

Noodles

Cavemen cooked on a sharpened spit over a sputtering fire, so George wondered how his life had evolved to include so many kitchen utensils. A simple fork or spoon sufficed for most meals. He turned a slow circle in the kitchen and then pulled open the drawer beside the sink. Salad tongs lay behind the tray holding silverware spooning in dividers cut to shape. They had rarely used the chopsticks jumbled along the side, and then only badly, before inevitably switching to forks. George shut the drawer softly.

Standing at the counter, George pulled the ceramic utensil jar forward from its designated spot beside the stove. Most kitchen implements he could not name, certainly not today, with a line on the calendar tightening like a noose around his neck. He did not care to guess the purpose of some utensils: preparing food, of course, but what food and when used, he could not say. He typically turned whatever he cooked with a table fork or coffee spoon and not infrequently burned fingers or singed hair from his arm in the process. “Silly,” Sandra had said more times than he cared to recall, “you hurt yourself again. Why don’t you use the thingamajab for that?” And then she’d kiss his palm or the impression at the base of his thumb, which probably explained why he never learned to cook with other tools.

He began to remove utensils and set them soundlessly on the counter. Some he did know, of course: the whisk, the corkscrew, the wooden spatula with a partially charred handle from the day he left it tilted from the skillet while he gathered ingredients for an omelet and walked to the stairs to holler up to ask if they were, in fact, out of eggs. They were, so the handle burned to no purpose. There were two ladles, a plastic funnel, a nutcracker, a potato masher unused for potatoes they never ate because Sandra wouldn't, a pizza cutter, measuring spoons, a basting brush always greasy no matter how often he cleaned it, and the meat tenderizer one side of which was a flat mallet and the other studded like a medieval mace. He had always wanted to use that tool and one time even hefted it and asked, "When would we use this, like on a hunk of bison or kangaroo leg?"

"Georgie, Georgie. It's for flank steak or veal," Sandra said.

"Isn't veal a baby cow starved in a crate?" he asked.

"We won't eat veal, naturally. But if we cooked flank steak, you'd use the tenderizer."

George set the mallet in the larger of two boxes on the counter. He spread the ice cream scoop, the grater, a garlic press with crusted pulp blocking most of the holes, and a vegetable peeler out on the Formica. At the bottom of the jar, he found the lemon zester that he did know and liked once Sandra explained its purpose. Today he selected a lime from the fruit basket and walked to the cutting board and began to zest the peel. Once, shortly after they had moved in together, he zested an entire bag of limes while Sandra was out shopping. He swept all the zest fragments into a pile on the counter and piled the used limes, looking like shorn sheep testicles, in a heap beside the sink. When Sandra returned, she looked quizzically from the pile of zests to the naked limes to George and raised her arms. "What? Why?"

"I thought we could make something with lemons. Something citrus."

“A dozen?” she said. “And those are limes not lemons.”

“Really, limes?” George said. “Why do we have so many limes?” He patted the zests into a heap and then pressed down on the top to make them less conspicuous. “Maybe we could cook something. You know a lot of recipes.”

“What the --” Sandra said. George thought that might be a moment when Sandra would darken into anger; instead, she burst into laughter. “Come here you lemon head, and give me a hug.”

“I really like that zester,” he said after they kissed.

“George? What are you doing?” Sandra said from the doorway now.

He hadn't heard her walk in with bare feet. She looked like what he called exasperazzled: half exasperated and half frazzled. Two steps into the kitchen, Sandra stood wearing baggy jeans and an old cream-colored knit sweater buttoned to the neck. George knew that the elbows of that sweater were worn see-through. A curl of hair had escaped Sandra's ponytail and hung across her right eye, and she had a smudge on her cheek. When Sandra spoke in that tone, George knew that exasperation could turn volcanic or the frazzle to tears. At least, that had been her way; today he had no clue.

“I was packing,” he said. “And then I zested a lemon. A lime actually.”

Sandra nodded slowly. “Now? We need everything packed by Saturday, and you're zesting a lemon?” She nodded again.

“A lime,” he said and set the zester down. He scraped the curls of citrus from the cutting board and carried them to the sink. When he looked up, Sandra was gone. George walked over to the counter and picked up the tools spread there and quickly and randomly put them into the two boxes on the counter. He paused when he picked up the wooden spaghetti server. It looked like a

giant's back scratcher with a long wooden handle and a flat head studded with dowels, two broken off into jagged teeth. He remembered the first night he had held that utensil, the evening Sandra invited him over for dinner more than two years before. They had dated for just a few weeks, working down the usual list: casual dinner and then nicer evening at a restaurant where they could order wine by name instead of color, a baseball game, twice a drink after work, a movie when they held hands the first time, and then the Saturday Sandra suggested he come over for dinner. She'd make pasta with bruschetta, which is how George knew - because he had no idea what bruschetta was - that he should bring a bottle of wine, a nice bottle.

