



READERS WRITE

THE KITCHEN TABLE

EVERY DAY WHEN I CAME HOME FROM school, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. I never knew what to expect — she could be quite moody — but we often had long talks, sometimes with laughter, other times with anger or sadness or disappointment. And always with coffee and cigarettes.

Once, she told me that she wished I smoked so we could sit and have a cigarette together.

My parents had six kids in seven years

and would have had more if my mother hadn't been diagnosed with late-stage melanoma at age thirty-three. The doctor told her she had about a year to live and advised her not to have any more children.

I don't think my mother and father knew what they were getting into when they became parents. As good Catholics, they didn't have much choice. If not for us, they could have done so much more with their lives: my mother was artistic, and both my parents were readers and think-

ers. But there they were with a houseful of toddlers and grade-schoolers, and now she had cancer.

My mother lived for seventeen years after her diagnosis — just long enough to raise us. In between spells of remission, when we could forget she had cancer, she endured brutal treatments. During her remissions, the eight of us went camping, riding all over the country in our VW Bus.

When her children were all in school, my mother finally had a chance to take

some art classes. One day I came home and found her artwork all over the kitchen table.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied defiantly.

She never quit smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, even when she was no longer able to sit at the table to enjoy them. She took them in her reclining chair, then on the couch, then on her bed, and finally on the hospital bed we set up for her. She wanted to die at home, so we took care of her — especially my father, who tended to her night and day. The first thing we did each morning was prepare her medications and boil water for her coffee.

The night after she died, I had a dream. She was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. “It’s gone,” she said, with a huge smile on her face. “The pain is all gone.”

I woke up and went to the kitchen. My father was standing at the sink with a dish towel over his shoulder. The kitchen table was bare. I told him my dream. We both stood there, not knowing what to do with ourselves.

Sheila Griffin
Waukesha, Wisconsin

I REALIZED MY MARRIAGE WAS OVER ONE Saturday afternoon while having tea at the kitchen table.

My son Adam, age three, was toddling around, hopping on and off my lap, dunking a cookie into my cup of tea. As the gooey mess dripped down his chin, he broke into a contagious smile. Then my husband, Stu, came in from the yard, slamming the screen door behind him, and sat down at the head of the table, obviously tense. I hopped up and made him a mug of chamomile tea. When I returned, Adam had gone into the living room to get his favorite truck, and he “drove” it onto the kitchen table, grazing Stu’s mug of tea. Thankfully Adam didn’t see the annoyed look his father gave him.

Stu pulled out the stack of bills and grunted in dissatisfaction. He resented my cutting back to part time since Adam was born. It wasn’t the first time he’d stared at me over the bills as if to say, *Earn your keep, woman.*

“Look at this,” he said. “Why is the electric bill so high this month?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it’s Adam’s new fish tank. They say the pump can eat a lot of electricity.”

“Those fish have got to go,” said Stu, looking as though his mind was made up.

I quickly crouched beside him and whispered, “But Adam loves them!”

Adam had stopped playing and was studying his father as though he were a stranger: who was this man threatening his beloved fish?

“Can’t we talk about this later?” I pleaded.

Stu’s face reddened with rage: I had questioned his authority. He picked up his mug of tea and smashed it down on the kitchen table. The ceramic mug shattered against the formica surface, and a green chip flew into the air, past the salt and pepper shakers, past the pile of bills and the permanent brown coffee ring on the tabletop, and right into my son’s perfect right eye, lacerating the cornea, nicking the pupil, delving deep into the lens, piercing the vitreous humor, and finally severing the optic nerve.

My sweet Adam. He never saw it coming, and his right eye never saw again.

Bernardine O.
East Northport, New York

MY THREE BROTHERS AND I GREW UP ON the edge of poverty. Our mother stayed home to raise us, and our father worked two jobs to pay the bills. Although I was never privy to the household finances, I always had an underlying sense that, once the evening meal was paid for each night, little or no money remained.

I was grateful for this meal, which we gathered around the table to eat. During the dark, dreary winter months, the heat from the oven, our bodies, and the food would often fog the kitchen windows, blocking the cold and darkness that loomed outside. Dinnertime was the only time of day our old house seemed amply warm, and the only time I appreciated what little we had.

Now I live in a beautiful new farmhouse on a hill, with two roaring fireplaces and a refrigerator full of food. And I struggle

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they’re the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn’t as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we’re unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don’t want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under “Name Withheld” if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author’s name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don’t question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you’ve already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We’re sorry, but we can’t respond to or return your work, so don’t send your only copy unless you don’t want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you’ll hear from us prior to publication.

