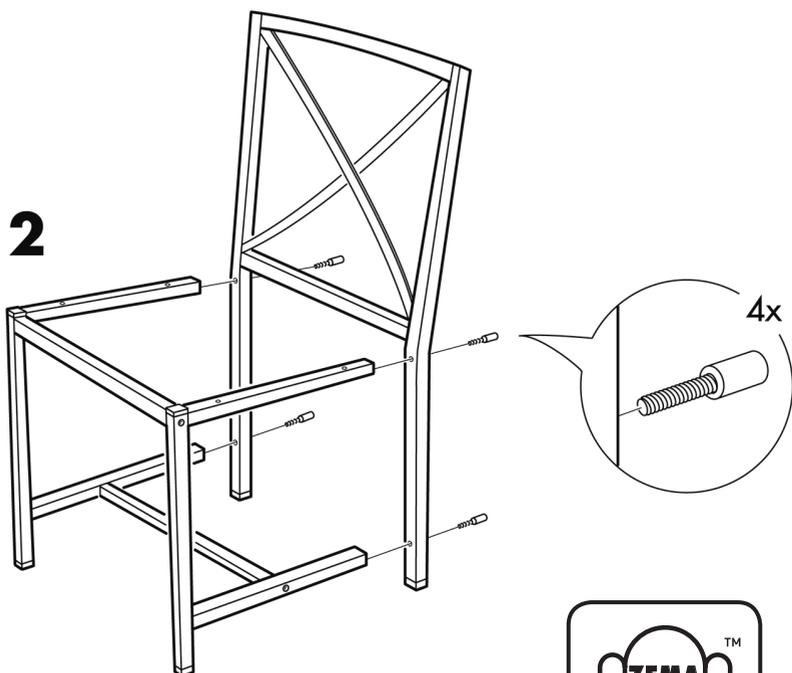
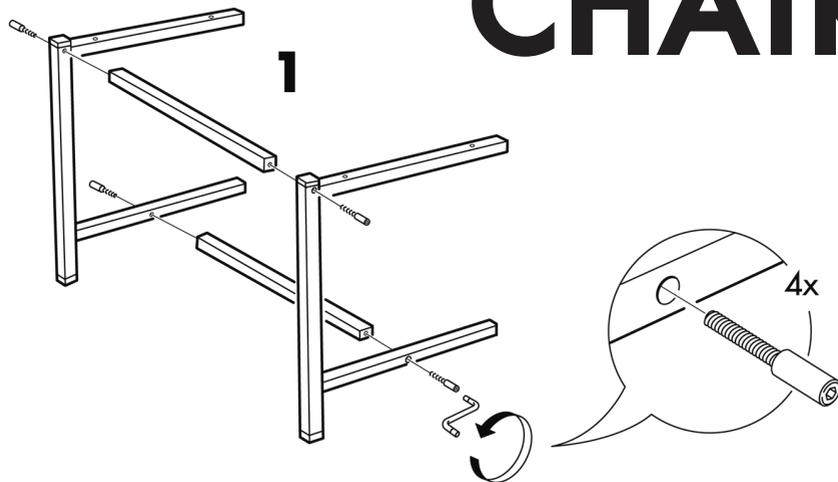


THE DREAM CHAIR



3. Lemon Soufflé

Welcome to the future; a time of tepid unease. The twenty first century, it seems, has begun with a whimper rather than a bang and the heady expectation of a newly prosperous age has quickly fizzled away like a damp Catherine wheel. The manic pace of the last century has created a false sense of expectation, but now the sprinter has doubled up with cramp and the race looks run. The anticipation that has so long held the computer age in great regard has not passed the baton to realisation. The information super-highway has become nothing more than a glorified answering service and festering sore of anti-communication. Talk is now so cheap it has become devalued and pointless. The twinkling microchip gadgets that once promised to so richly enhance our lives have done no such thing, and the world is bored. Bored in a way that is only ever witnessed before the storm of revolution.

Industry craves innovation and imagination, but humanity has become hidden behind closed doors. There is no need to think anymore; others do the thinking for us. Life has become convenient, flat-packed and custom-moulded for the apathetic. Morgan Sweet fights the urge to recede inside the safe shell of his brain, close down his mind and flick to cruise control. But the threat taunts with every turn of his day: Waiting amongst the trail of commuters in the morning, testing the epithelial cells of a sample during the day or when scooping the globular mass off his dinner plate at home. Marianne licks sauce from the edge of her knife. Her wine glass clinks against the side of her plate. Outside a dog makes its presence heard. Tonight, it is worse. Marianne's parents have joined them for dinner and the banality of life threatens to consume him whole like quicksand.

