

A-L-D-E-R

James Somers

A: That's really all I'm doing with this chair business, and the crossword, and the beer and a half, and all that—all I'm doing with all that is just trying to get you to imagine a very kind of *vanilla* scene.

B: To get me to see that there's no respect, really, in which this wasn't a typical Wednesday night, that what you're setting up here, in one manner of speaking, is an *archetype* of a Wednesday night.

A: Exactly.

B: But of course the danger there is that I'm going to think that this Wednesday of yours was somehow *unusually* normal. And it sounds—correct me if I'm wrong here—but I'm getting the impression that what you're decidedly not after is the kind of feeling where the very normalcy of the scene is what ends up predominating. I mean you're not out to spook me or anything.

A: Yes, that's exactly the sort of thing that I'm decidedly not out to do.

B: So at what point does the ramen get involved?

A: The ramen comes in a bit later. Right now all he's really doing is banging his head against the wall with this Druids clue. Because he is just sunk without it—there's simply no other way he can pull the corner together. And you know what that does to him, I mean we've talked about this before, you know that he has a very hard time putting these things down with empty swaths of any kind.

B: One or two letters he can tolerate.

A: One or two letters he can tolerate. But a swath of this magnitude—

B: He's starting to get, if not quote-unquote *stressed*, then at least the tiniest bit *impatient*. He's slipping out of his usual kind of magnificent calm.

A: Part of it is this beer and a half that I told you about. I mean it's at this point that he's seriously starting to think that the beer was a mistake. It feels like—and I mean this in a slightly more literal way than it's usually meant—but it feels like he's now working with just a fraction of his regular gear, thought-wise.

B: Like whole associative tracts have just... dried up.

A: And this is really why he starts thinking about noodles in the first place.

B: Frankly it doesn't surprise me. Say what you will about structural complexity, and operational...—To be dead honest here, you of all people should have a fairly mature handle on the kind of complexities I'm talking about—but at least a solid sixty percent of these battles are really just won with sleep and food.

A: That's really exactly how he's feeling at this point with the beer and this Druids nonsense. He's feeling that this impatience that you brought up, which is absolutely the right word for it, by the way—or *vexation*, maybe—that this vexation is going to be just about wiped out by a plate or two of noodles.

B: And it's this feeling, then, that drives him to the kitchen.

A: He goes to the bathroom first, as it turns out, but basically, yes, most of the action from here on in is going to happen with him either standing over the stove or sitting, in various configurations, at this horrible little table in there, in the kitchen.

B: I'm actually starting to think that I'd like a clearer picture of this stove. And the table, too, while we're

at it. The table interests me also.

A: There's really not much to this stove. In a way it's really closer to a stove *template* than it is to being an actual stove. By that all I mean is that to get to any other stove, you really have to start with something that looks exactly like this one. That's how basic this stove is. You need *matches* to light the burners, for God's sake. It's frankly quite dangerous.

B: You mean he could quite easily leave the gas on?

A: *Quite* easily. It's gotten to the point where he's become a sort of paranoiac regarding the pilot lights in this machine. He's developed little rituals and so forth to make sure he doesn't asphyxiate in his sleep. What it really comes down to—and he's taken a sort of hard line on this—is that wherever he goes next he's just flat-out insisting on electric burners.

B: And the table?

A: It's a horrible little table. Plain, cold—the thing is always cold—just horrible. To describe it in any kind of vivid *visual* detail would, paradoxically I think, take away from the impression I'm trying to convey here, which above all is of a kitchen table that you wouldn't be *enthused* to sit at.

B: You're right that it works better that way, without the visual details.

A: In any case, what he's doing now is he's got his back to the table there, and he's sort of standing around, rifling through his cupboard for a snack. In particular he's got his eye on the ramen.

B: The thinking there being that anything else—bona fide pasta, say, or some kind of pilaf—is at bare minimum a fifteen-minute operation, and it's not that he's *starving*, is it, it's that this vexation of his is really going to draw out each additional minute. I mean fifteen of the minutes that he'd be slated to have with the pilaf, say, are really a whole different ball game, qualitatively, from fifteen workaday off-the-shelf minutes.

A: Yes, I think you could argue that *something* of that sort is going on, at least unconsciously, with his choice of snack here.

B: And so with the ramen in hand, what does he do—he just sets up his pot of boiling water? Then what?

