the verge of adolescence and womanhood and it felt like I wasn't ready for that. I had no protector.

DB: Allie got better, but what her family saw as the curse was reappearing in other ways. Now Mary was sick. Cancer. Just like her mother Midge.

Then, as Mary began treatment in Connecticut, she and Allie became obsessed with a news story from their Jell-O hometown: Le Roy, New York.

It was about a group of young women known as the Le Roy girls...

NEWS CLIP: For months, doctors in LeRoy, New York, have been trying to figure out what caused twelve girls to have severe tics, almost like Tourette syndrome.

Stay with us.

ACT III

NEWS CLIP: Welcome back... what's been going on in LeRoy, New York, in the past months?

ALLIE: So in 2011 and 2012, um, and this is the story that my mom became really obsessed with.

NEWS CLIP: Strange illness has made at least a dozen teenage girls sick at the same high school.

AR: A group of girls who are living in Le Roy New York,

NEWS CLIP: Well, I used to cheer, every day...

AR: ...came down with a mysterious set of ailments

NEWS CLIP: I would go to art class... I used to [involuntary sound] I used to go to two art classes every day.

AR: ...ticking, twitching, tourette-like symptoms.

NEWS CLIP: I was always so... I was always so active, and...

AR: Nobody knew what was causing them.

NEWS CLIP: Everybody was always happy to be around me.

AR: And these ailments seemed to spread like wildfire among this group of girls.

So the town freaked out, as they should. Um, looked for all sorts of contaminants and environmental factors.

NEWS CLIP: And it's important to reiterate, the state department says it's confident students there are not at risk because of anything in or around Le Roy High School.

AR: But ultimately the, you know after every physical test was run and every possible physical problem was ruled out, the girls were issued a diagnosis of conversion disorder.

DB: What is a conversion disorder?

AR: Conversion disorder is... Um sort of what it sounds like. It's the conversion of emotional stress or trauma into physical symptoms that the person experiencing those symptoms experiences as real and involuntary.

DB: Seeing these girls, it suddenly struck Allie that something like this had been her experience, too.

After recovering from anorexia, one of her hands occasionally became paralyzed, stuck in a claw shape she couldn't uncurl.

But she'd never known what was going on — doctors had called her experiences stress-related.

She got heart palpitations and migraines... panic attacks so bad she had to go to an emergency room.

She and Mary had both come to understand their ailments partly through conversion disorder...or as Mary might have said...as symptoms of the curse.

So the case of the Le Roy girls captivated Allie and her mother...

AR: But I also really related to what felt like to me at their age like an inability to understand the scope of my own trauma or to own it and certainly to speak it. So, um, it made total sense to me that they couldn't say like what it was that they maybe needed to say and so their symptoms were coming out sideways because that certainly had happened to me.

DB: What'd your mom think?

AR: Um, my mom really thought that this was not only a response to um, the individual traumas in each girl's life, but the sort of larger patriarchal character of the town in which they lived, um one that she often times described as sort of Brigadoon. Like nothing ever changed, and that as being a problem specifically for women. Um, she also saw it as sort of

an intergenerational phenomenon wherein like women, and young girls in this case, were responding to the pain and the trauma that's passed down genetically from one generation to the next.

DB: Eventually, the Le Roy girls started to get better. One of them was diagnosed with tourette syndrome, and the rest were treated for conversion disorder. By the time high school graduation rolled around, everything was back to normal. And Jell-O, the food, obviously didn't cause any of this.

Years later, the neurologist who treated them stands by his diagnosis of conversion disorder. And until the end of her life, Mary stood by hers: the curse.

Just before her mother died, Allie Rowbottom headed to Le Roy.

AR: It was summertime and it was green and beautiful, and a little bit suffocating which is something that I've often times felt about Upstate New York. It feels like landlocked and there's trees closing in and mountains closing in and there's this sort of myth of Rip Van Winkle and I feel it... like I just have always felt sort of a palpable difference.

DB: *What did Le Roy look like?*

AR: It's very flat. It's um, it's very small. (laughs) Not super colorful. Especially in the winter. It's just very white and gray, and the buildings are very white and gray.

DB: She went to visit her grandmother Midge's grave...but she also had a vague notion of finding the Le Roy girls... as she searched for some of her own history.

Instead, she found herself peering through windows the old Jell-O factory.

The factory is basically abandoned. Jell-O left Le Roy in the 1960s - it moved its manufacturing to Delaware.

Now the brick building that used to truck in animal bones and ship out colored Jell-O powder is only really of use to the occasional paintballers.

