

Family Recipe

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You wondered about the delicacy of worms when you saw your three-year-old Thomas munching on them in the backyard. His hands caked in dirt (like any honorable chef covered in flour as he cooks), a huge smile of glee erupting on his face. You thought to yourself that if anything made a baby that happy, couldn't it do the same for you? Hilda, your crotchety mother-in-law, had left you alone with Thomas for the first time since you killed your wife. She still wouldn't believe that you didn't mean to run over her with the car. The image you saw in the rearview mirror resembled a flock of crows in the driveway. So you hurriedly backed up to shoo them away, instantly killing her. Hilda hired a doctor that insisted you needed help raising Thomas or else Child Protective Services would take him away.

"You wouldn't want to lose your child would you? Because I can take perfectly good care of him myself if you give me any reason. That's why I can't let you be alone with him," Hilda said. But after two years of constant supervision she felt she could give you a break. Saying something about cribbage with her friends, she warned you one more time as she left the house.

"Be careful. I don't want to hear of any more accidents when I get home. Or you can bet I'll take that child before you can say CPS." With Hilda gone you knew nothing could stop you from joining your son in a worm cookout.

Walking outside on the patio covered in fall leaves you take a bowl over to Thomas. He gurgles nonsensically at you as you place the large ceramic bowl in front of him.

"Help me out here Thomas, give me some choice worms," you say to him. He stares at you quietly for a moment, his eyes widening with what you think is realization. He grabs two large fistfuls with worms wiggling helplessly in his firm grip. Lifting the bowl towards him he drops them in with a satisfying thunk. His cobalt eyes watch the wiggly treats and he reaches towards them once more.

“Nope, not yet Thomas, we have to cook them first.” Grabbing a hold of the baby in one arm and the dirty ceramic bowl in the other, you head inside. Looking at the clock you see that it is about 4:00 in the afternoon. Just enough time to make the fried worms, eat them, and clean up before Hilda the Horrible gets home. Setting Thomas down on the floor near some toys in the kitchen, you remove a large pan from the bottom shelf of the cupboard. Meticulously you search through the dirt for each worm, reveling in the brown smudges covering your fingers and palms. Placing them side-by-side in the pan (you find ten in all) you wonder what sort of sauce to cover them in. You consult your master chef who is currently interested in placing a spider in his mouth.

“Mustard glaze, ketchup, or some cinnamon?” you ask him.

“Huptamus!” You nod, unsure of this particular sauce he speaks of. You decide he must mean for you to mix them all together. So you take out the prescribed sauces and squeeze them into the dirt-covered bowl. Mixing it with a spatula until thoroughly meshed together, you sprinkle the top with a generic cinnamon. You carefully place an equal amount of this sauce on each worm, trying not to favor any of the juicy looking ones. Wishing to consult Thomas once more on the amount of time to cook your fried worms, you find him nestled on the kitchen rug, his thumb in his mouth and drool dripping onto the words Welcome Home. Allowing your gourmet chef to rest after a long day of preparing his best dishes, you decide thirty minutes will be a good start.

A smell similar to turkey and rubber wafts through the oven door as the timer begins to beep. You note that the worms are not as crispy on the backsides so you flip them and place the rest of the sauce on top to fully flavor them. Another twenty-five minutes pass and your stomach is grumbling with joy at the thought of these crunchy brown invertebrates in your mouth. Pulling the pan out of the oven you place it on top and examine your dish. You think that the worms look browned to perfection, and the sauce gleams on every one. Placing a few on a plate you make your way to the kitchen table to enjoy.

The first bite is delicious; you think this particular worm retained a bit of sliminess so it slid down your throat effortlessly like a noodle. Staring down at your worm-covered plate you find the juiciest of them to savor in

your mouth. You find it in the corner, its plumpness defying all the others. Slowly you pick it up marveling in its crisp brown texture, almost like a french fry. It drips with the Huptamus sauce your son devised and you can't wait to take that first sweet and tangy bite. The worm is lying right on your salivating tongue, your teeth in the act of biting down when you hear the door open and Hilda call out.

"I'm home. Mary needed to pick up her grandchildren at the YMCA." You swiftly swallow the worm and pick up the plate. Racing over to the sliding glass door you throw out the remaining delicacies, disappointed in the waste of your meal. Hilda's footsteps shuffle into the living room and, taking a glance at your son, you move over to the oven. Slamming the cooking pan into soapy water you furiously begin to wash it.

"What is it you were cooking in the oven Ned?" she asks peering into the water for some clue. You fumble for a moment dropping the scour pad in the depths of the soap.

"I made some fish sticks for Thomas. Unfortunately he fell asleep and I ate them all." She examines you for a moment, taking note of your clothing and then staring at the countertop behind you.

"Well it's almost time for Thomas to be in bed anyway. I'm going to do my nails and when I come out, I expect him to be in pajamas and in his crib. Do you hear me?" she asks.

"Yes Hilda. I understand perfectly," you reply quickly. Hilda makes her way towards the kitchen doorway and then stops. Turning on her shiny black heels she walks to the patio door and moves to shut the blinds.

"Oh mother of God! What in Christ's name is that?" Hilda asks. She steps outside and picks up a red and yellow object, her mouth twisted into a grimace.

"Thomas must have been playing with worms again. He is a little boy after all," you say. She strolls over to you and shakes the worm in your face, splattering Huptamus sauce on your shirt.

"I knew that smell didn't come from fish sticks. These worms are cooked and you were the one who did it. You ruined your chance to care for Thomas. I'm taking him with me to Mary's and will find a lawyer tomorrow. You won't be seeing him again. You need help, much more than my doctor can give you." She drops the worm on the floor and the only sound in the

kitchen comes from its plop on the tiled floor. Turning from you she waltzes over to Thomas and picks him up. He opens his wide cobalt eyes, staring at you from over Hilda's shoulder. Reaching out for you, he begins to wail in her ear.

"Hilda, you can't take my son," you say crossing towards her. Whirling on her heel, she tightens her grip on the baby making him cry harder.

"There's nothing you can do. I already have." With that she rapidly marches out of the kitchen, the sound of Thomas's cries trailing behind like a woeful siren in the house. The door slams and you sprint to the window just in time to see her peel out of the drive in her Cadillac with your son. The house says nothing, you are left alone with your thoughts and a single cooked worm; the remains of the last meal you will ever eat with Thomas.