

the last meal | Robyn Eastman

The thump from his oxygen tank was the only sound I heard that Sunday morning when I came in the door of Dad's senior living apartment. It was my turn to sit with Dad for the day. It took him a while to open the door, and when he did, his gruff voice boomed at me, "Seems like every time I sit down in the bathroom, I get interrupted!"

Still in his robe, he shuffled to the chair by the window. His thinning white-gray hair was sticking up in three directions. He looked withered, so far from the athletic jock who was a champion on the first Michigan State NCAA track team, or the man who traveled all over northern Africa during World War II.

It was an uneventful day. I did my homework; my son and his wife came to visit, then I helped Dad to the bedroom, and tucked him in for his afternoon nap. When he woke up, he sat on the edge of the bed, struggling with his sock putter-onner. His hands were so stiff, he couldn't get his fingers to maneuver it.

"You want to go to the dining room for dinner, Dad?"

"Yeah, I thought that might be OK."

I brought his pants from the back of the chair and knelt down so that his feet went in each leg. He stood up so I could pull them to his waist.

He had been wearing diapers since he had his kidney out. When I pulled the pants up, they sagged all around the diaper, so all I could do was grab both sides of the waistband and count, "one-two-three," and tug them up, as he imperceptibly stood a little straighter. Though his fingers shook and were bulky with knots of arthritis, I walked away to let him zip his pants and fasten his belt buckle himself. The sound of the zipper and the clang of the belt brought back terrifying memories I would never forget.

Since he was on oxygen all the time, I switched him from the machine in his room to the large, portable tank that clanked as it rolled with us down the stretch of red, carpeted hall to the dining room.

The dining room was long and wide with a low ceiling. Gold brocade material cascaded around the windows, and gaudy chandeliers hanging at intervals above the white linen covered tables; it looked like an old hotel. The sign by the front desk read "Room Capacity: 300."

As we were seated, there was a steady stream of old people, like cattle coming and going from the dining room. They had gray, white, and purple hair; some had hair dyed to brown or black. Some were dressed elegantly, others in jeans, some with walkers, wheelchairs, or canes. Most of them nodded or smiled, with a few commenting on the dinner, the day or their health; an air of despondency hung about them.

"So, what are you going to have, Dad?"

Peering through dirty glasses, he scrunched his nose into wrinkles; his mouth pooched out like a fish, as he moved his head closer to the menu. The haggard old duck craned his neck as his head bobbed up and down. He carefully searched both sides of the small menu. "Stuffed pork chops. Had 'em last time, they were kind of dry, but I don't want the fish, had it for lunch."

We knew his days were numbered, though I did not know he would be gone the next night. As usual, I had expectations. Over the years I had waited in vain for him to call me his "princess," or give me some words of wisdom I could hang onto when he was gone, something that would erase the ugly past, but none came. We sat in silence as we did most of the time, ate slowly and talked little.

He ate more of the ice cream than he did his dinner, and then he sat there for a while, his eyes searching the room as if he was looking for something, though he said nothing.

I took sips of my water until it was down to the ice, then sucked on an ice cube, quietly crunching it with my teeth. He folded his pink napkin over and over, wiping the edges with each turn of the cloth until it was back in a neat rectangle next to his empty ice cream dish.

Finally, he said, "I guess we can go."