

ELIZABETH BARROW COLT

When I was young I never even saw my mother in the kitchen. The food just appeared at mealtime as if by magic, all steaming and ready to eat. Lacey would carry it in on these big white serving platters that had a rim of raised china acorns. Our plates had the same rim. Twenty-two acorns per plate, each one about the size of a lump of chewed gum. When I was very young I used to try and pry them off with my knife. . . . We ate every night at eight o'clock sharp because my parents didn't start their cocktail hour until seven, but since dinnertime was meant for exchanging news of the day, the emphasis was always on talking . . . and not on eating. My father bolted his food, and my mother played with hers: sculpting it up into hills and then mashing it back down through her fork. To make things worse, before we sat down at the table she'd always put on a fresh smear of lipstick. I still remember the shade. It was called "Fire and Ice" . . . a dark throbbing red that rubbed off on her fork in waxy clumps that stained her food pink, so that by the end of the first course she'd have rended everything into a kind of . . . rosy puree. As my father wolfed down his meat and vegetables, I'd watch my mother thread this puree through the raised acorns on her plate, fanning it out into long runny pink ribbons. . . . I could never eat a thing. . . . "WAKE UP, AMERICA!" she'd trumpet to me. "You're not being excused from this table until you clean up that plate!" So, I'd take several mouthfuls and then when no one was looking, would spit them out into my napkin. Each night I systematically transferred everything on my plate into that lifesaving napkin. . . .

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(Looks at her bass, helpless. Sighs. A silence, then very

loud and intense.) ONE AFTERNOON WHEN I CAME HOME FROM SCHOOL, MOTHER WAS IN TEARS BECAUSE LACEY HAD QUIT, WALKED OUT IN A TORRENT OF INSULTS. "NEVER AGAIN!" MOTHER SOBBED. "FROM NOW ON, I'LL DO THE COOKING MYSELF!" . . . IT WAS A BIG MISTAKE. SHE DIDN'T KNOW HOW AND SHE WAS IN THE MIDST OF MEN-OPAUSE. SHE KEPT BREAKING DISHES AND CUTTING HER FINGERS WITH THE CARVING KNIFE. ONE NIGHT SHE SLICED OFF THE TIP OF HER THUMB AND GROUND IT UP IN THE GARBAGE DISPOSAL! (HANNAN GALT *lurches towards the ladies' room upstairs. The lights rise a little to reveal the other diners. They're startled by ELIZABETH's sudden outburst and stare, then turn away feigning indifference, while hanging on every word.*)

Mealtime was much the same as it had always been. . . . Father still talked a blue streak, Mother still mashed her food into a pink soup . . . and I still spit everything out into my napkin. But they were paper napkins now, and since I cleared the table, there was no chance of discovery. I breathed easier. What changed then, was the violence that went into the cooking beforehand. . . . I never saw such bloodletting over meals! If she didn't knick herself while cutting the tomatoes, she'd deliberately slice a finger while waiting for the rice to boil. "Why bother cooking?" she'd cry, holding her bleeding hands under the faucet. "We'll all be dead soon enough!" . . . It was around this time that Mother was starting to get . . . suicidal. . . . *(She starts to laugh.)* Oh dear, I shouldn't laugh. . . . It was just so . . . comical! You see, Mother was very comical. She wore hats all the time, great turban-type creations piled high with artificial flowers and papier-mâché fruits. She wore them outside and she wore them in the house. She wore them when she cooked and when she ate . . . great teetering crowns that bobbed and jingled with every move . . . poor Mother . . . I don't know what it was that

"Call . . . that magic that happens and you know who you are, you know?"

ZAP

Like when I found out I was a tennis player.

[VITA: I love you.

ZAP: No, no joke.] I went to church and lit a candle, man.

[DOHERTY: You give thanks for that light.]

Really. I said my novenas, man, 'cause it had been like a— not a miracle that anyone would know except just me— but it had been like when those girls saw Our Lady of Fatima up on that hill. It was really weird. I was like in the fifth grade and I was watching these two hamburgers on some practice court, and they took a break and one of them hands me his racket. So I threw up a toss like I'd seen them do and zap! Three inches over the net, two inches inside the line. There wasn't nobody over there, but that was an ace, man. You should have heard those guys razz me. I mean, you know, they say, "Man, you stink." And all those things you can't repeat in front of a priest. They was really on my case. And I think that's the first time anybody ever looked at me. I mean, I was skinny, you've never seen—most of the girls in my homeroom had about twenty pounds on me. So this guy shows me a backhand grip and he hits one to me and zap! You mother! Backhand! Right down the line. And the thing is, that's where I wanted it. I saw the ball come at me, and I said I'm gonna backhand this sucker right down the line, and I did.

So then they took their ball back. Which I don't blame them, 'cause no high school hotshot is gonna get off on being showed up by this eleven-year-old creep that's built like a parking meter, you know?

But that was it. I hit that first ball and I said, "This is

me. This is what I do. What I do is tennis." And once you know, then there's no way out. You've been showed something. Even if it's just tennis, you can't turn around and say you wasn't showed that.

So I went to church and said a novena for those meatballs 'cause they didn't know all the butterflies that was in my stomach, that they'd been my angels. But, man, on the way home, anybody had asked me what I did, right there I'd have said, "I play tennis." Didn't know love from lob, didn't matter. That's what I am. 'Cause once you know what you are, the rest is just work.

The Art of Dining

Tina Howe

Premiere: New York Shakespeare Festival, New York City, 1979

Setting: An intimate, elegant restaurant on the New Jersey shore.

Ellen and Cal have just opened a restaurant called The Golden Carousel. It's a raw, freezing day in November, and three disparate sets of guests eat their way through the comedy and drama of one evening's meal.

Elizabeth Barrow Colt is dining with David Osslow, a hearty, self-confident publisher who admires her short stories. The meal is a nightmarish ordeal for Elizabeth, who is excruciatingly shy and so nervous she drops her lipstick in her soup. She is very nearsighted and does not wear glasses. She's also terrified of food, and when David tries to convince her to taste the dinner she's ordered, she tells him this story.

(Note: Though the two speeches occur in different scenes, they continue the same story and can be performed together.)