Lucky

By Stephanie Vanderslice

It’s challenging to talk about what happened to you casually, in normal conversation. Sudden Cardiac Arrest is a mysterious phrase, for one thing. Awkward and vague. That “time he collapsed in sudden death on the kitchen floor of our Conway home,” is also a mouthful. Between one another and with those close to us, we tend to call it “the event,” or sometimes you call it, “my event.” You have divided your life into the “before” time and the “after” time. I suppose I have too. The label cardiologists, survivors and their families tend to use is “SCA,” but that only works with people who know what that acronym means, who possess our terrible knowledge.
How to be writers, both of us, people who troll always for the exact right word, and still at such a loss to describe what happened. To tell a stranger in an elevator why you’re still wearing a mask. Or to explain this unwieldly, important thing when you meet someone new who, chances are, will confuse it with a heart attack, which it was distinctly not. It is, for now anyway, a part of a ghostly context, the corridor of air that follows us everywhere: The event. The SCA. Shorthand for the time my husband almost died a year and a half ago and no one really knows why and we’ll probably never know but he’s doing better, yes thanks, so much better and there are a million other things I could tell you about this but I will stop there.”

Isn’t that the way with any story? How to tell it. How much to tell and where to stop. How to make the characters come to life, without telling too much.

You cannot walk past a cat without stopping to talk to it and pet it. You feed each of our three, Lucky, Chairman, and Marie, their own tiny dish of milk every morning even though you know I don’t approve, believing the common wisdom that milk is bad for cats’ digestion.

“It’s fine,” you tell me. “If it made them sick, I would stop. But they love it.”

No wonder whenever you sit still, on the sofa or at your desk, you are soon draped in our pets. They just want to be near you.

You have always liked to feed people. You devoted yourself to feeding our children in ways even I couldn’t completely comprehend. Maybe it was the fact that I breastfed them as infants, something you couldn’t do. Or maybe it was your lifelong passion for food, for nourishment. As soon as they could eat anything that didn’t have to come from me, you were the one eagerly preparing it and spooning it into their mouths. Rice cereal the day they turned four months, on the dot. Later broccoli and squash and peas you pureed yourself and painstakingly poured into ice cube trays to

freeze. Because of you, commercial baby food never touched our children’s lips unless we were on a trip. And still you were always fretting they weren’t eating enough. As a nursing mother, I was more intuitive. If they were hungry, they would let me know. Our sons learned at a young age that one way to get me in trouble when I was home alone with them was to go the whole time not asking for anything and then complain the minute you walked in the door that, “Mom didn’t feed us anything. Can you get us a snack?”

Because outside of mealtimes, I probably hadn't. I didn't ask if they were hungry. I expected them to tell me. I loved my children and I showed it but you were always more solicitous.
You poured them their cereal every morning long after they could do it themselves, something I didn't find necessary once they could reach the bowls and the cereal. I did their laundry until we were able to teach them to do it themselves as pre-teens—but even after that I might find you throwing in a load for them or painstakingly folding their clothes, explaining, "they're really busy."

Both of us rode the school bus during our own elementary years, but for a long list of reasons, this was "not done" in Conway, so we traded off joining the drop off and pick up lines like everyone else. You were much better at picking the boys up for 3:15 dismissal. I found the whole "no riding the school bus" thing disruptive, so I made it a point to find out the latest I could pick them up without getting either me or them in trouble (3:45 if you want to know) and arranged my schedule never to miss the later deadline. I probably shouldn't admit that. But I was never late and the boys avoided the "dreaded" bus ride. One day, though, I found Wil sitting in the pick up line beside another friend who was in tears.

"What's wrong with Justin?" I asked as Wil got into the car.

"Oh, his mother can't pick him up any more and his babysitter is late." He shrugged. "I'm used to it."

I was the nighttime parent, which included existential crises in the teen years and, more often, "can you quiz me on this?" duties at ten or eleven pm. I was also the one on eternal vomit patrol—something that can't really be appreciated until your child has puked off the top bunk all over his shared bedroom in the middle of the night. Otherwise, like most other aspects of parenthood—doctors appointments, soccer practices, teacher conferences—unless we had to divide and conquer, we did them together. Still, you were probably more solicitous with all of us. You still are.

Solicitous. Yes. If I had to pick from a handful of words to best describe you, that would be the one.

Solicitous. The opposite of my father, who would just as soon let someone else do anything as do it himself. How he loved to be attended to, waited on. At first I thought it was just my mother whom he left to shoulder the burden of nearly every task in our home. Years later, though, during a vacation in the Adirondacks, I watched in disbelief as his second wife, a tiny woman, wrestled a huge canoe into the water for our boys to paddle even though my father was right nearby. You would never have let me do that by myself; probably we would have struggled together and eventually, that's what the three of us did until we got it in the water while my dad watched. Just like my mother had, my father's second wife made him sandwiches, brought him his snacks and drinks on a tray. He was pleasant about it, grateful even this second time around, but he still expected it. It was just who he was.

I reassure myself, at least that I clean up after every meal, handle all the finances, try to carry my share. At least I offer to help and sometimes you let me. But maybe I don’t mind being attended to, either, sometimes. Growing up I raked the leaves, mowed the lawn, shoveled the driveway, walked the dogs in sub-freezing temperatures. I understood that was what kids were supposed to do, especially back then, and I didn’t have siblings to share the burden.

