

## **My father's brain is on the kitchen counter . . .**

**By Laura Pritchett**

. . . and is, my mother emails, in a plastic bucket. She adds this: We can touch it, but no photos, and yes, the autopsy revealed that he had Alzheimer's.

I want to see my father's brain but can't get to it, because while it's at the farmhouse of my childhood, only a few miles from my current home and only one mountain valley over, my mother and I are at such a distance that we won't see each other. Perhaps at the rural post office by accident, sure—but on purpose, no, and into each other's hearts, certainly not.

So I am in a quandary:

She says I can't see the brain without her there.

She is in possession of the brain.

But I refuse to see her for reasons I've examined and deem worthy. There is no guidance on what to do in a situation like this.

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I park on the rural road and get out of the car and stand there. I look at the old white farmhouse tucked beneath the blue mountains, staring, unsure. Inside the house is both the brain and my mother.

Perhaps I should give up my quest. I've got other stuff to do. I've got an emotional stability to maintain. My kids need dinner. I've been showing up at that farmhouse for the last

twelve years of my father's disease to walk with him across the ranch, and therefore have been there plenty, been required to deal with her plenty. I am so tired.

But no. How often are we given the chance to look at our father's brain? Only once. Only once in a lifetime can a few of us stare at the plaques and tangles of a mind. Only once are we put in this odd position, to see if examining tissues will somehow heal you.

Somehow, I decide, I will get into that kitchen.

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But oh, look at *this*. We may not speak, but look how well we know one another!

My mother must know, for example, that I'll try to see the brain while she is at late afternoon Saturday Catholic mass, always at four pm, which she prefers over the hassle of getting up-and-moving on a Sunday morning. I pull up at the ranch, note the absence of her car, get out of my car, walk to the farmhouse, and try to open the door. I'm breaking into my own mother's house.

*Locked?* I stare at the doorknob, confused. This has never happened before. I try to find a key in the usual places—under flowerpots and so on—and then I realize that she knew I'd come—and has locked me out.

I shift my weight, from one foot to the other, again unsure what to do. The brain is right inside, around the corner, on a kitchen counter! I'm so close! I turn and stare at the donkey and peacocks who are staring back at me from the pasture in front of the house. Perhaps I could break in? I have an hour before her return, so I sit in a slant of sunlight on the porch and try to

clarify my options. Instead, I find myself trying to come up with a narrative that makes sense; some way to explain what has happened in these last few months. How the rift got so suddenly deep. Why the numbness of my emotions while in my mother's presence—which kept things amicable, at least—has been replaced by anger and disgust. My mind roils, trying for understanding: What story am I telling myself? What grief informs this unfamiliar rage? What cowardice resides in me?

Because still, I am sneaking around to see my father, even now that he's dead. During the last months of his life, I snuck into the care unit at night, when my eyes stung from exhaustion, so as to be there when she wasn't. Or at four pm, Saturdays. I'd offer him little cups of liquid over-the-counter pain medication because his teeth had just been pulled and she didn't want prescription pain relief, saying that he'd been a rancher all his life and was a Tough SOB, whereas I considered him a human being who likely experienced pain, even though he couldn't communicate it.

You could say, perhaps, that I was trying to avoid her as best I could while still providing him some sensitive care, or, you could say I was a cowardly sneak, unwilling to confront conflict, unwilling to stand up for him in broad daylight. As he had once done to me—sneaking me kindnesses but unwilling to stand up to her during the large scope of childhood.

And look at me now. Sitting outside a locked home, him in a bucket inside.

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I get out the little notebook I carry in my purse to write down observations. I write: “Donkey seems to be taking me to task.” Indeed, the donkey is staring at me with a ferocity not usually seen in their species. The donkey is *pissed* at something.

I ignore the donkey and flip through the other pages, landing on the one from my father’s ceremony. FUNERAL WAS A BLACK COMEDY, I have written. It was a formal Catholic mass, and Catholics were part of the mass, non-Catholics were not, so I sat with the other familial outcasts and recorded a few lines that made me think, *I am a fiction writer and I could never make this stuff up*, which is a cliché, but a cliché for a reason. My brain could have never formed these particular sequence of words. My eyes skim over the conversations I have recorded:

Aunt: I would have liked to stop by more often, you know . . . .

