

Slow Cooking

by [Joan Mazza](#) (May 2024)



Winter Table –John Aldridge, 1939

Slow Cooking

As forecast, an inch of snow has fallen before dawn, fluffy, sparkling in porch light, bending daffodils I can't see from inside where the house is warm. I peel and slice potatoes to boil and cool for potato rolls I'll bake later. A boneless pork roast browns in imported olive oil with onions, before I add pepper, caraway seeds, sauerkraut

to slow-cook in the oven in an All-Clad pot.

I think of Agafia in Siberia in her hut, content with potatoes and peas she's grown, pine nuts she's collected, roasted. It's thirty below. She's seventy-two, alone with her goats, cats, and a dog that she must feed, kept sheltered from wolves and bears. She gets water from the rushing river. No lights but candles. She has her prayers, writes letters in the old Cyrillic alphabet, waits for the geologists to come back with a little help, some red thread and buttons, refuses anything packaged in glass or plastic, or with evil bar codes.

My coffee's ready, the kitchen utensils washed and on the drain board. All three pets sleeping now since waking me at 4 AM. Though the fire's gone out in the woodstove, the electric heat clicks on. The house fills with the scent of roasting pork and caraway seeds, the yeast of bread dough rising. The woods are bright with snow in the day's first light when I return to bed, my thoughts on endurance, survival, the simple pleasures of home and home-cooked food alone.

Hands

Idle hands are the devil's workshop.

—attributed to St. Jerome

My mother rested by sitting at the window, embroidering tablecloths for my trousseau, knitting sweaters for the family in winter.

I embellish cards, paint trees in watercolors while listening to NPR, podcasts, audiobooks.

When my cousin talks about my grandfather and her father, she says they had *hand trouble*. In the context of cruelty and punishments, I know she isn't talking about handwork as skill, art, craft. My husky grandfather

hit his wife, his children, thought he had that right. Perhaps he felt it was his duty. When my mother's father threatened to cut his daughter's heart out, he showed he was a man. Not an artisan, but another head

of household, a bully exercising dominance. *Don't call it hand trouble*, I say to my cousin. *It's domestic violence. It's abuse. You don't have to water down the truth of our history when you talk with me.*

Color Wheel

Device for mixing virtual paints, three layers of cardboard turn on a rivet, names of mixtures in cut-out windows. Add yellow to violet to get autumn's brown. For burgundy, more black. Paint chips by Benjamin Moore display a range of value in lower case with names like *crowne hill yellow* and *oxford gold*, while Valspar names pinkish-orange hues *Carolina Inn Peach* and *Woodlawn Marmalade*.

Our DNA says we're all mixed, our mothers' mothers' mitochondria passed down through

the Old World. Though I like to say I'm pure Sicilian, I have a bit of Cocoa Bean brought back from Morocco. My grandfather stomped my father's train set flat, and my father told that story not as trauma, but with a bit of purple pride. Did that piece of chromosome pass to me or pass me by? Do I pass for gentle or carry that bit of darkness?

My mother's mother napped and took to bed to rest and digest. I can see now I take after her, not caring if you're tattooed or pierced. Your shoes don't have to match your dress. Though I'm cleaner, neater, not breeding roaches in my cabinets, I have her ability to disconnect, to be alone, sit in sunlight, my browning breasts tanning in the breeze. No near neighbors watch me. I wear stripes of a different color, mixtures you won't find on any wheel of colors.

To be healthy, balanced, live close to trees, I heard, long after I moved to Virginia to watch the changing shades of green—lime through fern, olive to emerald. The flowers bloom all over this palette, including blue and purple iris. I inhale a graduated rainbow, wheel through my days drunk on variety. My genes will be buried here.

Cultivating Intuition

I admit I saw the signs—his flashy monologue to try to win me, gold jewelry and promises of a house and pool, fenced yard for my dog,

while he lived in a ratty trailer. I saw the signs

of insincerity, how she lied, shared others' confidences, told me the opposite of the lines

she gave her students. She'd never do that to me. My intuition has always sent up a warning prickle at the back of my neck, caused

a quickened heartbeat and that thrum in my ears. I overruled the alarm, dismissed my fears as paranoia, discomfort with proximity,

perhaps frightened by intimacy. Seventeen when I returned the gold ankle bracelet for Christmas, I already felt oppressed,

although lacking the proper words to express what made me feel leashed, possessed, not loved for who I could become. On the cusp

of this new year, I'm optimistic, hold out hope I'm not too old to practice the art of trusting inner knowing. I discern patterns now,

can say their names inside my head when words don't match actions, agile in the graceful ways to retreat with a smile. *That's not my style.*

Carefully Taught

We were little girls listening to nuns who glided before us in their formidable, mysterious habits. Silent, we took it all in, trusted the truth of their tales, knew better than to question or fidget.

In the bible story, the Archangel Gabriel tells

Mary she is with child, dismisses her objection that she's a virgin. Baffled but obedient, she shows she's well trained. *I am the Lord's servant*. Surely,

she knew she was going to catch hell, would be shamed and shunned. Joseph, her betrothed, would be less than pleased. Would he believe her? Abandon her? We listened to this miraculous story,

most of us ignorant of basic sex, already aware our job was to accept, not question any authority. How magical and exciting for an angel to bring you such personal news! To tell you how special

you are, your future laid out. No questions! She was thirteen and poor, a little girl like us. If we were lucky, God might call us to renounce all our worldly pleasures to become nuns

to serve Him for all of our lives. We kept our heads down, got the message, already well trained.

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