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For Amy Freed, who persuaded me to play ball.

Cast of Characters

STEEL KNIFE, a 9-inch Sabatier Forged Steel Standard kitchen knife.

LASER KNIFE, an 8-inch poly-steel serrated Laser brand knife.

TEASPOON, from the Stainless set. Modest. Everyday.

GRAPEFRUIT SPOON, a short, shiny, plated silver grapefruit spoon.

STERLING FORK, an elegant heirloom now in regular use; a silver fox.

STAINLESS FORK, from the same set as Teaspoon.

Setting

The kitchen counter in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Smith-Jones. And later, in the dishwasher.

Production Notes

The actors playing these roles should be costumed enough to be recognized as the implement they represent, but need not be literally dressed. They could, for instance, even hold medallions that signify their implement. Sound effects of meal preparation can be used, especially the sound of the cleaver hacking apart frozen chicken, the sound of the garbage disposal, and the sound of the dishwasher.

JUST BEFORE THE WAR BETWEEN THE PLATES

A Ten-Minute Play of Manners in Three Acts and an Epilogue

by Larry Loebell

ACT I: Knives

(A beautifully sharpened nine-inch STEEL kitchen knife and a nearly new, similar-sized stainless alloy LASER knife pop out of their respective racks—the LASER knife, dismounting like a gymnast from the high bar, jumps off of a magnetic knife rack and lands on the counter; the STEEL knife somersaults out of an oak knife rack and sticks the landing on the counter. They face off, but the argument has started before now.)

STEEL KNIFE. Oh, right. Serrated. Like that means jack.

LASER KNIFE. Yeah? You think an onyx handle increases utility?

STEEL. You bet your ass I do. I got balance, baby. Heft. That's why I'm in the hardwood house and you're dangling off the fridge from a magnet bar.

LASER. Watch Her next time. Pull your head out of your knothole and take a serious look. Who slices tomatoes? Who slices bread? Who does Her delicate jobs? Her finesse work?

STEEL. Wussy work. Who carves meat?

LASER. I could carve, believe me.

STEEL. Like hell you could. Rip. Tear. Saw. Ever seen surgery tools? Razor sharp. Honed steel. Me.

LASER. I've seen surgery. They use alloy micro saws. They use crystal lasers. Why do you think my family has this name? Blades are high school biology. Edges are high technology.

STEEL. Your family's got that name 'cause it sells fools like Her. Laser. Give me a break. You got no lineage.

LASER. Lineage? For a base-metal shiv, you sure have a two-bit vocabulary.

STEEL. Listen to these names. Sabatier. Henckels. Shaaf. Wüsthof. You think brides want alloys? You think sous chefs ask Santa for serrated?

LASER. This is all academic.

STEEL. Yeah, can-cutter. I've seen your family on TV. "And we'll throw in these Ginsu knives for free."

LASER. She's coming.

(LASER scurries back to his bar.)

LASER. Glint. Glint.

STEEL. What are you doing?

LASER. What you can't. Getting Her attention.

STEEL. You're flashing Her?

LASER. SCREE. SCREE.

STEEL. You're screaming at Her?

LASER. She's looking.

STEEL. Her Cuisinart's a screamer, too. You wanna be in the same meals with that chop-meister?

LASER. She's reaching. It's me. Me. ME. Damn. Cleaver. That heavy-headed bastard.

STEEL. Wrong tool for the job, scree boy. She's got a block of frozen what is that, chicken? Another last-minute meal. What a *gourmet*.

LASER. *(To the cleaver:)* Hey, meat axe! You got gristle on your face.

STEEL. I gotta find me a kitchen where they do some real cooking. You got any idea how that bread knife got himself taken to that garage sale?

(Fade lights on KNIVES, but not totally. STEEL stretches out. LASER exercises.)

ACT II: Spoons

(Lights up on SPOONS. A metal GRAPEFRUIT SPOON climbs out of the dish drainer. A TEASPOON climbs out of a drawer.)

GRAPEFRUIT SPOON. He is so cute.

TEASPOON. Laser? I can't believe you like him.

GRAPEFRUIT. He's just like me. Flashy and limited.

TEASPOON. He's too common for anyone's hope chest, that's for sure. You're from a much classier set. You're silver!

GRAPEFRUIT. I'm plated.

TEASPOON. Still.

GRAPEFRUIT. Every mother warns her daughters about guys like him. He rings my tines.

TEASPOON. What's with those things anyway? I know forks with fewer.

GRAPEFRUIT. I'm all spoon, believe me.

TEASPOON. Fine. So what's he doing?

GRAPEFRUIT. Hanging off his bar. What a bod.

TEASPOON. I think he's showing off. And what in god's name is she doing?

GRAPEFRUIT. Chicken. In the microwave. Again.

TEASPOON. I was in there once.

GRAPEFRUIT. In the nuker? I thought it was all over if you got in one of those.

TEASPOON. I survived.

GRAPEFRUIT. Gives me chills.

