

Restaurant

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As a child, I played a game called Restaurant with my father. The game could not have been easier for my Papa to play. All he did—all he had to do—was sit there in his lawn chair with his newspaper and put in his order. I'd run off and bring back steaks (rocks), beans (wet pebbles), frankfurters (bulrushes), fish (milk-weed innards), and salads (assorted leaves), arranged on a paper plate and served with a proud "Voilà!"

The game was one-sided, to say the least. My father, a solitary inventor and genius—not an especially playful or demonstrative man—never pretended to eat or in any way enjoy the food I so proudly served to him. He would give a perfunctory nod of his gray, balding head and, with the paper plate balanced precariously on his knee, go back to reading the *Times*. Sometimes I would try in vain to spur his enthusiasm. "Papa!" I'd cry, whine, "you're not playing!" But most of the time I kept my mouth shut, knowing if I pestered him too much he'd get up and go down the hill to what we called the Building, his laboratory, and I'd be left alone.

Eleven years ago this past September, my father suffered the first of a series of strokes that would leave him severely brain-damaged and, ultimately, kill him. I was in my thirties then, but wouldn't be for long, and happened to be visiting my parents at the time. Suddenly I heard a strange wailing noise coming from outside. It was morning. I'd been sitting in the breakfast nook, sipping a cup of my father's favorite tea, eating a slice of his toast with his beloved orange marmalade, reading one of his books when I heard the sound, and so went out to explore. There was my father, in the closed dark garage, in the back seat of his Subaru, looking ashen. "Ah, there you are, Peter, my boy. Perhaps you can enlighten me. Where the hell is the bloody steering wheel?" (Though born in Milan, my father learned English in England, and he liberally salted and peppered his speech with 'bloodies.') "I can't seem to find the bloody thing!"

With little protest from him, I drove my father to the emergency room. My mother met us there, and we waited together, pacing the halls as they scanned my father's brain. The results indicated a transient ischemic attack, a TIA, a very small stroke brought on, most likely, by a mild case of late-onset diabetes or an elevated cholesterol count, or both (too much orange marmalade on his toast; too many soft-boiled eggs).

My father recovered. But then, a few weeks later, it happened again. We had gone for a hike on one of those very mild Indian summer days toward the end of September. A wet, mossy smell filled the air. A rainstorm the night before had rinsed all of the colors of the world, leaving everything so clear and crisp it looked as though it might shatter like glass. The hike was my father's idea; he loved to walk in the woods. We hiked to an abandoned railway bed that he and I had explored when I was a child, where a pair of tunnels dug through the granite passed over and under each other. I remembered, back then, seeing a hornet's nest looming as big as a barrel as we drew closer, with the hornets buzzing as bright as light bulbs around it. I refused to go on. "They'll sting me!" I said. "Rubbish!" said my Papa, urging me onward, against my protests, with my face half-buried in his ratty sweater.

Sure enough, in a swift, blinding hot flash, a hornet stung my exposed cheek. The pain swelled like a symphony. I howled all the way back to the car.

"You promised! You promised!" I wailed.

"Peter, my boy," my father replied calmly, stroking me, "by now you should know that my promises are worth nothing!" This was my father's sense of humor, but at the time I didn't find it at all funny.

This time, though, we didn't go through either of the tunnels. Instead we walked the opposite way down the tracks, to where the abandoned rail bed curved through a stand of willow trees like the ones lining our dirt driveway. Next to them, at the base of the embankment, there was a small pond, its surface covered with demure yellow leaves blown off the willow tree's branches. The sun felt warm on my arms and my neck. An ardent swimmer, I couldn't resist. I sat down and untied my shoes.

My father said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm going for a dip."

"Are you mad? It's much too cold!"

"Rubbish!" I said.

I wasted no time and plunged straight in off the gentle embankment. At my urging my father sat on a rock and took off his clothes. Soon he was in the pond up to his knees, massaging handfuls of water over his sagging chest and belly, his ancient penis casting a drooping shadow as I treaded water nearby, floating via the merest butterfly movements of my fingers.

"I don't suppose there's any chance I could persuade you to jump in?" I said.

"Strictly out of the question, my boy," said my father.

"It would mean an awful lot to me."

