

Harriet Springbett - Quark Soup

Diane snips basil into her sun-dried tomato sauce and mixes it once again. The sauce holds everything together. Without sauce, the pasta would be bland. Without sauce, the pasta twists would roll and scatter and the meal would fall apart. She squeezes her eyes closed against the welling tears, takes a deep breath and reaches for the pepper grinder.

Peter has been her sauce since their wedding, thirty-three years ago. At the beginning he was spicy. She'd studied him, breathed in the smell of him, anticipated tasting him. Her first contact with lips and tongue had revealed traces of pleasing ingredients. She'd puzzled over the hint of mysterious flavours and then discovered a challenging complexity of character. Over the years, she'd savoured the aftertaste that lingered on her palate. The sauce had delighted her, had become familiar, had kept its consistency through the good times and the bad. Then, a few months ago, she'd noticed a separation, a curdling. She'd persuaded him to consult.

Diane pauses, her hand on the grinder, and glances at her husband. He looks more like an overcooked pasta twist than a tangy sauce: a twist that has lost its spring. He slouches, limp, in the armchair beside the French windows.

Outside, the evening sun beckons her to come for their daily walk across the bastide. She wants to kick through the drifts of crispy leaves under the avenue of plane trees. She wants to climb up to the viewpoint and devour the Dordogne countryside. But he says he's too tired – he who, until his retirement, would study a quantum problem all night and still find enough energy to teach a full day at the university afterwards. And she can't leave her sauce until it has served its purpose.

Schrödinger noses open the hall door, miaows and pads across the tiled kitchen-living room floor. Diane blinks away the blur of tears. He's been in the pigeon house again, brushing against the flaky limestone walls. One flank of cinnamon fur is dredged with a dusting of floury white. She ought to scold him for stalking the birds.

He stops and turns his head towards her, as if daring her to limit his freedom. Can he read her mind, this cat that, according to Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment, could be alive and dead at the same time? After all these years, she still can't grasp the principles of quantum physics. She'd named the cat after Peter's hero, in memory of that visit to the science museum when he'd attempted to explain quantum mechanics to her. Their professions were worlds apart – and yet he'd tried. Other museum visitors had gathered around the picture of Erwin Schrödinger's cat to listen to Peter. His explanations had brought the exhibition panels to life. She'd almost grasped it; had sensed the stirring of something just beyond her reach; had been distracted at the crucial moment of comprehension by a zest of citric acid emanating from the chemistry laboratory next door.

Schrödinger's nose twitches. He lifts it to savour the meaty aromas wisping across the worktop bar and then turns his back. She watches him stroll past the shelves of recipe books and physics journals towards the armchair. He circles it and jumps, with the flowing ease of golden syrup, onto the coffee table beside Peter.

Peter's blank expression doesn't change. Diane doesn't think he's mulling over equations: when he works, he gazes towards the skies, his eyes feverish, hands twitching. He's not relishing the rolling hills of green countryside, nor the stone outbuildings, burnished in autumn splendour. Judging from the angle of his head, his eyes are fixed on the static grey of the patio paving slabs. Is he taking stock of his memories, counting and cataloguing them, checking them for blanks? Is he reliving them while he still can?

She watches Schrödinger place a tentative paw on Peter's checked trousers and then ease his weight onto it. He stretches up towards Peter's unshaven face, his whiskers trembling. He seems to be searching for reassurance that this immobile human really is Peter. Diane can almost hear Schrödinger's thoughts: the man smells like Peter. He looks like Peter. But the apparition of a lap in the checked trousers isn't right. For Schrödinger, these are the vertical trousers that pace up and down, up and down. They're the trousers that accompany him to the French windows and nudge him outside onto the terrace; the trousers that live in the office upstairs, or leave the house for days at a time. They're the trousers that come back smelling richly of exotic lands.

