In this essay, we encounter a family over the course of a meal. The star of the meal, besides the endless parade of food is Uncle Boris himself. And over the course of the meal, of the night, we learn about Uncle Boris and about his family. Our narrator is, we presume, the author. We understand him to be of a younger generation than Uncle Boris. It’s also very male centered--there is an Aunt who brings in the food and eventually goes to bed to leave these fools to their own doing, but we never even get her name.

The central form of communication among the four men (Uncle Boris, the narrator, the narrator’s brother and father) is argument. They argue over politics. They argue, it seems, over everything. That section of the essay (Barry Goldwater, Nixon, Bobby Kennedy, Communism, J.Edgar Hoover), that identifies a time period. The middle sixties about. And Uncle Boris has grown conservative in his old age and his nephew, the younger generation, our author, is more liberal. That feels like a kind of split any family might encounter. There is a mini-crescendo here where the author and Uncle Boris almost come to blows over politics. Boris threatens to call the FBI, though he doesn't (a point I want to return to).

I would say that another thing we learn over the course of the essay is that this family is Serbian and that they emigrated to this country sometime after, I’m guessing, World War II. I say this because of two scenes--the one where the author says he remembers the guard taking them from one prison camp to another and letting them stop to eat apples, and then the one with the list of nationalities where the narrator's father talks about how taking different sides in the war made everyone miserable. The apple scene seems important to me because this is an essay where food is plentiful but in this scene food is very scarce. There is another moment in the essay sort of like this--where Uncle Boris and the narrator's father go to a restaurant and eat well despite having no money.

I’m not really done with my summary. I haven’t talked about what we actually learn about Uncle Boris--the first thing we learn is that Mother Teresa, the saint of all saints, would want to clobber him with a baseball bat, which is to say that I think that we should assume is sort of a pain in the ass. We know he sings opera. We know he sings it badly. We know he has a lovely smile. We know that he can woo people with that smile and with his demeanor (he looks like a proper English Gentleman). We have that whole story about him fooling his family with the wine from the gas station attendant in Brooklyn. And we have that lovely little scene when his nephew kisses him on the head to end the argument, and it works. And he smiles his lovely sheepish smile, and he decides not to call the FBI on him (though we are to understand that he is joking--because he is a joker, Uncle Boris). He is a lover of good food and much of it. He is a lover of wine.

So why am I dwelling on all this, because to me, this is where the thesis lies. We understand Boris to be difficult and lovely and a faker and a hard worker who lived a tough life. And we are to understand this about his family too (again, they survived WWII). I’m trying to write this fast so you can see how not hard this is to do, really, or how informal this can be, but it’s worthwhile to focus on these two stories about World War II. These people survived the War in Europe. They were in prison camps by the nazis. These people, this family survived. That is more than most families have to endure. Our families are similar to this family probably in some ways, but most families are not. And yet that feeling--of this mix of love and hate and arguing and smiling--it's all a part of what it means to be in a family that survives, whatever you have to survive. And, most of all, I think we can understand that this is what love in a family looks like generally: it’s not all sunshine and roses. It’s loud and it is messy, but it is still family. That’s what love looks like in real life.