

Hollandaise

My arm sears as I rapidly stir the mixture in the pot before me in an attempt to create a sauce before the flame beneath the pan infects the ingredients inside with its overwhelming heat. Over the scream of the pan, I can hear my parents chatting happily as they watch the news. It's Mother's Day and cooking was the only thing my dog-walking money would allow me to afford, so I am making her favorite meal: eggs benedict. My eyes gloss over as I stare down into the pot of yellow goo rapidly condensing and adding more resistance against my whisk. I had woken up early to produce the perfect breakfast and I was already on my third attempt to win the war against the flame to produce Hollandaise sauce before the heat got a chance to break it leaving a pile of yellow mush with a blanket of fat to show for my hard work. I continued my battle swiftly ripping the bowl from the double boiler and vigorously whisking before dropping it back on top to soak in the heat once more. As I was only in fifth grade at the time, I hadn't had a chance to push my cooking abilities much further than a simple pasta dish or birthday cake so attempting to make a sauce notoriously known for its ability to break in a split second felt like an impossible task. My lips begin to turn upward as I realize the sauce has finally come together and can finally be draped over the tower of ham, egg, and English muffin to create one deliciously complete dish. I proudly bring out the plates to my parents as the feelings of accomplishment are finally able to sink in. I want to make a career out of this someday.

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Junior year of high school I was given the opportunity to take classes at my local tech center. I grew up in a tiny school and having the opportunity to not only see new faces but to learn something completely different from what was offered at my school was simultaneously

extremely exciting and nerve-wracking. I had researched their culinary program back in elementary school when my brother first learned about the tech center and had my eyes set on going ever since. I was extremely shy at the time but felt confident in my ability to survive given my home cooking skills and the fact that I convinced my boyfriend at the time to sign up as well so I wouldn't have to be alone. I had been going through some rough patches and was excited to finally have something to take up my time and keep my mind off of things, especially knowing I had someone familiar by my side. He was my first boyfriend, and I wasn't quite sure what you were supposed to feel when you were in a relationship, but it felt good to be closer to someone while simultaneously gaining the title of "girlfriend". The first day of school quickly ripped my dream out from under me as I realized our class was too large and needed to be split, leaving me at the main campus, and him being shuttled off to a classroom downtown. We were forced to quickly say our goodbyes and made plans to meet each other by the lockers at the end of the day so we could walk to the bus together.

As quickly as the day started, it was over. We had spent most of our time reviewing the syllabus and expectations for the class before taking a quick tour of the kitchen and shuffling us out the door. I had survived the first day of class with few bumps and began to grow hungry for independence. At my old school, everyone knew everything about everyone but I was surrounded by completely new faces and it felt good to be unknown. As I walked out to my locker and found my boyfriend gathering the attention of my peers enthusiastically waving hello, I felt my stomach sink as if the contents of my life I wasn't ready to expose had been put on display. I couldn't help but notice the judgemental expressions given by those around me as he towered

over the silence of the loud hallway excitedly talking about his day, already regretting my decision in convincing him to apply.

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By November I had spoken a maximum of three sentences in class and was still clinging to the wonderful unknown feeling at the beginning of the year. It felt like we had only been here a few weeks, but it was already time to be tested on our current skills to measure how we have progressed over the semester. The sound of oil splashing into ripping hot pans and knives charging swiftly across cutting boards filled my ears as soon as I entered the kitchen. Quickly after, a bead of sweat began to race across my forehead; a result of my anxiety and the high heat of the room surrounding me. I began my journey across the room to meet my classmates standing proudly in white jackets, my \$10 non slip shoes signaled my discomfort to the room around me as they squeaked across the entire distance across the tile floor. I can't help but notice the reflection of flames from someone attempting to flambé in the eyes of the student next to me; adding a touch of coolness to his already confident exterior. The jealousy in my brain made me feel as if I had just met my enemy and I quickly adjusted my posture and reminded myself of the experience I had had going into this moment. Although it was just a test covering ways to cook with oil that was in no way a competition, my silently stubborn brain was not going to stop until I knew that I did everything I could show my worth. I received a near-perfect score that day.

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In the days following the test, I found myself growing curious with the confident boy I stood next to before taking the test. I had paid attention to him previously (it was hard not to, considering he was always talking), but usually lost interest when he interrupted class for the

fifth time in an hour with another rebuttal against our teacher. He had originally sat a few rows in front of me, but moved a few weeks in the semester to be closer to his new friends in the class- which was coincidentally the seat directly in front of me. I started gaining a new perspective on his confident and loud exterior as I reevaluated his personality under a less scrutinous eye. He had tried to talk to me a few times, usually asking easy questions about my favorite foods and hobbies, leaving me to scramble up an answer that would bring the conversation to a close quickly without giving me the title of rude or short.

