

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

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Cooking Soup at the End of the World

WATER

In the old days, water was almost impossible to find. The headlines still talk about it: GLOBAL WATER SHORTAGE: MILLIONS DEAD. Where I live, the water shortage was followed by the water filters, which got better, and more portable, and more expensive. So expensive that people died fighting over them.

But that was back then.

These days, so few people are left that there's too many water filters. I see them lying dusty on the side of the road when I do my supply runs.

I used my filter to collect clean, cold water from the well after shooing away a couple Urchins. They like to peer into the well and pretend like they're going to push each other in, but they never do. Dead bodies would ruin the water supply.

OLIVE OIL

There's no need to build a fire, since I keep one constantly burning in my hut.

Gone are the days I had to build a new fire everyday. Now, after decades on my own, I live in luxury, and simply put my earthenware pot over my fire and splash in some oil.

The oil, obviously, is precious. I picked the olives myself. As the world got warmer, olive trees grew further and further North, until they finally took up root in my area. I joined my neighbors and learned to press my own oil years ago.

That was back when everyone was in it together. Now, it's every woman for herself. Nobody teaches each other. The only ones I trust enough to see are the ones I've known for years, like the Urchins or the man who sells soybeans.

It takes a lot of effort to make oil. Usually, I'd use as little as possible, but today is special, so I treat myself.

KIMCHI

After the oil starts sizzling, I throw in the kimchi until it turns soft. Because it has to ferment, kimchi has always taken a long time to make, but these days, the process is exhausting. Nobody else around knows how to make it, so even if I wanted to buy kimchi, I can't. I have to make it myself, which means acquiring the ingredients myself. I trade with the Urchins, who seem to know everybody. We have a deal: if they bring me my spices, they each get to have a bowl of my soup. I have to say *soup* instead of *stew* because *stew* has bad connotations.

Stew is a suspicious dish with diseased, mutated, or even human meat. *Soup* is okay, though. The Urchins love soup.

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

Their eyes lit up when I told them the name, *kimchi jjigae*. It's a spicy stew that I used to eat all the time, full of rich, savory kimchi and hearty vegetables.

Urchins love any novel food. Their whole lives, they hear about pizza, ice cream, and cotton candy, and never get to try any of it themselves.

For weeks, they've been asking when the soup will be ready. With me, they don't use the hilarious-yet-terrifying tone they use with other customers who haven't paid them back. Instead, they look at me with their too-big eyes and employ that old fashioned little-kid whine. *Why? Why does it take so long?*

I've explained the fermentation process, how it takes time to pack in so much flavor. They're finally starting to get it, and soon, they could start to ferment by themselves.

"Isn't this how you make booze?" asks an Urchin.

I purse my lips, which the grinning Urchins take as a confirmation.

Great. In two months, there'll be a new moonshine trade profiteered entirely by nine-year-olds.

ONION

I grew the onion myself and had that great bear of a man slice it for me.

The onion is genetically modified to grow as big as my head, which is perfect for his large, rough hands. He did a good job, and the slices are impossibly thin.

I don't put very much in the soup, though. Kids, for some reason, don't like seeing onions in their food.

GARLIC

I taught the Urchins how to mince garlic, which means that now we have far too much garlic on our hands.

I add a little to the pot and save the rest.

Perhaps next week we'll make garlic bread. And there are tomatoes in the garden, so if I can get flour and yeast, why not make a pizza? There'd be no cheese, since all the cows are gone, but I can find a replacement. The Urchins could roll out the dough and spread the toppings. Any leftover dough could be shaped into pretzels. It's a bright idea, but I'd need help pulling it off.

MUSHROOMS

Last weekend, I took the Urchins out to the forest to scavenge for mushrooms. They spent most of the time chasing each other around in the sunlight, and I was terrified they'd get lost, but we managed to find a lot of good food.

I add in a lot of mushrooms so the kids can taste how good they are.

I want them to be proud of their work. I want them to taste the warm,

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

earthy umami flavor and know that they helped create something delicious.

TOFU

After adding water to the pot, I slice the tofu into small squares.

It's not quite as firm as I prefer it, but I don't mind. The tofu was hard enough to find as it is. I had to go into town myself and find that great bear, the Soybean Man.

He's a silly man with a silly name. I didn't trust his tofu—I couldn't imagine those big hands delicately pressing the tofu. But he laughed when I told him that I'd make it myself, if only he'd give me the soybeans.

"You don't know how!" he said, laughing loudly and deeply in a way that only the loudest, most bearded men do.

"I know the basic principle," I argued. "And my ancestors have been making tofu for thousands of years. It's in my DNA."

The Soybean Man snorted. "Okay, then. Explain it to me. Give me your plan on how you'll make it, once I give you the beans."

I frowned, hoping my signature stare would break him. It didn't.

The Soybean Man shook his head. "Tell you what, I'll give you the tofu for free."

"No, you won't."

"Yes, I will." He sighed, a smile playing at the edge of his lips.

We've known each other for years, and always, I've been this stubborn.

"I see what you do for those kids," he says. "You can have as much tofu as you want. All that I ask is that you let me try some of the soup."

GREEN ONION

After everything is cooked, I take the pot off the heat, then add in the green onion. I try to make the dish pretty, even though no one really cares about that stuff anymore.

When I turn around, the Urchins' eyes light up.

They've been sitting in a circle, waiting patiently with their crude bowls in their hands. The Soybean Man is entertaining them with stories of his adventures. Apparently, he survived hurricanes and tornadoes and uprisings and zombie hordes.

The Urchins grow uneasy at the mention of zombies, so I send him a look.

The Soybean Man hastens to admit that this part was an exaggeration, and zombies aren't real.

The Urchins breathe a collective sigh of relief, and the Soybean Man smiles sheepishly at me.

I roll my eyes.

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

I portion out the stew while the Soybean Man serves the rice. He gives himself the smallest portion and ignores my directions to give himself more, until he takes a bite of the *kimchi jjigae*.

His eyes bug out, and he quickly takes the rice I offer him.

"It's not that spicy," he insists. "I'm just not used to it anymore."

"You should cook for him more often," says one of the Urchins. "Then he'll get used to spicy stuff. Plus, you'll get to hang out with him more."

The Soybean Man's cheeks redden.

I frown at the Urchin, and she sticks out her tongue at me.

"Well," says the Soybean Man, clearing his throat. "This *is* a delicious meal. I'd love to have dinner with you again, if you'd invite me."

The Urchins giggle and *ooooh*, but I ignore them and look at him.

He has a great big red beard and large hands and light-colored eyes.

I've always been disturbed by light eyes. I feel like I can look straight into them and see into someone's soul.

The Soybean Man has the lightest eyes I've ever seen, as if they're made of glass. As if his soul is transparent.

I take a bite of *jjigae* and close my eyes.

It is different, of course, than what I ate in my childhood. Not all the ingredients are there, and the ones that are are different.

But still.

I can taste, somewhere in there, something similar to my mother's recipe, and her mother's, and her mother's. And when I swallow, I can feel that same warmth slide down into the center of my belly.

And when I open my eyes, I look at the Urchins, and I feel the same way my mother must have felt when looking at me.

And I look at the Soybean Man, and I smile.

"Next week, we are making pizza," I say. "You are welcome to join us."