

The Dining Room Table

In 1936 my father almost went to medical school. Ten years later my mother almost became an opera singer. Together, in 1952, they almost bought a section of an unknown beach called Puerto Vallarta. In 1961 Dad put an end to almost. He sold the family funeral home and furniture store to buy land. And on the first day of his new life Grandma Antonia, who couldn't understand why the son she'd raised to be a gentleman would want to shame her by getting his hands dirty, drove to the side of the field where he was working and shot herself in the head with a revolver.

Antonia was a handsome woman who threw fantastic parties and cooked the world's most wicked German ravioli. It was weightier than its Italian inspiration, made with giant doughy ravioli squares she rolled by hand, stuffed with ground veal and spices, and topped with chicken stock, fresh parsley, and Parmesan cheese. A meal I helped my mother make for Dad's birthdays or special company. A meal we served on pink and white Lenox china against the olive green sixties-chic backdrop of our dining room.

We never spoke about Grandma. Our family's habit of avoiding the disagreeable wove itself into the almost-southern St. Louis atmosphere. It clung to magnolia branches, drifted with the aroma of honeysuckle, climbed rose bushes that grew outside our dining room windows. Sex, religion, and family insanity were not invited to the table. Neither was any practical discussion about my future. "You could be president of the United States," my father said before he sent me off to practice the piano, a skill certain to make me more marriageable. Happy. Ever After.

I hated the piano except at Christmas, when my sisters and brother came home from college and for a week filled out our home, gathering around the Steinway to sing carols, hovering over fried eggs and pecan rolls at breakfast, and dinners so large they had to be served in

the dining room. When my siblings left, the dining room, living room, and extra bedrooms fell silent, vestigial remnants my parents and I claimed but didn't use.

The first hours of the day my mother stole for herself, needle-pointing pillows and footstool covers from her stuffed yellow chair. When I woke, her time became mine. She cooked me breakfast—eggs and bacon, buttered English muffins, oranges she pulled into sections and arranged on my plate like flowers. After school she made peanut butter sandwiches cut on the diagonal the way I liked them.

That was Real Mom. Real Mom helped me with my homework, took me with her to the hairdresser, sewed my clothes. Real Mom snorted a little when she laughed. She held the steering wheel close when she drove, mouth turned up nervously at the corners. She wore an apron, cooked three meals a day.

Hostess Mom was different. Hostess Mom hired people to help her cook, worried about which crystal she should use, got mad if I spilled anything on her embroidered tablecloths. Hostess Mom expected me to make an appearance at the dining table among her Hostess Mom friends, who were not the same as her Bridge friends or Girlfriend friends. These were Important People—St. Louis musicians and business owners. They packed our home with the weight of their self-measure.

My mother kept the dining room dressed and ready—linens crisp, silver polished—its formality interrupted only by quarterly tax preparation and the occasional sewing project or birthday dinner. She didn't believe in store bought cakes—they bothered her as much as the neighbors' friends who honked from their cars instead of ringing the doorbell, and vacationed in Orlando instead of Paris; my mother made German Chocolate cake for Dad and Vicki, Angel Food with chocolate frosting for Susan and me, and pecan pie for Jon, squiggling our names across

the tops in neon icing and saving the pans for us to spoon clean.

The day she died I devoured a twelve pack of Ding Dongs. First edges, then middles, creamy centers last. Each individually-wrapped cake a meditation in tin foil and hydrogenated fat. A flirtation of my own with Colon Cancer.

We were eating popovers at Neiman Marcus's Tea Room when the two words first hit the air. They hung in the vapor between us, a dark, intractable pair. They followed us to the parking lot. Sat between us at the movies. Cooked with us in the kitchen, the family stepping around them, my mother's cancer added to the list of prohibited topics of table conversation. The first words to break the ban were in the past tense, first spoken from the altar and then the receiving line, the words of distinguished friends telling me how gracious and accomplished my mother had been. Real Mom was dead.

At my father's funeral we ate finger sandwiches and deviled eggs from paper plates we balanced on our laps, then gathered around the dining room table to pick over the remains of our parents' lives. My brother wanted my father's gun collection. My sisters chose my mother's diamond rings. I took the dining room table.

A young woman believes she should have certain things—a husband, a family, a house in the suburbs, the formal dining set—proof her adult self has caught up with its adolescent dreams. But the dining table's sensible Chipendale lines clashed with the Caribbean art and bright walls of my home. It was several years before I had the courage to paint over its

polished maple finish with black gloss and a burst of emerald-leafed poppies.

I never became the pianist, wife, or president my parents dreamed. I'm a dancer, an artist, a single mom. I've started a dance company, raised a son, traveled to Cuba. Other things, like winning a national dance title or meeting Oprah, I've only almost done.

The dining room table, pretty but hardly practical, Alex and I use for company or creative projects that require a large surface. For meals we prefer the intimacy of the kitchen, where we make our own rules about manners and dinner conversation, and whether hot dogs and pizza constitute a meal.

I'm not as patient as my mother. My time is not always my son's. But I try. I pull oranges into sections and arrange them into flowers on his plate, cut peanut butter sandwiches on a diagonal, toast his bagel with lightly melted cheese on top the way he likes. I don't believe in store-bought cakes, but sometimes I buy them.

I keep the recipe for Alex's great grandmother Antonia's ravioli on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard between my mother's *Joy of Cooking* and my *Mexico Illustrated* cookbooks. Worn and stained, traces of flour and salt fading along with my grandmother's handwriting, the card gives no measurements, only ingredients to guide a bloodline of well-rehearsed cooks. Ground veal, flour, eggs, parsley, sage. I tell myself I should make the dish for Alex. The tradition may end with us if I don't. But the recipe is for six and takes an entire day to prepare. It's dining room food. We're kitchen people.

