



Hot Dog

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“WELL,” MY MOTHER’S VOICEMAIL BEGAN, “this is a rather crazy request.” I’d called earlier to ask what I could bring to lunch—if she had a craving, a taste for anything special. She had to give it some thought, she said. My mother is ninety-six (two months shy of ninety-seven), and it had been a tough call she made nine years back to go into a retirement community while she was still fully independent, her life too large to stuff into that rBR on the D wing w/ patio. She made the decision when she still had her wits about her and was known across the Internet as a wily and ruthless Scrabble combatant. She made the decision while still a walker-free walker, a chair-free yoga student, an able driver, and an avid reader with no need for low-vision lighting. She made the decision when breakfast, lunch, and dinner still came out of her own kitchen.

I turned down the car’s air conditioning to hear what came next. “A hot dog with sauerkraut and good French fries,” she said.

Not so crazy, really. Hot dogs interest my mother from time to time: July Fourth, you’re likely to find her with one in hand. They’re not exotic—Mom grew up in Chicago, one of several cities that claims to have invented (or at least popularized) emulsified meat on a bun. More like hot dogs are what you eat in certain situations, she believes. Baseball games. Cookouts.

I could hear her smiling as she delivered her dream menu. It might have been that her non-Independence-Day desire struck her funny bone, or that it’s hard to always be the one asking, or that my sisters and I are always bugging her to eat more vegetables, and they are never something she craves. When

Mom and I go to the grocery store together, I routinely crack myself up with the opener, “So, what’s at the top of your list? Salad?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” she’ll say in her flattest South Shore deadpan, then head for the Honey Nut Cheerios.



Until all COVID-19 precautions at her retirement community are revoked and dining services fully resume, limited offerings and restricted socializing make for menus even less interesting than they’d been trending prior to the pandemic. Well before lockdown led to plastic satchels of microwaveable meals hung onto closed door knobs, the slide was notable and widely discussed. Table service had been replaced with self-serve, up-charges surfaced inside and outside the dining hall where once there had been no such thing. Want the lamb chop? Now they charged you. Borrow a cot for a guest? They charged you. Ask the front desk to call you an Uber? They charged you.

Residents blamed the demise on “The Presbyterians.” When I first heard Mom refer to the owners of her community this way, I wondered if she, raised Methodist, had let slip a fleck of interdenominational rivalry. Mom, whose greatest lesson learned from her family, she once told me, was that they didn’t teach her how to hate. Mom, who married across racial lines when it was still illegal in twenty-seven states. “The Presbyterians,” thank goodness, turns out to be simply the name of the not-for-profit outfit that took over after my mother moved in.

My concern for her moral high ground allayed, Mom’s references to The Presbyterians nonetheless skew critical, except, that is, in regard to their pandemic response. In that first year, only one person (one!) from the independent living apartments died of COVID-19. Visitors were not allowed to step foot on the property for a solid three months, vaccines were procured and administered with dispatch, and residents who did travel were required to self-quarantine.

Although the isolation bore down on her, my mother did not begrudge the constraints. Her only bending of the rules was to allow my two sisters and me to deposit care packages onto the manicured lawn at the edge of the campus. Ground coffee, fresh fruit, sea salt caramels covered in chocolate, various sundries. We used boxes small enough to fit on the seat of her rollator, and as she

wheeled by to scoop up the goods (and occasionally fling onto the ground a letter to be mailed), we'd wave from our cars, parked across the road, windows rolled up tight.

What bothers Mom far beyond feeling nickel-and-dimed by the new regime is what happens if (when?) she ceases being able to care for herself. She hopes she never has to go into the advanced care wing, she's said repeatedly, but if she does, we need to watch out for her. We can't leave the care up to them. Two or three years ago, my mother fell, then dragged herself across her apartment floor and over to the phone. The weekend nurse dispatched from the onsite Wellness Center recommended ibuprofen. In fact, my mother had fractured her spine. As troubling was the mystery of why she had fallen. She hadn't tripped, we pieced together; she had blacked out. A cardiologist was added into the rotation.



By the time the hot dog voicemail came through, I was already halfway to Mom's apartment. Decisions don't come as easily, no matter their weight: if she should take her sweater into the restaurant; whether the drive to Vermont in August will be too hard on her joints; does she want the boxed set of James Herriot stories or a single volume to start. I listened to her message as I crested a large hill. On the passenger seat next to me, roast beef sandwiches and potato chips and, to sprinkle across her morning cereal, a pint of blueberries. The message wound up, as most of our conversations now do, with her acceptance of the hand that's been dealt.

"I don't know where you would find it, so whatever you bring is fine, if you can't find the dog."

That day, at least, I didn't find the dog. On any day, I can't slow her hearing loss and can't reverse the macular degeneration and can't fend off the one-two punch of the leaky valve and congestive heart failure diagnosed by the new cardiologist. I can bring lunch, but I can't keep her friends from dying. I can't keep her from hearing about some of them months or years after they're gone, and this has prompted her to start a notification list, just so we don't leave anyone out when the time comes.

