Containers

Dad is dying. He shuffles around his kitchen with a plastic tube coming out of his stomach. It's connected to a clear bag that hangs from the waistline of his pants. The tube is filled with bubbles of partially digested food that move as slow as a slug into the bag. It's mostly liquid, light brown, and lumpy. To look at it requires a tough stomach, the ability to suppress revulsion.

Dad opens a drawer and hands me a plastic container. "Here, Jen," he says. He has saved this for me for almost a year. My name is written in his neat handwriting on a piece of tape on the lid. Apparently last year I gave him leftovers, and he's kept the cleaned out container for me ever since. Today, the day he is yellow with jaundice and his tube isn't draining properly, a beautiful clear and warm Sunday in September, he returns the container so he can cross this off his list of things to do. Normally I'd tell him that he shouldn't have saved it, that it was only a container for carryout Wonton soup, that I have plenty of them at home, but I don't say that. I take the container and I say thank you. I treat it as a gift.

Dad eases his way to his desk where he has a neat pile of paperwork that we go through together. His bank accounts, his will, his real estate agent's card, the timeline of his illness in case I want it for some reason, beginning on the day he started throwing up, continuing through the days when doctors tested, cat scanned, and MRI'ed him not knowing exactly what was wrong (or perhaps confirming what they already suspected) to the date that he was told he had pancreatic cancer. The

date of his death has a blank next to it as a placeholder. My father is nothing if not organized.

He is also someone who has never let an expiration date stop him. He is infamous for having crackers so stale they will bend. Before he came home from hospice, my brother cleaned out the cabinets and found a container of seventeen-year-old oatmeal. A cloth calendar for the year 2000 still hangs from a dowel rod in Dad's kitchen. The rim of the dowel is covered in a thick layer of dust. He's also got a shot glass of whiskey hidden in his kitchen cabinet that he sips out of every few days. His kitchen cabinets have old metal doors that don't close properly. The dishes rattle on the metal shelves when you force the doors shut.

"Dad," I ask, "why did you poor yourself a shot of whiskey and just leave it in the cabinet?"

"I take little sips out of it when I'm in pain," he says. A week later, the whiskey is still there, collecting dust, attracting ants and catching flies.

There is wildlife in the house that has nothing to do with whiskey. My aunt, who has been caring for my father during the week while my brother and I are at work, saw a sizable black snake at the foot of the stairs one night when she came out of the shower. She screamed for help, and my father, with his tube coming out of his stomach, shuffled into the middle room and somehow shooed the snake outside. My aunt suspects that mice are living under the sofa. She might be right. My father is organized, but not one to clean or pay attention to the way his farmhouse is crumbling around him. His house reeks of cigarette smoke. Everything is yellow, including my father.

Meanwhile, during the day, everyone is preoccupied with catching stink bugs. All over the house, there are Grey Poupon jars half filled with water that Dad has set up near the windows. Dead stink bugs float upside down in the jars. There are also soda bottles cut in half to make stink bug-catching contraptions. They are nearly as ineffective as the mustard jars. These invasive insects crawl into the house to survive the onset of fall and avoid a certain death. We collect and drown them, then feel a slight remorse.

If I could breathe, I'd smell the stink bugs and decay that have descended on the house. But I'm fighting a cold. The plastic container with my name on the lid has come in handy in my car when I make the fifty-minute drive to and from my father's house. When phlegm rises in my chest, instead of pulling over on the interstate to cough and spit, I open the plastic lid and hack into the container. It is disgusting but practical, much like my father's stomach tube.

On the weekends, I spend the night at my father's farmhouse so my aunt can go home. It's weird to be in his house at night. There are no lights around for miles, no sounds except the crickets. I almost trip down the hill when I take Byrdie for her last walk of the evening. I'm not used to such darkness. It is soothing and scary. It feels like there are only three of us in the whole world right now: me, my father and my dog. When I come inside, Byrdie is too spooked to climb the stairs to the second floor, so I carry her up. She rests on the bed near my feet, her ears pricked at every sound. I sleep propped up on pillows with a trashcan next to the bed so I can spit when I cough. I wake every time I hear my father stirring. Dad refuses to use his hospice bed and sleeps on the sofa, but he is too weak to be by himself. He wakes up

every forty-five minutes either throwing up or coughing or cramping with pain. Somehow he manages to get to his walker, slide into the kitchen and smoke another unfiltered cigarette.

During the day, Dad and I talk. He tells me he hears faint orchestral music as if he is tuned into a radio station that is barely audible. I tell him that it might be the music of the spheres to soothe him as he dies. I have no idea what I'm talking about, but he seems to think that what I'm saying is O.K. However, he forbids me from going to a medium to contact him after he dies. He doesn't believe, even a little bit, that it's possible to speak to the dead. "I won't," I promise. "But come into my dreams so we can spend time together." He doesn't know what to say to that.

His own dreams are wild. He tells me about a vivid dream in which three men in trench coats come to his bedside to operate on him, but his work friend from many years ago, Steve Bass, shows up and tells them no, that it isn't Dad's time to go yet. Then Dad says to me, "I haven't seen Steve Bass in years." He is preoccupied with the fact that Steve Bass protects him in the dream. It doesn't strike him that the three men are death. He knows it and doesn't know it at the same time.

We've had a long, beautiful, Indian summer and my father is seeing light in new ways. He saw the most magical light of his life from his side porch the other morning. "It was so beautiful, I wish you could've seen it with me," he says. "I wish I could've bottled it and saved it." All he has is the container of his memory. He tells me that when he wakes up in the morning and looks outside at the mist, he sees cobwebs that get lighter and lighter and disappear. The other evening as we sat on

the porch and the sun was setting behind me, Dad said, “There’s a halo around your hair.”

I know that Dad is seeing the kind of light that only the dying can see. In a week, he will be dead. I will see his last breath escape through his open mouth, his body empty of his soul. When the mortician comes, they will zip his remains in a body bag to carry him away. Later, his bones and skin will be burned to ash and delivered to me in a temporary urn, a plastic box with my father’s name printed on a label affixed to the lid. They will place the box inside a red velvet pouch with satin strings as if this will somehow make it easier for me to carry.