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# Ulva Lactuca

She looked loathingly at the spoon. It was a metal spoon, dark, with a small engraving on its handle – a sharp taste.

“Open your mouth, slowly, eaaaasy, like a little birdie in its nest,” he said, bringing the spoon to her mouth. He hated spoons; they had seemed despicable little things since he was small. Why did he now find himself having to wield it, full of soup, having to usher it now into this young child’s mouth, as his parents had done to him, as surely as his parents’ parents had also done? If they even had spoons then, if some fool had already invented them. He had to find himself an encyclopedia and figure out when the first spoon had been forged; he had to get his hands on an encyclopedia, a source of infinite knowledge by which he might survive. Spoon: A piece of silverware with a concave scoop at its end; typically used for carrying liquids to the mouth.

What bothered her most was the spoon’s rounded head; because of it, she hadn’t the slightest intention of opening her mouth, no matter how much he insisted. She distracted herself by staring at an embroidered image on the tablecloth. The threads of red and green tangled together, forming a flower. He couldn’t stand the sound of the spoon scraping the bowl. He had hated spoons since he was small, all of them: metals spoons, plastics spoons, those of wood, porcelain, tin. Why wouldn’t this little girl open her mouth? He spent more than a half an hour wrapped up in the delicate operation of feeding her soup. The soup had chilled several times; he would reheat it, swapping out the bowl. Maybe it was the design she didn’t like, he thought. He had heard that sometimes children wouldn’t eat because they hated how a bowl looked. There were several bowls at home, his wife had mentioned before leaving him: one with a mother rabbit in her bed, her large ears hanging over the mattress, which was ideal for baby food and custard. Another, a bowl with a painted forest, portrayed a scene of children gathering berries. He didn’t like that one at all. First off, he himself had seen a similar mulberry tree, and was now against this type of cultural colonialism. Secondly, because both kids seemed too robust and a bit old-fashioned, English or

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Dutch children from the past century, unpleasant really. What kind of child would identify with those two? Another plate had an abstract drawing on it, and an especially colorful one at that. His wife had no doubt purchased it convinced that parents should introduce avant-garde forms to their children from the outset, although Informalism had stopped being avant-garde some time ago. Surely his wife hadn't had the time to read up on it, or maybe she had already bought it before doing so. First, he tried the bowl with the mother rabbit and then the other with the Informalist sketch. (The girl unmoving, her mouth closed.)

He couldn't handle the spoon's weight in his hand forever. Why was he pointing this metal thing at her, equipped with its concave scoop for carrying liquids to the mouth? How do they make encyclopedias? That I'd like to know. How they write them. For example: the tactic of leaving out "metal utensil" was smart because, unfortunately, for humanity, there were spoons made out of wood and plastic, of glass, rubber, porcelain, and thread, even of sea foam.

Buy a mattress of… He had wanted to try out a new waterbed, but she had thought it an excessive investment. Investment, no, he corrected himself: an expense. Aboard that aquatic mattress, they could have paddled themselves through life, hardly swaying, rowing – arms crossed, excuse me, in cross, arms extended in, the shape of, a cross; sacrifice, hands hardly bent, the altar of some tribute, gods less perverse than you, legs gently opened, like this, hands bent and arms extended, the altar of sacrificial, ritual gesture, swaying back and forth, now this way, to port, now that way. Me above, you below, me below, you above, and the ship always rocking, me aside, you crouching, me standing, you kneeling, me leaning, you from the back, you standing, me going down. Why didn't she want to open her mouth?

She had managed to amuse herself by looking at the green and red embroidery while he went to the kitchen, but now he returned, returning patiently, returning stubbornly and serenely and she wanted to smile at him. She was willing to make peace and to let out one of his favorite giggles, the kind he loved. Yet suddenly from within the dish – where he had shipwrecked – the utensil appeared once more: the terrible metal spoon, ending in a concave scoop, used for carrying liquids to the mouth. She pursed her lips. They hadn't bought the waterbed because she didn't want to. Surely she didn't love him anymore, but that didn't lessen his enthusiasm about the floating mattress, lying forever in a boat, perpetually in motion. There he would have rocked her like a

goddess of water, like a statue submerged in sea; he would have loved her like a floating virgin, a vestal virgin of foam, wrapped in seaweed and lichen. He would have built a sanctuary within that sea, full of shells, stars, sea horses, mollusks, and jellyfish. Surely the ancients had a goddess of the sea. The ancients had gods for everything. Was Achilles's mother an aquatic divinity?

