

Family Dinner

Jean rarely cried. She had been counting, and the last time she cried was nearly three years ago. She didn't mind not crying, although sometimes she wished she could. She would see her friends teary-eyed at a movie and she would blink faster to see if she could force herself, but it never worked.

She didn't even cry when Antonio had missed the magazine's gala event, where Jean won the Best New Journalist award. She was only 24, one of the youngest people to ever win.

"I'm so sorry" Antonio had said later, "I got stuck at work. The stove caught on fire and the restaurant had to be evacuated."

"It's fine" Jean said. She went into the bathroom and stared at her reflection. Something hot swelled through her, but still no tears. She sank her fist into the towel shelf instead.

It was that same night, when Aunt May called to propose that the family have dinner together every month. She said they were growing too far apart.

"And don't forget to invite that boyfriend of yours, Jeanie," Aunt May said, and giggled.

"No problem" Jean had said through clenched teeth.

Aunt May continued on about the monthly dinners and wanting their family to act more like a family. Especially after Papa's lung cancer. They had caught it early, but Aunt May warned that cancer tends to come back.

It wasn't that Jean hated her family, or that she wasn't worried about Papa's health, but things always seemed to go wrong when they were all together. Just last Easter, when she had

brought Antonio to meet her family for the first time, Aunt May and Jean's mother had gotten into a screaming match that ended in several broken plates. On the train ride home, Antonio told her that he liked her family's passion.

"That's not passion," she had said, "they just like to hurt each other."

Even Papa was resistant to the dinners. Watching his daughters argue wasn't good for his health, he told Jean when she came over to walk his dog. Jean agreed, but there was not much anyone could do. Aunt May had endless optimism. She had somehow convinced everyone else in the family that it was a good idea, and so Jean and Papa had no choice but to go along with it. The first dinner was set for January 10th, just a week after the gala.

Jean arrived at Papa's apartment straight after work. When she knocked on the apartment door, she could hear Papa's dog barking and she could smell fish frying in oil. Aunt May opened the door for her. She was wearing a flower-patterned apron and her signature wide smile. No matter how much Jean disliked the situations Aunt May put the family in, her presence somehow deceived her into thinking everything would be okay. They embraced each other and Jean could smell the fish in her aunt's hair and underneath it the scent of her floral perfume.

"Hi Jeanie, glad to see you, hon. I'll be putting you on table-setting duty later," she said.

"it's just Jean," Jean said.

"Oh right." Aunt May scrunched her nose. "You're all grown up now. It's so easy to forget."

Aunt May looked like she wasn't related to the rest of the family. Her eyes were small, and her nose was large and round. Her hair was blonde, puffy, and curled up at the ends. She striped Jean of her coat and purse and hung them on the coat stand.

"Where's Antonio?" She asked.

“He’ll be here,” Jean responded.

“Well, come on in. Everyone else is here,” Aunt May said. She gestured past the entry way towards the dining room and kitchen. Jean wandered into the dining room, nearly tripping over the dog. Her mother and father were sitting on opposite sides of the table, talking, or maybe arguing. Although they had been divorced for almost ten years, Ernest was still invited to every family gathering. His eyes wandered up to meet Jean’s.

“Jeanie,” he said like he was surprised to see her.

“Hi,” Jean said. Frances turned to face her daughter.

“Please tell your father that print is not dead,” she said by way of a greeting.

“Print is not dead,” Jean said to Ernest. He shook his head like he had given up. Jean didn’t blame him. Conversations with Frances were not a place where people usually enjoyed themselves.

“Is Italy coming?” Frances asked.

“Don’t call him that,” Jean said, “but yes, he is.”

“And he’s bringing more wine, I hope,” she said, gesturing to the near empty wine bottle on the table. Jean shrugged even though she knew the answer was yes. Antonio always brought wine. Jean moved away from her parents and Frances turned back to Ernest and their bickering continued, their voices overlapping. Both her parents were academic in some sense, and they tended to have theoretical conversations about theories and critiques of theories and theories about critiques of theories. Ernest was an assistant professor of business at Columbia. Frances used to be a professor too, but when she became a best-selling author, she dropped teaching. She dropped a lot of things.

