

## Heart Spaces

The tablecloth hung like a beautiful drapery over the round table, intricate handkerchiefs were folded like flat ice cream cones. Their vintage floral patterns embellished the ivory tablecloth. The china saucers pulled at the crocheted loops and designed holes. Teacups clinked as Jori placed them with their matching saucers. They were the only things that matched in the messy kitchen. Cardboard boxes were scattered around the table. Their lids had been ripped open and colorful tissue littered the floor. Jori finished placing the teacups, an array of eras—from bright gold embroidery-like borders to blooming flowers. She was about to set down the queen of them all, the teapot, when her mother walked into the kitchen.

“Jori, what are you doing? You know I don’t like it when you go into the attic. It’s crawling with dust and who knows what else. How are we supposed to eat dinner?”

“We could always eat at great-grandma’s nice dinner table. We never use it,” Jori insisted.

“We use it for holidays and special occasions. I suppose we could use it tonight, but don’t think this gives you license to do this all the time, young lady,” her mother confirmed. She went to leave, and then popped back in the doorway. “And don’t think this gets you out of helping with dinner.”

Jori sighed and gazed over the round table as though it were a vast ocean. She spared each teacup a singular glance, and then sauntered off to help her mother with dinner. Once everyone was seated around the grand, oval dining table, they started scooping food to put on their plates. Jori watched as her family reached over each other for the food they wanted. She frowned as they put dollops of mashed potatoes, squash, and green beans onto their plates. Now all the dishes were scattered next to each person’s plate along the edge of the dark walnut table. Jori realized she had nothing on her plate and busied herself with getting some mashed potatoes and ham that her older brother and sister had already sampled.

Before diving into the mashed potatoes, Jori stared down the long table as though it were a tunnel. *Please be near me. Please be near me.* She silently hoped to herself, but the butter was on the other end of the table next to her father. Complete silence ruled the table, and Jori felt this immense weight on her shoulders. Her hands were placed in her lap on her napkin, and they felt clammy as she wrung her fingers. She was torn between her want of butter and her avoidance of inconveniencing anyone. She watched her father eat and read a magazine. Her brother and sister were playing on their phones, and her mother was making a list of all the things she needed to accomplish. Jori sighed, butter forgotten, and dug into her mashed potatoes. They were smooth, but she missed the salty and creamy taste butter would have given them as it would slide down her throat. She loved to make a reservoir out of the mashed potatoes, and then placing the butter into the crater was even better if she waited for the butter to melt. It would run down the sides after she initiated the first bite—destroying everything she built. After a while, she was the only one left at the dining table, still poking at her dry slice of ham. Her mother was already clearing the table and asked, “Are you done with this?” She was holding up the ketchup.

Jori looked at it hopefully and said, “No. May I please have it?” Her mother set it down next to her plate. After her mother left to take dirty dishes to the kitchen, Jori got up, walked around the table, and snagged the butter and mashed potatoes. Even though she should have felt triumphant, she only felt empty.

After dinner, Jori went to her bedroom and changed into her light linen nightshirt. The soft, cool sheets were welcoming on a warm summer’s night, like a cool ocean breeze brushing against the hot sand of the beach. She gazed up to the ceiling and imagined rosemary tomato quiches on a scallop edged plate, raspberry shortbread tarts in small cupcake crusts, cucumber sandwiches tied with green paper, and dark but smooth tea with steadfast steam. Jori smiled at the vision, but as she looked around the imagined table, the chairs were empty and covered with dust.

Jori awoke to a large crash. She bolted upright and her back made a peeling sound from the sweat clinging to the sheets. Her dark curls fell in front of her face. She huffed at them, but the stubborn curls stayed put. Holding her breath, she tried to concentrate, and then heard a faint humming. The cicadas and crickets were performing a resounding harmony outside the window, and Jori tried to block them out. It was like reaching out and trying to catch those gray orbs across the field of vision, and then the vision clears to nothing. She sighed short and heavily and got out of bed.

Jori felt as though she should wake up her parents. She tried not to run but did anyways down the hallway to her parents' bedroom door. The door made a resounding squeak as she gently pushed on her mother's shoulder.

"Mom," she whispered.

Her mother moaned and said, "It was just a dream, Jori. You're twelve. You need to sleep in your own bed."

Jori looked to her father, but he was snoring "I'm fourteen, Mom." But her mother was already back asleep.

