

INFO:

Title: Tomato soup

By: E.E, year 11

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PIECE:

It is not good to be so cruel, chicken. Come closer. I will tell you a story from when I was young.

I grew up in a small village, you remember? There was a woman in my village, an old woman. She was not a beautiful old woman, in the way that lots of old women in stories are. Her nose was hooked, and her hair was grey, and she had a great lump on the side of her nose. It was so big her left eye was constantly squinting to make room for it on her face. She looked as if she had once been very beautiful, but her face had crumpled over the years.

We called her, probably because of the lump, a witch. The youngest ones would run from her in the streets. The eldest used to throw their rubbish into her front garden. The adults were cruel to her too, in a different way. You see, whenever someone was suffering – which was fairly often in those days, as life was harder than it is now – she used to bring them soup. Tomato soup. Every time, even if we probably deserved to suffer for how we treated her. None of us would eat it, of course. The meeker families left the tins at the back of their cupboards, to sit forgotten for years. The fiercest ones would throw them out into the street.

I cannot tell you why we all treated her in the way that we did. It was the done thing. We had been cruel to her for as long as I could remember, and I never questioned why. We all knew why we didn't eat the soup, though. It was because she has poisoned it, because she was a witch.

Well, chicken, we had little to do to entertain ourselves during long, lazy summer days but play games. In my village, the chief game was 'dares', which is what it sounds like. You would dare one of your friends to do something exciting and dangerous, which they would, and then they would dare you, and so on. It was inevitable that the old woman would one day come into our game. She was the most exciting and dangerous of all.

It so happened that, one summers day, my father had taken ill. We all knew the tin of soup would arrive, and my friend came up with what we considered a rather ingenious dare. I was to sneak into the witch's house and report back which poison she was putting in the soup.

Her house smelt of thyme and age. It was warmer, so she had left her front window open and I had crept through. Her kitchen faced the garden, and I could see her silhouette hunched over a tomato plant. I slipped beneath the table and waited.

It did not feel so warm in her kitchen. The tiled floor was cold, yes, but it was more than that. The air around the house seemed too still and too silent. It made me shiver – though it may have been fear as she walked up her garden to the house. I had never actually been close to her, and the thought of changing that filled me with dread.

She brought her tomatoes in and began to wash them. I still remember this very clearly – I play it to myself, sometimes, when I struggle to sleep. She washed each one carefully and patted them dry. She cut them in half as if they were butter, poured oil over them and put them in her oven. I was no longer thinking about poison, or witchcraft. I was thinking about how familiar all the motions had seemed to her, and how often she must make soup for us. I was thinking about all the soup we had refused to eat. A heavy feeling began to grow in my stomach.

She roasted the tomatoes for twenty minutes. I know because I watched the clock above the oven fanatically. I was terrified, and I wanted to leave. I did not like being so close to her. I did not enjoy how confronting the woman I was so often cruel to felt.

When twenty minutes had passed, and my legs were so cramped I would have screamed had I not been so afraid, she took the tomatoes out and squashed them until they were liquid. She squashed garlic, and basil, and splashed in cream. The red elixir was poured into a jar, which was wrapped in parchment paper and left on the side as she went to get her coat.

The second I knew I was safe, I ran for the window. I did not notice that I had been crying until an eager crowd of my friends pointed it out to me. I could not talk to them. I did not know who they were anymore. How could they ask, with such glee, if this woman was truly a witch? I could only run home, where I cried for half an hour on my mother's shoulder.

Slowly, very slowly, we began to make amends. I would like to say I took the first step, but it was my mother. She sent a bunch of flowers in thanks for the soup.

We could never have done enough. Our entire village sent flowers to her, but it was not enough. We invited her for teas, and lunches, and dinners, but it was not enough. We could have thrown a parade in her honour and it would not have been enough to undo the years of unkindness. I carry it around with me, even today. I still see her face as she made the soup. She knew I was there, I'm sure. Though I'll never know why she didn't address me.

I will take you to her grave one day, chicken, if you'd like. It's very nice there. It's covered in tomato soup tins of flowers. It reminds me to be kind.