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THE YEAR OF SPAGHETTI

1971 was the Year of Spaghetti.

In 1971 I cooked spaghetti to live, and lived to cook spaghetti. Steam rising from the aluminum pot was my pride and joy, tomato sauce bubbling up in the saucepan my one great hope in life.

I'd gone to a cooking specialty store and bought a kitchen timer and a huge aluminum cooking pot, big enough to bathe a German shepherd in, then went round all the supermarkets that cater to foreigners, gathering an assortment of odd-sounding spices. I picked up a pasta cookbook at the bookstore, and bought tomatoes by the dozen. I purchased every brand of spaghetti I could lay my hands on, simmered every kind of sauce known to man. Fine particles of garlic, onion, and olive oil swirled in the air, forming a harmonious cloud that penetrated every corner of my tiny apartment, permeating the floor and ceiling and walls, my clothes, my books, my records, my tennis racket, my bundles of old letters. It was a fragrance one might have smelled on ancient Roman aqueducts.

This is a story from the Year of Spaghetti, 1971 A.D.

As a rule I cooked spaghetti, and ate it, alone. I was convinced that spaghetti was a dish best enjoyed alone. I can't really explain why I felt that way, but there it is.

I always drank tea with my spaghetti and ate a simple lettuce-and-cucumber salad. I'd make sure I had plenty of both. I laid everything out neatly on the table, and enjoyed a leisurely meal, glancing at the paper as I ate. From Sunday to Saturday, one

Spaghetti Day followed another. And each new Sunday started a brand-new Spaghetti Week.

Every time I sat down to a plate of spaghetti—especially on a rainy afternoon—I had the distinct feeling that somebody was about to knock on my door. The person who I imagined was about to visit me was different each time. Sometimes it was a stranger, sometimes someone I knew. Once, it was a girl with slim legs whom I'd dated in high school, and once it was myself, from a few years back, come to pay a visit. Another time, it was none other than William Holden, with Jennifer Jones on his arm.

William Holden?

Not one of these people, though, actually ventured into my apartment. They hovered just outside the door, without knocking, like fragments of memory, and then slipped away.



Spring, summer, and fall, I cooked away, as if cooking spaghetti were an act of revenge. Like a lonely, jilted girl throwing old love letters into the fireplace, I tossed one handful of spaghetti after another into the pot.

I'd gather up the trampled-down shadows of time, knead them into the shape of a German shepherd, toss them into the roiling water, and sprinkle them with salt. Then I'd hover over the pot, oversize chopsticks in hand, until the timer dinged its plaintive tone.

Spaghetti strands are a crafty bunch, and I couldn't let them out of my sight. If I were to turn my back, they might well slip over the edge of the pot and vanish into the night. Like the tropical jungle waits to swallow up colorful butterflies into the eternity of time, the night lay in silence, hoping to waylay the prodigal strands.

Spaghetti alla parmigiana
Spaghetti alla napoletana
Spaghetti al cartoccio

Spaghetti aglio e olio
 Spaghetti alla carbonara
 Spaghetti della pina

And then there was the pitiful, nameless leftover spaghetti carelessly tossed into the fridge.

Born in heat, the strands of spaghetti washed down the river of 1971 and vanished.

And I mourn them all—all the spaghetti of the year 1971.



When the phone rang at three twenty I was sprawled out on the tatami, staring at the ceiling. A pool of winter sunlight had formed in the place where I lay. Like a dead fly I lay there, vacant, in a December 1971 spotlight.

At first, I didn't recognize it as the phone ringing. It was more like an unfamiliar memory that had hesitantly slipped in between the layers of air. Finally, though, it began to take shape, and, in the end, a ringing phone was unmistakably what it was. It was one hundred percent a phone ring in one-hundred-percent-real air. Still sprawled out, I reached over and picked up the receiver.

On the other end was a girl, a girl so indistinct that, by four thirty, she might very well have disappeared altogether. She was the ex-girlfriend of a friend of mine. Something had brought them together, this guy and this indistinct girl, and something had led them to break up. I had, I admit, reluctantly played a role in getting them together in the first place.

