

BEEF CUTLET BATTLE

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Whenever I stare at an empty kitchen, I think of my babushka Lilya. I picture her in her flowery housedress, hands on hips, that half-resigned yet unyielding look in her eyes. It's the same look she had when I'd bring a school friend over in that awkward time between lunch and dinner, and there was nothing prepared.

My friend and I would sit down. I'd start to pour tea. That's when my grandmother's expression would turn to despair.

"How can you!" she'd say in Russian, "How can you just drink empty tea?"

Baba, I'd say, she didn't come here to eat, and we can order out, no one needs you to cook right now. But she would have none of it.

We'd need to hurry and leave quickly before she'd put out every last scrap of leftovers at the table, telling me "Offer her this" and "It is so shameful to receive guests like this!" and "Why isn't she eating the pickled cabbage?"

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It's no secret: I do not like to cook. I hate the dirty residue of oil on the stove, the time it takes after my workday, and how a recipe says one thing but another thing comes out of my oven. I don't enjoy it, I can afford not to. At least those are all the things I tell myself, as I'm Googling 'easy recipes', strategizing my next attempt.

I'll get no arguments from my boyfriend if I don't cook. He also doesn't like cooking, doesn't expect me to do it, and is the first to offer going out. And yet I'll go to the store and I'll buy a package of beef, even if it just sits in the fridge. So there's something there, I'll say, just in case I make *kotlety*, beef cutlets.

I haven't lived with my grandmother in over a decade, and I don't need to make *kotlety* by hand when food is just a click away. But I'll still feel like I'm playing hooky, even if I make a perfectly good something else.

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Among its many ironies, Soviet Russia produced great cooks. A lack of options begets creativity, and many babushkas worked wonders with concoctions of smoked herring, or transformed government meat into homey memories. I'm not sure Baba Lilya necessarily enjoyed the cooking; it was feeding people that she loved.

I used to think that my grandmother's fixation stemmed from early hunger. At seventeen, she survived the German bombing of Smolensk, her hometown near the Belarusian border. She then lived on soldiers' scraps during the trans-Siberian evacuation to Kazakhstan; she would tell me stories about how skinny, how tiny she was back then.

Or maybe she saw food as her job, the way we all had roles to play. By the time I was born, Baba Lilya was a retired widow with a full-time responsibility of feeding us, a family of five. She lived with us and immigrated to the US when we

did. For as long as she was physically able, only she would cook. She took on that task, so my mother and father could work, and my sister and I could be children.

Baba Lilya was also my closest friend when I was a young teenager in the suburbs of Boston. Outside of the kitchen we talked for hours: about art, music, great books, her life during the war. We watched Mexican telenovelas. We had a lot in common. But we could never discuss our dinnertime standoffs.

It happened every mealtime, the way our usual conversations began: a family discussion on geopolitics.

“... the Reagan administration had nothing to do with the collapse of the USSR,” my father would declare, fork raised. He’d always lived with Baba and her cooking, and couldn’t imagine it any other way. “The USSR collapsed because of internal weakness.”

“...She's not eating,” Baba would say.

“I’m done,” I’d say. Baba’s food was tasty, well seasoned. But there was just so much of it! She’d keep adding to the plate, no matter how full I felt, until she could approve that I’d eaten enough; in the kitchen she was in charge.

I wanted to focus on serious things the way adults did at lunch, prioritize the conversation the way they did, their wine glasses clinking after a good debate, the food being less important than what they had to say. At first I’d ignore her, participate in the debate, and let the extra cutlets get cold. “Why then is it taught in schools as an American victory?” I’d ask my father.

“Why isn't she eating?” Baba would interrupt, this time bolder, directing my parents. “Do you understand the child is not eating?”

I'd feel the blood rush to my face. Why was every bite in my mouth monitored, the way a baby's might be? Why couldn't I serve *myself*, the way every other kid in America had the freedom to do? Was I going to be forty years old, being fed like this?

"Stop it," I'd scream, maybe slam my glass down for added drama. "I'm not a child!"

My mother would tell me to be quiet then, to control myself, but it'd be too late. My grandmother would huff, leave the table, close the door to her room and stop speaking to me for the afternoon. I'd run upstairs mid-meal, angry, hungry and feeling like the child I wasn't, tears streaming down my face. My parents would finish the meal silently.

At other times I took to the stove at odd hours, so that no one would see me. Sixteen-year-old girls were baking cupcakes to bring to school, yet I didn't even know how to turn on a stove. I figured I should learn, but didn't want to argue with Baba about the proper way of doing things; so I'd take the beef cutlets from the fridge, and I'd try to heat them up myself.

Yet Baba would appear in the kitchen at the first clank of a skillet. "Ah-ha!" she'd say, "So you are hungry," as though she'd caught me stealing. "Here, here, let me do it. Your fire is on too high. You're doing it wrong. You'll just burn yourself."

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Eventually I learned to cook simple meals through YouTube, from the recipes printed on the back of ingredient boxes, by tinkering in my post-college kitchen. Yet I do it only when there's someone else to feed, never for myself.

Sometimes I'll stand at the stove and my boyfriend will come up behind me to point out another way of doing something. I snap at him, "Get back, I'm cooking," or "No, no, I'll do it myself."

Someone else in my kitchen feels like an intrusion into that exclusive space—that of a woman who knows how to love.

Towards the last days of her life, Baba Lilya was in pain, no longer able to cook. I'd call her daily, but I didn't know what I could possibly say. I missed our non-food talks, the times we spoke of classical music or our favorite leading men.

Instead I could only think of *kotlety*.

"The other day," I told her, "I made beef cutlets, just like the ones you used to make." They weren't, really. They were imperfectly shaped and slightly soggy. But my boyfriend ate them and said they were the best in the world.

I heard her smile. I knew that she was proud of me.

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Rita Reznikova was born in Moscow in the last decade of the Soviet Union, but grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, where she immigrated with her family in 1994. A marketing consultant by day and an aspiring essayist by night, she's working on her first personal essay collection.