"Oh but I can't, dear boy, I simply can't!"

"Sure you can, Papa. Just close your eyes and think of England."

It worked. To my great pleasure and surprise, with his eyes closed and with a “Yeeeeeee” my father didn’t plunge so much as let himself fall, like a chopped-down tree. We swam across the pond several times, me freestyle, my father doing his trademark sidestroke/scissorkick, our bodies cutting twin black paths through the gold carpet of leaves.

We were headed back to my father’s Subaru when suddenly he could no longer remember the word for ‘forest.’ He said ‘wood’, ‘arms,’ ‘*alberi*’ (Italian for ‘trees’). As he continued to speak, familiar words gave way like a collapsing rope bridge, leaving him stranded at the edge of a chasm. As he kept trying to speak his face started turning red, until finally I made him stop, afraid he’d give himself another, even worse, stroke. By the time we arrived at the hospital he couldn’t remember his own name, or mine, or even say who he was. The verbal world was like a closet filled with suitcases, all without handles, items he could not grasp.

Over the next few days, in his overbright hospital room, my father and I would evolve our own private language, a language of -isms and -tions and -nesses that eschewed all solid nouns and verbs in favor of abstractions—to the dismay of my poor Italian mother who, with her bare grasp of the King’s English, sat uncomprehendingly nearby. For hour after hour he and I would jabber on about ‘proportions’ and ‘essences’ like a pair of Mensa Club Martians. (“Yes, yes,” my father and I agreed as we admired the view through the enormous hospital room window, “there is a certain clear, positive quality, a quality of lightness, a luminance, or *luminescence*—yes, that’s it, a *luminescence*, a dreamy vernal effect.”) Slowly, one by one, like a flock of lost birds, the missing words flew back to my father. He recovered almost fully.

But then, not long afterwards, he had another stroke, and two months later another. And over time he was reduced to sitting in a chair staring off into space, or, if the weather was good, outdoors, in the backyard, in the same spot where he used to sit and play—or not play—Restaurant with me when I was a boy. Back then he would read his paper. Now, after his strokes, he could no longer read, or watch television, or enjoy music, or do much of anything.

But he could eat. In fact, aside from sleeping, eating became the only thing he was still able to do. And the only thing left that I could do for him was feed him. Every time I visited, I’d try to feed my father, supposedly to give my mother and the visiting nurse a break—but really to be in some meaningful way still close to him.

Even after they moved my father into a nursing home, though the setting and the chair had changed, the ‘game’ remained essentially the same. I sliced up his chicken and his carrots, stirred one-percent milk and Sweet’n’Low into his tea, made sure that nothing was too cold or too hot, too salty or too sweet. And then I fed him, one sip or spoonful at a time, wiping his chin every now

and then, trying to intuit, as best I could, which order or combination of foods he’d prefer. Should I feed him some chicken first, and then some carrots? Or the other way around? Or maybe a mixture? Maybe he’d like a sip of cranberry juice in between? Or a combination of juice and tea? There were no strict rules, of course. Standard dining protocols did not apply. A nursing home isn’t the Four Seasons, or Lutèce, after all. My father might even like a bit of dessert mixed with his main course, some strawberry ice cream served à la mode with his peas, or a spoonful of chocolate pudding with his broccoli.

But as time went by, confronted with a spoonful of whatever, my father was more likely to shake his head violently and refuse to open his mouth. He was losing his appetite, a bad sign for anyone his age, especially someone in his condition. Never a fussy eater, as each week went by my father grew more and more finicky, and feeding him became more of a challenge.

And a mathematical riddle. With each passing day it seemed that he wanted to eat only when things were given to him in very specific quantities, and in cryptic combinations. An alimentary safecracker, it was my job to unlock his appetite, to decipher its secret sequences. And, like a safecracker, I worked carefully, remembering those summer afternoons spent trying to get him to play Restaurant with me. I was still playing the same game, only now the stakes were much higher. Now the food was real and, unless I could get my father to eat it, he would die sooner rather than later.

“Papa, you’re not playing!” I wanted to shout—whine—every time he shook his head and refused to open his mouth.

But I didn’t, knowing this time, when he got up to go down to the Building, it would be for good. ☹