

“Chicken Soup”
by May Cotton © 2022

My parents sat in their usual places at the dining room table, my father at the head with his back to the living room, and my mother at the foot with her back to the built-in china closet, one of the many wonderful extras that came with our house — because the contractor who built the homes in our neighborhood in 1917 built what became our house for his own family. I sat in the place closest to the kitchen, to my mother’s left, where I could jump up more easily than my mom, who was wedged in between the table and the china closet.

I don’t know why we called it a china closet. It was clearly a cabinet, with glass-paned doors and mirrors against the back, and a set of drawers for linens. It was made of the same dark wood trimming the whole interior of the house, including the french doors between the living room and the dining room, which my father had taken off and stored in the furnace room so we kids wouldn’t break any of the 3x7 inch panes of glass. My mother used to speculate on how soon we would be old enough for the doors to be safe from us so they could be rehung, but the doors were never replaced until my mother put the house on the market when I was in my late 30s. The sale happened so quickly, I never got to see the mysterious doors my mom seemed to hold against us when we were young.

Our dining room table was an antique before it ever took up residence in our Denver dining room. Made of heavy cherry, “it was the first extension table to come across the Allegheny Mountains in a covered wagon,” my mother was fond of telling folks who admired it. These days I wonder how she knew that. Was there any truth to what might have been nothing more than a family rumor? Nevertheless, it is an exquisite table with beveled legs on tiny brass casters. At its smallest, the table is round, but my mother preferred to keep at least one or two leaves in place so that, even though we rarely used it, it was always ready to accommodate at least six people — the five of us plus a guest. Today the table belongs to me, but in name only, as it resides in the Adams County Historical Society museum in Brighton, Colorado.

Sometimes I think about my place of privilege at the table. Because I was the elder daughter — and the normal one — I sat at a place both in the kitchen and the dining room which made it convenient for me to jump up at anyone’s whim. It also meant I sat farther from my sister than my brother did. At most kitchen meals, he sat across from her, watching her get away with breaking all the mealtime rules he and I were expected to heed.

In the dining room he sat to my mother’s right, the place of honor otherwise reserved for our grandmother when she deigned to grace us with her presence, which she rarely did. My sister sat to my father’s left, providing a sort of symmetry to the lopsided table of five when there were no guests, and a definite symmetry when there were six — my sister moved to my side of the table, making daughters at our mother’s left hand, son and honored guest at her right. When my father’s parents visited, my grandfather sat to my father’s right, next to me, and my brother shifted to the middle of the table with our sister on his right and our grandmother on his left.

It was in this configuration we were sitting at the last meal my grandparents ate at our table. Usually when they came to Denver to visit, we ate out with them, or we would go to the home of their friends in the exclusive Montclair District where they always stayed. I learned early on not to question why they didn’t stay at our house, and at this meal which sticks so clearly in my mind, I learned why they didn’t eat there either.

In another time and place, my grandmother would have rivaled Martha Stewart in her knowledge of gracious living. When we ate at my grandparents house in Kansas City, we always ate in the dining room, whether there were guests or not. The only exception to this rule was breakfast, which was taken at the kitchen table on hot or cold mornings or on the front porch when the weather was cool. Every meal was served on linen, either placemats or tablecloths. Each place setting had at least two forks and three spoons, a butter knife and a dinner knife, a cloth napkin, and a selection of plates for the various courses. These days, the rule of etiquette appears to require only the silverware to be used for that meal be part of the table setting, but my grandmother would surely protest. Breakfasts were served on her assorted decorative dessert plates of which my grandmother grudgingly gave me five to start my own plate collection when I was 19. I have only two of the originals left, the others having been broken over the years.

My grandmother was the most fastidious of cooks. Every measurement had to be exact, every grain of dry ingredient at the exact level of the measuring device specified by the recipe, every step of the recipe followed exactly as written — unless, of course, the recipe was hand written, and then one had to take into account the writer’s potential errors. One could trust professionally published cookbooks whose recipes had been rigorously tested, but one could not trust one’s friends. One knew the fallibility of one’s friends.

My mother, on the other hand, was an experimenter. Onions gave her gas, which embarrassed her terribly, being the only daughter of a very Victorian mother, so when a recipe called for onions, my mother came up with something else to flavor the dish, usually celery. My father had severe food allergies to ordinary foods like pork and beef, milk and eggs, corn and potatoes. So my mother adjusted things, substituting pureed apricots for eggs in a sugar cookie recipe or turnips for potatoes. “They look the same when they’re cooked,” my mother argued. But you’ve probably never eaten mashed turnips with gravy.