"Ma," I say. "Who'll be on that list that we don't already know about?"

"Henry," she says, then follows up with a few other names that of course I

know to contact. Marilyn and Steve, the couple she met while volunteering at the arboretum. Rosemary, the woman who used to stay with Mom after she converted her empty nest into a Bed and Breakfast. Bryan, Rosemary's son, my mother's godson. I am a lousy godmother to several children, happy to have the honorific and generally fond of youngsters but disinclined to keep up long-distance ties. Mom has sent cards and presents and attended major life events. She's shown interest. Of course, Bryan's on the list.

Henry, on the other hand, is the widower of my mother's friend Dorothy, with whom (pre-Henry) Mom hitchhiked around Europe in the early 1950s. Henry, a headstrong fellow with diminished eyesight, insisted on driving well after most people would have acquiesced. When Dottie was alive, he counted on her to tell him the color of the traffic lights. Henry was (and maybe continues to be) an excellent folk dancer, Mom tells me, and back in the day he would only dance with partners of equal caliber. "Dottie was good," Mom says, "but I didn't make the grade."

Henry should go on the contact list? Really? It was a good six months before Mom learned of Dottie's death, and then only because she called. "He might want to know," she says.



I've noticed that my mother has taken to punctuating her life with the phrase, "Oh, well." The winning streak she's been enjoying against Veronica, her staunchest Words With Friends opponent, has come to an end. *Oh, well*. The computer she plays on has been freezing again and she needs to replace it but doesn't know how to go about it, where to even start, and no daughter steps into the pause that follows this remark with an offer to help. *Oh, well*. It takes Mom forever to complete the weekly translation for her German study group. The month is coming to a close and she hasn't used up her meal plan credits. Her Sun Golds aren't growing as big this year. Her left pinkie finger cramps and she has to unkink it with her right hand. Those fancy Danish hearing aids don't help when she's on the phone. It's harder to read. *Oh, well. Oh, well. Oh, well.* Is this acceptance or deflection? Does it matter? Either way, it comes across as a navigation, a negotiation of doors closing.

Syntactically speaking, "Oh, well" is a collocation, a phrase that results from

the pairing of words, a pair in which neither component can be replaced by a synonym and convey the original meaning. “Oh, good” doesn’t suggest the same thing at all. Nor does “Oh, fine,” although that strikes a kindred (if embittered) stance of having given in to larger forces. “Oh, well” speaks of surrender, but also to the possibility of agency: There is nothing to be done about what has happened or been learned or lost, but here we are...now what? That we are here, still here, is what we’ve got to work with.



My mother enjoyed driving automobiles more than most. No surprise, then, that she has become adept at using her rollator. She’s quick with the handbrakes, bumps expertly over curbs, and sweeps through the narrowest of doorways. When it’s firmly in her grip, my mother zips along. To distinguish hers from the others corralled in entryways and coat rooms—back before The Presbyterians took chairs out of the lobby, locked the library doors, shut down the gym, and shifted all meetings over to Zoom—she knotted a scarf around one of its poles, a slightly Parisian flair. We’re hoping the new regime of blood thinners and diuretics will keep her from blacking out again, but if that happens, she’ll have something to hold onto as she goes down, maybe just enough to ease her fall.

Steel-framed rollators fall below simple canes in the hierarchy of independent-living ambulation, but they rank well above those aluminum walkers with retrofitted tennis balls cupping the front legs to help them glide. Rollators are for people who can still hold their balance and want to make tracks. The two of us headed out for a walk recently, and the search for my dog’s leash put me some paces behind. By the time I caught sight of her, Mom and the rollator had already crossed a heavily trafficked thirty-five-MPH road. She was waiting for me at the opposite corner, unhurried and unharried, taking in the afternoon sun. I waved until she waved back.

The rollator accompanies her almost everywhere now. It is her security and her portable seat, her auxiliary purse, easily folded into a car and useful for hauling. Lighter bags on the handles, Mom directs. Heavy items on the seat. My sisters and I worry that this device, as useful as it is, may be adversely affecting our mother’s posture, accelerating its mutation into the same L-bend

that shrank her own once-towering mother. Our mother stood an impressive five-foot-ten through most of her life. I am only five-foot-four, but these days, when we are together, I see her from above, hunched and terrain-focused.



At lunch, Mom ate all of her chips but saved half of the roast beef sandwich for another meal. She liked it, she professed, but I knew it wasn't what she wanted. The next time I saw her, I would be sure to bring a dog. I would bring extra dogs and extra rolls and a big jar of sauerkraut. I would stuff the unused dogs and rolls into her freezer, behind the backup Lean Cuisines for when she doesn't feel like the dining hall's same old, same old. I would wedge them behind the Styrofoam cups of ice cream she brings back from the cafeteria and stockpiles for visitors, flavors paired with each: coffee for the granddaughter, Moose Tracks for the son-in-law. The Presbyterians have, at least, kept the good ice cream.

