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Table and Chair

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PAPPI TOMAS

Table and Chair

TABLE

Before the wheel certainly there was the table. Not round but square. Not even that necessarily. Something between square and circle. But a slab. A need to make the ground, some surface, exist between feet and head. To eat on. To sleep on. To sacrifice on. To cook, store, embalm on. To read maps, to knead bread on. To invent, repair; to write and play cards; to tell fortunes, to pound; to make hasty love on. Most of these arriving later, but doubtless all of them contained (their realization portended) in the vision, the inspiration, the accident that made the table.

O happy accident!

TABLE

I envy some people their tables. Kitchen tables mostly. The others—end tables, bedside tables, coffee tables, picnic tables—are all, as far as I can tell, outgrowths, shadows, subsidiaries, twice-removed translations of that ancient, original table before the hearth.

The thick, sturdy, tight-grained oak tables are the ones that excite in me the keenest envy. They are never cold against a bare arm. They take a liberal beating, from plates and bowls and pitchers, but emerge hardly a nick worse for wear. They outlive us, like the trees of their lineage, these patient old-growth planks. Families hand them down. Estate-sale devotees hunt them out. They support fruit bowls, flower arrangements, sandwich platters, tea trays, and show them off in the rustic light that, were they able, these dining accouterments would heartily ask for. How they bask in it!

And yet not one of these tables has found its way into my own kitchen. Not entirely true. My wife and I do have a table, fitted out with extendible leaves, made not of oak but of a chestnut-hued wood that weighs five times what it looks; a table that wears the stains of un-coastered cups of tea, splotches of nail polish, flakes of clear tape, olive-oil spills; that in return for these stains has given up most of its own varnished skin of mellow brown; a table that has followed us, clung to us, made its annual case to remain with us for

over eight years and will no doubt do the same for eight years more. But this table is somewhat smaller than we'd prefer for eating on, and we have, sadly, let it degrade to an unsightly condition more appropriate to workroom than dining room. In fact that is just where it sits today, in Rebecca's art studio, where it serves her purposes quite well, and provides a bit of grateful nostalgia. And it becomes, at the same time, daily more removed from its initial kitchen proximity. In its place, there sits a chrome-plated, pearled-linoleum beauty from the fifties, a pleasing and spirited table itself, and one my aesthetic sense entirely approves of. It's my heart that holds back its countrified praise. "Ah, but not a surefooted farmhouse table," I hear it diminish. "Not a table to grow old with."

CHAIR

It's the rare table you see that sits without a chair beside it. If you do see such a forlorn wretch, it is likely bereft of people as well; for few people I know will stand more than a certain time by a table before they need to walk away, or sit themselves down. And as few tables were made to support on their edges the languor of human bodies, and few people seem to have the knack for sitting gracefully, becomingly, atop a table, we try to supply our tables with chairs if we wish these tables to lure us.

The courtship does not end there. Once seated, we are as likely to stay seated as we are likely, meeting a stranger at a party, to recline in that person's company and lounge there all evening. It's a matter of fit, more than it will ever be of looks. Many is the ugly chair—spindly, worn at the sleeves, saggy middle, bowed spine, you know the type—I've come so close to dismissing, were it not for a lack of alternatives (libraries, hospitals, hotel lobbies are rife with such over-the-hill chairs); only to find in such a chair, my entire aching body apprehending instantly, that nothing in the way of muscle-soothing comfort is wanting. The cushions receive me with just the right middling indention (the kind perfection-seeking Goldilocks was after); the back cradles my spine as if it were crafted to the exact angle and length; my feet settle on the ground with little effort from my legs; my arms lie on their rests, slack from fingers to shoulders. Do not be haughty with a spent chair. Close your eyes if you must, drape the sorry thing with your coat, but don't

assume, dear finicky sitter, that you know the secret heart of an empty, bedraggled chair.

