

Inside 229

by Sylvia Knight

I couldn't see over the kitchen table. All I could see was my dad eating wood. He was picking it up off the table and eating it. My four older brothers and sister all stared. Tom was the oldest. My dad handed him a piece and Tom stuck his tongue on it and tasted it. He took a bite. Then another. He wasn't going to spill the beans till he got as much into him as he could.

It was Depression time and all we knew was that good things were hard to get. We were lucky. Our dad had a job at the Parliament Buildings driving government people around. So we got treats sometimes.

My dad finally passed out the wood pieces to everybody. By now, we knew it wasn't wood. Tom was chewing something good. So we dove in. It was sponge taffy. The outside cracked when you bit into it and the inside melted in your mouth, and you were left with the chewy stuff that stuck in your teeth and you could lick at it for hours. I was three years old and we'd just moved into the house. My dad said we were having a moving-in treat.

I was too young to remember the other house, but this one was okay, I guess – except for the cellar. It was dark down cellar and you had to pull strings hanging from the ceiling to get the lights on. And if the coal cellar door wasn't closed, you never knew what could come at you from in there. I always shut the door at the top of the stairs so nothing could squeeze through.

The cellar was where my mum went when she was mad about something. She'd go down cellar and stoke the furnace real hard. Mum kept the old factory sewing machine she did piece work on down there. She'd press her foot down on that treadle so hard the house shook – and so did we. When Mum was mad, we knew it. She threw the Christmas tree down the cellar stairs one Christmas while we were all whispering, "Did you do something?" "No, did you?"

She was mad a lot, my mum. If one of us didn't take our turn at the dishes, and they were still on the counter when she got home from picking up her stuff to sew, she'd sweep them onto the floor with one swing.

On her good days, though, Mum was nice. When I'd come home crying that nobody would play with me, she'd give me money to go to the candy store. And when I had growing pains, she'd rub my legs till they were better and put a cold cloth on my forehead and sit with me when I was delirious with a fever.

There was a fireplace in the living room with a pile of glass coals in it that lit up when it was plugged in and a mantle on top. Tom taught me one of his "lessons" when I was five. He sat me up on the mantle shelf one day and said, "Jump into my arms." When I jumped, he stepped back and I fell on the floor. He said, "First lesson in life: Don't trust nobody." I learned to run away when my brothers started teasing me. And I learned to hide my play dishes too so they couldn't shoot them off the cellar stairs with their BB guns.

Our dining room table was where I played with my cutouts and puzzles at one end, while my brother Ray would be losing his temper and smashing his balsa-wood model airplanes at the other end when the glue wouldn't stick. He had a bad temper when he was building those planes. Ray was the third oldest. He was the only one I ever heard swear. At Christmas time, when we had lights in the window and people just walked by and didn't stop to look, he yelled out at them, "Hey you bums. Can't you see our decorations?" He really got it for that.

My dad played cards at the dining room table and listening to the hockey game with his men friends on Saturday nights while I was upstairs in bed, falling asleep to Foster Hewitt's voice.

My sister didn't spend much time in the dining room. She was usually out birds-egg hunting with the boys or up in her room with her nose in a book. She never wanted to play dolls or house or cutouts with me, but she always kept an eye for me when we were out playing together. She'd come back for me if I missed when we were grabbing the back bumpers of cars and sliding behind them in the winter.

Tom and his buddies used to gather in the dining room and sing and try to play the piano while my mother yelled, "Stop that dumping!" Nobody ever learned to play the piano. Sundays in our house were pretty quiet till my brothers and sister got home from birds-egg hunting – my sister with her lisle stockings torn and her glasses broken, yelling about how Jim's eye fell out and Ray put it back in, and my brothers with an owl hidden on one of them. They usually got home around dinnertime when my mother was just getting back from wherever she went on Sundays. My dad always cooked Sunday dinner. We liked it because he made little buns and mint sauce from the mint he grew in the yard.

It took a long time to get us all settled down at the table. Something was always happening, like when the owl got loose and flew all over the dining room and got everybody all excited, except my father and mother. They got real mad.

We'd finally eat our dinner except for what went under the table to our dog Jiggs. But we had to wait till we were told we could leave the table. And that took so long that somebody would start humming "Oh I Can Lean Back," a tune we all knew. It was a signal to lean back in your chair as far as you could without falling backwards. Then somebody would crash and Sunday dinner was finished.

We never just walked down the stairs in our house. We'd sit on the cushions off the living-room couch and slide down. Or we'd slide down the banister. One time when Mum was sick we spat from the top stair over the banister on the lady who came to look after us. She made us pudding and when Tom said, "Lumps," and pushed it away and we all copied him, she sent us all to our bedrooms. When she quit, Dad had to go in the government car and get Aunt May and bring her to look after us. When Mum took to her bed, we stayed clear till she was better. We were used to Mum being down.