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## GIVE IT TIME

**William Matross**

Of all of the things that can be crafted in the kitchen, soups are the most mysterious to me. And with all great mysteries, its enigma draws me in. When I go to restaurants, I am apt to take the soup over the salad. When the server brings the small bowl, always too small to understand the subtle nuances the chef coaxed out of the ingredients, I start with the smell. A few years ago, at Sean Kelly's Pub in Downtown Missoula, my nose was poised over a creamy sundried tomato soup. I could taste the basil as the aroma passed over my tongue. Sweet, acidic, smell of tomato followed close behind and my mouth watered. I scooped up a spoonful and it danced along my tongue. It was simple enough—cream, tomato, onions, basil, but somewhere in the ingredients I tasted home and comfort. I was going to figure out how the chef works his magic and I decided then my first attempt at cooking a soup from scratch would be something like this.

Growing up, I had mixed messages about cooking. My stepdad cooked from time to time, and when he did it was delicious. My favorite memories with my stepdad were making his seasoned meatballs and sneaking a few before they were cooked, in the days before the fear of Mad Cow. Mom, on the other hand, was an oven cook. Baked goods to Turkey dinners were always her specialty. Other than the occasional, "Here, do this," assignments to keep me from playing under foot, they never really taught me to cook. I tried to demonstrate an interest and started asking Santa for an Easy-Bake Oven. It never came. My mom told me Santa didn't bring "girl toys to boys." Soon after, my dad moved to Billings for a couple of years to go to Rocky Mountain College and took my older brother with him. After they left, food in our house basically consisted of things readily re-heated in the oven or microwave like bags of El Monterey burritos, Van de Kamps fish sticks, or Stouffer lasagnas. I was often on my own for figuring out dinner because of my mom's schedule. Desperation often set in and I would end up with wonderful culinary masterpieces like split hot dog on toast with ranch or a dish of two-way Cincinnati chili using dollar store spaghetti and a can of chili. I even took Home Ec. in high school, but just struggled with following instructions. I felt doomed. By the time I was nineteen, I gave up on cooking for myself completely and would just eat at restaurants.

About the same time, I gave up on writing. It had been my passion all through

school and provided me a place to explore my imagination. Whether they were news articles, like the ones I started when I was six or seven or the three years I served on the Helena High School Nugget staff, fantasy stories formed from dreams and playground imagination, or academic responses in various classes, I had over a decade of writing. Near the end of high school one of my teachers, disheartened by the news I wouldn't be attending college after graduation, gave me the advice to try writing exercises where I would imitate writers I enjoyed. She was trying to encourage me to keep writing and work towards publication. Unfortunately, after the cap and gown were packed away with my yearbooks and I was living on my own, I struggled with these writing exercises. I would start something and get a few paragraphs in and lock up. I would read books discussing the process of writing and I would emulate them: set up a specific place and time to write, create character profiles and plot outlines, or find various prompts. Instead of aiding me, every step pushed me farther away from the one thing I wanted to be doing. Eventually, like with cooking, I gave up and threw out everything and resigned that I wouldn't be a writer.

It took about twelve years to figure out my problem. Recipes. I have some kind of cognitive dissonance with them. Some preset expectation to follow them "or else." It didn't matter if I was following the instructions on the back of a box of Hamburger Helper or someone's preset idea of how I should write, both were equally destructive. As soon as I gave up following them strictly, the block lifted. It liberated me and I realized, whether it was writing or cooking, I couldn't let someone else tell me how to do it. I needed to play and have fun.. The same is true with my writing. Gone are the days of half finished projects or frustration so violent that would fill my room with broken pencils and hand-shredded papers.

The process for these two activities is very similar: the muse comes to me when I sleep or I let my mind wander. With food, it generally comes when I am sleeping. The colors, smells, tastes, and textures are hyper-realistic. As the dream progresses, more ingredients reveal themselves and I watch myself learning how to work with and prepare them. I often taste it at various points and the ghost tastes often have my stomach

growing by the time the alarm goes off in the morning.

That's what happened the first time I got my idea for tomato soup. I could still taste the soup from Sean Kelly's on my tongue. Of course there would be cream in it. I rolled the soup around my dream-tongue, plucking out ideas. I didn't want a simple tomato soup like 4Bs. I wanted something a bit more complex. I tasted a little oil and realized I needed sun-dried tomatoes. Piece by piece, the soup introduced itself to me and by the time I woke up I was ready to make it. I kissed my husband on the cheek and told him I hope he was ready for a treat and left to collect the ingredients.

