

*Laura Freer**Hog Creek Review*

## Making-Do Soup

Last night I wanted to make your potato soup for myself and Sarah, but I couldn't remember the recipe. I'm not even sure there was one; you slung potatoes and carrots about the kitchen like they were bombs in some kind of epic warfare, but somehow it always seemed to work out into an edible dish. Watching you watch us eat: me savoring each bite, Sarah getting most of hers into her mouth, I could see the self-satisfaction on your face like Hannibal from the A-Team smoking his cigar at the end of the episode. I pretend I see you that way now, grinning smugly and trying for his rough mutter: "I love it when a recipe comes together" and biting down on a carrot stick in place of the cigar.

But last night, after I broke down sobbing against the cupboard as Sarah watched from her playpen, I called your mother for help. I was hoping that she would know some sort of recipe or magical incantation, but she didn't know.

"It was something Chris made, not me." I could hear the shrug of her shoulders over the phone, and the sadness.

"Did you try adding bacon?" she asks me. "Maybe the cheese was different, what did you use?"

"I haven't used anything yet. I didn't even get that far."

"Well, I would have used Velveeta, but I doubt it was anything that lowbrow." She chuckled to herself. "Chris always used weird stuff. Do you remember what color it was?"

I didn't. I said goodbye soon after that, because I didn't want to hear your mother cry.

So today I am taking the bus downtown in the rain after I reached the number of words allotted for the day (I find I can't write at home now so I go to the library and put on headphones to work) to pick up some different cheeses to try in soup, hoping somehow I'll recognize you in the taste of one of them. I sit alone, radiating if not hostility then at least discouragement to any boarder unfortunate enough to approach me as if looking for a conversation or even a spare seat. When we are moving and I am no longer threatened by the company of others, I press my face to the window, watching the goings on of the city. People are ducking into huge lurking office buildings and tiny huddled coffee shops and

restaurants, trying to avoid the rain. The rain, which is pouring down incessantly, is what makes me think of you. But then, what doesn't?

When the bus comes to a stop by the shopping center I ignore the rain, walking briskly into the store without looking around me or ducking my head, letting the water drops fall where they will, my only concession pulling off my glasses and stuffing them into my pocket until I am under the protection of the roof of the grocery. Pulling them out again I wipe off the stray drops on my front and shove them back into place before grabbing a basket and nearly stomping over to the deli. I hate grocery shopping. I hate the people looking at me as I fumble through the store, uncertain of the locations of items or the quantities necessary, so now I do my best to look determined and capable, if not fierce.

It doesn't last long, my posturing, and the soccer moms, the kind with a million kids following them or climbing on their carts, look at me strangely as my façade crumbles. I *need* to find whatever cheese it is that will make the soup perfect, just like you used to make it, but I don't even know where to begin. I begin crying over the cheese case in the store, and these women just look disturbed or put-upon by my distress. *Well fuck them*, I think and then smile through my tears as I can hear you in my mind answering wryly, disapproving but amused, "Thanks, but I'd rather not," with your grin that always went crooked and persuaded me to just about anything. But now you aren't actually here to persuade me to behave or to lighten my burden, so in my despair I give a stiff middle finger to a woman with pursed lips when her kids are looking at the sugary cakes in the bakery. She gasps then storms away in a huff, children trailing after her like the tail of a comet. I wipe my eyes and nose with my sleeve and go back to staring blankly at the rows of cheeses before me.

I had always thought there were three kinds of cheese: the sliced kind for sandwiches, the shredded kind for tacos, and the blocks of cheese my grandparents always sliced at a party. I am apparently uninitiated in the ways of cheese, though, because in front of me are cheeses with names I have never heard and descriptions that make me feel even more lost. What the hell is Wensleydale? And double Gloucester? Brie looks like the rest of the word is missing. Cheeses are hard, soft, spreadable; for salads, for dessert, for healing the goddamn lame for all it makes sense to me. I feel the tears coming on again, but before they can begin again a short male clerk with a baby face stops and asks me if I need help. I tell him I'm looking for cheese to put in potato soup, but I have no idea which one. He points out several, and I put them in the basket on my arm, allowing him to guide my decisions for the moment. After he leaves, though, I frantically add more and more, nearly filling the basket, feeling a dark frenzy welling inside me as I grab wheels, blocks, wedges, trying not to cry.

