

The Art of Cooking and Serving



A short story

by

MARGARET ATWOOD

The summer I was eleven I spent a lot of time knitting. I knitted doggedly, silently, crouched over the balls of wool and the steel needles and the lengthening swath of knitwear in a posture that was far from easy. I'd learned to knit too early in life to have mastered the trick of twisting the strand around my index finger – the finger had been too short – so I had to jab the right-hand needle in, hold it there with two left-hand fingers, then lift the entire right hand to loop the wool around the tip of the needle. I'd seen women who were able to knit and talk at the same time, barely glancing down, but I couldn't do it that way. My style of knitting required total concentration and caused my arms to ache, and irritated me a lot.

What I was knitting was a layette. A layette was a set of baby garments you were supposed to dress the newborn baby in so it would be warm when it was brought home from the hospital. At the very least you needed to have two thumbless mittens, two stubby booties, a pair of leggings, a jacket, and a bonnet, to which you could add a knitted blanket if you had the patience, as well as a thing called a soaker. The soaker looked like a pair of shorts with pumpkin-shaped legs, like the ones in pictures of Sir Francis Drake. Cloth diapers and rubber baby pants were prone to leaks: that's what the soaker was for. But I was not going to knit the soaker. I hadn't yet got around to visualising the fountains, the streams, the rivers of pee a baby was likely to produce.



Nothing so contributes to a pleasant dinner hour as a pretty table. The centerpiece may be a little more elaborate than for luncheon. The cloth is smooth and spotless.

be the ending to the luncheon—this last would be served on the dessert plates, of course.

THE FAMILY DINNER

The family dinner should be the clearing house for the best of the day's experiences of each member of the family. Dinner should be a relaxing meal, an end of the day affair to which each person contributes his most cheerful and amusing "yarns." On no account must it be the place where the day's troubles and disappointments are unloaded.

A pretty table is the first requirement for a pleasant dinner hour. The centerpiece may be a little more elaborate than for luncheon. The cloth is smooth and spotless—of white damask that reaches almost to the floor—and a thick white "silence" cloth is stretched smoothly under it. (Runners and place mats

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The blanket was tempting – there was one with rabbits on it that I longed to create – but I knew I had to draw the line somewhere, because I didn't have all the time in the world. If I dawdled, the baby might arrive before I was ready for it and be forced to wear some sort of mismatched outfit put together out of hand-me-downs. I'd started on the leggings and the mittens, as being fairly simple – mostly alternate rows of knit and purl, with some ribbing thrown in. That way I could work up to the jacket, which was more complicated. I was saving the bonnet to the last: it was going to be my *chef d'oeuvre*. It was to be ornamented with satin ribbons to tie under the baby's chin – the possibilities of strangulation through ties like this had not yet been considered – and with huge ribbon rosettes that would stick out on either side of the baby's face like small cabbages. Babies dressed in layettes, I knew from the pictures in the Beehive pattern book, were supposed to resemble confectionery – clean and sweet, delicious little cake-like bundles decorated with pastel icing.

The colour I'd chosen was white. It was the orthodox colour, though a few of the Beehive patterns were shown in an elfin pale green or a practical yellow. But white was best: after it was known

of linen or lace are also suitable.) Candles, which should never be used for luncheon, are perfect for dinner, casting a golden, flattering glow on objects and people. Such little touches as these make dinner a ceremony which warms the soul to think about all day.

For the rest, everything is much as it is at luncheon. While at a formal dinner you would not use the small bread-and-butter plate you would, no doubt, have difficulty in making your family subscribe to this principle when they are alone. So by all means let them have this very wholesome food and the equipment necessary to its use. A detail photograph of a correctly set dinner place is shown below.

The carving will, of course, be done on the table and in many households the homemaker will do well to see that the carver does not give all the choicest pieces to the rest of the family while keeping the toughest, least attractive scraps for himself. Not infrequently fathers are quite as unselfish as mothers!

Vegetables may be kept hot in covered dishes during the meal. Just before dessert is placed on the table all salt and pepper holders, bread-and-butter plates and condiment dishes



A detail photograph of a correctly set family dinner table

whether the baby was a boy or a girl I could add the ribbons, blue or pink. I had a vision of how the entire set would look when finished – pristine, gleaming, admirable, a tribute to my own goodwill and industriousness. I hadn't yet realised it might also be a substitute for them.

