

October 2021

Three Dinner Conversation Starters in a Pandemic

Kate Delaney
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

Part of the [Digital Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Commons
[Share feedback](#) about the accessibility of this item.
Network

Logo

Recommended Citation

Delaney, Kate () "Three Dinner Conversation Starters in a Pandemic," *The Mercury*: Year 2021, Article 2.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2021/iss1/2>

This open access nonfiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Three Dinner Conversation Starters in a Pandemic

Author Bio

Kate Delaney is a senior double majoring in English with a writing concentration and Public Policy.

Three Dinner Conversation Starters in a Pandemic

KATE DELANEY

Pennsylvania was ordered into a statewide shutdown in March. Restaurants, malls, gyms, and all other non-essential businesses closed their doors. Mom's yoga classes were cancelled. Dad stopped going into the office. The shutdown got extended in April. I got the call that the seasonal restaurant I worked at would not be opening this summer at all. Then the shutdown was extended again in May. Somewhere in that time, we ran out of things to say at dinner.

Every night at 6 pm, we sat down to eat, three plates laid out on a dark wood table built for six. Mom and Dad always cooked together on the laminate countertops of our kitchen while the news played from a computer in the background. "Kate, dinner!" came the shout when the meal was ready. I was always a picky eater, occasionally swapping cereal for whatever the main course was and refusing point blank to eat the salad, which always came at the end because "That's the European way!" according to my parents. Mom didn't like the way Dad watched her eat when he inevitably finished his plate before she could even touch her salad. She thought he stared less when they didn't sit across from each other and besides, she liked looking out through the dining room window into the neighbor's yard across the street, so she took the head of the table. Dad sat across from me but still managed to turn his whole body in his seat to stare at my mother when he had finished eating. He never stared at me. They had gotten used to eating meals for two.

Every dinner began with my mother asking, "So what's new for everybody?"

The answering "Nothing" came in unison, both my father and I mumbling the word.

"Anybody got anything on their schedule for tomorrow?"

"No."

The conversation ended.

I could've said my plan for tomorrow would be the same one I had every day in quarantine: take my virtual class from my room, have a smoothie in my room, maybe do a YouTube exercise video still in my room until the call for dinner came. My parents had established their own corners of the house too, my mother working from a plush chair in the living room and my dad taking over her office. She didn't like much that he took her office, but his work involved more Zoom calls than hers did so she

grudgingly accepted it.

One dinner in April, I watched as my father scooped a forkful of rice, chicken, and corn all into one big clump before popping it into his mouth, and I couldn't stop myself from asking — "Why do you that?"

"Do what?" he said, not looking up at me.

"You mix all your food together. You don't eat the chicken first, and then the corn, and then the rice?"

"No," he said. "That's so much less efficient. Is that what you do?"

"Yes," I said resolutely. "I like to taste just one thing at a time."

"I kind of skip between everything," my mother said, moving the food around on her plate. "I'll take a bit of the chicken, and then the corn, and then go back to the chicken."

"No, no, no," I protested. "That's not right at all."

Dad finally looked up at me, smiling through his mouthful of food. "I think you're just weird, Kate. I can't believe I never knew you eat like that."

"Well, maybe if you watched Kate eat instead of me, you'd have noticed, Kevin," my mother said, rolling her eyes at him.

"You're right! So many strange eating patterns going on right below my nose. Completely changes my view of my daughter! Don't even know who you are anymore!" He waggled his fork at me and we laughed.

"You're right," Mom answered dryly. "I guess we really just don't know each other at all."

I laughed, but as we cleared our plates that night, I wondered how much I really knew about my parents.

I knew my parents met at their summer job while they were both in college, working the toll booths at Jones Beach in Long Island, New York. I knew my Dad had been so shy on their first date, he barely said a word and my mom whistled to fill the silence. I knew my brown eyes and dark eyelashes and thick hair were my mother's. I knew my fair skin and the freckles that peppered my nose in the summer were all Dad. I knew my dad used to be a sociology professor at a university before moving into a more administrative position there. I knew my mother used to work in publishing when I was born, then was an elementary school librarian, before applying for the Korean-based ESL website she works for now. But what they were like when they were my age, their favorite movies and books, how they lived before I was born, the parents my brothers knew — I had no idea about any of that.

"Who do you think knows you guys the best out of me, Jack, and Connor?" I asked my parents thoughtfully as I dried the dishes. They glanced at each other.

glanced at each other.

I have always been painfully aware that I'm the youngest child. We were all four years apart in school. Connor was born in 1990, Jack in 1994 and I came last in 1999.

"Jack and I are five years apart, technically," I liked to correct my parents when they explained to people that we were all born four years apart. "It's just that Connor and Jack were born late in the year and I was born early, so it seems like four years, but it's actually five." My parents would wave away the correction and continue on.