Mom: He didn’t need any of your ‘healing touch’ voodoo nonsense.

Sister: I’d like my son to be a pallbearer.

Mom: Are you kidding me? He has tattoos! Forget it!

Niece: Some of Dad’s side of the family should have been included in the funeral service . . .

Mom: Sure, and we probably should have included the Hindus and the Muslims, too.

The priest officiating: This disease tells us that the Devil exists and is out there, working his evil.

My teenage daughter, arm on my shoulder: Mom, sit the hell down! Sit! Get through it, honey.

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My mother's recent email to her nine kids says: "Dad's brain is now back home. When we're ready, it will be buried by his body. In the meantime, anyone interested can come and look and touch if you want. Take no photos, please. I don't want to hear any 'yucks.'" "

Once when I was little, she necropsied Old Mama Cat on the picnic table at Thanksgiving. From the porch, I glance at the picnic table now, remembering. The cat had just been killed by some visitor's dog, and in her grief and science-minded brain, she decided to show us what its insides looked like. No one said yuck then, either. Not even when she reached in the body cavity and grabbed the multi-colored guts and plonked them on the table on which we often ate. By then, we were used to animals being shot, frozen, dissected, born, killed, eaten. We'd witnessed the mess of birth and death without averting our gaze—newborn bloody calves scrambling for life in the kitchen, bloated dead cows frozen to the ground outside, everything in between.

This is not a complaint, it is a simple statement of fact: Reactions were not allowed. The yuck had been wiped out of us long ago.

The idea of seeing his brain, perhaps even touching it, does not yuck me out.

The idea of seeing my mother does, though. I glance at the sun, estimating the time I have left. The donkey and I stare at each other. She blinks, I blink. She used to follow my father and

me on all our walks across the ranch for the last twelve years of the disease. She's probably wondering why I'm not walking, where the sweet rancher geneticist guy is.

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The donkey lets out a sudden shattering ye-haw and then gazes silently, oblivious to my startle. I startle frequently, an old nervous system remnant of an early childhood that was filled with being-on-alert. Perhaps, I wonder, I'm too wedded to my particular version of the story of what has happened in that childhood, the one that justifies the way I feel? I've told myself that she is an ugly human, not to be trusted or loved, and that she has caused many people a great amount of pain. That sequence of truths is likely verifiable by any independent counsel who took time to conduct interviews.

But still. Where to go from here?

Perhaps I should find some way to make peace, at least the sort that allows us to chat at the post office? But I simply seem unable to access that better part of me. All that I disliked about her was amplified greatly during my father's final decline, death, and service. It has burbled to a raging boil. Her caretaking of my father was as tough-love and erratic as the caretaking of my childhood. Not snugly or sweet; hard-edged. The specific instances of which always seem less important than the broad sweep of a lifetime of criticism, bitterness, rage.

I'd often wondered, during the last decade, as I heard her snap at him, if she was, somehow, unconsciously, oddly, getting back at him. Punishing him for the decades of being

gone—a geneticist workaholic father with a ranch on the side, leaving her with nine kids—and then for becoming a kid himself, never letting her out of that caregiving role.

I put my head in my hands and say *try try try*. Try to be her. Try to feel her story. She may have been rough around the edges, but she was the one *doing* it, after all.

I sigh. I am tired of thinking about my mother. I want only to see my father’s brain. Why, I’m not sure, except the general notion that it might offer me something, that rare opportunities should not be missed. Despite her suggestion of otherwise, I want to be respectful. I get up and scratch the donkey’s ears and drive away.

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Weeks go by and I hear from my siblings that the brain is still sitting around. I decide to give it one more try. It’s Saturday, mass time, but when I pull up, her car is there. I park, walk right to the front door, hesitate. I used to comfortably barge in—childhood years, teen years, college years, adult years, and in the last decade, beckoning dad to take a walk with me. Now I slink up to the door, wary. It’s been six months since I was inside the house, and the last time I was here, he was dying, and I was kneeling at the foot of his bed, rubbing his feet, those feet that walked so many hundreds of miles with me, and he pushed his feet into my hands, which I took to be a final farewell.

