

The Tabletop

The house is empty, aside from the table. It stands, stranded in the centre of the dining room, enormous suddenly without the polished dresser and the show plates and the shelves of china figurines.

"It's a shame it's so damaged," the agent had said in his perpetually apologetic way. "Otherwise we could have sent it to the sale room."

"My mother always believed it was valuable."

"Oh, it would have been once."

He glanced at the four pale rings pocking the mahogany surface and wiped his palm over the first one, still tinged with an echo of red. It was an old jam-jar that made it; filled, ever so carefully, and carried to the table to wash the paint from my brush. And though I dipped and swirled very slowly, the jar clicked when I lifted it, and a red circle stayed put like the gummy blood behind a plaster.

My mother didn't shout or scold. She rubbed at the mark with the soft cuff of her lambs-wool sweater until the heel of her right hand was crimson; then she pulled down the cuff of her left sleeve and wiped at the white mark with that. Finally, she sunk down onto the polished parquet floor, pressed her red cuff to her forehead and wept until I did too. I didn't know then that she'd sold her soul for that table. All I wanted was to be scolded and sent to my room without supper.

"We never had a proper table when I was a girl," she used to say. "Your Grandpa made us a table and two benches out of orange boxes and scaffold planks, and if you sat on the benches in shorts you'd get splinters in your bottom."

The story was supposed to make me value the table that I wasn't allowed to play at, but the curl of her smile as she told it made me long for orange boxes; hate this shiny imposter in our dining room with its smug amber sheen and its fat curves and its wide, bottom-plush chairs.

My father tried to hide the second and thirds rings beneath two whiskey glasses, which didn't work for long. My mother found them when she returned from Grandpa's with a bag of dirty laundry and grey circles under her eyes.

"Did you leave these here?" she demanded, as though I regularly sat up late with a whiskey in each hand. "Did your father have company last night?"

I kept silent about the laughter, which started fat and deep, and then thinned as the night wore on until there was only one laugh left; high and shrill and giddy, echoing in the hollow space above my father's. I didn't tell how that laugh moved through the house; was there, close by, when I awoke in the darkness; changed suddenly to a moan that trembled like terror through my mattress. I just shrugged. But I hated the sight of those rings, which were small and close together, like two all-seeing eyes.

I never knew how the fourth ring appeared. It was simply there one day after school, near to the whiskey glass stains, giving the eyes a great mouth that gaped at you in a perpetual expression of horror.

"Who did it?" I whispered, terrified that it had somehow, inadvertently been me.

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"Guilt will leave stains for all the world to see," my mother answered, rubbing and rubbing it with the beeswax polish that made the house smell loved, like someone else's, but never did any good.

I took this as an admonishment. And it wasn't until years later that I realised that this ring was not a physical manifestation of my own sinful silence; was nothing, in fact, to do with me. Was it my mother's guilt, I wondered then, that had risen like a bruise to the surface of the table?

She was not a woman who had the wherewithal to lie. Or dissent. Or displease. What she did have was an ability to swallow down her truths and compress them in the hidden silence of her heart until they were shiny, multi-faceted things made of a substance harder than hate.

She's lost that ability now and diamonds drop from her lips along with all the other flotsam that's been buried around them for too long.

"I almost took a lover once," she'll say, with a smile that's girlish beneath sixty years of sorrow. "I could have done, you know."

She'll laugh at the audacity of this, and there's no-one left to judge her. Not the nurses, who greet all the truth and jumble that spills from her soul with the same brisk smile; too kind not too listen, far too busy to care. Certainly not me. I'm thankful that she had this brief brush with joy, and sorrowful too, knowing that her happiness must have been fleeting.

I don't know whether my father ever noticed that fourth ring forever stretched in a silent scream, or would even have cared if he had. But for all the beeswax that my mother scooped onto its rim, it never polished out.

She bought a length of thick, plastic-coated foam soon after and cut it in a series of elegant curves that followed the bevelled edges of the table. It wore a thick damask cape after that, laundered and ironed each Thursday and replaced with an identical one that fell in perfect folds so gracefully that I'd forgotten there were four stains hidden beneath.

I stare at them now, over the remains of my coffee, and when I lift the mug, a fat white mark stays stuck to the surface beneath. For a second, a shiver of childish panic runs the length of my body. But it's too late to worry about stains. Tomorrow, the table will be smashed to pieces and dumped in the skip on the driveway. And without knowing or caring, my mother will laugh.