

Mervyn Kaufman
305 West 86th Street
New York, NY 10024
m.kaufman9@gmail.com
212-724-2457

ASPARAGUS, short fiction (4,390 words)

Asparagus. Moira frowned at first as she examined the stalks. But in her supermarket's display, they were bound in neatly beribboned bunches and were not those fat spears that often seemed so stringy, but skinny ones that drooped a bit near their narrow tips and usually proved tender and sweet. If she bought them, for four-ninety-nine a pound—which may or may not have been an especially good buy—she could build that evening's meal around them. She pondered a moment, fingering a few bunches. Not yet convinced, she decided to simply remember and consider them, then responded to an urge to move on.

Old friends Morgan and Diana were dropping by for a midweek meal that evening, a hosting event for Leo and Moira. She was a seasoned cook whose kitchen was sensibly laid out and efficiently stocked, and her culinary skills had been honed from years of meal-making for her family and also, occasionally, for long-time friends. Despite years of experience, cooking was not among Moira's singular interests or, for that matter, strong suits either. For one thing, her cookbooks and recipe files were downstairs, the volumes stacked neatly, by author, on one shelf of the spindly storage rack she and Leo had acquired at that yard sale down the street and then juggled between them, one in front of the other, in the only way they knew to haul their

purchase home: on foot. But then, alas, it proved too wide to tuck between those windows on the far wall of their living room. So downstairs it had gone, crowding the singularly narrow corridor that led to the basement's utility area, with its washer and dryer and that squishy padded mat Moira and Leo had purchased online to define a fitness area that, for a time, each of them used and then abandoned, without regret.

Moira liked thumbing through cookbooks and those magazines that promoted the recipes, menus, and privileged culinary secrets so artfully nudged from innovative cooks. But mostly she preferred preparing the dishes she could already make; the idea of leaning over an open book creased and weighted down by a can of beans or a full jam jar held no appeal. Maybe that's why she and Leo each resorted so often to deli food and take-out dishes from local ethnic restaurants. He had never expressed displeasure at anything Moira chose to prepare, whenever she decided to cook, but it was clear that many of their restaurant visits and home-delivered adventures were the result of his desire to expand their culinary horizons, something Moira herself was hardly equipped or eager to do on her own.

Today, she had been thinking about steak, which was unusual, because she and Leo had made a point, years ago, of shunning beef as much as they could. Back home, of course, when she was growing up, her family's evening fare was routinely topped by roast beef or chicken, leg of lamb or broiled calves' liver, and, on some rare occasions, steak. But the latter had ceased being served at all, soon after Grandma Norris had arrived and taken over the spare room. It wasn't that steak was so costly then, but that the family's new addition had immediately pronounced it "too hard to cut, impossible to

chew." So, from the day she moved in, after Grandpa's achingly long demise, dinner menus were invariably shaped by the particular foods Grandma liked and could deal with successfully. Steak never made the cut.

Years later, Moira's grandmother's passing prompted her mom to become a somewhat more adventurous meal-maker, but by then Moira was away at school, so her mother's later culinary excursions were experienced only during occasional home visits and, of course, at special family events. Her mom preferred working alone in her kitchen and, as she always insisted, it was definitely *her* kitchen, equipped the way *she* wanted it to be, with everything arranged and stashed according to *her* particular cooking needs and preferences.

Moira felt much the same way, though she was hardly militant about the privacy she craved when at work in her space. But it was made clear to Leo, as to anyone who ever visited, that, though access to it was not blocked by a door or a gate, her kitchen was a virtual no-trespassing zone that few people wished or were invited to violate. In truth, though, she entertained only when pressed—and mainly by her own compelling need to reciprocate, not to compete, of course. There were close friends for whom entertaining at home was a predictably special dining occasion, each featuring adventurous dishes that combined exotic ingredients in extraordinarily heady ways. Moira knew she could never perform at that level; nor did she ever wish to. She wanted to be known, and recognized, as being generous of spirit and sensitive of nature, but she harbored no desire to be involved in any culinary rivalry, if that should ever exist.

