

SPRING ONIONS

Once on a bus in a foreign country
far from home
just when winter was turning
into spring
I sat beside a woman
who knew my language.

I didn't know hers
but that didn't stop us
from starting a conversation –
first about our children,
their ages and genders,
then about the politics
of the foreign country
and how stupid men were.
We kept our words general
in case someone who shouldn't
might overhear and report us;
but we did venture bravely
to say how everything
would be better and different
if only women
were running the country.

As the sun was shining
and a pink smell of
blossoming was in the air,
we soon forgot our children
and the stupidity of men
and began to talk about
spring onions and how
they made the best soup
in the whole world.

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We agreed that you start
with a good-sized
experienced old onion,
a carrot or two, a bit of
winter parsley and of course
a potato; then you boiled it
for a while to mingle
the flavours and finally
you added a whole bunch
of spring onions –
the first ones of the season
that you found in the market
that very morning.

We smacked our lips
at the thought of that soup
with all the flavours and
colours of spring,
spring that was ending
the winter and about
to break into flower and
song all around us.

Before we reached the bus station
the woman turned to me
and said: come to my house
tomorrow evening and
I'll make you a soup of
spring onions; even the
thought of it filled us both
with warmth and we burst
into womanish laughter.

Did I go the next evening
to my new friend to eat
a soup of spring onions?

I found my way to her
apartment through the narrow
lanes and twisting alleys;
she had only two rooms –
a kitchen and sleeping room,
her two little boys slept
in the kitchen where she had
cleverly concealed two beds
in almost no space.

We ate the spring onion soup
in her little kitchen
under the red wall hangings
and slavic smells of her
apartment, and I'll never forget
how spring whirled and sang
around us as it burst
through the walls of that house.
Now I think how much more
pleasing her apartment was
than all of Paris and London,
how much more musical
her two rooms with their
singing choirs of colour,
and how they lighted the poor
shabby streets of that
faraway foreign city.

Every year since then
I go to the market when
I smell the first whiff of
spring in Toronto or
Winnipeg or Vancouver or
wherever I am, and I buy
the onions and make
a spring onion soup;

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and my heart flies
light as a bird across
the far seas to salute
a strange woman in a
legendary country –
and I know she is also making
a soup of the first
spring onions that very minute,
a soup for us to share
with all good people
everywhere.