Jori tiptoed to the bedroom door and listened. The humming became clearer, and she swore she heard laughing. Padding down the old hardwood floor hallway, Jori felt as though she could wake up her parents at any moment, but she couldn't stop now. The humming was louder, and once she reached the kitchen, it enveloped her. Her back was against the wall, and her body was at the edge of the doorframe. She turned and put her hand against the wood trim and leaned just past the doorframe. Jori whirled back to the wall, and dug her fingernails into the old, peeling wallpaper. She leaned again, took another look, and watched the spectacle.

Several people were sitting at the kitchen table. They were talking and laughing with one another while sipping from the teacups. Each one had an iridescent glow about them like a polished

china doll. Almost every chair was occupied except the one right in front of the teapot. Jori looked to the right of the empty chair and sucked in a breath that about exploded her lungs. The young lady's rich brown curls were pinned and set around her face, her cheeks were lightly blushed, and she wore a simple dark blue dress with a golden brooch. Jori stared at the lady's soft hazel eyes that were akin to her own. Just then the lady made eye contact with her. She didn't know what to do, but she couldn't look away either. Her eyes glazed over from the warmth in the woman's eyes, as though they were the only two that mattered.

The woman lightly patted the cushion on the empty chair. Jori took a breath and held it tight in her lungs as she entered the kitchen. Everyone grew quiet, and Jori could hear her bare feet padding as the moisture on her feet separated from the wood floor. An elderly man to the left of the empty chair abruptly got up to pull out the chair for her. She blushed and swept her arms under her long nightshirt before sitting down. The man gently pushed her chair in as she did.

Jori looked around the table to find everyone gazing at her with bright beaming smiles. She blushed and couldn't help but grin widely like a fool. She turned to the woman on her right, who was now pouring tea into Jori's teacup, and the woman said, "Hello, little one."

"Hi, grandma," Jori gushed, her deep breath finally released. Even though she had never seen her grandmother so young, not even in pictures, she could see the same unique features. She couldn't help but gaze at her grandmother's youthful beauty.

"I'm sure Jori would like some sugar with her tea," the woman sitting next to Jori's grandmother announced. She passed the small porcelain cup of sugar cubes to Jori's grandmother, who then passed it to her.

"Thank you..." Jori trailed off.

"Great Grandma Mabel," her grandmother finished. Jori almost dropped the sugar cube tongs and recovered them just in time. Before she could think of what to say, the man at the other

end of the table asked, “Would you like some quiche, Jori?” She was so focused on her grandmother and great-grandmother, that she didn’t notice the decadent food on the table. Everything she had imagined was there—the rosemary tomato quiches, the raspberry tarts, and even the cucumber sandwiches.

“Yes, please. Thank you, Uncle Arthur.” He grinned from her remembering, and Jori watched as the plate of quiches passed from one hand to another until it reached her. It was warm and savory. When she took a sip from her teacup, the warmth and bitterness of the tea melded with the quiche.

Jori couldn’t help but watch her family laugh and talk to one another. Even Grandpa Lou was grinning a little from something Great Aunt Agatha had said. The teapot was passed around to revive and reheat the empty or almost empty teacups. Jori and her grandmother were listening to Great Grandma Mabel gossip about the widow next door taking up gardening to be outside when the handsome mailman delivered the mail. Jori couldn’t help smiling while listening to Great Grandma Mabel and then her grandma asking questions and gasping at the appropriate times. She was grinning as she brought the teacup to her lips. Her great grandma’s voice was throaty and jumped in pitch.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten you, Jori Jean,” Great Grandma Mabel announced. “I’ve seen you run around with the neighbor boy.”

Jori shoved a cucumber sandwich in her mouth. Her grandma whispered, “You forgot the paper, dear.” Jori spat it out and the whole table roared with laughter. Despite herself, Jori smiled and laughed. She looked to her grandmother who had stopped laughing, but Jori could still see the laughter twinkling in her eyes.

Her grandmother took the tray of tarts Great Grandma Mabel passed. She placed one on her plate, and one on Jori’s. She then took the teapot and lifted it to refill hers and Jori’s cups. As she

poured the tea into Jori's cup, she said "I know why you're here, little one." Her voice wasn't harsh, but it wasn't full of laughter either. Everyone else was concentrated on their own conversations, laughing or having friendly arguments. Jori sipped on her tea and then looked to her grandmother as she held onto the saucer and teacup.

