

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Cooking Time

By Anita Roy  
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*Anita Roy is a writer, editor, publisher, and storyteller whose work has appeared in numerous magazines and story collections. In "Cooking Time," Roy invites readers to consider a world without some of the simple pleasures we take for granted. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing theme. This means paying attention to topics or big ideas that come up in a text. As you read, take notes on how life is different without real food and consider what message the author is expressing in the story.*

[1] The minute the doorbell rang, I knew that something was wrong. The sound set my nerves jangling, as if it was plugged into my brain. My thoughts flew to the box in the basement, but before I could move, Marra had leaped up. "That will be Mandy," she said. "About time, too." She opened the door. Two men stood in the street. They had AgroGlobal written all over them: dark suits, short hair, clean shoes, mirrored shades.



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"We're looking for Miss Stella Jordan?" the first one said.

Marra looked back at me, worry in her dark eyes.

"You need to come with us," he said.

[5] I got up. "Can I just..."

"Now."

There was no use protesting. I grabbed my bag and headed out.

There was a silver van standing outside. It looked so out of place in our street; like platinum dentures in a vagrant's<sup>1</sup> ruined mouth. "Nice wheels," I said. Suit One gave a small, tight smile as he held open the door.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked as we pulled out. We drove past crumbling buildings and old iron staircases, bumping over potholes.

[10] "Nothing to worry about," he said.

That wasn't an answer, but it didn't matter. I knew anyway. There was nowhere in sector 87 to go, except for AgroGlobal.

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1. **Vagrant (noun):** a person without a settled home who wanders from place to place

At that moment, all I felt was angry. I'd always known that Mandy's obsession would get us into trouble. But would she listen? Never. She would just get that look on her face, biting her lip, her eyebrows drawn together in a line.

"I'm going to win, Stella," she would say to me. "I know I can cook."

The weird thing is, she could, you know? She really knew how to cook. Nobody from the Sectors had even seen real food in their lifetime. It was fifty years since the Dying Out, thirty since the last great food wars, and twenty since AgroGlobal crushed the last aquaculture<sup>2</sup> smallholdings, and established itself as the world's largest — only — manufacturer of artificial food. "Newtrition" they called it, which quickly got shortened to "Newtri." "*Newtri: Fueling the Future*," the ads say. "With over 70 great flavors to choose from, just squeeze and go!" No mess, no fuss, and, although I'd like to say no hunger, at least people no longer starved to death. We owed everything to AgroGlobal — and they owned everything. Governments, armies, energy production, manufacturing, media, health care, communications, travel — temporal<sup>3</sup> and spatial<sup>4</sup> — you name it, they owned it. Everything people needed, and people needed fuel, and we all needed Newtri. That's not to say everyone was happy about it — I mean, look around you, right? But what choice did we have?

- [15] We all grew up on Newtri. Marra said us younglings were always clamoring for our tubes, but Mandy? She'd have just faded away if Marra hadn't practically injected it into her. She was always the littlest of us; still is. We used to call her "2D" — turn her sideways and she'd vanish. I always had to remind her to fuel up. "Yum, roast chicken and beans, and apple crumble. Your favorite," I'd say. She'd suck up a bit of her Newtri and then hand the rest to me while Marra wasn't looking. I wasn't complaining.

The driver took a right turn out of the Sector and onto the highway. I looked out at the dusty, ravaged land that stretched away on either side till it merged with the horizon, and thought back to that day two years ago when AgroGlobal TV had announced that the online Temporal **Relocation** Portal<sup>5</sup> had gone live, and that the biggest show on the planet was about to be broadcast: MasterChef of All Time.

That was the day everything stopped. Schools closed, offices shut down, factories were silent — the skyways were empty, there wasn't a single auto on the streets. Everyone was home watching.

It was the reality show to end all reality shows. Twelve specially selected contestants were sent back in time to battle it out every week for the ultimate prize: the Master Chef Golden Apron. In the words of Judge Cheng, "We're not just talking real food, we're talking about real cooking — you gotta work for it. You want to make fish? You got to catch the bugger first. You want to roast potatoes? You got to dig 'em up. You gotta chop your logs and stoke up that fire before you even *think* about baking. You get me?"

It was a seriously great show. We all loved it; everyone did! But Mandy? She didn't just love it, she was obsessed — she was *addicted*. She'd stare at the screen as if she was eating it with her eyes. She used to record every episode, and play it back in slo-mo, freeze-framing, and all the time scribbling away. There were stacks of notebooks and scraps of paper in her room. "Recipes?" I said to her. "I mean *recipes*? Seriously? What's the point of recipes if you got no fragging *ingredients*." And she'd give me that look again. It was like talking to a wall.

