Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why We Do Lunch

Alan Hines · Wednesday, March 13th, 2019

Cook's is one of those "where-you-go-after-church" kind of places. Not a cafeteria but a buffet. When Tommy was a boy, it was called The Holiday House and his parents would bring the family here for special occasions. These days Betty's children are adults with duties and schedules like everyone else, shops to keep open, appointments with clients, deadlines, jobs. Today they've set those responsibilities aside and brought their mother to Cook's once again for lunch, to celebrate her 86th birthday.

Tommy had picked her up at the assisted living facility in Orange City where she lives now. She and I were headed into the restaurant as he parked the car. She was holding my arm, saying she didn't feel like it was her birthday. And I told her that we had come here a few years before on her birthday. How old was I, she asked, and for some reason, a feeble attempt to keep it light, I said: 62. She said: I'm 62 this year. I am, I'm 62. She had a glimmer in her eye. She didn't really believe she was 62 and she knew that I knew that. I said: No, you were 85 last year. She nodded, matter-of-factly. So that means I'm 86.

Cook's is a bastion for smartly-dressed older Floridians, loose skin and tans. Most of the clientele look as though they have been coming here since the 60s. There's a L-shaped buffet, starting with a salad bar. At the carvery, men in tall white chef's hats serve you your choice or choices of roast beef, meat loaf, fish, lamb, turkey and sometimes ham. Then the vegetables: corn, greens, mac and cheese, green beans cooked southern style with ham hock, cooked all day within an inch of their mushy lives.

The six of us are at a table in the back, by the window. Cari, Tommy's youngest sister is on one side of her, and Darrin, Cari's husband on the other side. Tommy, his sister Cindy, and me, are across the table, facing them. Tommy's brother Ric can't be here today because of work, but that's okay. It makes things less complicated because he and their younger sister Cari haven't been on speaking terms for several years except for one time, last year. Tommy said to the family: It's your mother's 85th birthday and all she wants is to have her children in the same room together.

She did and maybe she didn't. Often we don't know what she's thinking. Sometimes, we believe she's missing something and most times she is. Actually though, she can be sharp, with a sense of nuance, and at times she can pick up on the subtleties of a situation or conversation far more than anyone gives her credit for.

It's white-hot outside, it might as well be Mars where you get cancer and cataracts just by sticking your head out the door. Air conditioning blasts over our heads. Cindy has just come from the

dermatologist and she's telling us that she has a spot or a mole that has to be removed. Cari tells us about someone she knows who's going through Blue Light Therapy, which is used to treat sun damage. None of us have ever heard of Blue Light Therapy so Cari sets out to explain because she's going to go through the procedure herself. They grew up in Florida and when they were young, it was about getting enough sun, now it's about getting too much. Betty sits between Cari and Darrin, listening or maybe she's just giving the appearance that she's listening, smiling when others smile, turning to Cari or Darrin or Cindy, whenever they have something to say. When they were children and supposed to be going to sleep, Betty wouldn't tell them to count sheep, she'd say: Think about the beach.

They reach for names and events, people they know or knew in common. They live in the same small town, they cross paths either sporadically or with a fair amount of frequency, they meet at holidays and special occasions, but today is different. Today, they're sitting around the table, catching up and touching base with each other for a longer period of time because it's their mother's birthday.

You got the meat loaf, Darrin says to Betty. Is that good? It smells good.

Betty looks over at him then and touches his beard, patting it a few times. This is new, she says about the beard. Cari and the others are pleased because she's made a connection.

When she talks about raising her four children, her recall is nearly perfect. She doesn't idealize them. She still observes them as she did when they were growing up, but with some insight about the adults they've become. She remembers the names of the streets they lived on, the houses, and the names of their friends. Being their mother was what she did.

This sandwich is too much, Darrin says. I'm full. He narrates, he keeps the talk going so that there are no lulls in the conversation. How's that roast beef, Tommy?