DB: *How do you feel seeing that... Seeing seeing what it's become?*

AR: It felt like something I should break into. Like I should like get into that building and like really root around and sort of see if I could find the... where it all started or something like that. Like I should be braver. And I think I've had that feeling a lot about um, Le Roy and the history there. But uh, I didn't. I didn't even want to. I didn't really want to. Like I felt relief when we left. There was always a sense that if you go, you might never come back like you might get sucked in and then you'll never leave. Um, so I remember feeling relief when we a) drove away from the Jell-O factory and ultimately when we drove away from Le Roy, I like couldn't wait to get out of there.

DB: *Um the curse is something that you've been thinking about since you were 5, right?*

AR: *Yeah.*

DB: *And so what does it mean to you?*

AR: *Um, it means not something that's at all specific to where I come from or my family but rather something that's specific to American culture. I mean, I think it's a particular brand of patriarchy that's wedded to American capitalism. And epitomized by the Jell-O brand. But I think you could look at other products and see it too. But Jell-O, because it was so invested in women's lives and um, freedom— or lack thereof— I think is a particularly apt emblem of the curse. And so like, although my mom had grown up learning about this Jell-O curse that people said was specific to her family, or mostly one family member said was specific to her family, really she discovered that the curse was collective.*

DB: *How do you feel about your own inheritance and money? It comes from Le Roy, it comes from Jell-O?*

AR: *Honestly, I see it, and I have to say I'm like fairly early into my life as like an heir... My mom died three years ago, and she she left me her slice of Jell-O.*

DB: *Her slice is worth a couple million dollars. That plus some other money means she never has to work.*

AR: *I... I really feel like it comes from her, like I don't really think about that. I know she did. And obviously like she grew up with Jell-O as much more of a presence than I did. But um, it feels to me like her. Maybe I am breaking the curse in some ways as I really don't see the money as a curse at all.*

DB: *In 2015, Jell-O made its final appearance in Allie's relationship with her mother. It was a few months before Mary died from the cancer she'd had for more than a decade.*

AR: *So, um at this point it was spring. March of 2015. My mom had had gone in for surgery in January and had seemed to be improving but then was no longer improving. So my husband and I flew to New York for her birthday and to see her through another hospital stay, sort of in an emergency capacity and decided to have a little birthday party for her. It was going to be her 70th birthday. And the only thing that she could eat was Jell-O.*

And she preferred black cherry. So we bought a bunch of that. And since we didn't have a mold, we just put it in a Tupperware bowl. Which we then flipped into this sort of odd cylinder shape and topped with whipped cream and a couple candles.

DB: *There's a video of this. She and her husband seem excited they got it to work at all.*

HOME VIDEO: *[laughter]*

AR: I went upstairs and got my mom and and led her to the table and we all sang happy birthday and she was sort of shuffling to the table in a white bathrobe with her hair a total mess, but she was trying to be delighted by the whole production. I think she was ultimately really fatigued. I have pictures of it and she looks just tired. But that was that was pretty much the last meal she ever ate.

DB: What did she say when she saw Jell-O at that stage in 2015?

AR: She probably rolled her eyes and felt like it was an inescapable truth of her life.

DB: Allie Rowbottom's new book is called *The Jell-O Girls: A Family History*.

DB: It's time now for Household Name Uncut. This is the part of the show where we take the things we had to cut out of our story but we just can not stop thinking about, and we bring them back for a segment we bring you every now and then called Uncut. So here with me right now are two of the producers of our show: Clare Rawlinson.

CLARE RAWLINSON: Hello.

DB: And Sarah Wyman.

SARAH WYMAN: Hello!

DB: And you have some Jell-O facts that are just on your mind that you have to share, right?

CR: I do, I do.

DB: Alright, Clare, you're up first.

CR: Alright. Well, I have an image, actually it is, that's been seared into my mind ever since researching this episode, and it's an image of the original Jell-O girl.

DB: There was a Jell-O girl?

CR: She's not at all related to Allie, but basically what happened is when Jell-O was really really struggling under Allie's great-great-great uncle's ownership, before anyone realized really what it was—it was just this weird scientific experiment—he hired an advertising executive on Madison Avenue to try to turn it into a hit. And this guy, Franklin King, was like, 'Right. I'm going to get my daughter in the studio, take a photo of her, and she can become the Jell-O girl.' And if you look at images of the Jell-O girl, like the original Jell-O posters with her, you'll see this very doll-like figure with these eyes—and this is the part that freaks me out the most—she has these very deadened eyes. She looks like an actual doll, not like a person who's then been drawn. But—

DB: It's kind of creepy looking.

CR: It's really creepy! And especially the way she's always looking sort of directly at the camera but doing these weird and kind of absurd things for a five-year-old. Like serving up platters of Jell-O to babies. Or like building forts out of boxes of Jell-O. Or there are times where she's holding a kettle and about to make Jell-O.

DB: That sounds dangerous.

SW: Yeah, that sounds unsafe.