Now she eyed the potatoes, all stacked ends up, like nubbly spikes, in a pair of wood barrels. That arrangement was so impressive—would it be compromised if she were to extract four choice specimens and drop them into her cart? But wasn't that the point, of course? Wasn't the purpose of this display to nudge shoppers to purchase potatoes and do something singularly creative with them at home? If not, wouldn't these tubers have been simply tossed in a bin somewhere, out of the way, rather than accorded a spotlight near the front of the store's vast produce section?

She picked out four specimens—hearty looking though not formidably huge. But even as she dropped them into her shopping cart, she began wondering if, after baking, they could be perked up a bit with some tangy sauce or a seasoned butter mixture—she'd go online later to see if either were possible. Routine was one thing, but mundane would send an undesirably different message. And what, ideally, should that evening's message be? That she and Leo were delighted to have Morgan and Diana as guests in their home again and wanted to make sure they felt welcome, comfortable, and satisfied? Or was it that this couple hadn't been heard from in months, and Moira was beginning to wonder if she and Leo had somehow fallen out of favor. And, if that were so, might others among their rather select inner circle also withdraw or perhaps consider doing so? Moira didn't think she actually *needed* people around her but for years, of course, had felt reasonably secure knowing that a clutch of couples *had* remained close, over time, like a coolly extended family. Now they were all empty-nesters, like herself and Leo, their offspring either away at school or in jobs or

relationships that took them far afield from the homes where they had known and grown up.

Of course, through the years, there *had* been stresses: divorces, separations, disappointments, whispers of infidelity, murmurings of disapproval. The choices each couple had made often did seem baffling but were always accepted, ultimately, without demurrals. No one ever sought to rock the boat. Still, there were memories that could not be easily dimmed or erased—wine and hard liquor and sometimes dope had, over time, made an impact, exposing truths and tragedies that most families would have wished to muffle or avert. But somehow, despite all that had occurred and been spoken about, most friendships had endured. Each couple seemed, publicly at least, to respect the others' tastes and choices. What might have been whispered about behind closed doors or spoken of darkly, late at night, in a car heading homeward or in bed sometime later, was never shared. Whatever people knew, suspected, disdained, or wished for was never overtly aired. Outward bonhomie was always sustained, thus fiercely respected.

Are we boring, Leo and I? she wondered, some months back, then shrugged off the notion. She felt content that the people she knew, those close friendships she valued at all, were unthreatening and supportive. Over time, she felt certain, there had been no covert sharing of door keys or whispers of late-afternoon trysts. Whatever was happening, of an intimate nature, among the couples she knew, would have, predictably, occurred behind closed doors—their own, to be sure.

Now she found herself drawn back to that asparagus display. It featured an appealing pileup of freshly harvested specimens, to which a uniformed clerk had just added more. Moira didn't know how much a pound would feed, or if the stated price was fair, but considering that there would be four of them at dinner, she found herself picking out twenty desirable spears, five for each of them—which meant all of one bunch plus half of another. That would be about right, she felt. People rarely requested second helpings of veggies, no matter how imaginatively prepared, and she had long grown weary of tossing out leftovers that had somehow been pushed to the back of the fridge and left there, unnoticed and mostly forgotten, for too many days.

Twenty spears was slightly more than a pound, but that didn't matter. What did, of course, was the sense of balance she would sustain—not too much or too little. Did she need a second veggie? Or should she serve a salad instead? She rather liked the idea of the latter—which she always enjoyed assembling, for it was something she felt comfortable being creative about. But what kind of salad? She would consider that later, when inventorying her fridge. She still needed to deal with her evening's main dish.

The idea of steak kept reasserting its appeal to her, mainly because it seemed so simple. Though this mid-spring evening might still be too chilly for Leo to fire up the grille on their earthy, used-brick patio, as he did for most of their summertime dinners, steaks could be cooked just as quickly indoors, each one prepared according to the wishes of the diner. Leo liked meat rare, for example, and usually managed to cook his own, whether in the kitchen's gas broiler or that charcoal-fired grille out back. Moira, on the other hand, since childhood, had preferred well-done meat, though, as a cook,

remaining open to medium-rare or medium-well for anyone who felt a need to express such preferences. Cooking steaks was less challenging for her than a standing roast or a Christmas duckling. She would make the steaks special by their selection—lean, with scant rivers of fat, and not threateningly thick. She had acquired her late mother's pearl-handled steak knives, which always won praise when she remembered to bring them out.