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2. raising animals and plants that live in the water for food
  3. **Temporal (adjective)**: relating to time
  4. **Spatial (adjective)**: relating to space
  5. a doorway, gate, or other entrance

[20] One day, we were sitting on the bed waiting for the show to start. I always got that fluttery feeling in my tummy when the music came on, and they showed those clips of contestants in past episodes cooking away all over the place: quail consommé<sup>6</sup> in Victorian England,<sup>7</sup> ragi paranthas in Harappa,<sup>8</sup> an entire medieval<sup>9</sup> banquet with roast suckling pig and sweet potatoes, and those *langues de chat* and petit fours<sup>10</sup> in a Parisian salon. It was that episode when they went back to ancient Crete<sup>11</sup> and had a pressure test for calamari dolmas<sup>12</sup> on a bed of rocket and cilantro salad, and at the end of it, Mandy turned to me and said — and I remember this clearly, ‘cause it was just the weirdest sentence I’d ever heard — “I would have caramelized<sup>13</sup> squid ink for the vinaigrette.”<sup>14</sup> I just looked at her. “What? It would totally bring out the feta,”<sup>15</sup> she said, as if I was the idiot.

When the show was over, Mandy took me by the hand and stood up. “There’s something I want to show you,” she said. I followed her out of the room and down the stairs to the basement. She moved a pile of broken-down crates, and reached behind the pipes to bring out a battered old box. It had a long wooden handle, and the flaps on top hinged open showing neat drawers stacked on top of each other. Inside were an assortment of knives, metal spoons, a long, cylindrical thing made of wood, a pair of what looked like pliers with wire mesh at the ends, and all sorts of other stuff. “My tools,” she whispered. Then she took my hand and held it really hard. “Stella, I’ve put my name in for the tryouts.”

I really thought she’d lost it. Okay, so she had somehow — God alone knows how — managed to collect all these bits and pieces of junk, and she’d read just about everything she could lay her hands on about cooking, but was all just *theory*. All the other contestants, in the whole history of MasterChef, had been from the Elites. People who had money and resources — some of them even (so people said) had *kitchens*, not that they had much to do in them but play around with different blends of Newtri, but still. They came from a different world. She didn’t stand a chance.

I was so wrong.

She *aced* the tryouts. At fifteen, Mandira became not only the youngest contestant to compete on MasterChef, but the only one ever who wasn’t an Elite. Imagine, one of us, a girl from humble old Sector 87 up there on screen for all the world to see. Everyone went crazy. “Mandira the Marvel!” the headlines screamed. “Teen Cooks Her Way Into History!” Mandy became a star overnight.

[25] She came back after a month, and she was *glowing*. Seriously! She literally couldn’t stop talking about all the food that she’d eaten: “Oh my God, Stella,” she’d say, “the peas. You pick them like this” — she pinched her fingers together and twisted — “and then pop the pods” — she flicked her thumb and index finger together — “and just eat them straight, and... oh... they were soooo...” And she’d put her fingers on her lips like she was remembering the sweetest kiss, and she’d be lost for words.

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6. a clear soup made from quail, a wild forest bird
  7. the time period (1837-1901) when the English empire was ruled by Queen Victoria
  8. Ragi paranthas are a breakfast pancake eaten in India and Pakistan; Harappa is a village in Pakistan.
  9. the time period in Europe between the fall of the Roman empire and the Renaissance — about 500 C.E. to 1300 C.E.
  10. Langues de chat (cat’s tongues) and petit fours are French cookies.
  11. an island in Greece
  12. a dish made of octopus and served wrapped in grape leaves
  13. to add flavor by cooking or heating
  14. a dressing or sauce
  15. a type of salty cheese from Greece

A month later, the day the first round was broadcast, practically the whole block came over to watch. You should have seen her prep that halibut! Most people haven't even *seen* a fish — not outside Planet Ocean Aquarium anyway — but she had that fish deboned and on the slab as if she was born with a — what did she call it? — a lithium-ion fillet knife in her hand. What a party we had that night! And the week after, and the week after that, until all the contestants had been eliminated, one by one, and it was down to the final three: Jerome with the floppy hair, Sherna the big-boned girl from Sector 47, and our Mandira.

When she left early this morning for the shoot, she seemed a little distracted, I guess. I put it down to nerves — I mean, even Mandy has got nerves — but now I'm not so sure. Before she left, she took me to one side. "Stella, I'm going to beat them all. I'm going to win," she said. It wasn't even a question. "Sure you are, Mandy. You're the best," I said. And although I meant it, not just that she was the best cook, but that she was The Best, my best friend, it came out sounding pretty lame even to me.