Her favorite ingredients were stewed tomatoes and Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom® soup. Nearly every dish my mother made began with a glass jar of home-canned tomatoes, fetched lovingly from the basement fruit cellar, a scary room lined with jars. In addition to the red tomatoes, the other full jars were bright yellow with peaches or pale ivory with pears, purple with plums or brown with cinnamon-laced applesauce, the empties waiting for fall when they would be refilled. Across the room, beneath the stairs, anxious centipedes lurked among the Christmas decorations, awaiting darkness. I came across a centipede once when my hands were the ones fetching the tomato jar for my mother’s latest culinary invention. My initial terror turned to interest once the little creature was scurrying around inside a canning jar with a punctured lid, an ideal candidate for show and tell.

Growing up between these two extremes of cooks, I expected to take pride in my cooking, but had little interest in reading recipes. If I really liked something someone else had made, I’d ask for the recipe, but like my mother, I played with the ingredients and always ended up inventing something else. The only difference was that my “something else” was usually palatable, which somehow never led my mother to the suspicious jealousy one might expect. She just praised me for the results. Ultimately, I think my mother had no real sense of taste. She loved everything and couldn’t understand why others tended to draw back suspiciously at the offering of her latest dish.

Of course, as I was young, I did not yet understand the social implications of cooking and serving guests in one’s own home. I knew only that there were always many tensions in the

kitchen and at the table until everyone settled at last into the eating, and then the emanations of energy shifted and everyone was happy once again. This, of course, only happened when there were guests at the meal. Family meals had a different kind of energy, and the relief came at the end of the meal when we were finally excused from the table to flee to our bedrooms where we were safe from the daily grilling about our accomplishments. My father's gruff demeanor made every dinner an ordeal.

At dining room meals, in the presence of his parents, my father was on his best behavior, chatting chummily with his dad, a smaller, gentler version of himself. If my grandfather had a gruff side to him, I never saw it. The two of them together were a delight to be with because they enjoyed each other so much. The energy flowing from my left that Sunday afternoon was so wonderful, it helped to sugarcoat the energy coming from my right. My mother was gradually slipping from the pleasure of using her new copper soup tureen to fidgety frustration as she watched my grandmother pick ingredients out of her soup and discard them on her butter plate.

The curious shift in energy caused me to look up from my own soup to watch the spectacle unfolding before me. My grandmother's nostrils flared as she stiffened perceptibly in her chair. My large mother seemed to grow smaller as my little grandmother enlarged. Nothing had been said yet, but my mother had clearly gotten the message that my grandmother was offended by the presence of skin and bones in her soup. Mamma was defeated once again, proven by her mother-in-law's disapproval to be a failure as a wife.

Years later my mother would tell me horror stories about the way my grandmother treated her, the hurtful things that were said, the biting criticism which served to reinforce my father's contention that my mother was stupid and my grandmother's contention that my father had married beneath him, that this country bumpkin of a daughter-in-law was never going to be more than a transplanted farm girl.

There is a part of me that wants to remember harsh words from my grandmother's mouth, some spoken condemnation to verbalize the fact that my grandparents would never eat at our table again, but what was said that day was a more subtle put down. I can see the table, the white lace tablecloth stretching between my bowl of soup and the plate where the rejects from my grandmother's soup bowl sat pushed to one side. The trail of crocheted flowers did not soften the harsh silence. I looked from my grandmother's butter plate stacked with graying skin, naked bones and discarded wing tips to the single chicken wing that floated in my own bowl. The size of the pile on my grandmother's plate told me she had been given the lion's share of the meat and had discarded most of it. Her words were short and to the point, but her tone dripped with venom.

"It is proper to remove the skin and bones before serving," she chastised. My mother wilted in her place as she gazed into her own bowl of soup. She was no doubt mulling over, as she often did, the difference between growing up poor and growing up privileged.

My perpetually-hungry young stomach growled in protest, but I could not force myself to eat my mother's famous chicken vegetable soup. The skin floating in my bowl suddenly appalled me. I knew instinctively how it would feel in my mouth, how it would slither on my tongue. I had never questioned the desirability of eating boiled chicken skin, but now I did. And my inability to eat it must have seemed to my mother like defection on my part.

Into the silence that followed my grandmother's reprimand came the sound of slurping, my sister happily feeding herself, chicken skin and all flopping into her mouth. Like my mother, she lacked discerning taste and simply enjoyed whatever food was set before her.

Reflecting now on this ancient incident, I contemplate the grace my grandfather had said at the beginning of our meal, blessing the soup, chicken skin and all.

“Father for thy unlimited good we thank thee,” he intoned. “Bless this food to our use. Keep us ever mindful of the needs of others. Help us to give of ourselves even as we have already received.”

My mother had given of herself in the preparations for this meal, served proudly to the family she loved, even the hateful mother-in-law whom she strove to love in spite of everything. But in this case I think my mother managed to serve up a metaphoric portion of what she so often received from my grandmother — the substandard parts, which this time, were a major portion of the meal.