I was knitting this layette because my mother was expecting. I avoided the word *pregnant*, as did others: *pregnant* was a blunt, bulgy, pendulous word, it weighed you down to think about it, whereas *expecting* suggested a dog with its ears pricked, listening briskly and with happy anticipation to an approaching footstep. My mother was old for such a thing: I'd gathered this by eavesdropping while she talked with her friends, in the city, and from the worried wrinkles on the foreheads of the friends, and from their compressed lips and tiny shakes of the head, and from their *Oh dear* tone, and from my mother saying she would just have to make the best of it. I gathered that something might be wrong with the baby because of my mother's age; but wrong how, exactly? I listened as much as I could, but I couldn't make it out, and there was no one I could ask. Would it have no hands, would it have a little pinhead, would it be a moron? *Moron* was a term of

abuse, at school. I wasn't sure what it meant, but there were children you weren't supposed to stare at on the street, because it wasn't their fault, they had just been born that way.

I'd been told about the expectant state of my mother in May, by my father. It had made me very anxious, partly because I'd also been told that until my new baby brother or sister had arrived safely my mother would be in a dangerous condition. Something terrible might happen to her – something that might make her very ill – and it was all the more likely to happen if I myself did not pay proper attention. My father did not say what this thing was, but his gravity and terseness meant that it was a serious business.

My mother – said my father – was not supposed to sweep the floor, or carry anything heavy such as pails of water, or bend down much, or lift heavy objects. We would all have to pitch in, said my father, and do extra tasks. It would be my brother's job to mow the lawn, from now until June, when we would go up north. (Up north, there was no lawn. In any case my brother wouldn't be there: he was heading off to a camp for boys, to do things with axes in the woods.) As for me, I would just have to be generally helpful. More helpful than usual, my father added in a manner that was meant to be encouraging. He himself would be helpful too, of course. But he couldn't be there all the time. He had some work to do, when we would be at what other people called *the cottage* but we called *the island*. (Cottages had iceboxes and gas generators and water-skiing, all of which we lacked.) It was necessary for him to be away, which was unfortunate, he continued. But he would not be gone for very long, and he was sure I would be up to it.

I myself was not so sure. He always thought I knew more than I knew, and that I was bigger than I was, and older, and hardier. What he mistook for calmness and competence was actually fright: that was why I stared at him in silence, nodding my head. The danger that loomed was so vague, and therefore so large – how could I even prepare for it? At the back of my mind, my feat of knitting was a sort of charm, like the fairy-tale suits of nettles mute princesses were supposed to make for their swan-shaped brothers, to turn them back into human beings. If I could only complete the full set of baby garments, the baby that was supposed to fit inside them would be conjured into the world, and thus out of my mother. Once outside, where I could see it – once it had a face – it could be dealt with. As it was, the thing was a menace.

Thus I knitted on, with single-minded concentration. I finished the mittens, more or less flawless except for the odd botched stitch, and the leggings – the leg that was shorter could be stretched, I felt. Without pause I started on the jacket, which was to have several bands of seed stitch on it – a challenge, but one I was determined to overcome.

Meanwhile my mother was being no use at all. At the beginning of my knitting marathon she'd undertaken to do the booties; she did know how to knit, she'd knitted in the past: the pattern book I was using had once been hers. She could turn heels, a skill I hadn't quite mastered. But despite her superior ability, she ►

► was slacking off: all she'd done so far was half a bootie. Her knitting lay neglected while she stretched out in a deckchair, her feet up on a log, reading historical romances with horseback-riding and poisoning and swordplay in them – I knew, I'd read them myself – or else just dozing, her head lying slackly on a pillow, her face pale and moist, her hair damp and lank, her stomach sticking out in a way that made me feel dizzy, as I did when someone else had cut their finger. She'd taken to wearing an old smock she'd put away in a trunk, long ago; I remembered using it for dressing up at Hallowe'en once, when I was being a fat lady with a purse. It made her look poor.

It was scary to watch her sleeping in the middle of the day. It was unlike her. Normally she was a person who went for swift, purposeful walks, or skated around rinks in winter at an impressive speed, or swam with a lot of kicking, or rattled up the dishes – she called it rattling them up. She always knew what to do in an emergency, she was calm and cheerful, she took command. Now it was as if she had abdicated.