By the time I feel a little relief and return to the front of the store, the basket on my arm weighs half a ton. Despite this fact, I hustle over to the opposite end of the store, and grab the biggest bottle of wine I can still manage to carry with the cheese, to match several

other similar bottles at home. It's a heavy load, and I'm straining with it until I finally reach the conveyor belt at the register. Sighing deeply, I unload the cheeses into a long train of dairy products on the belt, then add the wine as a sort of caboose. The teenaged cashier asks in a flat voice if I'm having a party, as if forced by store regulations to make small talk with customers who look like they're on the edges of sanity, and she wasn't particularly happy about it.

I'm still on the edge from breaking down earlier and so I reply "Yes, a cheese party. For myself. To go with my whine," with something of a giggle that leaks out of my mouth before I can stop it, my inappropriate hilarity as uncontrollable as my tears earlier. I can feel myself cracking around the edges. The cashier, however, with her short, spiky red hair and nose piercing, looks at me sideways, unconsciously wrinkling her nose, not realizing my pun. It's cute, even though the girl is obviously looking at me with disgust and a little fear: *Great, another crazy drunk*, I can imagine her thinking.

My cheeks burn a little, and I don't say anything more as I hand over a credit card to pay for my cheese collection. I'm told to have a good day in the same flat, uninterested voice, but after gathering my bags and heading towards the door I look back to see her leaning over to her neighbor, another teenage girl with long black hair. I can imagine what they are saying, and as I turn back and stride out the doors I can also imagine the eye-rolling and snorts of derision. It's tormenting food for thought as I make my way through the still spattering drops of rain to the bus stop and after, as I huddle under the plastic shelter, glaring at anyone who gets too close for comfort, waiting for the next vehicle to take me closer to home and the safety of solitude.

It is on the bus ride home, while I am watching the rain ripple over the glass, that I meet the old lady. The lumbering vehicle hissed as it lurched to a halt, and I gathered my things and hustled quickly onboard so I could get a seat by a window to myself and keep the other passengers at a safe distance. Whether I am concerned for myself or others is uncertain and probably not worth thinking about at this point, so I glare at those unlucky enough to board after me, message in my eyes clear. I'm not even sure what it is, myself, but I know it's unmistakable. The behemoth growled as it began its journey again, and I let myself get lost in the view of the city just beyond the glass, and in memories.

I am so lost, in fact, that I fail to notice the bus stopping, or the influx of new arrivals. I was gone inside a memory of you when I heard a gentle cough, and I looked up to see a tiny, nearly birdlike elderly woman, with her hair perfectly coiled behind her head and fingernails in immaculate French tips tapping against her purse. "May I join you, please?" her voice rolls musically, bright blue eyes peeping at me behind gold framed spectacles, and the fine wrinkles of her face showed the patterns of smiles and laughter ready to take their places at any moment.

I am still dazed from my memories, and look up blankly, unsure of where I am or what is going on. I try not to indulge in these little fantasy vacations for exactly this reason, but the day has been hard, and I am falling apart. The woman takes my dazed silence for an assent, and takes the seat next to me. I am already as close to the window as I can be, so when I grunt and shift myself in that direction it is more an automatic gesture than anything else. Besides, the woman is so small it seems like she could be placed in an overhead luggage rack comfortably; as I watch her flow down into the seat gracefully despite the protesting moan and rumble of the now moving bus, her figure upright and posture perfect, I have no doubt that even if she were treated like so much baggage she'd still be a model of grace and poise.

Next to this tiny woman, I try sitting up straighter; I hadn't even realized I had been slouching until she sits down but I am immediately aware of my posture. Looking at her impeccably clean pea coat over her sharply pressed slacks, I am aware that my jeans are from a previous day and dirty, and that my sweatshirt, stained and worn, still has dried snot and tear stains on the sleeves from earlier. At least I'd remembered to bathe yesterday so I don't smell, but I look maybe a step up from the man who holds up signs by the bus stop at the church I pass before I reach home. Thankfully, if this woman notices this, she is gracious enough to act like she doesn't.

As soon as she is seated, she begins a conversation, something that I dread: "Well, goodness, if that isn't a lot of cheese!" she chirps brightly, peering down at my bags. "I imagine you must be quite a fan!" She smiles brightly, flashing tiny, perfect teeth.

In the time since you left I have grown unused to this sort of friendly chatter; generally my communication is limited to disturbing cashiers, like earlier, and reading to Sarah in her crib, hoping she'll sleep soon, a routine I created in the place of your rocking and silly babbling. I try to avoid contact with strangers for fear that I'll break down in front of them. So, I clear my throat before answering, trying to achieve the right frame of mind for conversation. "Uh... yeah, I mean, no, I'm trying to find the right cheese to make potato soup. For my daughter."

