

## *Man in the Kitchen*

Dakpa Zady, who will not tell me his age, saying only that he is “a very old man,” is originally from Côte d’Ivoire. Zady, as he likes to be called, is a contractor and house painter. He lives in the Hyde Park section of Boston.



THE TINY COUNTER IN ZADY’S kitchen is stacked with ingredients he picked up at the Afro-Caribbean market yesterday. There’s a package of tilapia—two fish that have been gutted and sliced into thirds with heads and tails left intact—bags of frozen okra and fresh spinach, a small pile of chicken bones, and a bowl of shrimp, whose shells have been removed. Empty pots and pans are spread over the stove in preparation for the various dishes that Zady and his girlfriend, Lili, will cook today. He lights the burner under one pan and slices mushrooms into the oil that is now shimmering. Their sweet, musty scent fills the apartment, and Zady sings quietly as he stirs. He makes slow, graceful circles around the pan with a large wooden spoon, his lean, muscular arms seeming to move to an intricate dance rather than to stir mushrooms. “Oh, my girl is here,” he says suddenly, glancing out the second-floor kitchen window, which looks down on the street. “Now I better help her out.” He turns off the stove and slips downstairs with a jacket in his hand.

The bright morning sunlight streaming into the apartment reflects off a flat-screen TV that looks huge against the small wall behind it. Afro-pop drifts quietly from the other room, drowned out momentarily by the rustle

*Opposite:* Zady and Lili at the stove.

of paper and plastic in the hallway downstairs. Zady and Lili make their way up to the second floor, murmuring in French and depositing grocery bags and boxes on the sofa, chair, and end table. After several trips out to Lili's car, ingredients and kitchen equipment take over the small apartment. A wooden crucifix on the glass coffee table is moved aside to make room for containers of *foutu*, a type of dumpling made with plantain flour that Lili prepared at home earlier this morning, a pot filled with chicken pieces that have been partially cooked, ziplock bags of dried, ground okra and fish powder she brought back from her trips home to Côte d'Ivoire, and the *mandioca*, or yucca, she grated and strained several days ago, which she'll use to make *plakalay*, a type of dumpling popular in her village. On the side table next to the couch, Zady unloads a pair of scissors, a large wooden mortar and pestle, and Lili's prized calabash. The large bowl, made from the shell of a gourd, is smooth with wear, making it the perfect surface to roll her *plakalay* into balls. Zady peers into several bags until he finds what he wanted to show me. A frozen cylinder of *atieke*, or grated cassava, the classic staple in Côte d'Ivoire, is wrapped tightly in plastic. The tiny white granules resemble couscous, and, like couscous, they are steamed and served with stewed meat and vegetables. When I ask Lili if she also made this at home, she shakes her head, explaining it's a lot of work and something she can buy at her market.

When everything's been unloaded, Lili surveys the stove, moving aside the pots Zady has set out and replacing them with her own. She adds chopped onions and water to two separate pots of the parboiled chicken she's brought. The one on the left will be *kedjenou*, a popular stew from home. When I ask about the other, Lili shrugs and looks at Zady. "Call it sauce gumbo," he instructs, and Lily nods.

In Zady's pot on the front burner, onions, mushrooms, carrots, and chicken bones are cooking. He adds the tilapia pieces, explaining there's no name for this stew, because it's just something he cooks here. It does, however, reflect the kinds of meals his mother always made, even if she wouldn't have added quite so many ingredients. "I can just imagine what she would cook with all these things," he says, gesturing around to the piles of vegetables, pots filled with chicken, and bags of spices. "She doesn't have that many things."

Lili chops carrots on a small cutting board she balances on the edge of the sink. She adds them to her pots on the stove, stirring them slowly and watching quietly as more and more ingredients go into Zady's pot, which is nearly overflowing now with the fresh spinach and okra he's pureed in

the tiny blender he calls his “toy” and poured over everything. “You will not have consistency from me!” Zady laughs, pointing to Lili’s stews on the rear burners. “But hers are the traditional recipes. Mine, when you come back, will always be a little different.” Lily looks over the rims of her glasses at Zady, who is humming and stirring. It’s hard to guess what she might be thinking, because her face is fixed in a serious expression, and she doesn’t talk as freely as Zady. She adjusts her glasses and focuses her attention on the hot pepper she’s holding, cutting off a tiny piece which she adds to the stew. The *kedjenou* should be just slightly spicy, she explains when I ask. Zady, meanwhile, makes me pronounce the word several times to be certain I’ve gotten it right. Pointing to my notepad, he instructs, “Spell it *k-j-NU*,” to help me with the pronunciation, adding that a lot of Americans mispronounce French words. He repeats it several times, slowly enunciating the syllables in his deep baritone. He watches as Lili pours a beige powder from a plastic bag into the pot of sauce gumbo and tells me it’s the ground fish powder that goes into a lot of their home cooking. “You really have to brush your teeth with that one,” he warns.