“Jean,” Papa said brightly from the other end of the table. Jean turned to see her grandfather, sitting in his designated chair at the end of the table. Next to him Frances’s little brother, Uncle Rob, was staring at his phone.

“Hi Papa,” Jean said, “how are you?”

“Oh. You know, still alive.” He flashed a grin.

“Disappointing, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

Papa was in his 80’s but he was still young at heart. Despite the cancer, his eyes were still bright and sparkling, young behind the wrinkles.

Papa’s apartment wasn’t small by New York standards, but the dining room was stuffed to the brim whenever the family was there. In the center of the room was a long oak table that Papa had had ever since Jean could remember. The edges had a few small and crooked bite marks pressed into the wood, tiny memories of childhood. That was Alex’s fault. She knew every inch of the apartment by heart. She knew which floorboards squeaked the loudest, which records Papa kept in the living room cabinet. She knew the arrangement of Grandma’s figurine collection, which Papa polished every day. Everything was the same. The apartment was like a time capsule, a museum of itself. The only new addition in the last decade was Papa’s dog Ruth, named after Babe Ruth. He was small and white with curly fur and pink eyes. Jean disliked dogs and this one was no exception. He barked at every motion outside the window and whimpered whenever Papa wasn’t petting him. Still, Jean came over most days to walk Ruth down the street. The building was doing construction on the elevator which made it much more difficult for her grandfather to get in and out of his apartment.

“I’ve lived in this city for almost 40 years, Jean,” he would tell her when she offered to run errands for him, “I can take care of myself.”

“Just let me do one thing for you,” Jean had said, and after much grumbling her grandfather had agreed.

After the surgery it took Papa longer to climb the stairs. After the diagnosis Aunt May had made a fuss about moving Papa into an elderly residence home. She said it would be easier for everyone and they could rent out the apartment. For once, Jean and her mother agreed on something: Aunt May was wrong.

“Jeanie shouldn’t have to be his caretaker,” Aunt May had said. But Jean didn’t feel like a caretaker. Listening to him talk about music and complain about the Yankees and even walking his horrible dog didn’t feel like work. She did these things happily. And despite Papa’s constant protesting, she saw the relief on his face when she appeared at his door.

Sometimes he told her stories about the family, when Aunt May, Uncle Rob, and Frances were kids. The stories about Frances especially intrigued Jean. She could barely imagine her mother as anything other than what she was now: a stubborn and lost middle aged woman. But the way Papa told it, she used to be kind. She used to build ant farms on the playground, protect their small single file line from disruption. She used to make little drawings for her classmates when they were sick. Jean tried to imagine Frances as a child, a little girl with pigtails poking unevenly from the sides of her head. She tried to imagine her mother being someone who cared about ants.

“She was on fire,” Papa would say, “she cared about things with passion. I didn’t realize children could be so passionate”. Papa always got quiet after he told these stories. His bright smile and laughter would disappear into a longing stare out the window.

Now though, her mother seemed more like a dull flame than a fire, just trying to hold on to the last bit of oxygen. Her hair was brown and streaked with blonde and reddish hues. Her eyes were blue. When they twitched your way and caught you in their icy beam it was hard to look away. She dressed like a teenager in ripped jeans and casual tops. She cared about her writing more than anything, more than her family.

As Jean sat next to her grandfather, they both observed the conversation between Frances and Ernest which had devolved into something unrelated to the status of print.

“What we need is someone who will actually take care of the problem,” Ernest was saying, “and Miyaschwitz is not going to take care of it.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone else who could have even a chance more than Miyaschwitz,” Frances said.

“Well, he certainly isn’t doing anything.”

“There are lots of issues besides garbage.”

“There are health impacts, you know. Problems don’t exist in a bubble.”

“That is what hospitals are for, Ernie.”

“Can’t you see how this is flawed? You live on the Upper East Side. Of course they pick up your trash,” he said.

“And you live in Jersey,” Frances retorted, “don’t talk to me about this city.”

