

ENOUGH

BY ALICE McDERMOTT

Begin, then, with the ice-cream dishes, carried from the dining room into the narrow kitchen on a Sunday night, the rest of the family still sitting contented around the lace-covered table, her father's cigarette smoke just beginning to drift into the air that was still rich from the smell of the roast, and the roasted potatoes, the turnips and carrots and green beans, the biscuits and the Sunday-only perfume of her mother and sisters. Carried just two dishes at a time because this was the good set, cabbage roses with gold trim. Two bowls at a time, silver spoons inside, carried carefully and carefully placed on the drainboard beside the soapy water where the dinner plates were already soaking, her mother being a great believer in soaking, whether children or dishes or clothes, or souls. Let it soak: the stained blouse, the bruised knee, the sin—sending them into their rooms with a whole rosary to pray, on their knees, and a full hour in which to do it.

She was the youngest child, the third girl with three brothers, and since the boys were excused and the kitchen too small, their mother said, to hold a pair of sisters in it together, this final task, the clearing of the ice-cream dishes, was hers alone. Two at a time, she gathered the plates while the others sat, contented, limp, stupefied with food, while she herself felt her stomach straining against the now tight waist of her good dress, felt her legs grown heavy from all she had eaten. Sunday dinner was the only meal they had with their father, who worked two jobs to keep them all fed (that was the way it was put by mother and father both, without variance), and the bounty of the spread seemed to be their parents' defiant proof of the man's long week of labor. They always ate too much at Sunday dinner and they always had dessert. Pie on the first Sunday of the month, then cake, ice cream, stewed fruit—one Sunday after the other and always in that same rotation. Ice cream being the pinnacle for

her, stewed fruit the depths from which she would have to rise, through pie (if mincemeat, hardly a step in the right direction, if blueberry, more encouraging), then cake—always yellow with eggs and dusted with powdered sugar—and then at last, again, ice cream, store-bought or homemade, it hardly made a difference to she who was told once a month that a lady takes a small spoonful, swallows it, and then takes another. She does *not* load the spoon up and then run the stuff in and out of her mouth, studying each time the shape her lips have made (“Look how cross-eyed she gets when she’s gazing at it”). A lady doesn’t want to show her tongue at the dinner table.

Carefully, she collected the bowls and carried them two by two into the narrow kitchen. She placed one on the drainboard and then lifted the spoon out of the other and, always, with a glance over her shoulder, licked the spoon, front and back, and then raised the delicate bowl to her chin and licked that, too, licked the cabbage roses and the pale spaces in between, long strokes of the tongue from gold-edged rim to gold-edged rim and then another tour around the middle. Place it down softly and pick up the next. The creamy dregs spotting her nose and her cheeks, vanilla or chocolate, peach or strawberry—strawberry the best because her brothers and a sister always left behind any big pieces of the fruit. Heel of her hand to the sticky tip of her nose (lick that, too) and then back into the dining room again for the next two bowls. Oh, it was good, as good as the whole heaping bowl that had been filled by her father at the head of the table, passed hand to hand by her sisters and brothers, and set before her.

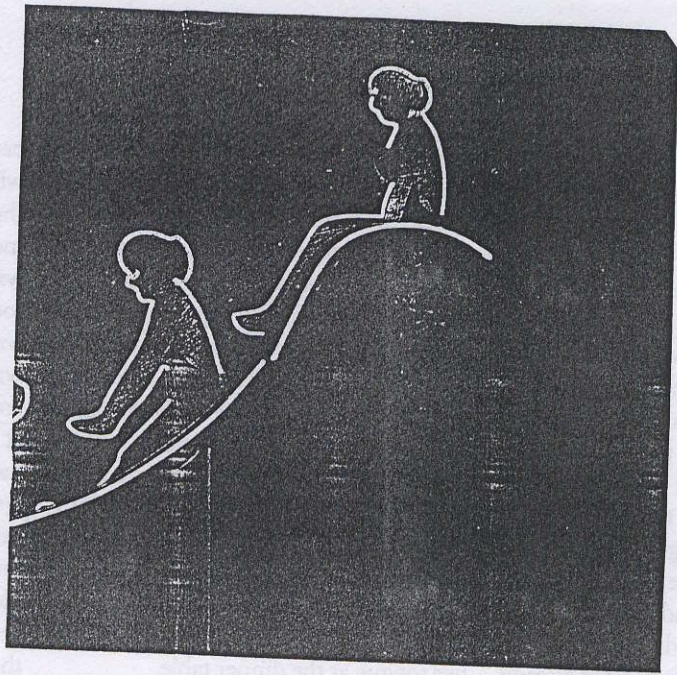
Extrapolate, then, from the girlhood ritual (not to say, of course, that it ended with her girlhood) to what came to be known as her trouble with the couch. Trouble on the couch would have

been more accurate, she understood later, when she had a sense of humor about these things that at the time had no humor in them at all. But such precision was the last thing her family would have sought, not in these matters. Her trouble with the couch, it was called. Mother walking into what should have been the empty apartment except that the boiler at the school had broken and the pastor had sent them all home and here she was with the boy from upstairs, side by side on the couch, her two cheeks flushed fever pink and her mouth a bleary, full-blown rose, and her mother would have her know (once the boy had slipped out the door) that she wasn’t born yesterday and Glory Be to God fourteen years old was a fine age to be starting this nonsense and wasn’t it a good thing that tomorrow was Saturday and the confessionals at church would be fully manned. She’d had a good soaking in recriminations all that evening and well into Saturday afternoon when she finished the rosary the priest himself had prescribed, the end coming only after she returned from the Communion rail on Sunday morning and her mother caught and held her eye. A stewed-fruit Sunday no doubt.

