

My Mother in Quarantine
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When I was eight, my mother taught me how to play chess. Her long brown hair fell forward like a curtain over the board, and her eyes and hands danced with perfect coordination. She commanded the black and white squares like a knight and stallion. Her brain was incredible: suddenly the rook was eight spaces forward, and her queen was just an inch away from my king. Game over. She would tell me I was getting better, I was getting smarter, and then we would empty cookie mix into a metal bowl and I would get to crack the egg...

Spaghetti tonight.

Again.

Meat sauce that has been ready since 4pm. I think she has permanently set the stove top at a simmer: the low heat allows the cooking process to elongate far past the “al-dente” directions on the back of the noodle box. The dinner table is set midday, with a plastic fork, spoon and knife at each setting. Even when it is Monday Corn Chowder Night. She folds paper towels into isosceles triangles. Some nights there are two cups put out at each place, and every night she prompts us to link hands and sing before we eat the first bite. *God is Great, God is Good, Let Us Thank Him for Our Foo* -- the last syllable is lost in the symphony of open-mouthed-chews, and half of my brothers’ spaghetti noodles have disappeared.

The blessing was great in elementary school. *God IS Great, God is Good, Let Us Thank Him for Our Food, Family and Friends*. It was great. The syllables flew off from our tongues in unison, and we would close our eyes tight as we chanted, and then open them to make eye contact (the smiling kind of eye contact) before eating. Thirteen years later, my mom pushes with gusto, but the rest of us keep our eyes open, mumbling along with her. I almost mention the other things we should be praying for tonight... maybe our health, maybe the blind neighbor with the ailing wife, maybe our education, maybe the nurses...but I eat instead. My world is expanded far beyond food, family and friends. Young adulthood has given me the atmosphere, but my mom is still in the brick house they bought just days before my first birthday.

Dinnertime is a battle. 6:33 pm.

We all know what’s coming. The bubbling frustration brewed from another day of uncertainty reaches 212 degrees, and spills over. It starts like this: my dad looks down, focusing on his plate as if he is trying to hypnotize each strand of pasta. My oldest brother sits up tall, ready. My older sister is torn. My brain revs like the broken air conditioner down the hall. My patience for my mother runs away from me along with my friends, my school, and my future job. She dives in:

How is the spaghetti, you know I found a new recipe tonight, do you notice the spice in the sauce? That is Tabasco. Supposedly a little kick of spice makes the pasta more gourmet. What do you think? You know your grandmother is all alone up in Little Rock. Did you call her today? Well I did. And she thinks you three will be out of here in no time. This is almost over, you know, I just wonder how they can open all of the restaurants all at once? That doesn't seem safe. Oh, am I excited for a nice date with your father and a glass of wine. The numbing monologue continues. I hate spaghetti.

A college education does something to you. Living on your own, letting your brain transform into the shapes it wants. The brain reloads with questions faster than you can ask them, and that's when you know you're knowing and learning and living. But it doesn't seem worth it tonight to let my new college brain out. Our opinions of the world remain concealed during dinnertime. Any acknowledgement of the fear of a global pandemic is muted by my mother's attempt at filling a seventy-three-day marathon of longing, frustration, even anger. Her monologue is on constant simmer. A mush of numbing words that fail to heal the equally mushy pile of emotions we carry.

The quarantine has brought out a change in our family. It has brought it out over seventy-three dinner conversations. Seventy-three monologues, which decline into deep silence. Quarantine has brought out *our* change. My brother, sister, and I trade off on the computer: classroom debates, phone call interviews, and late night Facetimes. Our voices are well-spoken, and our thoughts are intellectual, echoing from room to room. We learn incredible things on the phone and on the computer; my mom says we sound like adults. We are.

For the first time ever, we are in another world. Our childhood home fits like a right mitten on a left hand. She knows it. She knows we are different, so she tries harder. We wake up to cold eggs, and on Sundays she makes us fresh squeezed orange juice and pours it into the fancy glasses Grandma sent us. She tells us to make our beds. But my brother is 25 and misses his ham sandwich and Twix in the breakroom at work. She tells us to empty the waste baskets. But I am 21 and I want to be in a laboratory with a whole picnic of beakers. I long for the deep marks on my eyes from pressing up against the microscope. She wants us to go on a family walk. Let's get out, let's walk to the playground we used to go to. But our brains are in Nashville, in Atlanta and in New York City.

Dinner ends in silence. This was the first night I didn't speak. My brother gets up suddenly; his phone is ringing. "I love you, I am so proud of you, are you sure you don't want more pasta?" my mom says, as she reaches out to stroke his left shoulder. He leans away and forces a smile, no teeth though and his lips barely curl upward.

She tries for the five of us to make things right. Her stories, her food, the folded paper napkins are meant to make us happy, but we push her away. Her mothering is no longer a magic cure.

We long for our friends, just like she longs for her children.

She works harder than anyone I know. She faces defeat and gets little reward. She carries us: she carries my dad's temper, she carries my brother's impatience, she carries my sister's apprehensions. She carries my uncertainty. She cleans and loves, she cooks and cares, she talks and worries. She feels the despair of five, not one. She doesn't show it, though. Her brown hair was cut short, but it has grown down to her shoulders. It frames her face, and strands fall forward making intersections with the crow's feet encompassing each eye. She puts on lipstick each morning. By dinner, it has faded to match the rose in her cheeks. I look across the table at my mother. She ate all of her spaghetti, but her body is wiry. Each muscle in her arm shows, and her collar bones protrude. She's beautiful.

Let's play chess, I say.