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Family Dinners

For the first eight or ten years of my life, dinner began the same way. My mom would tell my brother and me to bow our heads, and together my family would recite the dinner prayer. "God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food. Amen." I do not remember being taught this prayer, but I do remember not knowing the right words. For a long time, I thought the dinner prayer was said in a foreign language. Nightly, I would bow my head and recite with confidence, "Goddace grace, Goddace goo, lettuce thanken forrar foon. Amen."

We ate dinner in a kitchen with blue and white linoleum floors. My dad picked out this pattern when my parents first bought our house. He liked it for the UK colors. Our table was an eight-sided phenomenon that was attached to the wall on two sides and supported by a single pole in the center. Each person had an assigned seat. My father sat next to the wall on which the telephone hung. If it rang during dinner, he answered with a resounding "Hesters,"—never a hello—and asked whoever was on the other line to please call back later, because we were eating. I sat next to him and next to me sat my brother. My mother's seat, by the other wall, was considered to be the worst because from it there was no clear view of the fourteen-inch television that sat on our table.

My family has always eaten dinner with the television on. On the nights when my father was home and the whole family was eating together, we watched the news. We always turned to NBC and watched Tom Brokaw, because my dad liked him better than Dan Rather. I understood little about politics or world events and I asked too many questions, but during the commercials my dad explained anything I was curious about. From him, I learned how the stock market works and the difference between Republicans and Democrats. I asked many of the same questions repeatedly, but no matter how many times he had already told me what the Dow Jones was, my dad was never at a loss for words.

Many nights, my father did not make it home for dinner. The phone would ring at around six o'clock and my mom would set down the knife she was using to slice apples, or the can opener she was using to open a can of Chef Boyardee cheese ravioli, and she would answer the phone with a rehearsed "Hello, this is the H. residence." A thirty-second conversation would ensue, and then my mom would take the glass plate cover out of its

cabinet, put it over a food-laden plate and push it to one side. On these nights, she let my brother and me watch whatever we wanted. Often, we watched "Wishbone" or "Bill Nye the Science Guy." If it was later in the evening, we watched "Wheel of Fortune" or "Jeopardy." Sometimes we would keep score as we played along. Naturally, though, we never lost points for the questions we got wrong.

Gradually, dinner came to incorporate responsibility. It was my job to pour the milk, because I was taller and stronger than my brother was, and more able to handle a full gallon of skim milk. It was his assigned duty to set the table, but I could not stand that he always did it wrong, so I would follow along behind him and put the silverware in the right places and fold the napkins. At some point, we learned how to run the dishwasher and wash dishes by hand and on nights when my father was feeling particularly parental, he would tell my brother and me that we "got" to clean the kitchen, like it was a big treat.

At some point, my family outgrew the "God is great" prayer and we moved on to our own, improvised devotions. My greatest dinnertime fear (aside from the presence of squash casserole on my plate) became my mother's occasional request that I bless the meal. I would breathe deeply and quickly utter something that sounded appropriate. Once finished, I sighed in relief at the knowledge that my prayer duty was fulfilled for at least a couple of weeks.

After my dad moved out, dinner became strange. We ate a lot of Papa John's pizza and Chinese food. During this period, my brother ate at a neighbor's house nearly every night, and my mom wore sunglasses at the table. I pretended not to notice. We did not talk, because the only things to talk about were things that could not really be said. I baked a lot that year.

My dad moved back in and dinner became lively and home-cooked again, though pleasant conversation was forced. We did not watch television during the meal anymore, because we needed to "focus on each other." My father moved out again. He moved in again later, then, still later, out. He came and went and moved and stayed, and sometimes he ate with us and sometimes he did not. I began ignoring all of his attempts at conversation. "Wheel of Fortune" became all-consuming.

During one of my father's stays within my home, my parents decided

to put an addition onto the back of our house. The construction, however, did not begin until after my father had left, finally for good. The addition included a new kitchen. The old octagonal table was ripped from the wall, the blue and white-checked linoleum floor was peeled away and the wall where the telephone had hung was demolished. The new kitchen has wooden floors and marble countertops and yellow-painted walls and lots of windows. We eat at a table that stands on four legs and wears a tablecloth. My mom does not wear sunglasses indoors anymore.

I wish I could say that at dinnertime, we bask in the warm yellow glow of community and thrive on the hum of harmony. I wish I could say that we excitedly and intellectually discuss world issues and our own lives. I wish I could say that we linger at the table, enjoying each other's company long after our meals are gone and dessert has become an aftertaste on our tongues, but I cannot. That would be the most acceptable picture to paint, but what actually happens is this: we eat together often. Not every night, but most. I pour the milk—still skim—and set the table for three, while my mom finishes putting together the meal. Usually, she cooks. She makes salad, or breakfast, or soup. We take our seats, which are always the same. Mine is considered to be the worst at the table, because it is the chair that does not face the television. When she remembers, my mother says a prayer before we eat. I generally do not attach myself to her prayers anymore, but I still always close my eyes and fold my hands, out of habit and the long-held belief that I have held since I was young, that although her eyes are closed as she prays, my mother will know if I don't bow my head. She will know, and God's disappointment will befall me.

After "amen," we eat. Sometimes we will talk to each other, but usually we turn on the TV—we have a big-screen one now. We laugh together at reruns of "Will & Grace" or "Seinfeld," or play along with "Jeopardy," or watch the news. We watched Tom Brokaw until he retired this year. Now we watch his replacement, Brian Williams. I ask questions during the commercials, but my mother has never been good at explaining anything. I ask more out of a need to clarify my confusions to myself than with hopes of obtaining information. When the meal is gone or we are too full to eat more, my mom pulls a deck of cards out from a kitchen drawer. She spreads them out on the table—which is covered by a black and white checked tablecloth she made last year—and amidst the groans of my

brother and me, we each draw one. Highest card does the dishes.

Every month or so, I meet my dad at a restaurant so we can eat together. He orders salads and talks about politics. I order fish sandwiches and conveniently forget to mention that I am a Democrat. I usually come home afterwards to find my mom dozing on the couch, in front of the television. She wakes up when I come in, and sleepily asks, "How's Dad?"

"Oh, I don't know," I respond, "the same, I guess." Then I put my leftovers in the refrigerator and lie down next to her, to watch what she's watching.

[Lucy Hester]