

AT THE TABLE

—Jennifer Dines

She picked up the plate holding his uneaten dinner, intending to scrape it into the trash can like she usually did when he didn't come home. The plate itself was a Liberty Blue dish—she had selected this china pattern when they were first married.

Tonight, the plate held a ribeye steak that had been cooked in a cast iron skillet with a pat of that Irish butter that comes in one big gold-foil-covered rectangle. Next to that steak was a side of creamed spinach, which she had bought fresh at the farm stand earlier that day. She had gone to the farm stand with curlers in her hair, a large pair of sunglasses (no crow's feet here), and a bit of burgundy lipstick. The lipstick couldn't be applied until after he'd left the house in the morning. She used to kiss him on the cheek before he left, but he didn't like to get lipstick on his face ("How am I gonna wipe this off?" he barked one day, and that was the end of the lipstick.)

Before the farm stand and the application of lipstick, there were the calisthenics, eight of each exercise done eight times, while she listened to the news on the radio, noting which topics might be used for conversation at the dinner table. She looked in the mirror and practiced saying things like "Did you hear Bansky sold that painting, and then it self-destructed?" in as natural a way as possible. Before the calisthenics and the elocution, there were the magazines that she poured over while drinking two cups of black coffee. Those magazines had the recipes, the beauty tips, the clothing, the advice to make you so wonderful that your man could want you, really want you, and maybe then you wouldn't hate yourself so much, then you'd know who you were,

you were his girl and you didn't need anything more than that. You could just slip away into the shell of yourself that you had created with all that perfect. She lived for the sound of his car pulling into the garage, the first kiss, the "delicious!" after the first bite of food. If he touched her once they were in bed, she thanked God that she had done everything right.

But tonight, she finished his drink (the ice had melted into the gin and tonic) and hers (plus another two glasses) and walked backwards through her day, through every single moment leading up to now. She had the fork poised above the food and the food on the plate that tipped down to the trash, but she stopped. She stopped and sat in his seat. She put the plate down in front of herself, and she ate.

Jennifer Dines lives in Roslindale, Massachusetts, with her husband and three daughters. Jennifer is a bilingual teacher in the Boston Public Schools. Her writing has been published in *High Shelf Press*, *Apricity*, *Variety Pack*, and *Burning Jade*.