Home-Made Soup

by Barry R. Taylor

"Thanks for helping prepare the vegetables, Claire" Glenda said, "It does make it go faster."

"No problem, Mum," her daughter replied. "Are you sure you remember the recipe?" She wiped her hands on a towel and sat down at the kitchen table.

Glenda said, "Of course I do. I've been making vegetable soup since before you were born. I'm hardly going to forget now. This soup is your father's favourite. Especially this time of year, when we have everything fresh from the garden."

Her husband, Gerald, did not respond to the mention of his name. That was typical, of course. He seldom intruded when 'his girls' were chatting. He preferred to sit quietly in his seat at the end of the table, scanning the newspaper.

"Almost everything," Claire rejoined, smiling. "We're still using frozen peas and corn."

"Oh, don't quibble. Most everything is from the garden, as it should be." She checked the pot heating on the stove. The butter was melted and just beginning to bubble. Glenda found the bowl of sliced onions and slid them into the pot. They began to sizzle at once. She added chopped carrots and celery, then stirred the mixture about with a wooden spoon.

"Those need about five minutes," she murmured. She found the pile of green beans, tossed them onto a cutting board, picked up a paring knife and began to efficiently slice off the stems and flower ends. Then she sliced each bean in two along a long diagonal. She stopped from time to time to check the vegetables in the pot.

"Want a hand with that?" Claire asked.

"No. You relax and let me cook." Her reply was terse. Sometimes her daughter's solicitousness was excessive. Glenda knew her way around her own kitchen. She had been making vegetable soup from scratch for forty years. It was Gerald's favourite soup. He always said so. No matter how deeply he was buried in the newspaper, when Glenda set a bowl of steaming vegetable soup in front of him he would set the paper aside and dig in.

She checked the pot. The onions were turning golden. Time to add the next ingredients.

She had the cutting board with the beans on it in her hand when she noticed the three peeled garlic cloves sitting on the counter. "Oh for goodness sake," she said out loud. She had forgotten to add the garlic. Well, a mistake easily corrected. She set down the beans and picked up a paring knife. She sliced the garlic into tiny white medallions, chopped each one into strips, then chopped the strips crosswise into smaller bits.

She slid the diced garlic into the pot, stirred it around. Gerald insisted that something as tiny as a few bits of garlic could not possibly alter the taste of a whole pot of soup, but Glenda knew better. Subtle nuances of flavour separated ordinary soup from truly good soup.

She gave the garlic a minute to saute, then added the cut beans, along with frozen corn and peas that Claire had already measured out. The mix sizzled as the frozen kernels hit the hot pot. Glenda mixed everything with the wooden spoon.

"The spuds, Mum," said Claire.

Only then did Glenda notice the four large, unpeeled potatoes sitting at the back of the counter. She shook her head. Screw you brain on, Glenda. She picked up the paring knife again and began cutting the potatoes, first in half lengthwise, then lengthwise again, then crosswise to make half-inch cubes. She never peeled them.

The tedium of it did not bother her. Chopping vegetables was routine work, yet in some way she found it deeply satisfying: the steady chop-chop-chop rhythm of the blade descending, the revelation of moist, flavourful flesh with each stroke, the transformation beneath her hands of something raw and earthy into food for the plate. Did Claire understand that feeling? Glenda suspected she did: Claire enjoyed preparing wholesome meals for her family. Gerald, of course, so rooted in the practical, would not understand, nor could Glenda explain it to him. She dumped the potatoes into the pot.

"I'll make the broth," said Claire. She was already moving before Glenda could stop her. She emptied several packages of dehydrated broth into a bowl of water and heated it in the microwave oven. That was a bit of a cheat, in Glenda's mind, but it did save time. When the broth was hot Glenda added it to the pot in a dramatic burst of boiling and steam. That was the moment that a mix of vegetables began to become soup. She followed the broth with finely chopped tomatoes, the first of the season, picked red and ripe that morning.

