

The Dishes

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THE DISHES became the big thing in our lives the year I was ten. There were four of us—my father, my mother, my eight-year-old brother, and I—and we lived on the poor side of a very small Missouri town in a very small white frame house that my mother said looked like a cracker box. Two tall pine trees on either side of the front walk made the house look even smaller than it was.

In the summer we tried to get cool on the front porch (my mother called it a veranda, but it wasn't) under the scraggly morning glory vines that never did cover the strings; or we gasped on the warm grass under the pine trees. Sometimes it was about midnight before we got cool enough to go to bed.

In the winter we huddled around a rusty iron stove in the sitting room, or more often, in front of the open oven door of the square black kitchen range that somebody had to keep feeding wood. The windows got steamy, but we never opened them; my father said we couldn't afford to warm

up all outdoors. In the coldest weather we even had to wear our heavy coats indoors, and two pairs of stockings over bunchy, fleece-lined, long underwear.

Like all the other families around us, we lived in perpetual hard times. We bought only the things we had to have, only when we simply *had* to have them—plain food, serviceable coats and caps, sturdy shoes and overshoes, schoolbooks (if we couldn't borrow them from somebody), and cheap pencils and tablets. I couldn't see that we were any different from the other families, but my mother said we were; she said we were different (and she meant better) because *she* was different. She said my father was making us live like poor white trash, but her people were "quality," and they were used to nice things. I thought that "quality" meant having the right to quarrel and bang things when you couldn't have what you wanted, instead of accepting the inevitable, as the mothers of my friends did, and trying to make the best of it. But I never thought of that right as belonging to me,

probably because my mother wouldn't tolerate what she called "tantrums" in a child.

Like many women of her generation, my mother yearned for a complete set of dishes; and like many of the men of his time and background, my father refused to buy a complete set of dishes.

"Tom foolishness," he would say, when he bothered to make any comment at all on my mother's fussing about dishes. "We got dishes, if you ain't busted 'em all."

"That's exactly what I feel like doing," my mother said once. "Those old things! All cracked and chipped!"

"You do and we'll eat out of piepans," he answered, without raising his voice. He was on his way out, but he stopped at the kitchen door, and in one of his rare moments of answering back, added, "I reckon them dishes wouldn't have cracks and chips if you wasn't always in such a temper when you washed 'em." He turned and went out, closing the screen door behind him in his quiet, careful way.

"I guess you'd like it if we lived like pigs and ate out of troughs!" she screamed after him.

My father was sixteen years older than my mother. His face was deeply tanned, and his hands were gnarled from the hard outdoor work he had done all his life. I heard someone say once, that as a young man he had coal black hair, and a red mustache which he dyed black with shoe polish; but when I knew him, the hair and his full mustache were the same color—iron gray. His face had interesting wrinkles that deepened around his eyes when he laughed and around his mouth when he was annoyed.

My mother was small and slender and full of angry energy. The eyes behind the rimless glasses she always wore were bright blue, and the hair she rinsed in sage tea when she washed it, and brushed a hundred times every night, was nut brown. She did

everything in a hurry. She even walked fast when she went downtown on a hot day, and my brother and I had to run to keep up with her. Every afternoon she took the kid curlers out of her hair, "did it up," and added her fancy comb, which stuck up from the bun on the back of her head. It was a brown tortoise-shell comb with intricate carving and two rows of shiny, bright-green imitation emeralds. No other woman in town had one like it. In fact, no other woman that I remember wore a fancy comb of any kind. She also put on her "other" dress and shoes, even when nobody was coming to visit. She never spoke to company in the regular voice she used every day, as the other women did; she had a special "society" voice that was pitched higher. My mother had been a city girl, and she had no intention of "going country"; next to living like "poor white trash," the worst thing was being "country." My father could really get her excited when he talked about going back to the farm.

Born and raised on a farm, before the Spanish-American War, my father still talked and thought like a Missouri farmer, even after years as a small-town photographer, a gold miner in California, a woodcutter, a carpenter, and goodness knows what else. The year of *THE DISHES* he was being a paper-hanger in the small Missouri town where, as a young man, he had been a photographer. He probably would have been happier being any one of those things if he could have wangled a little time to go fishing; but my mother was always at him to do something else, and at the same time always after him for never sticking to anything. She was never pleased with anything he did, and she was continually scolding about the things he didn't do.

