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## He Won't Tell Me, But I Know My Father-In-Law Loves Me

By Tanya Frank  
December 30, 2013

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**Tanya Frank's father-in-law is traditional, tough, stoic and stubborn, but he's dying and needs help. She offered, and somewhere along the way, an unlikely friendship was formed.**

My father-in-law is dying. At least that is what the nurse from the Mission Hospice seems to think. She calls it "declining," but the way she lowers her voice and pats my shoulder, I know what she means. I imagine she knows best, she's seen countless people "decline." And yet I can't help thinking that for a man who is dying, my father-in-law is very much alive, full of anecdotes, and the desire to check his bank account online.

Today he ate three square meals from the tray table. For breakfast, I scrambled him some eggs. "Plenty of salt," he shouted after me on my way into the kitchen, his voice so loud it stopped me mid-stride.

"Got any potato chips?" he asked, when I delivered his grilled cheese sandwich to him for lunch.

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Salt, eggs, cheese, and chips, not the kind of foods one would imagine serving to a patient post-stroke. "Let him have anything he wants," the hospice nurse said during her most recent visit.

"Of course," I said, humoring her, because my father-in-law was going to have whatever he wanted with or without the nurse's blessing.

After sharing 12 years of my life with his youngest daughter, I finally call him my father-in-law, but for the longest time he was just Hank, a thin-lipped man from Tennessee who mumbled when he spoke.

In the early days of us getting acquainted, he introduced me to the food of his southern roots—pinto beans, cornbread, and sausage. I forewent the sausage being a vegan, but I liked everything else. "Mama used to make the beans with hog fat," he told me, and I shuddered at the thought.

I knew his Mama had been widowed when Hank, or "Little Henry" as they called him, was just a boy. "It was The Depression and not the Parkinson's that killed my father," Hank told me. "It broke his spirit and sent him to an early grave."

It's hard to imagine all that loss that Little Henry lived through, how those same hands that went from sheet metal working to engineering had once milked cows on the family farm, shot hogs in the woods, and held his baby daughter, my partner Nancy.

These days, the pinto beans and cornbread are prepared exactly to Hank's liking by Barb, his wife of 59 years. It's no easy feat, as she is legally blind. Despite her disability, Hank doesn't clear the table after dinner, or do the washing-up. The closest he gets to domesticity is slapping together a peanut butter and jam sandwich or microwaving a hotdog. Hebrew National.

"My father never told us kids that he loved us," Nancy told me once. "So we naturally believed that he didn't for the longest time."

I had grown up not knowing what fathers did. Mine left when I was too young to remember his face. Perhaps that's why I was intrigued by Hank, and wanted to get beyond the fact that he helped elect Bush, and unashamedly voted yes on proposition 8—the very thing that would keep Nancy and I from being able to wed.

Maybe it was his short spiky hair, round moon face, and his mouth that rarely opened wide enough to show his teeth that made him appealing to me. The way his massive tummy rose and fell as he chuckled at his own jokes, and his eyes crinkled into slits to make him look like a Buddha.

Hank wasn't always a big-bellied man. There is a picture of him in his bedroom as a gangly 17-year-old, fresh-faced in a Marine Corps uniform.

Hank is thin once again. This time it is not of his choosing. Apart from the eggs, grilled cheese, and potato chips, most days he hasn't been able to eat properly. The stroke was over a month ago now, and has left him with nausea, hiccups, and vertigo, his limbs weak and scrawny under his blue silk pajamas.

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When he is sleeping, a deep tired sleep that leaves him hard to rouse, Barb sits by his bed, reaches for his heavy hand with both of her own, and pats it, like I imagine she has patted her children, soothing yet firm, in anticipation of making everything better. From time to time she moves her fingers to Hank's flushed cheeks, his furrowed brow, and she feels for his ear, then she leans low and whispers, "I love you, I love you."

Not long after my introduction to the family, Hank showed me around his workshop. A small aircraft hung from the rafters and the smell of invention and gasoline filled the air. "Here, take a hold of this," he said to me. "I'll show you how to rivet." I drove the riveting tool into the wings in the places that he pointed to with his rough grease-stained hands.

In 2009, Hank wrote a spy novel, having read so many he thought he could write one himself. "Why not?" he said. On one visit from him and Barb to our home in Los Angeles, he asked me to edit it. We sat together for hours on kitchen chairs at the dining room table, typing and spacing the text. His genre of choice was as unfamiliar to me as his politics, but his passion for the written word was right up my alley.

I thought about those things as I hovered over him, the stroke-victim, "declining." I pondered who he had been, and what was left of him.

In his weakened bed-bound state, pumped with a cocktail of medication, he had been unable to get to the commode.

"I need a nurse," he said, somewhat disorientated. "Do you think you could get me one?"

Though it had been 20 years since I changed a diaper (my son's), I volunteered.

I was nervous, but Hank helped me through. Never one to mince words, he said, "I bet you didn't think you'd be doing this when you met Nan, did you?"

"No, I didn't," I said, "but I guess life is full of surprises."

In the bathroom, I peeled off my gloves and washed my hands. I looked at myself in the mirror. Hank had given me something and I could see it. It was starting to course through me and settle in my gut—maturity, tolerance, the realization that, despite our differences, we have something in common. Humans die, every last one of us. I'll die like Hank, and I might just have to lose control, surrender to someone or something in the end.

For Hank, I was that thing, that person he allowed into his life, and for that I call him my father-in-law. And even though he's unable to tell me, I know that he loves me like family.

*Photo courtesy of the author*

*UK writer, Tanya Frank, came to Los Angeles in 2001 where she lives with her partner, their two sons, and two rescued mongrels. Since 2002, Tanya has taught creative writing to middle school children and facilitated memoir-writing workshops for elders. She received her M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction from the University of California, Riverside. Her work has appeared in Connotation Press, Fiddleback, WriteGirl Anthology, LA Family Magazine, KCET Los Angeles, and Lumina, the Sarah Lawrence College Literary Journal.*



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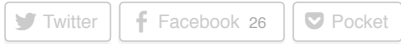
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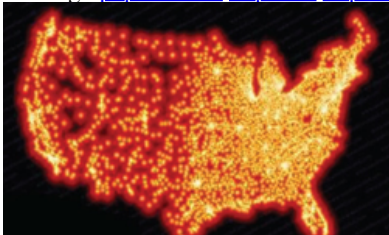
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