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Cold Cuts

The beachfront condo was a madhouse of mirrors. Many floors up in a 1970s stucco building, it was a tight two-bedroom of irregular shape decorated throughout with chrome and white furniture; and, while it had the benefit of overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, it smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and came with strict rules for keeping it chilly with air-conditioning to prevent mold. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors lined the south wall to give a feeling of spaciousness but instead caused disorientation. Each open space might be another trick of the eye, and I felt I might walk into a mirror wherever I turned.

Nothing about it meshed with my picture of my dad. What he liked was to be on the ground floor, to be able to go in and out of a house. I imagine him talking to the yard-work guys who brought their truck down the steep gravel driveway to my parents' house on Cape Cod; or carrying beer and wine from the kitchen to the old refrigerator in the garage to make room for more groceries; or emerging from the outdoor shower with a towel secured around his thick, pink middle, bony feet gingerly stepping across the flagstone as he greets his yellow Lab, the screen door slamming shut behind him.

My tall, sturdy dad had been felled by pneumonia in late fall of 2016, spending a full month at Cape Cod Hospital, which to his mind was almost as terrible as death itself. A doctor told him it would likely take six months to get better, but with his self-discipline he intended to cut the recuperation time in half. As part of this effort, my parents canceled their tiring annual road trip to Florida and flew there for a few weeks instead. I visited the last-minute rental in March 2017.

He and I were irritable in the condo: the sky, beach, and water out the windows too bright, mirrors and chrome amplifying both the light and the limitations of what we could do that weekend. He was determined to show me he was feeling better, and I could see he was self-conscious about the fact he wasn't actually doing that well.

When my mom and I returned to the unit after a walk in the blazing sun, Dad suggested we have cold cuts from the fridge. At their home on Cape Cod, he'd stand at the counter, fixing himself sandwiches, big plates crowded with bread, pickles, cold cuts, and cheese. My dad was the original foodie, teaching me from an early age how delectable a particular dish or type of food could be. He loved the tang and texture of extra-sharp cheddar, bricks of which he'd cut too many slices from for a snack before dinner. He raved about Italian hard salami; a good loaf of sourdough; Jewish rye bread; fried-egg sandwiches with salt, pepper, and mayo, the egg cooked over medium. Growing up, a pork chop and mashed potatoes might look uninteresting on my plate; and, after picking at them, I'd climb onto my dad's lap and watch with great curiosity

as he added sauces and condiments, piling foods together on his fork. Through him, I grasped the pleasure of it. I'd ask for a bite and could taste things anew from his plate, combinations, flavors.

In Florida, though, Dad didn't have much of an appetite or the stamina to make lunch in the kitchen. So he sat at the white lacquer table and made suggestions.

"Great idea," my mom and I responded about the cold cuts. We bustled around him, grabbing the wrapped turkey and ham, bread loaf, grapes, and glassware to set in front of him. He'd lost so much weight that his collarbones stuck way out, and his long arms were unrecognizably thin. Eighty-four, he was acutely aware of how he'd dramatically aged because the realtor who'd found winter house rentals for them for years hadn't recognized him. She'd been shocked at his appearance post-pneumonia.

We sat in stiff cane chairs fixing lunch at the table. "A little mayo on this would taste great, sweetie," he said to me, too embarrassed by his new frailty to ask for it directly. Up I stood to retrieve it for him. Since the pneumonia, he'd lost the ability to project his voice. As with his loss of strength and stature, the thin, raspy voice was emasculating, and it must have made him feel helpless in the face of wanting to control his recovery. Mom and I slid mustard and mayo to him across the shiny white table.

Dad talked about my sister-in-law's job search and how hard it must have been for her to leave a position she'd loved. He segued into the subject of gender and life expectancy: "These successful women are going to find out that becoming partners in a law firm comes at a price. All these old guys on the Cape die years and years before their wives. They toil away at high-stress jobs in D.C., Boston, New York, buy a place and move out to the Cape, and their wives are living much longer than they are."

Unlike my sister-in-law, I didn't have a big career. "Dad, come on," I said. "There's no relationship between being a successful professional and life expectancy." As a woman in my mid-fifties with different life experiences—some of them stressful—his assumptions annoyed me.

The two of us had had the same argument decades before, when I was twenty and home from California, where I was in college. My parents took my two brothers and me out to dinner at Mr. K's, an upscale Chinese restaurant in Washington, D.C. In an elegant dining room, we sat in skirted banquet chairs while my father, at the height of his legal career, ordered entrees for the table—steamed dumplings, orange chicken, garlic prawns.

He was the authority. But I no longer saw things his way. For starters, I'd fallen in love with a guy who'd come over to college from Germany, an army brat with an African-American father and a white German mother. This had blown open my worldview, so that my family of origin and even the setting at Mr. K's, with its golden rice bowls and dressed-up chairs, now seemed to me restrictive and confining.

Over crispy duck, my dad claimed that men had shorter life expectancies than

women because of the stresses of careers like his. With no research at hand, I thought his theory was wrong. I tried arguing. "What about poor people in other countries, Dad? Why do the women there outlive the men?"

He didn't listen. He dominated. At the restaurant, stuck seated at the table, I was livid, without the power or authority to go head-to-head with my litigator-father. Furious that he dismissed women's realities in general, I steamed above all that he dismissed me, my ideas, my experience. I knew the world was bigger and more varied than the one reflected in the cutlery and goblets on the heavy white tablecloth at Mr. K's.

