

Dinner 1959

by **Robert D. Kirvel**

Dinner is at 6 p.m. sharp. That doesn't mean 6:05.

Having your dinner requires sitting at the big table in your designated chair. Otherwise no food until tomorrow morning. Period.

Table rules are few but firm. Eat your vegetables. Clean your plate.
Sit still until you are excused.

No one says anything when Mother cooks liver and onions for dinner. No one likes liver and onions, but Mother says a doctor tells in a magazine how liver and onions are good for you, so hush and eat what's on your plate.

Anyone still having questions about dinner rules, go read that *Reader's Digest*® article on benefits—for young'uns (sic) especially—when American Families eat together at the table. Unless you have something against family unity, sticking to a schedule, manners, improved communication, and greater respect for others? Very well then.

No one is worried when Mother first announces Aunt Cee-Cee, regarded as the toughest nut in the family tree, will be arriving for dinner. At least no one says out loud he or she is upset because, looking on the bright side, it's a chance for everybody to work on improved communication with an elder, isn't it? Cee-Cee is driving all the way from Chicago by herself and will be spending a few days and nights, so everybody just relax.

One person is uncomfortable after realizing Aunt Cee-Cee and Uncle Walter—who drives his big, new car about ninety miles an hour on back roads and often shows up for dinner just in the nick of time—will likely be sharing a meal at the same table tonight. The two have not spoken to one another for “eons.” So, we’ll just have to see.

If Cee-Cee is a tough nut, her opinion of brother Walter is hard to fault. She thinks Walter is a loud and obnoxious jerk who is uninformed to the point of ignorance and is also a sexist, arrogant, egotistical, bigoted womanizer. Cee-Cee is sometimes wrong, but not always.

Yes, Aunt Cee-Cee and Uncle Walter both make it to the table in time for dinner. They take their chairs but do not look at one another. Bad sign.

At least one person at the dinner table is uncomfortable when Uncle Walter starts in on “them boogies” again at dinnertime, describing for the umpteenth time how those people is always sucking on cigarettes and slurping sickening-sweet bottles of coca cola through straws for lunch at the lunch counter during lunch break at the factory where Uncle Walter works as a security guard. Uncle Walter does not consider cigarettes and cokes a proper lunch for people, and he wishes there were a law, but then them boogies aren’t normal people, so

One person at the table, the youngest family member who adores his fourth-grade teacher, wonders what his teacher, an articulate black woman in her forties, would say if she were present at the family dinner table tonight and heard Uncle Walter talk about “boogies” in 1959 America.

Two people at the dinner table squirm when Uncle Walter tells his two young nephews at the table how he intends to teach them how to “walk like an Indian” through the woods. Walking silently on the forest floor out back behind the

house, he means, so as not to scare animals away you want to hunt. Like an Indian. Because Uncle Walter claims he is descended from silent-walking Indians, though no one in the family other than Uncle Walter wants to hunt or has ever heard anything about, or makes claims to, Native American lineage resulting in a predisposition to slip silently through the woods. Still, Uncle Walter swears loudly he is one-seventh Indian. Not one fourth or one eighth. One seventh.

Three people at the dinner table become fretful when Aunt Cee-Cee directs a question to her brother, Uncle Walter, a question that changes the subject. "Are you still humping that spic squaw?" This is a triple-loaded question calculated to get a reaction because it is pregnant with not-so-subtle references to Walter's life-long promiscuity, problematic claim to Indian blood, and racism directed at persons with ancestry other than his own, but especially at people of color, other than Native Americans, whom Walter has never thought of as people of color.

Many adults at the table are afraid Uncle Walter will answer Aunt Cee-Cee by bringing up one of several whispered-about facts concerning her lifestyle. This is fertile territory. For instance, Cee-Cee sells illegal but highly profitable French postcards (you know, porn, some whisper) from behind the counter of her smoke-shop cubicle on a high-traffic downtown Chicago street corner located in a high-crime neighborhood. Also, her shop is the only one on the street that has never been robbed, a remarkable immunity to crime that is not luck but owing to the watchful eyes of Men in Blue with whom Cee-Cee is on the most familiar personal terms and to whom she regularly makes "cash donations."

No one in the family brings up Sputnik. No one brings up Cee-Cee's "mobster" boyfriend connections, or Walter's crazy driving habits in his brand-new, green, Pontiac Bonneville coup, which will not remain pristine for long plus he can't afford it on his piddling salary, but don't ask, or how Dad gets peevish after spending time around Uncle Walter or Aunt Cee-Cee, let alone both, or Mother's

inclinations to strictly Biblical (nonmetaphorical) interpretations of Jonah and the Whale and The Last Supper.

All at the table, kids included, are relieved when Mother stands up before Uncle Walter or Aunt Cee-Cee can say another word and announces, “That’s enough!” while excusing the young ones from the dinner table even before dessert is served, though the kids will get their dessert later. Dessert is a chocolate-frosted, triple-layer, made-from-scratch, marble cake over which Uncle Walter, remaining at the table, will ladle cold gravy while eyeing Cee-Cee and claiming he loves gravy on cake—*always* has—just to get Cee-Cee’s goat.



Robert D. Kirvel is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor’s Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for the Short Story, and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, and Germany; in translation and anthologies; and in dozens of U.S. literary journals. His novel, *Shooting the Wire*, was published in August 2019 by Eyewear

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