The Year of Spaghetti

By MURAKAMI Haruki Translated by Kiki

1971—That was the year of spaghetti. In 1971 I cooked spaghetti in order to live, and I lived in order to cook spaghetti. I was proud of the billows of steam rising from the aluminum pot as well as the gurgling of the tomato sauce as it simmered—they were my raison d’être.

From a supermarket specializing in imported food, I bought a pot big enough for a German shepherd to take a bath in, an egg timer, and some seasonings and spices with strange names. I bought a cookbook that specializes in spaghetti as well as a dozen tomatoes. Garlic, leeks, salad oil—all of these aromas joined together and leapt through the air of my tiny one-room apartment, absorbed into its every nook and cranny. It smelled like an ancient Roman sewer.

Something special happened in the era of spaghetti in the year 1971.

Generally, I boiled spaghetti by myself, and I ate it by myself. I didn’t really need any company. I liked eating alone. I felt that spaghetti should be eaten alone. I can’t really explain.

I always ate my spaghetti with a salad and black tea: three scoops of tea leaves in a pot and a tossed lettuce and cucumber salad. Then I leisurely read the newspaper, enjoying my spaghetti by myself. From Sunday to Saturday, everyday I ate spaghetti. When Saturday is finished, the cycle of spaghetti begins again.

I usually ate my spaghetti alone, but sometimes I am struck by the feeling that somebody might knock on my door and enter my apartment. This sensation is especially strong on rainy days. It is different from inviting somebody to my apartment. Sometimes I sense an acquaintance, sometimes a stranger. It might be a girl with really thin legs from high school that I had one date with. Other times it is a younger version of myself, while sometimes it is William Holden with Jennifer Jones on his arm. William Holden?

However, nobody actually ever comes to my apartment. They are all lurking in front of my door, but nobody ever knocks.

Outside it is raining.
I cooked spaghetti all through the spring, summer and into the fall like a person bent on revenge, like a jilted lover burning a bundle of old love letters. She tosses them one by one into the flames of the fireplace; I slide bundles of spaghetti into the boiling water.

I put the trampled shadow into the bowl and then I mold it into the shape of a German shepherd. Then I drop it into the boiling water and I add some salt. I’m standing in front of the aluminum pot, a pair of long chopsticks in my hand, waiting for the mournful ‘ping’ of the egg timer. My bundles of spaghetti are sly and cunning—that’s why I can’t take my eyes off of them. At the moment they are sliding down the edge of the pot, disappearing into the inky darkness of night. Like a brightly colored butterfly being swallowed up by the eternity of the tropical jungle. Evening is calmly waiting for the arrival of the bundles of spaghetti.

spaghetti polonaise basil spaghetti spaghetti and garlic spaghetti carbonara,

spaghetti with clam and tomato sauce spaghetti and beef tongue.

Sometimes from the refrigerator I randomly grabbed leftovers to make spaghetti that tragically never receives a name. Nameless. The bundles of spaghetti being born in the steam in the year 1971, flowing like a river to the sea until it disappears. I mourned for them. All of my bundles of spaghetti in the year of 1971.

When the phone rings at 3:20, I am lying on my tatami mat and gazing at the ceiling. I am lying in the middle of a pool of warm winter sunlight, perfect for such mindless times. Like a dead fly in the sunlight of December 1971.

At first I don’t recognize the sound of the ringing of the phone as the sound of the ringing of the phone. I am just spacing out. The ring is like some unrecognizable fragment of memory. As the sound piles up, gradually in my mind it takes the shape of a phone ring. Finally, the air of my apartment hums with the vibration of the ringing of a phone: 100%, absolutely, without a doubt the ringing of the phone. Still lying down and half asleep, I reach out and pick up the phone.

The caller is a woman I can barely remember and who has never made much of an impression on me. She is so slight that she evaporates every day by 4:30. The former girlfriend of an acquaintance of mine. But I hardly knew him. If we met somewhere we did little more than exchange greetings. The same strange reason that brought them together a few years ago also broke them up a couple months back.

“Why don’t you tell me where he is?” she asks.

I look at the receiver, following it with my eyes. The cord is firmly connected to the receiver. Not bored so much as just verifying the connection.

“Why are you asking me?”
“Because nobody else will tell me,” she answers, her voice cold. “Where is he?”

“I have no idea,” I tell her. Even though I answer her I can’t hear my own voice. It doesn’t sound like my own voice.

She doesn’t say anything. She remains quiet.

The receiver becomes a pillar of ice. Everything around me seems to change to ice. It is like being in a J.G. Ballard science fiction story.

“I really don’t know where he is,” I tell her. “He just disappeared without saying a word.”

On the other end of the line she laughs. “I don’t think he’s smart enough to simply disappear.”

It is just like she says. I can’t agree with her more. He really isn’t that smart. But that’s not the reason I don’t reveal his whereabouts to her. If he learns that I told her, then he’ll probably call me. I will get embroiled in their lives again. I was still fed up from my involvement in their past. In a deep hole in my backyard I had already buried the whole incident and my memory of it. I didn’t want to dig it up again. Nobody could dig it up again.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t you like me?” she blurts. I don’t know how to answer that question. I actually don’t have much of an impression of her.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. “At the moment I’m making spaghetti.”

“What was that?”

“I’m making spaghetti.” I put some imaginary water into a pot and light the stove with an imaginary match.

“So?” she says.

I put some imaginary spaghetti into the boiling water, it slides down and I add some imaginary salt. I set the imaginary egg timer for fifteen minutes.

“I can’t take my eyes off of it right now. If I do, the spaghetti might stick.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“I’m at the tricky part of the cooking.” In my hand the temperature of the receiver continues to drop.
“So, could you call me back later?” I add hurriedly.

“You’re in the middle of making spaghetti, huh?” she says.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Are you eating by yourself?”

“Yep.”

She sighs. “I really do have a problem.”

“I’m really sorry that I can’t help you.”

“It’s about money, you know.”

“Really?”

“I want him to return it.”

“Of course.”

“Spaghetti huh?”

“Yeah.”

She forces a weak laugh through the phone cord. “See you later.”

“Goodbye,” I say.

After hanging up, I notice that the pool of sunlight on the floor had moved a few centimeters. I return to my spot on the floor in the middle of the sunlight. I look up at the ceiling.

It is sad to consider all of those imaginary bundles of spaghetti that will never be cooked. Maybe I should have told her, I regret that now. At any rate he wasn’t such an important person. A mediocre abstract painter who put on airs, a man who did nothing but talk big. She probably really did need that money back. I wonder what she is doing these days? I suppose at 4:30 in the afternoon her shadow has already vanished.

Durham Samolina That’s a kind of golden wheat grown on the plains of Italy. How would the Italians have reacted if they had known that they were exporting loneliness instead of spaghetti in the year of spaghetti 1971? I bet they would have been astonished.