

Under the Table
March & February 2024

When the banana spiders, in the dead of night, tiptoed in through the kitchen's screen window, leaving behind the tall banana tree, I was sure that their destination was the yellow-topped kitchen table. My mother took a hot soapy rag to the surface more than three times a day. She wasn't fond of crawling critters and should not have been living in Key West. Cockroaches slithered over the table's surface, as did anoles. As did the banana spiders. I think she thought they were after her. At least that's what her verbal invectives implied, on her bad days. I think they were too.

My older sister, Debbie, and I were best friends, since she was only sixteen months older than I. Sometimes the days were so hot that we had to play inside. Mother didn't want us messing up the living room, so we scuttled under the kitchen table, and the world became make-believe. It was strange the way just being under our very own roof made our world totally intriguing, almost begging for the make-believe. We believed that Mother couldn't hear or see us. She couldn't yell at us if we fought with one another. She never even noticed the time we brought in a frog, which Debbie insisted would turn into a prince. We were far, far away from home, and we never left a trace of our presence. We were that clever. Under that table.

That place of our own, underneath the kitchen table, was all we needed. On rainy days on the island, we imagined we could hear the rain on the yellow-topped table. When the sun set on the ocean's horizon, shadows crept in and sometimes elongated or distorted the table's legs. On the many nights that our father was off to sea on his submarine, Debbie and I, pajama clad, snuggled together under the table and sang songs. Mother, in the living room, sat alone and sang along with her long-playing records. We considered inviting her under the table but never did.

No other piece of furniture in our cinder-block house afforded my sister and me a comfortable cave. Our clothes closet was too vast and dark. We once tried emptying a lower kitchen cabinet. We could crawl in, but the space allowed for no movement of our limbs. Our chins scrunched into our necks. Besides, the cockroaches lived there.

If our fastidious mother disapproved of our stretching and rolling our bodies on the linoleum, she never let on. Perhaps she approved of our vanishing. Perhaps she welcomed it. Perhaps she believed in make-believe.

We were not long in Key West. Daddy went off to sea, and Mother fled with her two children to her parents' house in Baltimore. Our grandmother doted on me and Debbie. There, we didn't need to sit under the table. Grandmother's kitchen was vast. Surrounding a huge, almost empty space were walls against which sat a sink, an ice box, and a tall set of cupboards. At one corner, the wall opened up to a separate room that housed the stove and oven unit. Directly across from the unit was a cupboard with a big shelf for chopping and mixing. Most activity, though, took place right in the center of the big room, on a wide, white wooden table with hinged wooden leaves. It was on this table that Grandma turned white with flour, stinky with fish filets, and greasy with lard.

It was at this table that Debbie and I were introduced to the idea of a busy kitchen. Grandma spoke a mixture of German and English as she expounded on the virtues that Debbie and I were advised to absorb. It was here that Grandma and her sister, Aunt Nanny, sipped National Bohemian beer and fascinated us with intertwined stories—gossip!—of people in the neighborhood. It was through this kitchen that our grandpa Pop, clutching the Baltimore Sun newspaper, marched to find quiet on the back lawn. Debbie and I were allowed to sit on the table corners as long as our feet were clean.

It was at this table that Debbie and I were introduced to luscious meals that would shock today's dieticians. Called to lunch by our grandmother, we would watch as she rolled from their wax paper chunks of braunschweiger and baloney to be placed on white bread smothered with butter. Her homemade coleslaw was heavy on mayonnaise that certainly did not advertise an olive oil base. Cokie Coler, as she pronounced the bottled brew, was our preferred and oft-given drink. For desert, Grandma, only out of love, presented us each with a Tasty Kake Pie AND a Snowball. The chocolate balls were covered with a sugary, rubbery pink coating, and sugary coconut slivers. The coating, elastic if you pulled it, was so difficult to chew and safely swallow that it could easily have substituted for a disposable by-product from a Goodyear tire factory. At our table perches, on top of the world, in the midst of loving and caring and bustling humanity, Debbie and I shoved that pink coating into our mouths and played our favorite game when Grandma was focused elsewhere. "Look" involved chewing on the coating until it mixed with saliva, then opening our maws to see who could go the longest without gagging. Oh, the formative years!

Thirty-five years later, my husband and I and our three sons drove to Iowa to spend time with my husband's sister and her family. We ate meals around a crowded and noisy table, dogs maneuvering around our legs for children-offered treats. During the table's quiet time, our son and their son sat under the table, hidden by the wide cotton tablecloth. They traded baseball cards, formed a friendship, and perhaps flew off to make-believe. To this day, the memory is vivid of two children forming a world far from home, a table top their roof.

We have a large family table in our house. I do not sit under it unless the trestle needs dusting. I don't sit on it but to dust the overhead light fixture. I no longer have need of my own world of imagination; my three sons created that world daily. No one sits lonely in another room. No one heads outside to read. We, once five of us, are now a family of seven, plus dogs. I delight in pulling out the inherited good china, uncorking a nice but inexpensive bottle of wine, laying the cloth napkins, and preparing a meal for what I have always wanted—a crowded table. Make-believe steps aside for the joy.