Her oldest sister found her next, on the couch with her high-school sweetheart, midafternoon once again—their mother, widowed now, off working in an office—and the first four buttons of her dress undone, the lace bodice of her pale-pink slip all exposed. And then not a month or two later that same sister found her there with another boy, his head in her lap and his hand brushing up and down from her ankle to her knees.

Then there was that Saturday night during the war when her oldest brother, too drunk to go home to his new wife on the next block, let himself in and found her stretched out on the couch in the embrace of some midshipman who, it was clear, despite their quick rearranging

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of clothes, had his fingers tangled up in her garter. There were buttons undone that time, too, and yet again when she was spied on by the second sister, who never did marry herself but who had an eyeful, let me tell you—a marine, this time, his mouth, to put it delicately, where her corsage should have been and her own hands twisted into his hair as if to hold him there—which led to such a harangue about her trouble with the couch that, finally, even her old mother was moved to say that there was a war on, after all.

Later, her best girlfriend joked that maybe she would want to bring that couch along with her on her wedding

night. And joked again, nine months to the week later, when her first son was born, that she didn't seem to need that old couch after all.

There were seven children born altogether, the first followed and each of the others preceded by a miscarriage, so that there were thirteen pregnancies in all, every loss mourned so ferociously that both her husband and her mother advised, each time, not to try again, each birth celebrated with a christening party that packed the small house—made smaller by the oversized floral couch and high-backed chairs and elaborate lamps she had chosen—and spilled out into the narrow yard and breezeway, where

there would be dancing, if the weather allowed. A phonograph placed behind the screen in the kitchen window and the records going all through the long afternoon, and on into the evening. You'd see her there after the last guest had gone, the baby on her shoulder and maybe another child on her hip, dancing to something slow and reluctant and melancholy ("One for my baby, and one more for the road"). Lipstick and face powder on the white christening gown that night, as well as the scent of the party itself, cigarette smoke and perfume and the cocktails on her breath.

She was a mother forever rubbing a licked finger to her children's cheeks,

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scrubbing at the pink traces of her own kisses, forever swelling up again with the next birth. Kids in her lap and her arms wrapped around them even after their limbs had grown longer than her own. The boys, before she knew it, lifting her off her feet when she took them in her arms.

She was forty-six when she gave birth to the last, and he was eighteen and on a weekend home from college when he recognized, for the first time in his life, what the sighs and the stirrings coming from his parents' bedroom on that Saturday morning actually signified. (He did a quick calculation of their ages, just to be sure he had it right and then thought, Still?, amazed and a little daunted.) For the rest of the weekend, he imagined ways he might rib them about it, although he couldn't bring himself to come out with anything, knowing full well that even the most good-natured mention of what went on behind their bedroom door could get him the back of his father's hand—or, worse yet, cause a blush to rise from his own cheeks well before he'd managed to raise any kind of glow in theirs.

And there was the Christmas, some years later, when one of them had given their parents a nostalgic collection of forties music and, listening to Bing Crosby sing in his slow, sleepy way, "Kiss me once and kiss me twice (and kiss me once again)," hadn't their mother said, for all assembled to hear, "If you don't turn this off, I'm going to have to find a place to be alone with your father." And hadn't he and his siblings, every one of them well versed by then in matters of love and sex, sat dumbfounded, calculating, no doubt . . . seventy-one, seventy-two . . . still?

Shades of the trouble with the couch, she took her husband's hand in his last days and unbuttoned her blouse and didn't seem to care a bit who saw her, doctor or nurse, son or daughter or grandchild—or older sister who'd never married herself and couldn't help but say, out in the waiting room, "Now, really." She leaned forward, now and again, to whisper to him, even after he was well past hearing, her open lips brushing both the surgical tape that secured the respirator in his mouth and the stubbly gray beard of his cheek.

Growing plump in her widowhood, though she was the first to admit she'd never been what you would call thin, she travelled in busloads of retirees—mostly widows, although there was the occasional man or two—only missing a museum trip or a foliage tour or a luncheon (with a cocktail) at this or that historic site or country inn if a grandchild was in need of minding. What she could do best—her own daughters marvelled at it, who else would have the patience—was sit for hours and hours at a time with a colicky baby over her shoulder or a worn-out toddler on her knee and talk or sing. She told nonsense stories, more sound than substance, or sang every tune in her lifetime repertoire, from Beatles songs to ancient hymns, hypnotizing the children somehow (her sons and daughters were sure of it) into sleep, or sometimes just a dazed contentedness, tucked under her arm or under her chin, seconds, minutes, then hours ticking by, the bars of summer or winter, late-afternoon or early-morning sunlight moving across them, across the length of a room, and neither of them, adult or child, seeming to mark the time gone by.

