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Family Geometry

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The table is our first geometry: square, circle, rectangle, or the pecan oval of my childhood where I am a fixed point beside my sister, across from my brother, with our parents at the head and foot. I did not always sit there. In a photo taken on my second birthday, I am sitting in a highchair, beating my hands on the metal tray smeared with cake, wearing a chocolate frosting grin. I am tangential to the family table and the picture shows me straining to get out of my highchair to attain a place at the bigger, better table. In a later photo I am consoled with the dregs of someone's wine glass. At two, I already understand something: the party is at the other table, the table I am not seated at, the table a short distance from my highchair or across the room in the restaurant or across the room of memory.

When I was in first grade in Belgium my best friend was Julie—small, dark-haired, dark-eyed. Julie possessed everything I wanted: long hair, a mother with long hair, a pair of miniature stuffed mice wearing tiny taffeta crinolines that poofed out from their soft white bodies. I coveted the mice whenever I held them, stroking their whiskers, their skirts, their white fur. Finally Julie invited me to spend the night. Her family lived in an old two-story farmhouse surrounded by fields of sugar beet. I was enchanted by the gleaming marvel of the walnut stairway and mezzanine, the final swoop of the banister where we leapt off before crashing into the carved newel post. I stood on the threshold of her parents' room with its four-poster bed, the bentwood rocker with an afghan thrown over the arm, the cool light spilling through the northern windows, awed. My envy was complete when I saw Julie's room with its canopy bed sugared with lace, the immense mahogany wardrobe with the silver key, and finally, the mouse house, a miniature world of antique furniture, peaceful and still as the house where she lived.

We ate dinner that evening in the warm light of September at a battered harvest table in the kitchen. Julie's mother dandled the baby on her lap while

she heaped food on our plates, wild rice, flank steak, green beans. It was the first meal I remember enjoying. No father at the head of the table to worry us. Laughter. I touched the bare wood on the underside of the table, trying to understand its charm: solid, rectangular, the wood marred and worn by generations, the kitchen snug around us. I hungered for the ease with which Julie's family ate their meal and I knew I would want a table like this, a kitchen like this, a life like this.

Twenty years later I was in Salerno, Italy, at an eight-foot walnut Shaker table laden with antipasti: the best prosciutto, four different cheeses including fresh, butter-soft mozzarella made from water buffalo milk, black and green olives, sparkling wine, red wine, mineral water, fruit, bread. Our host, Gaetano, concocted a divine pasta sauce while his wife, Maria, assisted.

"Do you like this wine?" Gaetano asked.

"I love the wine, the food, everything," I said as I tore a paper-thin piece of prosciutto in half and ate it.

From my seat at the table I watched the meal unfold. As he juggled dishes, Gaetano explained the virtues of garlic, the character of the olive oil from Maria's family orchard, and the secret of the can of tomatoes in his hand, "These are the best tomatoes. The ash from Vesuvius, you know Vesuvius? makes a special kind of soil, and only on this plain below Vesuvius, outside of Napoli is this soil." Cooking had never been this communal, instructive, and entertaining in my mother's kitchen. Here was a method I could use.

At the oval table of my childhood dining was serious. My mother closeted herself in the kitchen, stewed over *Gourmet*, and drank martinis, emerging hours later, victorious or otherwise. We ate at eight o'clock, two hours later than anyone I knew. The dogs were not allowed into the dining room, whose champagne beige carpeting was plagued by the color's inherent desire for dirt. Before eating we prayed the same prayer, "Bless us O Lord and these thy gifts which we are about to receive through thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen," mumbled in a continuous rush by us three kids and intoned clearly by our father. I do not remember my mother praying or even bowing her head. She remained defiant of God and my father's Catholicism. Food was her religion: the grace finished, now we would worship.

Linen napkins were unfurled. We each had our own napkin ring. My father's was solid silver with his initials and graduation date from West Point, while the rest of us had ugly orange melamine rings painted with different flowers to distinguish them. Our first plates were white Ironstone octagons sold in a garage sale. Later a discontinued Wedgwood pattern called Blue

Pacific summoned a world I could only long for outside this plate rimmed with ocean blue. The silver remained the same, plated, floral, with the family *H* on the handle, the forks so large and unwieldy in my child's hand they were more weapon than utensil. I suffered through many meals. Moussaka with its hidden sickening ambush of eggplant. Cauliflower and Brussels sprouts bitter and hateful in my mouth. Meat I chewed and chewed, then hid in my napkin to sneak to our pair of poodles. My mother set her jaw, "It's not poison. Eat it. It won't kill you."