Schrödinger gathers his hindquarters onto Peter's lap and sinks into relaxation. He has no problem accepting Peter's change of state from active to passive. He tucks his paws under his chest and squeezes his eyes closed. Diane sighs. There's a lesson there.

Behind her she can hear the red sauce bubbling slickly. It is reducing, dispelling the extraneous liquid to emphasize its rich essence. Peter is starting to reduce too. He's already dispelling the present moment. One day, his childhood is all that will remain. She turns back to the hob and twists the pepper grinder. Crushed grains tumble into the lava and disappear.

"Alzheimer's," the doctor had said.

"Alzheimer's," she'd echoed, covering the silence while Peter spun into worst-case-scenario shock. Even in French, the taste of the word was familiar. It was a flavour from the past. It brought back memories she thought she'd buried at her mother-in-law's funeral.

Alzheimer's. Last time the flavour had been subtle, a four-day-old Korma curry on the point of turning, a zing of sour fizz on her tongue. This time it was a Vindaloo. It erupted in her mouth and spurted bitterness-loneliness-injustice-fear through her whole body. An Alzheimer Vindaloo. It will take more than bread and tears to soak up this inferno.

She hasn't told the kids yet. Danny-boy, in the Midlands, is high on baby wipes, bottles and sleepless nights. In their weekly Skype on Sunday he'd raved about the meaning of procreation and how he was looking forward to passing on his love of nature to baby Jake. It's hardly the time to talk of an illness that may be hereditary. And Holly is out of touch, somewhere in the Philippines, rebuilding the lives of tsunami refugees because rebuilding her own life has proved too much for her. The news can wait. It's not life threatening. Not yet.

It isn't as if they have work colleagues to tell, either. The professors who used to ring after Peter's retirement to ask him to lecture have stopped calling. The move to France has stretched and slackened his lifeline. It sags like the telephone wire she can see out of the kitchen window. Had his colleagues noticed repetition or ruptured threads in his reasoning, or have two years' retirement made his knowledge redundant?

In some ways it's her fault: she's the one who has isolated them in this French village. The Dordogne was her dream, the topping on the gâteau of her career, the gastronomic reward after her years of supporting Peter. The language in the Dordogne is hers; a feast of words peppered with confits and magrets; with slivers of foie gras and cèpes and finely grated truffles. She hadn't expected him, with his popularity in the London academic circles, to have such difficulty in meeting people. She hadn't considered that his brain might rebel against the peace of the countryside. His genius mind had mastered nanoscopic entanglement and the qubit state. It had figured out quantum superposition. But it couldn't grasp the recipe for the French language.

She puts the pepper grinder back on the shelf. There's a small herbal medicine jar hidden behind it. She opens it and shakes two Bacopa capsules into the palm of her hand. There's no longer any point opening them and sprinkling the powder into the meal: the time for furtive preventive

action is over. He has synthetic drugs to take now: cholinesterase inhibitors. He approves of the scientific approach, of course. There's no longer any need to steep ginkgo biloba leaves in water, to strew salads and soups with rosemary and sage. It's too late for all that. Anyway, she has a more immediate problem to solve.

She empties the jar of memory-enhancing capsules into the bin and then contemplates her sauce. She scatters a damp fingertip pinch of fleur de sel into the pan and dips in her teaspoon. The mixture is as salty as her teardrops yet as bland as Peter's expression. It's still not ready. She surveys her rack of spices.

Peter's voice monotones across the room: "Going to be long, dear?"

He'd only picked at his lunchtime walnut and avocado salad. She'd spiked the dressing with a phial of St John's wort, but he'd eaten too little to benefit from its antidepressant qualities.

"I hope not. Why don't you have a look at your new journal?"

He shrugs.

A shrug! Not an outright refusal. She hurries to the hall table and picks up *Quantum Technology* in its sealed plastic coat. Their eyes meet as she holds it out. Please take it, she thinks. Please look at the cover. Please don't tell me there's no point again.