Throughout the week he would continue his mission of getting me to open up one small question at a time- being met with a short, unfulfilling answer each time. It felt wrong to keep pushing him away when he so clearly wanted to start a conversation- but I couldn't help but feel like he did this with everyone.



As time passed I found myself sinking further and further into a toxic relationship. It felt like as soon as I took two steps outside of my comfort zone, he was right there beside me to push me back into his censorship bubble. I had never been a loud person, but as I grew, I found myself fighting to find my voice while simultaneously conforming to whatever my significant other wanted. It had started with my clothes: no leggings, no short dresses, no low cut shirts, nothing too loud or too showy. Next it was my friends, I never had a ton, but the few I had were quickly cut off so that it could just be me and him. I remember reading stories about these types of relationships and making a promise to myself I would recognise the signs before things got too serious and here I was watching my life disappear before my own eyes. I was manipulated into

thinking anything I did to separate myself from him was a crime against our relationship, and quickly fell down the path of doing everything I could to make him believe otherwise.

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As my confidence grew in the kitchen, I found myself itching to take back my life outside of cooking. I was determined to push myself out of my little bubble and do more things that scared me; starting with breaking up with my boyfriend. I had been battling with myself for months on if I was insane or if relationships were supposed to be better than what I was experiencing. I missed all the time I used to spend with just myself, enjoying my own hobbies, free to go wherever my mind led me. Instead, I felt trapped inside the world of what another person wants, constantly changing myself and my opinions to meet their standards. It took me at least a month to completely cut things off with him as I was always running back worried he might actually do the things he threatened when I said it was over. I felt like I was in fifth grade again, watching over a pot carefully trying to resist her sauce being broken, knowing that if it happened I would just have to face it and try again.

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By winter break, I felt like I was finally able to start re-emulsifying what had been broken in the past. Although I wanted to completely start over again, I struggled to let things go and had to rely on slowly and carefully adding back in the things that made me feel like myself again. I spent a lot of my time challenging myself, attempting new and difficult recipes yearning for that sense of pride I felt when I first sat down that plate on Mother's Day. On Christmas morning I offered to make breakfast, knowing just the recipe that would heal my heart. I found myself staring down at a double boiler again, the same beat-up whisk that had miraculously survived my

childhood ready to fight against the flame once again. I had already mastered much more difficult recipes over break, yet this one felt the most important of all. I watched carefully as the egg yolk, water, and lemon juice mixture grew in size, signaling the war against the burner below had begun. A familiar burn in my arm quickly returned as I desperately attempted to quickly whisk against the thickening sauce. As I removed the bowl from the boiler one last time a smile itched at my lips as I realized I had created hollandaise sauce for a second time in my life, only this time on my very first try.

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During my second semester, I grew more proud of the person I was and eventually didn't feel the need to keep hiding the details of my life that didn't involve cooking. I soon found myself growing close to one student in particular, the same one whose fiery eyes caught my attention during our first test and whose confident exterior made me stand taller and present myself with the same energy he was emitting, even if I was just acting. The three sentences I had previously spoken before had turned into paragraphs, and then pages of words that fell out of my mouth before I could register how much of my life I had been missing on sharing because all of my time had been wasted attempting to make myself no more than a name in a classroom full of culinary students. We were polar opposites in every way imaginable and when we were together it felt like I was at war with the flame again, only this time we were on the same team.

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Several years after my experience at the tech center I found myself hungry for eggs benedict once again. My kitchen had rapidly changed over the years, leaving me with only an old glass bowl I found at Goodwill, a pot that I stole from my old roommates, and the same (now

slightly bent) whisk I had used since childhood. I once again watched carefully as the ingredients whipped together, moving the bowl on and off the heat, skillfully whisking the ingredients as fast as my arms would let me. I felt a familiar worry rise up from my stomach as I dropped spoonfuls of butter into the yellow goo, silently praying I could create one cohesive sauce instead of two distinct piles of fat and mush. As soon as the feeling came, it quickly vanished as I felt a familiar gaze rest upon me in my pajamas in the kitchen, our kitchen, working against the same flame that sparked in his eyes junior year of high school.

A flame isn't an enemy, you just have to find a way to work with it.