"Why don't you open the wine?" Sandra said after she met him at the door with a quick kiss on the cheek. "Let it take a few breaths before we drink. Come to the kitchen while I finish cooking."

"Corkscrew?" George asked. He also needed a few breaths. Sandra pointed to a drawer while she slid spaghetti noodles from a box straight into a pot steaming on the stove. Sandra stirred the saucepan, adjusted the flame under a steamer and, after the wine had caught its breath, George poured, and they sipped. George idly unscrewed the cork and set it on the windowsill, red stain up. "Do you know what this part of the corkscrew is called," George asked, holding up the tool.

"The screw?"

"Good guess, but it's the worm. That's just something I remember. Maybe from my dad. He liked wine, also six packs of beer."

"I didn't know that. You're just full of surprises," Sandra said. "Not about your dad, of course, because how could I know, but about the worm." She held up the wooden tool that he

now knew was called a spaghetti server but did not know then. “Do you know what this is called?”

George looked at the implement carefully. He held out his hand, and Sandra passed it to him. He examined the handle, the flat head, and the side with the wooden pegs, all intact at that time; then he sniffed the wood. “Well, it’s not a hammer, so I’m going to say it’s a detangler. For dog hair.”

“But I don’t have a dog.”

“True. But if you get a dog - and I think you should get a dog, because you already have a detangler - she could have really straight hair.”

Sandra looked at him, squinted her eyes, and then burst into the laugh that he later came to think was the most Sandra of everything about Sandra. He had never heard that sort of laugh: one that started in her pelvis, vibrated up her chest, and then danced out with her breath, lifting her cheeks and eye brows as it expanded. “Give me that thing,” she said and walked over to him. She took the utensil from his hand, and then hugged him longer than he expected. “It’s a spaghetti server,” she said in his ear. “You should know something, Mr. George. I’m the kind of girl who owns a spaghetti server and knows how to use it. And I’m also the kind of girl that likes you.” Sandra walked back to the boiling pot and stirred the contents with the tool. George hoped that his sudden erection was not too obvious. He turned sideways to the window and straightened the cork where it had fallen over on the sill.

After what he recollected later as an awkward but portentous minute, Sandra asked, “Do you know how to tell when noodles are cooked?”

“That is a really good question, and one of the great mysteries of the universe. There have been decades of research on both sides of that question, and it turns out - as I confirmed recently - no one really knows.”

Again, that pause followed by a laugh vibrating the air between them. “You really are funny, George. Where have you been hiding all my life?”

“In the library reading joke books. Mostly.”

“Seriously, do you know?”

“Seriously, I think you’re supposed to throw a noodle against the wall. What I can never remember is if it’s ready to eat when it sticks or when it doesn’t stick.”

“Well, I don’t think it could be when it doesn’t stick, because you could throw spaghetti right out of the box, and it wouldn’t stick. And it’s usually a window, not the wall.”

George picked up a small segment of spaghetti that had escaped the pot and lay on the counter. He tossed it against the wall, and it bounced off onto the floor. “Hmm. Surprising. You’re right about that.” He quickly added, “Not surprising that you’d be right, just surprised at the experiment.” He took a sip of wine half out of embarrassment and half from realization that he had exhausted his store of verbal patter with a woman whom he suddenly wanted to find him as attractive as he found her.

“However,” Sandra continued without missing a beat, “throwing spaghetti against the wall is not the best way to tell when noodles are done, and that has been documented. It’s better to taste spaghetti, and for that a pasta server comes in handy.” She dipped the tool and deftly extracted a single limp strand of pasta from the pot. She pinched it in her fingers and then slowly sucked the noodle into her mouth, all the while looking George directly in the eyes. He lost

himself for a moment in her eyes and in the mesmerizing disappearance of the noodle between her lips. "Not ready," Sandra said. "But almost."

Two minutes later, Sandra extracted a second noodle and said, "Let's try the other way. Go over there by the cabinet." George did as instructed and looked back expectantly. George never knew if it was intentional or not, but the noodle seemed to stick to Sandra's finger or perhaps she flicked her hand sideways at the last moment. The noodle struck George in the forehead and dangled comically over his right eye to his cheek. It was hot, and he reached up reflexively to pull it off. "Don't you dare," Sandra said. "It's a noodle test."