He sighs. The corner of the journal brushes Schrödinger's head as he takes it. Schrödinger flicks an ear. Peter looks down at the cat in surprise. He folds the journal, uses it to push Schrödinger off his lap and then lays it on his knees.

Diane hovers. She wills him to rip off the plastic and complain about the environmental impact of excessive packaging.

He stares down at it. The cover lines are obliterated by his name and their address. On mail addressed to them both, his long, lettered name strengthens her insignificant 'Mrs'.

He looks up at her and frowns. "Can I smell burning?"

"I'll have a look, love."

She follows Schrödinger around the worktop bar. Twenty years ago the Alzheimer centre had suggested she find a different way to reply to each of her mother-in-law's repetitions. Since she began cooking this evening, she has already used 'No', 'Maybe', 'Surely Not' and 'I'll See'.

The meal had started hours ago as a simple bacon, garlic and tomato sauce to accompany his favourite pasta. Now she has soup and croutons and chocolate mousse and homemade shortbread. She still can't start on the pasta. Not until an idea has wafted out of her sauce.

Schrödinger curls around her ankles and miaows. Diane stirs the sauce and breathes in garlicky basil. It needs something spicy; something to surprise her senses into a chemical chain reaction and inspire her. A pinch of Espelettes? A soupçon of Tabasco?

Schrödinger miaows again. He sits between her and the spice rack, fixing her with his green eyes.

"Alright. You first," she says.

She reaches to the back of the cupboard and drags forward the last pile of tins. Schrödinger's purrs accompany her. The label of the tin she takes out is faded beyond recognition and has come unstuck. She opens the tin and peers inside. The jellied mass has separated into soupy lumps. She brings it to her nose and is swamped by the chemical stench of tinned meat. She has no idea what flavour it's supposed to be. She tips it up and watches the mess dribble and plop into Schrödinger's bowl.

"Here you are, Schrö. Dinner."

He hesitates, his head above the bowl, nostrils quivering at the unfamiliar odour.

"Eat up. It's—" she smooths the label flat, but can't read it. "—Tasty Mouse Morsels in Bird Wing Gravy."

Her grand announcement seems to reassure him. He dips into the bowl and begins to chew and chomp. She watches him incline his head to one side and attack a lump of gristle with his rear molars. Unlike Peter, Schrödinger hasn't lost his appetite. It's Peter who will soon become Edwin Schrödinger's cat: alive and dead at the same time. That much quantum physics she can understand. He has to eat. She must give him the courage to continue, to fight through the topping of depression on his plateful of Alzheimer's.

Despite his initial disdain, Schrödinger gobbles down his whole meal. It's all in the presentation, Diane remembers. Of course: the presentation. She tastes her sauce. The balance of tastes and aromas is perfect. She just needs a garnish. She knows exactly where it is tucked away. It's just a matter of recall. She turns on the gas under the saucepan of salted water.

Her mind ripples back to Peter's other bout of depression, the brooding silence he'd struggled through in his forties. She'd taken him back to the same science museum and pestered him to explain the exhibitions to her again. Little by little his shoulders had straightened. His eyes had begun to gleam once more. His explanations had quickly veered into realms of starry mystery. "The universe is a soup of quarks, gluons etcetera," he'd said, and she'd smiled at the complicity in his 'etcetera'. Her lack of understanding didn't matter. She'd listened to his voice, sensed the quickening of his heart, rejoiced.

She drains the pasta. "Time to sit up," she says.

Peter asks if he can smell burning.

"Of course not. Everything's under control."

She places the tureen on the dining table in front of him.

"Quark Soup," she announces. "Followed by Qubit Pasta and Subatomic Sauce. And rounded off with Chocolate Gluons and Schrödinger Shortbread."

"Quark soup, eh?" says Peter. He picks up his spoon and takes a sip. "Did you know that the universe is a soup of quarks and gluons?"

She smiles. "Really? Tell me about it," she says.