Now seasonings. She was about to open the spice cupboard when she noticed the line of bottles sitting on the counter: bay leaves, thyme, rosemary. A plate nearby held parsley and basil leaves from the garden, neatly chopped.

"Oh," Glenda said out loud. "We got these ready beforehand, didn't we." Now she remembered picking the parsley and basil. Had she chopped it, or had Claire done that? No matter. Everything was ready. She tossed a bit of salt and pepper into the pot, then measured out small aliquots of the dried spices. The parsley and basil leaves went in last.

Now all that was needed was time. The soup needed to simmer to let the ingredients mingle and mesh. She stirred the mixture, letting the scented steam tickle her nose. Glenda always felt a sense of accomplishment from preparing a batch of good soup. Home-made vegetable soup was Gerald's favourite.

"That needs about an hour," she said, turning about to address her husband. He didn't reply. Glenda stared at his empty chair. "Where – where's Gerald?" she demanded.

"Dad's gone, Mum" said Claire. She was standing close beside her. "Don't you remember? A couple of months ago."

"Oh. Yes, of course." She sank into the nearest chair. "I made too much soup."

Curse of the Were-Something

by Barry R. Taylor

Tanith was in a dark place. Worry and suspicion assailed her. Her husband, Henry, was keeping something from her, some dark secret he didn't want her to know. He tried valiantly to hide it, but Tanith could see the signs.

She and Henry had been married a year. Barely eighteen months ago she had been a nursing instructor at the University of Leeds when she met the aristocratic Henry Seekenhyde, who was visiting for a conference. The spark between them had been immediate and intense. Six months later they were married, and now Tanith was adjusting to living in a castle above a village in Transylvania. Though it wasn't really a castle. More like a small country manor, and the dickens to keep clean. Fortunately for Tanith, Henry was rich enough to afford a few servants.

The land was misty and mysterious, full of ancient forest and long-tended farms, although the village, perhaps once wood-beamed and medieval, was modern, prosperous, and full of tourists. Still, Tanith had heard the stories. Tales of screams in the night, of strange activity around the Seekenhyde estate, and young women disappearing without a trace. Her new home had a dark history.

Nevertheless, the people of the village held Tanith's husband in high regard. They treated him as a local magistrate. Henry told her once that his family name did have a title attached to it, but nobody paid attention to such niceties any more. Sometimes, when she was walking in the village with Henry, people would behave oddly. Some would shy away. Others would point a finger in their mouths, or bare their teeth as if to emphasize the incisors. Were they imagining . . . fangs? It bothered Tanith, but Henry only nodded to the villagers and carried on. "It's a local tradition, nothing more," he explained.

More bothersome still were Henry's own disappearances. Once a month or so he would start to become jumpy and distracted. He would look up to the sky, as if searching for a sign. Whatever was on his mind, he was unwilling to share it with his young wife. Instead he would tell her he had business in Sofia, kiss her briefly on the front steps, and spray gravel as his Land

Rover tore away down the circular driveway. He took no luggage. A day or so later he would come back, haggard and unshaven. When Tanith pressed him on where he had been, he said "business" and refused to elaborate.

Tanith wondered if he was having an affair. Perhaps he was driving off to see a woman named Sofia? She had trouble convincing herself of this theory. Such duplicity seemed absolutely foreign to Henry's character. Besides, he always returned from his excursions looking not smug or guilty, but exhausted, as if he had been awake for a long time. He showered and went to bed soon after. Tanith eventually noticed one more coincidence. Her husband always disappeared on the night of a full moon.

He was hiding something, she was sure of it. She was his wife; she had a right to know. So that evening, as the too-pretty maid was clearing away the dishes, she confronted him about it. Henry Seekenhyde was a tall man with a full head of black hair and a strong chin. He had a measured, dignified comportment, bespeaking the nobility of his ancestors. He listened to Tanith gravely. Then he said. "You are right, my darling. I have been hiding something. It's time you knew." He rose from the table. "Come with me."

