

“The Grace of Silence” by Michele Norris

Chapter One: Daddy

My father was one of those people who are most comfortable at the fringes, away from the action center stage. He did not need or crave attention. Instead, he was driven by the need to reassure others that everything was going to be all right. Belvin Norris Jr. was a fixer. An eternal optimist to the core. You could see it in his smile. As a grown man he still grinned like a schoolboy, and you could not help but grin along with him. His vibe was contagious. Kindness is usually seen as altruistic. But it can also be an act of desperation, satisfying a deep-seated need to avoid the mind's darker places. Benevolence, for some, is a survival tactic.

Even in his last hours my father practiced benevolence, always looking out for everybody else. Moments after the doctor delivered devastating news about his health, my father, still smiling, pointed to an infected cut on my left hand. It was his way of prodding the emergency room physician to turn his attention to me. The victim opting to be the benefactor.

Dad took ill in June 1988, while visiting his brother Simpson in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The minute he called me I knew something awful had happened. His voice was graveled, his words rubbery. He couldn't put a sentence together, and the failed effort only added to his frustration. He had lost control of his speech, but he managed to hold on to his sunny disposition. Although his words were incomprehensible, I sensed a false cheer, with each attempt at speech ending on an elevated note—the kind of verbal leap parents of very young children use to mask irritation or fear.

I was working as a newspaper reporter in Chicago at the time. Dad had stopped by to visit me on his way to Uncle Simpson's house. We had spent a few days going to baseball games and trying to get my kitchen in order. He was relieved to see that I'd finally learned to enjoy spending time at the stove. I showed off for him with jambalaya and pineapple upside-down cake. It worked. He set small talk aside, went back for seconds, and still had room for a huge piece of cake. When he was finished he dabbed his mouth and said, “Maybe now you'll find someone who will put up with you.”

To another person, this might have sounded like a dig, but I knew what he meant. I could use my kitchen skills to cook at home and save money and to help “close the deal” when I found the right man. I was twenty-six and living on my own in Chicago. No husband. No roommate. Just me in a second-story duplex apartment with high ceilings, a large kitchen, and actual furniture. For years my father had visited me at various apartments where the most comfortable chair had been either a wooden crate or something recovered from the curb on trash day. He never let me forget an embarrassing episode when I was living in southern California. A neighbor stopped by my Manhattan Beach apartment to borrow a coffee filter one Saturday morning. She couldn't stop staring at the wingback armchair in which my father sat reading the Los Angeles Times. “You know, Michele,” she said, “that looks like the chair I threw out for bulk trash pickup a few weeks ago.”

My neighbor left with her borrowed coffee filter and a piece of my dignity. Lucky for me, my father had a sense of humor and a strong commitment to thrift. He always believed that the prettiest car on the road was the one that was paid in full, and in his book the most attractive chair in my cramped living room that day was the one that had arrived without a price tag. We had a good laugh, and when he left, he snuck an envelope into my jewelry box with “sofa fund” written on the outside.

My father preached that he would always help me as long as I helped myself by working hard and spending smart. I was better at the former than the latter. When he visited me in Chicago in June 1988, he saw that I had earned high marks on both fronts. He appeared healthy during that visit. A week later, when I got the call from Indiana, it seemed I was talking to a man I didn't know. As soon as I put the phone down, I started packing a bag. I had to get to Fort Wayne fast. By the time I arrived, Dad had already checked into the hospital. The doctors there didn't know exactly what was wrong, but they knew that something was very wrong and that most likely it had to do with his brain or his central nervous system. The doctors spoke among themselves about anaplastic astrocytomas and radiation therapy. It was a code that could mean only one thing: cancer.

Even in the most terrifying moments at a sterile hospital, there is some comfort in knowing that a world you recognize is just outside and beyond the parking garage. You can fixate on a familiar image as a doctor shaves years off your life with each sentence. He can talk all he wants about therapies and operations, but you're thinking of the parking lot where you taught your daughter to drive, or the gas station that uses red reflective press-on letters to spell out a different Bible verse each week, like "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." While the doctor yammers on, you're thinking of the grizzled gas station attendant who climbs the ladder to change the sign, and wondering what pearl of wisdom he might offer in light of the news you just got.

In Fort Wayne, in a large hospital in an unfamiliar city, we were confronting an unknown illness that had swiftly robbed my father of his ability to carry out the most basic functions. We were looking at complicated surgery and, at best, a long and complex recovery, so the doctors suggested that we quickly move Dad back to Minnesota, where he could be treated closer to home.

We wanted to get Dad on the first flight to the Twin Cities, but his gait was unsteady and he seemed increasingly disoriented. He clutched my arm as we walked through the airport; he kept shooting me tight little smiles: reassurance. I wasn't buying it. By now his speech was so slurred that only I could understand him, and so labored that he wasn't able even to whisper. It took him so much effort and focus to spit out a sound that it was slightly explosive when it arrived, like a sputtering engine in a hushed area.

