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Welcome to the Living Room

Susan Hodara is the February guest writer. Susan has spent the last four years working with three other authors on a collaborative memoir, *Still Here Thinking of You*. (Their excerpts will appear here in months to come.) The book contains four separate memoirs chronicling each of their relationships with their mothers. These sections are framed by the story of how they got to know one another as a writing group and as friends. The pieces below, "Dinner at Five" and "My Mother's Leg" are excerpted from Susan's section of the book, "It Had To Be You."

Links to previous writers are at the bottom of the page. If you'd like me to consider your non-fiction or personal essay, please contact me at sandrahurtes@yahoo.com

Dinner at Five

by Susan Hodara

My mother is black and white behind me as I slowly starve myself. She serves me dinner at five, an hour before the rest of my family.

That's when I get hungry. I am sixteen, a junior in high school, and by five o'clock I have eaten only half of the 800 calories I allot myself daily. Dinner will take care of the other 400, and after that I will return to my bedroom, finish my homework, and go to sleep.

I have been eating like this since late winter, and now it is April; I have lost at least fifteen pounds. Each morning, I step onto the bathroom scale and watch as the numbers in the window between my toes sway beneath the black dial, then settle somewhere just above 100. I am delighted that my jeans are baggy; I gather the fabric behind my thigh into my fist.

My mother doesn't say, "Susan, you must be hungry! Come and have a snack!" She doesn't tell me I look too thin for my frame, or that there are dark circles under my eyes. She doesn't say: "In this family, we eat dinner at six and I expect you at the table."

In my memory, I cannot see her face or the color of her shirt. I do not hear her voice. She is there in the kitchen, turned toward the sink. She is cutting slices from the London broil the rest of my family will eat in an hour,

spooning out a serving of simmering peas and a splat of mashed potato, arranging them beside each other on my sea-green plate, and bringing them to me where I sit alone at the table.

It started abruptly, this so-called diet, on a cloudy Saturday when I spent most of the day in my room doing homework. I had plans for the evening, and before going out, I realized I'd only eaten a container of yogurt all day. I took an apple and left. The next morning, I savored the emptiness in my belly.

The part of me that loved to eat shut down. Until that day, I was the one who grabbed the lamb chop bones from my brothers' plates and chewed off the edges of fat; who offered to clean the meat from the chicken carcass, popping the best pieces into my mouth; who stole fingerfuls from the dishes my mother was preparing for supper until she shooed me away with a "Don't pick!" But for a few months in 1970, I had neither appetite nor cravings. The pleasure I took from food was replaced by the gratification of losing myself.

Looking back, I see it was a terrible time. My father had lost his job, and over a six-month period of job applications, interviews, and rejections, he descended into an angry depression. He developed arthritis, and spent hours of the day in bed. My mother hovered beside him, unable to help.

I see them standing close together in the living room, the curtains drawn though it is the middle of the day. The mail has arrived, and there is a torn envelope, a letter creased where it has been folded in thirds. My father is shaking his head. My mother stands behind his shoulder, tiny and silent. Then she cups her hand under his elbow and leads him upstairs.

In the afternoons I sit at the desk in my bedroom doing my schoolwork. I do not hear my brothers or ask where they are. I lie on my bed on top of the blankets to read.

Close to five, my stomach rumbles. I hear my mother preparing food downstairs, the tinny scrapings of spoons, the staccato dicing of knives, the airy dashes of water as she turns the faucet on and off. The scent of cooking meat enters my room, frying onions take root. I wait as long as I can, anxious for the meal I will soon allow myself to eat.

My mother is willing to feed me at five. She has set my regular place at the table before the others, a pockmarked paper napkin folded into a triangle beneath my fork. She expects me.

But what is she thinking? Is she happy at being able to spend time with me alone? Is she annoyed at having to feed me early? Or is she secretly

pleased that she can do something special for me?

In the kitchen, my mother does not say, “How was school today?” or “Do you have a lot of homework?” She does not sit down beside me to rest her feet, to keep me company. I long for conversation; I long for consolation. I eat quickly, clear everything off my plate. I do not taste my food. My mother is whisking, rinsing, cutting, making dinner for the rest of the family. I long for her to stop being occupied. It is her back that I see when I turn my head toward her. I long for her to look at me. I long for her to make me stop.

