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A kitchen is a place of change, of alchemy. Every cook is the magician who uses heat and time to transform a jumble of ingredients into something else, something other, a fusion of flavours and textures, removed from the original, greater than the beginnings. For three decades, conducting, observing, and recording those culinary transformations occupied much of my thinking, first as a chef, then as a writer. Each morning, I would stand at square one before my stove or my keyboard, hands poised. What to create today? Cooking is second nature to me now, but it wasn't always. My apprenticeship began in childhood. It was a slow, sometimes painful process.

“When you can see through it, it's done,” my grandmother said. I perched on a stool at the high counter, watching as she rolled strudel dough, thin, thin. She held it up, a parchment-like sheet draped over her wrists and fingers, and gestured for me to lay my palms on its surface. She shifted her square hands, the primal shape my own would grow into, so they mirrored mine, palm to palm, the membrane between us another fragile layer of skin that we coaxed toward transparency.

I was five in 1963. She was not yet fifty, but she seemed ancient to me, heavy and slow. The kitchen, hers then, is mine now; I am older now than she was then, but in my eyes, I'm younger, less exhausted by the physical demands of life, energized by—what, exactly? A better diet? A sense of purpose? But I can't claim to know that Gran had no sense of purpose: she was a farmer, and maybe that sufficed. We saw my grandparents only infrequently because my dad was in the air force, which meant we moved from base to base every couple of years; I didn't know either of them as well as I wish I had, but I've always realized that Gran was not the confiding sort. She would never have shared her doubts or her faith, and certainly not with a grandchild. I'm equally sure that she had questions about life; it seems an inevitable partner to aging. But I envy her faith. In its absence, I've turned to asking my own questions, and to wondering about the things she accepted as truths. But I do have one small truth—this kitchen still smells as it did in Gran's day, warmed by cinnamon and cloves, and the wood stove, occasionally smoking, the same stubborn flue.