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The Cold Soup Dedication

By: Robby Badgley

*Dedicated to Cornelio's shitty gazpacho,
and the lovely woman who served me it
for the last six years of my life.*

That's the dedication on the first page of Martin Lenali's fantastic autobiography 'A Life Through Wiser Eyes'. I've never been much of a reader, but when I heard that Martin had written a book I read it cover to cover in three nights. Imagine my surprise when he had made the dedication out to me, just the waitress at the smallest, jankiest Italian joint in all Manhattan. I'm not much of a writer, either. I still can't figure out why Zealous Publishing came to me and asked for me to write this preface for his autobiography.

My name is Julia Hess, and for about eight and a half years I've worked at Cornelio's Ristorante in Manhattan, ever since my junior year of high school. Almost every day Martin would come in around two in the afternoon and have a Guinness and a bowl of gazpacho soup.

Gazpacho is basically cold tomato soup, with some extra vegetables and spices added in. It was by far the least popular thing on the menu. One of the odd things about Martin was that he genuinely hated that cold soup, yet he ate it every day. Every. Day.

He never sat in the same seat two days in a row, he instead rotated between two or three different spots. The booth in the corner "Where an antique photo of some who-cares Italian family watched the dust encase their glass prison," (his words, not mine) the table not nearest to the window, but a bit off to the side, that "Has a wonderful view as the other table and is a bit more conspicuous for people-watching, but requires just enough effort to be off putting to the casual people observer." And finally, the smallest table, centered in the middle of the restaurant. It had just one chair and the tablecloth draped far lower than on any of the other tables.

"This table's my favorite," he'd always tell me. "I can relate to it."

The first day I met Martin was also my first day on the job. Cornelio was showing me how to balance the trays of dishes without dropping anything. Empty bowls and upturned plastic cups teetered on my left forearm as I struggled to pour a glass with my right hand. Water was getting all over the table, and Cornelio, being the jolly and wonderful man he was, decided to mock me instead of helping me out. The little bell by the door rang, and a short, wide man waddled his way to the corner table. His hair was fighting a battle he would lose over the years, but the moustache under his bulbous nose never wavered.

"Cornelio, Gimme some-a your god-awful soup," He opened with.

"You love it and you know it, you tasteless mutt." My employer replied.

"Who're you?" Martin seemed to be almost taken aback by the presence of something unfamiliar. He studied me through his thick glasses for a moment, then continued making his way to the booth without giving me a chance to answer. Cornelio had already gone through the swinging doors (which only swung one way if you didn't want to break anything) to get the soup. I decided it probably was for the best that I didn't answer him, and continued dropping trays and swearing under my breath.

He always ate his soup the same way. After so many years of just watching it I could teach a college level soup eating class. Contemplative Broths and Stews 102 with Professor Hess. He'd start by unwrapping the napkin slowly from around the cutlery. He'd stir it around for a minute and look miserable. His first sip was always the longest. He would fight to get the spoon past his lips. He'd then steadily down spoonful after spoonful until the bowl was about half empty, then he'd put it down and just stare at it. He looked as though he was searching for answers in the bowl, almost as if he was waiting for a bunch of alphabet spaghetti-o's to spell out something for him.

Ricardo, a cook who was a few years older than I, told me one day that Martin couldn't taste anything, and that it was all a show. At the time I was dumb enough to fall for it, so one day I sprinkled some brown sugar into the soup before taking it out, and he ate the whole thing as if nothing had changed. Every day for about two months I put different foods in, and each day he'd eat it. I eventually ran out of new things in the restaurant and brought stuff from home. I stopped one day when Martin's entrance was "Cornelio, soup, hold the baking soda and cinnamon this time, you've made some awful soup but yesterday's was uniquely horrific."

About a year had gone by when my plans of going off to college fell by the wayside. My mother died and my father turned to drinking to cope. We had never been rich but we'd at least been happy, my parents, brother and I. Cornelio and Ricardo basically became family to me at this time, they even let my brother and I sleep in the booths if our father returned especially drunk. I'd never really thought about it but having someone so reliably walk in was very comforting.

We had gotten to know each other, Martin and I, at least a little bit. As the years went on I even developed a sense of where he was going to sit on a given day. I was usually right, too. We had broken into a routine, Martin would walk in shortly after two, greet Cornelio, insult the soup in a creative way. I'd give him the menu, just as a joke, but if I forgot he'd demand to see it.

"New Menus? Cornelio! Where's the Gazpacho?" I remember his outrage when Cornelio thought the menus needed to look new. Quite possibly to accompany the new moustache he was so proud of at the time. I thought it looked like a wet mouse.

"It ain't on there, but don't worry, you'll get your soup."

After he pretended to read through the menu, he'd order the soup, eat it the way he always had. I'd walk up to him as he paused halfway through the bowl. "Why do you eat it if you don't like it?" his answer was always different. I wrote a few of the better ones down so I wouldn't forget. "The beer I drink to forget, the soup I eat to give me something to forget." "To remind myself that even a chef with so little skill as Cornelio can almost make it in the city." "It's food for the soul, it tastes awful but you feel truly fulfilled at the bottom of the bowl." "If I don't lose a bet." And my personal favorite, "I'm just trying to make it in this life as a vegan vampire."

I'll never forget the first day he didn't come in. It was a week, actually. And the day before his absence he left his bowl half empty. Cornelio told me not to worry, he'd be back soon enough. And he did reappear with a tan some time later. He always told me the stories of these spontaneous vacations, which he talks about a bit in chapters thirteen and twenty-four.

He would just up and leave sometimes, and I think he told me why one day when he told me why he ate that terrible gazpacho.

"Routine is the antithesis of adventure, Julia. Don't let yourself fall into the same thing day after tedious day, remember to live your life. I eat this soup to remind myself of how much I hate routine. Every day I stare at this bowl and think to myself: I have two choices. I can finish this bowl of liquid garbage or I can do something I've never done before. Trust me, if anything can make you want to get out of this city, it's Cornelio's soup."

We didn't hear about his death for about a week and a half. Ricardo ran in on his day off, newspaper in a cold, snow coated hand. I remember that he was cold because he had forgotten to put on his coat, and instead carried it over his arm the entire way from his hand. He pointed out the obituary. We closed the restaurant for the night and drank around the smallest table telling our favorite stories about Martin. It was always sad when two o' clock came around. Cornelio and I began eating soup at that time. I tried to stomach the gazpacho but I ended up just bringing cans of chicken noodle to work.

A customer came in one day and asked if this was the restaurant from a book titled 'A Life Through Wiser Eyes'. We had never heard of it, but then they said it was an autobiography gaining a lot of attention written by Martin Lenali. I ran to get two copies from a magazine shop and Cornelio and I spent the rest of the day reading. He skipped immediately to the chapter called "Cornelio's soup." He was a very loud reader, not that he read aloud, but his laughter and objections could be heard (and enjoyed) across the restaurant.

Martin Lenali found meaning in even the dullest things, like bad soup. His philosophy on life is inspirational, and his perspective and writing is always fun and enjoyable. While it's nice to have a chapter about his time at Cornelio's, my personal favorite is the one on his mid-life crisis and the boat. He was a lot of things, kind, strange, spontaneous, yet ordinary. To me, none of his bizarre traits compare to his dedication to cold soup.