TEASPOON. I was in the disposal once, too.

GRAPEFRUIT. Get out.

TEASPOON. We have it the worst. They say forks and knives. But it's spoons. We're in every meal. No fork I know could take what we take.

GRAPEFRUIT. Well, my experience is sort of specific.

TEASPOON. Take my word.

GRAPEFRUIT. What's coffee like?

TEASPOON. Coffee? You've never done coffee? No. I suppose not.

GRAPEFRUIT. I hate being a grapefruit spoon. I hate it. You've heard what they call me in the drawer. "Sporky." And "Tiny Tine." I want to be a regular spoon. I want to have experiences. Cereal. Melon. Ice cream. I don't want to do the same thing every day.

TEASPOON. Service is a vale of tears.

GRAPEFRUIT. Hey, maybe you could help me. If you knock me into the disposal, it could chew these things off. I could be regular.

TEASPOON. You're dreaming. First of all, it's imprecise. If you fell upside-down, you'd get mangled. And even if you fell right-side-up...I don't even want to think about what could happen if She didn't switch it off in time.

GRAPEFRUIT. A girl can dream.

TEASPOON. I won't help you. Don't even consider it. This is your life. You don't have it so bad.

GRAPEFRUIT. You're as bad as the rest of them. You have a family, brothers and sisters, a drawer where you belong. I'm alone. I'm a freak. Even the Laser knife looks down on me.

TEASPOON. There, there. Come nestle up to me. It'll be okay.

GRAPEFRUIT. I hate my life. You're so lucky. *(To the LASER knife:)* Oh, yeah, look at me now, Laser boy. When I'm pathetic.

TEASPOON. There, there.

(GRAPEFRUIT nestles with TEASPOON.)

ACT III: Forks

(Lights down on the nestled SPOONS, lights up on FORKS. Two regular dinner FORKS are doing handstands. They are from different sets, but are otherwise about the same size and shape.)

STERLING FORK. If Her mother hadn't passed on so suddenly, you wouldn't feel invaded and she wouldn't be having the stainless/sterling dilemma at every meal.

STAINLESS FORK. It was a lot easier before She inherited your set.

STERLING. Easier, but less elegant.

STAINLESS. You know I like you, and personally I'm glad you guys are here. It gets to be a bit of a bore to hang out in a place where everyone is like you and everyone has had the same experience. You guys have seen so much. Being carried from the old country, being in hock until Her grandpa had a job. But frankly, have you looked at these people? They're pretty much punters, if you know what I mean. So elegant, schemelegant is what I say. The old days are gone. A mink coat does not make a yak into a unicorn. Just take a look at Her.

STERLING. In Her grandmother's day, things were precise, determined. We only came out for company. Everyone behaved so grandly. In my family there were three kinds of forks—salad, dinner, and dessert. There was an order. Her mother added shrimp forks somewhere along the way. Now I never know what I'm going to be used for. And half the time, I wake up and I find one of your brothers sleeping in my bed.

STAINLESS. And visa versa. You guys are always in our drawer. Especially when He cleans up. Did anyone ever tell you that you have a, well, slight odor?

STERLING. That's real silver. But, ooh, stay away. It might rub off. You might get a tarnish.

STAINLESS. I didn't mean it that way. I just meant I notice when one of you gets mixed with our set.

STERLING. It's not as bad as mixing on the table.

STAINLESS. Appearance is what counts for you, isn't it?

STERLING. Pretty much. What do you think of that grapefruit babe?

STAINLESS. Too ambiguous for me. I like my spoons regular.

STERLING. That figures. She's got some deep curve on her. In my set, the spoons are nearly flat.

STAINLESS. Yeah, I've noticed. Why is that?

STERLING. Heritage. Tradition. I don't know. I've just never seen a Sterling who wasn't. That's how we're made.

STAINLESS. Well, I confess I am attracted to Sterling spoons.

STERLING. You would be.

STAINLESS. What's that supposed to mean?

STERLING. Nothing.

STAINLESS. No. Tell me.

STERLING. I'm just saying, classic lines, perfect proportions. Sterling sets the standard. Of course you're attracted. Just like I have a weakness for your spoons. They're so round, so earthy. That deep bowl. It's the exotic other, if you know what I mean. It's always attractive.

STAINLESS. If you say so. So what are your plans?

STERLING. No plans. When She's done hacking up that chicken, I'll probably listen to the knives argue about who'd have done a better job than the cleaver. I have to admit, I envy that Steel.

STAINLESS. Really? He's so prone to stain.

STERLING. Next to the serving pieces, preparation is the highest form of service. To only get used when the occasion is right. Steel's a workhorse, but he has poise. And he never gets put in the dishwasher. If these dopes had any idea of how bad it was for us Sterlings to be washed in there...

STAINLESS. I like my routine. It's a nice cycle. Regular work, regular time-outs for washing or just lying around. Lots of different hands. She's all over that knife, but no one else ever touches him.

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