



## The Apprentice and the Chef

by Jess Thomson

My belly rumbled, and I gave in. Yawning at the October twilight, I dragged myself out of the blanket cocoon that I was writing my latest essay in and shuffled down the corridor to the windowless kitchen of my university halls. My dinner today was a packet of instant noodles, chicken flavoured. The sheer lack of self-respect of eating this dish for the third day in a row was rooted in the small issue of having left home with absolutely no idea how to cook, and zero motivation to figure it out anytime soon.

As I keyed in the cooking time on the microwave, the boy who lived a few doors down the corridor poked his head around the door. He had floppy brown hair, always wore woolly jumpers, and loved to make himself the most extravagant meals nearly every night. Sometimes I would walk into the kitchen and see that he was aggressively

kneading bread dough to make the crust of a homemade pizza, while simultaneously stirring the tomato sauce bubbling on the hob and caramelising red onions in a pan. He'd regularly cook huge curries for all our friends during that first term of university, which we'd all eat huddled together in one of our tiny box rooms, listening to music and laughing about our antics from the night before. He loved to experiment with new techniques and flavours, and was always chatting excitedly to me about his sourdough starter as I heated up my boring tomato soup or something equally as uninspired. Naturally, I had a huge crush on him.

Eli grinned at me as he came into the kitchen. He sniffed the air and asked what I was cooking. When I told him it was yet another ready-meal, he rolled his eyes and sighed.



*"You can't live like this, Maisie!" he said. "I genuinely don't think there's a single vitamin in that entire dish. You need to eat some real vegetables or else your brain will dissolve and then you'll definitely fail your exams".*

I stuck my tongue out at him. He'd caught me heating up ready-meals every time he came in to cook himself dinner, and I couldn't keep up the pretence of 'having a lazy day' any longer.

My other friends knew that I had only figured out how to fry bacon the previous week, but I hadn't wanted Eli to know that, else he'd think I was a moron and definitely wouldn't fancy me back. I mean, who comes to university without knowing how to cut an onion?

*"Can I tell you a secret?"*

*"Anything", he grinned, leaning against the kitchen counter.*

I hefted myself onto the counter next to him and covered my face in faux shame, peering between my fingers at him. *"I can't... actually... cook. Like, at all. I mean, Nicole had to walk me through how to soft-boil an egg yesterday!"*

*"You're joking" Eli said, throwing back his head and laughing. "I thought the others were kidding when they told me about that!"* I internally made a note to murder whoever had blabbed, as I had specifically given them all instructions to Not Tell. Eli. Nicole had definitely figured out that I liked him, since she would dramatically wink at me anytime he was brought up in conversation, to which I would respond with the dirtiest glare that I could muster.

*"I just never learned! My mum was always such a control freak with the kitchen at home. She wanted to cook dinner every night, so I just... never did, I guess. Anyway, all she ever cooks is brown food, so I didn't exactly have much inspiration"* I grinned. *"Poor excuse, I know. I just never really fancied putting in the effort to replicate her speciality dish of sausages boiled in gravy with cabbage and peas."*

He raised his eyebrows at me, shaking his head as he rooted through the fridge. My heart sank. He thought I was an idiot. I was just starting to plot my revenge on Nicole for ruining my chances when his face brightened and he turned to me, excited.

*"Okay, listen up. I'm gunna cook you dinner - no, stop it, shut up, it's my duty as your friend and kitchen-mate. I'm going to cook myself - and you - dinner tonight and you're going to watch each step VERY CAREFULLY, and then eventually I want you to make the same thing for me. Deal?"*

I was secretly thrilled. I mean, he wanted to cook me dinner. Maybe this meant he liked me back? You don't just cook dinner for people you don't like, right?

*"...Fine, you have a deal. But I'm definitely going to send you the money for the ingredients"* I grumbled.

*"Absolutely not. I can't watch you feed*

*yourself exclusively carbohydrates for the rest of the year. You can make it up to me when we go out for dinner at a real restaurant some time"* he said, winking at me and laughing as my face went bright pink.

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That evening, he made me a beautiful aromatic Thai salmon dish, bursting with lemongrass and rich with coconut milk. I watched carefully as he peeled the ginger root with a teaspoon, telling me that only fools would use an actual vegetable peeler. He splashed in soy sauce with the muscle memory of someone who knew exactly how much to add, and twirled around the kitchen in an intricate dance that he seemed like he'd done a thousand times. It was mesmerising. We ate in his room, on the floor next to the window, watching the autumn storm buffet the trees outside, essays forgotten. I'd never really thought that cooking could be fun, so much fun, and that the food could be more delicious than anything I'd ever had at home. This was no beige meat and two veg, this was a magic potion of laughter and teamwork and electric conversation, and was the first time that I'd cleared my plate in years. I washed up, and must have gushed my thanks about 70 times before he threw a tea towel at my head.

*"I'll teach you some other basics, if you like.*

*But be warned, I only take on apprentices who I know will achieve true greatness”,* he said pompously, bowing deeply as I walked back towards my room.

*“I won’t let you down, O wise one”* I mimicked, curtsying with a smile.

I fell asleep that night full of good food, but with a new excited hunger for the next time I would get to cook with him.

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From that evening onwards, Eli would bang on my door whenever he was about to start cooking, and I would watch him whip up his feasts of choice. He taught me the tips and tricks that he had picked up from making meals with his mum, guiding my movements with his gentle hands, sending

electricity across my skin. He found how little I knew about cooking funny, letting out shouts of laughter when I asked stupid questions like “how on earth do I turn on this hob”, but always answered with a kind smile in his eyes, and all the detail that I required.

As the winter months drew in, we teamed up and cooked a banquet for our friends, who were very much craving the homely comfort of a roast dinner after eating pesto pasta every other day for most of the first term. The kitchen was packed with the hungry mob, watching their dinner be prepared, cracking jokes and sharing anecdotes about their days. Nicole flashed me a glance and wiggled her eyebrows, and I realised that this had been her plan all along; that telling the boy who loved to cook that I was in dire need of some culinary skills would result in many hours spent alone in the kitchen, getting to know each other. Squeezed in together, making a cornucopia of buttery roasted potatoes and tender rosemary-imbibed lamb for our closest friends, I think I knew that I loved him and his passion for making good food with and for those closest to him. The roast went down a treat, and was met with a round of applause from our wine-drunk, ruddy-cheeked friends. We were the champions of the evening, the mother and father who fattened the bellies of their tipsy adopted children. We stood and took a bow, hands entwined and raised in victory. When we sat back down, he didn’t let go.