I usually described my brothers in simple terms. "Connor's the athletic one, Jack's the smart one, and I'm just kind of different," I explained to friends, most of whom didn't believe I even had two brothers, since Connor left for college when I was ten and they'd never seen him before. I knew in my head that when I said I was "different," what I really meant was "not as good". While my brothers practiced lacrosse in the backyard, slinging balls as hard as they could against the stone of the house for hours, I quit every sport I tried. I took their old report cards from the drawer in the living room where my mom stuffed them and compared mine side by side. Jack's grades were always just slightly better than mine. In high school, Connor played varsity soccer and lacrosse and came home one night from sleeping over at a teammate's house with his ears pierced. Four years later, Jack made the JV lacrosse team, got elected president of the school's National Honors Society chapter, and got asked to the senior prom twice. When it was finally my turn to enter high school, Connor was entering the job market. I joined the marching band. I immersed myself in learning the flute because I could at last have an identifier—the musical sibling.

Jack and Connor had always been able to relate more. They worked at the same bagel shop when they were in high school, they played the same sports, they knew the same people. When Jack graduated college, Connor got him a job at his company, in the same department. They lived five minutes away from each other in Boston. They lived five hours away from my parents and me. When I graduated from high school that same year, I stopped playing my instrument. I had given up.

Somewhere along the way, I started calculating my lost time and realized my biggest disadvantage as the youngest.

At my grandfather's funeral, my mother, father, Jack, Connor, and I all sat in the stiff chairs set out in front of his casket. Everyone was laughing.

"Do you remember that awful duck tie he used to wear?" My mother giggled. "He loved that thing so much. And the way he always called everyone on their birthday and had 'As the Saints Come Marching'

queued up to play on his computer for you? You could barely hear it, the sound was so bad, but he'd still do it every year."

"What was the name of that old dog he and Grandma had when we were kids, Mom?" Connor asked. "The one that he'd feed corn on the cob to all the time?"

"Oh, god, Lucy. He loved that dog, treated her like a princess. That's just the kind of person he was."

"Oh, yeah, I remember Lucy!" Jack laughed. "A poodle, right?"

"Yeah, probably the most spoiled poodle ever," Mom said. "You remember her, don't you, Kate?"

"No," I said. "No, I don't really remember."

I did the math. Connor got 27 years with Grandpa, Jack got 23, I got 18.

"I'm not sure which of you knows us best," Mom said carefully as she coated the leftover chicken in plastic wrap. "Maybe Connor, since he's the oldest. But he also lives furthest away. Maybe it'll be you by the time this quarantine is over." She laughed.

I nodded, thinking carefully. I had so many questions and a seemingly never-ending quarantine to ask them. My virtual classes had ended. I didn't have a job. I spent most of my time planning for August, when I got to go back to school. It seemed highly unlikely coronavirus was going away before then.

The next day at dinner, I waited until the silence fell over us again.

"When did you guys get married?" I asked.

"When we were 25," my mom answered. "1986. Why?"

"Just curious!" I said. "I realized I didn't know." Under the table, I typed the date into my phone so I wouldn't forget. "What was the best part about your wedding?"

"Oh god, probably when it was over." My mom laughed, looking over at Dad. "Do you remember, Kev, how my uncle got completely wasted at the rehearsal dinner? He was throwing punches in my parents' front yard at anyone who came near him. I think the neighbors might have even called the cops."

"Yeah, I remember that!" Dad laughed. "And remember your Aunt Judy was dating that awful guy at the time? That was before he went crazy and started adopting all those cats. Think he got a black eye trying to stop your uncle. And then everybody showed up to the wedding the next day completely embarrassed and hungover."

"What a nightmare! I think that overshadowed the wedding completely. We were so focused on making the whole thing as cheap as possible. We did it in a little church by my parents' house. My dad had just

gotten laid off and Kevin was a PhD student, so none of us could afford a very big wedding. It was honestly more of a relief when it was over. Not that the honeymoon was any better.” Mom laughed over her water.

“Oh, you’re right. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so sick as during that airplane ride to Hawaii! The whole thing was pretty rough.”

“But look where we are, 34 years later!” Mom said. “Now we’re the crazy relatives, not leaving our house all day!” We all laughed.

Even though we never did seem to leave our little stone house in our quiet neighborhood, we couldn’t ignore the way that the coronavirus was creeping its way across the country. *The New York Times* headlines blared up from the kitchen table one Saturday in June: “A Nursing Home’s 64-Day Covid Siege: ‘They’re All Going to Die,’” “We Don’t Just Need to Connect—We Need to Reconnect,” “For Older People, Despair, as Well as Covid-19, Is Costing Lives.” I glanced at my parents, noticing the way my mother’s hands had gained new wrinkles. My dad’s 60th birthday had been that month. Did he always have white hair? When did it start losing its color? I can’t remember.

My parents’ bedroom is at the back corner of our house, the end of the hallway where the lights don’t reach, and while we kids were never exactly forbidden to enter, it certainly wasn’t encouraged. When I was seven, Connor was sixteen and left in charge of Jack and me for the night while my parents went out for their anniversary. I got ready for a night alone in my room, thinking my brothers wouldn’t want to hang out with me. But Connor swung the door closed behind my parents with a “Have fun!” and immediately turned to me.