When the various stews have simmered for a while, it’s time to make the rice. Zady pulls a fifty-pound sack from a low cupboard in the corner of the kitchen and holds it open for Lili to scoop. Before she can begin, he takes the pan from her and says something in French. “He wants me to make a lot of rice,” she explains with a sigh. Zady reaches for a bigger pan and begins to scoop it himself. “I always cook the rice last,” he says, lifting the cloth bag back into the cupboard. “It tastes great when it’s hot, and there’s nothing better than that!” He goes into extensive detail about its preparation—only an inch of water to cover the grains because an inch and a quarter will yield soft rice, and an inch and a half, overcooked mush not worth eating. He pours several tablespoons of olive oil into the pan, and when I ask about salt, he shakes his head emphatically, telling me it ruins the flavor.

He and Lili begin to debate whether she should do the *aloko* today, a popular appetizer in Côte d’Ivoire made by deep-frying slices of ripe plantain and tossing them with salt. He walks around the kitchen, looking through boxes and bending down to peek into cupboards in search of the plantains. Zady has a subdued, even energy when he moves, as if he were conserving some for later, an acquired trait, perhaps, when you grow up in a place that, as Zady’s told me, is always very, very humid. When he locates the plantains—both nearly black, the best kind for *aloko*—he passes them to Lili. She heats the oil to deep-fry them, and Zady tells us he makes them differently, with just a little oil in the pan,

“like a pancake,” so that it’s healthier. “That’s not *aloko*,” Lili says quietly, shaking her head.


When it’s time to eat, Lili takes a ball of her *plakalay* and several small spoonfuls of the *kedjenou* and the sauce gumbo she’s made and sits in the armchair next to the TV. Zady makes a place for himself across from her on the couch. His plate is piled high with rice, cooked the way he likes it: dry and slightly brown on the edges. There’s a large helping of his dish without a name, the green color from the pureed spinach and okra vibrant against the white rice. He eats slowly, savoring the flavors as he talks about his mother’s cooking and life in Côte d’Ivoire and warning us to watch out for the fish bones. When Lili gives a ball of *plakalay* to each of us, Zady passes. “If I eat that, I won’t have room for my rice,” he tells her.



When I tell them back home that I cook every day, they think I’m joking. My brothers can’t even imagine me cooking. Men just don’t do that there. My mother was the only one who cooked when I was growing up. No, for men, their responsibility is to provide whatever it takes to make a good meal, but you never see them in the kitchen. My family is certain I must have a woman here who cooks for me every day, because I’m educated and in America. They think it’s impossible that I’d have to do it for myself. But, in fact, I don’t have that basic thing. Even if they have nothing else, they still have someone that will cook for them every day. Where I’m from, that’s the least a man can have.

So I can’t tell them that I cook for my girlfriend; I haven’t said anything. They would probably feel disgust or worry that she owns me, that I’ve lost my manhood. Actually, they might be scared for me! But I do cook. I cook for her when she comes. The traditional foods, she excels in those. But she’s busy because she goes to school, she works, and then she has to take care of her kids. I feel bad for her because she works hard, so when she comes, I cook. I do vegetables with meat or fish. And always some rice. She really likes my cooking.

In my village, the food is rice. You always ate rice. If you have no rice, it’s like you are starving. There never was much choice: whatever we had, that’s what we would eat, and we grew our own rice, so that’s what we ate. But there was a time when we didn’t have much. That was when my mother left. She was fighting with my father for some reason, so she went to another village for a while. Oh, my God, what a disaster it was!




We had nothing, because my father, he cannot cook! He's not a food guy; he's more like a drink guy. But still, we needed to eat! You couldn't believe what a void—I mean, the family was just nonexistent. I can't even imagine now. She went for a long time. Oh, she was really mad! We were hungry. My brothers tried to cook but, oh, my God! For someone who never cooked to all of a sudden try to put food together, forget it. We were just eating to survive; there was no enjoyment in it.

You don't really have a choice about what to eat the way you do here. It's not like, oh, I feel like pasta or, oh, I'd like chicken or, maybe I'll eat a hamburger. Are you crazy? In America there are a lot of choices, but over there the problem is just finding something that day. So you eat to survive. Fortunately, my father was a hard worker, so, when we were young, we always had our rice, and he could hunt, so sometimes there was meat or fish, too.

When I went away to school, it was different. I lived with my aunt for a while, because there was a fourth grade in her village. All the relatives were sending their kids to her, so there were maybe ten of us in one house. It's not like the amount of food could just increase based on the amount of kids to feed. No, it stays the same no matter how many people there are. So we were fighting just to get a little bit. I can't believe we survived. There was very little to eat. But then, I passed a test in sixth grade and got to go to another school, where we were taken care of by the government. We lived on the campus, and there was a cafeteria, so I had food from that point on. It's a different lifestyle. And then I got a scholarship to come to this country when I was about twenty.

Oh, the food! There is no country like America that has so much food. Whatever you want, you can get! When I first got here, I was amazed by how much you could have. In one pot, there might be so many pieces of chicken, and you'd think, oh, my God! There was so much, and it was all the same thing! I mean, back home we might have two legs or two wings, but over here there might be seven pieces of wings—only wings!—or so many legs, and you'd think, Wow! How can this be? How can there be so many wings in one pot of soup? Back home there are certain parts of the chicken you don't even know about, because you've never had them. Someone else eats those—the good parts. So you come here and you see all of it; whatever part you want you can have.


