

# **Sunday Dinners and Crooked Driveways: A Family's Legacy**

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Crooked and starting to crumble; you would think that after sixteen thousand dollars and two redos, it would be straight. The amount of time and effort invested in trying to mend something that will never be the same again is so frustrating. We are at the end, the end of the driveway, talking about the end of life, how perfectly cliché. Could we not have picked a better location? As I stand here listening to the hospice lady, all I can think about is this stupid driveway and how crooked the ending is. It could be two weeks, two days, or two months; everybody's end-of-life journey is different. I hear her still talking, but she sounds so far away. How are we supposed to go inside and have Sunday dinner after this?

I wanted this moment to be a fleeting memory, gone tomorrow. The picture of our group on this perfect Sunday afternoon at that moment has remained ingrained in my memory, especially Diane's cloying, sympathetic head tilts as she details the end. There we were, my older brother, my younger sister, and I all standing in perfect birth order, speechless, incredulous, and completely dumbfounded. I wish my mind would shut down, because it is wandering, wondering: What are we having for dinner? What do you even eat after some lady bearing a strong resemblance to Big Bird tells you that the one constant thing that is a source of comfort, love and security is going to slip away slowly and there is not a damn thing you can do to change it but sit and watch it happen. Then, just like that, like so many generations before us and so many other Sundays before today, we gathered at the table and carried on with that Sunday dinner. I don't remember what we talked about or what we ate that day, but I do remember thinking that maybe this must be normal. We are not the first family to have to go through something like this. We are just like every other family facing death, right?

Mom passed away 2 months after that driveway conversation with Big Bird. The days and weeks following her death were a blur of tears and a gloomy, cloudy haze of fog and sadness. I was Dorothy, spinning in a tornado of misery, not knowing where or when I would land. I had to find a place to go where it was safe and where I could feel close to her again. Her kitchen and our family dinner table had become our boardroom, our confessional, our refuge, and the one thing that might hopefully offer me a small piece of comfort.

I needed to feed my soul with her words of criticism or encouragement. I needed to touch her warm, crepey skin and to feel her spirit envelop me. I needed something, anything, to feel her presence and let me know that she was at one time present and real, so I searched and found sustenance and comfort in her cookbooks. In her library, I found a book I had given to her as a gift on Mother's Day after my

first son was born. It was a cookbook by Sophia Loren aptly titled *Memories and Recipes*. That was exactly what I needed and wanted at that moment. I needed to get lost in those books to feel close to my mom again. She was and still is never far from my mind, but I needed to see her handwriting and to touch the pages where her hands had once been. If I wanted Sunday dinners to live on forever for generations to come, I needed those recipes. I sat on the floor in her kitchen reading about Sophia Loren, describing family, thinking that if Sophia and I were ever to meet, we would have so much to talk about, we would really hit it off. In her book, Sophia speaks of the incredible value that gathering as a family has in the lives of all its members. It's true, "the family and its role are the foundation of society. Family is sacred and a strong family provides the mutual love, commitment, and honesty that allow us to grow up true to ourselves and our fellow human beings."

We had a strong family bond; even though we were all very close, growing up in my family was not easy. My parents did the best they could with what little experience they had of the world and this strange land they had chosen as their home. We never wanted for anything, so we did not know what it was like to have to sacrifice or go without. In that respect, our life was easy, but that is where simplicity ended. Adjusting to a new marriage and starting a family in a new country all at the same time provided its own set of challenges for my parents. They went from being their parents' children, living in a place where they had the stability, safety, and comfort of family, to leaving everything behind to venture to America. Now they have become adults and the heads of their own household. This sometimes proved more than they could handle. When things get challenging or the everyday trials of a young couple just starting out begin to overwhelm, one seeks the security and comfort that only your parents and your family home could bring. Not being able to access this cocoon and feel protected for just a while to re-energize your fortitude, hurts. It leaves you with feelings of want and loneliness that eventually morph into resentment and sometimes hostility. The negativity that brews deep within you causes you to react and make poor decisions. Leaving home when they needed their families' support and guidance the most really made life difficult for my parents. Did they have the emotional maturity they needed to make such a radical move to a new country without any familial connections nearby? Probably not, but they were strong and determined to make a new life for themselves and the family that would soon follow. They pushed through heartache and pain; they worked hard as entrepreneurs to have a legacy they were proud of because it was built with their own two hands. They did whatever it took to stay the course and create a new life. No, it was not perfect, and at times it felt as if they were living in a house of cards that at any minute could come crumbling down, but they kept moving forward. Through it all, they never looked back, and according to my father, they never had any regrets.

In my memories, I can see from an early age, no matter what day of the week it was and no matter what activities we were involved in, we sat at the kitchen table to have dinner together as a family. There are pictures of my brother and me, we couldn't have been older than 3 and 4 years old, of a properly set table with candles, a bottle of wine, and a large serving platter with a perfectly browned chicken surrounded by an assortment of rainbow-colored vegetables. My brother and I were seated in our highchairs and dressed for dinner. We made a picture-perfect family. That's where it all started, and that was how it would be for years to come. The seating arrangement changed, and the table grew larger, but the core remained. Sure, when my parents died, they left us many treasures and trinkets, some with immeasurable value, but the most valuable gift was the gift of the family gathering, which eventually evolved into the ever-so-creatively coined Sunday dinner. It was at that podium that we shared confessions from our childhood escapades, debated social, political, and sometimes religious beliefs, exchanged advice, and recalled some of our greatest tragedies. Our children grew up around that table. They would eventually become part of the conversation. The table that we all gathered around every Sunday was the bridge that brought all the generations together, sometimes clashing like a well-brewed storm, finally making landfall and decimating everything in its path. My father would sit at the head of the table thinking that he was in charge, but he wasn't. Deep down in his heart, he knew this wagon had no driver. As powerful and imposing as he tried to be to each of us, we knew he had become putty since the day he became a grandfather. My mother was the one with the feared golden slipper. However, that was more folly than fear, despite her perfect sharp-shooter status.

The table has since found a new home in my brother's dining room, positioned in front of a window similar to the one in my parents' dining room. If you were to look closely at it, ingrained in the wood are beads of sweat born from conflicting arguments, tears of joy and sadness, and the sweaty handprints of anybody panicking that they may accidentally reveal their deepest darkest secrets while getting caught up in the moment. No matter what you brought to that table, you always left with a belly full of delicious food and sustenance for your soul. There may not have always been a resolution, but there was always laughter and good-natured ribbing. Sure, sometimes there would be a heated argument that would require a time out, and we would all have to retreat to our corners for a few days, but the next Sunday would roll around, and we would start all over again because it was ingrained in our DNA.

A family is its own small part of a larger society. Everybody has a role, and we all follow their rituals. This is where the idea for this blog was born, in those conversations, anecdotes, and stories. This blog is my family table, and you are welcome to join me any day of the week. You may laugh, you may tear up, or maybe you'll even want to throw something out of frustration. There may be a juicy, jaw-dropping shock, but sometimes you may even learn a thing or two- or not. However, you will always be welcome.

Sometimes you may even see a resemblance to your own family, but my ultimate goal for this blog is to entertain by connecting my parents' past to my present and my children's future.

