



Salmon Soup

Clara Bickford

H. Ec. Sr.

“**W**E’RE almost through, Honey. You stop now and get some supper, and I’ll finish up.” Mom tightened the lid with a quick twist and turned the jar of tomatoes upside down with the rest of them. She gave it a last rub with the damp cloth.

“Mom, let’s don’t finish tonight. We’re so tired. Won’t take long in the morning, and it’s almost six o’clock,” I argued.

“Yes, but we’re almost through.” She stopped and looked in the basket. “Won’t take half an hour. We’d better finish tonight if we go to town tomorrow. Wonder why Harold doesn’t come up?”

“Is he going to get a blue suit or a gray one, Mom?”

“He wants gray. I wish he’d get a blue one. But then it’ll be his graduation suit, and I want him to like it. It’s his money that’s payin’ for it too, that money he earned plowin’ corn for Mr. Hill.” She wiped a straggling lock of hair from her damp face with the back of her wrist. “I hated to disappoint him today. He’s been counting on going to town this afternoon. But these tomatoes just wouldn’t have kept till tomorrow, and that fence had to be fixed. Don’t see what’s keeping him so late.” She went to the window again and strained her eyes across the pasture towards the ditch where he was fixing fence.

“Oh, he’s all right, Mom. You’re always worrying about someone. Probably lay down to rest and went to sleep.”

THE kitchen was full of the smell of cooking tomatoes. Sickening, hot, steaming tomatoes. In the sink, pans smeared with tomatoes on the outside and with a gum-like ring of red inside. On the table, two long rows of jars upside down; full of hot red tomatoes with white seeds floating in them. In one basket, rotten tomatoes to throw to the chickens. In the gray granite pan in mother’s lap, raw scalded tomatoes with loose, cracked skins.

The room was full of uneasiness too. Uneasiness that had hung there all afternoon, hovering over our thoughts until we seldom spoke, or worked along not talking at all. Now as the day wore on, it closed in, smothering us, clamoring for attention.

“Will salmon soup and sandwiches be all right?” I asked. “That’s easy to fix, and it’s too hot to eat much.”

“That’ll be all right,” she answered as she skinned tomatoes with long quick swipes of the knife. “Say, come to think about it, Harold doesn’t like salmon soup. But you can fry him some potatoes and warm up those peas left from dinner.”

“Seems like he could eat it once even if he doesn’t like it,” I said.

“Won’t be much trouble to fix. I’ll help you in a minute now. Hate to make him eat something he doesn’t like.” She twisted in her chair and stretched towards the window. “You look down that way and see if you see him comin’.”

I PRESSED my forehead against the warm window pane and peered off down towards the ditch. The horses were still standing there hitched to the wagon, tied close to the road. “No, can’t see him, Mom.” My voice sounded a little worried. “I’ll go yell at him.”

I climbed on the sloping roof of the chicken house where I could see better and yelled and then listened. No answer. Louder. Still no answer. Funny. I’d yelled half a mile before. He must be working down in the ditch. Funny he didn’t hear me though.

Mom looked up as I eased the screen door open and slid in

without disturbing the flies settled there for the evening. Should I tell her he had answered back—just to make her feel better? I opened my mouth to say it, but instead, “He didn’t answer, Mom. Guess he’s working down in the ditch.”

I put the milk on to heat for the soup. The wet potatoes sizzled angrily as they hit the hot grease. I opened the can of salmon and fished the bones out. I heard the plop, plop of tomatoes pouring into the last jar. I heard Mom walk to the window, and without looking up I knew she was standing there straining her eyes across the pasture again.

“See him?” I asked.

“No,” she said. Her face was tight and drawn with weariness and anxiety. “Go get the boys and send them down there. I’ll finish supper.”

I watched them hurry down the road, their voices growing dimmer in the distance. Then Mom’s voice calling through cupped hands. A pause, expectant, hopeful. Dead silence. Suddenly George’s cry from farther away, down in the ditch, “Jesse! Hurry! Quick! Stay there, Mom. Mom! Stay up there!”

THEN cars coming up the road, up our lane. People getting out.

Dad’s team standing hitched to the mower. His face white and frightened. Mom’s gray and calm. “Walter, Harold’s drowned. Down in the ditch where the washout from the culvert is.” Her voice broke for a minute in the still darkness. “They’re bringing him up. Someone’s gone for the doctor. Maybe it’s not too late.” But there was no hope in her voice.

Kind hands steered her towards the back porch and steadied her while she sat down on the step. All about were voices in the hot darkness, low voices talking almost in whispers. Short snatches of conversation. Long pauses packed with wonder.

Then Dad there beside Mom saying, “It’s no use, Mom. Doc says he’s been dead, probably several hours.”

