On Sunday

Nora Wendl*
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She comes home late some nights.

It was around two in the morning before I got home, saw my mother in the kitchen, lights blazing over inconsistencies in the linoleum floor. Nut salt on her fingers, on the table. She ate them with her two front teeth only, as if to deny that she was eating at all. She sort of nibbled to death half a bag of peanuts, skins, too. People eat when they are worried.

This is a family that loves to eat. But nobody feels the need to restrict this indulgence to just a few holidays a year. No. We have extravagant, mouth-watering birthdays, decadent anniversaries (of deaths, births, accidents and near-misses), and we have Sunday.

On Sunday, we entertain her Grandparents at our house. There is a new carpet, fresh paint. Reupholstered furniture. We take off the plastic an hour before they arrive. Smooth the fabrics. Fluff the cushions on the davenport. A lovely shade of eggshell, ecru, off-whites.

My mother redid the entire house. It’s all the color of unclean white sheets.

I usually cook the main course—roast beef. I save the fat drippings for gravy—Aunt Mildred’s recipe. While the gravy simmers, I carve the meat up into quarter-inch thick layers, and fan them on the large blue plate, and set them in the oven to stay warm. The vegetables have been chilling, cut and placed in water, and are ready to be drained. They go into the heirloom Depression-era glass dishes. The dishes only come out on Sunday—Monday through Saturday they shine from the china cabinet by the window—like stained glass.

The meat is forever served on the blue platter. When I was really small, I thought meat grew on blue platters.

There is a green bean casserole that my grandmother feels compelled to bring, and that I habitually pass on without a close examination. The smell is enough of a deterrent.
Bill agrees. He eats the yams. Under four layers of marshmallows, pecans, and caramel, he says, you’d never guess a vegetable existed.

I am still not convinced.

I like to watch the bread work its polite, clockwise way around the table. How the oven-crisped buns steam when pulled apart, their skin cracking and flaking away. Little geodes, volcanoes.

The inevitable delicate dish of black olives they all start to pick at once interest has been lost in the rest of the food.

Last Sunday, she hid her roast beef in her napkin. I know she did, I found it balled up under the plates to be washed. I stack the plates to be washed to the right of the sink, next to the microwave. There’s no room to the left, that’s where my recipe boxes go—“limited counterspace must be carefully delegated in even the tidiest of households.” Between the dirty plates—that’s where she slipped it in.

Sundays ruin me. They unnerve my parents, shift my grandparents.

I switched to corned beef. Maybe the roast beef is too much, I told my friend Rhoda. She lives up the street, with her own daughter, Valerie. Valerie is a good girl. A little thin, but a good girl. Rhoda suggested the corned beef.

Suddenly, there was corned beef.

“I’m a Vegan.”

“That was a sudden and unexpected conversion.”

Did I mention my father is a comedian?

I took a decent amount of cabbage. Skipped the potatoes.

I tried changing the seating arrangement. I put her next to my mother. Who can waste food sitting next to a woman that survived the depression, on a ration of one lard sandwich a day?

It’s Sunday. Again.

The six of us are sitting around the table, surrounded
by enough food to feed every starving child south of the equator. Again.

And some body changed the seating arrangement. At the table, I sit next to my grandmother. Halfway through the meal, the old woman runs her knotted left hand down my right arm. At my wrist, she stops and squeezes. She stares at my hand—the hand that holds the fork like a scalpel.

She looks at my plate, where the four ounces of boiled cabbage lay, dissected into some bizarre grid system. Ten judicial one-inch squares.

She looks disgusted and makes a noise with her sinuses that gets the attention of all but one person at the table.

Mom excuses herself to the kitchen. The potatoes! She is going to warm the potatoes.

I load her plate if she leaves the table. When she gets back, she glowers, I can feel it. But I don’t look up. I never look up, it hurts too much. She is so sharp, angular at every joint. A walking knife.

My mother loads my plate with food when I’m not at the table.

She loads it when I am at the table.

I filled her glass with whole milk. I didn’t think she would know the difference.

I put the glass to my lips, tipped it back. Thick and slimy. Whole milk. My face contorts itself, I start to pull the glass away from me...but a strong arm reaches across the table, an arm that tips the glass back and forces the milk down my throat, into my stomach. Except when I start screaming. When I do that, I start to sputter, to choke, and most of the milk is in my lap, on the table, rivulets that run to the cream-hue carpet.

“Fuck! Fuckfuckfuckeveryfucking—cough—time I tell you, I don’t—cough—...”

In front of my grandparents. My father, brother. The Depression glass dishes. The heirloom crucifix.

