



Readers Write

THE DINNER TABLE

WHEN MY FAMILY MOVED FROM THE city to the country, no store-bought dinette would do for the kitchen. My father built a sturdy farm table and let me write everyone's name on the underside in my seven-year-old's handwriting.

More than eight feet long and too heavy for one person to lift, the table still dominates my parents' kitchen. It is the kind of table on which you can fill flowerpots and cut potatoes. And when dinnertime comes, you can push the newspapers and junk mail to one end and still have plenty of room for the food.

The tabletop is scarred with criss-

crossing lines from many knives and pizza cutters. Spots of gray paint show where my sister and I decorated plaster elephant statues. There are also paint flecks from my mother's peace-rally signs, tape from my dad's last project, and wax from last year's Hanukkah candles. My father recently offered to refinish the boards. "What?" my mother said. "And erase all these years?"

*L. Zuckerman
Greensburg, Pennsylvania*

MY FRIEND SUSAN'S MOM WORKED AS a cocktail waitress and was never home

in the evenings, so when I was visiting, Susan and I were left to our own devices for dinner. She would whip up lasagna and divulge her crushes while I finished my homework.

After graduation Susan and I took different paths. I went away to college, and she got pregnant and had a baby girl she named Liza. The father was a jailbird, continually changing aliases to avoid paying child support. After a year Liza was diagnosed with a mental handicap: the doctors said she would have the IQ of a three-year-old for life. Susan stopped writing me after that.

Nearly twenty years later Susan and I are back in touch, and I visit her at her government-subsidized apartment. Liza is grown, and Susan has two other kids to look after and a crippling back condition.

Every evening at 5:30 sharp, Susan bellows in a drill-sergeant voice, "Dinner! Hurry up! Move it! Move it!" She has set placemats on a vinyl tablecloth decorated with a holiday motif — for a holiday a month gone by. Liza, led by her teenage sister or brother, lurches across the room and bats her lashes at me. Getting her into her adult "highchair" is a challenge. I take my place on a cracked seat while Liza's favorite *Barney* episode plays in the background.

Dinner is still lasagna — with ground beef this evening because I'm here. There's a salad of only tomatoes and lettuce, because the food stamps have run out. The kitchen counters are littered with cartons, homework assignments, dirty dishes, and medication bottles. Liza spits out half-chewed mouthfuls, then grins impishly. The other two kids sass their mother and feign outrage at each other. "Mom's a real good cook!" they tell me.

I return to my quiet, childless home. The kitchen table is stacked with mail and papers to be filed. I haven't changed the tablecloth in years, not since my boyfriend left me. I can eat anytime I want, and at 10 P.M. I throw something in the microwave. Eating by the light of my computer, I'm reminded of how unused my dinner table is.

*Daria A. Fand
Honolulu, Hawaii*

THE SUMMER I TURNED FIFTEEN I was a youth delegate in a cultural-exchange program. I flew to Japan, where my fellow delegates and I learned about the art of calligraphy and the tea ceremony. We memorized and performed (pitifully) the folk song "Sakura Sakura," the Japanese equivalent of "This Land Is Your Land."

Each night I looked forward to eating dinner with the Shibuyas, my Japanese host family. At their table I learned more about Japan and its people than any book could have taught me.

Before we began to eat, Mr. Shibuya would hold his chopsticks with both hands,

bow his head, and say, "Itadakimasu." We'd all repeat this one-word prayer of gratitude for the food we were about to eat.

Dinner always began with postage-stamp-sized dishes of pickled pink vegetables, then bowls of miso soup with nori (seaweed). Then Mrs. Shibuya would spoon steaming rice into a dish for each of us and add grilled fish or chicken from a frying pan on her two-burner stove.

One evening, as Mrs. Shibuya hurried from stove to sink to refrigerator in the tiny kitchen, Mr. Shibuya asked me in practiced English, "Do you know what today is?" He paused, then answered his own question: "Hiroshima."

The small kitchen grew even smaller as I imagined the presence of the 140,000 people who'd died in 1945.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice cracking.

"No, no. We are sorry," Mr. Shibuya said. "Our friendship with you . . . it is the future."

"Itadakimasu," we said in unison, and we began to eat.

*Liz Sheffield
Shoreline, Washington*

WHEN MY PARENTS DIVORCED, MY mother, my brother, and I moved in with my maternal grandparents on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I had trouble adjusting. My Hungarian grandmother, a large woman with arms thicker than my thighs, argued constantly with my German grandfather, who was skinnier than a barbecue spit. I struggled to make new friends, and my grades in elementary school fell.

Then the school began teaching something called the "new math," a convoluted process of solving math problems by breaking them down into many discrete calculations, all of which had to be shown on paper. I couldn't grasp it. My grandmother, unrelenting on the importance of education, began to sit down with me

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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.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Rain	April 1	October 2009
Selling Out	May 1	November 2009
Anger	June 1	December 2009
Narrow Escapes	July 1	January 2010
Borrowing	August 1	February 2010
Walking Home	September 1	March 2010

at the dinner table and help me with my homework. Her knowledge of math was limited to grocery shopping and balancing her checkbook, but she studied my books with me and learned the new math herself.

