

The Dinner Table

"You may not leave the table until your plate is clean."

The words of these two tall figures echoed and burst her bubble of reverie. The little girl stared vacantly at her meal, fork in hand.

"Couldn't I have a break?" she protested. "Just for a little while. Just to stretch my legs."

"Once your plate is clean," a voice disputed.

And that was that.

She took a slow bite. She chewed, chewed, chewed, and swallowed. There was not a trace of flavor.

The dining room was shrouded in a dense silence, disturbed only by the clinking of cutlery against porcelain and the rhythmic sound of the girl's chewing. A flickering candle stood in the center of the table, casting elongated shadows that danced derisively on the walls. In the shadow's waltz, the little girl watched a spider traverse its way along a sticky tangle of thread that dwelled in the room's corner. She chewed, chewed, and chewed some more.

Her wistful gaze captured the sight of the vibrant, bustling world through the window. The view of the city, adorned with streetlights and a symphony of laughter, deepened a hole in her stomach. The streets pulsed with the rhythm of laughter and music, a mix of voices blending harmoniously in the air. How she dreamed of skipping through the neighborhood. The crisp air, icy shards, would pierce her rosy cheeks as she went about. But it would feel so good. She would enter the bakery just one block from the house and be enveloped by warmth, by the sweet aroma of bread and buttery pastries. There she would linger for an hour, revering the intricate designs of the cakes and joining in on the chatter, the latest gossip. She would not eat any of the baked goods there, only admire the tantalizing sweets. Then, the girl would make her way to the public library. She loved to read. Her appetite for books was insatiable; she could lose herself in the pages for hours on end without a

hint of weariness. She would stay in the library and never return home, no matter how urgently her stomach ached.

How she yearned for liberation, to slip away from the dinner table, to wrap her thick fingers around the doorknob, to twist, to take a breath of fresh air...

"Eat your food," a voice ordered.

She poked at the dinner with her fork, her parents watching her intently. On one side of her sat her mother, whose features were chiseled from stone, her cerulean eyes cold and calculating. Opposite her was the girl's father, a stern figure with a jawline set in perpetual disapproval, his gaze unyielding and unwavering. Neither parent spoke much, their silence suffocating, filling the room with an eerie emptiness. Instead, they watched their daughter with an intensity that bordered on obsession, their eyes never straying from her form, their scrutiny palpable and oppressive.

"You have made me eat my entire life," the girl said, breaking the silence.

Her parents did not blink. Their stares did not stray. "We know what's best for you. You are weak and frail."

The girl diverted her attention from them. On the wall, in the shadow cast against the light of the candle, she watched a lone fly fall right into the gossamer threads of the spider's trap. It did not struggle. The girl watched as the fly resigned itself to the delicate embrace of the silken strands, knowing that resistance was futile. As the eight-legged creature approached, the fly offered no rebellion, its acceptance of the inevitable written in the stillness of its wings. With a swift and precise motion, the spider delivered its fatal strike, extinguishing the flicker of life from the helpless prey. And, just as it was before, the web was still.

Her food was now cold, chilled by the passage of time. The girl's thighs began to ache, longing for movement, desperate to shake off the constraints of this everlasting meal. The agonized child shoveled food into

her gaping maw until she grew fat, still failing to clean her plate. Her stubby palms and pale, plump cheeks were coated in layers of a variety of sauces, gravies, and curries. She voraciously ate her dinner for breakfast and lunch as well, each day, eager to release herself from the shackles of her cushion-less seat. But her plate was never clean. Her mother kept a steady grip on a ladle, ready to fill her plate with more, *more*.

Brimming with rage, the girl's eyes blazed with fury as she finally resolved to take action. With a hasty and forceful motion, she swept her hand across the table, sending the ceramic disk crashing to the floor. The fragile dish met the tiles with a resounding crash, shattering into countless pieces.

As she released a long, weighted exhale, she sensed her shoulders ease. The man and the woman slumped to the ground, and in that moment, she recognized the sensation of freedom washing over her. Tears of long-awaited joy sprang to her eyes. Off she would go to the bakery, and then to the library, where she would spend her life in a book. Her heart raced with burning anticipation.

Only when she tried to get up, the daughter realized that she had never learned to walk. Regardless, her muscles were too weak to support her heavy weight, having not worked a day in her life as she sat immobile on the dining chair. She, too, crumpled to the floor, alongside her parents. The daughter did not struggle, resigning herself to the embrace of her parents' web, knowing that resistance was futile. And, just as it was before, the web was still.