

Raspberries Cooking for Jam

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When Cecilia first smells it, cutting through the chlorine fug, it takes her by surprise. The ripe heaviness of it, of raspberries cooking for jam.

Before she can put a word to the smell, her head has swung around. She's already looking for a kid with cordial, listening for the mother's scolding voice, or a teacher calling for order. Because surely that is the smell of raspberry cordial leaking up and out over the straw? There must be a red, spreading stain on a school shirt somewhere nearby.

But apart from the lifeguard and a few swimmers pacing the lanes, the pool is empty. Nothing but the splash of water to echo off the walls.

Funny how no one else notices the smell, of sugar so hot it will surely leave a scar if it touches you. It froths up and over and rises in her throat until she can taste it. Quick quick, she stoppers her nose and mouth against the stink of cooking fruit and sinks until the blue water fold over her head.

At the bottom of the pool she watches headless swimmers churning up the waters. She examines closely the black and cream tiles of the pool floor. They look large and oily, with clean edges, but all she has to do is wave her hand and the neat squares blur and wobble. She cannot hold her breath long enough for the depths to go still.

In the changing room, Cecilia towels her skin dry. She notices how the smell of the pool has seeped into her pores. It lingers beneath the soap and the creamy lotion she applies, and will last all day. Chlorine. It's what they use in bleach.

The fish shop smells not of fish but of disinfectant. She has watched the fishmongers in white gumboots and aprons and hats, sluicing out the floors, the steel benches and display cases with hoses and buckets. An incoming tide of foaming soap inundating the pavement, the gutters. Behind the green letters in Vietnamese,

which she can't read, and English, which she can, women scoop pink curled prawns into bags. Inside she can bathe in languages she doesn't understand, but that make her feel at home.

"Can I help you?"

The fishmonger facing Cecilia has scales in her hair, opalescent under the neon light.

"I'll have the ling please." She points out the ones she'd like. The fishmonger wraps them first in clear plastic, then in an opaque white bag and finally holds out a gloved hand out for payment. There is a small smear of fish blood on the latex-covered fingers. Cecilia takes her change with care, holding the coins between just one finger and thumb, and drops it quickly into an outside pocket. She looks down into rows of unblinking eyes.

Now the smell of the sea comes to her, through the phenyl. Not the bracing salt and ozone described in books, but the sea on a day after a storm; limp, rotting seaweed tangled with tiny carcasses, the beach littered with them. It is the smell of silver. Of darting things caught in currents and dragged to shore.

*On the Road to Mandalay
Where the flying fishes play
And the sun comes up like thunder
outer China cross the bay*

As a child, sailing from Rangoon to Europe, Cecilia had hoped for flying fish, but they hadn't seen a single one. They had kept their eyes on their father, his tears falling into the churning wake, and listened as he tried to explain why they'd left her mother behind.

There had been so many parties, she remembers that. Farewell and goodbye and see you again someday. "Don't forget us" "Keep in touch." "Traveller must you go?"

Her mother and father were always dressing up, going out. If she closes her eyes, she can see her mother asleep, wearing a party dress with a red skirt so full and so long, it spills over the end of the bed and onto the floor, drip, drip, drip...

Plip, plip, plip, the raspberries boil slowly in the pot. The sugar is hot enough to leave a scar for life. In Kalor, in the north of Burma, they used to help themselves to the wild golden raspberries. Cram them into their mouths raw and unwashed.

But here, in Marjorie's kitchen, with white tiles and butler sink, Cecilia sits, without fidgeting, at a scrubbed deal table, kicking softly against the chair in time with the eruptions of the pot. She can see a rectangle of green through the kitchen door and can hear her brother and sister shouting. A garden and sunshine, but Marjorie prefers Cecilia stay indoors. "Your skin is dark enough," she says.

Marjorie, Aunt Marjorie to you, even though she's just a cousin, skims the surface of the jam. The small cross at her neck and the beads in her pocket swing and jiggle with the effort of stirring.

"Your mother."

