

ANNIE DAWID

**Nitza Kosher Pizza
1977–1978**

Elbow-deep in warm suds, pressed against the stainless steel sink, I feel my boss's muscular arms envelop me. "Quit it, Sam."

"Kisses sweet in wine, kisses sweet in wine," he says, kissing the back of my neck. Or is it "kisses sweet *and* wine?"

"Sam, leave me alone."

His wife, Marie, does the books in one of the booths while I scrub pots and bowls, the remainders of Sam's private time in the kitchen; no one is allowed while he prepares his "special sauce" for baked ziti.

A Yemenite Jew, Sam broke with his brother in biblical fashion and quit the family business in Flushing to start his own shop in Great Neck, a suburb with plenty of kosher Jews to patronize this dairy vegetarian restaurant, with falafel, tahini, and the best baked ziti on Long Island.

Sam wears heavy black shoes and the checked-tweed trousers of a real chef, a starched cap cocked atop his head. By day's end, his apron is filthy.

Around Marie's pale neck hangs the star of David, a golden pendant also worn by her daughter, Teresa, eleven years old, who sits in another booth, doing homework. Last year, Marie converted to Judaism to marry Sam, who immigrated to New York as a teenager. He must be in his forties, Marie in her mid-thirties; I am seventeen.

"Why you don't like me kissing you? You need to laugh! To love! To feel joy! I make you feel joy," he says, kissing me over and over on the nape of my neck. He is short, just my height.

"Sam, your wife and daughter are ten feet away! Please leave me alone."

It's hard to push him away with real force, because his heavy arms feel so good, his backward embrace a kind of home.

"So what? She doesn't love me! And that girl isn't my daughter. Besides, Marie's not a beautiful Jewish girl like you, Ruth." He pronounces it "root." "You even have a book of the Bible named after you." I've always hated my one-syllable name, but in his mouth, it sounds exotic.

His wife calls, and Sam backs off, storming through the swinging kitchen door, angry with her for interrupting his moment.

One of a handful of high school girls who work for Sam and Marie, I get minimum wage, under the table, plus tips. We work behind the counter and bring food from the kitchen. Sam tours the narrow aisle, booths on both sides, to schmooze with customers who love his food, which is, in fact, delicious.

My friends and I put up with Sam and his groping, which never goes beyond the hugs and kisses from behind. We think this is how it works in restaurants, as it has in every kitchen where I've washed dishes, including the Indian place by the train station and the pricey French bistro on the so-called Miracle Mile in Manhasset.

It's wrong to fool around with a married man, I tell myself, feeling virtuous about my ability to resist my boss's warm embrace. Sometimes, though, I *want* to turn from my suds and wrap myself around him, pressure him with my hips as hard as he presses me against the stainless steel sink. Sometimes I want his erection against me. It's not his looks, his manners, and certainly not his personality that keep me working there.

All fall, Rachel and I have been saving diligently for our trip across Canada and California's coast after we graduate in January. When I started at Nitza Pizza last summer, Sam promised he would teach me how to make pizza, and I was thrilled—an actual skill to carry into my collegiate future! But when I burned my first pie, he ranted, swore, and prohibited me from learning more. I was banished to the kitchen, where I was more accessible than at the counter; his kisses sweet in wine moistened my neck again and again, me protesting, Sam ignoring my words.

High school ended, and the next day Rachel and I stepped onto the Amtrak “Montréalér” in Penn Station, future-bound. Although he had plenty of customers, Sam lost the shop the following summer, while Rachel and I were sleeping with brothers in Yosemite Valley. Reluctantly, he re-joined the family business in Queens, and Nitza Pizza—nitza meaning blossom or bud in Hebrew—receded into collective history, along with its celebrated ziti, baked by the Yemenite from Flushing with deft, loving hands.