

Tastes Like Chicken

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I was raised on a farm. Dad and Mom raised chickens, goats, cows, barn cats, two dogs and us four girls. Dad used to call us the Petticoat Junction Girls because our farm butted up to railroad tracks and we had a water tank. One summer the four of us painted it pink. Dad just laughed. He was, as they say now, a really good “girl dad”. We had fun, learned what hard work is, and had a great childhood. The farm gave us the majority of our meals. Mom would get creative with some of the cooking...especially when it was liver or tongue. But she would always preface her meals with “tastes like chicken”.

That farm was sold many moons ago just after Dad got cancer. He passed away in the bedroom of the farmhouse. He had been on hospice for about three months. That was such a blessing to all of us. It allowed us to spend quality time with him. It also allowed mom to be the love of his life instead of a caregiver. Before he passed, we began the process of selling the farm knowing Mom could not handle the work alone. Dad was more involved with the process than we thought he'd be capable of at that point. He said he was doing it to take care of mom.

Just a few weeks after he passed away, we started making a slow move to an apartment in independent senior living for mom. By slow I mean we took about ten days. We realized that she needed to process this in bits and pieces. She was grieving, the farm was selling, we were packing...we just had to slow our roll for her.

She was happy to move to her new apartment at a senior community in our town. Many of her friends were also living there and she enjoyed her, as she referred to it, “life of luxury” for several years. She would chuckle and say, “this old farm girl has a housekeeper like some Hollywood starlet”. Then she would bat her eyes and fluff her hair. She was always a hard worker, and we were glad to see her just enjoying life with no stress.

Last year she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and it was a hard pill to swallow for all of us. It seems as if adult children lose their loved-one two times with this disease. As it progresses you lose them mentally and again when they pass away. It's a dreadful and mean disease. Kelly, Liz and Laurie are my sisters. I was the first born, and named after my grandmother, Mary. I became Mom's Power of Attorney and Kelly handled the Health Care being she was the nurse in the family.

Mom accepted her diagnosis and was able to still live independently for about six months. Then we needed to move her to an assisted living community. We chose one that also had memory care. She needed more than independent living could offer now.



It was becoming clear that she needed the three meals a day because she was forgetting to eat or eating only sweets. She also needed medication management. Even with us setting up her medications, buying a time release pill dispenser, and calling to remind her to take them, there were too many errors happening. Our fool proof system was breaking down.

We had a really good conversation with the Memory Care Director prior to moving her to the new community about when memory care would be needed. She told us that the markers will be if/when her safety or the safety of the other residents is in jeopardy because of her actions. Another marker would be if/when the smaller environment of a memory care neighborhood is needed. It is also a secured environment, which goes back to the safety issue. The other reason might be if she is needing more prompting, queuing, and directing.

Fast forward a few months...Now our situation has changed, again. She is no longer safe living in assisted living. We need her in a secure environment.

"Kelly, I just got a call from the nurse at the community. Mom was not in her room for her med's at 9 P.M. They said they searched the community and have not found her. It's their protocol to now call the police. I'm heading over there now." I paused and took a deep breath.

Kelly groaned, "Ohhhhh, no. I'll meet you there. I'll call Liz and Laurie while driving."

Liz and Laurie lived out of state but did all they could to visit often and help us with Mom.

As I drove I just prayed Mom was okay. Thank God it's summer and we still live in a town that is pretty safe.

Kelly and I met at the community and were standing outside under the portico waiting with the nurse. It was now 10:30 P.M.

"Looks like it may be time for memory care." Kelly said, looking at Janet the nurse.

Janet shook her head in agreement, "It may very well be, we will have the doctor look at her med's and make sure they are firing on all cylinders. But frankly, I think it may be time as well. Her safety is our top priority."

Jim Johnson, my friend since first grade, was an officer at the police department and happened to be working that night.

He came driving up to the community with Mom in the front seat of his squad car.

"Wow Mom, you got to ride with Jimmy?" I said as I helped her out of the car.

"I did, always such a pleasant young man. I'm not sure why I was riding with him, but he bought me a hamburger and fries." She held up the white and red bag from the Hamburger Shack. She and dad used to go there on Thursdays for lunch because they would get a senior discount. Dad would joke it was as good as eatin' for free!

Jimmy gave us a wink, "My pleasure Mrs. Cole, I hope you enjoy it. It was nice seeing you."

"Nice seeing you Jimmy. Say hello to your folks for me." Jimmy's parents died years ago.

"Will do, Mrs. Cole." Jimmy knew Mom's cognitive state and was so compassionate and kind.

I approached Jimmy as Janet and Kelly brought Mom inside the community. Mom was telling Janet and Kelly about how she and Jimmy's mom planned the spring cleanup at church "just a couple years ago". It had been at least 20 years since she had done that.

"Thank you, Jimmy, I think she was hungry for a burger and just headed out. The funny thing is she could be eating a steak and she always says, "tastes just like chicken" This little

adventure she went on definitely draws the line in the sand for her to be in a secure area.

Jimmy took off his hat, "I'm sorry, Kelly. It's got to be hard seeing her decline like she is. But I have to tell you she hasn't lost her wit. When she first saw me come in the door at the Hamburger Shack she put up her arms and said, "You got me."" Jimmy laughed pretty hard.

"That's the thing with this disease, some of her is still there and then other parts are being lost on a daily basis. It's a dreadful and mean disease. Thanks again for the burger and fries."

I called Liz and Laurie from Mom's bedroom in the apartment. "Yeah, Jimmy found her at the Hamburger Shack. That's like a 15-minute walk from the community! "

Mom was eating her burger when I came out of the bedroom.

"Tastes like chicken to me." She held up her burger. She said that about everything she ate except ice cream. She loves strawberry.

I decided to stay with Mom through the night. She slept like a worn-out toddler. She had a full tummy and had taken a long walk. All was good in her world. Kelly would meet me in the morning to begin the paperwork for memory care. We will need to transition Mom as soon as possible. If we didn't, the next time she wants a burger, might not have a good outcome.

It was harder on us girls than on Mom to get her into the secure neighborhood of the community. I guess it feels like the last step. But we found her to settle in nicely and thrive more than survive.

She has friends that are just as pleasantly confused as she is. She enjoys chicken every night for dinner (that's what she tells us). We have had her medication adjusted a bit and that has helped to settle her mind a little. She now has lots to do during the day. But it isn't just to keep her busy, it is intended to keep her engaged. It's this purposeful play, as they call it, that keeps her connected and busy. She sleeps well at night...and so do we.

We have adapted to her world. She talks about relatives that have been dead a long time as if they are alive and coming to visit. We just agree. Not only have we adapted, but we have also adapted her little apartment with photos of where she is at in her mind. The photos on her walls and a coffee table album are from 20, 30, 40 years ago. But to her, it was just the

other day. She talks about her childhood, and we listen and ask questions. Sometimes me and my sisters are her sisters or cousins. At least we are still connected!

We may hear the same story over and over, but we don't care. She is still with us. Her beautiful heart is with us even if her mind is not.

A couple weeks ago, I brought her a hamburger from the Hamburger Shack. She mentioned something about her and Dad going there "last week". After her first bite, she looked at me, winked and said, "tastes just like chicken", chuckled and devoured the rest of it. She is still there, still her, still my mom.

One thing that has not left is her love of old hymns. She sang in the church's choir since she was a little girl. Those lyrics have not left her and many times when we visit she is singing.

It's a mean disease, but she is safe and we have peace of mind.