He left the room, with Tanith close behind. He led her through the drawing room and the library, then down a narrow back staircase into the basement of the old building. Tanith seldom ventured down there. The space was brick-walled, poorly lit, and littered with broken furniture, dusty and forgotten. What bones and secrets could one bury here?

Henry paused beside a bare wall. "My family lives under a curse," he explained. "Once each month, on the night of the full moon, I transform – into a dentist."

"Oh my god, no!" exclaimed Tanith. "You – what did you say?"

"You heard me rightly. Most days I am Mr. Henry Seekenhyde, local landlord and your faithful husband. But when the full moon rises I become Dr. Edward von Jekyll, D.D.S."

He pushed in hard on a brick in the wall. The wall swung inward, became a recessed door. He ushered her through.

The room on the other side was big and brightly lit. The walls were white. In the centre of the room stood a white dentist's chair, surrounded by drills and polishers and an X-ray machine. Labelled storage cabinets lined the far side of the room. There were innocuous pictures on the walls, as well as a framed degree from a respectable dental school in Bucharest.

Tanith took it all in, eyes wide. "You have one of those televisions in the ceiling," she observed, still astonished. "You're a dentist. But . . . how?"

"My grandfather tried to capture a tooth-fairy. He laid a trap under his pillow, baited with a hound's tooth. Needless to say it didn't work. The fairy was enraged. She put a curse on my grandfather, transforming him into a dentist for one day each month. Who knew the buggers were so powerful? The curse has been passed down to the eldest son ever since. Like my father before me, I am compelled to provide free dental care to the people of our village."

"But, but, you have a degree in agricultural economics."

"That is the Henry Seekenhyde whom you know. But when the full moon rises I become the white-coated Dr. von Jekyll, who has very steady hands and keeps abreast of trends in family dentistry. He encourages flossing and gives away toothbrushes with the von Jekyll name on the handle."

Tanith was still processing. "Where do the patients come in?" she wondered.

Henry pointed to a conventional door on the far side of the room. A row of uncomfortable chairs lined the wall nearby, across from a television and a stack of out-of-date magazines. "There's a second driveway through the orchard," Henry explained. "And a few parking spaces behind the house. I'm working on improving disabled access."

"It all makes sense," Tanith murmured. "The old stories. The screams in the night. The people disappearing."

He nodded. "Yes. On the night of the full moon, my grandfather used to kidnap young women, drag them down here, and – clean their teeth. He filled cavities too, but he didn't always keep enough novocaine. Hence the screams."

"Why just young women?"

"Because my grandfather was a pervert. My father transformed, sorry, he modernized the curse into a standard dental practice. When he died the curse passed down to me. One day a month isn't really enough for the whole village. My alter ego has a waiting list."

Tanith looked at her husband with new understanding, and even deeper love. "Thank you for telling me this," she said.

"You are my wife. It's time I stopped keeping secrets from you. And besides" – he paused for a heartbeat – "I could really use a hygienist."

Intervention

by Barry R. Taylor

Will this never end? Walter asked himself, for perhaps the fifth time that quarter-hour. Will this man ramble on forever? The hellish prospect did not seem impossible. The speaker at the podium had already been going on for what seemed like an eternity, and showed no signs of winding down. Walter shifted in his seat. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He tried to force himself to listen to the man at the podium, who was, apparently, holding everyone else in rapt attention.

Or perhaps everyone else was being achingly polite. Indisputably, no one could be following what the man was saying. His message was either so ethereal as to be beyond the ken of ordinary minds, or it was a jumbled mash of nothing. Walter suspected the latter. Either way, the result was incomprehensible. And interminable.

The speaker was an old man, thin and slightly bent, grey hair in his long beard and rather less on his balding head. The stage lights illuminated his form in the darkened theatre, as if he himself radiated the light of wisdom. He appeared to believe that everything he said was profoundly sagacious.

