

The Dinner Party

He took his seat where placed, between a middle-aged woman in a loose cardigan who smelled faintly of citrus, and a young man with a chicken neck and a laugh that sounded like a salmon flopping in a fisherman's boat. The table was a blur. Plates clattered. Glasses clinked. Someone leaned across him for the salt, offering a perfunctory apology he couldn't quite catch.

Sound washed in from every direction like waves at the shore, tumbling and crashing onto his ears. A word would arise briefly — 'game' or 'work' or 'next week' — and then sink back into the tumult before he could grasp the sense. He tilted his head, following a mouth, unable to follow the sentence.

Laughter came in salvos. Someone slapped the table. Another voice cut across. A story seemed to begin, only to be swallowed by another. He smiled when others smiled, always a beat too late.

They leaned in with jokes and questions and small affirmations, keeping the conversation aloft like a ball kept in play. He could see it being done, and marveled at the skill. Each played their part like musicians in an ensemble, all riding the tempo together.

A hand rose at the far end of the table, palm open, asking for the butter. It hovered there for a moment, waiting its turn.

Something about that gesture reminded him of another table, in another room and another time. Fewer people. More space between voices. Someone had raised a hand there too — not to interrupt, but to hold a thought in place while others finished.

A child had been at that table too, asking wonderful questions — why birds never bumped into the moon, whether the wind ever got tired. Her wild curiosity was honored like a gift.

They had eaten together like that, long ago, with talk that wandered without urgency. Silence had not been a gap but a guest.

They were gone now. Some taken by time, others scattered to the four corners of the earth.

A piece of silverware struck porcelain. The sound was sharp and bright, like a small bell. Someone said, "Sorry," too quickly.

The room came back into focus. Faces reassembled. The woman beside him was smiling at something he had missed. He smiled back. A bowl was offered. He took it and passed it on.

He felt a small ache, unexpected. Not to be like his present dinner companions, not to share their opinions or their certainties, but remembering what it was like — once upon a time — to be present without a mask.

He did not resent them for what they had.

But he could feel what he had lost.

And what was beyond his grasp now.

He also knew the cost of the table he remembered. It had been quieter. Easier to miss. What it had given him, he had not been able to keep.

For a moment, he held both tables at once.

The one where people are speaking.
And the one where he once belonged.

— *William Zeitler*

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