All along, this had been in fact the plan. I had originally been trying to make the soup because Sarah loved it, and she loved you, and because I wanted to be a parent that wasn't an abject failure, but you had left us on our own and me woefully inadequate to take your place. *It should have been me* ran through my mind, and it was far from the first time I'd thought it. But it wasn't me. It wasn't. Now I was trying so desperately to bring some piece of you back for her, who would never remember you, or at least somehow make up for the loss and I was failing in every way.

I experience a feeling of actual physical shock when the woman clucks, actually, genuinely, clucks at me, which I had heard of people doing but never experienced myself. It

was a gentle sound reminding me of a single contented hen at my grandparents' farm, and the surprise and sheer wrongness of it compared to my reverie nearly came across as a blow. "Now why on earth would you buy so many at once? They may well spoil before you use them." She looks at me closely with her tiny face laughingly turned upwards and bright blue eyes searching me like spotlights as she lightly says "Unless you plan on having nothing but soup every day!" and her face crinkles across all those mapped lines of her face into laughter that makes her eyes dance.

I'm angry, but left at a loss for words at this intrusion of common sense on my plans. No, I hadn't thought about the cheese spoiling. Cheese spoiling was your department, not mine. I didn't make plans for a life that included having to concern myself with rotting cow secretions after I fell in love with you, who found beauty in the act of putting a meal together and probably understood what a dessert cheese was for, though I would never be able to find out now. The tears well up behind me eyes, tears of loss, sadness, and of anger at you, the universe, and this damned laughing woman sitting next to me.

I bite my lip hard to fight down the anger that is now encompassing and overwhelming the other feelings. The frustrations I've been feeling: of last night and the soup, of today and the cheese, of this moment and the gentle pealing laughter next to me, bubbles up inside me like what I imagine witches brew to be like. My first impulse is to repeat the events of the grocery store, but this time perhaps with some added colorful vocabulary. With luck she'd move in a matter of seconds, leaving me alone to myself. However, looking at her, somehow it seemed inherently wrong to even consider flipping her the bird, and so I bit my lip harder, and ruffled my hand through my hair, anger subsiding into sadness again. Apparently my nervous fussing with my hair draws her attention to my uneven locks, for a moment the corners of her mouth twitch downwards as her eyes drift up to my hand in my hair then wander briefly over the shaggy, nearly shoulder length heap.

"That's an... interesting haircut," she says hesitatingly, and I'm not sure if she noticed how emotional I was or if she actually meant something else. "Who does your hair?"

"I do. I mean, I cut it myself." I'm a trifle defensive here, and in my mind's eye the old woman changes into a vulture. I shake the image from my mind so that at least I have a rational answer to give her, but still I'm surprised at the tone of something behind her words. My hair was a trifle shaggy, to be sure, but I figured that that style was fashionable enough right now that no one ever noticed that it wasn't sculpted intentionally by professional hands. Well, no one I actually spoke to, anyway, which I realize at that moment is a disturbingly small number of people, and the majority of those people don't actually see me face to face, like your mother. My hand creeps back up as if I could tell by touching it how bad it was, but I pulled back and bit my lip again, realizing how unaware I was of how I even looked.

“Really?” The old woman seems a bit taken aback by my answer, and had paused before saying this. She shakes her head, looking disappointed, and continues staring at me as if trying to decide something. “Are you an artist?” she says with a hint of a struggle in her voice, as if she just couldn’t quite make up her mind. “I always say the only people who cut their own hair are hairstylists, artists, and people who hate themselves.”

She leaves it there like a gauntlet, a challenge for me to pick up, a glove to the face delivered in a delicate and lady-like manner. For one moment all the rage returns, but as I look back into her eyes it dissipates, and I can feel the tears starting, then gathering in my eyes. I wondered how I could ever have seen her as a harmless hen; she seems perched like a hawk, watching my movements, measuring me, scoping out my weaknesses, and she didn’t even have to strike a blow. She delicately poked and I crumbled. How could she know? Not even my mother noticed; my mother, who criticized my every decision up to and including you. I cut my hair because I hate myself for not being able to keep you with us, and because I can’t be you for Sarah.

