

Table Manners

I held the door, waiting for everyone to catch up, hoping the handle did not slip with the sweat gathering in my palm. Jack gave me the eye that said, ‘Trevor, you’re walking too fast,’ but I just smiled, shuffled everyone in, then followed my dad into the restaurant. Inside, I reached for Jack’s hand just as he went to wipe some sweat from his forehead. Hopefully, no one would storm out like the last time my dad gathered everyone together. “Good evening. Do you have reservations?” the hostess called out. Someone needed to speak up and say no, even though, in other ways, the answer was clearly yes. Why *do* we say no when we really mean yes?

Dad finally spoke up. “Ah, no, no, we do not have a reservation.” He aired out his shirt, perhaps saving his complaint for when we reached the table that the air conditioning was not blasting enough.

“How many in your party?”

“Six.”

“Seven, Dad, you forgot Jack.” I did not have to avoid Jack’s reaction, as he had turned back towards the parking lot. His fists were clenching and unclenching, and I had to breathe a little, hoping no one noticed the effort. My shirt was sticking to my lower back. Dad had not noticed that it’s the one he bought for me last Christmas—the one that had been folded in the dresser drawer unworn since because I didn’t care for the broad stripes—when we met everyone at his house. Jack was just waiting to say “I told you so.” I should have worn an undershirt.

Dad’s nostrils flared a bit as he nodded to the hostess.

With seven menus clutched to her chest, “Right this way.”

As we passed through the dining room, conversations overlapped without intruding on one another. Servers moved and touched on their way behind and in front of one another without flinching or dipping their trays of drinks and hot food. A baby looked up from a high chair as his mother tried to spoon feed him some pureed something, the failed attempts spilled all over his blue-lined bib. That had been me once, back when we would come here for Monday family-night dinners, though I graduated, along with my brother, to real chairs and blue and red corduroys over time. The pictures from the family photo album back then showed Dad in his wide collared shirt to complement his long, bushy sideburns. Mom wore those loud flower-print dresses that now showed up in thrift store windows. When my brother and I were old enough, we devoured enough on our plates to earn fried ice cream; my parents, I would later learn, were busy staring across the table at one another, contemplating how long it would all last. I had not been here with my father since he had left my mother. Jack nudged me forward.

While Dad dusted off his seat, huffing in the process, I took the chair directly across the table. My brother, Adrian, planted himself in the seat to my left. Sherry, his girlfriend, scooted in her chair next to him, and opened her menu. Jack laid his napkin along his lap while my stepmother and her son shifted in their seats several times. Through the windows, the Southern-California sun was just starting to dip in the daylight-savings-sponsored sky. Dad hated the added sunshine, made him sweat too much. Why do they have to invent something new when the old system works just fine? he argued, not wanting to hear that the shift actually saved energy.

Our server would be right with us; we pored over our menus. My shirt itched. Jack nodded in slight amusement. His "there's a reason you haven't worn that yet," comment, made while he searched for the car keys on our way out the door, kept repeating in my head. I knew I should have washed it first before I wore it out of the house, though I doubted fabric softener would make it feel any more comfortable.

"What's good here?" Sherry craned her head over my brother's menu.

"They make a really good southwestern burrito here." Dad offered his "expertise" whenever he could.

"They took that off the menu," I called out while scanning my options. Dad had put his menu down so fast he probably had not noticed what had changed, assuming it was all the same once he found his favorite.

"That doesn't matter. They can still make it." He scouted around for our server as he rapped his fingers on the table.

Sherry clicked her nails while she considered the menu options. My brother stroked her long brown hair.

"A burrito does sound good." She smiled as she leaned into my brother's touch. Her hand moved across her stomach. Perhaps she wondered how her choice would throw off the "delicate tummy" she complained of.

"Please relax, Dale?" My stepmother gripped my Dad's forearm.

"I would really like to order a drink." Dad turned to his wife. "What are you going to have?"

