Mind Your Manners

Jake Bittle

“Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.”
—Henry James, opening line of *The Portrait of a Lady* (emphasis mine)

I was just beginning my junior year of high school when I started dating Rachel. She was my first Serious Girlfriend. During the first week of school, I asked her to the homecoming dance, and on the night of the dance, after a dinner at Maggiano’s Little Italy with all of our friends, I kissed her on the dance floor and asked her to be my girlfriend and she said, “Yes.”

Three weeks into our relationship, while I was hanging out with two of my bros, Austin and Brandon, I told them I had never had such strong feelings for a girl before. We were sitting on Austin’s sofa watching *Pawn Stars*. With a mouth full of Cheez-Its, I told my two friends that I thought I might even love Rachel. Brandon snorted. Austin did too, but then stopped.

“Actually, Jake,” he said. “We have to talk about something.”

I froze up. What did he mean? I assumed the worst: infidelity.
Most of the girls hereabouts are in love with him, or have been.

“They’re gonna have to take her out to dinner soon,” said Austin.

“I know,” I said. “So what?”

“With, like, her parents,” added Brandon.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know. What’s the big deal?”

“And you and Rachel are, like, good for each other. And she’s like, really hot. So you don’t want to, like, mess this up, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I know. What are you talking about?”

“Okay, Jake,” said Brandon. “It’s about when you eat. You’re fucking disgusting.”

Three years later, I can admit it: there were tears in my eyes. Of course I had noticed people laughing when food fell off my fork. Of course I had noticed that I tended to stain my
clothes with sauce far more often than other people did. But was it really that big of a deal? Was it really as bad as they said?

“Yes, Jake,” said Austin. “It really is that bad.”

I was appalled. Did everyone know this about me? Rachel and I had already agreed that we would go to dinner with her parents the following Friday: the Day of Judgment was coming, and fast. That night I stayed up well past my bedtime agonizing over the fact that my family and friends had all betrayed me by failing to point out and correct my primitive habits. Only in the wee hours of the morning did I come to my senses: though they were a little late, Austin and Brandon were really trying to help me. I decided to take matters into my own hands. I filched plates, utensils, and leftover food from the kitchen and brought the whole stash up to my room, where I practiced eating all through the night, scrutinizing my mouth and fingers in my computer’s webcam.

On the day of the dinner, Rachel’s parents picked me up in their SUV and I sat in the back with her as we drove downtown to an Italian restaurant (not Maggiano’s) that her parents liked. After her parents had each had a glass of wine and I had downed a Sprite and a half, the conversation started to flow. Rachel laughed at my jokes and her mother and father said I seemed intelligent. Afloat on the meaningless love for objects that Proust says always comes hand in hand with the beginnings of romance, I ordered the item on the menu that I thought would taste the best. So foolish! It was not until the waiter had waddled away that I realized the gravity of my choice: I had requested the linguine di mare. The noodles, the mussels, the grease! There was no way I would be able to eat it politely under such pressure. Her father was a police officer. Would he judo flip me out of the booth when he saw me dropping mussels into my lap and smearing sauce across my cheek?

The dish arrived. I picked up my fork, determined to prove my worth once and for all, but before I stuck it in the bowl I looked down and saw that I was holding it the way I had always been wont to do, with my entire fist curled around the hilt. Gently I put down the fork and picked it up the right way.
I took a few noodles and a node of shrimp from the top of the dish and tried to carry them over my lap and into my mouth, but—alas!—the noodles were hanging too heavily off the fork and one of them slipped down and stuck on the edge of the table. I jammed the pasta in my mouth. It was only then that I realized the table had gone completely silent. I looked up and met Rachel’s father’s eyes.

“Having a little trouble eating there?” he said. I gripped the leather of the booth to keep my body from disintegrating on the spot. Rachel flushed red and hid her face in her hands. I looked at her father, unable to say anything with my mouth full of pasta. He narrowed his eyes at me. I was about to make a run for it. But then he leaned back and laughed.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It doesn’t gross me out. I don’t mind. And as long as Rachel doesn’t have a problem with it, I’m certainly in no position to say anything.” I overflowed with joy. I spent the rest of the night completely aglow, feeling almost as though I could hear the “airy and fragrant phrase” from Vinteuil’s sonata that seals and signifies Swann and Odette’s nascent love.