A: He sits down at the table—facing the burners, for the safety of just about everyone in the building—and gets to work on that troublesome corner we were discussing before.

B: How does the crossword get into the kitchen?

A: He brings it with him.

B: Into the bathroom as well? I'm not prodding here, you see, I'm just letting you know that I'm keen on the details.

A: Yes, he brings the crossword into the bathroom with him. He brings paper freely into and out of the bathroom.

B: And I imagine that he's still not making any progress on this slippery little corner, is he. That would be my prediction—that he's still stymied.

A: He's at a real impasse, he really is. Whereas typically he spends about twenty to twenty-five minutes on the Wednesday crossword in *total*, that's about how long he's been going on with this single clue. In fact he's thought about little else for nearly a full half hour.

B: He's become a bit obsessive, you might say.

A: Locked in. He's just locked in to this little world of trees and "E"s and five-letter words. "Tree sacred to the Druids." He can't think of much else.

B: His mind's not *wandering* in its usual way.

A: Yes, that's good. What he's got going here, in a way, is the opposite of a daydream. No imagination whatsoever—a very *austere* sort of thinking.

B: And then the water starts to boil.

A: His pot really crackles when it boils, so there's absolutely no mistaking it. And what he does is, he gets up—quite happily, I might add, to have some reason to excuse himself from this clue—and unwraps two of these ramen noodle bricks. And he puts them into this crackling pot.

B: And he sits down again?

A: No. Like I said he's sort of happy to be away from the clue for a minute. I mean he hasn't completely given up thinking about it—he's still sort of chasing trees and "E"s around his brain—it's just quite a bit different when the puzzle's not in front of him, is all. Quite a bit more relaxed.

B: And on top of that is that he's always just gotten a kick out of watching these noodle-bricks kind of melt, hasn't he? Because they really do *unfurl* in a neat kind of way.

A: He absolutely gets a big kick out of the bricks unfurling. Sometimes what he does is he'll even take a fork or whatever out of the drawer and sort of jab the bricks, submerge them, to get this melting underway.

B: But in this particular instance?

A: What he's doing now is he's just letting them float for a while—he's letting the melting sort of play out on its own terms.

B: I mean he's *hungry*, sure, but now that he's over this pot, away from this Druids business for just a minute, he's really just sort of enjoying the noodle bricks break down.

A: Plus there's some very nice steam coming out of the pot now. And what he ultimately needed, I think—I mean it's certainly not *hurting*—was a nice bit of steam on his face.

B: He's starting to release a bit from the clue, I'd imagine, at this point.

A: He is.

B: You could even say—and I'm not trying to put words in your mouth here, so really, stop me anytime—but couldn't you even say that his thoughts are now unfurling in just about the same way as the noodles? It strikes me as roughly the same kind of unfurling.

A: Well what happens—and I have some theories about *why* this happens, or how—I mean it almost certainly has something to do with his being just about *locked in* for a half hour now with this Druids clue, and certainly the steam is involved—but he starts thinking quite wildly about noodles and trees.

B: The noodles are now boiling?

A: That could be the very thing that gets him started. Because he's looking at this ramen just going wild here—and it's sort of true about ramen, that when it's boiling it absolutely *teems*...

B: Well you have these very long noodles—I mean once you've got them unfurled you can really see how

long they are—and they're just squiggling all over the place, knotting and squiggling over and under one another and so forth. I completely understand this impression of teeming that you're talking about.

A: He's noticing this teeming—well *noticing's* not the right word, I don't think, because it's more that he's sort of *stupefied* by it—

B: He's *wrapped up* in it, maybe.

A: Yes, he's wrapped up in the teeming. And on a parallel track—you see now his mind has sufficiently unfurled to be able to entertain at least two tracks simultaneously—he is recalling this very strange idea he once had that trees—and it's quite clear where *this* association came from—that trees might think, not thinking the way that *we* think, you understand, but thinking the way that *trees* would think, with years and years to form the slow trace of an idea.

B: Which is sort of a wonderful way of looking at trees, really.

A: It is. It's a wonderful possibility. But don't forget that this cute little thought of his about trees is happening against a backdrop of all that teeming that we touched on before. It's important to keep these two tracks in mind.

B: Because these two quite distinct tracks of his, each engaging in its own right, end up sort of coalescing for him.

A: As tracks like these are apt to do.

B: And so he starts to wonder if his noodles are thinking.