But now as the silver van approached the shining steel gates of AgroGlobal headquarters, I wondered if she had meant something else altogether. A security guard scanned our ID chips and the gates slid open. The van drove up to the main gate, and my guys, the suits, got out with me. They walked me to the entrance, one on either side. A gray-haired man was waiting for us. He introduced himself as Professor Gulati, head of nutritional research, and shook my hand gravely. "Thank you for coming," he said politely, like I had any choice. "We need your help."

"Sure," I said. "What's this?"

- [30] "It's Mandira. She's a friend of yours, I believe. The thing is" — he coughed slightly — "she's disappeared."

I felt like my brain had just fused.

"What do you mean? That's not possible, is it? I mean, isn't that supposed to be impossible? You mean... you've lost my friend?"

"Calm down, Miss Jordan."

"I AM CALM!" I shouted. What about the tracker — the **implants** they had put in all the contestants before they entered the Portal? What about the safeguards and rules and scanning and regulations?<sup>16</sup> There had been a ton of them, all ratified<sup>17</sup> by international treaty. Nothing was allowed in or out of the Portal except the contestants. They were stripped and scanned before each episode. We'd had it drummed into our heads forever: messing with time was a serious business, and nothing, nothing could be allowed to **destabilize** the **Chronologic**. One little mistake and our whole present could disappear, *whoop*, up its own wormhole.

- [35] I was too busy freaking out to notice my surroundings, barely registering the long, gleaming corridors and glass archways. Professor Gulati finally stopped at a door and then held it open for me. "We'd like you to take a look at the footage," he said. "Maybe you can spot something we've missed. You knew Mandira..."

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16. **Regulation** (*noun*): rule

17. officially agreed to

I seriously didn't like the way he was talking about her in the past tense.

"We think she may have been planning this."

"She wouldn't!" But as I yelled, a vivid picture flashed in my mind of Mandy, that stubborn, crazy look she had in her eyes and I knew: she would. She totally would. *Mandy, you idiot, what have you done?* I groaned inwardly. *You are in an insane amount of trouble.*

Inside the screening room, there were five or six other men and women already sitting around, waiting for me, it seemed. There were desks and a large screen. Professor Gulati ushered me into a chair, and then turned to a guy wearing headphones sitting at one of the consoles. "Roll the film," he said, and then, as the lights went down he leaned across to me. "Rural Punjab,<sup>18</sup> 2014," he whispered. "All this is unedited footage. Shot this morning."

- [40] Jerome looked a bit awkward in his long shirt, and he kept tripping on his baggy trousers, but Mandy looked really good on screen. She and Sherna were wearing long tunics and loose trousers gathered in folds around the ankles. Mandy's top had little spangly mirrors and embroidery on it. It was really colorful against her cocoa-colored skin and she looked — well, I have to admit that skinny old 2D looked quite beautiful as she stood there listening to Judge Kumar explain the challenge. "Makki ki roti<sup>19</sup> and sarson ka saag<sup>20</sup> lunch for fourteen. Forty-five minutes to prep, cook, and plate up," he said. The presentation was what Judge Dingle called "fast an' dirty," but it still had to be spot on: the steel plates shiny, the tumblers filled to the brim with frothy jeera-spiced lassi,<sup>21</sup> and the ghee had to be made from scratch. It was tough, but it was supposed to be.

Each contestant was at their cook station in a different section of the screen, shot at different camera angles. The clock was ticking, and my heart seemed to beat a shade faster as I noticed that Sherna was falling behind. Jerome was already dry-roasting spices to season his sarson ka saag, which lay in the bowl in a smooth, bottle-green swirl. Mandy was rolling a wooden spindle expertly between the palms of her hands to whip the curd for frothy lassi, but Sherna was still struggling to get the right consistency for her roti dough. I heard one of the judges mumbling off-screen, then out loud: "You might want to add a bit more flour, love. Thirteen minutes to plate." She looked up, smearing one hand across her forehead and streaking her hair with dough.

"C'mon, c'mon," I found myself muttering under my breath. Of course I wanted Mandy to win, but — well, it was impossible not to want them *all* to make it. I glanced back to Mandy's corner of the screen — and it was empty.

There was a lot of commotion on-screen, people shouting and running, the camera careening around all over the place. And then the screen went blank.

When the lights came on, Professor Gulati turned to me. "Well, did you see anything? Anything at all? Something we might have missed?"

- [45] "I... I don't understand." I shook my head. "She can't have just disappeared... what about the tracker?"

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18. a state in northern India

19. Indian flatbread made from corn flour

20. Indian dish made with mustard greens and spices

21. Indian beverage made with yogurt, ice, sugar, and spices

"We... ah... found the tracker..."

I winced.