Letita is a cider barrel shaped lady with puffy ruby red cheeks and tiny watering eyes. She doesn't like Morgan. But then Morgan is a man and she despises men and their inherent stupidity. Marianne's dad is a dreamer like Morgan, only he dreams on a different level. He dreams of a place where he can sit and say nothing, sit and think nothing, sit and feel no guilt for the lack of life left in him. If Joe had the energy to climb Ben Nevis, or go ice fishing for giant crabs in Norway, he would. But he hasn't, so he doesn't. So for now he would rather just sit.

'They need two sperm samples for analysis,' Marianne is telling her mother.

Morgan winces, sperm shouldn't be discussed over the dinner table. 'Just in case there are any abnormalities with the first test. Apparently it takes around seventy-four days to make sperm, so if two samples are checked in a shorter time than this, it is likely that they are from the same population.' Morgan puts his fork down. He's not so hungry any more.

Letita has shifted her mass to let her full, pink elbows sit either side of her plate. She is chewing her fork thoughtfully. Oh, it's such a drama, isn't it?

'Morgan's exhausted, aren't you poor love?' Marianne grins at him. Don't talk about that. Please don't talk about that. 'And it was such a large pot.' Yes, thank you.

'Have you rewired that socket in the kitchen?' It's a well-meaning enquiry. But no Joe I haven't, f-off. What do you think of the Middle East crisis Joe? Is the wire dome over Gaza an infringement of human rights? What? You're not sure? Morgan is adrift with this kind of talk. Marianne thinks his one-word answers are ignorance. At university she found his idle daydreaming and moody silences endearing.

'He's thinking,' she would say.

Morgan shakes his head to Joe's question. He can't think of what to say. So Marianne helps:

'He can't be bothered. Anyway, he needs to save all his strength.' Oh. Dear. God. The momentary silence is soon stolen away by mother and daughter, like sand disappearing into a hole. Father and son-in-law stare blankly at the wall.

Who knows where ideas come from – some develop over time, a combination of carefully considered and plotted investigative trails pulled together to create a whole. Others are instantaneous, almost subconscious revelations allowed to burst out like magma breaking from a mountainous crust. They might come from the depths of sleep, or whilst walking the dog, whilst relieving your bowels of its contents, or, as Morgan is to discover in that moment, whilst scooping a spoon full of Marks and Spencer's Specialist Range lemon soufflé to the mouth. He feels as though a great icy hand has reached in through the bay windows and grabbed him by the back of the neck. He sits bolt upright and lets his spoon rattle in the dish. At first the others don't notice his sudden comatose state, letting the conversation flow undisturbed. It is only with a break in dialogue that they turn to look. He's as white as plain flour. They think he's going to choke.

The realization is at once obvious to Morgan. He feels like slamming his forehead against the table. The nearness of absolute solution makes him shiver. His

thinking, he realizes, has been literal not lateral, he's been thinking in the chemical not the physical. Joe's question is the answer. Of course it is. How stupid of him. Like a fresh bud appearing on a dying branch. Page reception; hope is alive and well. Imagine tiny electrical pulses – small doses naturally, almost undetectable - sent through the cytoplasm in order to stimulate the chemicals at the very nucleus of the brain, the engine room. Could the pulses be strong enough to run through the length of the body? So that the natural endorphins could be awakened and mixed with his man-made concoction - the perfect mix of human and nature hand in hand? Morgan wriggles in his chair. Has he gone completely mad? Pulses through the body, say... from, from, from this very chair for example. He grips the armrests and rocks back and forth. Why not? A chair: Completely controllable, unlike a pure chemical solution, a switch like a television, or a kettle, but instant and immediate and safe.

Marianne has got the hands-free in her palm. She is thumbing in 9, 9... but Morgan doesn't appear to be so much dying as coming alive. He stands up, sweat is pouring down his face. Suddenly he tells his audience everything. They seem enraptured. Or has he mistaken their expressions for shock. Has he shifted worlds and found fluent Hebrew? In his periphery there is slight movement. It's Joe nodding. No, it's just an involuntary twitch. The dam has burst its banks, he must continue, if not for them, then for himself – this is his moment. And then he has finished. He sits down and pushes his bowl away from him like a full stop. Marianne looks at him with that Marianne look.

'Very good darling. There's one more lemon soufflé left if anyone wants it.'

'Oh yes dear,' her mother beams, 'lovely.'

