

Father's Birthday

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It will be a day to remember if my sisters and I can make it through Father's birthday without upsetting him. Our track record is stacked against us even as I start to make plans for his special day.

Every year, we have a traditional banquet at a Chinese restaurant. Father may have lived in Canada for more than thirty years, but his taste buds haven't changed. I don't want to stray too far from our usual celebration, so I suggest a small change. We will detour to High Park before going for dinner. Father seems to like the idea. The last time we went there was five years ago on Mother's Day. Mother has since passed on.

Late that afternoon, as I dash around the house getting ready to leave, I yell out to Sam, "Please make sure you get to Magic Wok by 7 o'clock with the boys to hold our reservation. Don't be late, okay?"

Sam glances up from his newspaper. His blue eyes crinkling at the corners, as he watches Father fuss with his sparse, greased hair. "Mr. Liu, you're the best looking eighty-eight year-old man I know."

Father turns away from the foyer mirror with a grin. "You're not so bad yourself."

I'm always surprised at how well Sam gets along with Father. This wasn't always the case. Thirty years ago, when I told Father that I was planning to marry a *fankwei*, or white man, he threatened to disown me.

“Are you ready to go?” I ask.

Father glares at me. “Of course, I am. I’ve been ready and waiting for you these last ten minutes.”

“Sorry, I was just asking because Ellen phoned to say that she’s picked up Shauna. They should be here soon.” I am careful to use a soothing tone. No point in ruffling Father. Earlier, while he was getting dressed, I heard him humming a familiar old Chinese tune. He is in good spirits for now.

Father turns towards the mirror again. He tucks his navy blue golf shirt into loose fitting khaki pants, belting it firmly at the waist. Then he bends to wipe the powdery dust off his brown loafers with a wet paper towel before placing his feet inside. Finally he ties the laces into two neat bows.

The doorbell rings. Father picks up his Toronto Blue Jays’ cap and adjusts it carefully over his head. Shauna is stomping her feet when I open the door. Mother always said that Shauna kicked her way into the world, impatient to join her two older sisters.

“Ellen’s waiting in the van,” Shauna says.

“What’s the rush?” Father mutters.

Shauna holds the storm door open for Father while I yell to Sam to lock up after us. Ellen jumps out of the car as soon as she sees us. She holds the front passenger door open for Father. There is an unspoken understanding among us that he always sits in the front.

Soon we are on Highway 401. Father has already dozed off, a snore escaping every few minutes. Shauna and I are catching up on our children’s latest career and university moves when we are both jolted forward without warning.

“Oh oh, looks like a traffic jam,” Ellen says.

Father is wide awake now. “Wha...what happened?”

“There’s an accident up ahead,” Ellen says as she inches closer to the mangled cars.

“Did you have to brake so hard?”

“I couldn’t help it.”

Father grumbles. He is agitated with our slow pace. We take turns calming him, but he continues to rail at no one in particular. We breathe a collective sigh of relief when Ellen finally eases past the accident.

But Father’s mood has changed. Half an hour later, when Ellen pulls into High Park’s parking lot, he rouses from his nap with a jerk as the engine’s hum ceases. “I’m hungry,” he says.

“It’s not even five,” Ellen says.

“So, I’m not allowed to be hungry yet?”

“I didn’t mean that. Do you want something to eat right now?” Ellen asks. I can hear the edge in her voice.

I cast a warning look at her. “It’s okay. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Yes, I smell hot dogs.” Father points to a snack bar close by. “Let’s sit down at that table.”

“Why don’t we walk first?” Ellen says.

“You go for a walk if you like. I’ll just sit here and eat a hot dog.”

I grip Ellen’s arm and steer her towards the food line, while motioning for Shauna to lead Father to an empty table nearby.

“Why does he do this every time? Why do we even bother planning outings with him? He’s like a kid.” Ellen sends a stormy glance towards the pair sitting at the table.

“Don’t be mad with him. He’s probably tired. We should be grateful that he’s still healthy at his age.”

“I just don’t know why he’s always grouchy. It doesn’t matter what we do, we can’t please him.”

“I wish Ma was still here. He’s been lonely. He still mopes around the house. The other day, I saw him looking at some old pictures from Tangra.” My eyes cloud briefly. I remember Mama bustling in our home in Tangra, a suburb in Kolkata. Even later when she became weak, she continued to smile and remind Father how fortunate he was to have us three girls.

Ellen’s frown lines ease. “You miss Ma too? You know, I’m really glad that Papa is living with you since Ma died. I don’t have your patience and, unlike Sam, Eddie doesn’t get along with Papa.”

I understand how fragile Ellen’s relationship is with her husband. Whenever Father visited them, Ellen would call later to complain about how he upset Eddie. I say a silent prayer of thanks for my Sam, the only son-in-law who is never on the receiving end of Father’s tongue lashes. The irony is not lost on anyone. Of all three daughters’ marriages, mine was the only one that Father had strongly opposed. I thought he would never speak to my husband, but Sam never gave up trying until he won over Father.

“What can I get you, ladies?” The young man behind the counter interrupts our conversation. After placing our order, Ellen says with a grimace, “I picked up a couple of shirts for Papa.”

I roll my eyes. “I thought we agreed that we wouldn’t buy him anymore clothes until he starts wearing all the new ones he has. Remember the pants we bought him last year? They’re still in his closet, price tags intact.”

“Well, I didn’t know what to get him. I thought he could always use some new shirts. He wears the same ones all the time.”

“But you know what he’s like with his clothes. The other day I asked him why he doesn’t wear his new stuff. He said that, unlike me, he wants to make sure he’s got something new for every special occasion. Go figure.”

The snack attendant brings our orders. Drinks and hot dog in hand, we make our way to our table.

“What took you so long?” Father sounds cross.

“They were gone less than ten minutes. See how long the line is.” Shauna points to the people standing in front of the snack counter.

I give the hot dog and condiments to Father.

“I don’t feel hungry anymore. You eat it.” Father crosses his arms and sits back in his chair.

I watch Shauna’s face turning red. Quickly I say, “Shauna, don’t–”

“Why are you so difficult? Why can’t you be happy for once?” Shauna blurts.

“How dare you speak to me like this?”

“How am I speaking to you? We’re all grown-ups here. Why can’t we ever get together without you complaining about something or other? You want us to be respectful, but you don’t respect us.” There’s no stopping Shauna now.

I place a placating hand on Shauna’s arm. “Please stop. Let’s not ruin things.”

Shauna expels a loud sigh. “The day is already spoiled. He made sure of that.”

Ignoring her comment, I turn towards Father. “Why are you upset? Are you feeling alright?”

Father's expression is wooden. Ellen reaches over to hold his hand. "Please don't be angry. It's your birthday and we want to celebrate with you."

Father's glare sweeps over us as he pushes his chair back and rises. "I'm tired. Let's go home now."

"Papa, please stay. We don't need to leave yet. We still have a lot of time before dinner." My eyes plead with my sisters to jump in. They stay quiet.

Father starts to walk. "Well, I don't feel like going to the restaurant anymore."

"Alright, let's all go back to my house and we'll order in. Ellen, can you call the restaurant to cancel the reservation, please?" I try to keep my tone even. There is no appeasing Father in his current state. I hope that once home and rested, he will be less cranky. I should have predicted that something like this would happen. At least our track record still stands.

The End