For he was no ordinary speaker. He was a Distinguished Scientist. He was a Giant in His Field. He had written an Important Book. He was an inspiration to so many who had followed his work, including the moderator, who had used those words in his gracious and grateful introduction. The lecture hall was packed with conference-goers, name tags on lanyards around their necks, their attention fixed on the speaker at the podium.

The distinguished gentleman spoke without notes and used no visual aids. He should have used both. He rambled and he ranted. He interrupted himself. He changed direction whenever a new thought occurred to him. He dashed off on tangents as a fox after an escaping rabbit. He jumped into examples, meant to illustrate something or other, realized he hadn't provided the background to give them context, backed up to the beginning and then forgot where he was going. Every now and again he stopped, looked out over the sea of faces in their padded chairs, and threw out a random sentence that bore no connection to the previous paragraph.

Walter had less patience than some of his fellow conference attendees. He was here only at the behest of his well-meaning supervisor, who imagined that basking in the light of the great man's wisdom would enrich Walter's mind. In truth, he was losing it. He shifted in his seat again; he looked at the floor, then up at the skylights, then all around the room, then back to the man at the podium. When, when, when! would this rambling old man ever wrap it up? Didn't he realize he was over his time already? Did he have no consideration for the other speakers? Why wasn't someone yanking him off the stage?

Far out in space, well out of the plane of the planetary orbits, a tiny bit of rock hung in the void. Call it the mote. It was about the size of a radish, but irregular and pitted. Its velocity, of course, was relative. Compared against the background stars of the Milky Way it was hardly moving at all. Relative to Earth, which lay a little way off its highly eccentric orbit, it was moving very fast indeed. Still, as the mote passed, the gravitational lure of the Earth tugged at it. The pull at this distance was the gentlest of nudges, barely a hint. Yet it was enough to alter the mote's trajectory ever so slightly so that it swung a little closer to the Earth. The tug became a tiny bit stronger, and the orbit diverted a tiny bit more. The mote slipped out of its orbit into a long, winding spiral, with the blue-brown sphere of Earth at its centre.

Down on the planet, Walter was going quietly mad. The distinguished speaker was still speaking, or rather, he was still rambling. Members of the audience were beginning to shuffle. Restlessness was finally overtaking good manners. Off to one side of the stage, the moderator discreetly looked at his watch. Again. The speaker didn't notice, or he didn't care. He raised one finger in the air and made a particularly salient point, which no one understood. Please, please, please, finish up and quit already, Walter begged. I can't sit here any longer. Go off somewhere and write a another book. Or write two books. Make a documentary. Anything that gets you off that stage and out of my life.

The distinguished speaker stopped speaking. For an instant, Walter felt hope. The old man looked around the weary audience, then over at the moderator. He said, "Now, I realize I've gone a tad over my time, but I will keep you just a few minutes longer, because there are several further points which deserve explication." Then he wandered off again into the land of maundering meaninglessness.

Noooo! Walter shouted inside his head. I can't take any more of this! He diverted himself by imagining, in too much detail, leaping to his feet, pulling a nickel-plated

Smith & Wesson 686 out of his complimentary tote-bag and pumping six blunt-coned projectiles into the speaker's chest. The audience would roar their approval. In reality he shifted in his seat again. He let out an inaudible groan. Please, somebody make him stop talking!

The woman in the seat beside Walter was nodding off. The speaker at the podium was still going on. Walter was going mad. Oh merciful heavens he's gone back to point four (of seven) again! He's going backward!

Outside of Walter's desperate awareness, the mote was curving gracefully toward the Earth, following gravity's ineluctable pull. It gained even more speed. Friction with the upper atmosphere heated it's surface. It began to glow. It wound on down, the spiral growing tighter as the air grew denser and the grip of gravity strengthened.

The grey-haired man on the stage made a summative statement. Then he made another one. And another. Then he went back to re-emphasize why the first statement was important, which led to a major digression about a sub-point he had overlooked, or perhaps forgotten about. It was apparent to Walter, and probably everyone else, that the speaker had no idea how to wind up his speech. He kept on talking, and talking, perhaps in the hope that he would accidentally spill out a tight summary sentence on which he could end.