“Hot dog” is also a collocation, whether you're talking about the food or the exclamation or the showoff. My mother is no showoff. She is averse to self-promotion (again, Midwestern) and will shrink from the spotlight if asked to talk about herself. But this modesty, whether conditioned or a fact of her nature, has never stopped her from the doing of life, and when she was a young woman she stood straight, not one to hide her height. She had a slim waist and long legs, which only my oldest sister inherited. Mom also had a taste for fashion. Sometimes, we dig through the cartons piled up in one corner of her bedroom—boxes that have been moved twice without having been opened, most labeled “Memorabilia.” A hatbox safeguards a millinery tangle of straw and felt, applique and netting. Brimless calots, veiled curvettes, and a white linen Juliet cap, a headband with curving tendrils that spiral outward. In a plastic blanket box, tissue paper demarcates life events: the spruce green gym suit with the hand-embroidered “Margie Lievense” on its belt; the royal blue letter sweater from South Shore High, its wool thick and unyielding; the red velvet bridesmaid gown with a ruched midsection; her wedding dress, champagne silk dupioni, ballet length, with a lace-trimmed matching bolero. A Harry Keiser Original, according to the label.

Cardboard Bankers Boxes yield stacks of miniature, deckle-edged snapshots

that show her in smart ensembles and fine tailoring, flouncy bows around the neckline and shoulders for days. These outfits are from the mid-1940s, her college years in Iowa, where a Quaker woman came to speak and cracked open my mother's world with notions of pacifism and conscientious objection and bridge-building, balm in the wake of a just-ended war. After graduation, my mother, now called Maggie, came East and joined Quaker work camps in Philadelphia, where she and Dottie first crossed paths. A few years later they found each other again, again with the Quakers but this time in Germany, resettling refugees who had come back home. In photos from these years, the women—my mother a full head taller than Dottie—are often outfitted for work. Kerchiefs to hold back their hair, shirt jackets, practical boots. In their time off, they clown around with whatever's at hand: There's Dottie collapsed into a wheelbarrow. Here's Maggie climbing a tree. There's the pair of them, Dottie and Maggie, for all the world their own collocation, standing on a sidewalk: my mother wears a dirndl, her arm around the shoulder of a lederhosen-clad Dottie, both of them in rolled white ankle socks and loafers, gobbling up adventures, smiles open to the possibilities, fearless explorers both.



Months of lunches later, Mom and I sat on her couch, four leather-bound albums stacked between us. Her reading lamp was switched to its brightest setting, and we passed a magnifying glass back and forth as we meandered through their pages. When I came to a pair of photos taken at a beach, I placed the open album onto her lap, covering up the one she'd been studying. I asked for details.

That was a day trip to one of the East Frisian Islands, she said, then hauled herself up to retrieve a map of Germany. She found one, 30 years old and from AAA, and unfolded it across her knees once she was again by my side. It might have been on Norderney, she supposed, tracing a finger along the coastline of the North Sea. More likely it was Baltrum, a smaller island just to the east. For sure, though, she knew that there was nothing on the island, no shelter of any sort, and that it was scorching hot. By the end of the day they were all burnt to a crisp.

Even so, they clowned. In the first photo, Dottie sat in a swale between

shrub-topped dunes. She wore a halter-top swimsuit, dark and skirted and with a white ruffle at the edge. A classic bathing beauty pose, her body corkscrewing to look back over her shoulder at the camera, her short black hair blown about by a breeze. After a second or third or fourth look, the dark blot in front of her took shape. My mother's head. She'd been buried up to her neck. Some prankster, Dottie or the young man across from her (what was his name?), had given my mother breasts made of sand.

The second photo was taken on a different part of the island, tall grasses as the backdrop. Freed from her gritty interment, my mother crouched over a rumpled plaid bedspread. She looks to be packing up picnic leftovers, putting the first of several tins into a string bag. Modest as her ruched one-piece was, it showed off her lean form: the muscular arms, the pronounced clavicle at the base of a long neck, the stomach flat as a board. A carrot stuck out of her mouth, stogielike. Food was still rationed, so their meal had to have been simple, perhaps just cheese and bread. If they were lucky, she said, maybe an egg. Too many questions seem to wilt her pleasure at being asked. Too much digging points up all that can't be remembered. But so what if the food she ate that afternoon seventy years ago is lost to her, if no lens is strong enough to bring it into focus, if there is no one is left to ask? Oh, well.

Another complicating factor? Food interests Mom less and less, historically and otherwise. Her appetite has diminished, and the extra pounds she complained about for most of my life have evaporated. Even so I will continue to ask about cravings, for whatever tastes she can muster. I'm confident she wouldn't turn up her nose at a nice bowl of pea soup if it came her way, or a boiled lobster, or a frosty black and white. A hot dog with sauerkraut and good fries. Maybe she won't eat the whole thing, but that's okay. She can save a portion for later.