When I wasn't knitting, I swept the floor diligently. I pumped out pails and pails of water with the hand pump and lugged them up the hill one at a time, spilling water down my bare legs; I did the washing in the zinc washtub, scrubbing the clothes with Sunlight soap on the washboard, carting them down to the lake to rinse them out, hauling them up the hill again to hang them on the line. I weeded the garden, I carried the wood in, all against the background of my mother's alarming passivity.

Once a day she went for a swim, although she didn't swim energetically, not the way she used to, she just floated around; and I would go in too, whether I wanted to or not: I had to prevent her from drowning, I had a fear of her sinking down suddenly, down through the cold brownish water, with her hair fanning out like seaweed and her eyes gazing solemnly up at me. In that case I would have to dive down and get my arm around her neck, and tow her to shore, but how could I do that? She was so big. But nothing like that had happened yet, and she liked going into the water; it seemed to wake her up. With only her head sticking out, she looked more like herself. At such times she would even smile, and I would have the illusion that everything was once again the way it was supposed to be.

But then she would emerge, dripping – there were varicose veins on the backs of her legs, I couldn't avoid seeing them, although they embarrassed me – and make her way with painful slowness up to our cabin, and put together our lunch. The lunch would be sardines, or peanut butter on crackers, or cheese if we had any, and tomatoes from the garden, and carrots I'd dug out and washed. She didn't appear much interested in eating this lunch, but she chewed away at it anyway. She would make an effort at conversation – how was my knitting coming along? – but I didn't know what to say to her. I couldn't understand why she'd chosen to do what she'd done – why she'd turned herself into this listless, pallid, bloated version of herself, thus changing the future – my

future – into something shadow-filled and uncertain. I thought she'd done it on purpose. It didn't occur to me that she might have been ambushed.

It was mid-August: hot and oppressive. The cicadas sang in the trees, the dry pine needles crackled underfoot. The lake was ominously still, the way it was when thunder was gathering. My mother was dozing. I sat on the dock, slapping at the stable flies and worrying. I felt like crying, but I could not allow myself to do that. I was completely alone. What would I do if the dangerous thing – whatever it was – began to happen? I thought I knew what it might be: the baby would start to come out, too soon. And then what? I couldn't exactly stuff it back in.

We were on an island, there were no other people in sight, there was no telephone, it was seven miles by boat to the nearest village. I would have to start the outboard motor on our clunky old boat – I knew how to do this, though pulling the cord hard enough was almost beyond my strength – and go all the way to the village, which could take an hour. From there I could telephone for help. But what if the motor wouldn't start? That had

been known to happen. Or what if it broke down on the way? There was a toolkit, but I'd learned only the most elementary operations. I could fix a shear pin, I could check a gas line; if those things didn't work I would have to row, or wave and yell at passing fishermen, if any.

Or I could use the canoe – put a stone in the stern to weight it down, paddle from the bow end, as I'd been taught. But that method would be useless in a wind, even a light wind: I wasn't strong enough to hold a course, I would be blown sideways.

I thought of a plan of last resort. I would take the canoe over to one of the small offshore islands – I could get that far, no matter what.

Then I would set fire to the island. The smoke would be seen by a fire ranger, who would send a float plane, and I would stand on the dock in full view and jump up and down and wave a white pillowcase. This could not fail. The risk was that I would set the mainland on fire as well, by accident. Then I would end up in jail as an arsonist. But I would just have to do it anyway. It was either that, or my mother would. Would what?

Here my mind cut out, and I ran up the hill and walked softly past my sleeping mother and into the cabin, and got out the jar full of raisins, and made my way to the large poplar tree where I always went when I'd come to the edge of an unthinkable thought. I propped myself against the tree, crammed a handful of raisins into my mouth, and plunged into my favourite book.