"Maybe one of their margaritas. Sherry, are you going to try one?"

"No, no, Beverly, I'm not drinking." Sherry's eyes drooped.

"But why...oh, that's right, you...your stomach." She forced a smile. "I'm sure they can make a virgin one." Her face lit up enough so that you would have to be an idiot to believe Sherry avoided a cocktail over something an antacid could alleviate.

Ignoring the exchange, across the table, my father searched for something to get him worked up. "I don't understand why..." Before his impatience could swell, the waitress strode to the table. She took our drink order without writing anything down.

Perhaps sensing the stress knots forming between my shoulder blades, Jack rubbed my knee. He always jumped to my rescue without being told, just like when I would be in the weeds at work and he would greet a table when he saw I was backed up. He also knew what was setting me off at the moment, the same thing that drove him nuts: people getting too worked up when they dine out, as if the whole world is there for them at their fingertips just because they will pay the check.

My stepbrother, Carey, darted his eyes when he saw Jack's hand move. Jack sighed as he removed his hand. It was not his family so he avoided addressing my stepbrother's immaturity directly. Jack picked his battles. Before I met Jack, I would have made a scene, just to prove I could. But before Jack, I never would have placed my hand over another man's anywhere where someone in my family could see. Even though I was out to them, I would not put their faces in it. Jack understood this, yet quietly waited for me to step all the way through the door he helped open. His patience, though, was withering like a hot plate of food sitting in the kitchen service window.

"She'll have the chicken?" Dad could not be bothered to call out the full title, assuming the server would figure out what his finger was pointing to. The waitress nodded.

“Carey?”

“Halibut, well done. Can you put whatever that sauce is on the side?” The waitress smiled.

“I’ll have the tenderloin, medium rare, a side of sautéed spinach, and a green salad to start. Your house vinaigrette will be fine.” Jack made servers’ jobs as easy as possible.

I followed with, “I’ll have the same, minus the spinach.” Jack and I handed over our menus.

“Which is better: the lamb or the sea bass?” My brother kept his eyes on his menu.

The waitress navigated as best she could, offering the best response to a question with no right answer. She finally talked him into the sea bass.

Sherry weighed her options. Dad placed his hand on her shoulder while the edges of the waitress’ nostrils expanded and contracted. She had some nice teeth. I wished mine could get that bright.

“Order the southwestern burrito, if that’s what you want,” Dad called out.

“I don’t see it listed, though.”

“Can she get the southwestern burrito, the one you took off the menu?”

Since they no longer listed it on the menu, they no longer had the ingredients in-house to whip it up. Dad held her gaze, waiting for her to say no so he could object further. Menu change or not, they had better have what they used to have, his “request” would say. He was not one for “chefs,” people who got too fancy with their food. Cooks were more his speed. True, the customers who did not like the new menu could go

somewhere else, but he was sitting right there, and he wanted what he wanted, regardless of the fact that the restaurant removed it from the menu because it probably didn't sell.

"Are you sure?"

The waitress was sure.

"It's really alright, Dale."

"No, Sherry, if you want the burrito, I'm sure they can make it."

"No, really. I will have the chicken then, same as you, right, Beverly?" My stepmother beamed across the table. I rolled my eyes.

Dad's turn came. "Okay, now, here's what I want. I want to get the sirloin, but I don't want that spice rub you have on it. Can I get it without?" He could. "I also wanted to do a different sauce with that. That cream sauce just doesn't agree with me." She made some suggestions. "Yeah, that last one. Now, as far as sides. What I really wanted was some mashed potatoes without butter or cream." That was not possible. "Are you sure they couldn't get it together?" She was sure, and the veins in her neck showed she was annoyed too. "Alright, well then, how about this side of rice you have listed down here?" Vegetables were the enemy, apparently. The waitress ran through some options for Dad as she scanned around her section. She just got double-sat a deuce and a three-top. Clearly, she had to wrap this up quick.

