

## **It's Not Rocket Science** **By Tom Barlow**

Father didn't at first fully realize the mistake he'd made the night Mother tried to coax a compliment out of him for her bouef bourguignon. Distracted by a stubborn crossword puzzle clue, he'd ventured the opinion that cooking wasn't rocket science.

But the next morning he came down to breakfast salivating in anticipation of his usual Saturday boysenberry pancakes and maple-cured bacon, only to find a bowl of Booberry cereal floating in skim milk.

He turned to Mother, eyebrows raised.

"I couldn't comprehend the directions to make pancakes," she said frostily. "After all, I'm no rocket scientist."

Father disliked confrontation, so he gave her a chagrined smile and dug into the cereal with sham gusto. When Mother turned her back, though, he winked at Sis and me, indicating that he expected this to be a short-lived storm.

To our dismay, the battle escalated at lunch. When Father returned home from his office, he found no hot tomato soup waiting for him, no ham salad sandwiches with the crust trimmed and sliced on the diagonal as he liked.

Instead, waiting for us was a plate of cold Velveeta sandwiches on a rye that was chewy as a dog bone. For a vegetable, Mother served the raw broccoli I'd seen her throw in the trash two days before.

Father had trouble treating this meal with the same aplomb that he had breakfast. Between bites of the silage, he ventured the opinion that a little properly applied heat could improve both dishes.

Mother smiled wickedly. "You can't expect an ordinary housewife to understand how to properly excite cheese molecules."

Even at ages 12 and 10, Sis and I recognize that this was the time for an apology. Unfortunately, Father's radar was not so finely tuned.

That evening, he avoided the kitchen when he arrived home from work, instead joining Sis and me as we worked on the 4,999 pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that our dog Bosco had not yet eaten.

When Mother called us to the table, we came with trepidation. The meal Mother served was typical for a Saturday night; pork chops, peas, and mashed potatoes. But the chops were fried so hard they'd taken on the contour of oysters. She'd fried the canned peas in the same skillet so they had the crunchiness and flavor of pea gravel, while the mashed potatoes were the consistency of wet concrete.

Father said nothing, but as he gnawed on his pork chop, his face slowly took on the color of ham. Meanwhile, Sis and I were on our best behavior. Having seen a raisin pie cooling on the kitchen windowsill, we ate our mother's minimum daily requirement of each dish to earn our dessert. I surreptitiously offered a bite of my chop to Bosco, but he sniffed it once and walked away.

Mother waited until Father had stewed to the breaking point before she picked up the meat platter and wave it in his face." How about another chop??"

“Pork chops?” he said, scowling. “I thought these were Keds without the shoe laces.”

“I, sure there’s a better way to cook chops,” she replied. “If only I had the mental capacity to understand.”

He put his utensils down and pulled the napkin out of his collar. “That’s enough, Edie. You’ve made your point.”

“Point? Do I have a point?” There was no humor left in her voice.

“I’m sorry — about the rocket thing,” he replied. Unfortunately, there was forbearance in his voice that suggested he was more sorry about her petulance than about his initial comment.

Mother silently gathered up the dishes and carried them to the kitchen.

To our grave disappointment, she served us dishes of pineapple for dessert that had already begun to ferment.

That was too me for Sis. When Mother returned to the kitchen she said, “Pop, This can’t go on any longer. There’s *raisin pie* on the line. If you love your children and raisin pie, you have to apologize.”

He sighed. “I suppose I’d better, if I ever want to eat again. I can’t guarantee your mother will listen, though. She’s very stubborn when she’s mad.”

“Well, how about this?” Sis said, and made a suggestion, worthy of a rocket scientist, about how he could get back in Mother’s good graces.

Father begged off going to church the next morning, so the three of us traipsed up the streets for the 10 a.m. service.

On our return, Mother found a large gift-wrapped package on the kitchen table.

Father nervously nodded to it. “For you,” he said.

She pulled the box toward her. “Is this an apology?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I’m abjectly apologetic.” (He tended toward alliteration when he was nervous.” His eyes were full of equal parts chagrin and hunger.

“I’m not sure,” she said, pulling off the wrapping. But when I saw his gift, I knew that dinner was going to be spectacular.

As Mother held up the rocket kit, Father put his arm around her waist and said, “I have complete faith in your ability to put this together.”

When he kissed her, she kissed back. I slapped Sis on the back of the head to thank her.

The following Saturday night, after the sun had set, Mother carried the completed rocket out into the front yard. After a brief christening ceremony, Mother lit the fuse on Edie I.

The flame raced up the body tube, and the rocket took off with a bang. It streaked across the face of the moon before disappearing into the stars.

We waited for fifteen minutes for a sign of its decent, but never saw Edie I again. So we went inside for a late snack of the best raisin pie of my life.