But take a look in your freezer after she's gone, the daughters reported to one another and to the better-liked sisters-in-law as well. Nearly a full gallon eaten—or all but a final spoonful so she didn't have to put the carton in the trash and give herself away. She's welcome to it, of course, but at her age it's a weight thing. She needs to watch her weight. It's the deceptiveness, too, don't you see. What does she eat when she's alone?

Alone, in an apartment now, ever since the night a stranger crept up the breezeway, broke the kitchen window, and made off with her purse, the portable TV, and the boxed silver in the dining room which had been her mother's, she licked chocolate pudding from the back of a spoon, sherbet, gelato, sorbet, ice cream, of course. She scraped the sides of the carton, ran a finger around the rim.

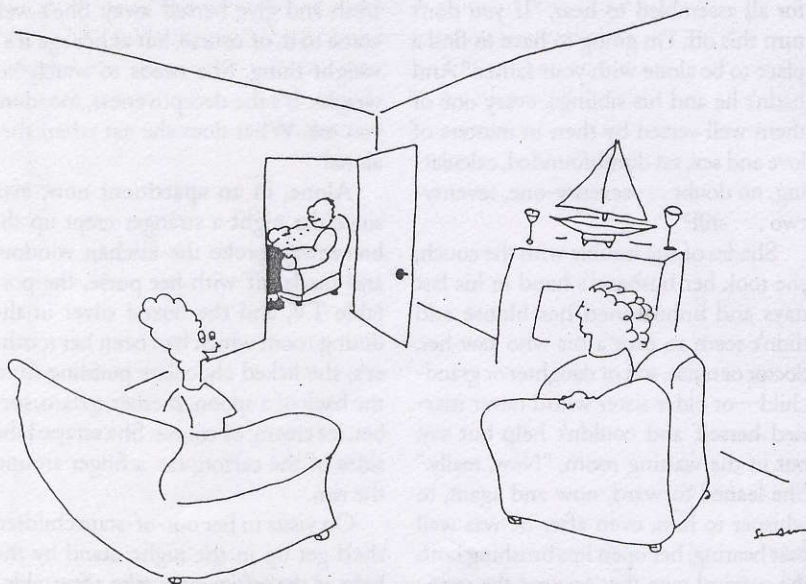
On visits to her out-of-state children she'd get up in the night, stand by the light of the refrigerator, take a few tablespoons from the gallon, or a single ice-cream bar, but always end up going back

for more. A daughter-in-law found her one morning, 2 A.M., with the last chocolate/vanilla ice-cream cup and a tiny wooden spoon—leftovers from the grandchild's birthday party she had made the trip specifically to attend—and gave her such a lecture, as she put it when she got home, that you'd think she'd been shooting heroin.

It was the weight that concerned them, said her children, conferring. They were afraid it was the weight that was keeping her these days from those senior trips she used to love, from the winter vacations in Florida she'd once looked forward to. Now that the grandchildren were grown out of the need for a sitter, she should be doing more of those things, not fewer. They solicited a talking-to for their mother from her doctor, who instead reminded them all that she was past eighty and healthy enough and free to do, or not do, what she liked.

They took to stopping by to see her, on lunch hours, or before going to the grocery store, keeping their car keys in their hands, and urging her to turn off the television, to plan something, to do something. Her grandchildren, driving cars now, asked her out to their kinds of places, treated her to frothy lattes topped with whipped cream that would repeat on her the rest of the afternoon and on into the evening, despite bicarbs and antacids, until she brought herself to tell them when they called, "Thank you, dear, but I'm quite content at home."

Peach, strawberry, and reliable vanilla. Rocky road and butter pecan and mint chocolate chip. Looking at ninety and still, still, the last thing she feels at the end of each day is that longing to wrap her legs around him, around someone. The pleasure of the taste, of loading up a spoon and finishing it bit by bit, and then taking another spoonful and another—one kind of pleasure, enhanced by stealth and guilt, when it is someone else's carton, someone else's home in the middle of the night, another kind when it's her own and she carries her bowl, in full light, to the couch before the television in the living room. Forbidden youthful passion and domestic married love, something like that, anyway, if you want to extrapolate. If you want to begin with the ice-cream dishes licked clean by a girl who is now the old woman past all usefulness, closing her eyes at the first taste. If you want to make a metaphor out of her lifelong cravings, something she is not inclined to do. Pleasure is pleasure. A remnant of strawberries, a young man's hands, a newborn in your arms, or your own child's changing face. Your lips to the familiar stubble of your husband's cheek. Your tongue to the last vein of fudge in the empty carton. Pleasure is pleasure. If you have an appetite for it, you'll find there's plenty. Plenty to satisfy you—lick the back of the spoon. Take another, and another. Plenty. Never enough. ♦



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