



Cutting Dad's Meat

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I remember the first time I saw my mother cut my father's meat. It was Sunday dinner. The family had gathered around the table. Prayers had been recited, dishes passed, and everyone was digging in. We had just launched into a discussion of the latest news of the day. But then I noticed Dad. He was just sitting there, his gaze downcast, hands at the side of his plate, fumbling with his silverware.

After a few seconds, he cast a helpless glance at Mom. "Oh," she said. Without missing a beat, she reached over, took up his knife and fork, and proceeded to cut the well-done roast beef into bite-size pieces.

A couple of years later, his gait grown halting and unsteady, Dad would need help walking to the table. When he sat down, Mom would tuck a napkin into his shirt as a bib. Instead of cutting his meat, she would feed him his meal.

I remember a day Dad and I were home alone, and it was time for breakfast. "What would you like to eat?" "I dunno." "How about eggs and toast?" "Okay." The eggs fried, I set the plate before him. Nothing. "Oh," I said. I cut the eggs into bite-sized pieces, and proceeded to spoon them in. Occasionally, a bite fell onto shirt. "Oh," I said.

In medical school, they did not teach us how to administer spoon feedings or wipe bottoms. Instead they taught us about epidemiology, diagnosis, and therapy. We learned, for example, that about 5 million Americans currently have Alzheimer's disease, and that, with every 5 years after the age of 65, the risk of developing it doubles.

We learned that Alzheimer's disease is associated with the build up of plaques and tangles among the cells of the brain. This causes the loss of memory and thinking skills. Eventually, the patient loses the ability to carry out even the simplest tasks of daily living. We learned that there is no effective treatment.

Over the course of my career, I had helped to care for many patients. But never one quite like this. These hands that fumbled aimlessly with the silverware, then later hung limp at his side—these hands had once cradled my brother and me as infants, then taught us how to throw and catch, then handed over the keys to the car, then hugged us at graduation.

The disease gnawing away at his brain and his mind had gradually inverted things. Now Dad could no longer watch out for us. We needed to watch out for him. The father no longer fed the son. Now it was the son who fed and cradled the father.