

The Pizza Shop:

CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! I toss the dismembered remains of carrots, broccoli, and cabbage into a mixing bowl. The onslaught continues as my knife's next victim, the cucumber, rolls onto the cutting board. Its unattractive oblong shape will soon turn into appealing circular slices. Rhythmically, I chop, moving ever closer to the fingers of my left hand that stabilize the vegetable. Like Odysseus' men who get lost in the siren's song, I enter a trance-like state, until ... SLICE!!

My heart beats through my chest, and I reflexively drop the knife assuming the worst. I peek at my hand, determine that no blood has been shed, then let out a sigh of relief. Phew! The flurry of adrenaline, and overwhelming sense of Déjà vu transports me to the first time I learned how to cut vegetables.

It was a sunny summer morning at Virginia Beach, and I was late for my shift at the pizza shop. Pedaling quickly through the neighborhood, I bolted through stop signs, enraging the drivers in my path. They broadcasted their anger through middle fingers and car horns. I grinned as I made my way to the shopping center. It was already 10:10 am, and I was supposed to be there by 10 am. I pedaled for a couple more minutes until I arrived at the back-entrance of the pizza shop. The pedals and handlebars of my bike propped it up against the brick wall of the adjacent building in the alleyway. I placed it next to the dumpster to discourage the local bandits from taking my coveted mongoose.

The worn hinges of the back door creaked, and I stealthily sneaked into the kitchen without my father noticing. Luckily, he was in his office with the door closed.

Water from the sink faucet filled a small bucket with hot water, creating bubbles as it mixed with the cleaning solution at its bottom. I grabbed dish rags from the bottom of the metallic shelf and tossed them into the bucket. Hurriedly, I rushed from the cleaning corner of the shop to the front of the store. My first task of the day had been to clean all the table counters in the seating area.

This was a task I didn't mind all that much. It was better than standing in one place and washing dishes for hours, which I had done countless times before. At least when I cleaned the booths, I was able to sit in them while I wiped the tabletops. I had tended to about half of the tables in the restaurant before my dad came out to check on me.

When we made eye contact, I could tell he knew I was late, but for some reason he didn't lecture or get angry at me. He told me to hurry up with my wiping, because he needed me to help him in the kitchen. This was abnormal for him. Normally, I would stay in the washroom and help wash dishes or clean the countertops after guests left the restaurant. Excited to see what my new task would be, I cleaned the remaining tables and seats as quickly as I could, returned the supplies to the cleaning closet, washed my hands, and joined my dad in the kitchen.

At first glance, I noticed a collection of vegetables, a cutting board, and a chef's knife. These are the materials I saw my dad lay out on the stainless-steel countertop, when he was ready to prepare the shop's house salad. Was this what I was going to be helping him with? Curious, I inquired my dad,

"Hey Dad! I am done cleaning, what do you need help with?"

Softly, and enthusiastically, he chimed,

"Hey bud! Good morning. I was thinking you could help me prepare the house salad for today's guests. You up for the task?"

"Pshhh, absolutely! Making a salad can't be that hard. Let's do this!"

"Well alright then! First things first, you need to learn how to cut up a vegetable. So, to do that you need three things: a knife, a vegetable, and a cutting board. Each vegetable will require a slightly different technique, and I will show you them all, but they all require the same philosophy and that is ... what?"

I was genuinely confused, so I uttered, "Uhhhh, I don't know...?"

With confidence and assertiveness, my dad replied,

"You must always cut down and away from your body. Never cut upwards or towards your body, this is how you will slice your finger off or hurl the knife toward your body. Do you understand me?"

I nodded my head, but the look on my face must not have been convincing enough. He further instructed how to cut cucumbers into thin slices, how to be forceful but careful when chopping carrots, and the steady back and forth within a 60-degree range of motion required to slice red onions into edible pieces. Every step of the way he stressed the importance of cutting down and away from the body.

He stressed this so much that it sticks with me to this day. I look down at the carefully sliced cucumbers in front of me and can't help but tear up. It's been ten years since he passed, and the lessons he taught me continue to live on. I will cherish this lesson from my time working in his pizza shop forever.

Thank you, Dad.