"Sorry to bother you," she said, "but do you know where he is now?"

I looked at the phone, running my eyes along the length of the cord. The cord was, sure enough, attached to the phone. I managed a vague reply. There was something ominous in the girl's voice, and whatever trouble was brewing I knew I didn't want to get involved.

"Nobody will tell me where he is," she said in a chilly tone.

"Everybody's pretending they don't know. But there's something important I have to tell him, so *please*—tell me where he is. I promise I won't drag you into this. Where is he?"

"I honestly don't know," I told her. "I haven't seen him in a long time." My voice didn't sound like my own. I was telling the truth about not having seen him for a long time, but not about the other part—I did know his address and phone number. Whenever I tell a lie, something weird happens to my voice.

No comment from her.

The phone was like a pillar of ice.

Then all the objects around me turned into pillars of ice, as if I were in a J. G. Ballard science fiction story.

"I really don't know," I repeated. "He went away a long time ago, without saying a word."

The girl laughed. "Give me a break. He's not that clever. We're talking about a guy who has to raise a noise no matter what he does."

She was right. The guy really was a bit of a dim bulb.

But I wasn't about to tell her where he was. Do that, and next I'd have *him* on the phone, giving me an earful. I was through with getting caught up in other people's messes. I'd already dug a hole in the backyard and buried everything that needed to be buried in it. Nobody could ever dig it up again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You don't like me, do you?" she suddenly said.

I had no idea what to say. I didn't particularly dislike her. I had no real impression of her at all. And it's hard to have a bad impression of somebody you have no impression of.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "But I'm cooking spaghetti right now."

"What?"

"I said I'm cooking spaghetti," I lied. I had no idea why I said that. But that lie was already a part of me—so much so that, at that moment at least, it didn't feel like a lie at all.

I went ahead and filled an imaginary pot with water, lit an imaginary stove with an imaginary match.

"So?" she asked.

I sprinkled imaginary salt into the boiling water, gently lowered a handful of imaginary spaghetti into the imaginary pot, set the imaginary kitchen timer for twelve minutes.

"So I can't talk. The spaghetti will be ruined."

She didn't say anything.

"I'm really sorry, but cooking spaghetti's a delicate operation."

The girl was silent. The phone in my hand began to freeze again.

"So could you call me back?" I added hurriedly.

"Because you're in the middle of making spaghetti?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Are you making it for someone, or are you going to eat alone?"

"I'll eat it by myself," I said.

She held her breath for a long time, then slowly breathed out. "There's no way you could know this, but I'm really in trouble. I don't know what to do."

"I'm sorry I can't help you," I said.

"There's some money involved, too."

"I see."

"He owes me money," she said. "I lent him some money. I shouldn't have, but I had to."

I was quiet for a minute, my thoughts drifting toward spaghetti. "I'm sorry," I said. "But I've got the spaghetti going, so..."

She gave a listless laugh. "Goodbye," she said. "Say hi to your spaghetti for me. I hope it turns out OK."

"Bye," I said.

When I hung up the phone, the circle of light on the floor had shifted an inch or two. I lay down again in that pool of light and resumed staring at the ceiling.



Thinking about spaghetti that boils eternally but is never done is a sad, sad thing.

Now I regret, a little, that I didn't tell the girl anything. Perhaps I should have. I mean, her ex-boyfriend wasn't much to start with—an empty shell of a guy with artistic pretensions, a great talker whom nobody trusted. She sounded as if she really were strapped for money, and, no matter what the situation, you've got to pay back what you borrow.

Sometimes I wonder what happened to the girl—the thought usually pops into my mind when I'm facing a steaming-hot plate of spaghetti. After she hung up, did she disappear forever, sucked into the four thirty p.m. shadows? Was I partly to blame?

I want you to understand my position, though. At the time, I didn't want to get involved with anyone. That's why I kept on cooking spaghetti, all by myself. In that huge pot, big enough to hold a German shepherd.



Durum semolina, golden wheat wafting in Italian fields.

Can you imagine how astonished the Italians would be if they knew that what they were exporting in 1971 was really *loneliness*?

—TRANSLATED BY PHILIP GABRIEL