



The  
Kitchen  
Table:  
An  
Honest  
Orgy

DENISE GESS

LEAH VINLUAN

*Food was just a pretext.*

— Carlos Drummond de Andrade, “The Table”

## My estranged husband calls from Paris

to tell me that if I were there beside him, I’d be proud of his outfit. Bill actually uses the word *outfit*, and for some reason, although he doesn’t fish, I picture him in fly-fishing gear. I imagine him casting lures as exquisite as exotic earrings into a cold stream and tell him this.

“No. I look like a Frenchman,” he says.

“I’m glad, honey.”

That “honey” slips out, skitters off my tongue. Although we’ve been separated for more than a year, we keep forgetting not to use such endearments. Bill reports on the weather, sounding as close as the next room. “People are in love all over the place here,” he says before he explains the real reason for his call, which is to tell me my copy of our divorce complaint is on its way to me.

I’m in Philadelphia, and except for this vacation to Paris, he’s still living in our house in New Jersey, which has sold. We’re waiting for the settlement in mid-June before he also moves back into the city. Then, for the first time since we began dating, we will live eight blocks apart from each other, just as we used to, except now we have a history. Whenever we speak we are alternately stunned and sad that what remains — a kind of untarnished affection one reserves for an old friend — is both more and less than we expected after fourteen years. His copy of our divorce complaint arrived without warning just before he left for vacation. “I cried, seeing our names,” he says. “Plaintiff. Defendant.”

My own tears shock me. I know where he was sitting when he read those words, in his usual place at the kitchen table. He always sat in the middle. My daughter always chose to sit at the end near the long window that faced the garden. I sat at the other end, close to the stove and the wall phone.

I have neither the table nor the six unmatched antique Hitchcock chairs I purchased one at a time whenever I found one in fairly decent shape. Little in this current apartment recalls that kitchen, except the black-and-white tile floor. When Bill says the table holds “so many memories,” I’m surprised. Despite the plans we had for communion at that table, in reality he spent very little time in the kitchen, except in the mornings. We did maintain that ritual: cereal and coffee while he read the gossip page of the newspaper aloud to me and my daughter. Sometimes we’d ask to hear our horoscopes; invariably, his and mine would be off by a mile. “Figures,” my daughter would say. “Water and fire.” Then she’d arch one eyebrow, a gesture I envied. He is fire; we, mother and daughter,

are moody, mutable water.

After I hang up the phone, I hunt down a poem I’ve recently read again after some years. The poem is called “The Table,” written by Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade and translated by Elizabeth Bishop. My copy is underlined. When had I inked up the pages, taking note of this line: “Around the wide table . . . It was an honest orgy / ending in revelations”? No words I might struggle to string together this morning will resonate more, and no other object we own tells a story quite the way that kitchen table does.

## We found the table at an antiques show

in a remote south Jersey town whose name I no longer recall, but I do recall my husband wanting something much less primitive, surely less scarred. Nevertheless, when I spotted the nineteenth-century farmhouse table with hand-carved barn-red legs and a modest pine-plank surface, I fell in love. Maybe the writer in me is attracted to damage and flaws, to the paradoxical beauty of ruin, but in less than a minute my desire transformed the battered farmhouse table into a monument of perfect imperfection.

I must have gasped, because Bill touched my elbow with his forefinger. This was our predetermined antique-hunting “caution” signal. I felt his hot breath in my ear. “He’s seen.” He meant the dealer had noticed us. I was then, and still am, quite incapable of concealing strong emotion — favorable or unfavorable. The dealer now knew that I loved the table, which would make bargaining difficult.

“Let’s get a cup of coffee,” my husband said insistently. Slipping off for coffee was a move that I had taught him: *you have to be willing to walk away from what you love*. Yet I never seemed able to take my own advice. As we edged away from the booth, the dealer began telling us that the table had also served as a barn work table; then, having heard me mention writing, he shifted his voice to a low confidential tone and said, “If I remember correctly, the owner before the man I bought it from was a writer himself.”

“He wrote what?” my husband asked.

The dealer scratched his chin. “Cookbooks, I believe.”

We headed for the coffee concession. Over weak coffee served in styrofoam cups, my husband said, “I thought you wanted a round table.” He had me there. The kitchen in our newly acquired eighteenth-century house was narrow and long, aesthetically better suited to a round table. But I had also learned, through trial and a few costly errors in furnishing our previous two houses, that there is no such thing as too big or too small or “wrong” when an object is cherished. I ticked off the list of our beloved pieces of furniture: Hadn’t

his grandmother's rosewood desk fit into the most unlikely spaces? And the club chair that I'd dragged with me from my first marriage — hadn't that always found its place?