"Life would be so much easier if you would just order off the menu." The waitress smiled at me as I spoke. She gathered up the remaining menus.

Dad waved me off as he looked past me and into the bar area. The televisions broadcasted the latest war reports, the same few lines of information stretched over three hours. The commentator moved on to cover the Supreme Court upholding a person's

right to engage in whatever sexual behavior consenting adults choose to behind closed doors. Americans’ right to privacy, as the courts reaffirmed, extended to homosexuals as well. A Pennsylvania senator weighed in with his misguided opinion: “I have a problem with homosexual acts, as I would with what I would consider to be acts outside of traditional heterosexual relationships.” My Dad sat rapt. The senator continued: “if the Supreme Court says that you have the right to consensual sex”—just say gay if you mean gay, buddy—“within your home, then you have the right to bigamy, you have the right to polygamy, you have the right to incest, you have the right to adultery.” This guy has a say in leading our country?

“It’s absolutely unbelievable what people think they are entitled to,” my father barked.

A food runner dropped off our salads. No pepper, thank you.

“Don’t people understand what message their actions are sending?” He could not be bothered to acknowledge that some of those people sat across from him. We had a “bias,” he would say.

“The salad looks good.” Jack dug in while Adrian and Sherry watched.

“Next thing you know the Supreme Court will be saying that gays should be allowed to marry.”

“What do you think of the dressing?” I asked Jack. The house dressing had a wonderful zest to it. Jack made something similar at our house. I tried to stay out of the kitchen. I opened the bottles of wine, as I had mastered the perfect pour: just enough to fill the glass more than half way, then a slow raise of the neck, quarter turn to let the excess drop of wine trickle down the proper side of the bottle, leaving no excess to wipe.

Tablesides, I learned a nifty trick of snipping the foil and drilling the corkscrew with one hand. Customers often offered their appreciation that the label never moved. They liked the illusion of something remaining fixed while something happened without noticing. I modestly assured them that it was no big deal when they said they had never seen it done that way before.

"They're going to tarnish a sacred institution in this country if they get their way."

"We probably could have split this, you know?" I hoped this salad would not kill my appetite for my entrée; Jack shoveled his salad.

"How're the salads, you guys?" Adrian nudged his bread plate, like a dog drawing attention to an empty food bowl.

"Did you want some?" I asked while Jack kept his pace. He probably wanted to tell my brother to order his own, as Adrian typically tried to mooch once something appeared appetizing.

"If you don't mind, just a little." I took his plate. "Thanks."

Sherry watched Adrian eat. After a moment, she reached for another roll from the basket in the middle of the table. Carey beat her to it. He had that bread ripped in half in a moment, the pieces squashed in the process.

"Carey, give her the roll. You've had enough." My stepmother leaned in so as not to have her command denied.

"No, really, it's fine. The food will be here soon anyway." Sherry would not cause a fuss if you asked her to. She got short changed at a Rite-Aid once and just shrugged and walked right out, staring at her receipt as if it were her fault.

Carey tossed the bread back into the basket then directed his attention to the crumbs in front of him. He stared at those crumbs as if he had no idea how they got there. He brushed them into a small pile, then over the table and into his palm. He then took the palm under the table and dusted it off, careful to make sure all the crumbs left his hand.

My stepmother spoke first before my father’s disgusted mouth could utter a comment. “Let it go, Dale, let it go.”

Three different people dropped off our entrees. In another moment, the waitress approached. “Can I get some butter for my rice and some pepper?” Dad asked. She would be right back with the condiments that tasted bad with potatoes. He never trusted the chef’s—or cook’s—portions. He watched while we took up our silverware.

Jack took a few bites, then scanned the table. “Dale, can you pass the salt?” Jack extended his hand.

Dad looked at the salt, then back up at Jack. My stepmother prodded the saltshaker towards Dad. He looked at her, then down at the saltshaker. Swooping it up, he handed it to Sherry. “Here, Sherry, pass this to... to...”

