

Listening to limericks

The palm trees loomed overhead. I suppose you get used to them if you live with them every day. I leaned back in my chair to see the breeze catch in the fronds. We sat facing each other – my mother, my great, grand aunt Molly and I. My great grand aunt faced the sun, my mother kept her back to it, and I was right in the middle, partly in the sun and partly in the shade.

My great grand aunt Molly is 99. She sat happily in the sun, closing her eyes and tilting her chin upwards to feel the sun's warmth. We were quiet, like many others sitting around the empty pool that warm January afternoon. We're just taking it in, I thought to myself. Relax. Life is fine. Enjoy the moment.

"Would you like to hear some limericks?" my great grand aunt asked. My mother quickly replied yes, that she didn't know that Molly was still writing them. I wondered how I'd missed the limerick thing. My great grand aunt Molly wrote limericks? She pulled her purse off the handle of her wheelchair. She slipped out a folded sheet of paper and began to read.

There was an old woman named Sally ...

As my great grand aunt recited the limericks she'd written, each one clever, slightly off color, the kind of rhyme that makes you smile whatever your mood, I shut my eyes.

Hearing her voice, though more tenuous at 99 than I remembered, takes me back in time. I am 7 years old, sitting at Molly's dining room table



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for Sunday night supper, looking cross-eyed at the flounder on my plate.

Did I have to eat that thing? I remember her talking about having caught it out on Long Island Sound in the morning and that was dinner, so I'd better go ahead and eat it. And then I am 10 years old in a T-shirt and denim cutoffs, excited to be dragged in a giant rubber inner tube behind the motorboat, holding on beside my older brother, who would have preferred a solo ride than one with me. Then I am 11 years old, listening to

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my family talk politics, their voices raised in what other families might call anger; but mine called "discussion" and was completely normal and meant everyone still loved each other.

There once was a man named John ...

Sometimes families drift apart from each other over time. Maybe it's a family member who lives six states

away and the sheer physical distance gets in the way. Sometimes a feud from long ago causes a rift and no one remembers what it was about anymore. Or maybe it's a more recent spat and people are still irritated. And sometimes families drift apart not due to any good reason but because we're busy, involved in our more immediate activities and issues. Though we drift apart slowly, the years accumulate. One year becomes three. Three years becomes a dozen. Maybe we realize that time has passed without a phone

call, a dinner or a hug.

Or perhaps, as seems to happen with me, there is a dull knocking on my senses that much time has passed. Still I do not pay attention to it. I keep going on with my life, doing whatever it is I do, ignoring the sense of time ...

... until suddenly, I'm sitting in the sun under palm trees in January listening to limericks.

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