

Chapter 2: Spaghetti Restaurant

Annette

The plate of spaghetti seemed to be staring up at Annette. She wasn't hungry at breakfast and lunch didn't occur to her that day as something necessary. Now at the dinner table she sat staring back at the lines of the noodles not really thinking about them. On that day the idea of eating was strange to her in the way that saying a familiar word repeatedly renders it numb. She had never looked at spaghetti in this way before, nor did it register to her that she was having a new experience with something she had eaten and looked at countless times. Each noodle was a pathway in a labyrinth of overlapping channels and tunnels, submerging and reemerging in a composition of chaotic homogeneity.

Darien had finished eating his pasta and cleaned the kitchen while Annette sat at the table lost in her noodled vision, after a few attempts to make eye contact, making loud noises with the dishes accompanied by forced grunts and emphatic oopses, he finally relented and went off to watch the news.

Annette avidly read the paper each morning and followed government proceedings closely but somehow found she and Darien never heard the same stories or had largely opposite understandings of what they had heard or read. These arguments would usually end by one of them conceding to the unreliability of the media, never coming to a mutual confidence in any set of circumstances. Annette often wondered what it would be like to be able to confirm information assuredly.

She wasn't thinking about any of this tonight. Her mind was blankly fixated on the undulating density of the plate of matter before her. She got up from the table eventually, walked to the kitchen and made herself a bowl of cereal which she ate leaning up against the sink. She rinsed her bowl and went to bed.

...

The next morning the plate of spaghetti was still sitting on the table and Annette woke up with Darien's knee pressing on her bladder.

In the bathroom she thought about hot house tomatoes and wondered if they (the tomatoes) felt patronized by the artificial summer they endured, forced into constant production with no real sense of life-outside-the-hot-house. The wind was loud and the cold outside took the form of a draft chill in the hallway between the bedroom and the bathroom. Annette passed through the chill and her thoughts left hot house tomatoes behind.

Darien

Darien usually made dinner during the week, even though he and Annette worked the same schedule, he somehow ended up taking care of the night routines. By the end of the day Annette was so deep in her mind, rolling over the day's interactions and mental burrows and rarely offered any guidance on dinner plans. Darien was used to this kind of thing from her and he often made pasta for dinner when he couldn't get any response out of her during his attempts to provide menu options. Ok, pasta it is. He liked spaghetti the best, something satisfying about the long, firm noodles filling up his cheeks, the way he had to use his teeth to cut down the long strands and the way the cut-off remainder fell off the edge of his lower lip back into the bowl below, leaving an oily gloss on that lower lip and a small drop of oil usually managed to pool in the dimple in his chin. He loved it. The fat of the red sauce with all of its oil, spreading and separating as it seeps down into the bowl, navigating the tunnels and cavities made in the negative space of the noodles. Little chunks of tomato drying up on the land-like surface of the noodles. As his wife sat staring in silence, Darien found himself overcompensating with enthusiastic slurps and satisfied grunts of approval for the meal. He was trying to entice her into eating but in the process found himself really enjoying his dinner and getting distracted from his goal of coaxing Annette out of her despondent meditation. He caught himself losing track of his task and realized he had made no impact on her mood but had really convinced himself to have a nice meal. This realization came over him and reminded him of a laughter yoga class he attended in college where the teacher led them in the task of fake-laughing until real, genuine laughter poured out of them. He thought about the moment the fake laugh turned into a real one. The pinocchio moment. How many laughs did it take to complete the transition?

He glanced over at Annette still staring. She seemed upset tonight, not her usual busy minded distraction but something a little more distant. It seemed that her spaghetti, untouched, had shrunk a little bit, or settled down in the green bowl like fresh potting soil after a few rounds of watering.

Joanne

Joanne had grown used to eating out alone at restaurants and had come to savor those moments. Often at dinner or lunch is when she would reflect on the lemons of the day, focusing her mind's image on trying to preserve the impact of the painted effect. Joanne scheduled her meeting with Susan for the second to last day of her stop and had a lot of time to rest and explore her new surroundings. She found a small Italian restaurant on the outskirts to the north of the town with a small patio that looked out onto the desert. They were never busy, she never saw the restaurant full, even on a Saturday night but they also were never empty. The menu was small and seemed as though every item on it was some variation of the same ingredients and she wondered if the entire pantry was filled with these five ingredients in mass quantity. She imagined neat shelves stacked in perfect columns with canned tomatoes, dried herbs, flour, onions, ground meat and large formless bags of ricotta.

As frequent travelers often do, Joanne settled into a routine in every town she would visit but rarely had so much time to spend in one place. Curiously, the employees of this restaurant seemed un-phased by the frequent presence of their new patron and never once inquired as to where Joanne had come from or why she was there. They didn't remember her drink order or any other details about her and each time she came to sit down, she would ask for the table at the far corner of the patio, and every time they would sit her there. Perhaps this was exactly what kept Joanne returning to the same place. It was clear that the restaurant was primarily frequented by locals and was not a notable tourist stop. Something about their indifference to her gave her comfort.