CR: I know, for a five-year-old! But then she grows up in these ads and so you see her in a few different ages, and she just remains now this kind of eerie ghost who symbolizes everything Jell-O went on to become in its advertising.

DB: Wow, alright, the original Jell-O girl. And now, next up, Sarah Wyman. We talked a little bit in the episode about some of the things that people used to put in Jell-O, but there's a lot more, and it gets a lot worse, right?

SW: Yeah, I promised you before we did this that I wasn't going to make you eat any Jell-O.

DB: Thank god.

SW: And I am a woman of my word. But we do have to talk about it because it's mind-bogglingly disgusting. Um, when we were producing this episode, I spent a ton of time looking at old ads and recipes for Jell-O, and one of my favorite ones is this one that I'm looking at, which has a picture of like a whole bunch of savory dishes, like we've got an entire fish on there, a chicken leg, some shrimp, some celery, and there are just arrows coming from the images of these foods pointing straight into this beautiful three-tiered Jell-O mold.

DB: Insert directly into the Jell-O. That's literally an entire fish! That they want you to put in Jell-O! Is that shrimp?

SW: So this all sounds crazy, and I had a ton of followup questions, so I tried to find somebody who could tell us more about these recipes and what it's like to actually make and eat them.

RUTH CLARK: The worst thing that we've ever made was a gelatin called California Prune Cream Salad.

DB: Wait, who is this person?

SW: So this is Ruth Clark, she runs a blog that's called Mid-Century Menu, and she has put everything under the sun in Jell-O.

DB: Ewww!

RC: It was prunes, unflavored gelatin, chili sauce, cottage cheese, mayo and sweet pickles. Really, it was very soft. And the only thing that was hard in it were like the chunks of sweet pickles. So otherwise everything's just kind of gloopin' around in your mouth. It was very, very strange and very gross. It was like having a mouthful of like silly putty.

DB: Ew!

CR: Was your next question to her just "Why? Why all these things?"

SW: So she finds it like kind of hilarious and exciting. Like, she told me about this—it's called "frosty the slaw man"—which was this like mountain of snowman-shaped coleslaw that she made. And she describes this like weird sense of pride she has after making these things.

CR: But it's not like she can possibly make it and eat it and be like enjoying it!

SW: So that is what blew my mind most. Is that, like yes, the vast majority of these recipes are disgusting, but some of them kind of... aren't. And I think that's half because Ruth is from the Midwest, she grew up eating this kind of stuff...

CR: She has low standards, is what you're saying.

SW: (laughs) I wouldn't go that far...

CR: Is that what you're saying? I don't know the Midwest!

DB: I think something's happening to you, Sarah. Like, you're starting to become... I don't know, I feel like next week we're going to get some weird Jell-O mold in the office with an anchovy.

SW: I'm not gonna lie to you guys, she kind of sold me on this concept.

RC: It was different cooking, but it's not like it didn't work, you know, most of the time. (laughs) It's just like a completely different way that you have to orientate your brain to realize what they were doing.

SW: Like, stay with me here. It's not insane to put all of your food in Jell-O. For one thing, it's this incredible preservative. You know how when you slice up an apple or an avocado it turns brown?

CR: Yeah?

SW: Okay, if you put that in a Jell-O mold, it buys you like another week.

CR: It, it... Sorry. It still doesn't make sense. Like, it's not worth the time and effort.

DB: Just like plan your shopping better.

SW: But at the time, this was revolutionary, right? Like, this was a cooking technology, it was groundbreaking.

CR: Well that's the thing. The only way I can understand it is the novelty of it being like this scientific experiment.

SW: But I think we still do stuff like this that we don't think is that weird. Like, Ruth pointed out that there are all these cake-making shows where bakers will craft these fantastic sculptures out of cake, and I watched those all the time when I was in middle and high school. Like, it's just insane to see what people can make out of food.

DB: But did you put the cake in Jell-O? [laughter]

SW: But Jell-O... it's the same thing, and it was the same thing in the '50s! It's just the art of making food that looks beautiful.

CR: Ok, well knowing what you know now, would you actually go home and make one of these bizarre Jell-O recipes and attempt to eat it?

SW: I don't know that I would go that far. I will not be bringing one of these to Thanksgiving this year, probably. But that being said, I do feel like I kind of get it now. Like, I see the appeal.

DB: That's one of our producers, Sarah Wyman, who is on the verge of producing some weird Jell-O molds. And then we have Clare Rawlinson, who is with me in the no Jell-O camp.

CR: No Jell-O.

DB: And I'm Dan Bobkoff.

CREDITS

Hey, let us know what you think of the show. You can email us at householdname@businessinsider.com And if you're new to the show, check out our past episodes, leave a review, and make sure you subscribe so you don't miss the next one.

This episode was produced by Clare Rawlinson and Sarah Wyman with me, Dan Bobkoff and Anna Mazarakis.

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