

ELOPEMENT

Chester visited his dad for the first time at Gold Bridges Nursing Facility in October. He was discouraged from visiting him for the first three weeks of his stay so his father could become “acclimated to the new environment” the staff insisted, and “to discourage your acceptance of him after an elopement”. An elopement in this case was not running off and getting married, but running as far away from Golden Bridges as one could get without being hunted down by staff, whose jobs depended on keeping residents in residence. Chester didn’t understand what running away had to do with visiting, but as usual, he followed the rules.

“Where the HELL have you been?” Chester senior bellowed when his son entered the room. “I thought maybe you’d been arrested or maybe you and Candace took the kids and moved to Calgary.”

“Hey dad, I told you I was banned from visiting for a while. I’ve only been missing for two weeks! They insisted on three, but I thought that was ridiculous. What is going to happen to change anything in week three, right? You look good. How’s the food? What have you been up to?”

“I’ll tell you what I’ve been up to. Nothing. I’ve been dodging all the women who want to marry me. If they had facilities to bake cakes, I’d be the fattest man this side of Omaha. Not one of them holds a candle to your mother, who has not bothered to show up once. Is she dead or what? Honestly.... I can’t remember.” Chester’s dad reclined in his recliner and let out a deep sigh. “I’m just kidding son; I know she is. If she were alive, I wouldn’t be here.”

“But she’s not, so we’ll never know, will we?”

“Well, I know. She would never have let me end up in this dorm for the dying. She would have let me live at home until I was done living.”

Chester thought about this as he sat on the side of his father’s single bed, covered in an old army blanket he had insisted on bringing, rather than a floral twin set from the guest room. He wondered if either one of his parents would have let the other end up here if they were alive. Would his mother have sent his father, or vice versa? Should he have taken his father in? Despite Candace’s insistence that they could easily handle another body, with the three kids, two dogs and three oddly invisible cats, it was Chester who resisted taking his dad in. What was one more soul? Too much. According to Chester.

“So, how’s the food?” Chester thought this was really what his father needed. Good steady meals and a television.

“Crappy. Thanks for asking.”

“Really?” Chester expected as much, given the vile smell that assaulted his nostrils when he walked by the cafeteria. Reminiscent of grade school hot lunches, it was all Chester could do not to gag.

“The food here makes your wife’s cookin’ worthy of a Michelin star. How is she? When are she and the kids coming by? It’s not like this place is ever closed.”

Candace will flip her lid when she sees this place, Chester thought. It isn’t bad, but it’s not where any one lucid wants to be. Especially when there are options. Or are there options? Is this where it must end?

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll be by soon. Is there anything you need?” Chester asked.

“Nothing you can bring me son, except maybe home.”

Chester was thinking that he should have followed the three-week rule. Maybe his dad would have forgotten about home. Home with Candace and the kids and the four-legged menagerie. Would another week of no contact be capable of paling the reality of possible escape? Would another week of distance from his dad made him, Chester, less guilty? Guilty for throwing his dad into this pool of people with no one, when clearly, he had someone. Someone’s, who didn’t appear to want him.

“Dad, it’s only been a couple of weeks. Have you gone to any of the activities? Met anyone in the cafeteria? What about the lounge? Watched tv with the group and see who you might meet?” Chester tried to say these things with enthusiasm, but the thought of socializing with people who didn’t know if it was Monday or Friday, or who the President is, seemed dismal.

“Ha! Wait until your kids plant you in on of these plots.”

Christ, thought Chester. Will this be my fate? Have I set an example for my children that I will live to regret?

Chester’s memories of doing things with his dad started to blend in with the things he did with his own children. Fishing at the lake, fileting the fish and building the fire pit flames to just the right temperature to cook the fish without torching it, baseball games both on television and at the stadium. When he did these things with his boys, he was present, like his dad was with him. It’s the day-to-day attention that his dad never gave him, that he suddenly realized he didn’t give Stu and Cole. He was rarely home for dinner, to help with homework, to learn about their

days, what their latest term paper was about or how they did on their latest math test. Were they taking algebra or geometry? He didn't even know. He was too busy to follow their basketball games or track meets. Just like his own dad. Chester felt his blood pressure rising. He started sweating as he looked up at his dad who was giving him a quizzical stare.

“What is it son? You look a million miles away! Indigestion? You want a Tums?”

Chester wished a Tums would cure the rude awakening stirring up inside himself.

“Aww.. Dad, I was just thinking. Remember the pond and our long summer days fishing, how I almost sliced off my index finger the first time you showed me how to gut a trout.”

Chester gave a soft whining chuckle.

