

A grimy apron draped over a chair, a faded one hung on the metal hook by the fridge, and a new one tucked neatly away in the rusted drawer that I could never manage to get open—not on the first try, at least. The point is, there were always aprons around the house and it made sense. For after all, both sides of my family were filled with top-notch cooks and foodies.

“All the best cooks are a chi huo (foodie) first and a cook second,” mother used to say. “You’d make a great cook.”

In this house, good food was never not within reach. There was always someone in the kitchen, an apron around their neck, and a wok in their hand. And before long, you’d smell the magic in the making and find yourself drifting towards it without you even being aware. It was all so fascinating. I’d often sneak into the kitchen and climb into the oversized apron, praying for the day when it’d finally fit, the day when I’d be the one standing in front of the stove, an apron of my own around my neck, and a wok in my hand. And before you know it, a mouthwatering smell would waft through the kitchen and into the rest of the house, whetting the appetite of everyone present.

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Mother was right. But she was also wrong—for I did not make a great cook. I did not even make an adequate one. How could I when simply the thought of food sent shivers down my spine? How could I when there was a lump in my throat I just couldn’t swallow away? “Where did my little girl who loved food go?” mother would say with tears in her eyes. “Give her back to me.” And with every shed tear, I fell deeper down the rabbit hole; with every skipped meal, I lost a part of myself. I got thinner and thinner until even my heart decided there was nothing left to hold onto.

But perhaps it was just vastation. Perhaps everything happened for a reason. But for better or for worse, I’m here today, so cheers to that.

Oh, what heavenly smell. Could this really be my creation? With my apron around my neck and a wok in my hand, I took in the smell of the magic in the making—the magic *I* was making.

“Did your mother make this? Or did you?” Father can no longer tell our cooking apart. As I took my apron off, I smiled. I did it. After all this time, I did it. But there was something bittersweet about it all. Here I am, at the finishing line, yet the world is so different than the one I had imagined. And whatever magic I once believed we held is now dissipating. I had wished to cook like the rest of them; I had wished to cook with the rest of them. Yet now, it was just mother and me. Grandpa lost his memories, grandma can no longer walk, and the rest are all losing their touch for one reason or another. It was just my mother and me. Oh, how the times have changed. If my younger self saw me today, what would she say? Would she be happy or would she weep? Or perhaps she would say, “Look at you. You’re all grown up now! Isn’t everything just great?”

“Isn’t it...” I’d say.