

The Lost Art of Mixing

PROLOGUE

Lillian stood at the restaurant kitchen counter, considering the empty expanse in front of her. It was a Monday morning at the end of December and the restaurant held the calm that occurred only after the onslaught of holiday feasts, the culmination of a culinary season that began in the fall. In those months of ever shorter days, sometimes the only ingredients Lillian's customers could be bothered to take from their own kitchen cabinets were boxes of macaroni and cheese, bread for toast, and the restaurant provided both memory and inspiration—golden half-globes of squash awash in butter, a lamb shank braised with the patience it would take to get through winter. After the exhilaration that was summer in the Pacific Northwest, autumn was like the sigh of an adolescent who realizes he must indeed grow up. It was Lillian's job to remind the people who sat at her tables that being an adult, the passing of a season or a year, was about more than just being older.

Still, Lillian thought, sometimes it was nice to be in the hush of an empty kitchen, without the heat of the ovens, the extra bodies of prep cooks and dishwashers and bussers and servers. This was what fed her—this moment of stillness, the long, cool stretch of the counters and the give of the thick rubber mat beneath her feet.

She decided she'd make a chowder, something simple and nourishing to take for her end-of-the-year appointment with Al, her accountant. Al wasn't quite old enough to be her father, but in many respects he had acted as one for her—a steady hand and mind when she was first opening the restaurant and a dispenser of reliable advice in the eight years since. Their nonfinancial conversations revolved mainly around food; Lillian didn't know too much about Al's wife, and his silence regarding children led her to believe there were none. Al always seemed happiest when he was sitting at a table in the restaurant, or eating the lunches she brought to their appointments in his office. It was a small thing she could give him in return for all his insights, and she was glad to do it.

Lillian collected the salt pork and butter and heavy cream from the walk-in refrigerator, thyme from a pot on the windowsill, dried bay leaves from a glass jar in the row arranged along the wall. She turned on the heat under the pot and added the salt pork, which softened and began to brown. Her stomach grumbled; she remembered she hadn't eaten breakfast and cut a slice of bread, taking occasional bites as she sliced through the hard white flesh of the potatoes.

She removed the cracklings from the pot and added butter and chopped onion, the smells rising up—onion never her favorite thing in the morning, but sometimes a chef didn't have a choice. She poured in chicken stock and then dropped in the potatoes, bringing the liquid to a boil and stepping away while they cooked. No point in pot-watching.

She returned to the walk-in refrigerator, using the intervening minutes to assess the food inside while her mind played with menus for the week. Leftover roasted red peppers and zucchini could be the beginnings of a pasta sauce; extra polenta could be sliced and fried in butter and sage. For all the glamour of restaurants, the underlying secret of the successful ones was their ability to magically repurpose ingredients, a culinary sleight of hand that kept them financially afloat and would have made any depression-era housewife proud.

Sensing the time, Lillian grabbed a package wrapped in butcher paper and headed back out to the prep area. The chunks of potatoes had softened. She smashed one against the side of the pot to thicken the broth, and then unwrapped the package.

As the white paper folded back, the smell of cod rose sinuously toward her, briny and green, the essence of old fishing nets and ocean waves. Nausea rolled up from Lillian's gut; she took one look at the fish and bolted for the back door.

Outside, she stood at the top of the stairs, gulping in the cold winter air.

"What was that?" she said to herself. And then she stopped and looked down at her stomach.

"Oh," she said. "Oh."