With that, they both paused for a drink of wine. They were sitting across from each other, both leaning slightly over the table, elbows propping them upright, like they were preparing for a debate. This was how their conversations usually went. And Jean knew that in a minute they

would switch to a new topic to argue about. Papa touched her shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her seat.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “they just have to get it out of their system.” He rubbed her shoulder. Jean could feel the tenseness in her muscles but instead of relaxing, she stood up.

“I’m going to go help in the kitchen,” she announced.

The kitchen was on the other side of the hallway, far enough away to not hear what was being said in the dining room. It was a tiny galley kitchen. A second doorway led into the entry way of the apartment. The sounds of sizzling and the smell of fish and spices and something earthy swirled into Jean’s ears and nose as she entered the kitchen. Aunt May’s daughter Catherine was standing over a pot on the stove, stirring a thick broth.

“Hi Jeanie,” Catherine said as Jean leaned against the counter just inside the doorway. The kitchen was a mess. Two large plates of something covered in foil were on the counter next to the stove. There was a pan of shrimp crackling on the stove, and a covered pot next to it. Food covered the counters, bread and cilantro and chopped carrots on a cutting board. Spices were stuffed into the empty spaces, spread around randomly.

“Hi Cath,” Jean gave her cousin a side hug so as not to disturb her stirring. Alex was squatting next to her, peering into the oven door. He looked up at Jean.

“Oh hey,” he said, standing up, “Aunt May told me to watch the pies.”

“Hey,” Jean said, “when did you get here?”

“Yesterday,” he said, “I stayed with dad.”

“Oh. You could’ve stayed with me.”

“Well, I assumed you would be busy.”

Jean felt a pang in her chest. She was busy. But so was everyone.

“You could’ve texted,” she said. Her brother shrugged. “How’s Yale?” She asked.

“It’s fine.”

“How’s...is it...Norma?”

“Naomi. She’s good.”

Jean nodded. The two had been together for a while now, Jean should know her name. But Alex had never brought her home or attempted to introduce her to the family. Maybe it wasn’t going so well after all.

“Jean, is Antonio coming?” Cath asked.

“Yeah, he is,” Jean said.

“Good,” Cath sighed, “I’m scared I overcooked the broth.”

Jean peered into the pot of bubbling brown liquid.

“It looks good to me,” she said.

Cath nodded and dunked a spoon into the broth. She put it in her mouth and then licked her lips and cocked her head.

“I guess it’s fine.” She said, “so how is everything? How’s life? I feel like I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Oh, you know. It’s good.” Jean said, “how are you?”

“Well, I’m sure my mom told you, I’m taking a semester off,” Cath said, looking at the floor.

“I heard,” Jean said, “is everything okay?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, eyes still on the floor, “it’s fine.” She looked up and suddenly smiled.

Catherine was beautiful. Her eyes were big, her nose was small and upturned in the perfect way, unlike Jean's which was too big for her face. Cath's hair was long and blondish brown. She had tied it in a bun for cooking.

"How is Antonio?" She asked before Jean could question her more, "how are you two doing?"

"Good," Jean said, thinking of punching the towels, "we're great."

"Is he almost done with his master's?" She asked, "it's nice that Uncle Ernest is there to help him." Jean nodded.

Antonio mentioned her father often, talking about office hours and assignments and business words that Jean didn't know. He had come to the U.S. a few years ago to study business at Columbia. Ernest was his advisor. They had laughed at the coincidence.

"I can be best friends with your father now," he had said.

"You wish," Jean had rolled her eyes.

"He just has a few more months," Jean said. Cath nodded like she was truly interested.

"You know I just saw those two just last week. It's nice that they can have a good relationship like that." She said.

"What do you mean?" Jean asked.

"Well, I mean I saw them at dinner last Friday. I think it's nice that they can have a relationship like that. I wish my professors would take me to dinner," Cath smiled and laughed a little.

"Last Friday? Are you sure?" Jean asked. Cath's forehead wrinkled.

"Yes, I think so. Why? Is everything okay?"

