

"What Really Matters" by S. Mullikin

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As a child I frequently watched my mother prepare our dinners with a sense of awe. I stood on tip-toe at her side, full of questions, my eyes hovering at counter's edge, watching her work her magic at a cutting board. It wasn't long before she asked me to help.

I started with simple things like fetching the ingredients from the fridge and cupboard. Under her direction I learned the secret language of measuring cups and fluid ounces. She taught me the fundamentals of cooking in the oven, in the crockpot, on the burner, and in the electric skillet. I'll never forget the stirring of everything with long-handled wooden spoons.

Growing up we'd sit down to eat our meals at a table perfectly set with plates and bowls on top of decorative placemats. Our glasses tinkled with ice, echoing the sound made as the knives, forks, and spoons were laid over napkins. In my mother's home our meals were about family, the food an expression of love.

When I had a family of my own I followed her example. I developed a love for it, not because I like my own cooking, which I do, but because others liked it. In fact the meals I make for myself are always simple. It's the ones I make for others that are special to me.

There's just something about those moments when I'm watching someone take their first bite of a dish I've prepared for them. Their heads tilt slightly upward as their eyes slid shut; their mouths working the flavors and textures around. Then the deep audible

sigh. After the first swallow, satisfied "Mmm's", punctuated by smiles, let me know in a way they are experiencing my love for them. It isn't surprising when I watch someone eat my food now, I'm reminded of my own mother's secret smile that she had when I see the pleasure my cooking brings.

These days I measure everything by the eye. My ingredients are pulled from a locker box and cooked in a microwave. There are no glasses with ice, no silverware. If I'm making something special, the invited show up with their own plastic bowl, spork, and cup. Any more than two guests and the room is crowded. I have no adequate table to serve them at, but we all find our places as we can: a few on the bed, one on the locker box, another on the toilet.

Neither the family I grew up in, nor the one I began, were ideal. But we all shared in that communal and familial bond that bespoke of Home when we sat down to eat together. When I first came to prison all I could see was the gulf of time and distance, steel and concrete, that separated me from my family. It felt as though all love and sense of connection had disappeared from my life.

But I've found it again.

In a cell smaller than some bathrooms are five men, packed elbow to elbow, all smiling around mouthfuls, nodding in approval. I may no longer be able to use the lessons my mother taught me all those years ago, but I'm thankful that I finally found enough wisdom to understand the real lesson. As I look around this room of contented souls, and smile

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that secret smile, I know that in this moment, we are all one.