Joanne had visited the restaurant twelve times and was sitting down for the thirteenth time, on the evening before her visit to Susan's home. Joanne made sure to get to her table before five o'clock as she wanted to eat an early dinner, get to sleep by nine and wake up at four in the morning. She planned to walk to Susan's home from her motel, a six-mile walk. Susan agreed to meet Joanne at seven in the morning and let her into her home to spend time with the paintings while she worked on an article about a new concept restaurant in LA where the food was served entirely on smoldering wood logs. Susan needed the pressure of the deadline and knew it would be due to the publishers by five o'clock the same day. Joanne would get ten uninterrupted hours with the five paintings and then Susan

would make them dinner. She made a mental note of her schedule before sinking her fork into her pasta and pirouetting it round with three swift turns.

Amy

Sitting upright, perched off the edge of a bench in the lobby of the restaurant, Amy was waiting for Rick who was running late to meet her for lunch. She hated meeting him for lunch during the work week as she was not fond of long work breaks and despised having to stay late. Her boss was getting on her case again as he did periodically, giving her impossible deadlines and tasks she seemed doomed to fail. But she and Rick had an anniversary earlier in the week they were both too busy to schedule anything for so she gave in. He was ten minutes late and she seemed to sit taller and grow stiffer with every passing second. The sound of other people being seated before her started to prick in her ears. "If he hits 15 I am leaving" she muttered under her breath as his tardiness hit 12 minutes.

At thirteen minutes past one o'clock, Amy looked more rigid than the steel bench where she sat. At fourteen minutes and thirty-six seconds, Rick blustered in the double front doors and looked around at the tables for Amy. He stood there looking out into the restaurant, when Amy saw him, she held her breath, waiting for him to turn around and see her and start his groveling apologies for his delay. He checked his watch and looked out again, seeing if he missed her. "They won't seat us until the entire party arrives," she said, now standing behind him. He turned and gave her a soft hug, turning immediately to the host who took them in two left turns between rows of communal tables to the end of a table close to the far back right corner of the restaurant, seating them facing each other at the end of a long table of pairs of people facing each other.

Water in the glasses, poured by Amy as a keep-busy activity to avoid speaking first, still waiting for that list of apologies, Rick raises his glass in a cheers and wishes her a happy anniversary to which she raises her glass and repeats the phrase back to him. Now the waiter is at the table and Amy asks about the specials to which the waiter responds with the daily specials and then Rick asks about the pasta dish and the waiter recites the ingredients:

Spaghetti with tomato sauce

Name of canned tomato inkjet

Print, paper

Thyme, French

White clay and laminate

Basil, not sweet

Polyester velvet in mud color

Flour, water, egg, salt

To taste glaze and underglaze

Pure plywood Extra Virgin Olive oil

Amy says she will have that and Rick asks what wine to pair with it and they order a bottle and the same special, Spaghetti with tomato sauce. The pair of people eating next to them were having something else to eat and Amy thought it looked good but they always ate this meal together to celebrate their marriage because it was the first thing they ever agreed on in the early days of knowing each other. She looked up at Rick's face who was looking at the scone on the wall behind her. He asks her about her day and she softens and starts to talk about the impossible tasks that her belligerent boss had assigned her and he sympathizes and says they need to get her out of that job and she agrees but they don't talk about the plan any more after that and the wine comes and its chianti and she didn't know why he bothered asking for a recommendation when they both knew the restaurant would suggest chianti and they would order it with spaghetti. Another cheers. Another restaurant employee—not the waiter—suddenly presents two forks and places one down on the table on top of the folded napkins, next to the space where the plate of spaghetti would sit and then disappears. This move prompted them both to look down at the empty space on the table where the plate would soon be and stare at the texture of the table top. Finally the waiter and the other restaurant employee carrying both plates of spaghetti come back to the table and the waiter refills the wine glasses and the other one places the food down. A third employee comes by with a parmesan cheese grater and grates the cheese and stops when.

In perfect, silent, synchronization, they take their forks from their napkins, take their napkins from the table and place them on their laps with one hand, while digging the fork down into the spaghetti and starting to eat. At the point of eating, they lose their synchronization and immerse themselves in their food, slurping up the long winding strands in independent rhythms accompanied by warm rushes of happiness. It made them feel in love to perform this ritual, Amy forgot the sensation it triggered for them and felt sorry for how cross she had felt when he arrived. Everything else turned off and they were lost in this bond which was a bond made entirely from turning inward, enjoying a meal but not sharing it. Being in the presence of another person having the same experience as you but not sharing it.

Gery

His doctor is concerned about what the nurses are telling him about Gery's eating habits. They say he will only eat pasta and he isn't getting enough nutrition because he won't even eat a sauce with it, just ketchup and that's just sugar. They're gonna try to add some vitamin powder to the ketchup bottle but it's still not protein or fiber and he is not fooled by the zucchini noodles at all or the cauliflower. He probably just misses his mother's cooking because he really never got over her death even though she lived until he turned 75. It's been a difficult 18 years. Gery lives alone but in a facility with nurses and aides who check in on and annoy him constantly. He doesn't want to be there and doesn't belong there. He only wants to eat spaghetti with ketchup and it's causing concern among the nurses and aides. Gloria claims she can get him to eat some broccoli and will plan her attack when she gets back from visiting her daughter on Tuesday. No one asks her why she thinks she can do this or how she plans to. Meanwhile, Gery will eat spaghetti and ketchup exclusively for the next four days, otherwise he won't eat at all.