My father supported her culinary terrorism, "You will eat everything on your plate young lady or—" The threat varied, but to be sent away from the table was the final shame. I do not know what was worse, to be forced to eat food I loathed, choking on tears, or to be banished from the table. That I do not have an eating disorder as a result of the regimen and discipline of these family dinners amazes me, but I suppose in a way I do—some days I forget to eat or cook.

My mother was a brilliant cook. Some dishes were too intensely flavored for me, while others were legendary favorites: Flemish beef stew on riced potatoes (the secret ingredient was beer); Hungarian goulash on buttered noodles with poppy seeds, redolent with sauerkraut, caraway, pork, tomato, sour cream, and dill, a dish my sister hated and I loved. I would eat anything Italian: lasagne, manicotti, minestrone, spaghetti sauce steeping fragrant all day long in the dented aluminum pot. As an adult, the food I enjoy cooking must be simple, unlabored, and delicious. If it can be made quickly and in one pot, I like it even more.

Last fall I stood in a discount store staring at a hunter green Dutch oven made by Le Creuset, a company famous for cookware that fuses enamel to cast iron. Every pot comes with a 100-year warranty. The Dutch oven was 80 dollars. I lifted the pot. It must have weighed ten pounds. I saw a winter of soups and stews, whole chickens roasted with rosemary, and I heard a voice behind me say, "You'll have it for the rest of your life." I turned around and saw my friend Jana smiling at me. That clinched it, that and a soup made for me in the orange twin of this pot 13 years ago in Ireland. I was in Dublin to study classics and theology at Trinity College, but really I was drinking Guinness, rolling and smoking cigarettes, and lying in bed until noon. I was learning about clothes and food; studying Hebrew was far down on the list. Natalie was my unofficial guardian, a generation older, a bank manager, unmarried, she had a snapping dry wit, with splendid taste in everything: her home, her clothing, her cooking. When I was 12 and she was 32, we had shared a room in a private clinic in Austria. We had both broken our

legs skiing. She had a spiral fracture that required surgery and pins. I had three clean breaks and boasted a pair of thigh-high plaster casts with slits down the center to accommodate the swelling. During that week, despite or because of our age difference, we became friends.

For my 21st birthday Natalie took the day off to make a celebratory dinner. What a gift, everything made with care from the *Cordon Bleu* cookbooks: cream of onion soup, a lovely fish, spinach with cream and nutmeg, profiteroles swimming in dark chocolate sauce. Good food, dear friends, all gathered around Natalie's pale oak circle of hospitality. I was of age now and knew what I wanted: a round table. A round table creates communion, everyone's glass within easy reach for toasting, everyone's elbows to themselves, no one sitting at the head or the foot, a democracy of dining.

I did not buy the round table first. I had an aborted affair with a mahogany veneer gate-leg table that was branded with the number seven. I thought, good, the rectangular surface is already marred. Later I discovered the table got a mark if you looked at it too long. Water, heat, the brush of the day-to-day destroyed that table. What had started out as a handsome Duncan Phyfe knock-off with a single flaw turned into an obsession with 0000-grade steel wool and touch-up stain. A piece of African fabric found at Goodwill hid the cursed surface until I made tablecloths from drapery fabric.

I knew I wanted a round table, but the color and style escaped me for over a decade until a New Year's Eve dinner in Iowa City—dead plain round oak with two or more leaves, no claw feet, a mismatch of oak chairs around it. Between courses, I nodded to my husband, Jeff, and tapped the table, "This is it." The following Christmas Jeff sent me out to buy fresh tortillas for dinner. When I returned a round oak table festooned with bows sat in the middle of the dining room. "Do you like it?" Jeff asked. "Is this what you wanted?" I smoothed my hands across the warm tawny surface: a pedestal table, dead plain, no claw feet, circa 1930. I nodded, wordless.

Two years later in an antique store I saw a pine harvest table covered with vintage cheese graters, potato ricers, jelly molds. I asked the owner, "John, that table you're using to display old housewares, is it for sale?"

John wheezed tobacco into my face, scratched his head, and said, "Yes."

"Is it old?"

"The legs are."

I laughed. "How much if I take it off your hands now and write you a check?" He named his price. I hauled it home in the back of my boss's Subaru station wagon, the old legs jutting out as I drove along Highway 24.