CHAIR

When it comes to fixing up a worn, wobbly, but eminently refurbishable chair, I am as lazy and shifty as the worst of them. I have one chair, to prove my claim, that has gone flat, hard, and naked under my backside for over five cushionless years, waiting and waiting, and possibly long ago despairing, while I work up my glacial, molasses-thick gumption. Meanwhile, the chair, as if to emphasize my neglect, has begun to fall apart even further, dropping important supportive screws, loosening into a state of squeaky annoyance, splitting here and there across its exposed plywood seat. Outside of watching a neglected plant wither into brown, crumbling ill health (I've no green thumb either), a dilapidated chair is perhaps the most pathetic sight I know. I look away with shame.

A really beautiful, well-made chair, however, can cost a mitigating bundle of money. At one fashionable home-furnishings store near my less than fashionably furnished home, a regiment of shapely, sturdy, carefully groomed straight-backed chairs were being sold for over a hundred dollars apiece. Probably not much money to some people. And really, one should approach a good chair as an investment, not something to be had for a bargain. Unfortunately, I like bargains a bit more than I do good chairs.

Meanwhile, the forces of entropy hasten. My charming motley collection of chairs at home will soon, by necessity, give way to a new generation. For the better. A chair shouldn't suggest, much less palpably demonstrate, that it wants a bit of mending, that its finest days have passed. A chair shouldn't make us doubt its mettle, much less bring us to envision a moment of collapse. As an icon, from a distance, a chair invokes a spirit of stability, an atmosphere of support. Close up, it can invoke the trash heap. I love my declining, homely chairs, but goodness knows that at some point, despite their success as heirlooms, they will crack under their failure as symbols.

TABLE AND CHAIR

I miss the kitchen table and chairs from my childhood home. There, I've said it. Though why should I admit this reluctantly? Here is why: I'm afraid of sitting down to a dripping, honey-sweet bowl of sentiment. And yet I must. And can anyone blame me? Aren't some props in our memory so stacked and stocked with good feelings (mostly good), so redolent of family love, so aglow with domestic happiness, that we dwell on them hungrily despite our misgivings?

So here, regardless of what some may think of me, is what I miss about that remembered table and chairs:

1. My mother turning in her palms spiced ground beef to form, one after another, enough perfect meatballs to fill a giant glass bowl—the kitchen smelling divine!
2. The floral-print seat cushions, again and again the securing straps breaking, leaving the cushion to drift askew.
3. Eating a bowl (or two!) of Fruity Pebbles / Apple Jacks / Fruit Loops / Frosted Flakes / Honey Comb / Cap'n Crunch / Lucky Charms / Honey Grahams... as a snack before bed (or "after bed," as I called it, too young to understand the language of time).
4. Spaghetti for supper on Wednesday evenings, the green-foil can of factory Parmesan, the small ceramic pitcher of extra sauce, and seconds, always seconds.
5. Yatzee and Parchesi when the grandparents came to visit.
6. Doing math homework by the sleepy stove-light (nearly succumbing to sleep myself).
7. The sight of my father's breakfast—oatmeal, coffee, orange juice, toast—laid out by my mother, while he finishes readying for work, coffee getting cold, oatmeal congealing.
8. The rust-orange (or were they chocolate-brown?) place mats, basket weave, edge ruffle, set out between meals.
9. Sunday breakfast, the whole Sunday breakfast spread.
10. Kitchen table turned cavelike fort, chairs turned secret doors, poorly lit underside the huddled scene of our play—spy raids, practical jokes, super-hero dolls, pilfered cookies.

11. For Christmas one year a foam-ball ping pong set, stretched across the table, clamped to the edges, played night after night until finally we bored of it (or did we lose the balls?).
12. The view, seated there, through tall sliding windows, of the backyard, my bike in the garage, the evergreen trees, and between them my father's garden.
13. The table and chairs alone, quiet in the empty kitchen.

TABLE

You would expect a table, a simple four legs, a simple flat top, to be a simple thing to build, if you cared to build one at all. But, like any simple idea, there is profundity in this one—at least for the novice that I was (and still am).

Yes, I built a table. And no, it does not earn its name.

