

## **Food Therapy: Pasta**

By Mohammad Khan

On a quiet street in a quiet home filled with silent people slowly walking around with an aura of grief accompanying them. Pale sunshine shone into the room from a cloudy day. The room was void of any color besides black and gray. The people clad in black walk with heavy steps around the house. A few sit solemnly with others and some sit in isolation and others hover around a mother and father like angels whispering prayers and condolences. It was time for him to go, says a man. He's in a better place, says a priest. There is no more pain, says another.

See the kid, in his mid-twenties, sitting alone on the couch watching the rest of the room with studious eyes and an introspective gaze. He runs his hand through his hair and swallows the lump in his throat and stares at the ground. A woman wearing a black dress and a bonnet with wilting flowers sits beside him.

"I'm sorry for your loss", she said quietly.

"Thanks", mutters the kid. "But It's not my loss." The kid grabs his stomach in pain but hides it.

She leans back. "I'm sorry you don't think it is." She leaves the kid alone and moves to talk with the other patrons.

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The next night, the kid enters his apartment empty, cold, and dark. Boxes of cold takeout fill the trash can. The blue moonlight of a tv screen faintly lights up the living room. A shell of a man sits slumped in the chair facing the screen. The kid ignores him and throws his jacket into the closet.

Without moving, the man asks if he brought any food. "The food you give me is a stale slurry. I want real food. I can take it."

"How's your blood pressure", asks the kid. He walks around the apartment avoiding the living room.

"131/87."

He looks out the window at the street below. Nurses walk with elderly patients down the sidewalk. "Any chest pain?"

"No. 99.2 degrees. I'm fine. Went to the bathroom an hour ago."

He walks to the kitchen and searches through the cabinets. All filled with empty medicine bottles of Tylenol, Ibuprofen, and other pain relievers and barely any food. Crumbs left over from mice and ants. The fridge is barren except for a half empty jugs of milk and empty boxes of fruit. A bowl of cold oatmeal sits in the fridge. The grains are lumpy from the absorbed milk. "We don't have any food", he grumbles. "I'll get some tomorrow."

Coughing sounds come from the living room, the man has mucus on his hand and dangling on his chin. The slime gleams from the blue light from the tv. "Throw out some of the food while you're at it", says the man clearing his throat. "The stench is nauseating."

"Did you take your cough medicine", asks the kid. In the cabinet, the kid finds a bottle of cough medicine. He walks over and pours out two tablets into his hand and freezes.

"What's wrong", asked the man, reaching for the tablets.

The kid moves away, studying the tablets. "This isn't cough medicine."

The man peeks into his hands. "What're you talking about? They look fine. Small, yellow pills."

The kid lifts a tablet. "But there are numbers on the back. I don't remember numbers on the back of the other pills. Where'd you get them?"

"The pharmacy downstairs. A nurse gave them to me."

"They must've mixed the pills again."

The man laughed. "Can't get rid of me that easily." His laughter turned into coughing and then into pain. He held his chest as his breathing relaxed.

"How's the pain?"

"Bearable", breathed the man. "For now."

"I'll find the right tablets and get some food", said the kid walking away. The man leans back in his chair. The kid walks to the kitchen with a heaviness in his step. He turned. "If...it does get unbearable, would you want me to..", the kid's voice trailed off.

"I don't know. I can't say what I'd want at that moment." The kid nodded and returned the tablets to their location in the drawers. The man continued talking. "Louis was a good kid. It's a shame he's gone so early." The kid doesn't respond.

"He felt alone", said a muffled voice from the kitchen. The kid looked around, it wasn't him.

"He was alone", replied the man. "But you two were inseparable. And stayed in contact throughout even when he got worse. His mom couldn't express how grateful she was that you were with him in the end."

The voice stayed quiet and the kid brushed it out of his mind as he opened the fridge. He systematically removes the empty cartons of milk, oatmeal, and rotten food. Hiding behind the cartons was a pasta dish encased in a plastic sheath. "Who brought the pasta", asked the kid.