By the time I was ten, some of the scolding was spilling over me; I was the scapegoat when my father wasn't around, and

unconsciously, I began to meet her tirades as my father did—with silence. My brother was more like her, and she babied him. She hardly ever scolded him, although once she did become quite upset when he came home with a knife for which he had traded.

“Don’t let me catch you doing such a thing again!” she exclaimed. “Trading!”

“But Mama,” my brother protested, “he wanted my wheel and I wanted his knife. Everybody trades.” He looked up at her with his big, round blue eyes, the cowlick on his tow head sticking up like an Indian feather.

But for once, she wasn’t melted, and she didn’t try to smooth down the cowlick. One of the things she had never forgiven my father for was cutting off the long golden curls my brother wore to his shoulders till the day he was eight years old. With those curls and the white buster-brown suits she made him wear, he was really a sight. My father thought he looked like a freak, and finally he took him downtown, had the barber cut off the curls, and bought him a pair of overalls.

“He’s no baby. He’s too big to look like a sissy,” my father said, when my mother screamed at him.

“Everybody trades,” my brother repeated.

“Not you,” my mother said. “You want to grow up country? Don’t let me catch you trading again. You hear?”

“Yes, Mama,” my brother said. But he stuck the knife in his pocket.

“Trading” was a sore spot with my mother, partly because it was what country people did and partly because it was a way of life with my father. She never understood the system of barter; he lived by it. He traded cords of wood for hog meat or wagon-loads of apples or jugs of cider and molasses. He took the axe handles he made to the general store and traded them for flour and lard and butter. After a day of

hunting he traded his surplus small game for whatever we happened to need at the time; the men who had to stay at home and keep store were glad to get fresh game. My father felt amply paid if he got value received in goods for other goods or for services rendered.

But my mother never understood. Every time my father made a trade for something, she felt as if we were taking charity. I remember the time my father brought home a washboiler to replace the old one he could no longer mend because it had rusted through. I could tell by the look on his face that he was pleased with himself. He set the washboiler down on the back porch and came into the kitchen.

“I got you that washboiler you been fussing for,” he said.

My mother turned from stirring something on the stove and looked at him without smiling. “Where did you get it?” she asked.

“Out at Tom Baker’s. I was helping him mend fence this morning, and I took it in trade. He had two. He brought his sister’s things home after she died.”

“Charity again!” my mother exclaimed. “I declare, I get so ashamed!”

“How many times I got to tell you tradin’ ain’t charity?” my father retorted. “If I got paid a dollar or a washboiler for the work I done, what’s the difference? I got paid and you got a washboiler.”

“Other people’s things! Respectable people pay money for the things they need. If you’d go out and earn money like other men, we wouldn’t have to take charity.”

My father became so exasperated he actually shouted. “I never took charity in my whole life! I got pride, and I can earn what my family needs. It don’t matter if I get it in cash or goods. Either way, I earn it.”

“It matters to me.”

"If you *had* money, you'd spend it on foolishness."

"If I had money, I'd buy a set of dishes."

"We got dishes," my father said, putting an end to the argument.

"But not a set," she called after him, getting the last word, as always.

My father, as usual, was heading for the old smokehouse, where he kept his tools and worked on his axe handles, and he pretended not to hear.

"When I was at home," she said to me, "we had sets of dishes that matched, like civilized people—and a whole set of silverware."

Home to her, was the city in which she had grown up—Montgomery, Alabama. Although she had been away from it for more than a dozen years, she was still trying to play the Southern Lady to my father's Frontiersman. She resented bitterly all the chores of the housewife in a small-town family not blessed with wealth, and she showed her resentment by as much clatter in the dishpan as she could manage, or by wielding the wet mop with fury, as if she had to finish in five minutes or suffer some dreadful fate. Most of all, she resented doing the washing.