She skims the surface, flicking foam into a small dish, then turns to face Cecilia. Her spoon is red with a congealed moon of jam at its edge. There is a bead of it at the corner of her mouth. It clings as her lips move, as she separates the sinners from those sinned against with the power of her breath alone.

"Your mother did not love all of her children equally."

She wheels back to the stove and speckles red against the white tiles.

"All the more reason, Cecilia," she calls, her back to the table, "to pray for her."

Pray for a mother who wore such pretty party dresses. A woman who had three children before she was 23 years old.

A car horn blares as Cecilia waits at a crosswalk for the green man and the beeping. The white plastic bag feels heavy in her hand. She squeezes it, feels the fish wrapped inside. She tests it for solidness, but it's no good, she can already imagine the final stages of putrefaction, feel the liquefied flesh running through her fingers.

On the steps of St John the Divine, my mother counts coins into her palm. The silver

kyats and pisah flipping like fish in a net. I've never seen so many coins at once. As my mother feels the weight of them, they threaten to spill out of her fingers, and splash and roll around the steps like a turning metal tide. She picks out a pisah and drops it, warm and coppery, into my gloved hand.

"Here, go light a candle."

I trot into the church leaving her to count all over again.

"A good mother would have known her duty."

Marjorie is stirring again, her spoon looks as if it might snap with the effort. The hot sugared berries splash her fingers, but she does not flinch.

Some sins are mortal. Others are grievous. Then there are the sins of omission. Each has an exact price.

Marjorie puts down the spoon, touches Cecilia's shoulder with sticky red speckled fingers.

"I say you're old enough to hear the truth. You are so near your menses."

Marjorie sits across from her at the deal table.

Plip plip plip. The raspberries boil in the pot.

"I say you should know how your mother really died."

My mother does not mince her words or take no for an answer. She takes big steps in high heels. When she holds my hand, she grasps it tightly, almost crushing the fingers. She winds her hair anti-clockwise. She does not like the smell of jasmine. She wears white gloves to church. She can add, subtract, multiply and divide large numbers in her head. She taught herself to touch type. She doesn't suffer fools. She gets cross if you scuff your shoes/drag your heels/twiddle your hair/blow your nose too loudly. She can't bear loose ends. When she smokes a cigarette without a filter she uses the tip of a lacquered nail to pick the shreds of tobacco off her red lipstick. She applies powder and rouge and eyeliner at her dressing table. Then she asks me, one eye

on her own reflection, “how does your mother look now?”

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“Marjorie” Cecilia’s father cries as they dock at Margate, “thank heavens for Marjorie.”

Beneath them, the water darkens and thickens, the surface slick with diesel.

“Can you see her? Can you see Marjorie?”

The children crane their necks looking for her. A tall woman, back straight, blonde hair already grey, one of those faces in the waiting crowd.

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Before we leave Rangoon, there is the one, final party. No expense is spared, even though we will need every single penny in the new land, and “think of it, their father only a Railway Guard”. On the mantelpiece, there are thick, yellow cards – our tickets for the ship. And one white card, for memory.

Everyone is there. The distant cousins, and uncles and aunties, the neighbours, our doctor, our priest, many others I don’t know. They are all dressed so beautifully and smell of flowers. A lady picks a sprig of jasmine from a floral display. “Here,” she says, “to remember.”

That morning, my father wept while cooking breakfast with an apron tied over his railway guard’s uniform. He stands at the stove as my mother used to do, holds the spatula in a closed fist, drops tears which sizzle as they hit the hot fat in the frying pan. We cannot cook what eats him.

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Cecilia slips the fish parcel into the first bin she sees, careful not to touch where the fishmonger put her smeared glove. Then she run-run-runs the next 100 yards, holding her nose in case the smell catches up with her. “Waste not want not, waste not want not,” she chastises herself.

“There are children starving in India,” says Auntie Marjorie, standing over her jam, her wooden spoon coated with red.

“Human life should not be wasted,” says one of the ladies at the final farewell.

My mother wears a red party dress with a skirt so long and so full, it spills over the end of the bed and onto the floor. Drip, drip, drip.