"I know you miss me. I know you miss all of us and everything we did together. But I also know that your mother, father, and siblings love you." Jori snorted at the last sentence. Her grandmother raised her eyebrows and Jori lowered her eyes, silently apologizing. "Things are not what they used to be. You have to speak up for yourself, even if it means being different. In my time, that would have been unheard of for a young lady of fourteen." Jori perked up and brightened at her grandmother remembering her age. Her grandmother smiled and continued. "You have to tell them what you want and expect, even if it means interrupting them, and even if they don't understand you, explain it to them."

"But they don't understand, grandma. They think I'm weird, and they're right," Jori argued and set her teacup and saucer down. She stabbed at the raspberry tart and ate a bite. It was hard being upset when the raspberries melted in her mouth.

"Yes. They are right," her grandmother confirmed. Jori blanked and just stared into the hazel pools of her grandmother's eyes. Her chest tightened and she started clasping her hands together under the table. "But it doesn't mean it's wrong either."

Jori's hands released and her eyebrows knitted together in confusion. *What is she saying? What does that even mean?* "Everyone values different things, Jori. There's not enough space in our hearts to love everything, and even some people have smaller spaces than others. Your heart is one of the biggest I know." Her grandmother's voice rose in pitch at the last sentence. Jori's chest rose and her eyes became glossy, but she kept listening.

“Your family loves you, even if their spaces are smaller. Just think about it. Even though theirs are smaller, you’re there. Despite everything else that could have been there, you made it.”

Hot tears were beginning to run down Jori’s cheeks. She was filled with so much gratitude. *How could she understand me so well? How is she able to put it into words when all I have are these gut-wrenching feelings inside?*

“I know it feels like those other things try to take your place, but they haven’t.” Her grandmother placed her glowing hand on Jori’s. She expected it to be cold and have a ghostly texture, but she was pleasantly surprised that it was warm, like the last waves of heat from a fireplace. “You just have to let them know you need more from their space.”

Her grandmother tightened her hand, so her fingers wrapped around Jori’s hand. Jori smiled and cried at the same time. She could feel the warm blaze between their clasped hands. Looking around, she noticed all the guests were gone. Their plates of raspberry tart scraped clean. It was only the two of them. She jerked her gaze back to her grandmother, who had a knowing smile on her face. Her iridescent glow was fading. “Grandma...” She trailed off.

“I love you, Jori Jean,” her grandmother replied.

Jori knew what was happening and quickly said, “But what if I need you? Where can I find you?” The cookbook titles on the bookshelf behind her grandmother were becoming clearer as she became cloudier.

“As long as you keep me in your space, I’ll always be here.” Jori could barely see her now, and she tried to close her hand tighter, but her grandma just kept fading.

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Jori woke up at the kitchen table. She opened and closed her eyes a few times. The kitchen table was still setup with all the teacups, saucers, and plates. A blanket her grandma crocheted years ago was on her, the top of it drooping to one side off her shoulder. She rubbed her eyes and squinted at the bright sunlight streaming from the windows.

“You’re finally awake, sleepy head,” her mother said as she walked into the kitchen. Jori said nothing and kept staring at the unused cutlery on the table. *Was it a dream?* “I made you some breakfast.”

Jori looked down at the eggs, bacon, and toast. There was steam rising from the eggs and the kettle started whistling. She looked to the stove and gave her mother a puzzled look. Her mom smiled and poured the boiling water into the ceramic teapot. Jori recognized it from last night. She peered into her cup and saw a small teabag of her favorite tea that she and her grandmother used to drink together. While waiting for her mother to pour the hot water over her teabag, she dug into the eggs. They were warm and soft. She was surprised when her mother poured herself a cup of tea.

“I didn't know you liked tea, mom.”

“I do. I just don't get the time to sit down and enjoy a nice cup of tea.”

Jori smiled and kept eating her breakfast. After a couple of minutes, Jori and her mother gently sipped on their tea. “So, are you going to tell me why you were asleep at the kitchen table this morning?” her mother asked.

Jori hadn't thought about what she would say to this question. There was no way she could tell her mother the truth. Maybe if she told part of the truth, it would pass enough as the whole truth. “I couldn't sleep, so I came down for a warm glass of milk. I guess it worked.”

There was a long pause. Jori felt like it was going to last forever, but Jori's mom seemed satisfied. After her mother poured herself another cup of tea, Jori realized this would be the perfect time. It was just the two of them and she had her mother's complete attention. Her hands began to sweat, and it felt as though there was a stone caught in her throat.

“Mom...” Jori began.