

Raoul Rodriguez
California State University, Los Angeles

It's *My* Time

Abstract

Baking, like baseball, requires immense amounts of practice to become great. Raoul Rodriguez, a first-gen graduate from CSULA, employs his love of both to illustrate joy in his life. The unfolding narrative captures the confidence, self-love, and conscientiousness that Raoul has developed and continues to work on. The joy characterized in these narratives is inspired by the surrounding characters that supported Raoul on his journey to finding measured self-confidence.

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RAOUL RODRIGUEZ

It's My Time

The count is 3 balls and two strikes, the bases are loaded, it's the bottom of the ninth and we're down by 3. It's game seven in the World Series and I'm tired. One hit, one millisecond of perfect contact is the difference between victory or defeat, between history or being the footnote in someone else's story. The game has been dragging on, the heat almost insurmountable and no amount of water I splash my face with will wake me up, no amount I guzzle down will satisfy my thirst. The pitcher shakes off a few of the catcher's signals before agreeing with his battery partner. He stands up as straight as he can, his body has taken a beating and so has mine, but I match his slouched posture no matter how tired I am. I imagine his hand fiddling with the red stitching, his index and thumb forming a secret circle while his other fingers grip the ball. I see right through his off-speed pitch; he tells me when his foot tap tap taps the mound three times. He winds up, sweat dripping from his graying curls underneath a dirt-stained bat, typical superstitious pitcher behavior. He takes one last deep breath before sending his pitch meandering towards the catcher's glove, the ball hoping to embrace the glove victoriously...

As a baker, I am tasked with adhering to the consistency and quality that the bakery, and its customers, desire. And I do a damn good job at baking. I make the goods that people want and love. They come to expect the same croissant or cookie they bought last week because it was so good the first time. I take my job seriously because I find joy in a job well done. The only caveat is that I don't treat myself the same, or at least I didn't used to.

One night, when I was high and playing video games with my friends, I really wanted cookies. I thought the easiest and quickest would be thumbprint cookies with a little jam on top. So, I got to work. Even intoxicated, I still performed like I did in any bakery I've worked at. I pre-scaled my ingredients and separated them into their proper stages. I creamed the butter and sugar expertly. I added my eggs, and once the wet ingredients were fully incorporated, I added my flour and leaveners. I pre-heated my oven and I reached a crossroads. The dough was warm—warm butter melts faster and unrested dough tends to spread more—the cooler the better. However, I really fucking wanted thumbprint cookies with a little raspberry jam. I decided to override my internal warning system and bake the damn things anyway. I filled them and stuck them haphazardly in the still warming oven. I smelled the cookies and jam baking, the sweet smell of a botched bake. I pulled them out and I was met with a tray of what once resembled thumbprints if my thumbs were the size of my heel. Of course, they had spread and deformed. I didn't care, my excuse was that “they were for me, so it doesn't matter.” My sister, who was visiting at the time, heard my sorry excuse and called me on my bullshit. She told me that I should respect myself more, even if the cookies were for me, don't I deserve well-made cookies? What does it matter who the cookies are for? At the time I wanted to yell at her, to lash out and tell her off: “Who do you think you are? Who are you to tell me how I should want my cookies? Of course I respect myself, you shithead.” But she was right. I wanted cookies but I didn't have the self-respect to give them, or myself, the time they deserved to make a beautiful product. I needed to change something.

...I felt like I could see in slo-mo, the eye of the ball careening away from me. I could see it in his eyes, his raised eyebrows indicating panic, he left it hanging. I lean in just a bit and swing. I feel the ball connect to the center cut of the bat, a solid THUNK.

I tried my hardest to change my mindset, to take things more seriously, to be better. Cookies are easy, baking is easy, but treating yourself with kindness and self-love is a little harder. I got too obsessed for a bit trying to be the best, and it drained me. I tried falling back into my old ways, but I felt a nagging voice in my head telling me I deserved better. I struggled to find a balance.

...I ran with my head down. I didn't realize it hadn't landed yet. By the time I lifted my head I had reached second. Success isn't always the effort of a sole person; success requires teamwork and coordination. Sometimes you don't have to swing for the fences; you aim to make contact and keep the inning going...

I didn't give up, though. Of course I didn't give up. The hardest challenge was perfecting my croissant. I tried again and again for years to create a satisfying croissant that made me smile. I worked through the anger and shame of flat, bready, uneven, over-proofed, underbaked croissants, and I was able to overcome that challenge. So, I worked my way towards balance. I think I found it, and although I might regress sometimes, I respect myself too much to slip backwards. My sister was right, but I knew she and my entire family believed in me. When I make cookies, I always try my best. I aim for a product that will make me smile because the joy I feel when I make something well is the joy of self-love.

... But I hit the shit out of that ball. I didn't watch it land, but the crowd made sure I knew that I had struck it out of the park. This was everything I had worked up to. Everything I could hope for. The game had ended, and we had won. My efforts, my work, the efforts of my team had set up the perfect moment for me to shine. I smiled to myself and felt proud of all my accomplishments. I may not have been the perfect player—I had made plenty of mistakes—but I pulled through and I worked on them and myself. I am a baseball player, and I am damn good at it.

I feel, as a first-gen graduate, that I am constantly in the last game of the World Series. I feel that anything could happen at any moment. A wild pitch could move the batters on base. A failed check swing could make weak contact and force an inning ending double play. Or, I could take a risk and go abroad and represent my family in a writing workshop, and I could make friends with students I would've never met otherwise. I don't know what happens after this, but I know that I feel like a champion, and I couldn't have done it without you all.