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The Fatal Ingredient

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The Fatal Ingredient

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Slowly, I push around the thick bowl of stew. Its delicious smell is wafting toward my nose, but my anticipation is dampened by the cruel fact that, hidden underneath the scrumptious brown liquid, lurks about fifteen green olives. Worse, they have pits and these remnants of consumption are to be placed ceremoniously on a small dish for this purpose. I can't even pretend to eat them, unless I say I swallow olive pits. It's a sticky situation."

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I’m ravenous, so I stuff myself with salad and bread, hoping to delay my stomach pains and the eating of those green gobs of bitterness. Two plates of lettuce later, the salad bowl is empty, and I gingerly take a bite of stew, deftly avoiding any olives. The beef is tender and melts in my mouth, making me hungry for more.

“How’s the stew, Lena?” Mrs. Livingston asks with anticipation stamped upon her lovely brow. How can I tell her that her six hours of preparation for this dish were destroyed when she dumped in that one ingredient? How can I tell that to a lovely, old, widowed friend of the family, who, for the past twenty years, has had me over for dinner every Sunday since I can remember? I can’t.

“It’s incredible,” I say with a smile. “It melts in my mouth.”

“The olives are the best part,” she explained with a smile. “They add the flavor.”

Deflated, I know what I must do. I spoon up an olive while she watches, a smile perched on her old, lined lips, painted especially for my visit, and place it gingerly in my mouth. I hope she can’t see my disgust as I chew the rubbery fruit off of its hard center and delicately place the pit on its little blue plate. Quickly, I gulp down half my glass of grape soda, purchased especially for me, and force a smile.
“You’re right. They really change the whole dish.” I’m hoping that Mrs. Livingston will take that as a compliment.

“Oh, yes. Now that I know you like them, I’ll put them in more of my dishes.”

Her smile said it all. Sundays full of olives and my teeth rotten from gulping them down with grape soda. This can’t go on. The plan hits me, and before I can stop myself, I place another olive in my mouth and pretend to choke on it. Mrs. Livingston is pounding on my back. I’m holding my breath until I think I’m going to pass out, and then I shoot the bitter sphere out across the table and it lands in the empty salad bowl with a loud plop. Mrs. Livingston is crying, and I make a feeble comment on the dangers of small round fruits.

“Oh, my. Yes. I guess they can be dangerous,” Mrs. Livingston replies faintly.

“I don’t think I can ever eat another olive,” I declare. Mrs. Livingston nods her head in agreement as I hide a smile.

--Suzanne M. Wood