



Changing tables

WHEN I FIRST MOVED into my parents' house, I got super depressed. They don't write fairy tales about 43-year-old, 8-months-pregnant-by-sperm-donor single moms who end up living back home during a pandemic. I talked weekly to my therapist about my loser status.

"I had chances," I'd say, "to have a normal life." And I meant it. I could've gone to law school and earned big bucks. I could've married Michael, the guy who was smitten with me at 25, now an accomplished engineer. But no. I chose to teach and push men away.

Then I made an entire friend group of single moms by choice my age who also just had babies. They're doctors and veterinarians, lawyers and brokers, and they helped me feel less like a failure and more like a woman whose life took a less traditional path. And although that first month of living with Mom and Dad was dark, after Autumn was born, I saw the light.

Living with them gave me the freedom to take a year of maternity leave, and, on a daily basis, provided me with family to share in Autumn's first everything. And when the rest of the world was locked away from my newborn during COVID, my parents were snuggled in, forming bonds so strong that instead of feeling like a solo parent, I was part of a triecta. Not only did I get used to my new norm, I thrived, often wondering if my current situation would become the rest of my life. I spoke to my sister.

"What? Are you just going to live with Mom and Dad forever?" she said.

I supposed I could've, but after a lot of thought, it didn't feel fair to any of us. My parents had raised their kids and deserved to go back to being retirees—ones who spoiled their granddaughter without the responsibility of raising her. And it was time for me to establish life in the real world with my new identity.

I found a place fast, and, piles of paperwork later, Autumn's changing table sat in the hallway waiting to be transported to its new home.

"The changing table," I thought. "How apropos."

Yes, it was the place where she received fresh diapers, but it was also symbolic of so many platforms becoming different. Instead of four in the kitchen, dinner would be two sets of two people eating miles apart. The thought took me back to a photograph I came across recently when cleaning out the basement. It was taken at our dining room table in the late '70s, well before half of the dozen people in it had passed. I was probably Autumn's age, too young to understand the concepts of change and dying. Back then, I assumed that those family members would always gather at that table, as sure as the sun would rise and set. Looking at the photo, I hear my grandpa's chuckle, feel my aunt's smoochy lap, smell my uncle's stale cigarettes. In my mind, I see the easy nestling of the wooden planks brought up from the basement, being placed just right to extend the table, making room for more laughter and light bickering. But soon enough, the dining room table broke its promise, changing all that was supposed to be fixed.

That first gathering after the death of my grandpa, we stood awkwardly behind chairs that weren't meant to be ours, the blare of silence deafening. Why couldn't the table stay the same forever? I think about all the changing tables worldwide, and how if we set up time-lapse cameras, we'd witness people being added and taken away, settings morphing to accommodate highchairs, then folding ones, and finally those with wheels. And I try to remind myself that changing tables aren't always bad or sad, and that especially in the context of who now gets a seat at our societal table—now embracing people of every gender and color—they can be good.

And every Shabbat, Autumn and I reclaim our seats at Nana and Papa's, and every Sunday, we set places for them. ★

Pictured: The author's family all had a seat at the table, circa 1979.



BY JILL S. LITWIN

Jill S. Litwin is a writer, teacher, and toddler mom. Her Mommy On blog can be found at jillslitwin.com or [facebook.com/mommyonjill](https://www.facebook.com/mommyonjill).