

# The Dinner Conversations

**Chorizo, chicken and prawn paella with a beetroot salad, Greek yoghurt and a glass of bottled water**

*Do you ever see anything on social media from your cousin Demy?*

*Sort of. She doesn't post a lot to be honest.*

*Where is she at?*

*University of Southampton.*

*What, doing music?*

*Yeah.*

*Does she not contact you or say hello?*

*Not really. I think, back in June we were talking. Just about general uni stuff.*

*Does she post anything?*

*Not much.*

*I wonder why.*

*What do you mean?*

*Well, her dad probably don't let her.*

I miss my cousin. I miss my family. I have family, plenty of it. I live with my mother and father and sister and we are close. We eat together, we watch television together, we work next door to each other. What I miss is everyone else. My father doesn't talk to my mother's parents, or my mother's sisters. My mother, in return, rarely talks with my father's mother and my father's brother. It's all politics, they say to me, don't get involved.

It wasn't always like this. We are distant with my father's side of the family. They live in North London and due to my father's bad back, he can't drive for long periods of time. We don't often visit. My grandparents, my mother's parents, live fifteen minutes away. They are where everyone in the family drift to, at Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, funerals, Easter, or week-end visits or let's go shopping visits or dinner visits.

As children, my cousins and I were looked after by our grandparents. I'd be at home every evening and every week-end but our parents had to work. My mother went back to work a week after I was born. She had to help my father run their business. They are barbers and opened their first shop at eighteen. If they weren't working, then there was no money.

I liked it at my grandparent's house. I got to play with my cousins all day. My favourite game we played was 'Offices'. Alex (my eldest cousin and the only boy), didn't participate in this one. My sister Nikki, my cousin Eleni (Alex's younger sister), my cousin Demy and I would gather as much stationary we could find and choose a step on the staircase to set up as an 'office'. Then we would sit on our step and pretend. We would call each other up with our hands and gossip.

*You know Demy forgot to send out that order.*

*Really?*

*Yeah and now the manager wants to speak to her.*

Demy would laugh because she could hear everything we said. Then we would laugh because she was laughing. On our pieces of paper we would draw squiggles to imitate real writing. The squiggles were what we thought grown-up handwriting looked like and there were pages and pages of it.

What defined every day we spent with my grandparents was food. We arrived to a breakfast of our choice. When we were younger, we would choose cereal. They had the range: Cookie Crisp, Coco Pops, Rice Crispies, Shreddies, Frosties, Golden Nuggets. Alex showed us a revolutionary way of eating cereal: mixing two or more cereals together in one bowl.

*Always mix something with Coco Pops because that way, you'll have chocolate milk to mix with the other cereals.*

As we got older, we started to appreciate a hot breakfast. I would have two fried eggs, two rashers of bacon, one Cumberland sausage, two slices of bread and butter, baked beans, a tall glass of orange juice and lots of ketchup. I was nine. Around this time, I remember my grandmother asking my father something in Greek, whilst using her eyes to point to my stomach. My father had replied to her in English, *it's just puppy fat, she'll grow out of it*. My mother had asked me, as she picked me up one evening, if I had, *eaten anything good today?* I told her the contents of my typical breakfast. The next time I went to my grandparents' house, my grandmother cooked me one egg, not two, didn't cook any sausages, and told me she had run out of beans. I shouldn't have said anything.

My cousins, my sister and I became accustomed to being overfed. We got used to snacking, because no-one told us not to, and we had three hearty meals a day because my grandmother loved to cook. If we didn't eat everything she put in front of us, she would say, *come on eat!* Then she would assume something was wrong with her food, sigh and sit quietly. That's when we would feel guilty and force the food down our throats.

I loved her food and still do. She is why I will appreciate and eat any food put in front of me. I still visit once or twice a week, in-between work and university, and my grandmother will still cook me lunch. Only my grandfather, my grandmother and I sit at the table now. We usually sit in silence, partly because we are enjoying the food, and partly because the fewer the people, the less there is to say.

I haven't seen Demy for nearly eight years. They stopped visiting and calling my grandparents but we never got an explicit reason why. We could certainly guess. Demy's mother is the youngest sister out of the four sisters. She left home early after meeting a man twice her age. My mother said that her and my Auntie Stefania had been close, *like you are with Nikki*. My mother told me that they often felt overlooked by their parents. Their mother had to work hard because my grandfather retired early. Their mother also had to raise four girls and look after her husband.

