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Tremolo

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During Chopin's "Scherzo No. 2," something distracted me. It was my father, drumming his fingers on his leg. My parents were sitting next to me in Philadelphia's Kimmel Center, enjoying the music they'd taught me to love.

But no, Dad wasn't drumming. He was playing the left hand along with the pianist: his fingers tapped his thigh like a miniature keyboard and mirrored the arpeggios, soft triplets, and emphatic chords, all punctuated by the gentle syncopation of mid-stage Parkinson disease.

My father used to be a fine pianist, though in our childhood he had time only for a swift run through "Gollywog's Cakewalk" or a Beethoven allegro before sitting down to slog through insurance paperwork that was the bane of a 20th-century surgeon's day.

He has wide palms and used to have strong fingers, with nails that were always trimmed and clean. Those hands performed surgery for more than 35 years, including 9 months in a mud-sodden mobile army surgical hospital during the Korean War. Those hands wiped the runny noses of 4 children in the cold air of steep Vermont ski slopes; sculpted clay and plaster of Paris (a bust of my mother's young face and head); played the violin badly and with passion; clicked a million photos; and grasped tennis racquets, Yosemite rock, and the carving knives over 50 Thanksgiving turkeys.

He's 88 now, and if he sits at the piano at all, his shrunken hands improvise a wild, plunky jazz. No more precise Hanon warm-ups or duets for 4 hands that he and my mom used to execute. These days, improvisation is the rule.

Tremor rustles the paper napkin in his hands, clatters the fork against the fruit bowl. Tremor: a musical tremolo, the lurch of an earthquake.

Sometimes, instead of sitting at the piano or in his power-lift La-Z-Boy, my father shuffles with his rollator to put on an old Art Blakey LP, loud. He takes up a discarded pair of my niece's drumsticks and on her old kit, tat-tat-tats on the snare and thuds the bass. Blakey jams on the hi-fi. Mouth working, Dad rolls out a defiant dum-da-dum, dum-da-dum and then crashes the cymbal.

Tissues always at hand, he dabs the corner of his mouth.

Last summer on Cape Cod, Dad wore an electronic metronome on a cord around his neck, along with his medical panic button. He concentrated on chewing and swallowing at dinner; the rest of us, 8 adults and 5 grandchildren and various friends, bantered, talking over one another as we do. Dad soon fumbled with the metronome, turned it on, and after a bit, said quietly, "It's a 6/8." I glanced at my sister Laurie, we cracked up. Dad switched to a 4/4 time and turned up the volume over our talk. There was the old glint in his eyes and something else: his struggling mouth danced with the beeping metronome and commented, more eloquently than words, on the absurdity and maybe a kind of rage against the lost legato of speech and breath.

After dinner, we pushed back the couches and put on some Frank Sinatra. My children showed off their newly acquired foxtrot and swing, and soon we all joined in, and my 16-year-old son took his grandmother for a well-led spin around the room. We were all dancing, laughing, teaching the younger ones.

All, of course, except my father, who was watching carefully.

He and my mom were once good dancers. In their teens in Brooklyn, they'd Lindy Hop with their friends. And when we were children, we'd ask them to swing in our living room, and they did, and my dad would end by swooping my mother into a deep dip and a full kiss, ripping his already torn T-shirt, and crowing, "Stella!"

At the Cape, Sinatra was singing "Nothing But the Best." Dad began to drum on the table, softly improvising a foxtrot: slow, slow, quick-quick, slow, slow, quick-quick, his palms pounded the smooth wood, louder and louder. He drummed with a set to his jaw that I've seen when he's rising from a chair or trying to replace a battery in his hearing aid. Foxtrot, waltz, cha-cha.

At home the following spring, Dad lay in bed, claiming he wasn't well enough to join the Passover seder.

"What is it, Dad?" I sat on the edge of the bed and encouraged him to sit up and take a sip of Gatorade through a flexible straw.

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"I'm afraid my legs will give way," he said softly. I assured him one of us would support him all the way to the table.

"I don't want to be a pest," he added in a whisper. I kissed him on the forehead: "I love you, Dad, you are not a pest." And I remembered him saying when we were young, decades before the Parkinson's, that he didn't want to be a burden later in life. Put me in a nursing home instead, he used to say, if I become incapacitated.

Eventually he made it to the table. Perhaps he couldn't hear all of the readings or prayers, but he looked revived and happy, and he watched his grandchildren with fierce love.

When the dishes were being cleared between courses, Dad sat with a few of us, idly brushing crumbs on the tablecloth. A rare silence among us, and Dad looked at no one in particular and said, "A seder is like a lobster." That's all he said. Exactly! A long lot of trouble for a few choice morsels. And the irony: a lobster isn't even kosher.

He's given to these brief, borscht belt koans now. Rolling into the kitchen in the morning, he warbles, "Watch out, I'm a new driver." How are you, Dad? "Upright and self-propelled."

That Passover night, he sat through the whole seder, eating well. Near the end we sang a song structured like "The House That Jack Built" where guests are assigned verses to add on, and full tilt, they repeat their verses each round, if they can stop laughing. My parents had the first verse, which meant they would have to sing it 13 times. Mom took the lead but

suddenly, Dad was singing all the words off-key in a loud vibrato as he used to on Saturday afternoons along with the Metropolitan Opera, driving us crazy, turning up the radio and belting out Verdi's "Di Quella Pira."

Two months later, on Cape Cod again, walking is harder, speech comes slowly. Getting out of bed may take a chunk of the morning. But one afternoon, Dad maneuvers his way to the snare drum, the only piece of the kit with him on vacation. He sits, raises a drumstick, and purses his lips in a half smile, ready to play along with Thelonious Monk. Then he looks around and gestures at a cardboard box containing a discarded toaster oven. Monk is drowned out in a drum roll, and soon Dad is using the piano bench, the cardboard box, an overturned wastebasket, the rattling oven—anything he can reach—to make a percussion orchestra. He taps a foot, nods his head, and rocks his body to the song, pounding through the Monk CD and Béla Fleck and the Flecktones, too, and I am grateful for the noise, for Dad's capricious rhythms, and the music he's made.

EPILOGUE

When this essay was accepted for publication in 2015, my father was still "upright and self-propelled." But he died at age 89, without symptoms or trauma, on March 5, 2016, at home with my mother, his wife of 64 years, at his side.

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