My mother walks into the kitchen. She’s as startled to see me as I her. She’s with a visitor—an archeologist, it turns out, looking at some old bones she’s found in the back of the

ranch. A tangly tension zaps between us, but good decorum persists, a visitor being there and all. We are not without basic manners.

I cross the threshold of the door. Make small talk. Glance around the kitchen counters. I am hoping to see a bucket. Perhaps it is sitting out, in full view, floating around? Finally, I just say it: *I'd like to see dad's brain. If you don't mind.*

Now it was the archeologist's turn to be startled. *Oh!* he says. *What? Is having human tissues legal? I should go.* But my mother insists otherwise. He and I stand awkwardly in the kitchen as she walks to her bedroom. We listen to her rustle around for a long time, a very long time, which is when I realize that she'd *hidden* the brain. Even if I'd snuck in the farmhouse in her absence, I'd never have found it.

Finally, she walks out with a Styrofoam white box and explains to the archeologist that tissues *can* in fact be returned, as long as they are returned to the mortician, and the mortician is a friend of hers, which is how she ended up with this brain, which she plans on burying with my father. She plunks the box on the kitchen table, peels off the plastic lid.

The brain does not look like I'd expected. Although I don't know what I expected.

It's sitting in a large plastic tub—perhaps the kind that ice cream or cookie dough comes in—and she holds up a crumpled thin membrane, which is, she says, “you know, that thing—the pia matter—that covers the brain.”

Beneath that is my father's brain. Or rather, slices of it. Thick, fat, meaty slices. Far more dense than I would have thought. I'm so startled, in fact, that I can feel my brain whirring around for some comparison in order to make sense of what I see. Big, thick slices from a serious

mushroom—not the fluffy kind, but a rarer kind, one with substance. But simultaneously, I am thinking: *Ouch, ouch, ouch.*

I look to my mother's green eyes, back at the brain. I think to myself: *There is a big bucket full of mushroom slices, arranged in various ways, and that is my dad's brain.* Then I think, *Hang tight, kid,* which is something he would have told me.

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My father was a calm and gentle man. Perhaps too calm and gentle. He was able to deal with the mess of calving, the blood and gunk of ranching, but not able to deal with childrearing, with fights with his wife, with screaming. Once, about five years into his disease, when we were walking across the ranch, the donkey plodding along behind, he said, "It wasn't so bad, was it really?" meaning my childhood, and, when I paused—I was looking for the right balance of kindness and truth and equanimity—he said, "Oh." And later, "I'm sorry I didn't stand." By which I believed he meant: Stand up to her.

Funny how much peace that moment gave me. I held him and told him I loved him. Told him I was sorry, too. By which I meant: that you have this disease. That it wasn't easy for you, either. That despite all you two gave, which was plenty, I still believe you could have done better, and I'm sorry I haven't yet let that go. I seem to be stubborn. Or wounded. Or both.

As I stare at it, I wonder if this is why I wanted to see the brain. To be reminded of a time when he could stand on his own, could escape her rough edges, and to honor the fact that I couldn't as a child, but I can now.

The report of this brain noted that there were sufficient “tangles and plaques” to account for Alzheimer’s and it strikes me now that it’s a solid metaphor. There he is, in a bucket, and there she is, behind me—a tangled mess.

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My mother and the archeologist stand to the side, chatting, giving me a bit of privacy with the brain. While they talk, I look, I process, I try to form words to explain. I realize now I am in a new quandary. I want so much to be respectful, but respect for one thing might inherently neglect respect of another. I want to be respectful of him and these tissues, of her and her struggles, but also be respectful of what I feel, my own true emotions. Can I love her, and love him, and love myself, when the three have such tangled histories?

I look out the open kitchen door, out at the lawn, and suddenly I know I’ll dart out there in a moment, having come to my limit of staying power. A yuck—or worse, tears—are threatening. I want a father. I want a mother. I want to quit wanting these two things. I want peace. I have just enough sturdiness to request that for all of us. I reach out my pinky finger of my left hand and let it rest on the tissue, on his plaques and tangles, and then I depart.