

NANCY ROACH



CHERRY CRISP

When my father was eighty-one years old, I baked him a cherry crisp. I had to adjust the recipe; he was having difficulty swallowing. He had lost thirty pounds in five months and I knew the ratio (pounds to months) because he lived in a nursing home, and they measured these things. On the day he moved in, a nurse wheeled a mechanical sling into his room, sat him in it, and without any warning at all, lifted him from the bed. He collapsed into the fabric and hung in midair like a giant baby delivered by an ungainly white metal stork. The machine registered his weight, and the nurse recorded it on his chart. Five months later he was placed in hospice, but I did not understand that to mean that he was dying. It was not that the staff was unclear; hospice approval required a reasonable estimate that the patient might die in the next six months. I was present at a meeting with six other people when hospice was proposed. We sat at a rectangular table in a room with no windows, and in that small space an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, a nutritionist, a doctor and a nurse confirmed that he was not doing well. But I knew my father. He was stubborn. Thirty pounds was drastic, thirty pounds was a great loss, but it was not clear to me that this committee was interpreting the numbers correctly. Their scale measured only my father's weight; it did not take into account his will.

The purpose of hospice, I believed, was to give my father access to extra services. Those services included a personal aide for three hours a day, five days a week. The aide could help him eat, but I thought that the extra attention might also improve his spirits. He had been depressed since his move but I still hoped it was possible to mitigate his distress. I imagined the aide could read to him or take him from the sixth floor where his room was located to

other areas of the building. Maybe my father would attend a poetry class or be able to listen to music. He could sit in the garden and breathe fresh air, or on a rainy day the aide could wheel him to the first floor lobby, and he could look out of the huge plate glass windows onto 106th Street and listen to the caged cockatiels squawk. But I misread the situation. My father didn't like the way the aide read and he quarreled with her for taking him places he didn't want to go. Leaving his room made him nervous, not because he liked his room, but because he did not trust the aide to find her way back.

We had not had much time to pack when he moved to the nursing home. My sister and I chose a strange assortment of odds and ends to decorate his room: a miniature model of an Irish pub whose sign had been personalized with the words, "Graydon's Pub" in red paint; a heavy brass sailboat that must have once been a paperweight; a silly clay sculpture of a smiling frog. As a measure of our confusion, we'd brought a bathing suit, something he would clearly never have use for again. I did not realize how reduced his circumstances would be. He had only a hospital bed with a plastic mattress, an end table and one corkboard; a curtain divided him from his neighbor. On the corkboard we tacked pictures of family and a variety of holiday cards. They constituted the only bright colors in the room. Everything else was beige or some color that was just another version of beige. I couldn't bear to see him without his presidential biographies or his psychology texts; I couldn't stand the sound of the television tuned to Maury Povich instead of C-Span. I was always trying to get him out of his room. I had not yet come to understand what it meant for him to be afraid to leave a place that he didn't want to be.

The cherry crisp was a present for father's day. My son Finn wanted to help me bake and I pulled a chair from the kitchen table and placed it in front of the counter. As soon as Finn walked into the kitchen I realized my mistake; he had grown too tall to stand on a chair. When I bake with my children I am occasionally permitted odd little flashes by which I can measure their progress: I see that less flour has spilled on the floor, or that my daughter Clementine understands the value of the fractions that run up the side of the glass measuring cup in faded blue paint. When the twins were born I had imagined that I would mark their growth in the typical fashion, by their first words, their first smiles, their first steps, but I don't remember any of those things. Instead I remember the busy street corner at twilight where

Finn accepted a logical explanation for the first time. I had promised to take the children out for Chinese food but it had gotten too late, and he understood why we could not go. I remember the purple brushstrokes of unfinished pie on a pile of plates in the sink in Virginia. That was the first Thanksgiving since the twins were born that I wasn't too tired to help with the dishes.

I can still see Finn and Clementine framed in the door of the yellow school bus the day they paused at the top of the steps but did not smile ecstatically to see me. Finally, after so many years, they believed I'd be there waiting for them. They still pause in doorways. Each time we leave the house, they stop at the threshold of the heavy wood front door and are detained, suspended by some force I cannot perceive, before they step down onto the sidewalk. And though they have been doing this for nine years, I still expect them to walk right through, and I often trip at their heels. Someday they will step outside without hesitation and I will catch a glimpse of their progress the way that I caught Finn, standing beside me at the counter, tall enough to reach the paring knife.