What about vegetarians? Was there anyone in her group who shunned meat and poultry, or even fish? She didn't think so but acknowledged, without comment, that people's dietary habits often did change over time, particularly those who had acquired threatening health issues. Although she didn't fancy herself pandering to individual dietary crotchets, she did feel that being insensitive to the food concerns any close friend might have, or have acquired, would be considered thoughtless and rude. So, perhaps then, adding another vegetable tonight would be wise and safe. But which one? Then she reminded herself that there were a few remaining packets of fresh-frozen peas at home, in her freezer. She could defrost, then mix them with sliced fresh mushrooms and toss them with butter, thus creating an excellent back-up dish. Mushrooms were special-priced that day. She dropped a small container into her shopping cart and moved on.

A year earlier, her local supermarket had made room for a creative florist whose displays now absorbed a whole corner of the store's front section. There were plants, too, of course, but mainly artful arrangements of fresh-cut flowers in appealingly painted containers. She found herself attracted to a clutch of pale mums that had

obviously just begun to bloom, thus might have an extended life well beyond that evening's presentation. She scooped them up carefully and laid them into the shallow wire shelf at the back of her shopping cart.

Moving on, she spent a long time in the meat department, selecting four steaks of similar size and heft, each one richly colored and with only occasional streaks of fat. Good choices, she felt. She didn't even check the price when the butcher slid them off the scale, mindful that each would be the centerpiece of a meal she knew her guests would find hearty, if not essentially memorable.

What was left? Well, Leo would serve the wine, of course. That morning, he had indicated the choices he was prepared to share with their guests that evening: mild reds and whites with only traces of acid, imported, of course—never domestic. The idea of serving wine pressed from grapes grown locally or relatively nearby seemed rather, well, short-sighted and not especially imaginative. And, of course, he would also take charge of the coffee. He had become a coffee fanatic some years back after complaining grumpily that the hot beverage served whenever he and Moira dined in the homes of friends or relatives was invariably bitter or bland. And, being a perennial student, her spouse had become immersed in coffee-making lore, schooling himself in ways to select and blend and, in particular, measure amounts carefully.

It made her cluck her tongue and shake her head a bit when recalling that, at a recent dinner party, Leo had pushed back his chair and tiptoed into the kitchen right after polishing off his entree. His hostess, just then popping a load into her dishwasher, had been startled to see him, of course, and barely smiled when he announced that he

had come to make the coffee. "The water must be fresh and cold, you know—preferably filtered. And," he insisted, "I always measure the water as well as the coffee, according to the number of servings I need to make. There *is* an essential equation."

At this point, the evening's hostess—it was either Edna or Georgette, Moira couldn't remember which—apparently nodded her head, reached for a can on a high kitchen shelf, cranked it open, and began shoveling ground coffee into the top of a timeworn coffeepot. "No, no, it really needs to be apportioned properly," Leo had said. "You mean like this, Leo?" she replied, shaking the pot meaningfully. Then ignoring him, his hostess had quickly filled the appliance with water from the tap, without taking a moment to measure it, cup by cup, and smiling at last, as she plunked the appliance onto her stove and turned the knob to release a flame. At this point, Leo had had no choice but to withdraw from the kitchen and reenter the dining room. Moira couldn't remember if he had even sipped any coffee that evening, but she did recall his sinking into sullen silence upon returning to the table after visiting their hostess's kitchen.

What about dessert? Moira wondered now, then remembered that Diana had promised to make something special with the berries she'd stored after harvesting her late-summer garden, a section of her yard that had expanded measurably over the years—those times when she was prudently picking and canning. Then it had shrunk quite a bit after the zucchini experiment, which had had all their friends chortling, mainly among themselves but even including Diana herself, eventually.

