



REFLECTIONS

Beans Love Cilantro

BY DONNA SCARAMASTRA GORMAN

“Lobio liubit kinzu.”

That’s the one piece of cooking advice Elmira gave me: Beans love cilantro. I tried to learn. I watched over her shoulder as she worked her magic, and occasionally she’d let me knead the dough, stir the sauce, peer into the pot. But she didn’t want me to learn, not really. Cooking was her joy, her talent — her way into other hearts.

I hired Elmira as my housekeeper when I moved to Armenia. I needed the help and she didn’t look like she’d take no for an answer. Tiny, birdlike, in her mid-fifties, with gray hair and hungry eyes, she showed up for the interview dressed to work.

I only learned her background months later. Elmira was an engineer who’d fallen on hard times after the collapse of the Soviet Union. First she lost her job (or rather, they stopped paying her). Then, one dreadful winter night, her apartment burned down. Her husband couldn’t handle the stress, so he took to his bed. Elmira was left to raise her two children and care for her husband. When she found out there were jobs cleaning houses for Westerners, she swallowed her pride and picked up a toilet brush. She had a son to put through medical

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school, after all. Every day she showed up early to wash, to iron, to scrub, and not once did she complain.

At first, I stumbled around hopelessly in my kitchen. I was trying to figure out how to make the recipes my family liked with Armenian ingredients. Pizza wouldn’t work without mozzarella. There isn’t a word for “tofu” in Armenian. As I pattered in my kitchen, reading cookbooks and muttering to myself, she’d often pass through and steal a glance with hawklike eyes. Every so often she’d offer to cut, slice or shred. Over time she began to ask questions about what I was making. And she started to make suggestions when I was at a loss for an ingredient.

One day she showed up with fresh beets and offered to make borscht. “No one makes borscht better than me,” she proudly announced. I’d had a long day at work, so I gratefully accepted. And what do you know? She was right: her borscht was divine. The next day she showed up with cauliflower and that night we feasted on cauliflower soup — not a heavy, cream-laden soup, but light and full of vegetables. The next day she made a spicy lentil soup with cilantro, and the next, yellow split-pea. Each time I

praised her soup and begged for the recipe. Each time she said she’d show me how to make it the next time. But every day when I came home from work, the soup was finished already, warming on the stove while she waited eagerly for my opinion.

Slowly, she became part of our family. My own mother was far away in the States, so Elmira took over. She criticized my hair. She held my infant son and kissed him, just like a grandma. She worried about me if I drove in the snow or came home late. And always, always, there was that soup. She loved us all with a love as fierce as a mother’s, and she labored over her soup in an effort to make sure we were warm, well-fed and content.

Our year in Armenia passed quickly. Sooner than soon, the State Department was ready to send us on to Kazakhstan. Elmira fretted and grieved for us. She flapped her arms, distraught, and asked if there wasn’t some way we could stay. I wished we could. But when you’re a diplomat, you go where they tell you to go and you don’t question the timing. I begged her to give me her recipes before I left, but she insisted I already knew how to make them all. “Just remember: *Beans love cilantro.*”

Beans love cilantro. But my soups just aren’t the same. I stand in my kitchen here in Kazakhstan, stirring my soup and thinking back to my days in Armenia, with Elmira fussing in our kitchen. I miss that soup. I miss Armenia. I miss Elmira. I guess that’s what she really wanted, anyway. ■