The moderator was no longer concealing his impatience. He looked at his watch for the fifth time. People in the audience were looking out the glass doors of the auditorium the way grade-schoolers look out at the playground. Sitting in the back, Walter was close to literally pulling at his hair. He was bored beyond expression. Please, please, please, he implored the universe, can't something or someone do something to make this man shut up?

The mote was in the lower atmosphere now, and moving fast. It was red hot. Atmospheric friction had burned off its outer layers. Now it was a tiny fireball, no larger than a pea, but slicing downward immeasurably fast. It blasted through the skylights over the auditorium, struck the distinguished speaker at exactly the level of his heart, tore out through his back and buried itself in the ground beneath the stage. A sonic boom shook the walls. Smoke poured out of the hole at the back of the stage. The great man stopped speaking in the middle of the word 'phenomenological', swayed for a moment, then folded up gracefully onto the floor boards, permanently silenced.

At the back of the hall, Walter leaned back in his seat. He ignored the shouting and commotion going on around him. He let out his breath. That had to be a coincidence, he

reflected. Had to be. It was impossible that he could influence the workings of the universe by wishing for it, however ardently. Still, if ever there was a man who deserved to be smitten . . . .

He left that thought unfinished. Whatever the means, he had been released from the purgatory that this plenary session had become. He got to his feet, picked up his complimentary tote bag and left the auditorium through the glass doors. He pulled out the conference itinerary to see where he should go next.

Lighthouse

by Barry R. Taylor

On a fine day in August, Kevin sat on a wooden bench, looking out to sea. Beside him, the white, octagonal tower of the Cape George lighthouse, with its ever-rotating light like a cyclops's eye, kept vigil over St. George's Bay. The lighthouse stood at the edge of a small park, sprinkled with benches and picnic tables. In mid-week there were few visitors besides Kevin.

"I hear you be wondering about the old lighthouse," someone said. "And how she burned down." Kevin looked up to see an old man, stooped and frail, settling onto the bench beside him. He was wearing workman's clothes, with a frayed cloth cap pulled down over his forehead. He was carrying something with a wire handle that he set on the ground beside the bench.

Kevin said, "Yes, that's right. Word gets around in a rural community, eh? Actually, I'm trying to write a piece on the lighthouse ghost. The local legend says the lighthouse keeper was killed in the fire and his spirit still wanders these grounds. But there's no proof there even was a fire. My publisher –"

"I don't know about any ghosts," the old man said. "I can tell you about the fire. She was real enough. Burned her right to the ground she did. 'Twasn't the lighthouse keeper who died in the fire. It was his son."

"His son?" I thought there were only – "

"He had a son. Old Alex MacEachern, the lighthouse keeper, he lived in the house with his family. His son it was who died. It was his father's fault, he's to blame for it. The fire, his own son's death, all of it. It was all the keeper's fault."

Kevin leaned closer. "Why do you say that?"

The old man shook his head. "The house wasn't even a proper lighthouse, was it. It was a plain house with a light on top. Built 'er right here on this bluff with a good view over the water. Three lamps set in a circle and an oil tank to fire each one. Built her in '61 they did, and I'm here to tell you the ships and the fishing boats coming in to the bay were right glad to see that light on the hill.

"But they didn't count on the wind, did they? She blows like the devil up here. Shook the whole house sometimes. The wind was a big problem. The wheel that turned the light ran on a pulley, you see, like a clock. The keeper had to wind up the weights, twice a day, to keep the light turning. But when the wind shook the house the turning gears didn't work. They put braces around the outside to keep the house steady, but she still shook like the palsy in the gales."

"Yes but what about the fire?"