“We’re playing hide-and-seek,” he informed me. I smiled. That was my favorite, but no one ever wanted to play with me.

Jack groaned. “Do we have to? That game is for babies.”

“Yes, Jack,” Connor said, turning to glare at him. “You have to!” He placed a hand over his eyes. “I’m counting! You both better go run and hide!”

I squealed, taking off for the upstairs while Jack rolled his eyes and headed to the basement. I opened the door to my parents’ bedroom with trembling fingers. I shouldn’t be in here, but this would be the last room Connor would check. The room was dark and shadowy, the big bed in the middle the perfect height off the ground for monsters to hide beneath. But I steeled my courage and headed for the bathroom. My parents shared a big, wicker hamper that took up too much space between the towel rack and the shower. I climbed in, feeling the plastic lining of the inside against my toes. The hamper had an attached lid that I swung over myself, closing myself in the warm darkness. The hamper muffled the sounds of Connor,

yelling from the downstairs, “Ready or not, here I come!”

I heard his footsteps clambering downstairs, the gleeful shout that meant he had found Jack a few seconds later. I heard the two pairs of footsteps, the opening and closing of doors as they started moving through the house. But after a while, the sound disappeared as they went towards the front of the house. I pressed my ear against the hamper, trying to listen. As the minutes ticked by, I couldn’t hear my brothers but I swore I felt something prickling at my back.

I burst out of the hamper, flicking on the light to the bathroom. They could find me all they wanted, but I wasn’t staying in that creepy hamper any longer. I shut the door, at least. As I sat on the cold tile of the bathroom floor, I started getting bored waiting for someone to find me. I got up, running my hand on the cool porcelain of the sink. I opened the cabinet below the sink, rifling through the boxes and bottles.

“Kate?” Connor’s voice came from the bedroom, the doorknob rattling. He and Jack came into the bathroom, finding me sprawled on the floor surrounded by the contents of the cabinet.

“What’s this?” I asked, holding up a box.

Jack took it from my fingers. “It’s Mom’s hair dye,” he told me.

“And this?”

“Dad’s pills, I think,” Connor said, looking at the clear box of medications organized by the day in my hand.

“What do they use these for?”

“I don’t know,” Jack shrugged, kneeling and beginning to stack everything back into the cabinet. “Adult things. That’s what people start to use when they get old.”

“Old?” My eyebrows furrowed. I had never thought of my parents as old before. Did that mean they were going to die soon? A different kind of fear squeezed at my chest.

Connor laughed. “You’re the youngest, so you better get used to Mom and Dad always being old for your age. Come on, let’s play again. Jack, you count.”

I tossed *The New York Times* into the recycling pile, clearing the table as I set places for dinner that night. The headlines still bothered me even from the trash. When we sat down to eat, I began a new line of questioning. “So, who do you think will be the one to take care of you guys when you’re older out of me, Jack, and Connor?”

My dad laughed. We were having chicken noodle soup. He let his spoon drop back into the bowl. “You planning on committing us to a home sometime soon?”

“No!” I said, blowing the soup in my spoon to cool it. “Just

wondering.”

“Probably you,” Mom said, thinking. “I feel like the daughter always gets stuck with it. I can’t really picture Connor or Jack doing it. Maybe if they were closer to us, they would.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Yeah, maybe.” I take another spoonful before asking the next question.

“If you were on life support, how long do you think you’d want to stay on it before pulling the plug?”

“Jesus.” Mom laughed this time. “That’s morbid.”

“Well, I just need to know! In case. You never know what could happen, and someone has to know what you’d want.”

“I don’t know,” Dad said. “A month? Three months? Definitely not a year, that’s way too long.”

“Okay, got it,” I said, cringing before my next question. “And you guys are organ donors, right?”

“Yes,” Mom said.

“And you’d want to donate everything? Like what about your skin? And your eyes? Sometimes they want that too.” I’d been watching a lot of *Grey’s Anatomy* that week, and it seemed like a fairly common question.

Dad sighed. “Sure, why not? We’re being cremated anyway.”

I nodded. “Then where would you want the ashes scattered?”

Mom laughed. “Okay, enough of this. You can find that information in our will when we die. Right now, you don’t have to worry about it.”

I sighed and went back to my soup. “It sucks being the youngest.”

“What? I thought we were planning our deaths.” Dad squinted at me from across the table.

“Well, I’m just saying, Connor and Jack will always have had more time with you than I will! That doesn’t seem fair.” I could hear the whine in my own voice.

“Maybe you should see this quarantine as your opportunity to make up for lost time, then,” Mom said. “Unless we all get coronavirus and die, of course.” Nobody laughed, just fidgeted slightly in our seats. We continued the meal quietly.

But the questions kept coming, night after night, just as the news of coronavirus hitting more and more people kept coming, night after night. Little by little, at twenty-one years old, I started getting to know my parents.