At the beach condo, Dad spread a generous layer of mayonnaise on a slice of Italian bread. "You need to open your eyes, Jennifer. You can see it at the Cape. When I go into Friends' Market, there are all these little old ladies stooped over with white hair getting groceries. You don't see any old men in there. The women are outliving their husbands by years—sometimes decades."

Did he want to tell my mom and me that it didn't feel fair that he'd worked hard to raise a family and that we were all still healthy? Did he want to say it wasn't fair that his petite, lively wife, whom he'd supported financially for fifty-some years, was going to outlive him?

In the bright glare of the condo, I couldn't see the point he was trying to make. I wanted him to show some largesse. *Don't blame work or women—or me or Mom—for mortality*, I wanted to say, *appreciate the life you've had!*

And I didn't want to take on the role of emotional dowser, divining the kind of feelings he never liked talking about. It would have left him bare, vulnerable. I wanted to use reason: "Men's and women's life expectancies don't differ that much, Dad. They only differ by a few years, and there could be a hundred explanations," I argued, struggling against his tunnel vision.

He was weak, not at the top of his argumentation game, with fluid in his lungs and little energy. His face was gray, lacking its normal red undertones.

Like a boxer who sees his opponent beginning to flag or favor his weak side, I sensed an opening to deal a significant blow. "Dad, you need data! The correlation is between income and life expectancy. When you have money, you have better access to medical care, and you live longer. Plus, people with more education live longer. I really don't think successful professionals die earlier!"

Maybe he wanted us to acknowledge how tough it had been to begin life in Topeka, Kansas, in the country's Dust Bowl, a sickly baby whose puny neck was lanced to release a pneumococcal infection from his bloodstream; to grow up in a migrant family during the Great Depression with parents who divorced; and from there to become a successful litigator and raise a family in Washington, D.C. He must have

wanted us to see how all that work, that tremendous effort, was leading only to his death.

Why couldn't I grant him this at the table?

As a girl, my father had been my principled Abe Lincoln, six foot four with black hair that shone. I looked up to him for everything—intellect, storytelling, understanding of history, values. He and I were straight-A-student types who worked hard and didn't cut corners. We were conscientious and thorough. In high school, even while at an all-girls prep school, I took my academic cues from him. When he told me I should understand the significance of the Nuremberg trials, I chose Nazi war criminals as the subject of my research paper. When he said Hemingway was the best short story writer, I tried to understand what was great about Nick Adams and wrote a lengthy paper about it. When he told me Dickens' *Bleak House* was a great satire about the British legal system, I read the whole thousand pages through that single lens. My father saw himself in me, and I saw myself in him.

"Look, Jennifer, what you don't understand . . ." Dad continued, still working slowly through a meager sandwich of cold cuts. "What you don't understand is that Cape Cod has a huge percentage of seniors retiring out there, so I see it with my own eyes."

Was the air-conditioning bothering his lungs? I wondered.

"There are all these little old ladies at the post office and at Friends'," his voice whispered and squeaked. "Their husbands have all died."

"Phil," my mom chimed in, with probably the best point of the afternoon, "that's because the husbands don't do the grocery shopping."

I wanted to win this argument—any argument—with him for once and for all. My dad was my foil. I shared his looks and temperament and was in many ways just like him. But I'd also turned out to be headstrong and fierce, following my own inner voice and desires—leaping off a wickedly high cliff in Jamaica in my late teens when he commanded me not to, dating a biracial college student and finally marrying him, creating an interracial family, moving to Tennessee, and leaning in to my creative interests and role as a mother.

"Dad," I raised my voice across the lacquered table, "you really think that because you practiced law, you have a lower life expectancy? I don't think so! People who have money live LONGER. People with education and successful careers live LONGER!" I pushed away from the table to conclude with force: "Besides, you're already PAST the life expectancy for both men and women!"

He dropped his chin to his chest, as if to say, *You just don't get it.*

My mom and I put away what was left of the ham and the turkey. I helped load a few plates into the dishwasher and sponged off the expansive white table.

Somehow, we managed to let it go, this gripping disagreement.

I do think he was proud of me, proud that I took my education and values and, with them, forged my own way. As he did his own life, I'm sure he saw my life, correctly, in the context of American history. My choices have required resilience and courage, but it was the Civil Rights Movement and the evolution of the country's consciousness and laws that made it possible for me, as a white woman, to thrive in an interracial marriage and to raise biracial children in welcoming, supportive schools and communities in the South.

Several years before the pneumonia, he drove me from a different rental place in Sarasota to the Tampa airport. He'd advised me not to rent a car for that visit because he wanted to take me to the airport. As we headed north across the bay, then through St. Petersburg, with him at the wheel, he asked questions, taking an interest in all aspects of my life, in each of my two daughters—their schoolwork, their sports, their friendships—in my husband and his academic position, in our life in Nashville—our cars, our dogs, our house—and in all the details of the freshman English class I'd just taught about poverty and education in America. The whole way, he listened.

I wish that in the harsh light of the condo, just nine months before he died, I hadn't combatively informed my ailing father that he was past his life expectancy. Clearly, he was grappling, however imperfectly, with his mortality, trying to find a reason for his predicament. And I should have seen that his reliance on one subjective point for his argument was evidence that his intellectual flame was flickering. But it felt good to bicker, and I suspect he got something out of it, too. Engaged in our small battle, tussling and sparring, neither of us were forced to acknowledge how crucial we were to each other. We played out what had become our familiar, feisty scripts, perpetuating the hall-of-mirrors illusion that he would always be here.

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