

12-1-2019

Dirty Spoons

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Recommended Citation

Grasso, Renee (2019) "Dirty Spoons," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol8/iss1/5>

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Dirty Spoons

My mom tapped on the door and cautiously stuck her head inside my room. The sound was so familiar, so delicate I couldn't tell if I was dreaming. As she softly crept toward me, I became aware of her yoga pants and V-neck T-shirt and realized I was awake. I wasn't in my dorm at school, startled by my roommate's alarm. I was at home.

Mom perched on the side of my bed and touched my back. "How are the sheets?" It was a cool September in Queens, and the Grasso household had already made the leap from regular summer sheets to winter flannel sheets; they were unbelievably comfy.

"Good." My mouth parted slightly.

"Good." My mom smiled. "It's already noon. I was letting you catch up on sleep, but you have to come hang out with your family at some point. You only get four days with us before you go back to school, you know."

I nodded. "I'll come down. Is there coffee?"

"I made a pot, but there's not much left. Come down and get some before Dad and Charlotte drink it all."

I shook my head into my pillow. "Okay."

Mom leaned down to pick up a shirt from the floor. She took it in my room as she folded it and drifted towards my suitcase.

"Don't worry about that, Mom, I'll do it. I just didn't get a chance to unpack last night."

"Oh no, it's fine. Hey, did you see that? I hung up Charlotte's painting. I put it over that poster you had, but I didn't think you'd mind."

I looked at the wall across from my bed to see a Jackson Pollock-style painting that my sister made when she was in high school. I smiled politely.

"Nice."

Mom finally slipped out after one more strict warning to get out of bed. I blankly fixated on the messy streaks of yellow and purple paint and began getting dizzy. I didn't dislike the painting, and I didn't even mind it covering my three-year-old Nicki Minaj poster. I just didn't like that my mom was messing with my room when I was gone. What's the point? My room had been exactly the same since I was nine years old, and I didn't mind it. Of course, I'd changed some things: I took down some Jonas Brothers posters, replaced some pictures of old friends with new friends, and vacuumed occasionally. For the most part, I didn't mind if it didn't grow with me. *God knows I changed too much in the past month for my room to keep up, anyway.*

I sat up in bed and thought about the millions of mornings that had come before, some almost exactly alike. Rushing to school mornings, rushing to church mornings, Sunday pancake mornings, Christmas mornings, but no morning had been quite like this one: my first morning home from college.

"Renee! You better not still be sleeping. Spend time with your *mother!*"

"And your sister!" Charlotte yelled from her room next door.

I rolled my eyes and jumped out of bed.

Perhaps the best way to explain my family is to describe the little spoon shortage phenomenon. Here's how it would happen: each family member got up in the morning, made a cup of coffee, and grabbed a little spoon to stir their milk and sugar. Finally, they went to set the dirty spoon beside the sink, only to find, to their grave disappointment, that the previous family member had left their coffee spoon in the same spot. By the time I woke up, there would be three lightly used spoons laying in a row, each with a small pool of coffee resting on its neck. My dad would usually patrol the travesty, tensely reminding me, "Kid, you don't have to use a new spoon."

In a house that loves coffee and hates waste, the little spoon shortage was no small issue. Our morning and afternoon coffee rituals could wipe out our little spoon supply merely twenty-four hours after running the dishwasher. As soon as my mom began noticing this trend, she nipped it in the bud. "Save the Little Spoons" became a new mantra for her, not unlike the way that PETA urges us to save the whales. Mom advocated for those spoons as fiercely as she did for any other abused kitchen supplies in her home. As we lounged on the couch in the TV room, Charlotte and I would hear her lamenting from the dining room: "One...two...three...four plastic cups on the table! Rinse them or throw them out. If you were just drinking water, then it's fine to just rinse them. It's not as gross as Charlotte thinks." I'd also hear: "Renee, how many times do I have to tell you? Spatulas, this drawer under the sink. It's like you haven't lived here for 18 years."