My mother says that her parents favoured her eldest sister.

*She was the one that went to university and moved out and had a child first. Nothing the rest of us did was ever good enough and I think Auntie Stef resented Mum and Dad because of that, why she left home when she was just a kid.*

*Do you miss her?*

*Of course. She has made bad decisions. I don't see why she can't just call Mum once and a while. But she's still my baby sister.*

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**Oven-cooked pork chipolatas, creamy mash potato, boiled runner beans, beef gravy and a slice of millionaire cheesecake**

*A psychologist gave a lecture to our class today.*

*Why?*

*He comes in because we do this thing called Brain Day. We get to dissect brains and stuff. Anyway, he was telling us all about famous murderers and how most of them had problems in the brain, which made them do the things they did.*

*Yeah, they like to blame mental illness.*

*Well, he told us about one guy who had recently been let out of prison. So, this lady walks into a shop. She starts to feel uncomfortable because there's a man in the shop that keeps staring at her, like in an angry, creepy way. She tells the cashier and he tells her to go into the backroom whilst he calls the police. By the time the police come, the man has already left the shop. The police take some statements and tell her he will be long gone by now. But when she leaves the shop, the man who was staring at her attacks her with a machete. He chopped off her head and threw it into the road.*

*Bloody hell.*

*Come on Nikki, we're eating.*

*No, go on!*

*When they examined his brain, they found that part of his pre-frontal cortex had been missing since birth, which has caused him to do weird things all his life. Until he did something horrible.*

*That poor woman.*

*I know, its disgusting.*

When you are put off your food, it really does go down your throat sideways. Every swallow becomes hard, tasteless, forced. The food is wasted, although eaten. It isn't appreciated, although had been at the start of the meal. There are different levels of being put off your food. Nikki's mention of a graphic murder whilst we ate, did make us stop chewing, and stabbing the runner beans with our forks. But it didn't stop us eating. The moment was weird, but then it passed. We let it go.

There are worse things to happen whilst you eat. One, which I particularly hate, are arguments. Whether they occur before you sit down to eat, or during, or after, they ruin any meal. I don't mean little arguments, I mean the arguments between you and the other diners that make you flinch. Where we say things we mean, or the truth. The ones where you move your body and plate away from the diner you are arguing with. Where you do not look up at any point, just stare at your plate. Where you don't actually eat, just push pieces of food around with your fork. Where you clean your own plate before anyone else finishes their meal so you can escape before they do. Or you just sit there and wait for everyone around you to leave the table because once they leave, you can finally eat in peace.

I always make an effort to sit at the table, regardless of whether there is an argument. My dad chooses to not eat and stay in his room, or eat outside by himself. My mum and sister never seem to disagree with each other so they will always sit at the table. The arguments don't always involve the four of us. As soon as we enter a different dinner setting from what we are used to, our emotions are heightened. We are suddenly aware of ourselves, how we look, what we eat, how we eat, the strangers sitting around us but not with us. Becoming more aware of ourselves is not always a comfortable thing to experience.

My dad isn't the kind of man to hide his emotions. I used to think he was, but as I got older, I saw him angry, and shout at my mum and I. I've seen him sad and depressed. He tells me he is depressed. He tells me he doesn't want to live in this country anymore, that he wants to go somewhere with sun, and nicer people and better food, live a simpler life. This is where we were two months ago, holidaying in the South of Cyprus, entering a traditional Cypriot taverna, where my mum's uncle knew the owner. It was a Saturday evening in late August so the place was busy. The waiters were sweating and so were the customers. People were bumping into each other and not apologising. We waited for five minutes in a queue to be seated, until my dad disappeared and returned two minutes later, ushering us to follow him. Somehow, he had found us a table and I remember feeling embarrassed walking past the other people waiting in the queue. *This is the Cypriot way*, I remember him telling me.

**Pitta, tzatziki, hummus, taramasalata, Greek yoghurt, pilaf, koftas and lamb souvlaki**

Four menus were dropped on our table with the waiter mumbling he was going to get us some water.