The round table was a gift from husband to wife, but the harvest table was a gift to myself. Few things have made me as happy as the harvest table with its scarred surface ready for battle with cutlery, crockery, spills, crayons, the human condition. The name says it all, to harvest, to bring in. The moment greetings are exchanged, friends and strangers gather at the table, as though invited. And they are invited, a table in the kitchen says, come on, sit down, have something to eat and drink, stay for awhile. I do not like the round table any less, but it serves a different purpose, something more formal and less essential. The harvest table defines our house. The kitchen will need to be big enough for all six feet of it. Everyone ends up in the kitchen at a party for a reason, not because the stove is the modern equivalent of the campfire, but something else, something unconscious, beyond the warmth of an imagined hearth: the inborn need to gather together when the darkness surrounds us and tell stories. Give everyone a large table, preferably battered, where they can sit, eat, drink, linger, and tell stories in the one room where they want to be. Our pine harvest table does this for us.

Jeff's cousin and his wife and two kids came to visit while Jeff was away on business. The first evening they brought more chairs from the dining room and arranged them around the harvest table. Without thinking they knew here is the center, here is where we want to be, not in front of the TV, but around the table. I began to make marinara sauce while we were chatting. Fourteen-year-old Nathan got up and joined me at the stove, "What are you doing? It's not from a jar." I laughed and shook my head and gave him garlic to peel and Parmesan to grate. Later when I looked at us all eating around the table, I understood why the table hungered for more than just Jeff and me. Two people at a large table seem to be missing an invisible family. A month later we hosted Thanksgiving for the first time. We ate in the dining room, but more hours were spent around the harvest table, peeling potatoes, eating hors d'oeuvres, talking over tea, over wine, over nothing.

When I was a child our dining room table brooded silent and handsome during the day. Sunday morning, I am five or six, and we are not going to Mass. The house is sleeping. I crawl beneath the dining room table with my stuffed animals and look out through the filmy lace tablecloth. I feel safe. This is our house, our ark, here under the table where no one can see us. Whenever I see children playing under a table by themselves, drawing their world in, I wonder what the weather is like above their heads that drives them below to pretend, yes, here is a safe place. What Julie's kitchen table revealed to me nearly 30 years ago was that a family could gather at the table

to eat, talk, work, and play, and the table could be a welcoming place, a haven for all. Table as haven, not battleground, was unthinkable to me then. We never talked around our family table. We ate and we argued, but we never talked. Once I could clear my plate and hold my own in an argument, I was a force at the dining room table. Out of habit, I still tend to argue too much in company around a table.

After years of formal dining rooms where the pecan oval table reigned in concert with the buffet and china closet filled with Italian linen, Bavarian bone china, Waterford crystal, sterling flatware, my parents took to eating in the kitchen at a rock maple dinette set. Not exactly the kitchen, but the transitional space between the kitchen and the family room. Eating in the kitchen was slumming to my mother. She had grown up in cramped apartments, eating bad food, often alone, in the kitchen. She vowed never to eat in the kitchen again. And she didn't. Not for years. The shift was gradual, first the occasional meal on a TV tray, then the maple dinette appeared in sight but not in front of the TV. Just as my mother quit buying lovely things to wear, she quit eating in the dining room. I would come home from college and chide her about not using the linen, the silver. Then I would iron a tablecloth and polish the silver and she would make a dinner I was finally old enough to appreciate.

My mother complained the dining room was dark. It was. By then everything in her life was blurring from years of drinking, and the eat-in kitchen—something she had always despised—was easier to manage. She did not have to concentrate or perform there in a way the dining room demanded. In the evening she could fumble through cooking, pick at the food on her plate, and then watch TV or read. Maybe the dining room table reproached her. All those years of glorious food. The stellar dinner parties. Everything she loved, everything she let go—she who cared about every detail of the table, the place settings, the progression of the courses, who sat where. All I wanted was to be her dinner guest, to have her full attention the way only others seemed to have. Now I see it was I who was not paying attention.

