

A CROWDED TABLE

For dancers, squirrel hunters, and everyone else

BY SILAS HOUSE



Illustrations by Molly Brooks

I FIRST KNEW THE TRUTH ABOUT our neighbor Michael when he was nearly beaten to death. He was thrown over a cliff behind our trailer and his cries for help awoke me in the blue hour, when the sun had not risen but the birds had started morning prayers. After I woke everyone, we stood on the high bank together until they, too, heard his guttural moans. My father hustled down to pull Michael up through the tangled briars toward where we had all gathered—my mother, along with my aunt and first cousin, Ann, who lived in a trailer right next to ours.

Michael leaned, weak and addled, against my father as they struggled to, his head down. Then the teenager raised his face and all of us could see his two blackened eyes, the deep gash across his right cheekbone, his badly busted lip. But we could not see the bruises beneath his shirt where they had kicked and punched

him while they called him a faggot. When Michael saw Ann, his best friend since childhood, he collapsed in tears. My father turned away, ashamed to see the young man weep.

My mother and aunt went into action. “I’ll make some biscuits,” my mother said, cinching the belt around her housecoat. My aunt took a hard draw on her Winston Light and marched inside to start sausage for the gravy. After my father had done his best first aid on Michael, we sat at the round table in the small kitchen of my aunt’s trailer and ate together. Cathead biscuits, gravy, and sausage, fried eggs, fried apples, and fried potatoes. My aunt and mother, true to our culture in southeastern Kentucky, never cooked a small meal. The silver sound of forks replaced the raucous conversation that usually sang out at our table.

That night at supper, I realized that my parents knew why Michael had been

beaten. Because, my father said, he was “a queer,” “a sissy.” My parents had most of it figured out, and Ann would fill in the details later: The boys had come up on Michael when he was walking home. They had beaten him mercilessly and then thrown him over the bank right behind his best friend’s home. My mother said that she loved Michael and hated to see him treated like that, but he needed to learn “to act like the other boys.” They likely figured their six-year-old wouldn’t know what any of this meant. But I did. In just a few years, these words and phrases would come to identify me.

By the time I was ten, my father, uncles, cousins, and classmates regularly called me a sissy, too. Even my phys-ed teacher—a miserable, track-suited woman whom I now suspect was closeted herself—called me this height-of-all-insults in front of the entire class. What could be worse than for a boy to act like a girl? I walked like a sissy, threw a ball like a sissy, sat like a sissy. I liked to read, which was sissified. I loved to dance and refused to squirrel hunt. I wanted to be in the kitchen, washing dishes and helping my mother and aunt cook. All sissified. That word was a brand that burned deep into my skin.

The first person to release me from all this was my aunt, Sis. She was also a grandmother, a second mother, a protector who spoiled me. She let me cry when I needed to. Sis was a melancholy person who had a good cry every few days and swore by them. “I’ve got them old blues



again,” she’d say, dotting a pink Kleenex to her eyes. “Hand me my cigarettes.”

When I asked to help in the kitchen, Sis didn’t turn me away. She taught me to fry eggs, string green beans, peel potatoes. “Always eat one raw slice for luck,” she said.

Sis showed me how to fix the two most important things of all: biscuits and cornbread. She told me that bacon grease and buttermilk make just about everything better. Sis and I would sometimes sing and dance to records in the kitchen. She’d shuffle her feet to Bob Seger or Prince or Loretta Lynn as she peeled potatoes, a cigarette clenched between her teeth. One time I noticed there were tears in her eyes as we danced. She turned away so I couldn’t see. Perhaps she had already figured out how much I was like Michael and how, someday, I might face the same violence for simply being who I am.

RECENTLY THE Highwomen put out a song called “Crowded Table.” The chorus goes, in part, “I want a house with a crowded table/And a place by the fire for everyone.”

My family always believed in the concept of the crowded table.

Won’t you eat with us?
The more the merrier.
Now hush, there’s plenty.
Y’all come on and eat.
Say the blessing.

Throughout my childhood, especially in summertime, we were always getting together to eat at our house or my aunt’s, the two centers of activity in our large family.

White half-runners cooked with salt pork and new potatoes, freshly pulled green onions, tomatoes so red and ripe the sight of them made my mouth water, peeled slices of cucumber, corn on the cob (called “rosheneers” in my family—a



distortion of the words “roasting ears”), cabbage fried in a cast-iron skillet with lard, salt, a lot of pepper.

And cornbread. Always cornbread, the queen of every meal.

For dessert, blackberry dumplings or banana pudding or cherry cobbler. Perhaps a Better than Church cake, pineapple upside-down cake, or Pig-Eatin’ cake. Sometimes there was cold watermelon or cantaloupe (“mush-melon,” in my family’s parlance), always raised in my daddy’s garden and heavily salted.

Friends attended these feasts as well as

family. They were usually folks who did not have much family to speak of, or had been turned away by their own. People like Michael, whose father never stopped taunting him for how sissified he was.

To hear my family’s pedigree—poor to working class, Appalachian, white, evangelical, all self-identifying hillbillies, some self-identifying rednecks, most staunch Republicans—a lot of people would be surprised to see who gathered at their tables. People of different orientations, gender identities, races, ethnicities, cultures, beliefs, and sensibilities have



marveled at the crispness of my aunt's fried chicken, the miraculous density found in my mother's chicken-and-dump - lings, the balance of crunch and softness that distinguish her buttermilk biscuits.