*What do you two fancy?*

*I gave a quick glance at the menu and at my sister.*

*Want to just share some bits? Some pilaf, koftas, tarama?*

*Yeah that sounds good.*

*I'm not that hungry. It's too hot. I think I'll join you.*

*I'm gonna have the lamb souvlaki. I'm quite hungry. Aren't you hungry Sophie?*

*Not that much. Really fancy some Greek yoghurt and pilaf.*

We waited. We waited ten minutes before our water came and the waiter gave us some bread, olives and dips that came on the house with every table. Before we had a chance to order anything, he had disappeared again. My dad sighed and mumbled something in Greek. Another ten minutes went by and a different waiter took our order. By the time the food came, it had been forty minutes and the only dish that arrived was my dad's lamb souvlaki. My dad asked the waiter, *is their food coming?* I never heard what the waiter replied with, I just remember him rolling his eyes.

*What did you just say?* My dad's voice was louder.

The waiter replied in Greek, *you don't need to raise your voice at me sir*, and his patronising tone made my dad flip.

There was a lot of shouting, and my dad banging his fists against the table. A lot of hand movements and finger pointing. The words spoken between the waiter and my father were in Greek making the argument appear harsher, more violent. I remember telling my dad to calm down but I was ignored. I remember hearing the woman on the table next to us gasp when my dad banged his fist against the table particularly hard, causing a spoon to fall to the floor. Surprisingly, it was dad who put us out of our misery when he told us all to get up because we were leaving. I remember looking at the floor as we left the restaurant. I do remember seeing the owner suddenly run out from the kitchen, bemused and start shouting at the waiter that had been arguing with my dad.

I had not been that hungry before the meal. However, after the incident, I had lost all my appetite. Where did it go? It's as if my emotions overtook all the other urges in my body. I was no longer hungry, I didn't want to talk, or think, or move. Even swallowing my own saliva was difficult. I remember that evening very clearly, each moment of it, because I never ate a meal.

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**Grilled sea bass with chunky chips, fried mangetout, asparagus, baby corn, runner beans (halved) and mayonnaise with garlic.**

*I got a feeling in my bones*

*Can't get you out of my veins*

*You can't escape my affections*

*Wrap you up in my daisy chains*

*Hip-hop in the summer*

*Don't be a bummer, babe.*

-Summer Bummer, Lana Del Rey, feat. A\$AP Rocky and Playboi Carti.

Listening to music through my headphones, while I eat with other people, is like watching a silent movie. Eating fried mangetout as it cracks and pops in my mouth, while Lana's crisp voice sings eerily in the background, is completely calming. I don't have to be involved with everyone but I am here and that means there is no pressure to do anything but eat, which is what dinner times are for.

I am not a fan of talking at the moment. Not with my family. Mostly because our family has been interrupted. Nikki has met someone. Someone my mum and dad knew before my sister met him. He was a friend at first. I didn't see the signs. I didn't think it was weird he was having dinner with us, or watching football with us, or playing board games with us, (which we haven't done as a four since five Christmases ago). I was told, *he's lonely*. I was told, *he plays football for a Championship team and most of his family live in North London. He's by himself. He has no-one. It's sad. Okay, I said. Okay. I'll be okay with it.*

You see, the last time we invited someone into our family like this, I was hurt. This man was older, a family friend. He had money, or he acted as if he did. My mum and dad had been cutting his hair since he was a boy. They knew his parents. He was loud, blunt and rude but he seemed nice to us and was also Cypriot, so it was like he was excused for any faults he had. He took my sister and I out. We went for afternoon tea in a hotel where I felt uncomfortable, but did enjoy the sweet tea and pink finger cakes. We went to multiple shisha places (with my mum and dad too) and ate in

places you don't go with your parents to eat. We went to London Zoo in the summer and frowned at the monkeys living in confined spaces. The last time we went out was to Harrods. We each had a sirloin steak with fries and cherry tomatoes. It was cooked perfectly. After the steak, we wondered around some more, then he had to go. We knew he was leaving early and that we had to make our own way home. I was prepared to get the underground to Cannon Street, then it was one train. As we exited Harrods, he called us a black cab and gave us some money. I refused and said, *it's too expensive, it's quicker by tube anyway*. He wasn't having it and pushed my sister into the cab. I didn't want to cause a scene so relented. It was cold and raining. We said, *thank you and see you soon*. It was nice to be with my sister, just the two of us, which didn't happen much anymore. I started conversations and she ended them. She was on her phone, texting. The cab got stuck in traffic and the bill went up twice the amount we were given. I paid what was left, angry, but thought it best to focus on getting home.