She cursed like a person possessed. I’m supposed to let my daughter starve to death? It was quite a scene.
Mary and Francis left after that.  
John went for a walk, and we didn’t talk about it.  
Sundays have become more elaborate. More food, 
more fat. Or is it just in my mind that they grow grander? 
That in my deprivation, they have taken on a circus-like 
effect?

Please meet my Mother the Ringleader, my Father the 
Fire-tamer, Billy, the acrobatic boy.  
Mary and Francis, the oldest living oaks.  
I am the Fat Lady.  
At night, my body jerks sometimes. Like I’ve been 
falling, and I finally have hit bottom, and bottom is my bed. 
Or is bottom the body I’m in? It wakes me up, and I don’t 
sleep again for hours, lying there, staring into dark.  
My mother eats for me. My vicarious appetite.

I’ve gained ten pounds since she started this. I think 
it’s flying off of her little body, and right onto mine. Let me 
tell you, we only gain weight in two places when we reach a 
certain age, and this weight I’ve gained, it knows right 
where to go.

But darkness takes a form, if the eyes can digest it 
long enough. And I see things. I see, flying above me, thin, 
beautiful trapeze artists. Too swift, deft for gravity, even. 
They fly and float and all I see are their willowy, elusive 
shadows on the backdrop of my wall—a dingy canvas that 
refuses to move.

The house has gotten messy. It isn’t dirty, just 
messy. John said something to me. Asked me why, when he 
comes home from work, things look so disorderly. I said I 
wasn’t sure. I asked him where time goes, why it seems 
there is so little? He went on a walk.

If I stare into dark long enough, I drowse. A dream 
happens—I look down again, from the trapeze, and there is 
the crowd of hundreds, around the foot of my bed. A crowd 
of hundreds—the five faces that turn to me every Sunday at 
dinner. The faces that sit at the table, and I am back to my 
dangerous sleight of hand.

Under which plate, which napkin, which hand is the 
corned beef?
On occasion, the matronly face guesses correctly.

I find relief in cooking. The laundry has overgrown the hamper, slides across the basement floor, but all I can concentrate on is the souffle in the oven.

I warn them—we must whisper, lest it fall.

I want to save the illusion of pastry—thought I know it's full of hot air.

Tuesday, six in the morning. I slide quietly down the ecru hall, black in the absence of morning light, scarcely breathing, trying to hook the door before I am caught.

I am not as dark and silent as I think, am whirled into the kitchen, waffles piled in front of me.

I was awake all night, leafing through my cookbooks. She loved pancakes and waffles when she was so small, so I made them both. I have this new cookbook: Southern Living. All the recipes use whole, natural ingredients. Eggs, whole milk, unbleached flour. Healthy.

I am sick. I can't eat these. Golden death on our best china, Mom's fake smile.

It was all laid out, the syrup, the butter, the knives and forks. I was willing to cut it for her and put it in her mouth. All she had to do was chew and swallow.

The circles under her eyes mirror the blues under mine.

"We'll eat one together," she hums and starts to cut it.

"I know how you used to like syrup in every square. Remember? You said they were little swimming pools. Isn't that funny? You were so funny..."

"Mom, I was five. I'm missing the bus."

"Well, that's why we have cars."

Distracted humming. Her half is cut into sloppy squares, disfigured under all the sticky syrup.
Aunt Jemima is beaming at me from her place between us.  
"I have a test."  
"You were up late studying, weren’t you?"

My half is bald. I start to cut it, precisely, between rows of the square punctures.

She ate it plain. It took her so long, she ate it cold, too.

I took her to school, she got there fifteen minutes early. She was so anxious to be back and see her friends.

I gag myself before homeroom, when nobody else is in the bathroom.

I throw away the chicken sandwich on whole wheat, slathered in mayonnaise. I leave the apple in the brown paper sack and put it in my locker.

I’m late for homeroom again, but I can’t walk just yet.

I lean against the cool metal, press my damp forehead to it and close my eyes. I wet my lips with a little saliva.

Tonight my grandparents are coming over for dinner.

Nora Wendl is a student of Architecture (yes, capital A) at Iowa State University. She has, much to the chagrin of her advisor, been taking some English classes lately. These are (artistically embellished) Nonfiction.

On Right:

Heather Straszheim: I am from the great, big old town of Roland, Iowa; you might have seen the sign for it while traveling north on I-35. Currently I’m a senior majoring in Biological Pre-Med Illustration (basically, I draw stuff). Whenever I can find a minute or preferably ten to spare, I enjoy star gazing, long evening walks, dancing in the kitchen with my roommates (hi girls!), and reading great literature that’s worth my time. One of my greatest weaknesses is a steaming mug of French vanilla cappuccino! My favorite hangout is the coveted Mufu.