He didn't argue. Either he was tired that day or — now that I think about it from this distance of the estranged wife — he was already settling into some private resignation, one as insidious as my private disenchantment. So we would buy the table. We finished drinking our coffee, decided on an acceptable price, and made our way back through the crowds. As we neared the corner booth, the dealer was enthusiastically talking up the table to another couple. I was relieved when I heard the woman proclaim with conviction, "It's too long," before she tucked her husband away.

We examined it again. It was pockmarked and scratched, and initials had been carved into it. Who were "D.H." and "C.A."? What boldness or recklessness had led them to make their marks here rather than on the trunk of a tree? As I ran my hand along its surface, I was delighted to discover a smooth depression in the left corner; the palm of my hand slipped snugly into that worn section, where, I decided, many other hands must have rested, gripped, slammed, and pounded the surface while negotiating the everyday struggles of family life. Surely it would serve us as well, humble us with its simplicity, and provide the setting for forming connections. This would be the table at which I could keep an eye on my daughter and stay in touch with her and her friends. This would be the table where Bill (who claimed to need and love and miss sitting in the kitchen) would linger with me in the mornings before going off to work, and where we'd find each other again late at night to talk. And, given its general appearance and long history, I had faith that any human accident — spilled juice, a hot dish that might leave a mark, a harsh word spoken carelessly — would be forgiven here.

I've always been as serious about creating a life with meaning as I am about creating a work that *lives*. What I wanted, what I believed *we* wanted and needed as a family, was a house where, as the architect Christopher Alexander puts it, "you can feel the weight of your own heart." That year, Bill's heart was under wraps. He had suffered three losses: his best friend, then his father, then his mother. I had committed to good times and bad, and in this crisis I wanted to provide comfort: *Come to me. I want you to come to me and rest here. Here is home.* But he never spoke of these deaths, which left me bereft of a way to reach him. Maybe it was naive of me, but I sunk a lot of hope into that table as a stage for intimacy and believed that after taking its place in the kitchen with the black-and-white tile floor, it would be our house's heart.

## **We brought the table home, and after**

a few days Bill warmed up to it. Rarely spontaneous, now he dug out his penknife and announced he was putting the knife in a kitchen drawer for brave and well-loved guests to use to carve their initials in the table, too. My parents were our first dinner guests, and my mother thought we'd lost our minds when we proffered the knife. A child of the Depression and a believer

in lemon oil and glass-smooth surfaces, she likes her furniture unmarred, matched, polished. *Patina* is not in her lexicon. "You need to sand and paint it, not write on it," she said.

Her words struck a nerve. *Not* writing was what I had been doing for more years than I cared to admit, and I blamed everything outside of myself for this artistic crisis: not enough time, the wrong town, no office space, the wrong house — and no kitchen table. I actually said that at a faculty party when the host asked me how the writing was going. He was incredulous. No kitchen table? What kind of cockeyed excuse was *that*? I would have agreed, except that kitchen tables have always mattered to me. Tables. My life has revolved around them.

## **Throughout my childhood, I reveled in**

Sunday visits to my paternal grandmother's house, where dinner was served at one in the afternoon. My mother would dress my siblings and me in our best clothes, and we'd usually arrive by late morning. Before I even entered the vestibule, I could taste the raw dough for handmade ravioli, and I knew Little Grandmom had gone to early Mass at Saint Calista's Church, that on her way home she'd bought the ricotta cheese at Mancuso's, and that she was already in the kitchen rolling the dough flat on a bed of pure white flour.

She saved the best part for me: spooning onto the dough dollops of ricotta cheese that she had blended with whole eggs, sharp Parmesan grated by hand, parsley, and — her secret ingredient — the tiniest smidgen of nutmeg. With her skinny fingers riding mine, we folded the dough over carefully and then dipped the mouth of a clear, wide drinking glass in flour before pressing it down over the bumps to make cheese-filled rounds. We repeated the process until the table was covered in rows of swollen, fleshy coins. While she and my mother put the finishing touches on the ravioli, sealing the edges with fork tines, I licked leftover streaks of cheese from the pressed-glass mixing bowl. By then, the steam from the salted boiling water on the stove fogged the lone kitchen window, clouding the view of the enormous snowball bush in the yard. Little Grandmom, who wore dresses on all occasions and her fancy voile apron on Sundays, would pull the short white step stool from under the formica table and place it close to the stove. She patted the top step: "OK, Den. Bring the oil." It was my job to stand on the stool to add "just a little bit" of the earthy-smelling olive oil to the pot.

But the food was only part of the fun. In that steamy kitchen I listened to stories: my grandmother's unvarnished disapproval of her soon-to-be son-in-law, "the gambler"; what was happening to poor Antoinette across the street ("The louse left her nothing"); Grandmom's visit to Aunt Lena around the corner; did I want to go "up the street" and visit Aunt Annie and Uncle Nick after dinner? Life's important moments were about people: about feeding them, loving them, forgiving them, and — as I learned too soon — losing them.

*(end of excerpt)*