The old man nodded. "April, 1907 that's when she was. The wind was blowin' right mean off the sea. Old MacEachern and his son, Owen, were working the lights, and they had a job to do because the wind kept knocking about the gears and the light had to be turned by hand. Owen wasn't of a temper for bein' a lighthouse keeper. Didn't like living up on the bluff all alone. He had a great row with his father about what do about the light. The lad thought it was high time someone built a new lighthouse, a proper light on a cement tower, firm against the wind, so they wouldn't have to work all night turning the lamps.

"Well, old MacEachern, he had a temper on 'im. He told his son he was tired of his complainin' and if wanted a taste of real solitude he could spend a night on duty by himself. He stomped off and turned in for the night, leaving his son to turn the lamps alone, though it was weary work for one man. That was his sin, that was. There were always supposed to be two men awake during a storm. If MacEachern had stayed awake, the fire might have taken the building without taking any lives.

"Sometime in the early morning the fire broke out. Probably started in the machinery room, right below the light tower, where the oil tanks were kept. Maybe it started from a used wick that wasn't properly snuffed. Old MacEachern had gotten lazy 'bout cleaning up, there were bits of wick all over the floor. Askin' for a fire, that was. The wind had calmed by then, but in a clapboard house fire spreads right quick. The dog smelled the smoke and started howling, waking everyone up. MacEachern's wife and daughters were on the ground floor and they cleared out double quick. The daughters rode off to get help from the neighbours. MacEachern, that hot-headed old fool, was asleep on the second floor, right below the machinery room, and he was almost trapped by the fire. He escaped out the back door in the nick of time.

"Owen was up in the light room, above the fire, but maybe he could have gotten out if someone were there to lead him through the smoke. His father could have done that, if he hadn't

gone to sleep. God's mercy, why did he leave him there? Why didn't he save his own son? It was all his fault. He should have stayed awake. He shouldn't have let his son die."

Kevin was fascinated. "How do you know all this?"

"Because I was there, wasn't I!" His reedy voice was angry now. "I was right there on the ground with the fire crew and all the neighbours doing whatever we could do to stem the flames." He shook his head. "It was a lost cause. All we could do was let 'er burn, right to the ground, and make sure it didn't spread to the horse barn.

"Well, they built a new, proper lighthouse in '08, and MacEachern stayed on as keeper for a while. He was never the same though. He never got over the fire. Always talking about it, he was. He kept saying that Owen might have escaped, that he was still alive somehow. You see, there was a rope ladder in the light room, and if Owen were quick he could have climbed down the ladder two floors and jumped the rest of the way. They never found a body in the ashes, did they.

"MacEachern kept expecting his son to come back. He started asking where Owen was when the family sat down to dinner. Sometimes he would go out looking for him, stomping around the ruins of the old house, trying to find his lost son. His poor wife could never convince him that Owen was gone. He started wandering the grounds at night, a lamp in one hand, searching everywhere for Owen. Fair weather or foul he was always out there, awake and searching, his wife could hardly stop him. They had to bring on a new fellow to help tend the light.

"One night a fog rolled in off the sea, thick as lies and cold as death. The new fellow was up in the tower running the light. MacEachern's wife told him to stay inside but he snuck out with his lamp, wandering about the land looking for Owen. In the fog he couldn't see the ground very well and it looks like he fell right over the edge of the bluff, into the forest down below."

The old man shook his head, rueful. "I suppose that's where the story of the ghost comes from, MacEachern wandering about with his lamp. Old fool. His own carelessness caused his son's death, then his own too. Is it any wonder that his soul can't rest, even after death?"

The old man stopped speaking. He sat very still, staring at the ground. He seemed profoundly sad.

Kevin was silent too, contemplating the old man's tragic story. Then he frowned. He said, "Wait, wait a minute. Something doesn't add up here. The fire was in 1907. If you were there, fighting the fire, you would have to be at least one hundred and forty – "

He stopped. The bench beside him was empty. He looked around, but found no one. The summer sun shone down on a vacant park, a single car, and a stalwart white lighthouse, forever facing the sea.