This book was a cookbook. It was called *The Art of Cooking and Serving*, and I'd recently thrown over all novels and even *The Guide to Woodland Mushrooms* and devoted myself to it entirely. It was by a woman called Sarah Field Splint, a name I trusted. *Sarah* was old-fashioned and dependable, *Field* was pastoral and flowery, and *Splint* – well, there could be no nonsense and weeping and hysteria and doubts about the right course of action with a woman called Splint by your side. This book dated from the olden days, ten years before I was born; it had been put

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out by the Crisco company, a manufacturer of vegetable shortening, at the beginning of the Depression, when butter had become expensive – said my mother – and all the recipes in it had Crisco in them. We always had lots of Crisco on the island, because butter went bad in the heat. Crisco on the other hand was virtually indestructible. In the long ago, before she'd started expecting, my mother had used it to make pies, and her writing could be found here and there among the recipes: *Good!!* she'd written. Or, *Use half white, half brown.*

It wasn't the recipes that held me in thrall, however. It was the two chapters at the front of the book. The first was called "The Servantless House", the second "The House With A Servant". Both of them were windows into another world, and I peered through them eagerly. I knew they were windows, not doors: I couldn't get in. But what entrancing lives were being lived in there!

Sarah Field Splint had strict ideas on the proper conduct of life. She had rules, she imposed order. Hot foods must be served *hot*, cold foods *cold*. "It just *has* to be done, however it is accomplished," she said. That was the kind of advice I needed to hear. She was intransigent on the subject of clean linen and shining silver. "Better never to use anything but doilies, and keep *them* immaculately fresh, than to cover the table for even one meal with a cloth having a single spot on it," she ordered. We had oil-cloth on our table, and stainless steel. As for doilies, they were something beyond my experience, but I thought it would be elegant to have some.

Despite her insistence on the basics, Sarah Field Splint had other, more flexible values. Mealtimes must be enjoyed; they must have charm. Every table must have a centrepiece: a few flowers, an arrangement of fruits; failing that, "some tiny ferns combined with a bit of partridge vine or other coloured woody thing in a low bowl or delicate wicker basket" would do the trick.

How I longed for a breakfast tray with a couple of daffodils in a bud vase, as pictured, or a tea-table at which to entertain "a few choice friends" – who would these friends be? – or, best of all, breakfast served on a side porch, with a lovely view of "the winding river and the white church spire sailing out of the trees on the opposite bank". *Sailing* – I liked that. It sounded so peaceful.

All of these things were available to the house with no servant. Then came the servant chapter. Here too Mrs Splint was fastidious, and solidly informative. (You could tell she was *Mrs* Splint; she was married, though without sloppy consequences, unlike my mother.) "One can transform an untidy, inexperienced girl into a well-groomed, professional servant if one is patient and kind and fair," she told me. *Transform* was the word I seized on. Did I want to transform, or to be transformed? Was I to be the kind homemaker or the formerly untidy maid? I hardly knew.

There were two photographs of the maid, one in daytime dress, with white shoes and stockings and a white muslin apron – what was muslin? – and the other in an afternoon tea and dinner outfit, with black stockings and organdy collar and cuffs. Her expression in both pictures was the same: a gentle little half-smile, a straight-ahead, frank, but reserved gaze, as if she was waiting for instructions. There were faint dark circles under her eyes. I couldn't tell whether she looked amiable or put-upon, or merely

stupefied. She'd be the one to get blamed if there was a spot on the tablecloth or a piece of silver less than gleaming. All the same, I envied her. She was already transformed, and had no more decisions to make.

I finished the raisins, closed the book, wiped my sticky hands on my shorts. Now it was time for more knitting. Sometimes I forgot to wash my hands and got raisins on the white wool, but that could be corrected later. Ivory Soap was what Mrs Splint always used; it was good to know such a thing. First, however,

I went down to the garden and



broke off some pea vine and a handful of red flowers from the scarlet runner beans, for the centrepiece it was now my duty to arrange. The charm of my centrepiece would not however cancel out the shabbiness of our paper napkins: my mother insisted they be used at least twice, to avoid waste, and she wrote our initials on them in pencil. I could imagine what Mrs Splint would think of this grubby practice.

How long did all of this go on? It seemed for ever, but perhaps it was only a week or two. In due course my father returned; a few maple leaves turned orange, and then a few more; the loons gathered together, calling at night before their fall migration. ▶

► Soon enough we went back to the city, and I could go to school again in the normal way.

I'd finished the layette, all except the one bootie that was the responsibility of my mother – would the baby have the foot of a swan? – and I wrapped it in white tissue paper and put it in a drawer. It was a bit lopsided and not entirely clean – the raisin smears lingered – but you couldn't tell that when it was folded.