One of Betty's grandsons lives in her house now. Casey, her Miniature Schnauzer, lives with us and our dog, Otso. Casey is 12 and only gets excited by food and boys on skateboards. When Betty first moved into the assisted living facility, she missed him desparately. His whereabouts and welfare were in her litany of questions: Where's Casey? I miss Casey? Why can't Casey stay with me? When Tommy takes Casey to see her now, she's not sure that he's her dog. She insists that she has a little yellow dog, and Tommy tells her that the little yellow dog she's thinking about was the dog she had when she was a girl. She accepts that, and you can see she's working to figure it out.

She asks the same questions every time you see her, and then ten minutes later she asks the same questions again. At first, she always said: I have a house, where's my house? Where's my car? How did I get here? What happened? All of us have told her the story over and over, like we're telling it for the first time but we're not and she knows that we're not.

You fell, Tommy tells her matter-of-factly, repeating the story from the beginning. I'm amazed at his patience. I did? She's so interested to hear. She's not panicky but genuinely curious about how this happened and how she doesn't remember any of it. You broke your hip and you needed to have someone with you. Sometimes she says: I'm okay enough now to drive my car, I can take care of myself. Then other times she understands completely when he explains and she realizes that he's right. He almost doesn't have to say it.

Tommy drives her to doctor appointments and takes care of her medications. He's the liason with

the assisted living administrator and staff. He and Ric bought her a small freezer for ice cream, and Tommy also takes her to Publix regularly to buy grapes, cat litter, and other essentials. Usually, he goes to see her three days a week.

Cindy, Ric and Cari visit on other days and times. Miraculously, they never run into each other. She doesn't remember who's there from one day to the next, which is liberating for her and for her children. Tommy maps out a monthly schedule when we're in England so that someone is responsible for seeing her every week. The others let Tommy take the lead. They agree that no one else can do it as well as he does it.

Darrin is sitting across from me. He gives me a nod. That lamb looks good, Alan, he says. I say that yes, it is.

The other residents at Savannah Court see me come with Tommy to see her and take her to the grocery store or Gram's for lunch. They don't understand how I fit into this picture, and at times Betty may not either. Rather than tell people I'm her son-in-law, she introduces me as Tommy's good friend and her good friend. When I visit alone and it takes a moment for my name to come to mind, I introduce myself. Tommy and I have been together since the mid-70s and were able to get married in 2013. Have you forgotten? I'm thinking, a little hurt, but of course, she's forgotten and why wouldn't she.

Darrin says: This sandwich is too much. He's going to take it to work to eat later. Betty asks him where he works. She's always known and she may know now but nobody can tell. *The Daytona Beach News-Journal,* he says. He's a printer, he prints the newspapers. Didn't someone in the family work there, too? Darrin asks. Everyone hesitates but Betty knows the answer to this one. Cindy says: Tommy had a paper route— It was *The Deland Sun News,* Tommy says. That's right, Betty says. *The DeLand Sun News.*

Tommy tells how he used to hate collecting; it was 35 cents a week, 70 for two weeks, $1.40 for a month. He recites the rates by heart. They've been in his mind all these years we've known each other, and for some reason I'm surprised that I've never heard them before.

Cindy remembers that sometimes their dad drove Tommy on his route when it was raining. She remembers sitting in the back seat of the car with all those folded newspapers, and how sick it made her, the smell of newsprint and ink. Cari may or may not remember but she's heard all about it. I wasn't there either but I remember the story about a woman in the neighborhood phoning Betty to say: Betty, I have to tell you that I see Tommy riding his bike and reading a book at the same time. Each of us, even Darrin and I, have second-hand memories about Tommy's paper route.