“Um, yeah. No, I just must’ve misremembered something,” Jean said shaking her head. Antonio should’ve been at work on Friday night. No. He should’ve been clapping for her as she collected her award. He should’ve kissed her on the cheek and whispered how proud he was. Or maybe she was being dramatic. Cath could’ve easily misremembered the day. Maybe he had indeed, gotten dinner with her father but on a different night. Before Jean could ask any more questions, Aunt May returned from wherever she had disappeared to, carrying a cardboard box, which she shoved into Jean’s hands.

“Can you set the table, honey?”

“Okay,” Jean said. The box was full of candlestick holders, place mats, and table runners. Jean set it at the end of the table next to where Papa was sitting and began unpacking the decorations. Papa and Uncle Rob had turned their chairs around to face the small ancient cube TV in the corner of the room. The Yankees were playing. Jean wasn’t a fan of baseball, but she could tell that the Yankees were losing. Papa and Uncle Rob groaned in unison occasionally, but that was the only sound they made. Frances and Ernest were talking more casually now, but Jean still tried to tune out their voices as she laid the table runner between them. Frances seemed to be talking about the plot of her new novel, which followed an alcoholic trying to reconnect with his son. Jean winced at the irony.

The doorbell buzzed and Aunt May called,

“I got it!” A minute later, Antonio burst into the room, his perfect teeth shining, a bottle of red wine in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other.

“Ciao my friends,” he said loudly. Aunt May, who was standing behind him, beamed. Her face was red, and Jean knew that later she would comment on how lucky Jean was to have such an attractive man. There was no doubt he was attractive. He had dark thick hair that always

fell perfectly around his face, and kind brown eyes. Jean usually felt herself swoon almost as badly as Aunt May whenever he was around, but now she didn't feel that attraction. The family chorused their hellos and ciao's back to him. "I brought this from my uncle's collection," he said, gesturing to the bottle, "and these for my favorite family," he gestured to the flowers.

"Aw Tony! That's so sweet." Aunt May fawned as he handed her the bouquet. Antonio worked his way around the table, kissing everyone's cheek. After he kissed Jean, he whispered, "How are you, amore mio."

"Can I talk to you later?" She asked. He nodded. He had put on too much cologne and it burned her nostrils.

"Of course, of course. We will talk."

He continued around the table to Ernest and Uncle Rob. He gave a firm handshake to Cath and Alex who had entered the dining room and were standing next to Aunt May. Everyone, even Frances, was smiling, their mouths grotesquely wide and gaping. Antonio was too happy for the family, Jean thought. Even as she thought it, she hated herself for not being happy with the rest of them. All she could think was: *He should've been there. He should've been there.* Antonio set the wine down on the table.

"Well, when are we eating?" Papa asked, chuckling.

Antonio disappeared into the kitchen to inspect the food while Jean finished placing the candles and place mats around the table. Papa turned off the TV and he and Uncle Rob mumbled about the game.

Aunt May, Cath, and Antonio carried the food out of the kitchen and set it on the table. Alex set a plate and utensils in front of everyone.

“That’s enough food to feed an army,” Papa commented, and it was true. There was battered and fried fish, potatoes and gravy, some sort of shrimp pasta, green beans, mystery casseroles, an assortment of breads, and a large salad. When the food was on the table, the four of them sat down, Antonio in between Jean and Frances, and Jean next to her grandfather. Ruth sat patiently between Papa and Jean, waiting for the inevitable treat Papa would give him.

“This looks beautiful, May,” Ernest said.

“Oh,” Aunt May said, waving her hand at him, “if Tony had been here, I’m sure it would’ve turned out a lot better.”

“Not at all,” Antonio said, “you’re a great cook, May.”

Aunt May giggled like a child and put her hand on her chest.

“And the table looks beautiful, Jean,” Papa said, nodding to her.

“Thanks,” Jean said. There was a pause as everyone looked at the food.

“Well, should we say grace?” Aunt May asked. Frances snorted. “Don’t ruin this whole night, okay?” May said to her.

“I didn’t,” Frances replied.

“Please,” Papa said. He took May’s hand to say grace. “Let’s be nice, right?”

“Not everyone conforms to your religion, May. Maybe take a minute to consider that,” Frances said. May snatched her hands away from the table.

