

The Krakauer Table

In my childhood home, there was one knock I didn't fear. A little before midnight I would hear the rapping on our doors and awaken to the aroma of steamed cured meat and potatoes. My father would yell, *Krakauer! Yoohoo! It's time for Krakauer!*, and we would run downstairs in our pajamas and await the large bowl of huge spicy Krakow kielbasas my father got from the Polish deli near his office in Manila.

Each one was a foot long, scalding hot and torn on one side from where my father finally remembered to prick them with a fork while cooking. We each got half on our plates, a baked potato whose skin we were made to eat for its nutritional benefits, and when we were brave enough, a dollop of horseradish on the side.

"Peel off the sausage skin," my father said as he plopped them on our plates, "it's toxic."

We peeled it off but snuck chewing on the flavorful casing when he wasn't looking. The midnight snack was a rare treat, and we weren't going to miss out on any of it.

It would be a sad morning to learn that Krakauers were served the previous night and one slept through the sound of forks on plates from downstairs. One would hope that their dreams were better than the ignored meaty fumes from the kitchen. It was a rare moment in itself to see my father fish something out of a pot and serve it to his children, and even more unusual for us to run downstairs at his call.

My father's steps up the stairs were usually a cause for alarm. His bedroom was on the ground floor and there would be no reason for him to climb the long staircase unless he wanted to speak to one of us about something that couldn't wait, or couldn't be shared with others at the dinner table.

"*Hala!* What did you do?" One of us would say, scaring the others when we heard he was coming. We would run through the day's events in our heads, already stopping tears at the prospect of his inquiry. We would point and blame each other for the impending confrontation. He would choose one of us to scold about school or another related offense. The rest would be terrified that he might not be done with just one.

Among ourselves, my siblings and I were safe to accompany our thoughts with voices, to sing, dance and create characters for our plays. Everything almost always ended when we heard his footfalls outside our doors.

My father was a stern and impatient man who could, if he wanted, control our breathing with his eyes. He believed in silence when children were in his presence. There would be no eating or talking in the car, and having to stop because someone needed to pee would cause his temper to flare. It got so bad that our mother would not let us drink water during long drives, reminding us of what would happen if we needed to break the schedule of his bathroom stops. During one family trip, he suddenly pulled over on a highway shoulder because somebody farted in the car. We lined up like POWs and stood barefoot on the rice hulls that were drying on the road. He interrogated us until he found the culprit. Someone eventually admitted to the crime.

My mother stood by her man, knowing that there would be a lot more trouble if she took our side. Sometimes I would feel her pity towards us in how we were being programmed to need little by way of deprivation. She would secretly buy us the nicer notebooks we wanted, but then beg us not to tell him. She took chances in enrolling us in ballet or soccer even if these were considered frivolous and useless exploits. She didn't object when my father pulled us out of these classes in favor of swimming or scouting. He said that it was so we could survive a shipwreck and be lost in the wild.

Like my sisters, I grew up to seek partners whose rules I could follow or secretly circumvent. I tiptoed around lovers and truly believed that if I appeared perfect in their eyes, then that meant I must be loved. To me, any form of criticism was grating, and it was better to lie than be deemed flawed. I treated relationships like a monster climbing up the stairs to scold me. Lovers were interruptions of the solitude where I could be happy in my thoughts, where I could be myself, make mistakes, have bodily functions, fart. . . .

As a defiant teenager, I once mustered the gall to question my father's lack of affection and asked him why he insisted on withholding his love.

"Love?!" He looked at me as if I were blind to my surroundings and ungrateful for what I had. Worse, he said that word in a tone that shattered my theory that all my siblings and I needed was for him to say it out loud. It felt like spit in my eye. That was the only time he ever said it and it burned so much that I never wanted to hear it again.

"You know what your problem is?" he said, and I both craved and feared the answer. "You have been raised by American television. This is Bill Cosby bullshit!" he said, and left the explanation at that.

Lord knows I've tried to find a way to explain my father, just for my own peace of mind. He grew up poor during the Japanese-American war. He caught polio and became permanently disabled. He fought his way through paralysis, poverty and an abusive father to get a graduate school scholarship in the US. He built a successful company in the luckless country that is the Philippines. He achieved far more than he ever dreamed, and he believed it was due to the adversity he faced in childhood. He must have tried his best to replicate those hardships in our lives.

Our Lenten holidays were spent in his hometown, where he took the time to tell us stories of his childhood as one of six children. He pointed out the site of his family's home, his school, the ocean he wrote poems about. He said that a Japanese soldier aimed a bayonet at his mother's belly when he was in her womb. He said that he and his siblings were disciplined by having to kneel on salt. He told me that he got beaten once for forgetting a mango he was trying to ripen in a sack of rice. It rotted and ruined the precious grains for the family's meals for a month.

