

When I blinked awake, my first thought was something along the lines of arson and homicide, as was typical of the average pre-teen when woken before noon. Luckily, due to my receiving less than ten hours of sleep, I was too lethargic to act on these aggressive urges, and instead rolled out of bed with all the grace and charm of a dying antelope.

The thin, tattered carpet barely clung to life beneath my feet, which was enough to remind me that I was in my grandparents' apartment—a fact that roused me from slumber far more effectively than the bracing chill of the early morning. Stumbling to the kitchen—as per protocol in any Italian household—I found a slice of fresh bread and chewed languidly, watching the shadows of the city cast dancing figures on the tiles.

It was 6 a.m., which was an ungodly time for anyone to be awake, but I was excited. The pot that stood, tall and proud, upon the surface of the stove promised what I'd been yearning for since I was old enough to walk and complain at the same time: the family *sugo* recipe.

I'd been stirring the *gravy* and ducking the spoon since I could remember, but I'd never known how to make it myself; the wafts of fresh tomato and basil and garlic would billow around my face, and it always felt like home, no matter whose home it was cooking in. To be able to make it wasn't purely a question of age or skill; any fool could throw tomatoes in a pot and stir, but a test of the heart.

(Cooks are born, not made. Of course, one can *learn*, but only a true cook can *make*. That's what separates food and sustenance.)

My grandfather lumbered in, a great big wall of a man with meaty hands and a beard like a forest. He spared me a smile—*my* smile, the one where his eyes crinkled at the corners and his mustache twitched up in a parabola—and waved me closer: “You don't make *gravy* by sitting on your ass.”

Sleep was still heavy in my stomach, melting through my heels and rooting me to the floor, but I was nothing if not stubborn. He set me to work chopping the garlic (an age-old task of great skill and prestige) and began a long line of instructions that I struggled to memorize. The kitchen quickly began to fill with that fragrant steam of tomatoes and spice, and I hurried to finish before I was soaked.

Eventually, he directed me to fetch the fan from the dining room and I did, struggling under the weight of the ancient device. Its blades were slow dinner plates coated in what I suspected to be the same amount of dust located beneath my bed, and it cut on with a grinding noise that foretold of the Great War of Sin and Vice, as was written.

Demonic appliances aside, I was finding my niche. I was small enough to avoid getting underfoot, but nosy enough to manage being mildly annoying, which balanced rather nicely. Once the spices had been sufficiently added, the *gravy* was set to simmer until we added the meat. “The trick to a good sauce,” Papa said, punctuating his words with a jabbing finger, “Is

to give it time. Nothin' special about my recipe, it ain't hard, but you've gotta let it cook. That's the problem with jar-sauce. People rushing, rushing, rushing. Don't wanna give it time to be good."

So we gave it time and waited by lolling on the maroon couch, eating good bread with olive oil and watching the Food Channel. "Problem with her," Papa would begin, "Is she uses too much. You don't need all that for a good steak, yeah? You got to let the meat speak for itself." And when the time came to add the meat, we did: browning it, letting it sing its own song.

That's the thing about cooking—it's raw and natural. You don't need to dress it up or make it pretty. Good food doesn't just keep people alive; it brings people together, makes them laugh and talk and yell. Good food simmers on a stovetop and lets you stick your finger in when the old people aren't looking and brings you home after a terrible day. Good food, more than anything, comes from good people.

Some people paint. Some write. Some sing and dance and understand calculus. And some—the ones that are very lucky—cook. ▲

