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My Father Loves Birds

Our backyard was always filled with bird feeders teeming with birdseed, and our basement bookshelves were always filled with books like “Birds of North America” and “The Canadian Birdwatchers Guide.” When I asked my father why he knew so much about birds, he would simply say that his mother loved birds. Birds run in the family, it seems. So we always set aside our stale bread and old cereal to be fed to the birds in the back yard each week.

We knew there was something wrong when my father, at the age of 55, began to add leftovers and meat scraps to the stale bread and cereal, cooking it all into a huge, unnatural bird feast. When we asked what he was thinking, he explained that the birds ate pests like mosquitos and grubs in the summer, so we should be providing them with protein and fat throughout the winter to ensure they would be back to eat the pests again in the summer. Pretty soon, he was purchasing discount ground beef, frozen mixed vegetables and loaves of bread in order to prepare elaborate bird buffets every week. He would excitedly explain his bird-feeding strategy to confused dinner guests and annoyed family members, never heeding a word of argument. I was having horrible visions of gigantic mutant birds terrorizing the neighbourhood, high on hormones from the discount ground beef.

Not long afterwards my father was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia or FTD. There were a few misdiagnoses at first, since FTD affects people at a younger age than more familiar disorders like Alzheimer’s and the first signs are often unusual behavioural changes. The diagnosis was frightening and confusing, but also a relief – my father’s frustrating and increasingly erratic behaviours were finally explained. As his judgment and insight continued to fail, my father lost the ability to drive, lost interest in gardening, refused to observe basic personal hygiene and eventually he lost the ability to cook. He became increasingly agitated and fixated on certain patterns of behaviour (daily visits to fast food restaurants, entering mail-order contests and purchasing products by mail) that, despite multiple prescriptions, could not be controlled by medication.

Three years after his diagnosis, my father was moved to a hospital ward, then to a long-term care home. At each visit he would review the list of reasons he needed to be taken home: he had to walk the dog, he had to cut the grass, he had to feed the birds. Those were the hardest days.

Eventually, though, my father forgot about the dog and the grass. In fact, he forgot we even had a dog and forgot that he had ever lived anywhere but “the hotel,” as he called the care home. He even forgot about the birds. When we would ask if he remembered feeding the birds in the backyard, we would look out the car home window and ask, “What, out there?” Then he would smile, lose track of what we were talking about and pat my mother on the hand. Those days were easier.

My father still lives at the care home and he still thinks it’s a hotel. I’m not sure if he knows who I am, or who my mother is, but he sure knows that he likes the hugs and kisses he receives when we come to see

him. He often starts sentences and is unable to finish them, but he always has a smile for anyone who will sit with him and listen. A few weeks ago some old friends came to visit. They took my father out for a walk around the block and then sat in the care home yard, singing the old barroom songs that my father used to love during his drinking days in Montreal. I don't think he recognized the people or the music, but he seemed happy to be sitting out in the sun with such cheerful folks.

At one point, between songs, my father looked up at a gold finch that was sitting on a hedge and said, "We should get the birdseed that those yellow birds like. Then they'll come more often."

It's not important that my father doesn't know where he is, or what song we're singing, or his own daughter's name. The greatest comfort, for which I am deeply grateful, is that he knows what makes him happy and he knows what he loves. And my father loves birds.