Nor was this merciful man—God bless you, John Redacted, wherever you are—some exceptionally forgiving outlier.
Rather, he was one point in a whole constellation of people who have professed tolerance for and patience with my disgusting manners. Peers, mentors, relatives, and employers of mine have been able “look past” my “bad habits” and “accept me” for “who I am.” Some of them even find my lack of etiquette “cute.” At the time of writing I am a full nineteen years old. I have successfully cast a ballot in a congressional election, put together a coherent résumé, and completed one-and-a-half years of undergraduate study (about three hundred and fifty dining hall meals, if anyone’s counting). I do not remember the last time I ate something without spilling it or getting it on my face. Really. The adult world, the world of etiquette, restraint, maturity, has for whatever reason chosen so far to forgive my awful manners.

But the older I get, the more I see that although my sloppiness has, for the most part, been tolerated by those around me, it has certainly not been ignored. I grow increasingly aware of how easy it is for people to spot my bad manners and of how much I stick out at a table, even among close friends or family members. Other people do not always comment on my manners (perhaps because they have the very self-restraint that I seem to lack), but I know they know. I can see it in their eyes. And besides, even if they didn’t notice, I would still notice; even when I’m distracted by a
rowdy conversation or an interesting story I can never go too long without feeling the sauce smeared across my cheek or noticing a meatball fall off its fork and into my lap. But of course everyone sees: at a dinner table every face is plainly visible. All mouths are on display. Even once my sloppiness has been acknowledged and forgiven, my fumbles and spills still break up the fabric of the meal, interrupting a congenial atmosphere by arousing at best pity and at worst suspicion.

Even if it does not significantly change the way the world treats me, then, this habit at the very least changes the way I experience the world—specifically the social world(s) of the dinner table, one of the most important sites and forums for human interaction. It is in this world, this essential world—this proving ground, this stage for courtship, this arena for argument—that I must tread with the greatest caution and face my greatest embarrassments. There are few things more enjoyable than a hearty dinner with friends or family, but when the very act of inserting food into my mouth becomes a spectacle, this communion is blocked and negated. Eyes rush in my direction. Even if I am excused, there is a moment during every dinner when I am completely alone, left to struggle on my own with noodles and flanks and spoonfuls of rice. I am walled off from the scene of dinner, from the sense of a meal, and thus from one of the very nexuses of civilized life.

If we trust Literature (which I do—I have always regarded it as a transcendental substitute for gastronomical sustenance, the source of a higher kind of calorie) we are likely to conclude that besides reading, eating is the most important thing a human being can do. A hearty portion of many a classic novel is dedicated to that second-highest of mortal pursuits. Even Thomas Foster, in his atrocious book *How To Read Literature Like A Professor*, was perceptive enough to make the second chapter about the significance of meals in literature. Off the top of my head we have, by way of famous meals, Plato’s *Symposium*, the tea ceremonies in *Genji*, the feast in Joyce’s “The Dead,” the banquet in *Macbeth*, the opposed tables of the British and the Indians in *A Passage to India*, the cramped meals served with yerba mate in Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*, and don’t even get me started on the dinners in *Karamazov*. Dinnertime in all of these wonderful books is a place of great consequence, a site for meaning and for meaning-making,
and in reading them I cannot help but wish that I could find the same significance in the meals of my own life. But even though my sloppiness does not bar me from the table altogether, it always prevents me from entering fully this realm whose essence is not consumption but communion. Because I can never transcend the actual process of eating, I can never reach the real bliss of “dinner,” the “invariably memorable” space Woolf sees as being illuminated by “the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse.” I am held back from this poetic realm, the “meal,” by the mundanities and minutiae of gross, gastrointestinal life.

I am never more conscious of this gulf between my literature and my life than when I read Proust. His masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* both inhabits and parodies the French realist world of manners and sociality, and thus overflows with examples of the significance of meals. Of the novel’s 3500 pages, at least four hundred take place during dinner, probably another three hundred during coffee or tea, and a solid seventy-five are devoted solely to the physical description of food itself. The gorgeous memory that opens *Swann’s Way*, the first of seven volumes, has the narrator spying on his family as they have dinner in the garden of their Combray mansion. He watches his parents entertain the inimitable Charles Swann, stopping every few moments to ask the maid Francoise to bring out another plate of fruit or to fill up their coffee. When I sit at the dinner table, whether it’s in a booth with my girlfriend’s parents or at one end of a sprawling private room at Maggiano’s, I often feel like poor Marcel at the window, unable to join in the *cult of dinner* even though I am right in the heat of the meal. It is only eating itself, the original purpose of the meal, that prevents me from enjoying the possibilities of communion that Proust so elegantly describes. I would never make it in *Lost Time*. M. Swann and Mme. Verdurin, seated at the long table at which Swann woos the elusive Odette de Crecy, would gasp at my behavior as I jammed pear slices into my mouth and spilled coffee all over my lace bib. I would be condemned, ridiculed in the gossip papers, ostracized from every Parisian circle—my awful manners would bespeak my lack of culture, my ignorance, my barbarism.