It seems that one early summer Sunday, Diana had directed her husband to dig up a slender rectangle of lawn near their yard's back fence, then turn the soil under, once and once again, after she had sprinkled what her nurseryman, Evan, had assured her was fertilizer with nearly magical growth properties. There, in that special patch, she had planted zucchini seedlings—eighteen of them, she boasted—distancing one from the other according to Evan's careful instructions. Within weeks, she was literally overrun—harvesting more long, thick zucchinis than she or anyone she knew could ever want to acquire or cook. Week after week, through much of that summer, she would stop by her friends' and neighbors' homes, at first urging, then ultimately pleading with them to take some or all the zucchinis she had brought to their backdoor. The next year, that veggie bed had been planted entirely with nasturtium seedlings—though, in later years, herbs, berries, and a few legumes would be added—and neither she nor any of her friends ever uttered the word "zucchini" again. And anyone serving that particular vegetable to family or friends in their community would have been risking reprimand or ridicule.

A young man in a freshly pressed smock was assisting the cashier when Moira joined the queue at the checkout. He smiled and wished her a good day after he had deftly packed her purchases in tall sacks and loaded them into her cart. She paused as she rolled it away from the counter, then, after a moment, impulsively aimed the cart away from the exit doors and back toward the produce section. Barely slowing her stride, she impulsively scooped up another whole bunch of asparagus—how could she

be sure to apportion just five as she served each diner? And what if she didn't? What if one of them happened to get six or even seven spears? Someone would ultimately be shortchanged. It seemed a minor concern, but one that had begun to gnaw at her as she moved about. Moira would never want to appear ungenerous, not to old friends and certainly not where farm-fresh asparagus was the focus.

As she paused there a moment—not only beside the asparagus display but also near piles of bunched carrots and rhubarb and not far from stack-ups of just-harvested apples—another concern flashed across her face. It was trouble enough to concoct a dinner party for two guests, but little more if just two more were included. And the obvious choices would have been Reba and Phil, who lived down the street from Morgan and Diana, thus, presumably, could be considered among their nearest friends. That couple would certainly hear about the evening she and Leo had shared with Morgan and Diana and perhaps wonder why they, too, had not been included.

In truth, Moira had never cottoned to Reba, whose tastes extended to the exotic and whose language was frequently peppered with publicly uttered words best left to whispered musings or men's-club bravado. Years earlier, Reba had loudly opined that a certain signed watercolor one of her friends had just haggled over at a local art fair was "certifiable shit." It was a judgment others might, too, have shared discreetly, if queried, but would not have considered expressing openly. Moira had recalled seeing the artwork in question—on the new owner's wall and, earlier, of course, on display at the fair—though she retained no clear memory of what it looked like or why it had aroused

such coarse disapproval. But she certainly did remember what Reba had said, the judgment of a forthright woman not to be trifled with or compromised.

Moira squinted as she stood there, trying to recall if Reba and Phil had ever been guests in her home. Probably not, she concluded, and if not, this might not be the most appropriate or acceptable way to establish or renew a relationship. "Why us? Why now?" they might well wonder. And since Reba and her spouse were presumably close with Diana and Morgan, the evening's conversations might well favor *their* mutual relationships and shared experiences, to the exclusion of hers and Leo's. Besides, she reminded herself, Phil had once been described, by none other than her own occasionally outspoken spouse, as "a colossal screw-up," in a rash pronouncement while pulling up his boxers as he exited their bathroom. It was a judgment she might have agreed with then, as now, recalling the chaotic and only marginally profitable book fair Phil had once organized to benefit their church. But, of course, she would never have expressed her feelings in that fashion. Mentally reviewing these factors, Moira felt free to move ahead on plans unaltered by concern or circumstance: Diana and Morgan would be her only dinner guests that evening.

Now she carried the additional fresh-asparagus packet to the Express Checkout, where a harried clerk placed the purchase in a paper sack and nearly dropped it behind the counter before setting it into the waiting cart. Moira handed the young cashier a few bills, almost without thinking, and quickly pocketed the change, relieved that she had averted what could have evolved into an embarrassing lapse that evening. So what

if there were spears left over? She could always have them for lunch, later that week, perhaps in a chilled salad, or add the chopped-off tips to a vegetable soup. What had she been thinking?

