

Standing next to the stainless steel table in the milkhouse, turning the crank on the little, compact cream separator, I have about twenty minutes just tied to that handle. It is time for thought.

What goes through my mind during this morning routine could be called “stream of consciousness,” I suppose. I am alone, I can’t leave the job even for a minute, and it could get a little tiresome just watching the two spouts of the separator, the larger one discharging a frothy, splashy stream of skim milk while the petite tube nearby sends forth a thin, golden ribbon of rich cream.

But, thinking time can take a person on a long journey, recall a happy moment or an old grievance, or explore anything from personal interests to worries about the world.

Most frequently, I seem to use this time to think about books. Sometimes, I am mentally still in the story of whatever I have been reading. In this case, it was a novel by Margaret Atwood that, like many of her books, is somewhat prophetic. It certainly was dystopian. But, what was running through my mind as I stood there turning that crank was admiration for how she could infuse an awful story with humor, joy, and sympathy.

But, other things intervened. The stream of cream reminded me that I would have to churn later in the day—not this cream, but yesterday’s and that of the day before. Two quart jars and two smaller ones in the refrigerator were waiting for beaters to turn their contents from ivory liquid to firm, yellow butter.

And thinking about butter led me to musing about what I might make with that most useful food. Some of it, of course, ends up in the butter dish on the table at meals. And some finds its way into the customary baked goods that help sustain us—bread, rolls, cookies, and cakes. Most, though, goes first to the freezer where it stays until we need it. We always hope to have enough frozen butter to last during the winter when we don’t usually milk a cow.

This time, though, I began to think about croissants. I had not made any of these flaky crescents in a long time. Maybe, butter being so plentiful this summer, today should be the day to assign some of the day’s churning to croissants.

The first churning resulted in almost precisely a pound of golden butter. That was exactly what I needed for a batch of croissants. So, I made that butter into a flat, rectangular pad and refrigerated it. And there it is today waiting for its coating of dough

and further rolling and turning.

But, while I was turning the separator, I didn't dwell on croissants very long. Other thoughts intervened. There was a big bowl of fresh strawberries waiting in the refrigerator, and it occurred to me that shortcake biscuits were a lot quicker to make using heavy cream instead of butter. I put that task on my mental agenda.

And, finally, as the warm milk in the separator basin flowed down through the machine, I came back to the present, and as the last cupful disappeared down the drain in the basin, I stopped turning the crank and let the separator wind down on its own. The milk stopped abruptly, the cream drizzled a bit and then ceased to flow. The morning task was finished.