Instead I stop myself. On a warm day in June, I come home and begin to eat. My parents are seated at the kitchen table as I open the refrigerator. I pull out a serving container with half of a roasted chicken inside, place it on the table, and remove the lid. I stand as I tear the meat from the bone. Then, my lips still greasy, I open cabinets, sampling breakfast cereals and pretzels and black licorice nubs. In the bread drawer I find graham crackers, and with them I eat raisins out of the box. My mother watches me but no one mentions that it isn't mealtime.

My Mother's Leg by Susan Hodara

We are visiting my mom because of her left hand, but it is the image of her right leg that stays with me.

She fell a few days earlier, walking downhill on wet leaves near her home in the suburbs of Washington D.C. She is eighty-two, healthy and upbeat, but she walks cautiously, reaching out for support from whatever is nearby, especially when she's rounding a corner. “I should have been more careful,” she says of the moments before her fall.

My mother didn't report the incident to me for two days. Then she called. On the phone, she told me she fell forward. The gloves she was wearing tore from the impact, and she scraped her knee through her fleece pants. “My nose was bleeding,” she said. A man driving by stopped to see if she was hurt. “He had his young son in the backseat,” my mother said, “so I felt all right taking him up on his offer to bring me home.” In my mind, she hits the ground flat like a board. The picture of her lying face down on the sidewalk, blood flowing from her nose, makes me shudder.

A visit to her doctor the next day determined that no bones were broken. “I was lucky,” she said. “I find it hard to believe because my hand is so swollen.” Which is why my husband, Paul, and I decided to make the

trip from New York.

She stands behind the glass door to her house watching as we make our way up the walk, and kisses us each on the cheek when we enter. She wears tan corduroys and one of my father's turtlenecks beneath a coral-colored cotton sweater I gave her years ago. Her short gray hair provides little contrast to her pale complexion. You can see the bruises on the sides of her nose where her glasses were shoved into her face. She is smiling, and I am glad to see that she seems fine.

Her hand, however, emerges from her sleeve like a bruised fruit. It is blue and gray, so bloated no knuckles are visible. My mother says she isn't using it, but I catch her repeatedly involving it in activities alongside her right hand, balancing the side of the orange juice bottle, or holding the edge of a baking sheet of potatoes. "Don't do that!" I yell, but she ignores me.

My mother is as caught as I am between the reality of her age and the memory of who she always was. Her fall dislodges us both, and all weekend, I observe her. Because of the cold, she dresses in layers that thicken her silhouette. For most of her life, my mother, who is an inch or so over five feet tall, was petite and slender; she tucked her blouses into her slacks. She had a secret stash of miniature chocolate bars that she ate watching television at night — "to keep my weight up," she explained once when I discovered the bag. Now her belly protrudes roundly onto her lap when she sits. I notice the way the sides of her cheeks hang as if tired, and the blurriness of the line from her chin to her neck.

I don't see my mother's leg until the next morning, when she decides to change the Band-Aid that is protecting the scrape on her right knee. She is standing, and I am sitting nearby on the edge of her bed. She is wearing her nightgown, and has to lift its bottom edge up to her thigh to keep it out of the way. The scrape looks like a child's skinned knee, softened from the Bacitracin she's been using since she fell.

The way her nightgown is raised, I can see a side view of almost the entire length of her leg. It stands rooted to the floor, the skin the faintest pink, sprinkled with freckles and cherry red spots, and slightly mottled, especially close to the top. The calf is cone-shaped, its skin smooth and taut, ending abruptly at the lumpy circle of her knee. The thigh is a larger cone, mushier and less defined. The only time I've seen my mother's bare legs is when she wears her bathing suit, but I've never paid them any attention. Now her right leg is displayed before me, less than a foot away. I study it as she works to apply her Band-Aid. I examine it for the signs of age, for flaccidness or decay. I think briefly of my father, dead almost a year.

Then it strikes me: this is my own leg. I recognize the color and shape,

the tone of the flesh. I've never identified my body with my mother's; hers, I thought, was finer, more delicate. I always considered myself stocky. But her leg, I finally recognized, is my leg. It isn't fat; it is solid and functional. But it isn't elegant, it isn't beautiful. It stands on the floor the way a leg is meant to do. For an instant, it makes me sad, this sudden nearness to my mother's body, but I dispel the feeling, retaining only the image. The limb, so human, irregular and too short, the color like pearl.

Susan Hodara is a journalist, memoirist, editor and teacher. Her articles about the arts have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harvard Magazine*, *Communication Arts*, and others. Her memoirs are published in a variety of anthologies and literary journals. She is co-author with three other women of *Still Here Thinking of You*, memoirs about mothers and daughters. Her website is: www.susanhodara.com.

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Gretchen Fletcher

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