"Louis's mom dropped it earlier this week. As a thank you in case she didn't get a chance to see you at his funeral." The kid unsheathes the plastic, the aroma fills the room. "Why don't we eat that", asks the man. "She put it in the one place I couldn't reach. So I waited."

"And I waited too", said the voice reemerging in the room. The kid fumbles with the pasta, nearly dropping it.

"Good", said the man. "Let's eat."

"How about we don't", said the voice. The kid places the pasta on the counter and looks around the room. They're alone.

The man shifts slightly. "Why not? What else do we eat for dinner?" While the man speaks to the voice, the kid searches for its origin. He sifts through the cabinets and spies through the windows on the streets below.

The voice snaps back. "How about you finish the oatmeal you left this morning. It stinks up the whole

fridge.” The kid turns to the pasta sitting on the counter. The strands slathered with tomato sauce form a mouth and the meatballs are the eyes. It stares back at the kid and smiles.

“Well ok then. Bring the oatmeal”, says the man indignantly. The kid doesn’t move. “Warm it up and bring it.”

The meatball eyes follow the kid as he prepares the old oatmeal and hands it to the man. Old photos of two kids enjoying a birthday party flash across the screen. The photo fades to the next memory of two mothers with their boys during graduation. The kid grabs his stomach in pain.

“We’ll eat the pasta later”, he says through the pain. “I’ll grab some cereal. It’s getting late.” He turns off the tv.

He grabs the pasta dish and cautiously carries it to the fridge. Its eyes and mouth no longer present as he shrouds the dish in the plastic sheath.

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The next morning he wheels the man to the door where a nurse waits for him. The man wears comfortable attire and an englishman’s cap atop the silver lines of remaining hair.

“Good morning Harold”, says the nurse jubilantly. “How are you doing today?”

“Good morning, Travis. I’m doing Great”, said the man beaming from ear to ear. “I’m still here.”

“Glad to see it”, replied Travis through a gilded smile.

“I bet you are.”

The nurse looked at the kid. “We’ll be back by the evening.” The nurse takes him down stairs to the rest of the elderly patients.

The kid closes the door. His stomach grumbles as he hadn’t eaten since last night. His eyes wander to the fridge and his hands travel to the handle and eventually reach the plate of pasta wrapped in plastic sheath. Leaning at the counter with a fork in hand, he lifts a noodle of pasta and eats.

“Hold on there cowpoke”, says the pasta in a worried voice. “You know, if you’re going to eat me at least give me a chance to say my final words.” The noodle dangles from the kid’s mouth. The meatball eyes stare into his and the noodle strands that form the mouth quiver.

“You can talk”, said the kid.

“Now that we have a firm understanding of the obvious. Can you wait a moment and eat something else?” The kid walks to the fridge and searches for something. He grabs his stomach in pain and his head falling beside the pasta. He opens the cabinets searching for medicine, throwing out empty pain relief bottles. Leaping to other cabinets tearing empty bottles apart searching for pills. Two pills stumble out of the cabinets onto the floor. The kid falls to his knees lapping up the pills and dirt into his mouth.

The kid leans against the cabinets breathing normally. Soon the pain returns as he writhes on the tiled floor as his hands swing wildly looking for the pills. His hands grab a drawer and pull out a meat mallet. Sweat beads upon his brow as pulls himself up to the counter. He uses the mallet as a crutch on the counter. He pounds the mallet on the counter, chipping away the paint and ceramic covering. Then he smashes his left hand with the mallet and presses the serrated side into his skin drawing blood. He falls to the floor sighing in

relief. His hands run through his hair as the blood drips down his left hand.

The pasta speaks inquisitively. "You're an idiot." The kid doesn't respond. "But you already know that", says the pasta. "Which makes breaking your hand an act of punishment or relief from guilt. Making you an even bigger idiot."