Upcoming topics and deadlines are:

ISSUE	TOPIC	DEADLINE
February 2003	Falling In Love	September 1
March 2003	Perfection	October 1
April 2003	Asking For Help	November 1
May 2003	Marijuana	December 1
June 2003	Vanity	January 1
July 2003	Wasting Time	February 1

each day to recapture the feeling of gratitude I felt at my family's kitchen table.

*Andrea Hayde
Asbury, New Jersey*

WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER IN THE FIFTIES, I was always looking for different, more satisfying ways to masturbate. In my quest, I discovered that the neck of a milk bottle was the perfect size to accommodate my erect penis. The only problem was how to keep the bottle stationary. Moving it up and down manually seemed pointless; I might as well have used my hand. If I lay down on the bottle — even with pillows strategically positioned on both sides — I was afraid my weight might break the glass.

The kitchen table offered a possible solution. I figured if I pulled the table leaves apart an inch or two, I could wedge the bottleneck between them, leaving the opening nearly level with the surface.

One Saturday night when my parents were out, I tested my idea. My experiment proved so successful that I wound up repeating it many times afterward. As disgusted as I was with myself, I was helpless to control my urges. Sometimes my heart would race so fast that I worried I might drop dead of a heart attack. Worse than the fear of death was the thought of my parents coming home and finding me naked on the table in the middle of the act.

*Richard E. Platt
New York, New York*

MY GRANDFATHER FARMED THE BLEAK red clay of northern Mississippi and spoke to the Lord on a daily basis. All day long, while plowing or picking, he kept up a running dialogue with Jesus. Even at dusk, when his work in the fields was done, his communion was not. Dead tired, he would look for a place to lie down, but my grandmother always refused to let him on the furniture in his soiled clothes. So he would lie on the floor instead; and since floor space in their small farmhouse was scarce, my grandfather got in the habit of lying underneath the kitchen table. There he would continue his discourse with Christ.

This was how I came to know him: his dirty boots protruding from beneath the oilcloth-draped table and his cries of praise and supplication floating up to the

ceiling. The family largely ignored this strange behavior, but I could not. Compared to my little-boy fears, he was so sure; compared to my family's middle-class suburban decorum, he was so unabashed, so triumphant. I suspected he knew something, that some secret was hidden there under that table.

*Bill Shippey
Tarzana, California*

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, MY FAMILY ATE dinner with the TV next to the table, tuned to the nightly news. Our seats at the table were assigned, and I sat to the left of my dad. At most meals, he would rub his leg or hand against my thigh, my foot — anything he could reach. (I wish I could say that was the extent of his groping.)

During these moments, I would often stare at my mother, incredulous that she didn't notice, couldn't see, didn't stop what was happening. When she did nothing, I would sit in silence, flushed and miserable, boring holes into Tom Brokaw's face, praying that he would stop in midsentence and say, "Ken, take your goddamn hands off that girl's thigh." But Tom never said anything, and neither did I — at least, not until long after I stopped sitting at that table.

*R.A.W.
New York, New York*

I WAS A HETEROSEXUAL FEMALE ART STUDENT living with two gay men in the early seventies, when free love was still safe and there was lots of money in the art world. Vincent, Neil, and I were all out on our own for the first time, and much happier than we had been at home or in the dormitories, where we'd felt like morose misfits.

One night the three of us picked up a handsome man at a dance, and after some confusion, he ended up in bed with Vincent. Another time, Vincent hung two super-8 movie cameras from his neck so that they bounced on his knees as he walked. We thought the resulting ten-minute film was a masterpiece. I switched to a dance major, became anorexic, and got a cockatiel for my birthday, which I put in a big birdcage in the living room. Neil painted his room black (including the furniture) and wrote poems about our weekly dramas, which he left on the kitchen table for us to read. His

poems brought order and meaning to the chaos of our lives.

One day, I brought home a hungry stray cat. When I walked in the door, the birdcage was open, and my cockatiel flew out in terror. It circled the stove, where Vincent was cooking chicken soup, and somehow, in its panic, the bird fell into the pot. Vincent quickly pulled the bird out — still alive — and cradled it in his hands.

I put the cockatiel back in its cage, wrapped towels around the outside, and hitchhiked to the vet, crying the whole way. The doctor couldn't do anything for the bird, and my bringing it out in the cold had probably only made matters worse.

Neil sat up all night, keeping the bird warm in a cardboard box with blankets and a light bulb. My cockatiel died the next day.

That week, the poem on the kitchen table was titled "Bird Death in Soup."

I wish I knew if Vincent and Neil have survived the AIDS epidemic. And I wish I had a copy of that poem.

*Lori Salomon
Mill Valley, California*

(end of excerpt)