At the airport we sat across from two stout middle-aged blond women with wet-set curls and matching pink satin jackets. They must have been on their way to a convention or a sorority gathering; they were electric with excitement and frosted up like high-calorie confections, constantly rifling through their pocketbooks for mirrored compacts, then checking their makeup or blotting their lipstick. I remember them so well because they were sitting next to a large Amish or Mennonite family.

The men had long beards and wore suspenders. The women had long braids and long dresses, and their heads were covered by little white hats that looked like fancy French fry baskets. They seemed uncomfortable with the constant chatter of the satin dolls. They, too, noticed the women's prying eyes and "get a load of this" gestures, though the taciturn demeanor of the Amish rendered them perhaps slightly less interesting specimens than Dad and me.

When my dad tried to lean toward me to ask a question, his words sputtered forth like bricks tumbling from a shelf. The satin dolls found it hard to mind their own business. They stared and pointed every time Dad attempted to speak. They didn't try to hide their disparagement, one of them harrumphing loud enough for anyone to hear, "Goodness sakes, it's not even noon yet!"

After spending a lifetime trying to be a model minority— one of the few black men in his neighborhood, at his workplace, or on his daughters' school committees—my father now sat facing the condemnation of the two blond scolds. They had apparently concluded that he was an early morning lush instead of a gray-haired man fighting a losing battle with a devastating disease.

Here is the conundrum of racism. You know it's there, but you can't prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, how it colors a particular situation. Those pink satin ladies were strangers to me, so I have no idea if they would have been as quick to judge a gray-haired white man with impaired speech. However, I do know this: the fact that they were white women added mightily to my father's humiliation. I knew my father felt the sting of their judgment. I knew it because he kept pushing up his cardigan sleeve and futzing with his wrist, as if he'd left home without his Timex. But it was not the wrist on which he wore his windup watch. It was the wrist where the plastic bracelet had been affixed at the hospital. His awkward gestures were a silent plea to the satin dolls to notice the hospital bracelet. My heart breaks every time I think of the look on his face that day.

The jut of his chin showed indignation, but the sag of his shoulders and the crease in his brow conveyed something different. Something hovering between anger and shame. There was also, however, a hint of grace. I see that now that I have come to understand my father better, as a man who was always in tight control of his emotions. I believe now that he was trying not just to salvage his dignity but also to absolve the two women from dishonor. A less controlled, more impulsive man might have responded by giving those women the finger to shut them up. My father drew strength from reaching past anger.

The aphorism "Kill them with kindness" might have been penned with a man like Belvin Norris Jr. in mind. By fiddling with his wrist he was saying, "If only they knew," rather than "Shame on you."

Dad boarded the plane early because the flight crew knew he would need extra time to settle into his seat and because they wanted to check his medical release from the hospital. He was flying alone that morning. I planned to drive his Oldsmobile back to Minneapolis and meet him there the next morning, a decision I have spent a lifetime regretting. Before walking down the jetway, he motioned for the nurse and the flight crew to wait a second. He leaned toward me as if he wanted to tell me something, but he couldn't get words out. He kept looking over his shoulder, aware of the flight crew watching and waiting, and perhaps wondering whether the satin dolls were also taking it all in. He kissed me on the cheek, a loving but clumsy gesture. His balance was off, so it was almost as if we were bumping heads. I didn't mind, and I certainly didn't care who was watching as we locked in a long embrace. My eyes were closed, fighting back tears, so I barely noticed when the flight attendant crept into our circle of grief to gently remind us that they had to stay on schedule. The attendant lightly cupped my father's elbow and led him away. It is disturbing to see your parent treated like a schoolchild, yet amusing to watch a man grin like a lucky teenager when a pretty woman takes his arm.

As I walked away, the satin dolls gazed at me. They must have overheard the chat about Dad's medical release because now they wore pouty, ingratiating smiles. Lipstick contrition. I walked past them and smiled back. It hurts to recall my response; I, like my father, had reached beyond anger to offer conciliation instead. I had every right to throw my father's humiliation in their faces. Spitting at them was, of course, out of bounds, but at the very least I should have served up a scowl.

I should have made them squirm. I should have been the black girl that certain white women are conditioned to fear most.

I didn't do any of that. I am my father's daughter, and such caustic gestures weren't in my DNA. I was raised by a model minority to be a model minority, and to achieve that status, certain impulses had to be suppressed. Years later, I understand both the reason and its consequence.

I was almost out of the waiting area when I felt someone touch my shoulder. I turned, thinking it might be one of the women, intent on apologizing, but there was no nail polish on the hand touching my arm. The hand was large and calloused, marked by raised splotches resembling coffee stains. A bearded man held my forearm; he called me "ma'am," though it sounded like "Mom." "I'll watch over your pa," he said before darting back to join his family.

I wonder what my father had wanted to tell me, but couldn't, right before he'd boarded the plane. More of his classic lunch-box wisdom? "Learn all you can" or "Save your money" or "Don't eat too much late at night"? More than twenty years later, as still I mourn, I wonder if he was trying to impart some eternal verity before his final flight home to Minneapolis. This would be the last time I saw him alert. Within a day Dad slipped into a coma. Within a week a fast-growing brain tumor took his life.

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