My baby sister was born in October, a couple of weeks before I turned twelve. She had all the right fingers and toes. I threaded the pink ribbon into the eyelets in the layette, and sewed together the rosettes for the bonnet, and the baby came home from the hospital in the proper manner and style. My mother's friends came over to visit, and admired my handiwork, or so it appeared. "You did all this?" they said. "Almost all," I said modestly. I didn't mention my mother's failure to complete her own minor task.

My mother said she'd hardly had to lift a finger, I'd gone at the knitting just like a beaver. "What a good little worker," said the friends; but I got the impression they thought it was funny.

The baby was cute, though in no time she outgrew my layette.

But she didn't sleep. As soon as you put her down she'd be wide awake and wailing; the clouds of anxiety that had surrounded her before she was born seemed to have entered into her, and she would wake up six or seven or eight or nine times a night, crying plaintively. This didn't go away in a few months, as *Dr Spock's Baby and Child Care* said it would. If anything it got worse.

From having been too fat, my mother now became too thin. Now she was gaunt from lack of sleep, her hair dull, her eyes bruised-looking, her shoulders hunched over. I did my homework lying on my back with my feet up on the baby's crib, jiggling it and jiggling it so my mother could get some rest. Or I would come home from school and change the baby and bundle her up and take her out in her pram, or I would pace back and forth, pressing her warm fragrant wriggling flannelette body against my shoulder with one hand while holding a book up with the other, or I would take her into my room and rock her in my arms and sing to her. Singing was particularly effective. *Oh my darling Nellie Gray, they have taken you away/And I'll never see my darling any more*, I would sing. Or else the "Coventry Carol" from Junior Choir:

Herod the King, in his raging,
Chargèd he hath, this day,
His men of might, in his own sight,
All children young, to slay.

The tune was mournful, but it put her right to sleep.

When I wasn't doing those things, I had to clean the bathroom or do the dishes.

My sister turned one, I became thirteen; now I was in high school. She turned two, I became fourteen. My girlfriends at school – some of them were fifteen already – were loitering on the way home, talking to boys. Some of them went to the movies, where they picked up boys from other schools; others did the

same at skating rinks. They exchanged views on which boys were real dolls and which were pills, they went to drive-ins on double dates with their new steadies and ate popcorn and rolled around in the back seat, they tried on strapless dresses, they attended dances where they shuffled around in swoony music and the blue light of darkened gymnasiums mashed up against their partners, they necked on the couch in their rec rooms with the TV on.

I listened to the descriptions of all this at lunch hour, but somehow I couldn't join in. I avoided the boys who approached me: somehow I had to turn away, I had to go home and look after the baby, who was still not sleeping. My mother dragged around the house as if she was ill, or starving. She'd been to the doctor about the baby's sleeplessness, but he'd been no help. All he said was, "You've got one of *those*."

From being worried, I now became surly. I escaped from the dinner table every night as soon as I could, I shut myself in my room and answered questions from my parents with grudging monosyllables. When I wasn't doing homework or chores or baby-tending I would lie on my bed with my head hanging over the edge, holding up a mirror to see what I looked like upside-down.

One evening I was standing behind my mother. I must have been waiting for her to get out of the bathroom so I could try out something or other on myself, a different shampoo most likely. She was bending over the laundry hamper, hauling out the dirty clothes. The baby started to cry. "Could you go and put her to sleep?" she said, as she had done so often. Ordinarily I would trudge off, soothe, sing, rock.

"Why should I?" I said. "She's not *my* baby. I didn't have her. You did." I'd never said anything this rude to her before. Even as the words were coming out of my mouth I knew I'd gone too far, though all I'd done was spoken the truth, or part of it.

My mother stood and whirled, all in one movement, and slapped me hard across the face. She'd never done that before, or anything remotely like it. I didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. We were both shocked by ourselves, and also by each other.

I ought to have felt hurt, and I did. But I also felt set free, as if released from an enchantment. I was no longer compelled to do service. On the outside I would still be helpful – I wouldn't be able to change that about myself. But another, more secret life spread out before me, unrolling like dark fabric. I too would soon go to the drive-in theatres, I too would eat popcorn. Already in spirit I was off and running – to the movies, to the skating rinks, to the swooning blue-lit dances, and to all sorts of other seductive and tawdry and frightening pleasures I could not yet begin to imagine.

"The Art of Cooking and Serving", © O W Toad Ltd, 2005.
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