

## The Passing of the Spoon by John Paul Rollert

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Mother didn't return the wooden spoon, not until she was dead, and even then only after I had cried out her name, several times, to ensure that her eyelids wouldn't snap open and her stare, angry and unequivocal, wouldn't chasten my presumption. She held the spoon like some culinary martyr, hands clasped over the handle, right between her shrunken dugs, and only when I had screamed her name and pressed my hand against her cold forehead did I finally take it, twisting it free from her child's fingers.

My mother had that wooden spoon for as long as I can remember, but it gained its significance only when it lost its purpose. When I was a child, my mother directed the household from behind her wooden spoon. Its cup, gravy stained from years of cooking, glistening with grease or broth, summoned us to seats at dinnertime, and whenever our mouths got away from us, the swift rap of the long handle always brought them home. Even my father, Foss County's largest invertebrate, was led about the house by that spoon. Mother pointed and waved, the conductor of an interminable symphony.

I escaped the wooden spoon, first when I went to college and for good when I married Sylvia. Or at least it seemed for good. Then, shortly after I turned 43, my father died, and being the only son –

and a good son, at that – I asked my mother to come live with us. My mother, though she had never liked Sylvia and often asked at dinner when we would start having children, no matter how many times I explained her that Sylvia couldn't, moved in immediately, claiming the empty room next to ours (which she promised to vacate when the little one finally arrived).

The spoon did not appear immediately. No. It was only after a few weeks had passed, once she stopped trying to claim the cooking from Sylvia and found that she was unable to marshal my movements when Sylvia dictated them first. Only then did the spoon appear. I came down for breakfast and found it there, held upright by my Mother as she sat primly on the couch. She didn't look over, not even when I called her name, and I now know that this was the first sign that Mother had decided to stop communicating with Sylvia and me.

The divorce wasn't immediate. For a time, Mother still joined us at meals and occasionally answered when spoken to. Then she was silent. When I would ask her – and later, when I knew she was no longer eating, beg her – to come to meals, she would turn her eyes and fix them on me with a stare that had all the welcome of a bee sting. At the same time, the tendons along her knuckles would appear as she gripped the wooden spoon as tightly as her tiny fingers allowed.

Before long she stopped coming out of her room except to go to the toilet and bathe herself. (Mother was a lady to the last.) Otherwise, she lay on her bed, the spoon clutched against her chest like the icon of a small apocalypse, and the only movement she made were those of her eyelids when they snapped open to glower at me.

When she finally died, I can't imagine she weighed more than 60 pounds, her body like that of a little girl's, drowning in her mother's clothes. That's how I found her, still lying on her bed, spoon clutched against her chest, her eyes shut (this time, for good).

Sylvia stood in the hall, watching me as I tended to her. (She refused to step foot into the room.) When I was done, she asked redundantly: *Is it over?* I walked over, holding the spoon, and nodded. *It's over. Good*, she said, grabbed the spoon, and broke it over her knee.

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