

## *Spaghetti*

When the first limp noodle appeared in Charles' trouser pocket he was with his friends and they were sitting in the park at night, smoking stolen cigars.

'You always throw up the first time,' said one of the boys as he blew a cloud of smoke. Charles regarded the single strand of spaghetti tangled through his fingers. He tossed it aside into the night, and accepted a lit cigar from the boy to his left.

'How is it?'

He coughed. 'It's fine.'

The next time it happened, Charles had just been dropped off at school. Private school life had largely agreed with Charles, who found relief in institutionalisation. He was taught literature, history and Latin grammar. He did rowing and debating and had piano lessons. His marks were satisfactory but not too satisfactory. The school uniform was designed to humiliate: grey blazer, tie, shirt, shorts, and socks pulled up to the knees. The second bell rang, and grey-clad boys milled around him. A feeling of wet discomfort prompted Charles to stick a hand into the pocket of his shorts where he found a handful of spaghetti. The feel of it made him sick. He dropped it into a bush and hurried to class.

He was in English Literature when he felt a pressure in his pockets, making the fabric of shorts grow taut. The class was taking turns to read out loud, a stanza of Keats each, following the circle of desks which went around the room. Poetry, the teacher had said, was made to be heard. Charles forced his hands into the tangle of spaghetti, feeling it squash between his fingers. It was one stanza before he had to read. He waited, and dreaded. The boy next to him spoke well. He enunciated clearly and did not stumble. As the boy came to the last line, Charles realised that his lines were over the page. His face grew hot. He withdrew a hand from his pocket. It was damp and coated in a starchy residue. His fingers stuck to the page as he turned it. His time came and he mumbled his lines, trying not to choke.

'Wh – who are these coming to the – uh – sac – sacrifice – to what green altar o – o myst – st – mysterious priest –'

Spaghetti came out of his pockets when he put on his shorts in the morning. The longer he left it, the more appeared until it spilled out. At home he could always get rid of it

quickly, into the kitchen bin or toilet, without being noticed. Sometimes it would appear during his classes. He would have to wait for the bell until he could throw it out somewhere without being seen, and for the remainder of the lesson he'd be horribly conscious of that damp, unpleasant weight against his leg. It would be prone to slipping out, and so he'd remain still, not daring to move. He feared that he'd lean too far one way and spaghetti would splatter onto the ground, or that he'd raise his hand and spaghetti would fly everywhere. He would not know how to explain himself if that happened. So he didn't raise his hand, nor did he speak, or stand, and he made sure to always be the last one out of the room.

He started missing rowing training. His school lost a regatta. He stopped playing the piano because spaghetti kept on spilling onto the keys.

He hoped that it would stop.

It got worse.

He fixated on his pockets, endlessly desperate to empty them of spaghetti. He'd lose focus and plead his friends for their notes later, shamefaced. He began arriving late to classes, unprepared and disorganised. He forgot about tests, didn't submit work on time, and was always excusing himself for incoherent reasons. His friends were content to share their notes as Charles had never asked for anything before, and they did not seem to notice his untimeliness or frequent disappearances.

Years ago Charles had discovered that if his friends tended to be loud and boisterous there was less need for him to say anything, and so he had allowed himself to be absorbed into a group of the loudest and most boisterous boys in his year. They talked about girls but never to them. They sang the rude version of the school song at assemblies. They occasionally bullied the odd boy who spoke slowly and had no friends of his own. Although Charles never joined in with their taunting and shoving, he never did anything to prevent it, and sometimes he felt that was just as bad.

'How's it going?' asked one of his friends one morning.

'Good,' he said.

Charles' biology teacher was the only woman in a school of male staff and male students. She was a young and kind teacher who worked very hard to make up for the fact that she had secured her first job at such a prestigious boys' college through family connections.

She was not yet disillusioned with the institution and felt a great need to make a difference in the lives of each and every single one of her lukewarm students, and was deeply concerned with the observable drop in Charles' test results. She cornered him after class.

Charles' face contorted with misery. His palms sweat and his knees felt weak.

'Is something wrong, Charles?'

'No, thank you. I'm fine.'

'I'm concerned about your last test.'

'I'll do better next time.'

'I do hope so.'

Charles' wrists trembled, his arms trembled and his body trembled. His spaghetti trembled.

'I have spaghetti in my pockets.'

'Oh,' the teacher did not know how to respond. Her heart went out to the poor, shaking boy whose hands were too big for his body, his nose too long for his face and his pockets too full of pasta. 'Your pockets?'

'Yes.'

'Which ones?'

'My shorts.'

'Oh.'

'Sometimes... my blazer.'

'Oh.'

'It just appears there.'

'You don't put it there.'

'No.'

'How much?'

'Not very much.'

'Oh.'

'It's okay. It isn't very much.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. It's hardly anything. I'm fine.'

'Oh.'

Charles' voice dropped to a whisper. 'Sometimes it's penne.'