“I wasn't sure who would faint first from all that blood! You, or your poor mother. That woman gave birth to you, yet the sight of that bloody finger had her crashing down at that picnic table lest she end up in one of those anthills by the camper! She was not happy when I laughed at her, but she forgave me once she realized I had that first aid kit stocked with everything we needed to get you bandaged up.’ His dad laughed.

Chester barely remembered his mother being there that day at the lake. His sole memory of the day was the searing sting of the knife and grit of fish scales scraping his palms. His dad had poured some cold beer on his wound and wrapped it up. Or had the can of beer tipped over when his father had grabbed his bleeding hand? Chester realized that at the time of the incident, he was only thinking about himself, a young boy bleeding to death. But his dad had saved him.

“I never did get the hang of fileting fish, did I dad?”

“Oh, sure you did. You cleaned those trout up good enough for eating at the camp. I always checked for the stray bone before I threw them on the grill. There's nothing like fresh is there? The fish sticks they serve up here could be mistaken for cardboard.”

“Sorry about that. They must have some meals that are ok.”

“Sure, if your taste buds are already dead I suppose you wouldn't realize how bland the food is here. My taste buds are fine. I do like the chocolate pudding.”

Great, thought Chester. He likes the chocolate pudding. This is what his life has come to. It's the best I can do for him, after all he has done for me. I owe him, don't I? I had no idea how much he made me who I am, but wait; is that something either one of us wants to admit?

“Hey, did I ever thank you for teaching me about compounding interest? Really, honest to God, that one thing dad Watching my savings account grow, even when I hadn’t deposited all my lawn mowing money for the month was a real motivator for me as a boy.”

‘It’s things like that that make millionaires. Or at least keep the likes of us out of debt and a bit ahead of the Jones. You were always good, and still are with money. I mean, look at me! I couldn’t afford to stay here if I hadn’t saved myself and taught you so well. Sorry I can’t cover all of it. It might be cheaper for both of us if I just lived with”

“Let’s give this a bit longer dad. See how it goes.” Even as he said it, Chester knew it was a load of crap. His dad would never like it here.

Chester knew, and he knew his dad knew, although neither one of the men were willing to voice the fact that Gold Bridges Nursing facility was dying people. Chester Sr. did not belong. But, like the way people walk for a mile with a stone in their shoe or let a splinter fester for days embedded in a sore finger, neither one of the men bothered to address the issue that was obviously boggling both their minds.

It wasn’t until a few weeks into Chester’s residence that his son got the wind of the future. Walking listlessly into the home, Chester marveled at how the odd and unfamiliar could so quickly become mundane and normal to him. The ugly orange reception furniture no longer assaulted his eyes when he entered ‘Bridges’ as he had come to call his father’s residence. The cacophony of a dozen TVs from a dozen different rooms wafting into the hallways seemed as natural as bird song. Chester barely even noticed the various noxious smells.

“Hey Dad” Chester said on entering his father’s room.

His father wasn’t there. His bed was made. His framed picture of his grandchildren was still on his nightstand and there were several Riccola wrappers surrounding a half of a bottle of Boost. Chester’s eyes quickly swept the room, where he noticed the small locker door open, and empty. His father’s shoes were gone. How many pairs had he had? Did he have shoes or slippers?

Chester sank into the hard pleather guest chair next to the door, clutching the brown paper bag filled with crullers that his dad loved. He could barely catch his breath. What should he do? He wished he had brought one of the kids with him, or his wife ... That would have been a distraction, someone to take care of, someone to take care of him. He had to focus. He knew this moment would come, but even as it was upon him, he was avoiding it.

Five minutes passed. Then ten.

“Oh, hi Chester” and aide whistled as he sped by the room with a cart overflowing with streamers and half eaten bagels carrying the remnants of a morning birthday breakfast.

He was gone before Chester could ask him what was going on. A slight reprieve from the unavoidable truth of his dad’s absence. He shifted in the chair, stared at the bag in his hands and waited.

Five more minutes passed. Chester stood up and picked up the picture of his kids. It was at least two years old. The swing set was gone now.

“Your late!” a voice boomed from behind him.

“Dad! What’s going on?” Chester was almost ecstatic and tried to control his joy.

“They moved me. Something about the air ducts being redone. I don’t know. Follow me and check out my new digs. Now I have two trees and six parking spaces to look at! Moving up in the world. Hey, bring that picture will you?”

“I brought you some crullers.”

“Yeah, well I already ate. What are we doing for lunch?”

“Thought I’d bring you to the house. The kids are home. We can start up the barbecue and grill you some dogs.”

“That’d be great son. You think Candace has got any of that piccalilli she makes around? I miss that stuff...”

“She’s got a lifetime supply for you dad, trust me.”