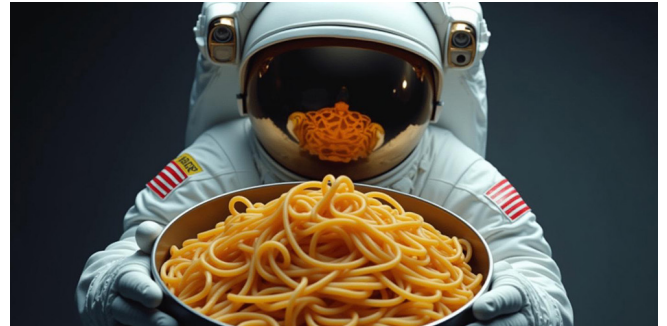


Year 11 & 12 Category: Winner

In The Spaghetti

by Nina Stachurski
UC Senior Secondary College Lake Ginninderra



As he careened towards Earth, the spaceman opened his final can of spaghetti.

He was convinced that spaghetti was best eaten alone. He couldn't really explain why he felt that way, but there it was.

He always poured himself a glass of wine to have with his spaghetti – red, of course – and made sure he had plenty of pasta and parmesan. Then he laid everything out neatly on a chequered tablecloth and ate his meal contentedly, watching stars fall across the windows of the space shuttle. From Monday to Sunday, one spaghetti week followed the next. That was the best way to keep track of his days in space: counting down the dwindling cans above the control panel.

Spaghetti strands were slippery bastards, and he'd learnt not to let them out of his sight. If he turned away for even just a moment, they might well slip over the edge of the can and into the darkness.

Before he left Earth, he'd stocked the cabin with all the different types of canned spaghetti.

Spaghetti marinara

Spaghetti puttanesca

Spaghetti al cartoccio

Spaghetti primavera

And then there were the pitiful strands left at the bottom of the can. Sometimes, if one squinted hard enough, the plastered spaghetti would form familiar shapes: a cloud, a dog, a dragon. Born in heat, they were scraped down the waste disposal hatch and into the blackness of space.

The spaceman had just finished his meal when the shuttle landed in a pool of cool winter sunlight. He paused for a moment, feeling the sudden weight of his space suit. It had rusted over time and creaked with each step he took. *Creak, creak* as he slowly walked across the cabin and, mustering his strength, heaved open the door.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to late-afternoon light. He stepped down onto the red earth of the landing strip, the door closing behind him with a dull thud. Long shadows of high-rise apartments filtered across the landing, the structures both impressive and ominous in their immensity. An eerie tension hung over the city and the hairs on the back of the spaceman's neck stood up. Had Earth always been so quiet?

The tip-tapping of footsteps broke the silence. Approaching was a businessman in his early thirties, dark hair combed back from an expressionless face. He wore a perfectly tailored suit, his silhouette all lines and sharp angles.

Hello, G156, he greeted the spaceman.

I've been sent by the head of Intergalactic Operations to welcome you. I know your journey has been long, so I'll skip the formalities but I...

His voice was rough and unnatural, as if he wasn't used to speaking this much at once.

I think you'll be extremely proud of the impact your research has had. Mankind has never before developed so rapidly, and it's all thanks to you.

As he spoke, he ushered the spaceman down the length of the landing strip, the creaking of the space suit rushing in to fill the silence.

The technology you gave us has advanced far beyond anything we could have imagined. World hunger, poverty, crime – all have been eradicated. And in the place of hardship and time-consuming human connection, we've been able to focus solely on progress. Of course, I'm sure it will take you some time to adjust to the Age of Solitude...

The businessman trailed off, watching as the scarlet light of dusk began to seep between the high-rises. They stood in silence at the end of the strip, their shadows, two darkened specks upon the scorched expanse of earth.

Well, there's really not much else to say, unless you would like me to escort you home?

The spaceman could sense the hesitancy in his offer, yet he instinctively accepted. He wasn't sure why, but he suddenly felt very attached to this strange man, on this strange and lonely planet, so different to the one he remembered.

Night fell as they slowly made their way through the city. The moon, huge and flickering, trapped itself in beads of sweat on the spaceman's neck. Each house they passed was set back from the street behind a tall, barbed wire fence, darkened windows looming out of the shadows. There wasn't a person in sight. Tacked to the streetlamps were brightly coloured advertisements, barely legible in the dim light.

Privacy is priceless

Keep prying eyes at bay

Focus on progress

Eventually, they reached the spaceman's front door.

Would you like to come inside? he asked.

The businessman took a hurried step backwards, his hands clasped behind his back.

No, no, I must refuse... Thank you for the kind offer.

He feigned politeness but was obviously taken aback.

You see, in the Age of Solitude it just isn't proper to do such things. Soon you'll understand.

The spaceman nodded reluctantly, and, without another word, his companion paced away in the direction they had come. Passing beneath the faces of the looming houses, he suddenly looked very small and lonely, his leather shoes tip-tapping with each step he took.

The spaceman unlocked the door and stepped inside his darkened kitchen. The shadow over his huge and airless apartment was broken only by the headlamp beams which passed like shooting stars across the floor. On the shelf above the stove was a lone packet of spaghetti, cloaked in a thick layer of dust. Instinctively, the spaceman boiled a large pot of water, his hands carrying out the familiar task almost of their own accord, and he waited for the timer to ding its plaintive note. He'd spent years of his life wandering the cosmos but it was there, stranded in the midst of that silent city, he felt more alien than ever before.

When the spaghetti was ready, he poured himself a glass of wine and pulled the chequered tablecloth from his spacesuit. Outside, it had begun to rain. Dark drops pitter-pattering on the roof like a solitary drummer at the end of a solo. A thin veil of steam rose from the spaceman's bowl, its comforting warmth washing over him. Yet he just couldn't bring himself to take a bite. There was something missing, something he had never realised he needed before.

Perhaps spaghetti was not, after all, a meal best eaten alone.