We used the flat side of the knife to smash cherries and remove their pits. We wore aprons to protect us from the juice. I showed Finn how to peel the skin of an apple in a continuous motion and to my surprise my own peel came off in one neat curl. We diced the apples into tiny pieces so that they could be swallowed whole and Clementine sneaked into the kitchen and ate the bruised and fragrant apple skin. I adjusted my recipe to add extra cornstarch and flour so that the consistency of the cooked fruit would meet the "pudding thick" requirement of my father's dietary restrictions. We ground almonds to dust in the spice grinder so my father could have the flavor of nuts in the topping without the risk that he might choke.

I wanted him to have something homemade. His days were a slow cycle of sleep and food, neither of which brought satisfaction. His diet consisted of pureed meals: meat and vegetables and grains blended together and molded into pale, uncertain rectangles that wobbled on his plate. His dreams were filled with policemen and riots and thwarted attempts to escape. His sister Ellen visited him every week, and my sister and I took turns, but our company could not alleviate his suffering. Many of my visits revolved around the question of napping. He wanted to sleep during the day and saw my presence as an opportunity to set me to work on

the nurses. They did not want his schedule to get turned around, it was inconvenient and frustrating for them, the way it is for a parent with a baby who sleeps all day and is up all night. I never knew what to do. I could argue for him, and sometimes I did, but it was difficult to accept that all I had left to offer was the hope that he could sleep through my visit.

The cherry crisp was a compromise. My father's true passion was apple pie and he was particular about his tastes. He wanted his pie room temperature, never heated, and served à la mode, vanilla ice cream no whipped cream. For years I baked pie on his birthday, pie on father's day, pie on Thanksgiving, and each time he would rate my pie on a scale of one to ten. After I made the discovery that he preferred crumb topping to the fancy lattice top I'd been weaving, I managed to earn a respectable nine point six or nine point seven on most occasions. That was a good score but I wanted the satisfaction of a ten. After years of fractional misses, I came to understand that a ten was not in his nature. To console myself I devised an explanation that did not fault my baking; I assumed he refused to go any higher because he did not want to believe that the slice of pie he was eating was the best he could ever hope for.

Long before I learned to bake, we enacted this same little ritual, the scale of one to ten, in the cool waters of my uncle's swimming pool. The pool was not the traditional rectangle, but like an exquisite puddle, had its own irregular shape. For a novice diver, the design had an advantage; at a broad curve in the deep end, a shallow stone ledge was submerged a foot or so, and from this ledge it was possible to learn to dive without taking too much risk. Toes curled over the edge, hands pointed in prayer above my head, I squatted low and rounded my torso until my fingertips touched the water; all I had to do was tip myself forward. Eventually I worked my way from the ledge, to the side of the pool, to the diving board.

From the opposite end of the pool my father rated my dives. He was dark-haired and lean, relaxed on his chaise lounge. The goal was to enter the water with grace, but I was not a graceful or physically competent child; I lacked the proper sense of abandon. At the moment I leapt from the board I would focus on the rush of liquid up my nose, or the fear that I would not stop my rocket descent in time and that my knuckles would scrape bottom, or worse, that my head would crash into the cement. I remember learning to

dive as a solitary act; I was under my father's watchful eye but the fear of the plunge was mine to conquer alone.

His tone was genial when he shouted my score, and my father liked his decimals; most scores hovered between six point something and eight point something. He rarely shouted a whole number and I don't remember ever achieving a score as high as a nine. My father kept strictly to the role of judge; he did not offer commentary. In the absence of information I kept diving off the board but was never able to improve my score. Looking back, I can see that we had already begun to practice the subtle art of repetition and disappointment.

While the crisp baked, I cleaned the kitchen. Water filled the mixing bowls and crumbs washed down the drain and I worried that I might feed my father the meal that killed him. I used to be able to bring him small pleasures, Comice pears or honey buns, but they were no longer considered safe. Once I took my father to a swallowing specialist at Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn. The doctor positioned my father carefully inside of an X-ray machine and then asked him to swallow a variety of substances. Afterwards, he showed me the videotape. I watched with horror my father's chewing skeleton. With the obtuse joy of a man in love with his work, the doctor pointed out problem areas, and I became intimate with the mechanical difficulties of eating. I knew with precision the folds in my father's throat, the places my cherry crisp might collect where it should not.

I remember the drive to the nursing home—a glorious sunny day, windows open, tonic air blowing off the Hudson River, a profusion of tiny red roses blooming from highway dividers—as if my own sense of freedom were amplified by the contrast to our destination. When we arrived at the Jewish Home I led my husband John and the children to a small sitting area with couches and a tall glassed-in cage of golden finches. I hoped the nervous activity of the birds would distract the children from the reality of the surroundings. I was afraid to take them up to my father's room. Every time the elevator doors opened onto the sixth floor, a row of residents in varying states of distress greeted me, their wheelchairs banked against the nurses' station, a sort of receiving line for visitors. It was not the twins' first visit to a nursing home, and it is not clear to me whose feelings I was trying to protect, theirs or my own. If I had thought about it reasonably I could have prepared them and explained any unfamiliar sight. But I did not think about

the nursing home reasonably, and it is more likely that I was worried for myself, worried they would see that this was no place someone you loved should live.

