

Preserves

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This fall, it seems the world is ending, but gardens are producing like mad. I become obsessed with using up fruits and vegetables. I get an adrenaline rush at the farmers market. There are ten-pound cabbages, pumpkins as big around as truck tires—last week, three dollars, this week, two. My heart beats fast. What will happen to these giants? What can be done to make them last?

I do my best. I get a food processor. I take home buckets of squash and tomatoes and make soup and salsa to freeze.

I remind myself that grocery stores exist. When the harvest ends, I can still get produce. But instinct is stronger than reason. I go to the wine shop to pick up a couple of bottles and end up with a bag of eggplant and radishes from the shop owner's CSA share. Overwhelmed, he's displayed his excess vegetables on the back counter with a sign that says PLEASE TAKE.

I fill a paper bag so full I can hardly carry it. It tears as I haul it into my apartment, spilling purple and red into the hallway.

My dad texts asking if I want some apples. I say sure. He comes over to drop them off, and when I buzz him in, I realize he meant a *lot* of apples—two

grocery bags, one paper, one plastic, both full to the top. He tells me they're Haralson apples from a colleague's family orchard, that the break room has been overflowing with them. I set the heavy bags on the counter and we chat. He brings up the latest mass shooting.

I ask him the question I've been asking everyone older than me: Do you think the world is getting worse?

He doesn't say yes or no, but he talks about being a kid and expecting a bomb to blow up his school at any moment. He says he remembers crouching under his desk during fallout drills, hands over his head. He remembers murders. John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr.—the sudden announcements on TV news.

"But this semi-automatic weapons stuff—that's new." He shakes his head. "Guys firing a bazillion rounds a minute into concert crowds—that's new."

"God." He tears up now. "I keep thinking about how easily that could happen to you or your sister."

Every year, my dad and his college buddy Stenz go Christmas shopping together at the Mall of America. They don't want to do it this year. Stenz thinks it's a soft target—the biggest mall in the country, the holiday crowds. They'll go to Rosedale instead, or the Burnsville Center.

When my dad leaves, I fill a sink with water, wash the apples, and set them out to dry. By now, most of my counter space is taken up with produce. I wonder if all this stockpiling is a physiological response to danger, if this level of national anxiety is altering us down to our cells.

The body braces itself, just not always for the right disaster.

Still, I'm moved by the resplendent harvest, how, even now, the land is flamboyantly generous.

I decide to get serious about food preservation. My friend Carolynn says we can borrow canning supplies from her sister. We drive to Brooklyn Park on a crisp October morning, and when we get to her sister's house, there's a huge speckled pot waiting for us on the front stoop. We heft it into my trunk and lift the lid. Inside, there's a round metal rack, sturdy funnel, jar lifter, and tongs.

I've never canned before. Carolynn has once, but under supervision. We decide to start with something simple: applesauce. We stop by the store for a twelve-pack of Mason jars, and on the drive back to Carolynn's apartment, we admit that it feels like we're preparing for the end of the world.

Carolynn lives in the attic of a house on the West Side of St. Paul. The place feels like a folktale with its pale-pink walls and slanted ceilings, gable window and rocking chair. The kitchen is spacious, but the bathroom is the size of a stall in an airplane. When you sit on the toilet, your knees press against the door.

We sit at Carolynn's kitchen table, each of us with a knife and cutting board, and fill three mixing bowls with apple chunks. We argue over whether to leave the skin on.

We transfer the apples into two dutch ovens with unmeasured amounts of maple syrup, orange zest, cinnamon, lemon, and ginger. While the apples simmer, we research the canning process. I browse the internet for step-by-step instructions and copy them into my notebook. I'm a decent cook, but this is advanced-level kitchenry—so many ways to go wrong.

Every online manual warns of botulism—that home ec topic of nightmares, that slide show with the bulging can of corn—something so humdrum changed into a raging mutant.

“What if we give people botulism?” I ask.

Carolynn stirs the applesauce. She's wearing a black T-shirt printed with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I. The queen's face is spattered with bits of cooked apple.