"So, what do you do with this number?" she'd ask. "Are you sure that's right? Let me try." Sometimes her frustration level surpassed mine. "Ah, shit on it!" she would grumble, throwing down the pencil. But a minute later she'd pick it up again. "You got to get this learned," she'd say. And somehow I did learn despite myself.

Years later I returned from college for a visit. My grandfather had died, and my grandmother now lived alone in a trailer park. I stayed with her that summer, sleeping in her guest room. She was happy to be cooking for someone again. The first morning I was there, she served me a massive breakfast. I had not eaten so well in a long time. As I ate, I ran my hands over her old kitchen table and felt faint indentations. Pressed into the wood were numbers, often overlapping, from the new math. Neither my grandmother nor I had thought to use a pad under the paper to protect her table.

My grandmother saw me looking and, putting on her glasses, peered at the marks as if noticing them for the first time. Then she looked up at me, smiled, and said, "So, you think you learned well enough, college boy?"

*David Wood
St. Petersburg, Florida*

WHILE WORKING FOR THE PEACE Corps in a small Amazonian frontier town, Rue and I became acquainted with all the other non-Bolivians in the village: a fundamentalist missionary, a handsome young Frenchman escaping his past, and a German businessman who had the only concrete house in town; the rest of us lived in bamboo-and-adobe huts with thatched roofs.

One night the German businessman invited Rue and me to dine with him and his family. We looked forward to a break from our usual meal of yuca and boiled beef. At dusk we put on light cotton dresses and flats and walked through the village to their house.

The businessman greeted us at the gray steel door, and we chatted in Spanish, our common tongue. His thin, nervous wife offered hors d'oeuvres while their two adolescent daughters giggled and their son, a sweet-faced four-year-old, played with toy soldiers on the ceramic floor: lining them up, whispering orders to them, rearranging their ranks.

After a dinner of imported ham, new potatoes, canned green beans, and Swiss chocolate, the wife brought out silver goblets of cognac on a tray. As I accepted the goblet, I saw that it was engraved with a swastika — clearly the careful, deliberate work of skilled artisans.

My fingers trembled, and the cognac sloshed in the cup. Rue slid a hand to her throat and surreptitiously dropped her grandmother's Star of David, which she wore on a chain, inside her dress. Both of us had Jewish last names, though Rue had been raised as a Quaker and I as a Unitarian. We sipped our drinks and waited a polite interval before offering our thanks and heading home.

Rattled, we walked too fast, furious at our host, and at ourselves for having been so naive. In our hurry, under the moonless sky, I stumbled and fell, which unleashed my tears. Rue vomited ham and cognac onto her shoes right there in the middle of the street.

*Margaret S. Mullins
Jarrettsville, Maryland*

ONE THANKSGIVING MY MOTHER, HER friend Sharon, and I delivered dinner to a group of homeless people who lived in the woods beside the train tracks. I was only eleven years old and afraid of strangers, but we knew these people well; many of them had stayed in our home for weeks at a time. We had been homeless ourselves in the past and had met Sharon while living at a shelter where she was a social worker.

We cooked a traditional holiday feast and brought it, along with folding tables and paper tablecloths, to the woods. The homeless men were surprised to see the aluminum dishes of piping-hot mashed potatoes and sliced turkey, and they jumped up to help us unload the food. I wondered how many holidays they'd spent in the cold and wet, drinking away

their troubles.

We set the tables up like a buffet, and everyone grabbed a paper plate and plastic fork and dug in. People sat on old logs, tree stumps, and blankets spread on the ground. I looked around at the grinning, weathered faces and felt proud to be sitting at that Thanksgiving table.

*Angie Phipps
Calhoun, Tennessee*

I HAD WORKED IN CHILD WELFARE long enough to know that adopting a teenage boy would not be easy, but somehow I felt that it would work between Kevin and me. He was a good kid who'd had a bad life, and I, as a single father, could nudge him in the right direction.

We had our first argument at the dinner table. Kevin had been playing with his new neighborhood friends when I'd called him inside to eat.

"Why do we have to have dinner together every night?" he asked.

"Because you and I are a family, and families eat dinner together," I said.

For the next several months Kevin tried to counter this logic with his own reasoning. When that failed, he began showing up late enough that the food would be cold. Occasionally he wouldn't show up at all. But I never gave in on what I thought a functional family should do.

Eventually Kevin adopted a new tactic: make dinner unpleasant. "This would have been better without the onions," he said, tediously separating the onions from his stew.

I tried to sneak small slices of onion into dishes, but Kevin would pick them out with his usual complaints.