Now Mom announces: “Everyone, when you make a cup of coffee, use *my* spoon. I’m going to leave it by the sink, and I’m always the first one up in the morning, so it’ll always be there. Eight spoons a day for coffee is just... ridiculous.” She said these things again and again, until the kitchen felt like a minefield, with your next potential misstep lurking in every corner.

The only sin worse than forgetting to use Mom’s coffee spoon in the morning was failing to notice that she made a pot of coffee for the family and making your own cup in the Keurig. This heinous, unforgivable crime was exactly what I did on my first morning home from college. In my groggy state, I nodded to Mom, who cheerily said “She’s risen!” without looking up from *The New York Times* on her iPad. I made a beeline for the Keurig. It wasn’t until she heard the distinctive whirring of the coffee grounds that her head snapped up. “Renee, I told you there’s a pot of coffee.”

“Oh, too late. I’m sorry.” I couldn’t conjure up my usual level of sympathy for committing one of her kitchen offenses. It was the first time in two months that I was sharing a space with someone over the age of eighteen.

She forgave me instantly. “It’s fine. More for me.” She was letting me off easy even though I was up to at least strike three by now—sleeping late, leaving clothes on the floor, and ignoring the pot of coffee. I realized with a pang that she missed me. At the very least, I should’ve gotten a passive-aggressive glare by now. But all she said was, “Hey, since you’re not gonna take the rest, can you pour me another cup?”

She’d only drink coffee out of her favorite mug: tall, ceramic and covered with pink dots. Of course, she’d already put it in the sink right after her first cup. I inspected the mug for any dirty dish residue, ran some warm water over it, and pivoted to grab a dish towel. Suddenly, I paused, overcome with guilt. Mom kept everything in immaculate form. Clothes folded, dishes stacked away, and every spoon used to its full potential. At school, running water could suffice for doing dishes, but at home it felt like I had spit in my mother’s breakfast. I grabbed the dish soap and a sponge. Right as my coffee finished filtering out of the Keurig, my sister came bounding down the stairs.

“Look who’s finally awake. Why’d you make a cup of coffee when there’s a pot? You always do that.” Charlotte wasted no time in making a few cutting but amiable remarks. She skipped across the kitchen with open arms, and I cringed in anticipation. “I’m so glad you’re home! Oh my god, relax, Renee. Do you hate me or something?”

“I just don’t like being squeezed in the morning,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. Still, Charlotte’s joking accusation felt more accurate than my weak protest. What was different? Why was I happy to see her, but couldn’t hug her? Maybe this had something to do with that sinking feeling I had for the entire bus ride home, or maybe my family should just know better than to ask so much of me before my cup of coffee.

“Renee, just because you’re this cool college student now doesn’t mean that you can...” Mom trailed off. “I don’t know where I was going with that.” She shrugged coyly and sipped her coffee.

Charlotte snorted and picked up where Mom left off. “Back when I was a college student, I... oh, never mind.” She mimicked a pompous grad reflecting on her glory days. In reality, she graduated only three months ago, and I suspected that she didn’t miss it at all. Charlotte didn’t like doing her own laundry or eating alone, which I considered simple pleasures. She’d gotten tired of going out by her second semester. “I don’t want to bore you with my stories. Tell us some of yours!”

I laughed as I unwrapped a Thomas English muffin. I was never a huge fan of English muffins, but two months without a toaster in my room had made me crave their simple, familiar crunch. “I call you guys every day. I don’t have any stories to tell you.”

“*Sure,*” Charlotte intoned. Mom’s face had turned cautious. Why was Charlotte pursuing this? She knew that when it came to drinking, smoking, and other foul behaviors, our parents’ policy was “don’t ask, don’t tell.” I realized that I was so preoccupied with my new college persona that I may have overlooked how other family dynamics had changed, too. Since moving back home for law school, Charlotte had transformed into an adult who would be making a steady income soon, no longer my trendy twenty-something sister. She stopped answering my texts once it hit midnight, because she was already asleep. Every morning, even on the weekends, she was up at the crack of dawn studying. When I told her drunk and high antics that I thought she’d find funny, her laugh sounded more nervous than amused.