"... but no sign of Mandira." Professor Gulati stood up. "What about before she left? Did she say anything to you? Did you notice anything different in her behavior?"

I shrugged. "No."

- [50] "Miss Jordan, you do realize the seriousness of what has happened? The **Chronologic** may have been **compromised**. We no longer know what might happen."

"Well, surely if something *had* happened, then, well — I mean, shouldn't we already know about it by now? Everything feels about the same to me. You're still here. I'm still here."

They asked me all kinds of questions about Mandy, and I answered them all. Well, most of them anyway. But all I really wanted to do was get home, get back to somewhere dark and quiet where I could think.

It was late at night when they finally dropped me back. Marra and the others were relieved to see me, but I just couldn't face any more questions. I had a Newtri and then slumped off to bed. I lay there for hours, it seemed like, until the house was still and silent. Then I crept downstairs and opened the door to the basement. I moved the crates and reached behind the pipe. I pulled out the toolbox and opened it. Right on top lay a piece of paper. I unfolded it carefully and smoothed it out.

*Dearest Stella,*

- [55] *I guess by now you know I've gone off-grid. I don't know if you'll ever forgive me, but I owe you an explanation. It's the least I can do. When I go to MasterChef today, I'm not coming back. I've decided I can't live like this anymore. You remember in school they taught us all about the Dying Out? Years before it happened, this guy called Einstein said that if the bees disappeared, mankind would only last another four years. Well, he was wrong about that. Maybe we would have died out if it hadn't been for Newtri, but we're still here — you're still here. I know all about the **Chronologic**. I know it can't be changed, but I asked myself why? Why can't we change history? I've been in the past, Stella, I've eaten fresh strawberries, I've bitten apples, I've tasted freshly baked bread with a hunk of creamy brie, I've licked tandoori chicken masala off my fingers and drunk peppermint sherbet.*

*Maybe I can't change anything — but I know I've got to try. Perhaps if people know what life will be like without the bees, they'll be able to do something about it. I don't know. All I do know is that I want to live my life — and if I can't cook real food, I might survive, but I think I'll die.*

*Look after yourself my darling Stella-bella. And know that I will always be*

*Your best friend forever,*

*Mandy xxx*

[60] I couldn't believe I would never see her again. That my friend — who I saw this *morning* — was not just dead, but that she must have died a hundred years ago. I tried to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. Instead, I found myself filled with this strange, insane, bubbling, uplifting feeling. The **Chronologic** was broken. Or if not broken, then at least cracked. And through that little crack, the light came in. Fragging hell, Mandy, what on earth have you started? And then I started to laugh, because I know that even though everything was exactly the same, nothing ever would be, ever again.

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How does the character of Mandy contribute to the theme of the story?
  - A. Mandy's decision to travel back in time shows the dangers of technology.
  - B. Mandy's longing for real food shows that scientific advancement comes at a price.
  - C. Mandy's escape from MasterChef shows that scientific advancements are useful to most people.
  - D. Mandy's love of cooking illustrates that people should follow their dreams in spite of any obstacles.
  
2. Which detail shows the downside of technological advancement?
  - A. "She aced the tryouts. At fifteen, Mandira became not only the youngest contestant to compete on MasterChef, but the only one ever who wasn't an Elite." (Paragraph 24)
  - B. "She totally would. Mandy, you idiot, what have you done? I groaned inwardly. You are in an insane amount of trouble." (Paragraph 38)
  - C. "They asked me all kinds of questions about Mandy, and I answered them all. Well, most of them anyway." (Paragraph 52)
  - D. "If I can't cook real food, I might survive, but I think I'll die" (Paragraph 56)
  
3. Which event on Earth led to the invention of Newtri?
  - A. People didn't have time to cook a full meal.
  - B. After the bees died, people started starving.
  - C. After the forest fires, nothing grew on the land.
  - D. People didn't appreciate real food and wanted something different.
  
4. Which detail best supports how Mandy's disappearance affected AgroGlobal?
  - A. "What do you mean? That's not possible, is it? I mean, isn't that supposed to be impossible? You mean... you've lost my friend?" (Paragraph 32)
  - B. "messing with time was a serious business, and nothing, nothing could be allowed to destabilize the Chronologic. One little mistake and our whole present could disappear, vhoop, up its own wormhole." (Paragraph 34)
  - C. "Inside the screening room, there were five or six other men and women already sitting around, waiting for me, it seemed. There were desks and a large screen." (Paragraph 39)
  - D. "She and Sherna were wearing long tunics and loose trousers gathered in folds around the ankles. Mandy's top had little spangly mirrors and embroidery on it. It was really colorful against her cocoa-colored skin and she looked —" (Paragraph 40)



5. What is the theme or message about scientific advancements?

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