She walked over to him and stared critically at his face, his forehead and then his eye. "No, it's not a fair test, not being a wall or window. I'll have to taste it." She leaned and slowly put her lips to his forehead. George felt her lick his eyebrow, and he felt the tip of her tongue touch his eyelid. He shut both eyes. "No, still not done," Sandra said. When he opened his eyes, he saw Sandra smiling back at him. "But very close."

Two minutes later, George took the server from Sandra and on the third try scooped a noodle from the pot. "Stand by the window," he said to Sandra. "The window is a better test." What occurred at that moment George ever after believed was a personal, verifiable and never repeated proof of the existence of God. The noodle flew from George's hand - or God's - and landed on the smooth skin of Sandra's chest in the vee of her blouse and stuck there.

She looked at him and he at her. She started to say something, and George watched her chest as the noodle slowly slipped down her left chest and disappeared. Sandra looked from her blouse to George and then leaned back against the sink and laughed lightly. George looked from her eyes to her chest. "Well," Sandra said. "Is the noodle cooked or not? I'm hungry."

"But, it's --"

“Yes, it is.” Sandra undid the top button of her blouse.

George stepped to her and carefully undid two more buttons and slowly spread her blouse. “Oh, you’re not --“

“No, I’m not.”

Maybe it was George’s fingers, perhaps again God’s, but he opened her blouse further and saw the noodle curled like a treble clef on Sandra’s left breast just above the nipple and looking startlingly white against her skin. She had a single black hair where her areola met smooth skin. George bent his head, cupped her breast in his hand, and licked the end of the noodle from her skin. The noodle was soft, but her nipple firm as he nuzzled it. Sandra’s scent - a mixture of sweat, sex and perfume - hit his face like a claw hammer.

In the morning, he awoke with Sandra lying across his right arm. A little while later without movement, Sandra awoke, and George found himself looking into her eyes. “What would you like for breakfast?” she asked.

“Noodles?”

“Are you making any progress on this crap?” Sandra said. Again, George had not heard her enter the room, but he looked up in time to see her stand on tiptoes to look into the two boxes. “Well, that’s something, but we’ll never finish at this pace. I told my girlfriends I could be over by 8 o’clock tonight. And what are you doing, exactly, George? When I walked in, you were staring at that thing in your hand like a church relic.”

“Do you remember --.”

“We can hire someone to pack us if we need to, you know.”

“No, I, I, we can do it. Your box or mine?” he said, holding up the spaghetti spoon.

Sandra looked at the wooden utensil briefly and then at George. "I don't care. The thing looks broken whatever it is." She shook her head. "You know, we can also just give all this stuff to Salvation Army or have a yard sale."

"No."

"Well, think about it. We need to be out of here by Saturday, last day of the month."

Sandra walked back out of the room. After a moment, George stirred himself, turned to the counter, and raised his arm high. He hammered the spaghetti server down toward the Formica and stopped a fraction from the surface. He pressed the handle down hard until the wood bowed. Abruptly he relaxed his arm and spun around. He held the server first over the box labeled 'George' and then the red box with 'Sandra' written in bold letters on the side. He turned like a short stop fielding a baseball behind himself and stepped to the sink cabinet, tossed the utensil into the waste bin, and clicked the cabinet shut. Looking up, he saw the reflection of his face in the window over the faucet, but displeased with the thought that he looked at what someone from outside would see peering inward at him, he turned away.

Across from the oven, he opened the cabinet containing pots and baking pans. The shelves held a jumble of colored mixing bowls, a Mickey serving tray Sandra bought at Disneyworld their first year together, and a sauce pot dented at its base from the time he heaved it onto the patio after the forgotten contents caught fire during an extra inning World Series game. George shut the cupboard and shook his head groggily side to side like the bull on a television show that had scared him as a child. At the end, the bull, sword buried to the hilt above his shoulder, staggered, turned to his left and then right still seeking something red and not yet aware that he was, in fact, already dead. George picked up his box from the counter and tucked the top flaps corner under corner in a tapeless seal, and then walked out of the kitchen. He had

his hand on the front door when he stopped. He paused for three breaths and then walked back into the kitchen. He pulled the spaghetti server from the wastebasket under the sink and then, balancing the box in one arm and holding the utensil in the other, went out the front, pulling the door shut behind him.

In his car, he set the spaghetti server in front of him above the steering wheel like a dashboard ornament. He almost didn't cry all the way home to his new and mostly empty apartment.

The End