I looked at Charlotte sitting at the counter now, her dark hair falling in her face as she read *The New York Times* on her iPad, just like Mom. I wondered if she’d still want to watch stupid Lifetime movies and go on “spy missions” with me when she became a big-shot lawyer. Charlotte had always toed the line between being my friend and my second mother, but one important difference between Mom and Charlotte was that Charlotte watched my Snapchat stories. She’d never snitch on me, however, she could do a mean guilt trip if she was in the right mood.

But what am I even guilty of? I wondered. I thought about how my mom lectured me continuously the summer before I moved out. “Don’t drink hard liquor, Renee. If I get a call that you’re getting your stomach pumped and you’re four hours away from me, I swear.” My mother clearly didn’t know the simple mechanics of a college pregame, of course we drank hard liquor. It’s cheaper than beer and doesn’t make you bloated. Besides, it makes all the guys look a lot cuter. I knew from my aunt’s stories that my mom drank plenty when she was my age, so what’s the deal with the guilt trip?

I felt frustrated that she didn't trust me, but I also reminded myself to stand in her shoes, watching me walk away to college. Was there really any way for her to know if I'd make all the right decisions? Parenting is like taking a lifelong test that you can't study for and you never really get your grade on. My sympathy for her and my itch for independence took up two halves of my brain, like the two different people I was at my two different homes.

I brainstormed some PG-13 stories I could tell to satisfy my audience. "Hmm. Well, this is kind of funny. My TA for Business Ethics handed back my paper with literally no criticism. He just wrote 'Idk what to tell you to improve, I honestly wish I could write like this.' And, like, this is the person who's supposed to help me with these papers!"

They both laughed. Charlotte shook her head, "Genius problems! Prep's English teachers prepared you well." I missed being able to brag. If I told my friends that story, they'd just call me a smart ass.

Mom was never impressed—meaning, she was never surprised by either of our accomplishments. She was only incredulous, "How much older is he? What qualifies him to grade your papers, when you're obviously a better writer?"

Whenever I told Mom a story, she always went a little too far and I'd end up defending my antagonist. "He's a year older and took the class last year. He's really helpful with other parts of the class, he just doesn't have much constructive criticism."

I'd almost forgot about my English muffin. I ran to the toaster oven and twisted the knob until it dinged.

"Did it burn?" Mom asked.

"Nope, I got it." I looked in and grinned at the golden-brown complexion.

"Does the little baby need help getting it out?" Charlotte mocked.

I used to be too nervous to reach into the toaster because I burned my hand when I was younger. I was so excited to reach in to get my Pop-Tart that my hand clattered against the toaster oven's red-hot roof. I was fine but began asking Mom or Dad to do it for me whenever they were around. Charlotte eventually teased me enough that I gathered up the courage to retrieve my own English muffins and bagels. In fact, Charlotte's teasing helped me shed a lot of my childish tendencies. Still, it was annoying.

The bathroom door swung open and my dad—was he in there the whole time?—looked genuinely surprised to see me, as if he hadn't picked me up from the bus station last night, "Oh, hey kid."

Don't say anything about the coffee pot, I willed.

He pointed to the fruit bowl behind me, "There's one banana left, I can share it with you if you want." Even worse. Mom and Charlotte snickered.

“Stop being such a fruit pusher!” I said on script. “I know where the bananas are, you don’t need to make a public service announcement about them.”

Dad hung his head and hid a smirk while Charlotte dove into the specific issues with banana sharing, “You can never really split it evenly because it’s such a weird shape. Only one person can use the peel, so the other person’s hands get all sticky. And...”

“Yeah James, and why are you always trying to share a banana? It’s not an ideal food for sharing!” Mom’s joking, incredulous tone toward my dad sounded indistinguishable from her angry voice. Sometimes, when I would hear it from my room upstairs, I’d have to press my ear to the door to see if she and Dad were actually fighting or not.

“Alright, alright, enough!” Dad pretended to look insulted and turned accusingly to me. “Renee, I thought you’d finally be on my side when you came home.”

Never one to miss her cue, Mom jumped in, “Why would you think that?” She rolled her eyes towards me. “When we make fun of him while you’re at school, he talks to your graduation picture and says he wishes you were here.”

