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At the Dinner Table

Briana Kunstman

Spring Term

Reflective/Personal Prose

My favorite part of Thanksgiving has always been the fights I accidentally start at the dinner table. In fact, it's always been something I was taught to avoid. "No political banter or controversial conversations", they say, and of course, I agree. As we sit at the table looking at the woven placemats with various patterns below, we rally in our gratitude and the complex history of this event in relation to Indigenous people is erased. My jaw clenches.

A genocide, that we turned into a colonizer's celebration.

As we pass the bread basket around, grabbing eagerly at the pieces we'd like, I pick the one from the very top. A family member remarks, "Should you have that? It's an awful lot of carbs!" and begins to ramble on about the health concerns one could have. It's health at every size, except for when you're fat. How dare people take up space. I look down and force back a smile.

A reason to put others down for existing, as if fatness is some sort of evil epidemic.

Shoving the thick turkey mashed potatoes into our mouths rapidly, we hear the other end of the table addressing "illegal" immigrants and the job market. The term "alien" is casually tossed from person to person. Around the table, voices raise in agreement as the stereotyping begins. As if they could understand the dangers as people flee and feel the fear they do as they strive for their family's safety. I press my spoon into my plate, leaving a slight bend in the metal.

A way of defending their prejudice even when no human is illegal.

By the time the stuffing makes its way around, we've begun to hear about the "overrepresentation" of LGBTQ+ people in the media. One claims everyone is gay nowadays, and the rest join in, giggling, asking about "they/thems" and making pokes at being "spatula-sexual". Then the suggestion of straight pride rises, and everyone is on board. The thing is, their love hasn't ever been illegal, it didn't start with riots, nor did it lead to horrific deaths

from the brave people who chose to fight for a difference. They've never had to wonder if they'll be accepted based on who you love. It starts to set in, the numb, dull, anger but I brush aside that feeling so as to not upset anyone.

Their way of saying love is love until it's not the "normal" kind.

My favorite, the cranberry sauce, reaches the table's edge. Amongst the discussion of tragedies that have occurred in the news, we hear the sly comment, "She was kinda asking for it". What comes next is a blur: a description of her clothing, and the denial of men needing to be held accountable for their actions. In my head the 97% rings. The abrupt silence in my mind is gone in an instant as #Metoo stories flood my mind. I grip my thighs together in discomfort.

They imply that men have a right to her body.

The sweet potato pie is the finale to our dinner. As they stuff the sweet pie down, they joke about BLM, one echoing "but why not all lives?" and another angry, asking why the protests are necessary. Ignorant. The system cannot be fixed if its intentions were never good to begin with. I go to speak- but as I do they shove the plate into my hands. Silenced.

Privilege in the form of white supremacy.

So I finally explode. The calm kind of explosion that no one seems to listen to truly, but instead watch it in disbelief. But what about equality? Fuck equality! We need equity. What about us? What about them? What about human rights is a debate? What about the women who can't walk alone at night without pepper spray and keys at the ready? The children who can't come out without risking their lives to love another? The American Dream we pretend to uphold? What is it like to be a cis, heterosexual, white man in America? Jumbled up thoughts roll out. I hold myself up.

"Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes"- RBG.

With that, I continue. Silence. Everybody is silent as I watch the faces of those who were not aware I had a say. In a way I feel relieved... just for a moment. I finally feel like there's a chance for a real conversation. The silence persists. Then, the table creeps into various questions and comments,

“Oh, so you're a femi-nazi?”

“I didn't mean to, it's just-”

“What, are you gay or something?”

Everything goes dark inside. I feel the hot flush rushing over my face. I feel small again. I know I've broken the one rule we discussed before coming. Maybe I shouldn't have spoken...or was I right to speak up? I fight myself in spite of my knowledge.

Why is it our job to stay quiet?

We learn about change as we're put up against those who aren't willing to hear it. Stuck in their ways we are left as the outcasts, the bad influences, and the overly opinionated gen-z population. But we keep working and educating and crying out for hope. I won't stop speaking nor is it my job to be little in order to allow for others to have room to speak in privileged comfort. Their comfort is oppression for too many others.

Basic human rights aren't controversial. They shouldn't be controversial. But they are.

This is exactly the problem- which is why my favorite part of Thanksgiving has always been the fights I start at the dinner table.