

Cooking Lessons

by Cory Hart

Artwork: *Wooded Landscape with Cottage by a Pond* by Thomas Gainsborough

Through the window of my small kitchen, I gaze out and admire the tree by the window as it stands calmly in the waning autumn light, its bark wet from an earlier rain storm. Demands of the day have left me exhausted, a lone performer juggling the acts of a circus gone haywire. Long has been the day, but soon will come the night, bringing with it a blanket of shadow to cuddle under, a comfort from the trials of the day. Not for the first time, I find myself wondering what it is I am doing with my life, and worrying about where I am going. There is so much that I want from life, but how can I summit that proverbial peak I so desire, when I am stuck in the mud of the footpaths at the bottom of the mountain?

From the tree out the window, my gaze wanders to the Springerle rolling pin displayed on the countertop, an heirloom Mama gave me, that was given to her by her grandmother before that. My eyes are drawn to the specks of dust that are invading the intricate carvings of birds and flora, a testament to the time I am losing. Once upon a time, I would bake to relax, for joy, and as a way of showing love to those I care deeply for. But recent turns of the clock have seen me repeating the mundane and ignoring the things my soul desires.

Looking down, I find my hand clenched around a dish cloth, knuckles white. Releasing the fabric, I send some of my tension with it, feeling satisfaction as I watch it collapse onto the counter. Would it be terrible if I went to bed now? I muse over the temptation, but with stains of orange still illuminating the horizon, I decide I cannot justify burrowing into the warm embrace of sleep just yet.

Picking up my steaming mug of tea, I cross the wide oak planks and set the cup down on the coffee table, sliding a marble coaster beneath it. With another movement, I turn on the television and settle into the familiar mold of the couch cushions. The screen flickers in black and white, a story of wartime presented by the Golden Age of Hollywood. Many a weekend afternoon in my youth was spent watching the classics of cinema with Mama, delighting in tales of romance, loving families, and the zany antics of characters who could easily be persuaded to pause for a musical number.

I would be willing to sing in public, too, if the struggles of life were resolved as they are in films and novels. No matter the hardships the characters face, things are resolved by time the credits roll or the author acknowledgments begin. And maybe life does work that way, if you think about it. But living in the early chapters of a saga comes with shadows in a forest where you aren't sure where the path leads. For the moment, though, I at least know where my boots are at on the trail: as the final light of day seeps into the ground like water down a drain, it tugs my eyelids with it and I give in to sleep.

Dawn. Sensing the light fluttering against the other side of my eyelids, I begin to wake just as my brain also registers sounds of birds and a squirrel scurrying up a tree. Did I leave the window open? I go to rub the sleep from my eyes, but my hand brushes the surface below me, and my eyes fly open. Grass. Grass? I touch it again, expecting it to disappear like a phantom in the night. When it doesn't, I turn a questioning expression to a lady bug on a nearby dandelion, but she crawls slowly along, leaving me to solve the mystery myself. I stand, unsure as to where to go but with nothing better to do. Beside me is an old oak tree, its branches above forming the roof of my surprise new house. In all my born days, never have I accidentally fallen asleep outside. How did this happen? And now that I think of it, I realize that

my surroundings are unfamiliar. Just to the right is a dirt path, and I step across the grass to it, unconsciously hoping it will offer indication of where I am. I can feel panic spinning a web across my chest, lacing the fibers with uncertainty and doubt as it goes about its work.

My feet begin to move, choosing flight when there is nothing to fight. The path curves through a copse of trees and it leads me home. Or, rather, that is the sensation I feel when the trees open into a clearing and my eyes take in the cottage on the hill above, its windows watching thoughtfully over the pond sitting below. Rings ripple out on the water as a fishing bobber plops onto the reflected image of a cherry tree.

Lounging against the trunk of the real thing, cane pole in-hand, is an older woman wearing a calf-length white dress with buttons down the front and a red ribbon cinching the middle. She could be sleeping, peaceful as she looks in the early morning light. But her eyes are open and have found me, too. Her gaze is familiar, and who she is comes rushing at me like a bull in Pamplona. The love in her expression tells me she knows me, too. In that blip of time, there is an undeniable knowing. Because she was, so I am. Year after year as I have gone about my day, I have turned to the photo of my great-grandmother, Inathe, sitting on the side table in the living room. I have marveled at how much I look like her and longed to know her. But she left the world before I entered it, and stories of her were all I have had to cling onto.