He had collected his share of sea spoils, tiny fish and crustaceans. "We'll navigate this life together," he told her, "and you'll have a bed of water like the coral and sea sponges." Like the ulva lactuca, which the encyclopedia calls the lettuce of the sea – good for your complexion. He read once in the newspaper that a man who was shipwrecked survived two months eating only sea lettuce. And a woman looked twenty years younger after rubbing her face with the ulva lactuca every day. Things like this appear in the newspaper all the time. But she hadn't wanted to buy the waterbed and now the baby wouldn't open her mouth, not for anything in the world. He steadily aimed it at her mouth. The metal rim advanced, mercilessly cutting the air. She looked away, pretending not to see it. The icy edge brushed her cheek. If she were to blow forcefully, the liquid would spill and splash over the other rim. She had carried out this operation many times. She had let the terrible concave scoop draw near and, when she had it close, almost touching her with its chill, she'd let out a huge breath with all her lungs, and the liquid would splatter the ground, the tablecloth, or napkin. The liquid trickled down, as it always did. She couldn't blow the spoon away, nor could she move it away from her, but she had managed to send the liquid to hell with the air in her lungs. And yet, she didn't feel like repeating the operation. At one time, her mother and father had laughed when the liquid dripped to the floor, dirtying the tiles and rug. She seemed to find it amusing as well, that suddenly the spoon's contents would splatter, the scoop empty like a baby-less crib. But her mother grumbled loudly the next time she did it, waving her arms and raising her voice while saying a series of things she didn't understand, but that evidently had to do with the fact that the spoon was now empty and the soup was on the floor. As far as her father was concerned, he had laughed about it a few times, although – no one knows why – one day he suddenly became annoyed, like he didn't enjoy it anymore. In fact, he seemed offended and would get worked up, as if the liquid and floor were his personal belongings. And every day there were spoons in her world, every day they were pointed at her, always with those cold edges and perpetually trying to carry liquids to her mouth. She hadn't wanted the waterbed because she didn't

love him anymore. Symptoms like these are common in everyday life, it's just that you don't see them because they come disguised in other reasonable things, and one day you discover that the pattern precipitating catastrophe had appeared long ago, that there was another woman in the house, a "friend," the third person excluded from the pair. They had borne catastrophe from time immemorial, perhaps from the day they first met; both were pretending, both hid her – they searched for secret spaces, darkened, so as not to see her, to hide her, to ignore her presence – in order to discourage it. Catastrophe: An ill-fated event that causes great upheaval. And the ill-fated event had occurred, provoking great upheaval. Catastrophe: cataclysm. Somewhere a train had crashed and a tidal wave had flooded the house, the bedroom; the objects were shipwrecked, the chairs now lost. An earthquake shook the walls, the foundations, the wind carried away the rooftops, the tide drowned the doors and windows, and those familiar things stopped being so familiar (he hated spoons and clocks), and other, other familiar things suddenly became unbearable. Everything was set from that moment on, he thought, since the day we first met. The spoon sunk into the liquid. She took advantage of the moment to shift in her highchair. She lacked freedom of movement: the chair was a cell to imprison her while she ate. It was the wooden stakes that held her there, that cornered her. She tried to bite them, cut away at them with her teeth, scratch them, but the wood was tough, resistant; she chewed through the edges like a dog, scraping them up. "The girl is incapable of eating her soup, but she'll swallow up the chair instead," he casually commented one day. The funny little ways of children.

It began to ascend, full of soup: that piece of silverware with a concave scoop at its end; typically used for carrying liquids to the mouth.

"I'm sure she won't be happy. She can't be happy. She'll never be," he said out loud, picking up the spoon. She saw it climbing up like a slow metallic animal, sweetly and heavily rising. It was sent into flight. Anxiously, she waited for it to level out.

