

Excuse Me

Mom didn't like to cook and rarely did. One night, Dad had it.

"I'm hiring a cook," he said. "Three nights a week."

"No," Mom said, "you will not." She removed that night's dinner from the freezer, four boxes of Swanson's Turkey and a bag of Ann Page Krinkle-cut French Fries.

Dad said, "Look, I come home, I want dinner on the table. And not that crap. I want real nutritious food."

Mom said, "This is not a restaurant."

"It will be when I hire a cook."

"You will not bring a cook into this kitchen."

Dad said, "Why not?"

She spread tin foil over a narrow tray and folded the edges neatly around the tray's corners.

"Because I don't want anyone in my kitchen," she explained.

"OK," Dad said, "but excuse me. Why not?"

"Because I don't, that's why."

Dad said, "What do you care? You never use it."

Mom peeled the foil back on part of the TV dinners and slid them onto the oven's wire rack.

"I do not want anyone in my kitchen," she said, "and that's it."

Dad's stomach growled.

"You hear that?" he said.

She said, "I didn't hear anything."

Dad said, "Boys?"

I said, "I heard it."

Wally said, "In Rocky Point they could hear it."

"Look," Mom said, "I'm not having this conversation. There is nobody coming into my kitchen, period."

Dad said, "You're not making any sense."

She said, "It makes perfect sense to me."

"Boys," Dad said, "is your mother making sense?"

Wally said, "Nada." Wally was in fourth grade. He was taking Spanish.

"Stay out of this," Mom said, "the two of you."

I said, "But we don't understand."

"Really?" Mom said, untying the apron at her back. "Do you understand this?"

She threw the apron on the floor, clomped past the dining table and turned toward her room. In another moment the door slammed.

Wally said, "Don't pick that up, Cliff. Let her clean up her own mess like she always tells us."

"All right," Dad said. "Remember, she's your mother."

Wally said, "How could I forget?"

Dad said, "Enough."

He turned off the oven and put the TV dinners back in their boxes. A few minutes later he one-knuckle knocked at the bedroom door.

"I'm taking the boys out for pizza," he said.

She said, "I don't care what you do."

"Do you want to join us?"

Wally frantically waved his arms. "Dad, no," he whispered.

Dad ignored him.

He said, "Well?"

We heard her get up, heard a closet door slide. Wally muttered, "Fuck." He was lucky Dad didn't hear him or he would have been sucking a fresh bar of Lifebuoy past his tonsils.

We loved going for pizza. And we loved where it was made. At the Big 'N on Route 25A near Radio Road. The N stood for Nick, and that made sense. Nick made the pizza. The "Big" made sense, too. Nick was almost as big as Dad. He wore a sailor's cap and white t-shirts underneath a sauce-stained apron. He wore a mustache, which Dad didn't like, but he didn't make too much fuss about Nick's. Maybe because Nick served in the World War. If you served in a war, Dad could overlook things like your mustache. He overlooked Nick not shaving, too, and the way he smoked even when he was pounding out the pizza. From Nick's lower lip, a Lucky Strike always hung. The smoke made him squint while he knuckled out dough. But something didn't make sense—the apostrophe before the "N." I asked Dad about it.

Dad said, "You have to ask Nick."

So one time I did. I said, "Hey Nick, how come there's an apostrophe before the N?"

Nick said, "Hay is for horses."

I said, "Yeah. But what about the apostrophe?"

Nick said, "I didn't go to no college, boys. I served in the US Navy and you can put that in your flat hat and smoke it."

Wally said, "You ever hear of an apostrophe?"

Nick said, "You ever hear of the USS Boise?"

Wally shook his head.

"See," Nick said, "you're not as smart as you think."

Dad turned into the Big 'N's gravel parking lot. We parked right at the entrance. On weeknights, most families took their pizza home in boxes.

"Go say hello to Nick, we'll be right behind you," he said, and we ran inside.

And there he was, behind the counter.

"Hey," Nick said, squinting over a Lucky, "it's the Marine Corps kids."

"Flip the pizza, Nick," we cried, and the few other diners at tables looked up and smiled.