It's really a "work bench," if you go by the diagram and instructions from which I constructed it—four feet high and wide, two feet deep, three drawers down one side, a back panel for hanging tools. But essentially a table, a useful surface between feet and head.

But don't build a table unless you have the right tools, and good ones at that. My tools, all of them shabby, were as follows:

- 1— dented-chipped-nosed hammer
- 1— flimsy, plastic-handled hacksaw (note: not meant for wood)
- 1— stripped, too-small, Phillips-head screwdriver
- 1— mangled, too-big, flat-head screwdriver

The two-by-fours, the plywood, the Masonite board, all of this I had the lumberyard people cut to match the specifications my wife, the artist wanting this table, had given me, the handyman wanting some skill in his hands. Clearly, in light of the above toolbox, I was not equipped to cut wood with any precision (nay, to cut wood at all!), so I felt no compunction about jobbing the work out. Also, my workroom was my living room: this would pose challenges enough.

And my poor neighbor below (a friend of mine; once my writing teacher in college), what a rattling three days she must have suffered so this table could come to be. Apartments are not places to build tables. And yet what injustice! The idea that people who live in apartments must forego building tables. This project was clear-

ly more than mere domestic improvement. It was an assertion of freedom!

So I asserted myself into every corner of our living room, and a good length into the hallway as well. Pieces of wood stacked wherever I could stack them. The smell of wood-glue. Dropped nails in wait for bare feet. And the noise of pounding, nail after nail after nail, enough hammering percussions to make even me look impatiently toward the end of this work (a man of quiet word-crafting, through and through). I'm sure my wife, too, was happy to reclaim her peaceful home, regardless that on her new table she would soon be pounding metal.

I would be dishonest, however, if I didn't conclude by saying that I am proud to have made this amateurish table. It stands up straight enough; it wobbles only slightly; it's practical (as in: honest, good, valuable, etc.) if not very pretty; it has not, after six or so years, shown any significant signs of falling apart (the bottom drawer support requires periodic hammering, but has not, to its credit, fallen out completely); and it continues to serve my wife's purposes, unless she is too kind to tell me otherwise, in which case I won't press the point.

Yes, I made a table. I don't expect to make one again.

CHAIR

Whatever happened to that maple-brown vinyl-upholstered La-Z-Boy chair that sat for years in my family's downstairs family room? It was my father's favorite chair (my mother's parents had two just like it down in their own downstairs family room, one for Grandpa, the other for Grandma, one chocolate brown, the other collard green, two moss-covered thrones kept cool and soft in their grotto); he loved to nap in it after dinner, recline in it during a television movie, list forward from its edge to cheer a football game. But there were plenty of occasions besides when I could languish in this chair myself, either alone, or with my brother beside me (when we were small enough; and then only when we were civil enough). The vinyl was cool against my skin (my heels, my calves, the back of my thighs, my arms, my neck) when I first settled onto it; then in a matter of minutes, without my noticing, skin and vinyl would find a middle temperature they could agree upon, and I would find myself wavering between waking and sleeping, rolling in the firm

but yielding cushion of the chair, to one side, to the other, hearing the vinyl creak under my weight, feeling fresh cool places where my body had not yet been. Leave, little brother. Leave me alone in this heavenly chair. I'll bust your lip if you don't.

But where did it go? It was gone by the time I was twenty, when I would visit my mother now and then (my father dead now). It was there, I remember, when I was nineteen. My mother sat in it one evening as she told us she intended to marry the wan, pale-attired, narrow-faced man who sat on the sofa to her left. I didn't like him, though I didn't really know him either. The chair must have squeaked and creaked under my mother, as if voicing her unease (mine, too). Did she dispose of the chair soon after that evening? I don't recall ever seeing it again. And yet I never asked about it. It must have been extremely beaten down, when my mother finally resolved to part with it (did she haul it to the Salvation Army? set it out on the curbside? bust it up and leave it for the garbage truck?). I do remember its piping cracked in places, white plastic tubing jutting out like fishbones; and rents in other places, the mesh underside exposed and fraying; and the crippled tilt of the footrest, from a lost bolt perhaps, or a split bracket. Maybe I wasn't surprised to see it gone, just an old piece of junk, a useless relic.