Then it's time for cake and the staff is singing "Happy Birthday." It's huge yellow cake with whipped cream icing and one candle. Betty thinks about her wish for a moment. Cindy says: Mom, you have to make a wish and blow out the candle. But Betty ignores her because she's still thinking, she has something very specific on her mind. And then she blows it out. Cindy says she isn't a cake person, so no one expects her to take a piece but she does and eats half of it. Cari and Darrin eat half of theirs, too, and stuff the rest into a "to-go" box along with some neon yellow-colored macaroni and cheese that Darrin will take with him to work later that afternoon. What is it? The cake? The wish? Something has happened during lunch to change the tone of things.

Tommy remembers that the newspaper was two hours late the day JFK was shot. Customers on his route were waiting in their front yards, waiting so they could get the news as he rode his bike down

the street. He handed each of them their newspaper, one by one. How can this be so poignant to all of us, but it is. It's stirring for Cari, too, even though she was a baby and could have no memory of it. Darrin wasn't even born yet. It has nothing to do with JFK or the assassination or where any of us were that day or even about Tommy delivering the newspapers that afternoon. It's another kind of memory. We each have our own silent moment, even Darrin and I, even the waitress.

The waitress has cleared the table and now it's time for presents, Cari and Darrin's first. Cari hands her mother a beautiful gift bag with a beachscape on the sides. Cari's style. A pair of white, slip-on boat shoes with soft insoles. We wear the same size, Cari tells her mother. And Betty says: We do? She looks like she's wondering if this was something she should know? Size 9? Was she supposed to know that? Was it even something she once knew? Betty carries it off with grace. In a rush, Darrin is saying: Show her the card. Cari says, yes, the card, where's the card, and Betty is fumbling through pink tissue paper around in the big bag knowing that she's supposed to find the card. And then Cari pulls it out for her and Betty opens it. It's one of those cards that unfolds like an accordion and Betty starts to read the sentiment but then can't speak. It affects the rest of us that way, too. Cari takes it from her then and turns it around to show it to Cindy and Tommy and me. When you take her back to Savannah Court, put it up on that wall, Cari is saying to Tommy in a stage whisper. And take down that other thing, which I've been trying to get rid of, put this up there so she will see it.

Next it's Cindy turn. Cindy has given her a set of ultra-soft turquoise-colored bath towels that everyone oohs and ahhs over. Betty is quietly tearful now and it's not because of the towels or the shoes or the cake or any of this in particular. She's overwhelmed and a little confused because here they are, but they're grown up people with gray hair and they're all sitting like they used to at The Holiday House when they were children.

Cari says: Now, don't let Gracie use these towels. Gracie is Betty's cat. Beautiful white with charcoal markings and born without a tail. She'll give them to Gracie to make a bed, Cindy says. I do the same with Bella, Cari says. We love our animals, Betty says. She's beaming at the towels. You know that they remind her of something. We sit there, her children looking at her and she's looking back and they're unable to speak because how do you say it? Cari puts an arm around her mother and gives her a hug, breaking the moment.

For me, this has been pleasant and heart-warming. As we leave, we wind our way through the tables of older people being fawned over by Cook's waitresses, long-time pros. Why don't we ever come here? I ask Tommy. Because it's creepy, he says.

We walk out into the bright Florida sun, under the green canvas awning and along the walkway that's lined with the planters of ficus trees. Cari is saying to Tommy: Be sure to see if these shoes fit when you take her back to the room and if they don't, let me know and I can return them. Tommy probably will, though he doesn't have the time. All of us must get back to what we were doing or what we were supposed to be doing next. No one thinks about it but Betty has a schedule, too, Gracie, bingo, other activities, sometimes the challenge of another afternoon of being around people who are all old.

Tommy's gone to get the car and the rest of us wait in a cluster in the bright Florida sun. We'll take his mother back to Orange City. Cari and Darrin will get in Cari's big white Jeep and Cindy in her big white SUV and we'll drive off in separate directions. It's so bright and hot that we all look bleached out, like mole people who live subterannean solitary lives. Betty is squinting and Darrin

says: look at me, and she looks up, but she’s looking into the blinding sun and he says, no, no, look at me, look at me, and she does. She smiles at him and touches his beard. That looks good on you, she tells him.

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