And so I appreciate that you are solicitous of all of us. I appreciate it not because I can’t do most of these things for myself but because I know, I can.

My paternal grandfather was seven years older than my grandmother, which is also

roughly our age difference. After World War II ended, he took advantage of the GI Bill to go to Chiropractic School in Iowa, something he had always wanted to do. He left my grandmother and my mother, who was a toddler at the time, in Brooklyn and went to Iowa ahead of them to get them an apartment and set up their household. They joined him some months later, traveling several days by train. “That is not an easy trip to take with a toddler, by yourself” my grandmother often reminded me.
A few years shy of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, my grandfather was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a blood cancer whose survival rate has since gotten better but which was low at the time, often a matter of months. My grandfather lived another three years though, in part because as one of the original health food nuts he was in otherwise great condition and in part because my uncle was also a physician. As soon as my grandfather was diagnosed, he moved my grandparents into his own home, overseeing every aspect of my grandfather’s care. He lived to attend our wedding during a period of remission and was later able to die at home, surrounded by family. Still, considerably weakened in his last months, he often sat in one of the two wing chairs in my uncle’s garage turned in-law apartment watching people and cars come and go through the bay window that looked out onto the street, unable to do much. My grandmother sat beside him in the other chair in companionable silence. Never a man of many words, he was even less so now, wearied by this disease, a shell of the person who used to walk miles every day. Once, my grandmother told me, he turned to her and sighed. “Well, Marge,” he said, “It looks like this is going to be one of those times I go on ahead of you, to get everything ready, like I always do.”

My grandparents were religious Christians, my grandmother especially so. Raised a Lutheran, my grandfather converted to Catholicism for her. He loved her and he knew what was good for him. The story of going ahead would have been a familiar one for them, John: 14: 2-3 a common New Testament reading, “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.”

My grandmother had a long wait. Sixteen more years. My mother-in-law outlived my father-in-law by eighteen years. And yet. And yet. My great-grandparents both died in their eighties, within one month of each other. Professor Pierre and Madame Alix Deguise, who met in the French Resistance and were legendary French teachers at my undergraduate college, spent their last days side by side in a Connecticut hospital, holding hands.

We are sitting on the sofa on a Sunday morning, drinking coffee and reading. “Roslyn Carter died last night,” I inform you. She’d gone into hospice just two days before.

“How old was she?” you ask.

“Ninety-six.”

“And how old is he?” you say, referring of course, to her husband, Former President Jimmy Carter.

“Ninety-nine,” I answer, after a quick phone search. “He’s in hospice too. I don’t suppose it will be long for him.” I pause. “I hope that’s us some day.”

You shrug. “We can hope.”

It goes unsaid that I don’t necessarily think we will live that long. What I mean is that I hope the time between our deaths will be short.

After Rosalyn Carter died, a popular quote from the former President made the rounds, “As long as Rosalynn was in the world, I always knew somebody loved and supported me.”

I was born into an affectionate family, attended to, almost excessively, as the only grandchild on both sides for eight years. I could never claim that I was not loved, although we are not always loved the way we need or want to be, in a way that makes us feel safe. Whole.
It is New Year's Day 1976. I am almost nine years old. My father is watching an interview with Jimmy Carter's mother, Lillian, snowy haired and sassy at age seventy-eight. Carter will be inaugurated in a few weeks, Amy Carter, who is the same age I am, holding her parents' hands and walking down Pennsylvania Avenue in cowboy boots and a velvet-collared coat.

"Why is his mother alive," my father weeps, waving angrily at the television through gulps and muffled sobs from the Early-American style rocking chair in our living room. "And mine isn't?"

I watch from the sofa, unsure what to say. Last summer, his mother, my grandmother, Gladys, died of lung cancer at the age of fifty-seven. The dress I wore to her funeral, an itchy peau de soie the color of bricks, was the same dress I would wear a month later, with matching knee socks and Buster Brown shoes, on the first day of third grade.

My father hasn't spoken of my grandmother in several months, can't seem to do it without breaking down, which wouldn't have been such a bad thing but seemed to be something he wanted, needed, to avoid. She would disappear so quickly in the months after her death because we weren't allowed to mention her unless my father did.

Even so, at eight, I have no words of comfort, don't even think to say, "I miss her too," which probably would have helped. But my father's emotions have always taken up a lot of air and space, and my own grief seems flat by comparison, a punctured balloon. After all, I had only known her for eight years to his thirty-two, although it had been, for both of us, the span of our lives.

I wonder now, if I had lost you two years ago, if I would also shake my fists at the television now and sob and wonder why the Carters had been given seventy-five years and we only twenty-eight.

Only twenty-eight? What about the people who only get five or ten or even twenty years? Perhaps I am more like my father than I realize. Nothing is ever enough for me. I always want more.

My parents were married for twenty-seven years before their divorce and so I suppose that was the star I steered by, consciously or unconsciously, until I understood, that October day, that there were plenty of other reasons we might not make it to thirty other than abandonment and bitterness.

Two days later there will be clips from Roslyn Carter's funeral running on CNN, Amy at fifty-six, her face lined and fuller now but still betraying flashes of the bespectacled eight-year-old on Pennsylvania Avenue. The former President is wheeled in to the front row, apparently insistent on being at the service even as he has so clearly deteriorated that he seems barely conscious.

She’s making a place for him. It won’t be long now.

I still think how lucky they are. How lucky.

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