Big Forks  
  
 Butter always comes first. Anyone who tells you otherwise is probably a phony.   
 It is best at room temperature, but the baker knows that setting butter out the night before is a lofty goal reserved for Julia Childs, or others who have their shit together. I always microwave my butter for sixteen seconds, on high, so that is just softened for mixing. Once, I accidentally melted a whole stick so it bled all over the microwave, and it took me forever to scrub off the melted mess. My dad yelled at me the next day because the plate was still greasy and I hadn’t put it away, and I melted, too.  
 Today I unwrap the butter and it falls into the metal mixing bowl. Two sticks, thud, thud. Next is always sugar. Sugar must be mixed thoroughly with the butter, and so I measure it half cup by half cup but not too carefully, the grains heaping on one side and thinning on the other unevenly, an idea I am used to from looking in the mirror.  
 I grab a fork to mix with. My mom and three younger sisters like to say this is pointless because we have both a hand mixer and a standing mixer in our bright and spacious and well-stocked kitchen. But I always use a fork. I want to labor over the cookies, to put all my muscle into the motion of birthing a beautiful ball of dough.  
 Today’s fork is a “big fork,” in contrast with a “little fork.” We have two sets because my dad does not like to eat with a utensil that is too light for his Italian grip.  
 I mix and mix, my arm bulging in its slow circles against the butter’s smooth resistance. I wonder if my bicep is too big and think that at least I’m putting it to use. Slowly the butter and sugar become an endearing, creamy mass, and I taste it, momentarily pretending the raw fat and sugar won’t settle.  
 Eggs next. I crack three and scoop out a piece of shell because my dad might be eating these. More stirring, now, and then what I call in my head the “little ingredients”—salt, vanilla extract, baking soda, baking powder, sometimes cinnamon because this kitchen is mine.  
 I am pouring one teaspoon of vanilla extract—a husky ingredient important for its flavor—when my dad loudly pushes his chair out from the high marble counter and leaves the kitchen with a “See you later, Gab.” I have been giving him his space and he mine. Usually this is his house and he occupies wherever his thick stature pleases. But he knows this kitchen is my own today and whenever I choose to bake—to create something beautiful, to let inaccurately measured flour become my biggest worry, to reclaim.  
 “Love you,” I reply as I add a teaspoon of salt and smile as the flakes fall and glisten on the mixture like the white flurry in our backyard. Salt brings out the sweetness and flavor of a baker’s masterpiece, and so I always add a little extra.   
 It takes me until after the baking powder to realize that my dad has left his plate, and his cold cuts, and his cup, and his big fork. He did this yesterday, too, and I watched my mom clean it up, and the day before and the week before the same. Each of my three younger sisters has taken a turn.

Now the sight stops my rhythmic mixing, and I confront this mess. It is in my kitchen and asking to be cleaned up, supposing I the daughter be the one to do it. So I do, slowly, and each utensil and bit of food feels heavier. I wipe away the crumbs on the dark countertop—imperfections.   
 Flour is next, the second to last ingredient. With these two cups comes a new and fierce blizzard, and I pick up my fork and begin to stir strongly. Around and around and around and despite my force some of the flour just isn’t mixing but forming streaks across dough. I drop my fork and it clangs.   
 In go my hands. I thrust them into the dough and I’m almost up to my elbows in it and I love the feeling. I knead and knead and feel the dough between my fingers and keep going until I can breathe again. It is now a pale beige color somewhere between firewood and snow, and I think it is beautiful.  
 True bakers know never to overmix, not to worry about the little lumps and bumps left in our batter or dough. Overmixing and overanalyzing leads to a tough and tired and bitter product. I continue to breathe.  
 Chocolate chips are last. I learned recently that a woman invented chocolate chip cookies, and I’m not sure why that surprised me.  
 I tip the bag and let the chips pour, rushing into the bowl. My dad likes to tell me that I don’t use enough chocolate chips, on the odd chance that he eats my masterpiece. I pour more.   
 Dough is stuck between my pinky and ring finger, and under my nails, and around the ponytail holder on my wrist I forgot to take off, and I continue mixing with my hands, relishing the mess that is mine.

“Teaspoon-sized” is what all the recipes say dough balls should be, but in my kitchen there is no ideal. I shape a diversity of dough and plop them in disarray on my tray, plop, plop, popping a bite into my mouth with every other ball I shape. My mom and sisters like to tell me I eat too much when I bake, and today their voices echo in my empty kitchen.

I eat one more bite of the gooey, smooth, sweet dough and smile spitefully. My dad strolls back into the kitchen.  
 “Dad, you forgot to clean your plate again.” The words escape before I’ve swallowed, and I almost choke. I wait for a reply and try to stand taller, but I’m shaking.  
 He looks at me for a second, frozen, with a streak of flour on my forehead and cookie dough on my hands and in my mouth—his striving daughter. His expression stumbles its way from indignant to understanding. “Oh, I’m sorry.”  
 I nod. Today, that’s all I need.