"Shut up", mutters the kid under his breath. The kid leans against the cabinets breathing heavily. His head faces the ceiling in a euphoric trance.

The pasta dish sits above him. "How long has it been", asks the pasta. "Since the pain began."

"It never stopped", breathed the kid.

"How did it start?"

"Since he passed", he says as he pulls himself to his feet. "I didn't feel it at first. Then one day it was there. A pain. Invisible to everyone."

"Louis? Who was he?"

"He was my friend." The kid inhales deeply, trying to smother the pain. "And I killed him."

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The kid dragged himself to the chair and slumped into the seat the man sat in previously. Empty pill bottles form a trail leading from the chair to the kitchen where many more remain hidden in drawers, under tiles, and stashed behind walls. The pasta dish remains on the counter.

"You're dying", says the pasta.

"It's the least that could happen to me."

"Why punish yourself? What did you do?"

"I'm not gonna talk to a creepy pasta dish."

"No one else is coming for you. I'm the only one here. I've heard the pain."

"You don't know what did him in."

"I know he reached stage 3 bone cancer from his mother. But you stepped in."

"I did..."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Your secrets are safe with me", said the pasta dish. "Unless you keep them from yourself."

The kid rubbed his forehead in pain. "I was with him", began the kid. "As the doctor told him they couldn't operate anymore. That he might not survive. The cancer could spread into his lymph nodes. The donor list is long and it has been years waiting for a match." The kid shifts in his seat. "The doctor told the nurse the code for the morphine drip attached to Louis. We both heard it, but he was too weak to move or speak. The

nurses came in and helped us wheel him back home. We kept the same morphine drip for the pain. While the rest of the family tried calling other hospitals and checked donor lists, I was with him in the room.”

“No one saw you?”

“No one suspected me. If they did, they covered it up. Louis was gone and I had given him enough morphine to give me a window to get distance from him.”

“You ended his life. Spared him the pain.”

The kid shook his head. “No.” He pushes his palms into his face and slides them upward to the forehead trying to shield his eyes from the memories. “An hour after I had given him the morphine. We got a call about a donor match. The match would’ve prolonged his life and greatly improved the quality.” He leans back in his chair exhaling to the ceiling releasing his soul to the sky hoping for acceptance. “A second chance and I took it away. I killed my friend”, said the kid. “I killed my friend.” He continued to repeat himself as a meditation, finally accepting the act through tears.

The pasta was silent for a while before speaking. “I won’t pretend that I’ve been through that. But...I know what it’s like to feel alone. To scream so loudly and no one hears.”

“If I had just waited”, whispered the kid. “If I had just waited and tried other options like I learned, then maybe.. Maybe I’d still have my friend.”

“You haven’t told anyone?”

“Tell them I killed their son? A good kid with a big heart and even bigger life ahead of him if he got the transplant. They’ll hate me for it. It’ll destroy them.”

“It’s destroying you right now. It’s eating you alive.”

“It’s something I’ll have to live with.” The kid sinks lower in the chair. “For a little while longer at least.”

“You’re not going to ask for help?”

“I don’t deserve it.” He curls into a fetal position and begins rocking back and forth.

The pasta threw up its noodles in exasperation. “What would he say about this? Would Louis want you to die of grief and pain?”

The kid drops to the floor on his hands and knees. “No”, he whispered. He crawls towards the counter and lifts himself. “He would want me to move on.”

“You were trying to help him. He would understand. Louis would not blame you.”

With his shaking hand, the kid reaches for the landline on the phone. 911, what’s your emergency? says the operator. “I think I’m dying. I’m at 2131 Sunflower heights. Apartment 334.” The operator calls the paramedics and asks the kid to stay on the line.

The kid’s skin turns pale as he slowly sinks to the floor while holding the landline near his face. He sits against the cabinets and rests his head upon the phone.

“I’m sorry for your loss”, says the pasta.

“Thank you”, says the kid.

“You’re welcome, sir. Stay with me”, replies the operator.