A: You have to understand that they really do teem in this very lifelike way, if you boil them just so—and on top of that if you already have this trees idea, I mean it's really not—

B: This bizarre possibility is not wrought *whole cloth* here, there are a lot of elements conspiring...

A: You have this locked-in period that we've been talking about, which is really just an absolute full half hour of *vexatious* thinking about trees, and of course the beer and a half—

B: And additionally this pot of lifelike ramen. I mean if he's under the impression—and it really sounds like he has to be, given this idea of his about trees—if he's one of these people in the intelligence-qua-pattern camp, for instance—

A: You can sort of *imagine* how he might find himself in this peculiar spot. I mean it's not really all that absurd a jump, once you see these various elements conspiring.

B: Conspiring, ultimately, to put him over his plain little stove, enjoying a nice bit of steam on his face, watching these noodles teem, wondering if they cogitate.

A: Thinking about the sorts of things noodles might think about.

B: Sauces, for instance.

A: Or cutlery of various kinds.

B: And whereas trees would presumably think in this very *enduring* manner, maybe what these noodles care about is by comparison quite ephemeral.

A: Trivial, even.

B: Not to *them*, of course—but when you stack it up against what the trees...

A: These are just absolutely different planes, I think he's thinking. I mean he's interested in the noodles *for their own sake*, not necessarily with all this tree baggage.

B: Although there is the *slightest* bit of pity here, isn't there, with the lamenting of their terribly short lifespans.

A: Where he convinces himself that without the boiling...—that it's their *élan vitale*.

B: And if someone is... *sensitive* enough to entertain these possibilities in the first place—

A: Surely they're sensitive enough to worry about turning the heat off at this point, knowing what they think they know about the lifespans of noodles.

B: And this is where we hit our proverbial flash point. Because he can't decide what to do about these noodles, these noodles which he now temporarily—but sincerely—takes to be *alive*—and so, quite naturally in light of what we know he knows (or *thinks* he knows), he leaves them boiling. And he tends to them for a while. He watches, and he waits, and he tends. When the water runs low—as it invariably does, as it invariably must—he panics. But only for a moment, really, once he realizes that he can just add more, so long as he's careful not to cool things down too much. He gets into a little routine—a cycle of adding water, little by little, enough to keep a rolling boil. He even cobbles together a sort of system of timers and measurements and what not—he gets the whole thing down quite precisely. And of course through all this there's some downtime—short breaks which he uses to wrestle with his crossword. But try as he might, that devil of a corner just won't budge. He gets *tired*—this tiredness being, in a spirally sort of way, both a cause and effect of his struggle with this corner—he gets *so* tired, in fact, that he sort of dozes. He misses an alarm, then two. And with no water to absorb the heat, this ramen and this pot of his can't help but take every last bit of it, take the full force of this medium flame... You'd think the noodles would burn first, but no, it's the handle—it's the plastic handle that catches first. Which is lucky, frankly, because of the terrible chemical smell it puts out—which smell, terrible though it is, is strong enough to wake him up. Startled and confused, and tired, and terrified, he springs up and knocks the pot into the sink, he puts out this smelly little fire, having nearly died because he thought his noodles were alive.

A: You know, I don't actually think I'm going to use the fire. It's a bit unbelievable, I think. I mean did what you just say ring true to you? Did it sound like something that could happen, in your mind?

B: Well what's the alternative?

A: I mean I think he *considers* your little life-support plan there, but really for no more than about one tenth of a second. At which point I think he gets his head together—he sort of snaps out of it a bit—and he turns the heat down. Remorselessly, I might add. He *eats* his ramen. He feels better, too—I mean if anything his head is just about absolutely cleared up at this point, with a nice full stomach now. And he solves the puzzle.

B: So this bizarre little episode is just the kick he needed to get him thinking laterally again. Imaginatively.

A: It's enough of a kick to get him to *release* a little, yes, to look back for a second at this other clue, this one that crosses the Druids one there. And he sees—this after about forty full minutes of *not* seeing it—that “cerebral” is spelled with an “A” at the end, not an “E.” Classic irony. So now he's looking for “A”-trees, not “E”-trees, and of course, being the erudite little fellow that he is, he's got it in really no more than a minute after that. At which point the rest of the corner basically just undresses for him. It *snowballs* is what I mean. He finally fills it in. He can put it down. He can put it down and he can go to sleep and he can dream his dreams of wise old thoughtful forests and anxious noodle brains.