

A hand in a blue ribbed sweater sleeve holds a white ceramic lid over a white ceramic pot. The pot is filled with a light-colored soup, and steam is rising from it. A wooden spoon is inside the pot. The pot sits on a folded light-colored cloth. The background is dark.

*AN ODE TO SOUP AND ITS
MAGIC POWERS*

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It was 1°C and raining, and I was walking home from work. It had been a particularly hard day. My hot tears were blending with the icy deluge, taking most of my mascara with them as they leaked down my face. I crawled into my flat, peeling off my damp coat and wringing the sleet out of my hair – then I smelled it. The soft sweet scent of butternut squash, peppered with the tang of chilli and sharpness of lime. The Frenchman was making me soup. There was a loaf of bread sat on the counter top, still steaming. We filled our bowls to the brim, then sat snuggled in our warmest blankets, by the window, watching the rain drown the city. Somehow, the day was saved.

I don't think there is a more comforting food than soup, in all its forms. Chicken soup is for the soul, so the saying goes, but vegetables can also do a great job at filling you up with warmth and goodness. A hot bowl of soup is a tight hug by a bonfire, a shared joke over a cup of tea, pulling on your cosiest jumper, that moment you finally lower yourself into a bath simmering with lavender oil.

It has become a tradition, since that tearful grey day in our tiny flat, to cook up a steaming pot of soup when one of us is feeling particularly down. It's the first tradition that we've had that's just for us, a shared wintertime secret, the magic cure to

a bad day. There is something about methodically chopping vegetables that makes me forget the world, and standing over the hob stirring my cauldron of goodness makes me feel like an apprentice witch in her snow-coated cottage in the woods, brewing up some magic potion that will make everything Better Again.

My favourite soup to conjure is a black bean and tomato number, flavoured with chilli flakes and thyme. It has the perfect kick, and warms you up on the coldest of days. The Frenchman's favourite is a roasted red pepper and sweet potato soup, silky smooth with a spark of ginger. Sometimes, if we've got the time, we grab the flour and knead a soft loaf of bread into existence, ready to be slathered in butter and sprinkled with flaky salt. We can often make our way through a whole loaf between the two of us, tearing off little chunks to mop up every last drop. Afterwards, we lounge, overstuffed like teddy bears and warm all the way down to our toes. It feels, just slightly, like nothing will ever be cold or bad or stressful again. As the winter months draw closer again and the air starts to cool, I feel myself getting excited to carry on our little tradition for another year. Even with what may be to come this winter, hopefully the comfort that cooking soup brings can get us through the cold and the darkness, and keep us hopeful for the spring.