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NON-FICTION | SPRING 2015

## **EIGHT GROWN CHILDREN**

By ANN CASAPINI

As my mother and I walk down the corridor, the air smells of disinfectant and urine. It is early afternoon but some patients at the Nassau Community Nursing Home are still wearing their pajamas, slumped in their rolling chairs, lined up along the walls. Some sleep. Some smile.

We enter the communal visiting/event room to find Dad sitting in his wheelchair, already dressed, but hair barely combed and face unshaven. I am holding the cake and candles.

Mom's carrying fresh coffee in a thermos. It is November 13<sup>th</sup>, Dad's 86<sup>th</sup> birthday. Dad had always been a man of simple pleasures. He loved his house, his garden, his Newsday and his pipe. Cake and coffee in the afternoon was one of his rituals. He used to dump the entire piece into his coffee and eat it with a spoon.

We set paper plates on the plastic folding table, dim the lights and do our best to sound cheerful as we sing "Happy Birthday." Then we feed him because his shaky hands cannot find his mouth.

We visit for two hours then wheel him back to his tiny grey room. Get him settled into the hospital bed. Arrange the pillows and crank the top end up.

I sit on the edge of the bed to say goodbye and his pale blue eyes burn into mine. “I don’t understand,” he says in Parkinson’s typically low gravelly voice. “I have worked all my life to raise eight children. Lawrence, Betty, Ida, Johnnie, Maria, Linda, you and Anthony. I don’t want to be here. I want to go home.” I look away, holding his thick fingers in my hand, wondering why is it my job, the youngest daughter, to explain this to Dad?

“Why can’t I stay with one of you?” he presses on.

Would he understand that Mom is depleted and depressed? That we were all worried about *her* health? Does he remember that Lawrence, Ida and Johnnie live in Ohio? That Betty died four years ago? That Maria lives in Washington State? That Linda has two small children to care for and a full time job? That I am newly divorced and struggling to pay for a studio in New York City? Should I tell him the news about his youngest son that we’ve been hiding? That Anthony is now in prison? I try to give explanations out loud but choke on my guilt. Our reasons, which seemed so logical and practical when we made the decision to bring Dad here, now seem like lies. All I can manage is “We love you Dad and we are doing the best we can.”

As my mother and I walk down the corridor in helpless silence, I pick up the pace, knowing I’d be unable to bear it if I were to hear him call after us.

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