

On the Verge Writing Contest 2020, First-Place Non-Fiction Winner

By Sarah Lachmansingh

EATING AT A STRANGER'S TABLE

Mom bought a new table midsummer, mid-depression. This was to replace the oblong dining table my parents had purchased in 1999 when it was stylish to shop at Leon's, and have glossy orange furniture in every room. As a child, I was small enough to swing below the table, the underside like a mechanical jungle. The table was its own house, the kind of world I took for granted.

These were the memories I fixated on when Mom decided it was time for the table to go. I was sixteen, too big to fit under a table like that, so there was no evidence suggesting we shouldn't replace it. But change was its own God to me, omnipresent, to be feared.

Mom had already received messages from a few interested moms, one a blonde woman whose profile picture on Facebook Marketplace made her look like she was the kind of lady to overuse Facebook Marketplace.

Mom was selling everything in the dining room. She thought the decor was too country. I had too, always poked fun at the tackiness of everything: the gold chandelier, orange floors, everything multicoloured and proudly ugly.

This was the point of Mom's mental health recovery when retail therapy extended to redecorating an entire room. She didn't want modern, but something eclectic, unique to our family. Mom still hates modern, calls it pale and boring.

No one in the house cared to redecorate, but this was one of the only things she'd wanted. Mom never wanted anything, so this is what the family gave her—no questions asked on this new project of hers. She'd been on disability leave for months at this point, bought a gym membership, was on antidepressants. It was the only point in time where there was worry for her, and even then, not enough.

A few weeks before we found a committed buyer, I scrubbed the acrylic paint I had splattered on top over the years. Most of it came off with just a few swipes of a sponge, but there was one green speck I'm not sure I ever removed.

Cleaning the table was like prepping a body for a funeral. It was too polished after, and had lost its sense of person. This feeling was like the one Mom had described when staring at the body of someone who'd been too made up by the mortician—it was always the blush they got wrong, she'd say.

When it was cleaned, I stared at it like it was someone I no longer recognized. I wanted to forget it. It seemed like it was still there even when it was gone, like phantom limbs, a ghost. This is how it was with Mom too, the old version of herself versus the recovering version. Pieces of who she used to be remained, the rest foreign but learning.

We'd eventually sold the table to a grandma who'd been interested in our hutch. She needed it for her grandkids.

We have a table too, I overheard Mom say when the grandma visited. She couldn't turn the lady away, who said she didn't have enough cash for both. Mom sold the two for the price of one.

That grandma needs it more and the money doesn't matter, she said for days after.

My parents delivered the hutch and table to the grandma's house a week later. It was a run-down building which sat on top a patty shop in the West End of Toronto. There were many of these in the city, warm inside, the air spiced.

Apparently, the grandkids jumped around when the table arrived, laughing, happy. They helped lift everything inside, eager, as if they stacked freshly-wrapped Christmas gifts under the tree.

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The couple we purchased our new table from were in their mid-eighties—Mr. and Mrs. Soni. Their son helped them downsize by posting ads for their furniture on Facebook Marketplace, since they prepared to move out of their home. They were too old for it.

The Soni house looked like it was meant to be a bungalow but it wasn't. It was quaint and a lot like my house. It had the same livedness to it, the smell unique to whoever breathed inside, whatever was cooked. I wondered how many memories you'd have to forget to leave a house like that, one with its history caught in every ever-changing layer of paint.

Mrs. Soni showed us around her garden. What would it be like to leave behind things that meant a lot to you? Maybe Mom felt this about her old self, pre-depression, like Mrs. Soni's flowers, which the new owners would likely leave to die.

Mrs. Soni sat us down in the chairs that would eventually sit in our dining room. The cushions were too soft, but the table was pretty enough. Dark hardwood. Mom liked the table so I pretended to, acted like I didn't think the cushions were too soft.

Mrs. Soni made us chai. This was the first figurative meal we'd have at this table. I held the mug close to my chest. She made it from scratch in her spice kitchen: cardamom cinnamon—these are the spices my sister detected. I never paid enough attention to know the difference between cardamom, cinnamon.

The Sonis' reality was what I feared most for my own family, my own house. My parents growing too old to climb the stairs, eventually selling it for a condo in some placher nicer than Scarborough, maybe Vaughan. I didn't fear what depression could do to Mom as much, just that her and Dad could sell their/our prized possessions, leave behind their/our life for a brand new one.

Abandoning what essentially felt like a womb was never an option—This had happened to the old inhabitants of our home—The Stanleys, who were the only previous owners. We knew the

same house. I didn't want anyone to ever do this with my home—know it like I did. I didn't like thinking the Stanleys might have felt as I did, that it happened to them anyway.

Maybe this happened to Mom too—all the things she hadn't wanted, piled on top of her in the forms of prescriptions, therapy. That maybe she hadn't wanted to move out of her body, leave behind her old self and adapt into someone new.

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Everyone deserves something that feels like their own, something borrowed, something that adjusts. That's probably why Mom thought it would be healing to change our dining room. Good things are recycled and rebuilt—that's why we bury people underground and wait for them to turn into flowers. We give ourselves to the things we love—the places, the objects, everything we take for granted—and when it's time to give them away, we adapt.

Maybe I'd always fear leaving my house behind, the change and the never-ending hollowness of *getting used to*. Getting used to things looking different, getting used to Mom feeling different.

Sometimes I still picture the grandma's grandkids excited about a stranger's table, not toys, just something to eat on. Four kids swinging under it, exploring their own version of my mechanical jungle. All of them laughing, these big dimples, playing pretend while it lasts.