But again, we’re talking about my life, not literature. What’s even sadder than my inability to participate
wholeheartedly in this world of dinner that I read so much about is that there is nothing really profound or philosophical about this inability. I’ve read about more than a few slobs and indecorous eaters. One thinks immediately of Falstaff, Fyodor Karamazov, Ignatius Reilly, and their glutinous ilk, followed by manner-breachers like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and the various tyrants and tycoons in Dickens. Perhaps the best example of symbolic sloppiness is the priest in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* who causes the Madam to give up religion when she sees a mustard stain on his robe. The way that exteriors often function as barometers of the interior, the way that a character’s sloppiness can signal not just bad manners but some key psychological fact, is part of what makes these books so magical, so very unlike life. It would be easy to ascribe some kind of characteristic symbolism to my bad manners, but it would also be misguided to do so. My sloppiness is not a refusal to abide by the social norms of my historical period or a manifestation of my passionate hunger for all things sensual and gastronomical. Nor, as I might like to believe, is it an indicative measure of my devotion to a life lived somewhere other than this material world. I care about food; I enjoy meals. I would like to linger. I would like
to poke fun at Dr. Cottard, to send for another round of pies at Combray, to eat lunch in the Bois with Albertine. The fact that I could never do so has nothing to do with the food, then, and everything to do with me. This ferocious mouth and these fumbling hands do not symbolize some kind of Epicurean passion for the juices of carrot and onion, the gravy and the garlic and the celery.

In another character, for instance Falstaff, a ravenous appetite might symbolize a greater appreciation for the delights of this world. But to suggest something of this nature about myself would also be to falsely bridge the gap between life and literature, between the senseless and the sense of which it dreams. My accumulated sloppiness is no symbolic characteristic. If it means anything, it means that as a young, white, relatively wealthy, and otherwise sociable male I have been given a free pass in civilized life; the accidents of my birth, gender, and class have allowed me to sail through adolescence without having to curb or fix my very nasty tendency to slurp and spill. Without any reason to shape up, I have never felt the need to do so, and thus my sloppiness has become a constant presence, not a fatal flaw or a mark of sin but just a very, very bad habit.

And habits, almost by definition, mean nothing: in fact, as Proust himself tells us, they exercise an “anesthetizing influence,” (Volume I), a “deadening effect” (Volume VII) on our actions and decisions. They are merely mounds of past action that have grown too heavy for us to slough off. This observation functions as a commentary on life, of course, and not on the world of the novel itself: when Odette spends too long looking in the mirror or when the Mme. de Guermantes walks with a dignified lilt, it means something. My sloppiness does not: it is just sheer boorish disgusting habit, not epic or tragic or symbolic but only dull, pedestrian, and ugly most of all. My sloppiness is only itself. There is nothing beneath it.

If I were a chum of Swann’s or a primped Guermantes boy my bad manners might mean something more. We might be able to tease them apart and use them to build some “significance” out of me. But I am not in a book (and if I am, it is certainly not Proust). Thus, this kind of significance, this level of “character,” is unavailable to me. Even if it is true
that I am both sloppy and inconsiderate, there is no sense in which the former is true *because* of the latter. The best I can do is point to my awful manners as an indication of privileges and prejudices relating to my class and my gender—but these are facts about the world, not facts about me. It would be better, I often think, to live in Proust or Dickens, where one’s exterior habits and features can and do testify to one’s internal character. But to pine after such a world is totally, painfully futile; we can visit Proust’s Combray, but we can never stay.

Instead, I reach to dip the madeleine in the tea and I knock the teacup over onto the tablecloth. The pastry falls apart in my mouth and its crumbs cover my chin and my shirt. There is no memorious efflux but only a few worried stares from the other side of the table. I apologize, I clean up, I wipe my mouth, and that’s it. The only thing left is a mess.