So every now and then, when the desperation is too much, I go into the bathroom that we shared in the house that reeks of memories of you, and taking my hair into one hand and the scissors in the other. I cut as if I can cut away the memories that I cannot bear and the future that seems so bleak. As the chunks fall to the ground, I feel some release, some sort of expiation, though it is never enough to make me feel like I’ve done enough for any of us. But what I didn’t understand was how this woman saw through my shabby appearance to recognize the source. How could she know? I’m looking at her through the tears in my eyes, her face blurred except for the piercing blue eyes I can see so clearly.

I didn’t see it happen, but suddenly the woman is gently patting my hand with her own, though her eyes do not seem to have lowered their intensity. “Well, I’m not one to say,” she said in a softer, quieter tone, “but after I lost my husband, I learned to treat my body like I would a sick patient. I used to be a nurse, you see, and there was no surer sign that I was about to lose someone than if they started letting themselves go, women especially. So I would do their hair or shave them, bring in perfume or aftershave and maybe even a little make-up. Does wonders for a body, being treated like it’s beautiful. Can bring someone back from the brink of death, he used to joke, my Martin.”

The old woman takes a hold of my hand, grasping it lightly as she says this last bit, laughing musically, while an eternity and a day pass by as I look back helplessly, a tear or two rolling down my cheeks. I don’t know what to say. Her question and its answer has stripped me bare, and I feel like my guilt that I have held in secret is laid open for this tiny woman like I’m a patient on the table before her with a tumor to be removed. I stutter a bit as the bus lurches to another halt, but I never form any real words.

“Oh, well, this is my stop,” the woman chirps, and, with a final pat on my hand and as gracefully as she had sat, she rises, gathering and smoothing herself to leave. She looks over her shoulder at me before she heads up front, peering over her glasses, and like a benediction she imparts to me, “By the way, I always use a mild cheddar myself, in my potato soup, same as my macaroni and cheese. Gives it a nice, rich flavor. I bet your daughter would like it, too.” With those words, and a crooked smile so like yours, she is gone.

The rest of the ride is uneventful and I am silent, lost in thought. The tears stopped rolling, and the heavy rain has dwindled to a sprinkling as I finally get off the bus at our stop and walk in the light patter to our house, carrying the bags which keeping me anchored, it felt like, to the earth. After getting in the door and shaking off the stray droplets, I immediately go the kitchen and load my cheeses, all of them, into the fridge. Some will be used for recipes, and some I am going to slice up for when I invite your parents over for dinner.

The wine, which I have decided to reserve for the same occasion, I put away in a high cabinet as the sitter, your niece Amanda who wandered into the kitchen when she heard the door, fills me in on Sarah’s attempts at walking and the words Amanda swears she hears, though I never have. Today I ask her how classes are going, and she is startled but tells me they are going well. I ask her what she is taking and I am afraid her eyes are going to burst from her head. I really have been far away from everyone around me. We chat, and then I tell her I won’t need her tomorrow, that she can have the day off. She looks at me, concerned, I am sure, for my mental health, and asks if anything’s going on.

“No, I’m staying home with Sarah and making dinner,” I tell her, and she shrugs and smiles, glad, I have no doubt, for a day off. She goes back into the living room to kiss and cuddle Sarah goodbye, who is only just woken from her nap Amanda tells me. Saying her goodbyes, your niece breezes out the front door.

I walk into the living room then, where Sarah is beginning to play contentedly, and scoop her up into my arms and on an impulse cover her face in kisses. She gazes at me with her bright blue eyes, the eyes of the woman on the bus, your eyes, and laughs her trilling laugh into my face. Still holding her close to my chest, I walk over to the large bulletin that serves as a schedule of events for our little family, blank since you left, pick up the erasable marker and as Sarah tugs at my hair I write on the top of the left side: *Schedule hair appt. tomorrow AM.*

I think for a little while, absently chewing on the marker Sarah keeps making a grab for, laughing. I think about all the cheese in the fridge now, and I know I’ll have to get some more groceries and recipes to use them up. I can do that tomorrow, and I can take the car and Sarah with me, and then I can stare down anyone with impunity, and we can sample the

grapes together which I used to do with my mother. Simple things, why had I never thought of them before? I kept thinking about you, and us, and the woman on the bus, and how things will never be the same, and how Sarah and I will live with that.

So after a great deal of thought, I take the marker out of my mouth, dismaying Sarah, and put it to the board again.

*Menu*

1. *Tomorrow – mild cheddar – macaroni and cheese*
2. *Wednesday – to be determined*