With the sudden burst of joy in my heart, my mind doesn't stop to question how it's possible. "Are you hungry, child?" She calls across the swaying wildflowers that separate us. I nod, not knowing if it is my stomach or soul that are hungry. "Come with me, then. I set out some bread dough to prove before I came out to the pond this morning, and it is ready to be kneaded."

Side-by-side we head up the path in companionable silence, the wooden screen door with its gingerbread molding and netted window beckoning us forward. "Come in, come in." Says Inathe, propping her cane pole in the corner by the door. Any passerby glancing through the window over the sink would see that the kitchen is her domain. She immediately busies herself, handing me an apron as she slips the neck of another over her head. She moves with purpose, knowing she has work to do, but a calm radiates from her that I can feel warming me from my toes to the top of my head. For the first time in a long while, I feel sunshine in my heart.

Tying the apron strings around my waist, I take in the kitchen with its ceiling-high white cabinets and the red and white backsplash that matches the white and silver Formica table and red chairs that sit in the middle of the room. I walk over to the counter by the sink, where Inathe is turning the bowl of dough upside down onto a floured surface. "Open that drawer there," she instructs me, nodding at a drawer by her side. "And dip your hands into the flour."

I open the drawer, expecting to find a bag of flour curled up inside, but instead my eyes take in a drawer filled with nothing but flour, no bag in sight. "This is so handy!" I exclaim, realizing with blushing cheeks that this is the first thing I have said to my great-grandmother. She chuckles and pushes the dough away from her before folding it back again. "You tell your Mama she needs a flour drawer." She motions me forward and guides my floured hands against the dough, forward then back, forward then back. "Now, you just keep kneading the dough just like that until it feels right; take your time with it. If you go too fast, it won't rise well." I keep the pace steady, staring out at the cherry tree by the pond as I think about her words. A short while later, the dough is kneaded and we gently place it in a cranberry-colored glass loaf pan, and Inathe slides it into the hot oven to bake.

"Grandma," I say, leaning against the counter. "When life got too much, how did you keep going?" There are so many questions that I would like to ask, so many stories I want to hear, but in this

moment, I need her advice the most. "Sit down, honey." She says gently, indicating one of the chairs at the Formica table.

As I sit, she crosses to the freezer and takes out a tin can, then pulls two glasses from the cupboard, pouring sweet iced tea from the frozen can into each glass. Sitting down beside me, she hands me one of the ice-cold glasses of tea. "Life doesn't come easy," she begins. "We're born screaming. But it isn't all bad, either. You must embrace the rain as much as you revel in the sunshine. I watched three of my boys go off to the war, and they came back to me. And three of my other babies left this world when they were barely toddlers. So easy it would have been to drown in a river of my grief, but a voice in my soul told me I had to go on. That there was good and beauty in the world and there could be even more yet to come, if I kept the fight in my heart. A voice that told me I was needed. And so I gave thanks for my blessings and vowed to give it everything I could." She reaches out and takes my hand in hers, the cameo on her ring finger cool against my skin. "Fear is a monster that survives only in the dark, dear girl. Shine a light and fill the darkness with color, and drive the monsters out. Start a new path where there isn't one and continue forward with confidence. Be joyful, and above all else, know that you are so loved."

As tears wind their way down my face, I stand and come around the table, embracing her like a raft in the sea. My heart beats out all the words my mouth doesn't know how to express yet, and she squeezes me all the tighter. "You may not always see those who love you," she says, pulling back and holding me by the arms. "But they are always walking with you. You have so much to offer the world; be kind and share it." She embraces me in a long second hug before stepping back, her hand still in mine. "May we meet again on another sunrise. Now, you must wake." And at that moment, the kitchen timer for the bread dings.

Evening. Groggily, I open my eyes, the familiar mold of the couch around me. Beside me, on a marble coaster on the coffee table, is a cold mug of tea. The credits are rolling on the movie, the final strains of the music fading out. I sit up and place my feet on the ground, then stand and cross the wide oak planks to my little kitchen with the tree somewhere beyond the darkened window. I look down at the old rolling pin with its carvings of birds and flora, and I smile. Opening a drawer, I pull out the bag of flour curled up inside and begin to bake.

The End