There was a price for every mistake and failure, and in his family there was no recourse but to excel and leave their small coastal town. To their credit they all finished school with honors. When my father typed up fifty grad school application letters with the one strong finger of his good hand, my grandfather

mocked him the way he did when the doctors said he would never walk again. My only recollection of my grandfather was when he was already on his deathbed, and until then he was a notoriously remorseless man who refused anyone's help, a man who died too proud. My sister said my father cried when our Lolo died, and I remember wondering what for, not yet learning the regret of an unspoken love.

Papa is seventy years old now, and in all respects he is an old man. There aren't many traces of his towering height and terrifying voice, nor his commanding presence that silenced his 500-employee corporation just by the advanced warning of his cologne. I am taller and stronger and would no longer budge if he stared me down or tried to pierce me with his bushy eyebrows and raging eyes. His bodily aches now prevent him from walking too far. Yet his words still scour like salt on raw knees, when he calls us names now even in our late thirties and forties, when he calls my newly-skinny sister fat or my sick brother a pig, while he laughs as he makes snorting sounds. I do not react when he calls my successful fashionista sister pretentious and delusional. I nod when he says being a vet means picking up dog shit for the rest of my life. We let him do a rundown of his associates by his chosen names: *hindot*, *tarantado*, *anak ng puta* (fuck, idiot, son of a whore).

To others it just looks like a bitter old man ranting random nonsense as he loses his grip, but to me it is a shuttle back to the huddle in our rooms where we feared the mercilessness of his words and became desperate for the impossibility of his approval. It quickly transports me to a particular moment when I sobbed on my sister's shoulder because I was called stupid after I proudly showed him a paper I wrote for school. We learned to keep these words thrown at us even if we didn't want them. They were his diligently honed weapons of choice, and naturally they also became ours. When we left the family home we sought them out like junkies, collected more from books, brewed and fermented them in our chests, and then threw the most caustic ones at the ones we would love. It was a matter of necessity to rid ourselves of them, as if they were burning coals that that would scorch our mouths if we didn't find a way to spit them back out. I am sure he wonders about us too, the differences in our lives, and how in our middle-class wealth and private Montessori schools, his four children had much, much more than he ever desired. He often says we should be better than him because we had everything, and how glad he is that we hated him so much we couldn't wait to get on with our lives. To a degree, he is perfectly right. I wouldn't be so tough if I wasn't so wounded and scarred. We wouldn't have built better relationships if we didn't know otherwise. We wouldn't drop the word "love" as often as we do, believing in the good measure of a surplus. My sister wouldn't buy her four children t-shirts that say "Loved." She wouldn't save an extra one for me just in case I've forgotten that fact.

I agree when I am told he must have tried his best to raise us with everything he had, and especially with what he never got. I attempt short conversations with him that might bring out the things in him that I like: his brilliance, his knowledge that ranges from Baroque architecture to valence shell electrons to decision theory to nuclear fission to Tutankamun artifacts to Rudyard Kipling to Chinese high-fire porcelain from 200 A.D. I look at my childhood home and see its fantastic character in purposely unfinished walls, in steps and doors taken from abandoned churches, the incorporation of a heavy drawbridge chain and a black Gothic knocker on the front door. I'd rather hear about his love of art, his collection of vases, plates, and Spanish furniture. His recollection of his childhood selling candles and shining shoes at the Lingayen plaza. I could talk to him about his business, his life's work and true love of being buried in books he buys and sells. Truly this is an amazing man who found success in his passion. When we speak, I want to only have the memory of my departure from his company to be with a New Yorker lady I just met, when he said he "could not interfere with an affair of the heart." But my feelings for him are like fishhooks in a bowl. Every time I try to take one out, all the rest follow. So for both our sakes, I just leave them be.

Except for the memory of Krakauer nights, and the mystery of their existence. On those late nights as a scrawny, skittish child, I longed to drink the broth the sausages made because I knew, like that moment, it would taste amazing. To me

the smoked meaty flavor was the smell of the father I needed. I pictured his long day at work and his thought of passing by the store for some sausages and potatoes. I wondered how he searched the cabinets for the perfect pot and the cupboards for serving platters. He must have counted the links to be sure he had enough. He must have limped up the stairs to knock on our doors one by one to wake us up.

"Midnight snack!" he would yell, and our eyes, for once, would light up at the authority in his voice.

There were no interrogations at the evening table. Unlike other mealtimes, midnight snack times weren't venues for discussion. At all other times questions would constantly arise about one's lackluster performance at a particular subject, or one's favored attention towards the arts or sports instead of on academics.

At the Krakauer table there would only be a father sitting before his children, all half asleep and smiling dreamily, awaiting the meat and potatoes he chose and cooked for them.

When I think of my complicated relationship with my father, I try to only recall that moment when sausages were dumped on my plate and oozed a juice I would drink from the lip of the dish when I was done.

It would be the one moment of certainty that would stand out among others that have left me unsure. The Krakauer table was proof that the man I knew as my father must have known at least one way to our hearts.