Jack reached past Sherry and took it himself. After seasoning his steak, he forced, “Thanks, Dale.” He dropped the shaker close enough to the table to make a sound but not a scene. I winced, for although I wanted to be the one to say something, I was not prepared to do it in public. Jack said I should always be prepared to do it in public. My father could use the embarrassment; it would compel him to remember it more. He had not known my dad long enough to realize he recalled most the lessons he provided. Tell

him he should trim back the tree because it will fall on the house, he'll shrug; when that tree is poking through the roof, he'll yell about why nothing was done about it sooner.

The waitress delivered my father's condiments.

"Thanks," I said for him. He glared at me from across the table. I stared back.

"Beverly, how is your chicken? I'm surprised it came out as juicy as it did."

Sherry's voice bounced on all the syllables, showing off the same vocal chops she used to invite people to renew their theater ticket subscriptions.

Perhaps looking for an answer, my stepmother poked away at her chicken, much in the way my mother used to when trying to see if my father's criticism held any merit.

Mom would come home from work and go right to the kitchen. She would serve the family only to wait for Dad's reaction. We sat and waited for Dad to take up his silverware first on these nights.

"This meat is so dry," Dad said, offering his typical response. He used anything to vent his job dissatisfaction and the tightening of the family budget that encouraged us to eat at home more. Instead of getting a new job, he preferred to complain about the one he had, making everything else around him the reason for his discontent. This was our family quality time, in my father's eyes, even if all we really did was share oxygen. Still, he insisted we eat together at least once a week, to maintain our family unit. He had always dreamed of having a family; that explains why he left his first wife for not being able to have children.

One time, my mother, lucky wife number 2, while poking away at her plate of chicken, spoke back: "Looks fine to me, Dale. If you're not happy with it, don't eat it."

She tilted her head as she smiled. Her long curly brown hair dipped off her shoulder.

Her feisty hazel eyes were growing tired by the day.

"Well, anyway." Holding my mother's glance for a moment, he turned his attention to my guest at the table. "Julie, I'm glad Trevor brought home a girl for once. We were starting to get worried that... well, you know?" He raised his glass and smiled, perhaps wondering when the grandkids were coming.

My brother laughed, the particles of food falling out of his mouth and back onto his plate. My mother dabbed her mouth with her napkin and leaned over to my first and only girlfriend. "Don't mind the men in this family, Julie. Hopefully you got the one that will grow out of it." I wonder if Mom knew I would be outgrowing the idea of trying to date girls. Though Dad would be the one to grow first: he divorced my mother when he realized her opinions held as much interest for him as her cooking. Once free of my father, and a little practice, she became quite the cook, talents my step-father would come to enjoy. That might have been the last dinner we had together before they separated.

"Send the chicken back," Dad said to Sherry.

"No, it's fine, it's fine." Sherry smoothed out her napkin.

"Are you sure that's going to be enough food, Hon'?" Adrian eyed Sherry's plate like my father used to ours, making sure she was eating enough.

"Worry about your own plate, son, she's an adult. It's not like she's pregnant."

As Dad chuckled, my stepmother set her fork down, averted her eyes and took a long drink from her water. Sherry tussled her hands on her lap. Carey split his attention between smacking his meal into submission and monitoring Jack.

Adrian eyed my father amidst the long, uncomfortable pause that had settled over the table. My stepmother bowed her head after taking another long drink of water. I took a deep breath, bracing myself, like a watching a glass slip from your tray with no hope of grabbing it, just waiting for it to shatter once it hits the ground, wondering if it will hurt any customers as it breaks. Dad looked at Sherry, and when she would not return the eye contact, he looked again at Adrian.

After some more moments, "How far along?"

Adrian rested his hand on Sherry's shoulder. "Seven weeks."

Dad rushed his fingers through his thinning gray hair. "Getting married?"