Our relationship got better, and I watched Kevin grow into a tall, outgoing, confident young man. During his first year at college, Kevin drove home unexpectedly over a holiday break and arrived to find me sitting down to dinner with a friend.

"Hey, can I have some?" Kevin asked.

"It's French onion soup," I replied, thinking no further explanation was necessary.

But Kevin joined us at the table and cheerfully ate the soup while talking about life at college.

Later, clearing the table, I noticed a tangle of uneaten onions at the bottom of Kevin's soup bowl. He hadn't complained once.

Jeff W.
Rociada, New Mexico

THE MOOD AT THE DINNER TABLE was always set by Dad. If we'd spent the day working in our field, he was relaxed and jovial. It pleased him to see his three boys and three girls all pulling together. He'd butter his corn cakes, slather them with strawberry jam, and tell a story about growing up in Kentucky, or about a prank they'd played on a co-worker at the mill, putting jalapeño peppers in the man's lunch.

Those were the good meals. But there were others — when Dad was working nights and wasn't able to get much sleep — that weren't so good. Then the food was not cooked to Dad's liking, or my hair was not brushed properly, or my sister Cora hadn't washed her hands well enough to suit him. Dad would bait each of us, trying to trick us into talking back or being disobedient, but we'd limit our conversation to requests to pass the food. The tight cords of muscle in his neck told us: *Be still. Say little.*

One night Joe, the tallest yet the weakest of us, said to Dad, "Could you pass the butter, please?"

"Here you go," Dad said, passing the dish, then the butter knife, blade first. As Joe reached for the handle, Dad pulled the greasy, blunt blade through his fingers, leaving Joe's hand slick with butter. Dad laughed, but no one else did. He'd pulled this trick on Joe over and over. This time Joe snapped.

"Very funny!" he shouted, throwing down his fork and standing to leave.

Dad's hand, which had been lying in wait, whipped out and caught Joe across the face.

The rest of us kept our heads down and waited for dinner to end.

Ruth O.
Portland, Oregon

MY FATHER, AN EMINENT ACADEMIC, was given to delivering dissertations on his children's faults and failings at the dinner table. Sometimes his meas-

ured, scholarly tones would escalate into screaming, and on a few occasions he lifted the entire table and brought it down hard on the floor for emphasis. My siblings and I endured his rages and cowered in silence.

Decades later, after my divorce, I would bring my thirteen-year-old son to my parents' house for dinner a few times a month. One evening, as we were eating, my father cleared his throat and said to my son, "Danny, there is something I have to tell you. You have a very serious fault, and that is your failure to pay attention to the world around you."

"Dad," I said, "please don't talk like this to Danny."

"I will talk like this to him," replied my father. "I want him to know his faults."

My forty-four years of cowering came to an end, and I started to scream at my father. I jumped out of my chair, paced the dining-room floor, and waved my arms. I even put my face right up to his. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember that my father apologized.

When I'd finished, I looked around and saw that my son had left the room. I found him upstairs watching a wrestling match on TV. I took his hand and said, "Danny, I am so sorry that Grandpa was mean to you."

My son shrugged and said, "That's OK, Mom. I wasn't paying attention."

Constance V.
New York, New York

I KNEW HOW LONG EACH OF MY mother's boyfriends was going to stay based on where he sat at dinner. Once a boyfriend started sitting at the head of the table, it was clear he would be sticking around for a while. Not long after he'd taken over the head seat, his clothes would show up in the laundry room, his favorite beer would fill the fridge, and the furniture would be rearranged to his liking.

Before moving in, all the boyfriends exhibited a false chumminess toward me, and after they'd become head of the household, they all expressed resentment at my presence. I remember one boyfriend was yelling at me for no apparent reason when I made a decision about my own future

dining-room table: it would be *round*.

Name Withheld

THE SOUND OF THE CHOW CART ROLL-ing onto death row at 4 A.M. is the most effective alarm clock I have ever heard. It isn't humanly possible to sleep through the racket as the guard slams the cart into the metal doors to push them open. The cart this morning reeks of pancake syrup, once again shattering my hope that we might have that rarest of gastronomical delights: eggs.

I sit up in bed and assess the six-by-nine-foot cage that has become my world. Each day I meticulously clean my cell in the manner of a man who has nothing left but a sliver of pride. As I move to plug in my hot pot, I look at the six photographs of my family and my ex-fiancée that I have taped to the wall above my table, which is really just a piece of rusted metal attached to the wall.

The chow cart arrives at my cell, and I accept my meal through the slot in the door, which is then slammed shut. I pour my coffee and sit down at the table. Once again the cooks, through some form of penal culinary alchemy, have managed to make pancakes taste like cardboard. I barely touch them. I don't wake up in the mornings to eat, you see. I get up to have my morning conversation around the table with my loved ones. We speak without words, sharing memories of a world forever vanished. I push my tray away, get back in bed, and tell my family I will see them later at dinner.

Thomas Whitaker
Livingston, Texas

(end of excerpt)