

Excerpts, *At the Table: Nourishing Conversation and Food*

After class, at 3:30 sharp, “X” steps into my office. He looks so stereotypically a spy that I can’t believe he can possibly be one. He is in his late fifties, short, stocky, and white-haired, and he has thick black eyebrows. His forehead is creased, the Volga, the Ob, and the Lena flowing across his temples in undulating lines....

Conversation is lively at our table that evening as I report on my meeting with “X” and the RCMP. Tim sounds confused. “I don’t get it. Are you a spy or something?”

“No,” says Karen. “Dad is going to be a double agent.”

“He’s going to be nothing of the sort!” Dot retorts. “There’s no way we’re having dinner with that man. It isn’t safe.”

“I’ll go if you won’t!” says Karen excitedly.

“I’ll go, too,” Deb says eagerly. “What will we get to eat?”....

(“**‘X,’ The Spy who Stayed out in the Cold**”)

“*Isto é chato,*” Sam, seven, a demanding eater, complains—“This sucks,” in Portuguese. It’s a phrase I taught him at March break, sitting at our glass-top dinner table in a villa we had rented in a remote corner of the Algarve. Teaching the boys rude expressions was, I figured, a good way to interest them in memorizing some basic Portuguese as well as keeping them happily engaged at the table. I was aware, too, of the study done at Harvard that disclosed that dinner with the family is more important in developing vocabulary in young kids than play, story time, and other family activities.

“Just try the salad, Sam,” Deb says. “You might actually like it.”

His lips curl like wood shavings and his chin droops onto his chest, the blond fringe of his hair touching his plate. “I hate salad.” (**“Back Home”**)

....we’re at our dining room table in Toronto discussing with friends and relations the endangered art of conversation. “People are on their cell phones all the time now, talking and texting—in restaurants, at the dinner table, it doesn’t matter where....”

“Yes, everyone seems off in their own space most of the time,” my cousin Nigel observes....It’s as if people have turned their chairs around and are facing away from the table.”

(**Singing for Their Supper**)