Home at last, she quickly unloaded the car and carried her purchases into the kitchen. While scrubbing the potatoes she had selected, she noticed a flashing light on her wall-mounted phone. Lifting the receiver and pushing a button, she heard a recorded message from her spouse reminding her that she had failed to take her cellphone with her when she left the house that afternoon. But why would she have bothered? She was only going to the market. However, it seems that during her absence, Leo had received an urgent call from Morgan and then dutifully shared its message with Moira, which was that Diana's mother had injured herself in a sudden fall at home and been taken to that new hospital in the town next to theirs. Morgan said he would be joining Diana there, later that day, thus neither of them would obviously be coming to Moira and Leo's house for dinner that evening and very much regretted cancelling their date at this late hour.

Leo had ended the call by urging Moira, once again, to please carry her cellphone with her, especially when she left the house to do errands. "We're getting on, you know. All of us. We're vulnerable—anything can happen, any time. . . .Anyway, I'll be home by six, as usual. Kisses." Moira was rarely disposed to keep her phone fully charged and, even when she did, only occasionally remembered to keep it with her, though not, of course, when she went food shopping or had errands to do in town. That would seem superfluous. Entirely unnecessary. Now, of course, she wondered if Leo's call had come

before, after, or during her quest for ingredients for the meal she had planned to prepare. No matter, she thought. There was nothing to be done.

She started to put her purchases away and then stopped herself. Squinting a bit and shaking her head, she wrapped the steaks in waxed paper and laid them on the top shelf of her freezer. Then she cleared the "chill" compartment in her fridge so she could store the wrapped veggies along with the fresh salad fixings she had purchased earlier from her greengrocer and set aside for this evening's event. Everything would have its place, including the flowers she had chosen, which she arranged loosely in a tall pottery vase she positioned not on the dining table but right there on the kitchen counter. Thus it would be visible to her while she preparing a meal, which, suddenly, was not at all what she wanted to do. Instead, she found herself poking through one of the shallow top drawers of a corner cabinet, pulling out the stash of takeout menus she and Leo had collected over time and referred to now and then. There were a few she had liked and always fancied—one from that Mexican restaurant near the dry cleaners', another from a Chinese place in the next town, a third one from a nearby establishment whose specialty was Southern fried chicken.

"Here, pick one," she announced to Leo, as he entered the kitchen from the garage, sometime later. "I don't care which—whatever you want. And I'm sure what you choose will be just fine. Later, I'll call Diana, of course, and maybe we'll visit the hospital, if she says we should. But, right now I'm so hungry I could eat practically anything. So, please—you decide the where and what, dear, then phone in the order. Okay?"

Leo looked a bit nonplused but nodded obligingly, scratching his head as he leafed through the clutch of menus she handed him, then fished in his pocket for his second pair of reading glasses, which he must have left in the car. Hefting his jacket over one shoulder, he headed toward his home office, that ten-by-ten-foot extension they had added to the far end of their bedroom, two years earlier, when Leo first began contemplating, though not yet initiating, retirement. After a moment, she heard his voice, but not his words, as he phoned in his dinner selections. She knew he wouldn't tell her what he had ordered, when he returned to the kitchen briefly, nor would she have wanted him to. She knew how much he enjoyed surprising her with his choices.

In the moment before turning back toward the door leading to their garage, Leo paused and nodded. A look of sympathy flashed across his face before he retreated. He had thought to console Moira, in some deft way—to say something positive and reassuring about the collapse of their dinner plans, unaware that it was not abandonment or disappointment she felt, at that moment, but penetrating pangs of relief. Moments later, she heard his car start up again and watched, through her large kitchen window, as it twisted down the driveway, its signal lights blinking boldly in the gathering darkness upon reaching the street, before turning east.

Moira's mounting hunger elicited a growl from her stomach, prompting her to poke back into her fridge for something to dull those pangs. Immediately, she found herself focused on that batch of asparagus she had stored there earlier. Unfolding the wrapping, she extracted two hardy specimens and consumed them right there, where she stood, before carefully re-wrapping and refrigerating the remaining spears. Now she

sat down wearily, resting her elbows on the broad kitchen table, which had been custom-built for the space years ago, and folding her hands neatly in front of her.

Then, for the very first time that day, she smiled.

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