

Our Last Supper

I'd picked the right night to do it. I knew it was time when I heard the first shots fired, while she was still in the shower. She probably hadn't heard them over the water running, but she definitely would have heard the explosion a few minutes later, so she must have known as well. The shots, the explosion—none of it surprised us. We'd planned for this.

I was making her favorite dinner at the time, or at least it was one of her favorites. It was her favorite meal that I could make without bugging her for help, I guess. The chicken dish. It was the one exception she made for eating meat.

I'd bought the chicken the last time I went into town but couldn't remember exactly when that was again. If I hadn't cooked it that night then I'd probably needed to freeze it along with the others, but then what? Then it'd never get cooked. Defrosting meat felt like such an ordeal, and it wasn't like we had time to waste.

The rice was the key, and it was where I was most likely to screw things up. I'd made the rice too mushy before and overcooked it more times than I cared to keep count of. I'd made it with too much lemon, or no lemon at all, and I struggled to remember which she preferred. But she ate it either way and was too polite to ever correct my mistakes, so I never learned.

The special twist was in the injection, added into a store-bought flavor syringe. I prepped the chicken quickly—pounding, trimming, seasoning—before she could see any of it and risk losing her appetite. The two cutlets were flash fried, tossed in a buttered pan, and tucked in the oven before she was wise to the menu.

Gunshots echoed from elsewhere in the neighborhood. Maybe a few blocks away still. Closer than before, for sure. They were making their way toward us, like we knew they eventually would.

She stepped out of the bedroom in that dress that she knew I liked, but she was always too uncomfortable to wear in public. She'd put on makeup. I didn't even know she owned any. "You look great," I told her, and I meant it. I always meant it.

“Thanks,” she said. Her nostrils flared and she sniffed the air. “Did you put lemon in the rice?” she asked.

I checked the counter to spot the lemon rind just to be certain. “Yeah. You like it with lemon, don’t you?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling. Of course that’s what she’d say. She ate it either way.

I was still in my sweats. I’d been in my sweats all week, I think. I may have washed them a few days ago, but I couldn’t remember. I didn’t feel dirty, though, so there was that; but then she was so clean that I must have looked like a slob next to her. But we could hear screaming now and knew that there wasn’t any time to change. Certainly no time for a shower. The alert for the rice went off and there just wasn’t a moment to spare, so I remained a slob.

I fluffed the rice with a fork, and the chicken was still a couple minutes from finishing, but then I realized that I’d never prepped the sauce! Of course, the sauce! It wasn’t the rice that I usually screwed up—though I’d screwed it up plenty—it was always the sauce! Ideally slow simmered lemon and cream and cheese, a pinch of paprika if I had it around. I could rush through whipping some up, but it was never quite the same in a hurry. But it would still be better than nothing.

“Do you need any help?” she asked.

“No.”

“What about with the sauce?”

“No, I’m fine on the sauce.”

“Have you started it then?”

“It’s fine, I don’t need any help,” I told her. “Just maybe get the table ready. Maybe some candles? Maybe music? You pick.”

“Do you want music?” she asked.

“You pick.”

I pulled the chicken out the moment the timer dinged and set it on the counter to rest, then put all my attention into the sauce. I eyeballed the ingredients and cooked it hotter than I should have, but I could hear shouting coming from the Weaver’s home just across the fence-line, so I knew it wouldn’t be long before they were here.

I grabbed a bottle of sparkling wine from the fridge and our wedding glasses off the top shelf. “How’s the table coming?” I hollered from the kitchen.

“We’re ready,” she hollered back.

I cut the eye on the sauce, stirred it, and carried the bottle and glassware into the dining room.

"I'll just need two minutes to plate it," I said. Tires squealed from the next street over, followed by the metallic crunch of a collision.

"It doesn't need to be pretty," she said, "just hurry." Her voice broke and it hurt to hear.

I tossed a cutlet on each plate, heaped a couple servings of rice beside it, and dumped a ladleful of sauce over it all, then brought the plates to the table.

"Where's the broccoli?" she asked.

I'd forgotten that I always forgot the broccoli. I regularly screwed up the rice, typically rushed the sauce, and always managed to forget the broccoli. I was an awful cook, but she liked that I tried.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I forgot."

"It's okay. There's a lot going on," she said, and managed a smile despite the sound of gunfire up the street.

She cut into the chicken and winced. It was pink in the center. Too pink, certainly. "Oh," she said, disappointed.

We'd been together for thirty years and knew each other inside and out, so as she looked at me expectantly, I knew that she wanted me to assure her that she wouldn't need to eat it, but that just wasn't the case. "I'm sorry," I said again, "it's in the chicken." She nodded solemnly, took a bite, and I poured her a glass of wine, which she promptly emptied to wash down the chewy undercooked meat.

"Hit me again," she said, smiling as she nudged her glass toward me. I refilled her to the brim and returned her smile. I loved her smile for its scarcity. It took a lot to get her to smile, and harder still for it to be genuine. I could always tell the difference in a real smile because then I couldn't help but smile back.

We'd been through so much together that it was hard to believe it was all about to end. There should have been plenty to say, I thought, but what could we say when words felt insufficient? If we'd believed in god then perhaps we would have prayed, but we didn't, so we didn't. We had no children to reflect on, and our beloved dog was dead and buried so long ago that the memories were corrupted. We'd already accepted that the planet was dying, its people had gone mad, and that there was nothing left that we'd really miss. So what could we say in the end? Nothing. Instead

we just ate bad chicken, gulped down sparkling wine, burped discreetly, and wordlessly agreed that was more than enough.

A vehicle hopped the curb outside with a second one screeching to a stop soon after. Metal ramps clanged against the pavement and boot-steps were heard dispersing about the cul-de-sac. We cut bigger bites, chewed aggressively, and swallowed ample chunks, hopeful that they'd go down. We maintained eye-contact the entire time, sharing the moment to its bitter end.

There was a pounding on the door. "Citizens!" a man shouted. "We are with the National Patriot Front and we have a few questions to ask you." Fear flickered into her eyes and I couldn't bear to see her scared. Then more pounding. "You have three seconds to open the door. One—"

"Well, maybe I'll see you in the afterlife," I told her, trying to lighten the mood before I shoveled my last piece of chicken in my face. She laughed through a mouthful of food.

"Two—"

She choked down her final bite and said, "Let's hope not," then finished her wine.

I reached over to hold her hand and she squeezed tight. She smiled, so I smiled, and the poison worked as advertised. We went out smiling.