

*Holly Morgan*

### THE KITCHEN TABLE

The round cherry table sits in a place of honor next to my sofa, showcased in front of a rice-paper screen with cherry-stained frame. An Oriental rug inches up to its pedestal base and gracefully-curved tripod feet. It's the only antique I own.

In its youth the table was a workhorse. It sat in the corner of my grandparents' kitchen, covered in oilcloth. To my grandmother, the table itself was inconsequential, merely a platform on which to set groceries after coming up the short set of stairs from the back door, or cookie sheets from the oven two steps away. It was also, even at less than three feet across, still the largest surface on which to knead the yeast dough for her incomparable cinnamon buns. I can *imagine* my grandparents eating their meals there when they were alone, instead of in the Duncan-Phyfe-formal dining room. I can see them sitting in that corner by the window reading the morning edition of the Providence (RI) Journal, Pop-Pop with his coffee and Baba drinking tea, not speaking to each other. Or bickering. If she had one opinion about something, his was the opposite. They loved to pick arguments with each other, a source of tension and aggravation to the other grownups at holiday gatherings. Maybe they felt closer as they sat at the kitchen table to read, and re-read, the letters—eagerly awaited—from my Aunt Laura, who skated with Holiday on Ice. The onion-skin envelopes were postmarked Barcelona, Lima, Paris, and other exotic locales.

When Laura came home we always had a family celebration, leaves in the Duncan Phyfe and the buffet covered with heaped serving dishes. We kids loved to hear about her travels, *plus*, she brought us gifts. One winter she taught me figure eights on a frozen pond by our house.

Our family lived thirty long miles from Providence. My mother drove us kids to ‘The City’, as she called it, over pre-interstate two-lane roads at least once a month to visit at the O’Neil Street home my grandfather had built many years before. Sometimes Baba would drive down to ‘the country’ and pick me up for the weekend. I was her first grandchild and felt entitled to be spoiled.

She and I would sit at the kitchen table and peel roasted chestnuts, or shell peas, or pit whatever cherries the birds hadn’t scavenged from the tree in the tiny back yard. When her best friend Nora dropped by from next door I’d listen to the neighborhood gossip as they sipped their tea in the corner while I traced the lines of the Oriental-patterned carpet in the dining room with marbles from a big tin.

I was twelve when we got a call that Baba had had a stroke. My mother drove the thirty miles to the hospital alone, promising that my brother and sister and I could visit soon. A few days later, though, the news came that Baba had died, and I never got a chance to say goodbye to my favorite person.

My grandfather took to driving down to visit us often, to my mother’s dismay. He always knew how to stir up a hornet’s nest, criticizing my parents and us for everything, now that his sparring partner was gone. I can picture him sitting alone at the

little table covered in oilcloth, eating the Rice-Roni he thought was such a great invention. I'm sure he missed Baba's home-cooked meals, her cinnamon buns, the arguments he thrived on.

Six years later, when it became time to put him in a nursing home, the O'Neil Street house was closed up. And when he died a few years after that, my mother, with her brother and sister, reluctantly decided it was time to let go of the house. Newly married by then, I was invited to accompany my mother and Aunt Laura to the house as they sorted belongings and memorabilia. Laura had bought many of the nicer furnishings over the years, so she felt entitled to them. Luckily, she and my mother both ignored the two things I'd already decided I wanted—the kitchen table and the threadbare carpet I used to play marbles on.

In the early years of my marriage we did use the cherry table in our kitchen, but I couldn't bear to see it covered in oilcloth. I fed babies at it, unloaded baked cookies and groceries onto it, and yes, even let pans of *Baba's Cinnamon Buns* rise on it (though I never did knead it there). We've refinished it several times. When we could afford a larger table in the kitchen, I moved my sturdy antique wherever it was needed most as we moved from one house to the next.

Now, energy and enthusiasm for making cookies and cinnamon buns gone—*my* grandkids all grown up and two hours away—a new table sits in a sunny corner of my kitchen. It's a little round glass-topped pedestal trimmed with wicker. My husband and I eat breakfast there, planning our day, and on Sundays read the morning paper over bagels and coffee. Our octagonal glass-and-brass dining table is reserved for family gatherings and special

celebrations. My cherished antique, holding only a lamp, a pile of books, and a fat candle, doesn't *have* to work for its keep anymore.