“We have to keep everything super sterile,” says Carolynn.

We scrub the table and counters and sinks. I wash my hands until my cuticles sting. We wait. The kitchen windows fog. The apples cook down smooth and sweet. We taste the applesauce, add a slug of maple syrup, taste it again.

I open the package of Mason jars and remove the rings and lids. These I sanitize in a saucepan of boiling water. We have something on every burner now: the big canning pot, the bubbling applesauce, two saucepans for sterilizing tools.

Carolynn heats water in the canning pot and sets the jars on the rack—twelve in a circle, as if they're holding council. We wish the jars luck and lower them into hot water.

I drag the kitchen table, draped with dishtowels, close to the stove. We're ready. She lifts the rack out of the water by its handles, and when the glass jars crest the surface, shiny and steaming, they look like a trove of jewels dredged up from a shipwreck.

We work in focused silence.Carolynn uses the jar lifter—a wide forceps with nonslip grip coating—to pull the jars one at a time from the rack. I fit the funnel over each jar and ladle in the applesauce, then, with the tongs, fish a lid and ring from the saucepan.

I balance the lid, that smooth metal disc, on the mouth of each jar, and center the screw-on ring over it. Carolynn tightens the ring, then puts the filled jars back on the rack in the canning pot.

We get through three jars, and she pauses. "Oh, no."

I stop mid-ladle. "What?"

"We haven't been wiping the rims."

I frown at the sheet of notebook paper where I've written the instructions.

Step 5: Clean rim and threads of jar with damp cloth.

She peers into the pot. "They might not seal."

I picture pints of applesauce down the garbage disposal, wasted. "Can we take them out and do it over?"

Carolynn's not sure, and my notes say nothing about whether it's safe to open up and re-lid jars once they're back in the water.

I google it. I think it's fine.

She lifts the three mess-ups out of the canning pot, twists off the rings and pries off the lids. I see no obvious apple residue, but I run a paper towel firmly over the lip, and around the spiraled threading.

We put the three jars back in the canning pot and fill the rest quickly, developing a rhythm.

Fill, wipe, lid, ring, twist, put back in pot.

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Soon we can talk while filling jars without messing up the flow. We brainstorm future things to can. Jam, spaghetti sauce, curry paste—I could start

canning my salsa instead of freezing it in ugly plastic yogurt containers.

“We have a survival skill,” I say tentatively.

Carolynn wields the jar lifter. “We’re ready for the apocalypse.”

She tells me about someone she knows who cans whole chickens. “We’ll can rabbits!” I shriek. “Squirrels!”

Both of us picture a whole canned squirrel looking out at us from a jar, like the formaldehyde-preserved specimens at the natural history museum.

We’ll start an underground bunker, and if our boyfriends are nice, they can shelter there, too.

In the TV series *Doomsday Preppers*, every episode profiles three people getting ready for the kind of event that could wipe out civilization. Some fear economic collapse, others the realignment of earth’s magnetic field. Each episode has at least one gun nut stockpiling weapons to protect himself from future intruders, and one friendly hippie with a cider press, planning to preserve enough food to feed her whole neighborhood.

Secretly I fear that the nice hippie preppers are less likely to survive a disaster, but I root for them anyway.

When all twelve jars have been filled, lidded, and returned to the rack, we submerge them and bring the water to a boil. After ten minutes, we lift the rack to the surface, the jars of applesauce clinking together musically. We carry them with the jar lifter to a beach towel we’ve spread in the living room. They look so wholesome and clean lined up on the towel, but what if they don’t turn out? What if they’re infected with horrible pathogens?

I review my handwritten canning notes, now crumpled and smeared with apple guts. “It says to give them twelve hours, but that the jars may seal before then.” I look at the other side of the paper, though I’ve written nothing there.

Carolynn’s gone into the tiny bathroom.

“How do we know when they’re ready?” I call through the door.

I want to succeed at this. I want to hold the earth’s goodness in my hand, preserved—a half-pint of vacuum-sealed mercy.