“I know,” she said.

In the kitchen Mr. Hill was telephoning to the undertaker. “Yes, that’s right. Walter Browns’. Their boy drowned this afternoon. Yes, right away.”

We sat there on the porch, Mom and Dad and the rest of us. George weeping short, dry, terrified sobs. Jesse with his face

pressed close on his knees to shut out the sight of Harold's dead body, cold and naked in the water. Mom reached out and pulled George closer to comfort him. She felt for Jesse in the dark, and stroked his hair with gentle, soothing hands. "Try not to think how he looked, dear, when you found him tonight. Just think about how fine and big he was today when he rode away."

WE WERE remembering him—he'd had on blue coveralls, still new and stiff, and a straw hat with a frayed brim pulled down low on his forehead to ward off the burning sun. Almost six feet tall, he was, the last time we measured on the door casing in the kitchen. The pencil mark was still there, two inches above Dad's. It would be the last mark for him. He'd clattered down the lane in the wagon after dinner and had turned back and waved to Billy until the hill had swallowed him up. He'd been disappointed because we weren't going to town. But he hadn't said much.

"If we'd only gone to town today," Mom said, remembering. "What if some of the tomatoes did spoil? Oh, if we'd only gone to town to get his suit."

"Mom, don't blame yourself for it," Dad said. "It was nothing you could help." His shoulders shook under a long shudder and then were quiet again. "It was nothing you could help," he repeated.

"Mom, what's the matter with Harold? Where is he?" asked little Wayne, edging closer.

"He's dead, honey."

"But I'm hungry. I didn't have any supper," he said, not understanding. "When are we gonna eat?"

"Of course you're hungry, and it's bed time, too. Mom'll get you something."

"Let me do it, Mom," I said, not wanting her to see the potatoes and the soup there waiting for Harold to eat.

Someone had set the salmon soup off the stove. It was cold. An oily scum of bright orange floated on top of it. I dumped the hateful soup into the sink. The liquid ran off leaving the flakes of salmon there in the drain. I scooped it out with my hand and threw it into the garbage pail.

WAYNE finished his glass of milk and licked the last crumbs of the cookie from his lips. "He's only five," I remembered.

As I turned to take him off to bed, a pile of familiar-looking clothes caught my eye. A pair of blue coveralls, stiff and new, and a straw hat with a frayed brim. And his shoes. Big and empty. Mom must not see them now. If she started crying, the boys could not stand it. She must not cry.

"Do you need me?" she asked through the screen door.

"No! No, Stay there, Mom. I'll put Wayne to bed." I gathered up the clothes and hurried to the washroom.

A few neighbors still stood about, helpless and quiet and wanting to comfort. Some of them sat in the living room with the kerosene light turned low. A narrow strip of brighter light streamed out of the crack under the closed door of my room where the undertaker was still working. I was glad Mom couldn't see the beam of light.

Out on the porch Mom's voice or Dad's broke the silence now and then. "I just can't help but know he'd be all right if we'd only gone to town. And it was his money. He could have gotten the suit alone," she'd say again. And the boys or Dad would say, "Oh, no, Mom, it wasn't your fault."

THE clock in the kitchen struck nine, long sad bongs.

"You boys go up to bed now," Mom said, gently urging them up. "You can rest some if you can't sleep. Come on, get up. Try to sleep." She kissed them, and they clung to her.

"Night, Dad." He answered by holding them close a minute and patting them hard on the back.

"You, too," she said to me. "You can sleep on the cot in our room, close to Mother. Want me to tuck you in?" I remembered she'd see the beam of light if she did.

"No," I said, "I'll be all right."

I started for the bedroom, but inside the kitchen door I stopped suddenly alert. Somewhere far off a wagon clattered away in the distance. I listened as it faded away in the blackness and disappeared over some hill just as Harold had clattered down over a hill a few hours ago. Mom had heard it, too. She sat up and leaned towards the dying sound, straining to hear it. Then

it was gone, leaving a great lonely emptiness. Mom's head dropped forward into her hands, and her first sob broke the stillness of the night.



Chant of the Hoe

Richard N. Mason

Sci. Sr.



Chop dat cotton.
Chop dat cotton.
Squash dat weevil—
Cut his fuzzie
On de groun'.
Dere's another, an' another—
Get 'em all, get 'em all.
Weevil get dat cotton,
Cain't make no cotton,
Make no cotton,
Sho' will starve.
Chop dat cotton.
Chop dat cotton.
Sun, beat ma back
An' beat dat groun'
An' beat dis cotton all aroun'.
Ain't no sun, ain't no cotton;
Ain't no cotton, ain't no grub;
Ain't no grub, sho' will starve.
Chop dat cotton.
Chop dat cotton.