I started to learn to cook when I came here. There were four of us in my program, and we were a bunch of guys who had been taken care of all our lives by our mothers and then our school, so we only ever had to



show up and eat. All of a sudden we found ourselves in a place where none of us knew how to cook. I just started to put things together on the stove. Basically, we wanted to make our rice, because we have to have our rice, but sometimes we'd try to make a sauce, like maybe we'd boil vegetables with meat. In the beginning, the seasoning was the difficult thing, because sometimes we might put too much salt in. Or we might forget the salt. Another mistake we made is we would put the food on the stove and go watch TV. Then, all of a sudden the alarm would go off and the next thing we knew, firefighters were invading the building. Yeah, not once, several times!

So I just had to learn. It's not like I read it from cookbooks. In Africa, well, the place where I'm from, there are certain things that are natural. Like cooking. You have to know them; you don't learn them. It's like dancing, like the drums. They don't teach people how to do the drums; you just do it. You can't learn it. Singing, it's natural. You have to be able to sing, or you don't know how to sing. Cooking, usually it's the ladies who do that, so to read a cookbook or to go to school to learn cooking, no, never. School is for something else. It's another level, and only those that are educated go to school. But cooking? Even in the villages where the people are primitive, they know how to cook. So how can anyone go to school to learn cooking? Here, I know it's different, but in Africa, if you tell them you're going to school to become a chef, they will laugh. They cannot even imagine that. They would not believe that there are people in America going to school for cooking. And making a presentation with food? They don't think about that. If you're hungry, just find something to eat. And a cookbook? Come on, what are you looking for in a book? they'll ask. In Africa, even kids, young girls, twelve years old, know how to cook. So how can a grownup go to school for that? They cannot picture it. You go to school to be an engineer, a doctor, an economist. You do not go to school to be like your mother, who cooks.


A girl learns by watching her mother. She can start as early as ten, eleven. The only reason we had problems when my mother went away was my sister was not with us then. Otherwise, she would have taken over, because if a woman doesn't know how to cook, she's not going to find a good man. Yeah. The fact is, if you cook, your man will come home. If you're not going to make him a good meal, he's going to find one somewhere else. And it's not going to be with his mother! So you have to really be good, because your man will always stay where the good meal is.



I really haven't spoken with my mother for a long, long time. We talk on the phone, but there's very little that we can exchange. First of all, I really didn't master my native language, Beté, because I went away to school at a young age. So I cannot go into detail about a lot of things. I can speak a little, but I have to mix it with French, and she doesn't speak French. When I call, I ask her how she's doing and let her talk. I can understand her, but if I try to say something, I can't be abstract, and I can't articulate certain ideas. It's frustrating. I cannot really talk to my mother. It's very, very difficult. And I don't go back because it's so expensive. Sometimes it's just better to send them the money. I tell them I could spend two thousand dollars to visit, or I could just send it instead. They really need the money.

They don't have the opportunities you have here. The government is in control of everything. I couldn't do what I do here. People would laugh at me. They would say, Are you crazy? We send you to school and now you paint houses? They would expect me to be in a big office with a big Mercedes and always wearing a tie. It's not that I don't want that, but you have to do what will help you survive. And it doesn't matter what that is, because in this country, nobody will mock you for it. But over there, everybody wants to be in a big office. I think the mentality of the people has to change. They have to realize that success in life is not just getting a high degree and working in an office. You need to do whatever is necessary to take care of yourself and your children and to help the country, too. We all need to take part so that things will improve, so the roads will be clean, the houses will look nice, the neighborhoods will be in better condition. We have to stop waiting for the government to do all those things. We need someone like the little contractor, like you have here. People need to begin to do these things. That's the great thing about this country. You can be a doctor if you want, but you can also put your diploma in the drawer and put on your dirty clothes and go into the street and try to make it. There's no one telling you that what you're doing is beneath you.

When you look around, you find there's no such place like America. There's so much diversity, so many people doing different things. Life is not boring: the food, the people, even the weather changes. You can always find something to feel good about, the change of seasons, for example. Maybe you like skiing in the winter. If not, there's always something else. You might be enjoying the sun one minute, and the next, it's gone. In Africa, nothing really changes. It can be humid all your life.



But here, everything is so dynamic; things are always moving. And then, sometimes before you know it, you're too old. Time goes so fast.

I've moved around since I was very young, but this is the place I've lived the longest. I'm going to stay. Sometimes I miss people. I miss the ambience of the country; it's very fun! You don't see people worried like, oh, I have to pay my bills or, oh, my God, my rent is due. You have no such concerns, because there are always people who take care of you. When I go back, there's always someone who will feed me: my cousins, my friends' wives, my mother.

You know, when I was growing up, whatever my mother made, it was always the best thing of the day. I grew up eating her food, so it was always the ultimate; there was never anything better. And I think when you go home and you eat your mother's meal, that's when you can say, the day is over and I can go to bed, because now I've been fed. Sometimes I think, without that, it's like nothing.