He had asked her to let him keep the girl so he wouldn't feel so alone, although only during the first part of their separation. She gave in – an understanding and tolerant gesture that hit him below the belt. She taught him how to prepare baby food, wash her, heal her boo-boos. She left a notebook full of long-winded explanations about every possible thing. There was a time to get her up and a time to let her sleep. In any case, he hired a young woman to care for the girl in the afternoons

while he worked. Don't forget to throw out the leftovers every night. Make sure to heat her milk before putting it in the bottle. Vegetable soup every day. Here's the pediatrician's number, and instructions to care for burns, colds, and stomach aches. She'd never be happy. It'll never happen. The directions to the cheapest laundromat. For electric repairs, call 242-3315. Emergencies: 999. If she chokes, get behind her and pull back on her stomach until she's breathing again. Oh, the fading of her hands. The languor of her face. The many geographies I traveled as explorer, and now I'm nailed, nailed forever to that cross. Stuck in those extended arms, perpetually perpendicular. Awaiting the gestures of her hands, prophesying, forever, awaiting... Put everything in its place, it'll save you time. Leave a set of keys at your mother's house, in case you forget yours. She'll never be happy.

He raised the spoon, like a bird slowly rising in the air. She saw it approach from a distance. From far-off it came, always reaching shore, like the tide. Set the alarm clock every night. Don't wake her if she moans in her dreams. He reached the street as if for the first time. He remained still for a moment in suspense, in the steamy air. He looked around carefully, as if something in his neck might fracture, split. The milk, the laundry. The soup as well. Make sure the phone is properly connected; sometimes it disconnects when you vacuum. I've forgotten how to live by myself. How it feels to wake up alone in the middle of an empty pillow. If she weren't trapped in the highchair, she'd be able to look through the window, ease her boredom a bit. Every afternoon, when you get home from work, remember to give her a bottle of milk. Never leave sharp objects within her reach. Not one sharp object – except for her icy expression as she leaves. Ah, what beautiful Carrara marble. Remember loud noises make her nervous. He took a deep breath. The girl refused to open her mouth. For the last half hour she has simply refused to open her mouth. A balanced diet.

"Easy, eaaasy," he said, "look at the handsome Mr. Bunny at the bottom of the bowl."

No one could ever know whether the rabbit was a he or she. Yet, his wife had made it clear that it was a woman. If she doesn't want the soup in the bowl with the children on it, swap it out for the one with Mrs. Rabbit. Wrapped in milky sheets, who could tell if it was a he or a she? With just a little effort, she could stand up in her highchair, lean forward, and knock it to the floor. I'm sure she'll never be happy, he thought. He continued to drown the spoon in the liquid. There are three types of sea sponges: calcareous, siliceous, and corneous. The vast majority of sea sponges

reproduce vegetatively. Puffs of liquid smoke. She might be able to move the chair if she pushed all her weight forward. Call Mom's house only in case of emergency; she'll tell you where to find me. Why did her mom know where she was – and no doubt with whom – but not him? Only real mothers deserve affection; all others are detestable. I'm not trying to plot against you, she said. He picked up the spoon and moved it toward her. She saw it approach from the distance. It came from afar, always reaching shore, like the tide. She pushed it away. Don't let her control you, she has to obey you. Don't give into all of her whims. Why doesn't she want to open her mouth? The Rabbit slept in its white bed, hidden within the bowl's depths. A bunny with ears, large and clean. He brought the spoon to the girl's mouth and held her by the neck with two fingers. He could hold her captive like this. I never wanted to oppress you. A limitless possession – the ritual gesture of abandonment. The door you'll never open. She felt gripped by several large, powerful fingers. I won't hurt you. I only want you to extend your arms in a cross, and in this watery bed we'll voyage like two boats rocked by the tides. She understood she couldn't escape. Soon it was sure to happen: the spoon, pointed, would cross space with its liquid cargo. Open legs and a head turning, full of thorns. She wanted to think it was all a game, perhaps to alleviate the stress. He increased the pressure and she tried to resist him; she was frightened. He came closer and closer. She was breathless, which is why she took a deep breath in, trying to get him away. He realized her eyes were full of tears, and she began to sob on account of the orgasmic punishment, don't holler, please, don't cry, she gulped deeply, just stay here one minute more, and she blew at the spoon with all her might, toward the sticky liquid that cascaded over the linen tablecloth and onto the white cover, like a shroud blanketing an altar.



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