

“FROSTY FLAKES”

By

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I ate the Frosted Flakes, dry, out of the box, and listened absently to the speaker. I wasn't anywhere near tuning into this person who droned on and on about Part D Medicare. Instead, I was on the porch, on a small island, the sun shining, and Dad was still alive--eating Frosted Flakes with sliced bananas--trying to get at the sugar bowl to make it sweeter. *No, Dad*, I said, like an indulgent schoolmarm and then thought better of it. What difference did it make? He was almost 80, and he loved his sweets, and his breakfast. I was his caretaker now, and here we were together “going down life's path,” he'd say. To days that started with his favorite, “Frosty Flakes.” *Let him have it.* And I nudged the bowl close to his fingers. An egret landed on the patio, and the cat chased a gull down to the canal.

But then I was back in this grey conference room, the air conditioning turned down so low I could see my breath, and I would need my Medicare to kick in if I survived this boring presentation. I got up and walked out. I looked across St. Petersburg's bay. Sailboats rocked gently, white clouds drifted against a baby blue sky. I ate the last of the Frosted Flakes, but I was still hungry. Remembering Dad. And

Food. Usually, a person remembers Mom and Food. But I remember Dad and Food. He loved to eat, and to get us treats, but he didn't cook at all.

I take that back. He made us oatmeal when we were little and Mom slept in. He called it his special recipe; what he did was put a dusting of cinnamon on top and call it a day. But because he made it, and it was out of the ordinary routine, it was special. When Mom made oatmeal, it didn't taste the same--She didn't know the special ingredient.

Dad was better at Food when he was out of the kitchen. He brought home boxes of eclairs and donuts from State Line Bakery--until my brother Felix came up with juvenile diabetes. We gave up the bakery but Dad made it up to us. My brother Nick hounded him: "Tie me up, fly a kite," he'd say. "Buy me a cherry tart." That's all he wanted, and Dad gave in.

On Saturday mornings, he would take us to the office where we wrecked Aunt Margaret's adding machine and coaxed Dad to get us junk out of the vending machine. A candy bar never tasted so good. Then it was a trip to Quickee Burger, a silver diner built out of a railroad car, where the patties were flat, greasy, and lacy around the edges, the buns soft and the ketchup and mustard oozed down my arm. Grease still has that nostalgic tang.

On Sundays, it was Dietrich's for chocolate ice cream so rich and dark I've never seen the likes of it again. Dad drank the milkshakes, but I spooned it from the tulip glass and roll it around in my mouth until my head froze up. If we could, we talked him into buying us the home-made butterscotch--a recipe that went to Emil Dietrich's grave with him.

Why is it that I remember Dad and Food? Was this even Food?

No, it was Love.

We drove to Florida in the station wagon, four of us kids under the age of eight at the time, and someone was always throwing up. My brother Nick was the lucky one who stood up in the front seat as we curled through the mountains of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia. But we were the lucky ones. He could have been in the back seat torturing my sisters and me.

We came to a ferry. Dad went off to get us lunch after he drove the car aboard the deck. I saw him at a shack near the dock, his arms loaded with brown bags. The whistle blew on the ferry. I panicked. I looked up and saw my dad, and I saw the water widening between him and us. I screamed. The dozen or so passengers waved and yelled for the captain to stop the ferry and back up. I had almost lost my Dad. For a bag of hot dogs. The picture of him, slightly helpless but smiling, his close cropped military hair cut and his broken, boxer's nose. He was "The strongest man in the world," he'd told me. I could not lose him.

But some 50 years later, I did.

I think about those times. The sweet times. The dock, and the water widening. My Dad reaching for the Frosty Flakes, his white hair fluffed in the Florida humidity, his cane leaning on his chair. His merry blue eyes. He did have to go, but I always feel him here, especially when I eat those Frosty Flakes.

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