

# At Home Around the Table

Roles suddenly shift

—By Maureen L. Egan

A blast of laughter explodes through the house from the kitchen, where my teenage daughter and her friends are taste testing just-made chocolate ganache, and into my bedroom, where my husband and I aren't sleeping anymore. Groggy, I smile at their hyperactive hysteria. Having just shared gooey food with two of my own high-school friends, I'm sentimental about silliness and sweetness. God knows how many times my friends and I kept our parents awake late. The shortest distance between two points in time isn't a line; it's laughter.

During high school and summers in college, my high-school friends and I hung out in each other's houses, commandeering kitchen tables, basements, porches. With Jackson Browne and Dan Fogelberg on the stereo, we were literary and lofty, carrying on philosophical conversations until we switched to Monty Python jokes. How patient our parents were with us. How little attention we paid them.

These friends and I live hours apart now and don't sit around together much — a meal once or twice a year, maybe. Mostly we talk on the phone. A simple "How's your mother?" isn't answered so breezily anymore. Two of our mothers are widowed, mine two years ago, Stacy's 90-something mother, Mrs. W., decades ago. Sharon's mother, Mrs. R., has "run-ins with the clock," as she puts it — or, as the doctor puts it, mild cognitive impairment.

Our parents still live in the houses we sprawled about in during the '70s and '80s. Fine houses, but too much for them to take care of, too full of their grown children's detritus and too many stairs. Talks around the kitchen tables now are often thick with denial or fraught with frustration. Our parents are reluctant to downsize. They worry about losing their independence if they move. We worry about losing ours if they don't.

Stacy's mother isn't as strong as she once was. Mrs. W. was so smart and rascally. She spoke to us like we were adults, and she made homemade root beer. Mrs. R. was the first woman we

knew who did it all — keep house flawlessly, provide chocolate pie at a moment's notice and go back to work as a lawyer after years at home. And my mother, raising a big brood, was unflappable and eminently practical; she could do no wrong. She still lives on her own with not one of her eight children closer than a couple of hours away. It doesn't feel right.

It's a muddle to us what our duties to our parents are. Day to day, it's not clear if we have overstepped our bounds or fallen woefully short.

If it were up to us, we'd help our mothers move somewhere more manageable, safer and closer to us, and sell the family houses. It's not up to us. My mother is wary of being drawn into her children's frantic lives. She adores her grandchildren and appreciates her children, but she's also suspicious of us. We have expectations, ideas, agendas. Our plans exhaust her. The pace of being around her friends, peers and other widows suits her better. I get that.

At breakfast the other day, Sharon, Stacy and I tell each other we won't hold on to houses that are too much for us. People cooking for us?

Sign us up. We'll make it easier for our children and embrace the condo or one-floor living before a medical crisis comes. We'll live somewhere together if we're widowed. Wishful thinking. Whistling in the dark.

Nobody's situation is easy. The thorny complications overwhelm us all, and no solution is ideal. But I wish, grown children and parents together, we could acknowledge our anxiety about the present, our fear about the future. We need to look at the possibilities without anger and angst, with understanding and good humor. We're lucky we're not in panic mode, so the options aren't bleak. Memories are portable, able to be unpacked anywhere. And there is still fun to be had and time for our parents to feel the comforting bonds of home somewhere else, to settle in somewhere snug, a place of their own. There's a kitchen table there. And there can be laughter around it, too.

