

## “Eat Dessert First”

My father had his own way of imparting wisdom. He handed down stylish phrases when I least expected it. They burst forth suddenly and came always as a surprise. “Eat Dessert First,” was a favorite and best serves to describe his philosophy of life that helped to shape me through the years.

One hot, July Saturday morning, more years ago than I care to remember, my dad asked me to join him for lunch, a ritual I now look back upon with bittersweet nostalgia and fondness. This particular day, it was just the two of us. My mother, also invited, declined the offer for nobler pursuits: a manicure and wash and set at the beauty parlor where her standing appointment would never be sacrificed for anything as mundane as lunch.

“It looks like it’s just you and I, missy,” dad said with a twinkle in his eye “So, let’s go and raise some hell” another one of his pat remarks.

We went to a local spot in the same hometown, in which my dad had grown up. The restaurant was bustling with people, providing enough background noise to add an air of merriment to our meal. My dad and I parked ourselves in a booth and were handed menus, so large, they reached over the top of my head and offered more choices than I could ever hope to consume.

Such were the days when rules got broken, anecdotes were recounted and secrets shared. Over grilled cheese sandwiches and French fries for me and fat hamburgers, charcoal burned and blood red for him, my father revealed a most alluring confession.

“You see that woman over there?” he pointed to a table a few feet away.

I surreptitiously snuck a look.

“That’s Marion Chase, the gal who had a crush on me all through high school and into my law school years.”

With that, came a wink of an eye to Marion, whom I could hear giggling all the way across the room, while I, the budding adolescent, sat on the edge of my seat as he regaled me with this top secret piece of news about a gal who obviously still held a sliver of his heart.

“But,” my father said, moving his head so close it was practically touching mine, “she couldn’t hold a candle to your mother.”

As the afternoon stretched before us, I saw my father as the romantic figure, who could dazzle women as he dazzled me. He became some sort of irresistible hero in my eyes.

At another lunch, months later, I perused the menu at a different restaurant, this time in Manhattan, twenty minutes from our home. On this particular Saturday, I couldn't decide what I wanted to eat. My father, realizing my dilemma, summoned the waitress.

"Bring us the dessert menu," he said.

Obligingly, she returned with a small, leather-bound book, edged in gold leaf with a list of desserts that had my mouth watering. Profiteroles, chocolate mousse, chocolate cake and chocolate soufflé were mine for the asking. I felt as though I had entered chocolate heaven.

"But, daddy, we haven't even had lunch."

"Even better," he winked that same Marion Chase wink, "when in doubt, eat dessert first!"

"What will mommy say?"

"It will be our little secret," he said.

And there we sat on that chilly autumn afternoon in a cozy French restaurant, he, dipping a long silver spoon into a parfait and I gorging on layers of chocolate cake oozing raspberry and covered in a white chocolate sauce. I remember wondering if life could get any better than that.

There were to be many more lunches and dinners in our future. We began a tradition where we met weekly to catch up on each other's lives. Even after I was married and living in Manhattan, dad and I had a standing dinner date that I came to rely on and treasure. He never once cancelled out, despite his busy schedule and so, I learned to honor commitment and value the importance of keeping appointments. The only Tuesday we didn't meet at a restaurant was when I went into labor with my daughter. That night mom, dad, my husband and I dined together in my hospital room. My father brought the champagne that he had been saving for this occasion.

"Even my new granddaughter can't get in the way of our Tuesdays." And there was that wink as we clicked glasses and toasted the birth of Elizabeth.

And then, in 1974, it abruptly ended. My father was in his sixties when I heard the news that he had passed away. His death brought with it a sense of longing I have never yet been able to relinquish – longing for something that would never be the same again. I had accumulated a wealth of knowledge from our talks and I was privy to personal insights and private thoughts he loved sharing with only me, mainly because my reactions were always so spontaneous and sincere. I was genuinely interested in everything he had to say which made me, his audience of one, a perfect dinner companion. I even believe there were times that my mother was a bit jealous, although she brushed it aside by saying: "whatever *do* you two have to talk about?"

My dad also had a reflective side that felt protective and nurturing. He took me seriously, too by paying credence to my individuality and giving me room for self-expression. As a lawyer he was accustomed to problem-solving. Our dinners provided a venue into which I could retreat and unload my

worst trepidations or, conversely share my happiest moments. Without judging, he gently guided me through childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, and served as my one-man support system and guardian of my soul.

Beneath an often serious façade, was a man who knew when to let go and enjoy life to its fullest. He lived and played hard, and I, his only daughter was his favorite ‘partner in crime.’ With me, dad could be himself. He could drink one too many whiskey sours of which my mom would not approve. He could finish off the entire bread basket at his favorite steak house and not be reprimanded. I, in turn could order anything I wanted and not be required to clean my plate. He taught me how to retrieve the perfect pickle by sticking my entire arm inside the barrel, and how to peel an apple leaving the entire outer layer of skin, intact. He made me my favorite sandwich called “the cream cheese door” which consisted on tuna fish on a roll and lined with cream cheese which I had to lick through in order to get inside. He let me taste wine before I was age-appropriate to drink. I knew how much to tip a waiter before I was twelve and how to order a meal in perfect French. Most importantly, on certain occasions, I was allowed to eat dessert first. For me, this was about as good as it got.

Long after dad was gone, I still mourned his death. In the years that followed I kept hearing him calling my name which would stop me cold. Decades later, when I was to experience the death of my husband, I was comforted by the fact that perhaps the two of them were dining together in some magical place. I like regaling my husband, Mark with stories of dad and he smiles knowingly as he, the father of four daughters, can appreciate it all too well. I am sorry that he and my father never met.

Dad died too young and had a lot more tasting left to do, but I revel in the fact that we savored much of it together. We went on for years enjoying each other’s company and in his parting, I was energized by how lucky I was to have shared the Tuesdays of my life with him and the great life lesson he passed on to me: when you don’t know what to do: “eat dessert first.”

I now take my two grandchildren Andrew and Caroline out to dinner weekly. They can choose any restaurant they want as I was privileged to do so many years before them. “I don’t know what I want to eat,” Andrew sighed, perusing a menu too big for a seven year old’s eyes. Caroline chimed in, “I can’t make up my mind, either, grandma,” she said.

My father’s voice came echoing back. “Then, I guess we’ll have to eat dessert first!” I told them.

And they, sitting back in wide-eyed disbelief, broke out in smiles, and “eating dessert first” was exactly what we did.