Nick said, "What do I look like, some clown on Ed Sullivan? I toss, not flip."

Wally said, "Whatever."

Nick picked the dough off the stone countertop. He fingered white flour onto the stone and slapped down the dough, which he pressed out with his fingers, then smacked with flat palms. And then it was aloft, up above his head like a flying carpet, spinning until it landed, softly, onto his fists. And the fists spun it some more until it seemed to take off and rise again off his knuckles and float against gravity on top of smoke from the Lucky Strikes.

Dad said, "Why don't you quit fooling around and throw some sausage on that thing."

"Aye aye, sir," Nick said, winking. "Extra cheese?"

Dad said, "Why not?"

"Anchovies?"

From a table in the corner Mom shouted, "No anchovies!"

Nick looked at us.

"What she got against anchovies?"

Wally said, "What she got against cooking?"

Dad said, "All right, the two of you, sit down, go join your mother. I'll bring you your Cokes."

Mom sat against the wall smoking a Chesterfield, her gaze turned toward 25A. It was still light out. You could see the faces of the people in the cars that drove by. Mostly men going home from work. One sang along with the radio, his arm out the window. Another smoked with both hands on the wheel. They stopped at the traffic light. When they looked into the Big 'N, they seemed embarrassed when I waved. They looked back to the road even though they weren't going anywhere.

Each booth had a tableside jukebox on the wall above the napkin dispenser. Dad dropped coins into ours and pressed some buttons.

"I hope you're not playing those songs again," Mom said.

Then, from the PA system, we heard the booming voice of Jerry Vale: *My love forgive me, I didn't mean to have it end like this...*

When it got to the part Jerry Vale sings in Italian, Nick started singing along. Everyone was laughing. *Amore scusami se sto piangendo...*

Wally said, "Look, is Nick crying?"

Nick stopped pressing dough and opened his arms wide. *E se mi penserai ricordati che amo te*. Little teardrops pressed through his closed eyelids.

"I forgot," Dad said, getting misty-eyed himself. "He spent a year after the war on shore patrol in Naples."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mom said.

Dad said, "You wouldn't understand."

"Well excuse me for asking," Mom said. "I think I'll go wait in the car."

Dad said, "Sit down, the pizza's coming."

She said, "You know I can't stand these stupid songs."

"They're not stupid," Dad said, "they're Italian."

"Italian my foot," she said.

"But you're Italian," I said, "Mom, right?"

Dad said, "Cliffy."

"But isn't she?"

"Don't call your mother she. She's your mother," Dad said, "And yes, she's Italian."

"I'm American," Mom said. "We're all American."

Nick came with the pizza on a big silver metal tray. He set it in the middle of the table and from his apron he pulled a circular blade for rolling the pizza into slices.

Wally said, "Can I?"

Nick looked at Dad and Dad nodded.

"But careful, you hear me?"

Wally pressed the roller into the pizza but it didn't go smooth.

"Look," I said, "he's ruining the cheese."

Wally said, "I'm gonna ruin you."

"Gimme that goddamn thing," Dad said.

He wrenched the blade from Wally's hand and handed it back to Nick.

"You gotta do it fast," Nick said. "Watch."

First, he pressed the roller into the fat crust. Then he rolled forward in one swipe. "You see what I'm saying," he said. Then he pressed out a second and third. He was about to finish off with the fourth when the ash from his Lucky Strike fell right into the middle of the pizza.

"Jesus H. Christ," Dad said. "Are you kidding me?"

Nick said, "Take it easy, marine, I'll make youse a new one."

We kneeled on stools and watched Nick make us the next pizza, the white flour on stone, the slab of soft fat dough, slapped once, flipped over, slapped again, his fingers pressing into the middle, pressing out, and the fat dough getting wider and skinnier. He dipped a ladle into a silver cylinder of red sauce and dumped the sauce into the center of the dough. He made circular motions with the ladle and spread the sauce out like ripples from a stone until it reached all the surfaces of the pizza. Then he stuck his hand inside a plastic bag filled with pieces of white cheese. He removed a fistful and sprinkled the white cheese over the red sauce. He fistfisted sausages on top of the cheese, then more cheese on top of the sausage. He reached for a long handled pizza peel, slid the tray across the stone underneath the pizza, turned and opened the wide oven door, and slid the pie all the way to the back of the oven. He moved a couple of other pizzas already cooking closer to the front.