As soon as Charles emptied his pockets more spaghetti would appear. His mind was constantly occupied, constantly waiting, woefully anticipating the next opportunity to escape into a bathroom and put the spaghetti in a bin, or down a toilet, or a drain, or into a cistern. He began to hate dressing in his school uniform, knowing that by the time he'd tied his tie, he would have to empty the spaghetti out of his pockets. After weeks of dispensing increasing amounts into bins, potted plants and grates, Charles was quite exhausted. His drop in grades had him moved to a lower stream biology class and never had the chance to speak to the teacher again.

Eventually there came a day where he could not will himself out of bed. He could not stand, and he absolutely would not put on his pants. He stayed in bed, spaghetti sliding out of his pyjamas onto the sheets. He tried to scream but nothing would come out.

After days of skipped school and feigned illnesses, he gathered the courage to speak to his parents.

Charles' father was seated at the head of the table. He had three items set out before him: a cigar, a cigar cutter and a lighter. He lifted the cigar, thick and rigid, between the fingers of his left hand, and grasped the cutter between the thumb and index of his right. The aperture between the two blades formed a perfect circle which would slide shut in a circumcisional application of pressure from either side. He placed the tip of the cigar into the opening and severed the end in a swift pinch. Blades sliced through the dry tobacco, leaving a cleanly cut end. Little pieces crumbled loose and dusted the table. He took the cigar between his lips and brought the lighter to the foot, flicking it to life with a thumb, all in a seamlessly co-ordinated sequence of motions. He sucked, saliva moistening the papery leaves, as the cigar ignited and crackled quietly. Lips caressed and convulsed and quivered as the heat was drawn through its length. Finally, his labial grip relaxed and smoke poured from his nostrils in clouds.

The smell of it overwhelmed Charles' sensitive olfaction; dark, heavy, masculine. His virginal experience in the park had made him vomit. He wondered if he would vomit again.

Charles' mother set a plate in front of him. She had made spaghetti for dinner. With mushrooms, shaved parmesan and three-leaf salad. He wanted to cry. He gathered all that he had left, the fear, the guilt, and spoke.

'Mother. Father. I haven't been well.'

'We know, and you haven't wanted to see a doctor. We are very worried,' said Charles' very worried parents.

'I don't think a doctor can help me.'

'Then who can?'

'I don't know. You see, the problem is my pockets.'

'Your pockets?'

'Yes.'

'What is wrong with your pockets?'

Charles drew a deep breath. The shame of it suffocated him.

'There is spaghetti in my pockets.'

'We don't understand, Charles.'

He stood up, pushed his chair back and reached both hands into both pockets to pull out handfuls of spaghetti and drop it onto his plate on top of the mushroom pasta and salad. He reached into his pockets again and pulled out more spaghetti. His face grew red and his knees were weak and his throat was acrid. Charles' mother's mouth grew thinner and thinner and Charles' father's knuckles grew whiter and whiter. The plate was buried under a mountain of spaghetti when Charles stopped, hoping that his parents would understand. It would be okay, he thought, for them to just know about it. They didn't have to make it stop. They just had to understand, and maybe let him stay home on days when there was a particularly debilitating amount of spaghetti in his pockets. It would be okay, he thought, if they just knew, and said that they were sorry for him.

'That is a lot of spaghetti,' they said.

'Yes.'

'And this is causing you trouble?'

'Yes.'

'Well, why don't you just eat it?'

There was nothing more horrible to Charles than the suggestion of eating the dank, furry noodles that haunted his days, his nights, his pockets, and rendered his existence utterly miserable.

‘I can’t,’ he choked.

‘Why not?’

‘It isn’t that simple.’

‘I don’t see why not.’

Spaghetti fell out of Charles’ pocket and splattered on the floor.

‘I can’t.’

‘Have you tried?’

‘Yes.’ This was the gruesome truth.

‘Well, try harder.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You can. Just put your mind to it.’

‘Okay.’

‘You *must*, Charles. What if someone finds out? What will they think of you? What will they think of *us*?’

‘I will.’

‘Good.’ His parents resumed their dinner. Charles stood at the table, spaghetti dripping out of his pockets.

He went to school when he could, and also went when he couldn’t. He went to rowing training, piano lessons and Latin and gained nothing. His mind would be in his pockets and he’d go from class to class with no recollection of what had happened, leaving behind a trail of spaghetti. He fell behind by such an extent that he was sure he’d be expelled. He couldn’t tell his friends. He reasoned that if they cared enough to pay attention, they’d have noticed the spaghetti, and would have asked. They’d ask why he kept disappearing between classes and ask if there was anything wrong, but they chose not to notice, and if they chose not to notice, they would not want to be told. It wasn’t as though they would be able to do anything in any case, thought Charles, although he continued to yearn for someone to simply ask him ‘is there spaghetti in your pockets?’ to which he would reply

‘yes, there is,’ and they would say ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ and although this would not stop the spaghetti, it would have made Charles feel just a little better.

But nobody did ask. When they said ‘How are you?’ he said ‘I’m fine,’ because they were not really asking, and did not really want an answer. He tried to tell them, his friends, his mother, his father, he truly did try, so many times, but when opened his mouth to speak, only spaghetti came out.