Nikki was quiet in the days that followed. My mum was growing concerned with how much time my sister was spending on her phone. *Who is she texting all the time? I don't like it. Can you check her phone? I don't know how they work. Please, I'm worried*. I told her I'd try. I knew her code. I saw her enter it when we were sitting close together in the cab. My sister had gone to walk the dog with my Dad. She had left her phone in her room, on her desk. I saw it. I was quick. I entered the code and went to her messages, careful not to read any she hadn't read yet. Most of the messages were from him. The man. Our family friend. I started scrolling through the conversation, skimming bits, looking for something. I didn't know what I was looking for. I would know when I saw it. And I saw it. The messages were from the same day as our trip to Harrods, at the same time we were in the cab.

*How can I thank you for taking us out today?*

*You don't need to thank me hun.*

*Yeah, but you do so much for us.*

*I like you guys. But if you did want to thank me...*

It makes me feel sick remembering what my sister replied. She was about to turn sixteen. He was in his early thirties.

I managed to keep reading at the time because I saw my name.

They were talking about me.

He was asking, *what is wrong with her though?*

My sister was saying she doesn't know, she doesn't know why I am the way I am.

*But why does she eat so much? Why is she like that? Like a pig. Oink Oink.*

*Yeah, like a fat feminist pig!*

<Laughing emojis>

When you argue with your sibling, you eventually get over it. You're angry in the moment, you really do want to kill each other. But you realise it was stupid and you still have to live with this person and love this person unconditionally. You laugh and get over it. I didn't know how to deal with a man who I didn't know that well, and my own sister calling me names. I told my mum. She was shocked and disappointed, mostly about the sexual nature of the messages my sister had sent him and vice versa. I told her, *when you talk to her, leave me out of it. I don't know anything. I didn't do anything.* She agreed. I don't know what was said between my mum and my sister. I know my dad never found out, otherwise he would be in prison now for murdering our 'family friend'. I know my sister never found out that I had discovered the messages. It was hard being normal with her after that. What made things worse, we had to pretend everything was fine. We couldn't cut the man out completely otherwise dad would know something was up. In the end, he

left on his own. He stopped visiting, and my dad was happier for it. The man had very controversial opinions, which didn't look good for my parents' business when he sat in the shop, saying what he liked in front of customers. It was a relief when he left. I know that as much as my mum knew it was for the best, and it was a relief for her too, she was sad it had come to an end. We don't have a lot of friends. Our extended family isn't tight. We are quite lonely people. Yet, my mum loves to host. She loves to cook for people, look after people. She has always wanted more children.

Now, we have a new person in our lives. He consumes my sister, as much as my parents deny it. He consumes them, as much as my parents deny it. But, they are happy. For my dad, he has found the son he never had. They both had similar upbringings, on an estate, with absent or unloving fathers. He is a footballer, which excites my dad. He has got someone to talk football with. That used to be me. I had a Liverpool Football Club kit before I could walk, (there are photos), and he has taught me so much about football that I shock men when I state my opinion about a game. My mother has gained another child. She has a daughter with a boyfriend. It's exciting, it's new. I have let her down. I didn't go out with boys. I wrote, and loved school, and played guitar. I didn't do normal things. Now she has that, and I should be happy she is happy. My sister stays at his place a lot. I don't see her much unless he is there. When he isn't there, she is texting him, or talking about him. Is it love? I don't know. I assume it is, if that's really what she feels. She is young, but thinks she knows the world. He is nice. He is okay. I don't think he is the most loving or caring person in the world, and yes, I think my sister can do better. I also think my sister is better and should go to university and make something of herself. My dad told me that *not everyone wants to do what I am doing. My sister might prefer to settle, have kids, have a small job but not go to university, and that is okay.*

I am watching them now. They are laughing, I can feel the vibrations. Dad's fork is in the air, in front of him, and he is moving it from side to side as he speaks. Their plates are nearly empty. It doesn't matter that I am not a part of the conversation. I bend a little to scratch my leg and notice my sister's foot intertwined with his. My mum starts filling everyone's glasses up with water. When they finish, he gets up first, as Lana sings *don't be a bummer, babe*. My mum starts clearing the table and the rest move to the conservatory to continue watching football. I am not done. I stay.