But here is the part I have dreaded telling you.

While my parents and my aunt always welcomed guests to the table, I am sure they would not have readily set a place for Michael if he had insisted on bringing a boyfriend. They would not have been so keen on pulling out extra chairs for the many people of different religions and cultures who have joined us if those folks had talked too much about worshipping different Gods or no gods at all. Any conversation about Black lives mattering or a grandchild complaining about deadnam - ing—the hurtful act of calling a trans person by their former name—would have been shut down immediately. They were always fine with people joining in, so long as those people were quietly different.

Throughout my childhood, I witnessed tremendous homophobia from both of my parents. My aunt Sis, so open-minded and loving to me, was quick to allow casual racism to rear its head in disgusting lan - guage. This habit led to the only true ar - guments she and I ever had. Many of my cousins who have welcomed so many different kinds of people into our family gatherings are vehemently anti-immigrant and proud to openly condemn anyone who protests, whether it be for women's rights or racial equality. The sharpest

blade of my life has been this dilemma: How to reconcile the fact that people I love, and who love me, possess such hate - fulness, often defended by Scripture.

I still don't have the answer, but I do have hope. Here's why.

There is no monolithic Southern family. Mine is the one I know best, and I have witnessed great change occur within us. My parents, who once chatted at supper - time about rounding up and forcing all gay folks onto an island, now welcome my husband and me to their table as a couple. They buy us joint Christmas pres - ents, go on vacation with us, and refer to us as a coupled entity: y'all. They support and adore our son, their grandchild who has transitioned to male over the last couple of years. Sometimes when we are at the lake or dining together in a restau - rant, I stop to marvel that we are all out together, my parents laughing and un - afraid of how people might see us.

Over the past decade, my parents reluc - tantly began an anguished self-examina - tion. They started to listen. They laid down their pride. This is the way forward for the South, for all of us. To listen. To possess humility. To look at ourselves. And ulti - mately to change. The future I imagine includes everyone who is willing to love. To gather all at a crowded table. And it includes letting the hate-filled ones know that they will always be welcome—but only if they get themselves sorted.

I can go on loving them, but it will be a quiet love—because there is a thin line between grace and enabling. I can sit at a table with those whose opinions differ from mine. I will sit at the table with anyone who is willing to be open-hearted. But I will no longer subject myself to filling my plate beside those who actively endan - ger the lives of others, who vote to take rights away from women and LGBTQ people, who refuse to admit that they, too, must work to help heal the wound of

racism in our country. I can no longer pour glasses of sweet tea for those who believe the environment doesn't matter, that im - migrant lives are inferior, who wrongly insist there is already justice for all.

Over the past few years I have had to disrupt too many family gatherings by calling out my cousins or others. When they spout their disgust for differences, I'm considered the bad guy for defending myself and others. They lean into each other, laughing, and tell me I'm too serious, that I've allowed politics to divide our family. Once again, I'm just the sissy who thinks too much. Once again, I'm left to simply be thankful that at least my parents have been willing to do the work of self-examination.

EARLIER THIS YEAR, I saw Michael for the first time in decades. He had moved to Florida when I was a teenager. A cousin of mine passed away, and Michael came back home to pay his respects. Not much has changed for him. He never really came out and has never had a public gay rela - tionship. Sometimes a place and a people do damage that can't be repaired. Michael has moved through his entire life afraid that if he isn't quiet about who he is, then he'll be beaten again. Negating and shun - ning have left their scars, too.

After the funeral we went back to a family member's house, where a local church had prepared a feast for the mourn - ers. Michael and I piled our plates with ham, fried corn, hashbrown casserole, sweet potato casserole, and macaroni salad. We sat together at one of the long tables on the porch. I asked if he ever missed home. "I never thought I would," he said. "I thought I'd never look back. But

I have, every day." All these years later, and he still wanted to be accepted in the South where he had grown up. I do, too, but so far, I've only found that acceptance at my parents' table. There's a small county-is - sued sign where I grew up: HOMETOWN OF SILAS HOUSE, AUTHOR. A few years ago someone spray-painted FAG across it. My father took down the sign, scrubbed the paint away, and put it back up. There are few things that have broken my heart more than this image of him.

My mother came to sit with us. She ran her hand down Michael's arm, and there was an apology on her face. Before long, my husband and my father joined us. And we ate together.

I believe in forgiveness and giving grace. I do not believe in offering myself up for a beating, whether physical or spiritual. To set a welcoming table in a truly New South, we must actively work to nurture others and aim toward justice together, for everyone who is being oppressed and belittled. We must listen. The South of my dreams is a crowded table of many different colors and accents. Stacked on the table are platters full of the food I grew up with and delicacies I have never known before. My husband and I will be treated like everyone else. My cousins will be there. Their hearts and minds will have opened up to new songs and new dances. Everyone won't think the same way, but they will all bring love, first and foremost. That's the table where I want to break cornbread together.

Bless this food.
Love your neighbor.
Amen.
Pass the butter. 🧈

Silas House is the New York Times bestselling author of six novels, including *Southernmost* (2018). His writing has recently appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, and *Ecotone*. With Sam Gleaves, he co-wrote *In These Fields*, a folk opera that debuted at the 2016 SFA Fall Symposium.