

Ravioli

When I was twelve, I graduated from being a boxer to being a spreader. As my grandpa stood behind me, reaching over to guide my hand, he taught me how to spread the ravioli filling. His dark Sicilian hands, dirty and coarse from years of boning and cutting meat in an old sausage factory, gripped my hands firmly, but gently. "Do it like this, Rachel. There you go. Hey, look at my little Rachel, she's spreadin' the filling! There you go, babe, you little shit! Ha, ha, she's got it."

Every year before Christmas, my entire family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, spend an entire day in my grandparents' garage. There we mix, spread, box, sweep, and dance to my grandpa's Mob Hits CD in the midst of a light cloud of flour. My grandfather used to have a family business, an Italian delicatessen called La Villa. When my uncle passed away, there was no one in the family able to handle the business, so my grandpa felt compelled to sell it. Saving hundreds of boxes, ravioli cutters, a mixer, and an old metal dough maker, he transferred the deli to his garage, where once a year the old family business comes back to life.

Arriving early in the morning, we immediately settle in to work in the frigid garage, making raviolis. Boisterous laughter and shouts seep through the walls as my family begins stretching the dough and spreading the filling. Uncle Gerry works the dough machine, every once in a while stopping to swear when the dough breaks; my mom and two aunts take turns plopping the meat and spinach filling on to a neatly laid out sheet of flour-drenched dough, every now and then permitting one of the children to indulge in the satisfying task of throwing on the wet, sticky filling; the kids wait as the end of the table to box the raviolis. One child makes the box, another sprinkles rice flour into it, and the last places the sheet of delicate raviolis inside. My grandpa walks around critiquing, often taking over to illustrate his way of spreading the filling or rolling the raviolis.

Every year we never fail to stage a full-fledged flour fight. White powder flies everywhere, creating a slippery film over the glass cement floor. The same year my grandpa taught me how to spread the ravioli filling, my cousin Kaula's single Christmas wish came true. In the cloudy midst of the flour-based mist, she noticed that the white snowy atmosphere we'd just created was reflected outside. "It's snowing!" she announced with a dazed fascinated glaze covering her eyes. Eighteen white-washed, smiling people danced around the front lawn, blending in with the falling snow. I caught a glimpse of my grandpa's face; he watched his family all together, laughing and enjoying themselves. He appeared so content, standing there, laughing to himself, shaking his head.

My grandpa worries that once he dies, no one will continue the family tradition. Each year, fewer and fewer of us show up to help make the traditional raviolis, everyone being too busy with the demands of jobs and the priorities of school. But, I can not even imagine Christmas without our traditional garage reunion. It is a custom that makes up part of my identity, an identity I am proud of.

As the flour settles, we all help clean up the garage. While taking turns sweeping flour into piles, cleaning off tables, and washing dishes my grandpa turns up his CD as the lyrics of a Dean Martin song join our family. With arms out wide my grandpa sings along, his deep voice bellowing the words. His dark-skinned face turns a deep red as he laughs and dances around with my grandma: "When the moon hits your eye, like a big pizza pie, that's amore. When the world seems to shine, like you've had too much wine, that's amore!"