"Won't those get burnt?" I asked him.

"Not if I'm careful," Nick said.

Wally said, "Why were you crying?"

Nick said, "When was I crying?"

"When Dad played that stupid song."

"*Amore scusami?*" Nick said. "That's not stupid."

Wally said, "OK, but how come?"

Nick shrugged. "You're young," he said. "You don't know how sad love is."

I said, "Does Dad know?"

Nick said, "All too well, my young friend. All too well."

I said, "Are you American?"

Nick smiled wide. One of his teeth was the American flag.

"Cool," I said.

"You're not Italian?" Wally asked.

"I'm Italian-American, and proud of it. So are you."

I said, "We're just American."

Nick said, "Says who?"

Wally pointed to our table. "She said so."

Nick said, "Don't call your mother she. She's your mother."

Wally said, "Yeah, everyone keeps reminding us."

Nick said, "So don't forget it."

He reached the peel into the oven and slid out our new pizza. The cheese bubbled and blistered around the sausage.

"I'll slice this one over here," Nick said.

This time, Nick's cigarette curled smoke from an ashtray near the cash register. "Sherry Baby" played on the jukebox.

Wally said, "Can I try again?"

Nick looked over at our table.

"You gonna do it right?"

Wally said of course, and he did, all four rolls for eight slices.

Nick set the tray on our table. Then he pulled four Cokes out of the refrigerator.

"On the house," he said.

Dad said, "No."

"Yeah," Nick said, "on account of the you know."

He reached across the table and dropped two quarters in the jukebox.

"H-8," he told Wally. "Press it for your old man. Then you pick one."

Wally pressed the buttons. Inside the jukebox window, records flickered back and forth, then clicked to a stop. A 45 slid out, then spun onto the platter. Mandolins and violins filled the speakers, and Dad was out of his seat, his arm over Nick's shoulders, and together they sang, *Al di la del bene piu prezioso, ci sei tu*.

"All right," Mom said, pushing back from the table, "I'm waiting in the car."

"Jackie," Dad said. We all of us watched her push through a screen, then the outer door.

The song kept playing—*Where you walk, flowers bloom, when you smile all the gloom turns to sunshine*—but the room felt strangely silent.

"Jeez," Nick said. "Who does she like?"

Still looking at the door and shaking his head, Dad said, "Eddie Fisher."

Nick said, "The Jew? You're sh—, you're kidding me."

Dad felt behind the jukebox. "This thing unplug?" he asked.

Nick hit the jukebox with the heel of his hand. The record scratched off.

He said, "I'll get you a box for the pie."

Later that night, I thought I heard noises in the kitchen. Mom sat at the window blowing smoke through the screen. Her face looked strange in the night light.

"I wake you up?" she asked. "I was trying to be quiet."

The toaster oven pinged. She reached in and pulled out a metal tray. A slice of pizza sizzled on top.

"Watch your ashes," I told her.

She set the plate down hard and shook her fingers. "Damn thing's too hot."

She took out a knife and two forks.

"You want a bite?" she asked.

I asked if there was any Coke.

"Coke's not good this late. It will just keep you awake." Then she said, "All right, but just a small glass, OK?"

I said OK.

We chewed our pizza. Now the crust was crispier. The extra cheese made it chewy and hard to separate my teeth.

She watched me eat and continued to smoke.

She said, "You understand, don't you?"

I said, "Understand what?"

"What do you mean what?" she said. "Why I don't want anyone else in this kitchen."

That reminded me of where this night had started. I finished my Coke and pushed the glass forward. I waited until she refilled it.

I said, "Yeah, I guess. Kind of."

"I thought so," she said. "You're the smart one."

I belched. I didn't say excuse me.