

Ann Kammerer

Spaghetti Night

Mom moved out,
saying Dad moved on.

“He’s been busy.”
Mom lit a cigarette.
She crossed her legs
and caressed her knee,
talking about
the spaghetti nights
at Armando’s,
how she wouldn’t go,
how she couldn’t stand
seeing Dad,
sloppy and pawing,
fawning over women,
telling him to
take me along
instead.

“I’m sure you’ve met
all his lady friends,” she said.
“Like that Mena—
that Italian one
with gaudy jewelry,
and that black hair she got
courtesy of Lady Clairol.”

I was a few years shy
of drinking age,
not quite out
of high school.
The bartender told Dad
I could sit at the bar,
that he'd look out for me,
that the guys
from the neighborhood
would buy me Cokes,
that I could eat
as much spaghetti
as I wanted,
that I'd be fine.

"Thanks Jimmy," Dad said.
"I owe ya."

Dad put five bucks
in Jimmy's tip jar.

"Be a good girl."
He tapped my shoulder,
then patted my head.
"Don't put up
with any shit
from the guys, OK?"

He left me
a few cigarettes,
then slid into a booth
lined with red velveteen
and lit by dim sconces.
A woman waited
with dark piled hair,
her olive skin
smooth and supple,
her cheeks vibrant rose.
They sat quietly,
sipping drinks,

the woman
smoothing butter
onto warm bread,
Dad idly twirling
his spaghetti,
sucking strands
coated in red sauce
between his thin lips.

“Your Dad
sure likes the ladies.”
Morty from Francis Street
slipped next to me
on a stool.
He bought me a Coke
then lit my cigarette
with a safety match.

“You like baseball?”
He nodded at the TV
suspended on brackets
over the bar,
Jimmy looking up
from beneath.
The Tigers were on,
leading the White Sox,
bottom of the fourth.

“I guess,” I said.
“I mean, it’s fine.”
I told him Mom’s dad—
my grandpa—
had been a catcher,
that Mom always wished
she had nine kids
so she could field a team.

“I’m sure your Dad
could’ve helped her
with that,” Morty said.

“If she’d given him some
once-in-a-while.”

Morty winked.
He chewed on a toothpick.
Jimmy snapped the towel
he kept slung
over his shoulder,
telling Morty to zip it.

“Don’t talk to her
like that,” Jimmy said.
He polished the bar
in front of me,
wiping away the rings,
his Catholic medal dangling.
“You want another Coke?”

I told him I did,
then twirled on the stool,
seeing Dad,
the woman smiling,
his fingers stroking
her pale slender hand,
Morty saying “great pitch,”
as a ball slapped
a catcher’s mitt,
the roar of the crowd
a soft murmur
on the barroom TV.