My father's beard had been shaved again. It was a messy job and bits of his moustache remained whiskery. He was dressed in a loose-fitting pair of grey drawstring pants and a green sweat jacket that was not his. Not even the few things that still belonged to him could be kept track of anymore. All his clothes were labeled—it was the very first thing the nursing home had done, affixed their own labels—but clearly the attention they paid thereafter was perfunctory. In preparation for lunch, a full-length bib and a towel covered this outfit of his-and-not-his clothes. I navigated my father through the strange passageways of the nursing home whose elevator did not stop on the first floor but required us to descend to the basement in order to exit and then find our way back up through a series of ramps and halls. The kids had abandoned the finches and gone outside. They did not hesitate at all when they saw my father, they ran to hug him and he joked, “You gruesome,” but I’m not sure they caught the pun.

We ate the crisp outside in the garden, which was hemmed in by tall apartment complexes and sloped away from the nursing home, leading to a small, gurgling pool of water. The hydrangeas were in bloom. We found a table that wasn't bolted down and pulled it into the shade beside the soft, pink blooms. The kids gave my father cards they had drawn for him—a striped sailboat with a lone fish swimming below, a portrait of the family ornamented with an origami crane for good luck—but he did not say anything about them. I brought him two bags of pens and two copies of his revised phone list. The new list was printed in extra large type and slipped into protective plastic sleeves. His old list had been ten pages long; this one was reduced to eight numbers, one was his voicemail, six were relatives, and the last was a high school friend. This was his remaining sphere of influence, but the truth was the list had no practical value; my father could no longer work the phone. The pens were equally useless tools in his hands. My gift was to give him what he had asked for.

We served the crisp with vanilla ice cream and I was pleased that the adjustments to the recipe had worked. The fruit was soft and thickly gelled, the topping had crunch but melted safely in the mouth. As soon as my father finished his first piece he requested a second. At the table next to us, a small,

brown dog named Sally in a yellow t-shirt entertained us for a while as she ran in circles at the feet of her owner. Then we toured the garden and searched for things to talk about. I had not really thought beyond the crisp. We looked for dominoes in the nursing home common room but couldn't find any. I regretted the things I hadn't thought to bring: Clementine's flute, Scrabble. "Do I have to have lunch?" my father asked, and we returned to the table and watched as he methodically worked his way through the pan of crisp.

I understood how sick my father was, but I never looked at him and saw a dying man; I saw a man who was living with illness. I understood that he was in decline, but I could never fix a point in the trajectory of his descent. In a painting I once bought as a souvenir in Italy, a diver sails through the air, dark skinned and naked, above a pool of blue. His head is not tucked between his arms, but raised, and his gaze falls not upon the surface of the water, but into the distance beyond. The painting is a replica of the Tomb of the Diver at the ancient settlement of Paestum. Mine is a small, heavy rectangle made of plaster and stone; the original is frescoed onto the lid of a tomb. The image is said to represent the plunge from this life into the next, and it is the most pleasurable representation of that journey I have ever seen. The diver is young and virile and making a display of this last dive. Spindly trees curve towards him like delicate, titillated women hoping for a closer look. The trick, I think, of the painting, is the placement of the diver. Death is represented not as the end of an arc but at the moment just before; it contains all the hope, thrill and possibility of the dive before the diver takes his plunge.

Eventually the effort of eating exhausted my father. His eyes closed and as he started to fall asleep, he pitched forward in his wheelchair. He was in danger of falling to the ground, and John pushed against his side to try and keep him upright. My father was working at cross-purposes, leaning over to get his mouth to the crisp. When my children were babies, I used to marvel at their ability to eat and sleep at the same time. This was the balance my father was attempting but without success. I convinced him to sit back by offering to feed him. He ate a few bites but could no longer stay awake. It was time for us to leave.

Progress is perhaps easier to measure than decline. I could see the slow disappearance of fruit and cinnamon and flour and nuts, and I could see the bright red traces the cherries left behind on the side of the white tin pan, and in both the absence and the remains of the cherry crisp, I could see that my

father was pleased. The sheer volume of his appetite that day should have been praise enough, but it wasn't. I was compelled to ask for my score. With his crooked pointer finger my father traced a slow number ten on the tabletop.