

Fiction

The Year of Spaghetti

By Haruki Murakami

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Illustration by Seymour Chwast

Nineteen-seventy-one was the Year of Spaghetti.

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

I went to a cooking specialty store and bought a kitchen timer and a huge aluminum pot, big enough to bathe a German shepherd in, then went around to all the supermarkets that catered 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 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 the ceiling and the walls, my clothes, my books, my records, my tennis racquet, 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, by myself. 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 William Holden, with Jennifer Jones on his arm.

William Holden?

Not one of these people, however, 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 and cooked, 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, oversized chopsticks in hand, until the timer dinged its plaintive note. 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. The night lay in silent ambush, 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. I mourn them all—all the spaghetti of the year 1971.

When the phone rang at 3:20 *p.m.* 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 spotlight.

At first, I didn't recognize the sound 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 per cent a phone ring in one-hundred-per-cent 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 that 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 make a lot of 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 back yard 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 said suddenly.

I had no idea what to say. I didn't particularly dislike her. I had no real impression of her at all. 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."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said I'm cooking spaghetti," I lied. I had no idea why I said that. But the lie had already become 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 imaginary 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 eight minutes.

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

She didn't say anything.

"I'm really sorry, but cooking spaghetti is 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 O.K.”

“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 the phone, did she disappear forever, sucked into the 4:30 *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, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)

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This Is Just To Say

By [William Carlos Williams](#)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

D. H. Lawrence, 'Figs'.

The proper way to eat a fig, in society,
Is to split it in four, holding it by the stump,
And open it, so that it is a glittering, rosy, moist, honied, heavy-petalled four-petalled flower.

Then you throw away the skin
Which is just like a four-sepalled calyx,
After you have taken off the blossom, with your lips.

But the vulgar way
Is just to put your mouth to the crack, and take out the flesh in one bite.

Every fruit has its secret ...

THE MICE by Lydia Davis

MICE LIVE IN OUR WALLS but do not trouble our kitchen. We are pleased but cannot understand why they do not come into our kitchen where we have traps set, as they come into the kitchens of our neighbors. Although we are pleased, we are also upset, because the mice behave as though there were something wrong with our kitchen. What makes this even more puzzling is that our house is much less tidy than the houses of our neighbors. There is more food lying about in our kitchen, more crumbs on the counters and filthy scraps of onion kicked against the base of the cabinets. In fact, there is so much loose food in the kitchen I can only think the mice

themselves are defeated by it. In a tidy kitchen, it is a challenge for them to find enough food night after night to survive until spring. They patiently hunt and nibble hour after hour until they are satisfied. In our kitchen, however, they are faced with something so out of proportion to their experience that they cannot deal with it. They might venture out a few steps, but soon the overwhelming sights and smells drive them back into their holes, uncomfortable and embarrassed at not being able to scavenge as they should.