In April the phone rang during lunch, in a distant room, and we did not hear it. Later I picked up the remote phone and heard the stutter tone of a message waiting. “Diane, it’s Dad. Listen, I found Mom unconscious on the kitchen floor this morning. She was still dressed. She never came to bed last night. I sleep like a log and never heard anything. I tried to rouse her. I kept saying ‘Jo, Jo,’ but there was no response. Then she vomited a lot of blood, a pool the size of a card table. I dialed 911. The fire station’s only a few

blocks away and the paramedics got here in minutes. She's in neurosurgery now, down at Presbyterian. Diane," his voice breaks, "I think we're going to lose her." Click. End of message. I stood by the harvest table and began to wail. A friend sitting at the table stood up and put his arms around me. Sobbing and gulping for air, I could hardly relay the message.

The pool of blood the size of a card table—I know that size, the nights my parents hosted bridge, two card tables of four, the cards with their gilded edges and Florentine backs, the little dishes of savories and sweets on each table, the coffee urn on the buffet with the battery of china cups and saucers, and the marvelous dessert I must not touch. I imagine my mother's body on the kitchen floor, beside the rock maple dinette, a wood so hard a nail cannot be driven into it. The previous dinette set had been made of equally hard material: wrought iron.

All those years she sat at the dinette in the kitchen. I remember her mounting stamps for the collection while sitting at the wrought iron table, a tall glass of Coke beside her, a Pall Mall straight burning in the beanbag ash-tray before she quit smoking. She would hold the mint issue stamps with tweezers as she placed them in their protective sleeves. As her small shadow, I loved the stamps with flowers and animals. "They're pretty, but they're worthless. British Honduras," she would snort. When I was three the wrought iron table sat on the screened-in veranda of our house in Santo Domingo and we ate outside, I in my highchair, my family in the four available chairs. Large pale moths attached themselves to the screens and the Dominican Revolution exploded in the distance. A time of fear: the family poodle that bit me, jagged glass atop the wall surrounding our house, nearly drowning in the O-club pool, tarantulas our live-in maid killed with the mop in one blow.

I did not believe death could be so sudden, not hers. I thought my mother would live to see my children get married and have children. I thought our lives would run parallel, not touching, but parallel. We were going to Italy together next fall. "Not Florence, not Rome, Rome is dirty. It's not the same," she said on the phone four days before. "Maybe Tuscany or Umbria. The hill towns. Do you remember Assisi?" I remember Assisi. I was eight. The rest of the family stayed behind at the *pension* while we went together to the church where the exhumed body of St. Clare lay on a bier behind glass in a shadowy chapel guarded by nuns. The saint's wizened face was black, ancient, and frightening. To cleanse of us this horror my mother took us to San Damiano, the original convent of the Poor Clares, and we walked in the cloistered garden amid bees and flowers eight centuries after St. Francis wrote his "Canticle of the Sun" here. Above us in the hill town

of Assisi the church bells tolled the hour, but we were quiet together. Now I cannot break the silence.

In Albuquerque my mother's absence filled the house. The dining room table was covered with her last cataloging of the stamp collection. Magazines, cookbooks, conjugations of French verbs, piles of recipes and grocery lists were strewn across the rock maple table, as though she had just risen from the chair where she always sat, her back to the kitchen, her world. I could not bear to sit at the dinette and what little I ate in my father's house I ate outside at the battered redwood picnic table on the patio, my back to the kitchen. Her world had vanished, despite all the details of her existence covering every surface. End tables, coffee tables, night tables, countertops, the desk, each bore the mark of her daily life: half-finished knitting, novels with her place marked by grocery coupons, letters to answer, earrings, tissues, makeup, her glasses. I held her glasses to my chest. Everything she would never see appeared before me—our house, our garden, our children, our ordinary lives moving forward into the invisible distance.

My father comes to visit. Without my mother beside him he is smaller, almost frail. As I embrace him I feel his mortal bones as he feels mine. We both have lost weight we cannot afford to lose. I strive to make food he will enjoy, recipes of my mother's, knowing he hardly cooks. He sits between me and Jeff. I watch as he eats, pasta with tomatoes and cream, lime tarragon chicken, second helpings, extra bread, pouring wine only for himself. All those years at the head of the table he said the prayer, barked the orders, and thrived. Now he tastes nothing, only eats. How strange to have him here without my mother sitting silent over her morning tea with the newspaper at the harvest table or sated with a dinner I labored over, snapping down cards with sweet determination as she set my dad in bridge, a glass of cognac beside her on the round dining room table.

That last winter after 12 years of playing bridge with my parents, Jeff and my mother against me and my father, we finally switched partners. My mother and I won. She was pleased I understood the game well enough to bid correctly, to follow her lead, to know when to slough and when to trump, how to work the crossruff, the finesse, the bad split, all those lovely subtleties in bridge, and yes, to beat my dad.