I laughed at the image of my Dad begging my picture for help and followed his eyes to the frame hanging behind Mom. It’s one of my best pictures, with true, honest eyes and long, flat-ironed hair from before I chopped it all off last summer. My prom and graduation pictures looked great too, but behind those smiles I wasn’t too happy. High school was just uncomfortable. I was always shifting between friend groups, always running to band practice, and always wondering what was wrong with me. I smiled, thinking of my friends at college. We chilled in each other’s rooms, sometimes stressing about homework and guys, but mostly laughing and talking. It felt stable without feeling too high-stakes. It was disorienting that my family preserved the old version of me on this wall, while I grew and lived my new life 200 miles away.

“Yeah, kid, we miss you when you’re gone.” I snapped out of my reminiscing and watched my dad as he walked with the slightest limp across the kitchen. Out of all of my family members, I talked to Dad the least while I was at school. Whenever I did call Dad, his end of the phone call was almost always something like this: “Watch the Yankees lately? No? Oh, okay. You have class today? How are your professors? Awesome. Yes, Nanny and Grandpa are fine. Okay, kid, I’ve gotta go. Talk to you soon.” He never really inquired what I did with my time other than whether I watched Yankees. Maybe he didn’t want to know.

I glanced at my phone. iMessage from Julia: “*So bored at home bro.*” I thought about what to type back for a moment, then settle on, “*yeah it’s weird. Miss you <3.*”

“Wow, only home a few hours and she’s already telling her friends how lame her family is,” Mom said. I looked up at her with a start, and her face fell when she realized she may have been right.

“No, I’m happy to be home. I needed a break.” But home didn’t feel like I had expected it to, and I couldn’t pinpoint why. My first month at college had felt like nothing but firsts, and I didn’t mind it. Now that I was home, I wanted to be wrapped up in some comfort and familiarity.

Of course, things had changed without me. I expected that. I didn’t expect that I would feel physically dizzy balancing how I’ve changed with how my home has changed. I sat at the counter, drinking my coffee, and just kept noticing different ways that the house had shifted in my absence; like how our wooden paper towel roll had been replaced with a stainless steel one. Or that we just always kept a tablecloth on the table now, even when it wasn’t a holiday. I didn’t even miss home when I was gone, but it strangely hurt to be excluded from these changes.

I had to come home to feel homesick, I thought. I felt like Charlotte’s Jackson Pollock painting: two distinctly different colors, smeared together on one canvas. I’d told Mom I was happy to take a break, but was that true? Being home was bringing up so many complicated feelings that I didn’t know which life I needed a break from anymore, or which one was honestly mine.

Home was a break from my roommate, whose presence was often a looming, isolated silence. Home was a break from stress, since being on a campus sometimes felt like license to be productive or social 24/7. But, mostly, home felt like a startling break from the new me. Home was a break from hungover breakfasts, when we congregated at the College-in-the-Woods dining hall at about 10 a.m., and would usually still be laughing and recapping the previous night when lunch was served at 12 p.m.

There wasn’t much reason to loiter after breakfast in the Grasso house. Dad gravitated to the living room to watch CNN and Charlotte asked me if I wanted to go to CVS with her to pick up her prescription. Mom began listing things we had to pack before I returned to school on Sunday.

I rose from the counter and walked to the sink. I washed my spoon.

A few months later, I’m home for winter break. I’ve changed my mind about my major ten times, I’ve laid naked below a Pink Floyd poster of six naked women; I’ve had bad trips, great quesadillas, and final exams.

Mom and I are driving to the mall to do some last-minute Christmas shopping. She turns to me and smiles, “Glad you’re home, honey.”

“Me too.” I try to think of a way to phrase the question burning at the back of my throat. I hold back for a moment, and then I just say it, “Do you think I’ve changed?”

Without a moment of hesitation, Mom says, “No.”

“Really?” My insulted tone catches me off guard.

“Yes. Do you think you did?” She’s still watching the road, but I feel her eyes on me.

“I don’t know. I guess not.”