In those days most of the women in our town used washboards in galvanized tubs. They put the dirty clothes and hot water into one tub and scrubbed the pieces with yellow soap, one at a time, on the washboard. Then they put the scrubbed pieces into another tub full of warm rinse water. Lazy women usually rinsed only once, but the conscientious housewives rinsed twice. After the scrubbing was done, the wash water was carried out bucketful by bucketful and dumped in the back yard, usually on whatever garden truck needed watering. Then the tub was filled with cold water from the well, for the second rinsing. Each garment had to have the water rung out of it, by hand, at least three times. Then the

clothes had to be hung out on a line across the back yard, no matter how cold the weather.

Doing the family wash was a tedious, back-breaking, messy job; but my mother tackled it, like everything else, with fury. On washday—always Monday in our town—the back porch was a battleground no child dared to invade. Nor did she suffer in silence. It was not the work she resented so much as the disgrace. With her hair tightly rolled in kid curlers and a big apron covering her front, she would begin the scrubbing and the muttering, usually at daybreak. Any women whose clothes weren't flapping on the line before ten o'clock was considered a lazy good-for-nothing, the subject of gossip by all the other women.

"Mama would turn over in her grave," she would say, "if she could see me doing nigger work." If I was in hearing distance, she would add, "Your father's just making a nigger out of me."

I didn't know what a nigger was—we lived on the *north* side of the Missouri River—but I gathered it was something she considered "lowdown," one of her favorite adjectives. I would examine her to see what she meant, but I never could see. The women all looked alike on washday; they all wore kid curlers, big aprons, and their oldest shoes. When I asked questions, or when I wanted to help, she just chased me out of the house, as if some of the disgrace might rub off on me.

After I learned to read and discovered fairies, elves, and brownies, I decided a nigger was one of those, and for a long time I would put a saucer of milk beside the kitchen steps, hoping to lure one in to help Mama.

The year of THE DISHES, my father spent the winter months at home, and my mother grumbled, as usual, because he was always under foot. People did not have

their houses built or painted or papered in the coldest months, and so my father made axe handles of hickory wood, or walked out into the country to cut wood for people, or did other odd jobs. But mostly he made axe handles or sat in the sitting room behind the stove, reading.

That winter one of the local merchants decided to try a big-city stunt and have a contest everybody could enter. First he spread the prize out in one of his windows. It was a complete set of fancy dishes with bright red roses all over them—plates, cups, saucers, sugar bowl and cream pitcher, gravy boat, soup tureen, and a few pieces I couldn't name. Then he gave everybody three weeks to try to win them. All we had to do was write "Slater's Furniture Store" on a penny postal more times than anybody else. I wangled a penny from my mother and set to work right away.

I had been at it for two days when my father became interested. I kept interrupting his reading to ask him to put a sharp point on my pencil. Finally, he took my card and looked at it. He knew about the contest, of course—everybody in our little town always knew about everything that was going on.

"You're wasting your time," he said disparagingly. "You won't win with that. Look at all the space you've left."

"It's because my pencil's too soft," I wailed. "It smears, and it breaks all the time."

"Hm," he said. He was always noncommittal. Close-mouthed, my mother called him. It infuriated her that she could never get him to say beforehand what he thought about anything, so that she could point out in paragraphs how wrong he was. He laid down his magazine, put on his hat and heavy jacket, and his four-buckle overshoes, and left by the back door, not bothering to answer my mother's shrill query about where he was going. With my sleeve

I rubbed a clear place on the steamy kitchen window and watched. First he stopped in the smokehouse; I could see through the open door that he was rummaging in the old trunk he kept there, behind the bench where he worked on his axe handles. Then he came out and closed the door and started downtown, making big tracks across the new snow.

"He can go traipsing all over town, while I have to stay here and work like a nigger," my mother grumbled.

"But you just said this morning that he was always underfoot and you wished he'd go somewhere," I reminded her.

"Don't be sassy!" she snapped. She stopped banging the dishes she was washing to do up a kid curler that had come loose and was hanging down. "Get out of here and let me alone."

I was glad to go. Later, when I was older, I tried to get her to correct her inconsistencies; but at ten, I was merely confused by them. So I usually hid where her voice didn't reach me—or I could pretend it didn't—and read my few books over and over.

My father didn't say anything at all about his project. But after supper he cleared one end of the table, pulled the lamp close to him, and began taking things out of his pocket—a little wooden frame with a piece of ground glass in it, a magnifying glass, a penny postal, and a funny-looking pencil with a needle-sharp point. I stood behind him and waited. Sooner or later he would tell me.

