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Right Brain: Pull Up a Chair

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Sour pool-water evaporates from my cheeks leaving only the chlorinated memory of a morning spent under the sun. Our small feet patter on the scalding cream pavement, soaking in those same fleeting memories from wrinkled soles. With burnt backs and clogged ears, our bottoms slip into weatherworn lawn chairs around the picnic table. Despite having some give, the chairs begin to leave discrete indentations in the back of our thighs.

As I sink further into the fading array of blue plastic slats, my grandfather takes his place at the head of the table. My cousins and I await his methodical approach to scooping ice cream; he packs it thoughtfully into every crevice of the cone. I watch and smile with the humble wisdom that comes with being the oldest grandchild and only granddaughter: these scoops would be topped with a story.

The midday sun settles on familiar age spots gently crowning his forehead. Tender sage-colored eyes make a home among these marks of well-earned rest. A fleeting breeze brings a hint of savory warmth to my nose, his button-down shirt perpetually carrying the garlic my grandmother used to cook lunch. He intermittently clears his throat with a resounding rumble that draws my attention back to his face. A grin settles in as he effortlessly shares the inside of his heart.

We sat in those sharp chairs long after the ice cream became a dry sticky remnant on our chins, relishing playful tales about the mischievous German shepherd named Prince and vivid memories of a
wildly different childhood. Some stories taught poignant lessons while others acted as a vehicle for the punchline, all provided the catharsis of speaking to a receptive audience.

Prince was a rescue. A quick visit to the vet on his first day in the family made his poor health clear. Rooted in a conviction that any dream is possible with hard work, or perhaps plain old stubborn nature, my grandfather and grandmother decided that Prince’s fate wasn’t yet sealed. On that first night home, my grandfather watched his wife rummage through the refrigerator. Chicken, kielbasa, ground beef, eggs - nothing inspired this poor puppy to eat. The next morning, they woke to the pungent smell of the evening’s failure. Perhaps they hadn’t failed…a single hardboiled egg was missing from Prince’s bowl. This lit a fire in my grandmother. A carton of eggs boiled in the morning. A carton boiled in the evening. Twenty-four eggs a day. They kept disappearing. Prince began to heal.

I pause. “Didi, how could Princey eat all of those eggs?” He chuckles, shares that all-knowing grin, and continues. My dad, still a child at the time, was laying on the floor playing with a toy car. From this vantage point in the living room, he could see a flash of white breaking up the shadow under the couch. He curiously reached for what turned out to be a pile of slippery, untouched hardboiled eggs. He ran to the bathroom to rinse off, but when he opened the shower curtain there were more; a mound of eggs hidden in the bathtub toppled over, coating his legs with slime. As Prince recovered, the resource hoarding slowly stopped. However, every now and then a hardboiled egg found its way into a laundry basket, under the covers at bedtime, or even into another family member’s story.

Years pass by and the stories endure. This time we are in the kitchen of my father’s childhood home, our elbows stuck to the vinegar-soaked tablecloth, its threads carrying the same essence as my grandfather’s button-down shirts. My grandfather clears his throat, clutching the rusted chef’s knife in one hand and doling out thick slices of the watermelon with the other. He takes a large mouthful. The age spots on his forehead melt away, his sage eyes shut as he lets out a humble sigh. This outburst of emotion from a usually stoic man draws us in further.
He began this story in a small Ukrainian village on a dog day of summer. His group of friends from the neighborhood escaped their duties on the wheat farm to explore the shaded forest nearby. Their group stumbled upon a single wild watermelon growing in the brush. Raised in a country emaciated by man-inflicted famine, the children knew they needed to keep this discovery a secret. They made a pact to wait until it was ripe and pick it together. Each day they took turns in shifts guarding the watermelon from wild animals and watering it when the soil became dry. At last, the watermelon was ready to be picked. “That was the best watermelon I have ever tasted…although this one comes close.”

The chairs evolved but I continued to collect his stories. Our last one begins with me walking into our hometown community hospital. Earlier that day my dad called me, “The doctors told us it’s going to be soon.” His inherited stoicism mirroring the master.

As I entered the hospital room, immune to the beeping monitor and undertones of daytime soap operas, I searched for a chair to pull to the bedside. A forest green plastic chair with bent metal legs was available in the hallway. It had small holes along the seat portion, which surely would leave their impression in my bare legs on this otherwise beautiful summer day. I pull up the chair, beads of sweat pooling through my damp mask, and his familiar eyes open. The crown of age spots on his forehead was grander under the hue of fluorescent hospital lighting.

“You know my granddaughter is a doctor,” he says to me. I nod and go along listening as he proudly cites my latest achievements. Hollowness overtakes my chest and abdomen. I tell him that it’s me, “I am your granddaughter.”

“Oh, it’s you! I couldn’t tell with the mask.” Relief fills my hollowness. His presence alone, the slouched posture, quiet lips, and welcoming expression invite a story. He acknowledges every word as I detail the time my new puppy bit a hole through the wall. I embellish a hole so large you could reach your hand through to feel the weather outside. I then reveal that hidden just beyond the dry wall within the house’s framing were a few hardboiled eggs being saved for later. Through a resounding chuckle he says,
“well, you’ll never go hungry.” A glance at the clock signals that it’s time to share this moment with the next visitor. I stand from the plastic chair, the indentations established on the back of my thighs, the catharsis of speaking to a receptive audience never more apparent. One last chuckle embraces my soul as I walk out of his hospital room and into the dimly lit ward.

It feels as though I step directly out of his room and onto a ward at the Children’s Hospital where I work. Grief presses the mute button, the vibrance of the rainbow walls dampened. Transitioning back to training in the face of loss feels seamless. Familiar waves of heartache still billow in this hallway where I lost a patient shortly after we found his pontine glioma. More striking than his terminal diagnosis at five years old were the stories his parents shared. While breaking the news or bringing toys to his bedside, I sat with a slouched posture and quiet lips, my own sage eyes a privileged audience to these memories.

This mood creates a stark contrast to the exuberance usually present in my approach to rounding on the pediatric unit: engaging a toddler in parallel play using finger puppets as I evaluate strength and tone, watching a preschooler’s pupils constrict symmetrically as they turn to point out the window at the imaginary dragon guarding their castle, or telling a story about a courageous dog named Prince to my patient who asks if they will ever get better. Blending this youthful imagination with witnessed resilience in the face of devastation, I process my own grief and form the foundation of my practice. The tales that welcome me from hospital beds join the family folklore already sitting around Didi’s picnic table.

Through a slender peek-a-boo window at the end of the hall, I make out a dark silhouette. She paces. As I approach her corner room, she stops to peer through the tempered glass in my direction. Frantic waves commence and she clumsily exits the room. Her fervor single-handedly bringing color back to the rainbow hallway. I know the woman instantly. I had taken care of her son several months prior, his chronic disease having caused profound malnutrition. Without pause and with the entirety of our wingspan we hug each other like long lost family. Our upheld connection ushers me into their new room and we both pull up a chair.