“You know what? fine. We won’t do it then,” she said calmly.

“For fuck’s sake,” Frances sighed.

“No, it’s fine. You can be the center of attention Frances, don’t you worry,” May replied curtly as she began passing dishes around the table.

Jean sighed as quietly as she could. *Here we go*, she thought and reached for her glass, which Antonio had already filled with wine. She glanced at Alex and Cath who were across the table. They shared her look of dread and regret.

As the food came around, Jean accumulated a pile of fish, potatoes, and salad.

“How was Las Vegas, Robert?” Ernest asked, attempting to repair the mood. Uncle Rob shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

“It was good, you know. It was Vegas.” Uncle Rob went there every year for New Year’s. He said the parties were better than any in New York. Jean didn’t believe it. The only real reason he went was for the casinos.

Uncle Rob looked like every other man in his 40s, although he was maybe a bit larger than the rest of them. He was balding quickly, which Frances made fun of him for. He had tried to compensate by growing a beard, but it wasn’t a great look for him. As for his personality, Jean still hadn’t figured it out.

“Pick up any STDs?” Frances asked. Rob glared at her. Papa laughed and said,

“Not at the dinner table. I don’t want to hear about Rob’s personal life.”

“If you really want to know, Frances, no I didn’t pick up any STDs. Actually, I met a really nice woman named Destiny.”

“I bet you did,” Frances said, smirking.

“I don’t understand why you don’t just go to Mohegan Sun,” Aunt May said through a mouthful of potatoes, “it’s so much closer.”

“That’s true. But it’s not Vegas,” Uncle Rob replied. Ernest chuckled.

“The man has a point,” he said. Uncle Rob nodded in appreciation. Ernest looked to Jean and said,

“Jean, I heard that you got an award...”

“I did,” Jean said after swallowing her salad, “the magazine gives out awards every year. I’m the Best New Journalist.”

“Congratulations,” Aunt May said.

“That’s great, Jean,” Papa said.

“That’s good,” Frances said, “are you still a journalist if you work for a magazine though?”

“Yes,” Jean replied.

The table was quiet for a moment.

“Well, I’m proud of you,” Ernest said, “that’s my girl.”

Jean withheld her cringe as Ernest smiled at her. As if he could take credit for her success. He hadn’t come to the gala. None of them had. She hadn’t invited any of them outright, but they all had the option. Ernest continued to smile at her, and she forced herself to smile back. Over the past few months, Ernest had somehow gotten the idea that he needed to reconnect with Jean, after not being present for most of her childhood. Before the divorce, when things between him and Frances were bad, he had what Jean and Alex referred to as his midlife crisis. He moved to Korea to teach English for two years, only visiting once at Christmas and once in June. Now he and Jean played tennis every other Sunday.

She held her father’s gaze until he glanced at Antonio, and then at his plate.

“I wish I could’ve been there,” he said, quietly.

“What were you doing?” she asked. Ernest looked up, startled.

“What do you mean?”

“Why couldn’t you come?”

“Jeanie, I understand you’re upset, but we can talk about this another time...” he glanced at the rest of the family, most of them avoiding eye contact.

“Your father is a busy man,” Antonio said to her. Jean suddenly felt electric, like a rubber band stretched too thin. One more pull and she might snap. She took a breath through her nose and said,

“It’s fine.”

Conversations broke apart and merged together like waves around the table. Antonio and Aunt May began to talk about the food:

“I put some of this English vinegar in the mashed potatoes... do you think they taste alright?”

“They were delicious. You know, anything you put into mashed potatoes tastes good. I put sour cream sometimes.”

“Really? Now that sounds good.”

Papa and Catherine somehow got into an argument about politics; what congress was or wasn’t accomplishing. Alex, Uncle Rob, and Ernest had begun talking about movies they had seen recently, with frequent interjections from Frances. Jean sipped her wine peacefully, watching Antonio. He nodded vigorously when Aunt May spoke and his perfect hair jiggled a little bit. She wondered if he had really gone to dinner with Ernest instead of going to the gala with her. It was certainly possible. He tended to be forgetful and uncommitted. She looked between her boyfriend and her father. Was it odd for a professor to take his student to dinner? Maybe not. She had been to several dinners with professors before, although the majority had

looked at her boobs more than her face. As Jean watched, Ernest looked up at Antonio, who was laughing at something Aunt May had said. Maybe Jean was imagining the look in his eyes.