But here I am now thinking about that chair, trying to piece back together its sad broken history. And what if I found it again, abandoned, in some musty-roomed Goodwill? Would I want to take it with me? Resuscitate it, give it a new face? I don't think so. But I would probably stop to sit in it. I'm sure I would do that.

TABLE

In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, a seasonal guest at the Ramsey's shoreside cottage, a sad, lonely painter who yearns for the grace she imagines the Ramseys possess, is captivated by an image of the gloomy Mr. Ramsey (who is sad, she thinks, and misunderstood like herself) that his son, Andrew, once put into her mind. An image he suggested as a stand-in for the philosophic inquiry that comprises his father's work. "Think of a kitchen table," he told her, "when you're not there."

So that's what she did, wishing to conjure up an idea of Mr. Ramsey; she focused her mind on "a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue

seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in air.”

It seems to me that an image of a table might very well serve as a stand-in for anyone we know, but whose character defies conventional description.

My father, for instance, was certainly a compact hardwood table, a bit run-down, a jiggle in its legs, but faithful, and imbued with joy.

My mother, as a table, is likewise compact, but more crisp and honed, always dusted, always polished, never topped with clutter, never knocked askew, one of those restrainedly sensuous Victorian tables, admitting its curves, but refusing to enjoy them.

I have a friend in New York who is probably a table of classical proportions; neither high nor low, thick nor thin; right-angled, symmetrical, seamless; solid as if carved from stone, black through and through as ebony; a Spartan table, with nothing atop it, but deep as the deepest well, and soft to the touch.

My brother and sister are end tables, I’m sure of it, identical in substance, inseparable as bookends.

I am the low coffee table between them, not so different in form, but residing on a different plane, and off to one side; I am covered in thumb-through magazines, last night’s supper plates, discarded socks, a coffee cup, the usual mess; we claim not to understand one another, though we are each a part of a single set, resenting our connection.

My wife’s the sort of quirky antique table one finds at garage sales; an ample round top made for bowls of food and twilight gatherings; sturdy lathe-turned legs; careful, flowery carvings filled with rose-pink paint; scalloped borders; layers of chipped paint, lingering, not forgotten; a table of beauty; a forever table.

TABLE AND CHAIR

During one of our lolly-gagging weekend walks about town, my wife and I passed a garden store, out in front of which was displayed a small iron table, round-topped and curlicue-adorned, and two companionable iron chairs of the same flowery style. The iron was painted a watery oxidized-copper blue, thinly enough to let black show through. It was a charming, romantic, and thoroughly

enchanting set-up, and if the price tag had not said \$450, I might have insisted we buy it on the spot.

A handwritten sign, done in bold red ink, hung from the table rim, and it, too, tugged at my sentiments. "Perfect for Dinner on the Patio," it said, in case the table alone had failed to instill a similar vision. And I realized that, like nearly all domestic furnishings, certain tables and chairs bring with them a tradition, a lifestyle, a realm of activity, an ideal backdrop. No wonder these items can be so expensive to buy, so difficult to build from scratch: a lifestyle is a pursuit, and most pursuits, the ones that really mean something to us, are not to be purchased cheaply, or without effort.

The round stone table, for instance, that we both fantasize about, and the trellised, brick-laid, lushly planted courtyard surrounding it—only a magic spell could bring this scene into being as quickly as we'd like to have it appear. And yet one must start somewhere. Buy the table, and eventually you will buy (or build, if you're the artisan type) the chairs. Then you will fancy a verdant nook, and begin taking small, considered steps toward creating one. Maybe a stone wall is in order, and a small vegetable garden. Brick by brick, stone by stone, branch by branch, board by board, that simple tabletop expands to include rooftop and treetop, plot and path. If nature abhors a vacuum, a table and chair despise an incomplete composition. They are the central themes of a domestic life. Who would leave them to languish undeveloped? Not I, dear reader, not I.