

1 I kept thinking of my mother's first meeting with her future in-laws, the anxious  
silence in the parlor as the people who would become my father and grandparents read their  
respective Bibles, and the girl from Smith College sat alone on the sofa and looked from one  
Musgrave to the other, wondering who these people were, that such weird behavior could  
5 seem natural. And when they had finally been called to the dining room by the maid in her  
starched black uniform with the white collar and everyone was seated, Mother Musgrave said  
to her son, "Bernard will you say grace?"

The college girl watched the others, and when they lowered their heads and closed  
their eyes, she did the same and for the first time heard her fiancé pray aloud to God and  
10 His resurrected Son. When he had finished, *in Jesus' name, amen*, she opened her eyes and  
saw the cold, clotted vichyssoise<sup>1</sup> suppurating in the dish before her. Oh, dear, she must  
have thought. What have I gotten myself into?

No one spoke. Silver clanked. The father slurped. The maid arrived with bread and  
soundlessly paddled back across the thick carpet to the kitchen. Finally, the son, the Yale  
15 medical student, cleared his throat, placed his soup spoon carefully down, and said,  
"Mother? Father? I have an announcement to make".

The others looked up and placed their soup spoons as carefully down as he. The  
college girl did as they and put her hands in her lap. The mother dabbed at the corners of  
her thin, lipless mouth with her napkin. The girl did the same. The father turned in his chair  
20 to face his son, as if interviewing him for a position at the bank.

"Announce away!" Father Musgrave ordered.

The son, a tall, too-thin boy of twenty-four with permanently tousled brown hair and  
a large Adam's apple, cleared his throat again and said, "Well, I've asked a girl to become  
my wife." He looked across the table at the girl who would become my mother and smiled  
25 nervously, and the girl smiled back in a way that she hoped was reassuring and proud. "And  
I'm happy to say that she's accepted!" he declared and laughed awkwardly. "How about  
that?"

There was a brief silence. His father turned back to his soup, as if deciding not to hire  
the boy after all. His mother said, "That's nice, dear," followed by a long pause. "Who's the  
30 girl?"

The story always ends there, its point, as far as my mother was concerned, made.  
She was the only one who told it, and she never told it with my father present and of course  
never in front of my grandparents. She believed that it was about her, after all, not them.  
But I had always wondered, what happened then? Did the girl get up from the table and run  
35 out? Did the boy try to smooth over the sudden rumples in the occasion by quickly excusing

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<sup>1</sup> Vichyssoise : variété de soupe

himself from the table and following his fiancée to the foyer? She already had her coat on and buttoned, tears of shame and humiliation in her eyes, and he held her by the shoulders and explained that she mustn't take it personally, his parents were cold only because they were frightened.

40 "That's what powerful people do when they're frightened, darling, they go cold on you." I can hear him now, his voice seductively calm, so reasonable sounding -a kindly, wise man, even back then, when he was little more than a college boy. "They have only me, you know. And they're afraid of losing me to you."

They touched hands lightly, and the girl took off her coat, wiped her tears away, and  
45 the two returned to the table as if nothing untoward<sup>2</sup> had happened.

But I know it didn't go like that.

The girl who would become my mother didn't leave the table. She wouldn't dare. She sat there instead with a sickly smile pasted onto her face and wondered, as she would for the rest of her years, if she had been insulted, which was why she told the story repeatedly.  
50 And the boy who became my father, his voice raised a register, as if driven by excitement rather than fear, said, "The girl I've chosen to marry is right here with us today! It's Iris!"

My grandparents turned their hard gazes on my mother, and both of them nearly smiled, as if suppressing frowns. My grandmother said to my mother, "Well, then, welcome to the family, Iris."

55 "Yes," my grandfather said. "Welcome."

And my mother said, "Thank you. Thank you both."

She herself had no family to which she could welcome them and thus, struggling to find something appropriate to say, could only say thank you, over and over, and in time came to believe that her gratitude was genuine.

Russel Banks, *The Darling*, 2004

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<sup>2</sup> untoward : *fâcheux*