Jean and Antonio had met during Jean's study abroad semester in London. She was doing an internship with *The Guardian*, and he was working in a restaurant. When he handed her the takeout for herself and her boss, she noticed his muscular arms and soft eyes. He offered to buy her a drink twice before she accepted. It was a summer fling, nothing more. But when he told her, a year later, that he was moving to the U.S. to go to school and work for his uncle, they decided to rekindle the relationship.

"I would like to say something," Papa said, rising from his chair and pulling Jean out of the past. The family quieted and turned to face him. "First, thank you all for coming tonight. I know families are imperfect, but I think we are doing a good job of trying, which is a lot more than what some people do. The doctors caught my cancer early, but I still feel lucky to be alive. I am lucky to have all of you. So, thank you," he said, and then raised his glass. Aunt May's eyes were watery and so were Cath's. Jean blinked, but her eyes were dry. Ernest raised his glass.

"Thank you, Oskar," he said, "to long life"

"To long life," everyone said, raising glasses.

At that, dinner seemed to be over, and Uncle Rob and Cath cleared away the food and began washing up in the kitchen while Alex and Papa moved into the living room. Frances poured the remaining contents of the wine into her glass.

"That was a good meal," she said.

"How many glasses have you had?" Aunt May asked. Jean and Antonio shared a look as Frances lowered her glass slowly, glaring intensely at her sister.

"I'll be back in a minute," Antonio whispered to Jean as he stood up from his seat.

“I don’t need you to mother me,” Frances said to Aunt May, “I was trying to say something nice to you.”

“I’m not mothering. I’m just looking out for you,” She responded.

“Bullshit,” Frances muttered. Aunt May let out an exasperated sigh and turned to Jean, a renewed smile across her face as she tried to salvage the conversation.

“You’ve been quiet tonight, Jeanie,” she said.

“I’m just tired,” Jean said, “it’s been a busy week.”

“Oh yes, it’s amazing that you won that award. Work is going well, then?” Aunt May asked.

“Yeah,” Jean said, “it is.”

“And you and Antonio... That’s going well?”

“Yes, I mean, I think so.” Aunt May looked into her glass for a moment and then crooked her head and asked,

“Are you thinking about...marriage at all?” Jean didn’t know what to say. Of course she had considered it since they had been together for over a year. She wanted that life. She wanted a husband and kids. She wanted to own her own place. She wanted family dinners. She wanted to be attentive to her children and care for them the way a mother should. She must’ve taken too long to respond to the question because Frances jumped in.

“A little advice, honey,” Frances said, “don’t get married. Trust me, it’ll ruin your life.”

“Just because your marriage fell apart doesn’t mean everyone else’s is doomed,” Aunt May said. Frances shrugged.

“I’m just being realistic. Speaking of my *failed marriage* as you would say, where is Ernest?”

Jean looked around. Her father seemed to have disappeared from the table.

“I’ll find him,” she said, standing up quickly to get away from their bickering. She walked past the living room and down the hall. She peeked into the bathroom to find it empty. Where had Antonio gone if not there? She continued down the hall to the room she and Alex used to stay in when they were young. Their engraving on the door frame was still there, at knee height: *Jean and Alex’s room. Do not enter!* She smiled at the memory of the two of them, probably no more than 8 years old, crawling around on the floor and scratching their names into anything they could find with Alexander’s pocketknife. She opened the door. Hands groped, tongues intertwined, bodies pressed against each other. Jean stopped. They broke away slowly, like velcro.

“Oh my god,” she said, hand against the door frame to catch her balance, “oh my god.” They looked at her in shock, or maybe shame.

“Jeanie, it’s not...” Ernest started, but he didn’t have any more words. Antonio moved towards her, and she flinched away, moving down the hallway. She grabbed her coat from the coat stand and raced down the stairs. For the first time in three years, tears wet her face.