Now I play bridge against the computer. While the computer does not chastise me when I lead the wrong suit as my father did, it does not smile a secret smile when I take it to game, as my mother would. Jeff, who partnered

my mother for years, never fully understood the intricacies of bidding. Each bid is a code, and he often mistranslated, ending up in the wrong suit and overextended. His standing joke with my mother was, "Five hearts, and you're playing them." My mother would no sooner enter our house than he'd be chanting, "Five hearts, five hearts," while she waved her hands at him to stop, as though trying to still a playful dog. I think about the five honors in hearts he placed in her coffin and I feel like we are what is left of the deck, impaired, unplayable, useless.

The people I love have always been at the table where I am seated. The table's shape or location alone do not give it meaning. My sister's oak trestle table covered with bowls of fruit, toys, scars, stains, and the wearing love of three children. My in-laws' teak rectangle, bare during the day and battened down with padding and tablecloth (vinyl for grandkids) during meals. My sister-in-law's cherry Mission reproduction piled with no fewer than six Indian dishes made by her husband, for which I minced ginger and garlic at the melamine table in his kitchen. My other sister-in-law's solid oak round table built for her by a friend who said, "Hell, Liz, if I'd known you were going to have four kids I'd have made you a larger table." My friend Jana's expanding Scandinavian rectangle covered with heavy tapestry and her generous heart. Our friend John has not one but two tables in his enormous kitchen and another picnic table on his porch. John has no wife or family but he understands something fundamental: the table and the people at the table are the focus in any room, in any country.

My mother favored the oval and all of her tables have been variations on the ellipse. How like her the oval is, not the first shape that comes to mind, not an everyday shape, but used everyday. Neither rectangular nor round, the oval is the shape of compromise. "I'm a Libra," she would say. "I can't make up my mind and I hate arguing." Although when pushed my mother could have the final word and silence. Like her oval table, my mother was graceful and defined, exacting and pleasing, with just enough curve to draw you close and just enough edge to make you keep your distance. I doubt my father could have been a tyrant at a round table, and as it was he was reduced and moderated by my mother and her oval table. The real power, I believe, sat at the foot, not the head, of the table. She was our go-between, our diplomat, the voice of reason in his ear. "Tell him," I would rage, "tell him this." And she would, tempering my message.

During one of her last visits I was struggling to cook a meal beyond my scope (taking it to game, as it were). I was peeling garlic with a knife, fresh

garlic whose papery skin clung to the cloves. My mother asked, "Why don't you smash it with the handle of a knife and then peel it?"

"I know that!" I shouted. "I want the cloves to be whole to mince."

She fled the kitchen. I finished peeling the garlic and walked into the living room. She sat in our overstuffed chair, crying.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Mom."

She nodded and said, "You've never spoken to me that way."

I put my arms around her and kissed her cheek, "Come on," I said, "help me finish dinner."

At our harvest table I sit across from Jeff, my back to the stove. At the round dining room table I sit beside him, my back to the kitchen. Like my mother, I do not want to see the world where I work—it's like sitting next to the waitress station in a restaurant, all clatter and distraction ruining the meal. Most cooks will sit with their back to the kitchen or the stove, regardless of their sex, and yet close enough to spring up for the next dish or the salt shaker. But my mother never got up from the table.

This is what I imagine happened. The local news finished and my father went to bed. My mother sat in her customary place at the rock maple table, sorting through recipes or reading or making her grocery list, while the blood that had been wearing a weak place in the artery for 63 years finally broke through. Cranial aneurysm, quick, merciful they say, except for those who loved her. Seized, she falls to the floor. The long night. If I think about the long night she lay on the kitchen floor I will not stop crying or blaming my father for not finding her sooner.

If I think about her dying in the kitchen there is some comfort in that because she loved the kitchen and preferred to be alone in it. She had complained of a headache earlier in the evening. This is the last supper but they do not know it. He does not pray at the table unless all the family is assembled and this is rare. What we pray for now is not possible. Come back. Let us all sit down together. Everything and everyone in their place, like dishes in the cupboard, the simple order of the everyday, what we expect will continue, but does not. I sit at the harvest table in her absence and wonder what to cook, even as she did in her kitchen. The basket of acorn squash, the last of the basil, the tomatoes coming on, fall. ■