I live in a conveniently close spot for getting food. Just a few blocks down South Third Street from my apartment is the Good Food Store, where I prefer to get most of my ingredients when the mood strikes me to play with my food. They would have everything I needed. Grabbing a basket, my first stop was a fresh head of garlic. Like my best friend Corbin, I believe garlic makes everything better and it finds a way into most things I make. I am not a connoisseur when it comes to finding the best ingredients, preferring instead to trust my nose and instinct. I pick out a large red onion, as my husband prefers them and I have learned to appreciate the layer of flavor they add. One of the many things I love about the Good Food Store is their selection of fresh herbs. My dream called for fresh basil and I grabbed a bundle of the sweet smelling leaves. I suppose if I was more of a foodie, I would make my own stock, but with a hectic schedule pre-made stocks fair well. Two large containers of low-sodium chicken broth would work perfectly and nearby I found a couple large cans of diced tomato. Snaking around, I grabbed some fresh unsalted butter and a pint of Kalispell Creamery heavy cream. Last stop in the store took me to the antipasto bar and the sun-dried tomatoes. I didn't need a small jar. I needed a large container and shoveled spoonful after spoonful into the clear plastic container, making sure to drain off most of the packing oil. The whole haul was probably more expensive than if I picked up the ingredients elsewhere, but I trusted the quality of the items I picked up which made it worth it.

At home, I started by rough chopping the onion. It was potent and had me tearing up quick. I have tried many of the various kitchen hacks for no-tear cutting and I haven't

found one that works when the onion is this potent. I put my large stock pot on medium and put in about three tablespoons of butter and add the onions. While they sauté, I chop up five cloves of garlic and added them. While those are cooking, I pick out some of the larger leaves of basil from about half the bundle and chop them up. I add the basil and sundried tomatoes to the translucent onions and stir them together.

The smell of garlic and basil brings my husband into the kitchen. “How long do I have to wait?” he asked as he stares in the stockpot.

“Not sure,” is the only response I can form. “But, we’ll need some bread and I forgot to get some.” I send him off to get some from Le Petit.

One thing I learned from my parents is to keep the kitchen clear while cooking. Growing up, we just had a pretty small kitchen and having more than one person just meant running into one another. Our kitchen is fairly large and open with not enough counter space for my taste, but keeping my husband out of the kitchen meant I am less distracted and more attentive to what my food is doing.

The rich smell of sundried tomatoes signaled it was time to add the rest of my tomatoes and the stock. I turn the heat up a little and bring the pot to a boil, allowing all of the flavors to mingle and then drop the heat back down to simmer for a few hours. My husband comes home with a loaf of Pain de Campagne, Le Petit’s version of sourdough. It will be perfect with the soup. He sneaks away into the kitchen and samples some of the soup.

“I think it needs something else,” he hollers from the kitchen.

I was thinking the same thing, but other than a little salt and pepper and the cream, there wasn’t anything else from the dream. “Just give it time.”

My internal timer goes off and I give the soup another swirl. I prefer blended soups and decide I will go that route with this one. I rinse out my blender and blade and get it ready to go. When blending warm or heated items, it is important to blend in small batches to avoid a mess and potential burns. It is a slow process of filling the blender half way and pulsing to get to the right consistency—not quite bisque. When they are done, I transfer each of them to a second pot. After the last batch, I add the cream and

bring the heat back up to help thicken the soup. I was surprised by my end result. Most creamy tomato soups are various shades of pink, but mine was a burnt-orange color with small flecks of basil. As it finished heating, I took bundles of basil and did a chiffonade as garnish.

I grabbed our olive-colored stoneware bowls, thinking the contrast in color between bowl and soup would enhance the experience, and ladled a healthy portion for the two of us and tore off two hunks of bread and set them down on our table. It wasn't Sean Kelly's soup and it wasn't like any of the others I have tasted. But it tasted even better because it was mine. The sourdough added another layer of flavor and the only thing noise in our apartment was lip smacking and slurping.

"You were right," my husband said as he stood up to get another bowl full. "I just needed to wait."

I have made the soup a few different times. While the ingredients are usually pretty similar, I have never made it exactly the same way twice. I have tried crushed tomatoes, instead of diced; oven roasted Roma tomatoes instead of sundried; rosemary and basil; or even four-cheese "grown-up" grilled cheese on sourdough instead of bread alone. Every experience of making it is different, each batch seasoned with whatever was going on in my life at the moment. And each time it reminded me I could cook. I didn't need a recipe to tell me how to make it. And, after making this one, I have gone on to make up my own "recipes," including a yellow curry chicken with turmeric and coconut rice; my special chili with Guinness, cinnamon, and chocolate; and a bacon, apple and cheddar soup. Most of what I make these days are items I haven't seen on a menu or even tasted. Just like my first soup, I just listen to my dreams and trust my intuition. My main rules when cooking are take the time and enjoy what you are doing. Like writing, it is all about a little inspiration and the decision to do it. And often times it is better than I imagined.