"We're going to wait to see how things work out, after the baby." They were waiting for the right reason. At least that is what my brother told me when I had caught the pregnancy test left out in their bathroom. The kid who used to swim on a full stomach; the guy who said yes to the cable upgrades for the car stereo installation in his car that needed a new engine; the brother who got loaded and shaved his head the night before senior portraits, was growing up finally.

"Dale, let yourself enjoy it." Once home, they would argue about who knew what when. My stepmother would cry, plead, then close the door to the bathroom in order to be alone. They would whisper to one another after some time passed, and then the lock would turn, and everything would be alright until the next time. Should I follow their example?

I placed my hand on Jack's knee. He placed his hand over mine. My Dad turned his attention from his half-eaten plate to a war update. I squeezed Jack's hand tighter. I needed to tell my family that Jack and I were getting married in a few months, or as close

as we were allowed. If Dad could see that I was serious with someone—not the kid who asked for sports equipment and tossed them aside weeks later, bored—that sight would quell his reservations about what was right and wrong when it came to love. But I could not speak, for the words I needed to say would move me closer to Jack and farther from my family, perhaps a distance I would never be able to bridge again. Feeling the moment slip away, I rested my left hand, the one with the glistening platinum engagement band on my ring finger, on the table. The ring caught the setting sun’s rays bathing the room, exposing all the shimmering dust hanging all around us. If marriage is what my Dad saw as the adult thing to do, then let him appreciate my maturity.

Without moving his head, Dad’s eyes darted down. His jaw relaxed as he eased back in his chair. He looked up at me, then up at Jack. Jack put his fork down, smiled at me, then turned to my father. His eyes hollowed.

“Excuse me,” Dad whispered as he stood and tossed his napkin on top of his plate. He walked in what I assumed to be the direction of the bathroom.

My stepmother watched him disappear around a corner and turned to Sherry, who would not look up. Instead of feeling good about the life growing inside of her, and smart about not marrying for the wrong reasons, she felt guilty for letting my father down, the man who welcomed her into the family with open arms, the one who was far better to her than the alcoholic one she had at home. Why people in this situation did not rally around the expectant parents rather than shunning them was beyond me. “He just wants you two to do the right thing, that is all. No harm in waiting. Just love your child.” She glanced over at my stepbrother, who continued to devour his plate. She

turned to Jack and me. "You know he loves you both, it's just... he may never get to where he needs to be with you two, but he does love you both."

Rubbing Sherry's back, Adrian glanced at me with the if-you-only-knew eyes.

After he paid the check, Dad paced around his SUV while Adrian and Sherry got in the back seat, Carey tucked between them.

My stepmother hugged Jack and me. "Are you two coming back to the house?"

Jack left the decision to me, counting on me to deliver the right answer. "No. I think we'll leave from here. We have a long day tomorrow and should get home." The sun had dipped below the mountains and a crisp breeze drifted past. We said our goodbyes.

On the drive back, something in the air smelled different, like I had discovered a new scent. At home, Jack wrapped his arms around me once he closed the front door. From the top of the stairs, our cat meowed while our dog trotted up to us, panting, drooling a touch on our jeans. "You okay?" Jack asked.

I looked at all the pictures of our life together framed on the wall: I smiled through clenched teeth at the top of the Eiffel tower, my fear of heights getting the best of me; for our second anniversary, Jack sprung for a suite overlooking Niagara Falls. He sat behind me as we gazed out from our hotel window as the water rushed over the cliff. The Canadian side of the falls offered the best view. Down the hall, a small collage of some family pictures. There were a whole lot of smiles. "Yeah, I'm good." Part of me was busy dying.

The house line rang. Jack stayed by my side, sharing my sentiment of letting it ring. However, on the fourth ring, we moved as one into the kitchen, to the phone and answering machine sitting on the wall we had just painted a warm evergreen. When Dad's voice clicked on, I turned down the volume. Jack kissed my cheek, ran his hand along my shoulder, then fingered the collar on my shirt. He smirked; a little levity. I would never have to wear the shirt again. We took our dog and went upstairs to join our cat.