"What are you, up to now?" my mother demanded. "How do you expect anybody else to see, if you hog the lamp?" She hitched her rocking chair closer and began to crochet furiously. For once, my father answered her. "I'm going to win you them dishes you want," he said. Then to me, "This here is a retouching pencil. It's so hard and sharp I can write real small with it."

"Where did you get it?" I asked.

"I had it from the picture gallery. Now you be real quiet and I'll show you how little I can write."

My mother made her usual sniffing noises, but she didn't say any more. My brother, on the footstool beside her, kept on fiddling with something or other; he hardly ever paid attention to what anybody else was doing. I stood as still as possible while my father laid the card on the glass in the frame, held the large magnifying glass over it, and began to write. Then he let me look at the card.

"I can't read it!" I exclaimed.

"Look through the magnifying glass," he suggested, his mustache twitching the way it always did when he was smiling underneath it.

There it was—"Slater's Furniture Store"—every letter clearly printed, as easy to read as a book.

"Look, Mama," I said. "Look how small Papa wrote it."

Mama got up to look through the glass. "That's pretty good," she admitted grudgingly. "But you can't expect a ten-year-old child to do that well."

"I don't," my father answered. "I'm going to make this myself."

I can still see him, a graying man past fifty, bent over his magnifying glass, patiently inscribing on a little card, line after line, the name of a furniture store. Nights he worked under the lamp and daytimes beside the window. He used all of the three weeks, right up to the day before the contest was to close; and through every day of it my mother grumbled at the waste of time.

"Don't tell anybody till I get it finished," he had cautioned. "I want to surprise a few people."

I didn't tell anybody. But every day I looked through the glass and was thrilled at the progress he was making in filling

up the card. And every day I went downtown to stare at our dishes. There was never any doubt in my mind about who was going to win them. I hugged myself with joy when I thought how happy my mother was going to be with the whole set of dishes she had wanted for so long.

At last the great day came. My father never said a word about how everybody praised him and wanted to shake his hand, and how they put his card in the window with a big magnifying glass over it and another card saying who had written it, and how the town photographer told him, "Any time you want a retouching job with me, you got one." He wasn't interested in the glory; he just wanted the dishes, and he got them. He carried the big box home and set it down on the table in front of my mother. Then he opened it and started taking out the dishes one by one.

"What on earth have you got there?" she demanded, even before he got the box open.

I couldn't hold in any longer. "Dishes!" I shouted. "Lots and lots of dishes—a whole set. Papa won the contest! He wrote the name more times than anybody else. And he won the dishes. Mama, he won!"

I watched my mother's face with the little brown curls all around it—she had the kid curlers off because it was afternoon—and I waited for it to change, to get happy. I wanted her to hug my father, and be glad he won, and be as excited as I was. But I think I knew all the time she wasn't going to. She stood there for a long time just staring at the dishes.

I did not know then that to my mother what counted was not so much *having* a set of dishes as *having* my father go out and *buy* them for her, with money. I'm sure my father did not understand that.

My father took the last dish out of the box and set it on the table. He put the excelsior in the kindling box, and he set

the wooden box the dishes came in by the back door, to take out the next time he went to the smokehouse. Then he came back and stood by the table, waiting. I remember how gently his gnarled fingers handled the fragile china, bright with red roses. The table top looked like a garden.

Finally, my mother spoke, not to my father, but to me, and I could hear the scorn in her voice. "*Free* dishes!" she said. "Just like your father."

Then she started clattering them together to take them to the kitchen to wash.

My father didn't say anything. He just turned away slowly and walked out to the

smokehouse. As I watched his back walking away, I noticed for the first time that it was getting a little humped, the way I had seen farmers look when they carried heavy sacks on their shoulders.

I didn't like the dishes any more. Taking my coat off the peg by the kitchen door, I followed my father to the smokehouse and sat down in the doorway where I could watch him work on an axe handle, making long yellow curls of wood as he drew his two-handled knife along the length of hickory. I saw him smooth the wood with a caressing gesture, the way he had touched the dishes. And suddenly I was crying.