



SHORT FICTION | FALL 2022

“Where There’s Life”

By Roger Spencer

When Millie’s parents arrived, they invited us to dinner at a nice restaurant. I put on my jacket, tie, and best behavior, but still felt like a scrawny dweeb who had no business courting their beautiful daughter. Millie was the embodiment of refinement, talent, and unpretentious charm. Even before I met them, I knew from Millie’s homesickness after the Christmas holidays how close she and her parents were, and that she was the apple of her father’s eye.

I was too self-conscious to taste what I was eating during the meal. My table manners were never cultivated or criticized when I was coming of age, and I was used to using my fork in the European style without the required shift to my right hand after cutting my food. My napkin never stayed put in my lap and bread was used to mop up the excess gravy. This was fine on a camping trip or even a picnic, but clearly not when making a first impression. On the other hand, if I ate correctly but too slowly, I wouldn’t be able to respond to the occasional inquiry from the parents who were already done with their plates. Talking with your mouth full—you might as well call in the firing squad already.

Millie’s mother was a small attractive woman, but I sensed that you wouldn’t want to cross her. When Millie was still living at home, she sometimes would have to whisper a warning to her little brother: “Mama’s on the rampage!” so he’d known to hide in a closet till the storm blew over.

Anne had not had an easy life. Millie told me about her mother’s talented but impoverished family in Kansas. Anne’s father was a house painter but there was no steady work for him, so the family farmed some of the kids out to childless couples and took in boarders. Anne met Millie’s father when he rented a room from her parents. The romance didn’t take long to bloom. They made plans to attend college, but Jim lost his tuition money when a bank defaulted and closed during the Depression. They got married anyway and she got a secretarial job to put him through an engineering program at Kansas State.

Jim was a tall handsome man, a little heavy but the picture of a genial host at a barbecue or country club. You wouldn’t know from their formal manners and smart clothes that they had both been well acquainted with poverty and manual labor, he on his father’s wheat farm and later cleaning the college stadium. Now he supervised a refinery for Pemex.

Both of Millie’s parents were friendly but in a way that I felt was short of actual acceptance. My ironic sense of humor was lost on them. Our only connection was through Millie, but I wanted very much to like them, in addition to admiring their enterprise and devotion to each other and their children.

It felt to me as if they were thinking, “You’re Millie’s boyfriend, she seems to think enough of you to want us to meet you. There must be something about you, besides being a med student, that we haven’t yet discovered. We’ll see.”

They asked me a few polite questions about my plans for the summer and how long it would be before graduation, where I hoped to go for my post graduate training and where the rest of my family lived. But Millie and her parents had a lot of catching up to do about her younger brother and their friends in Mexico, so most of the conversation involved the three of them. Anne had an encyclopedic knowledge about all her friends’ doings, especially her best friend, whose husband was a big shot at Pepsi Cola de Mexico. She was glad to share every detail. Millie’s parents thought there would be time to get to know me better in the event that Millie stayed interested in me.

The good news was that Millie’s parents seemed to be loving, decent people who doted on their children and tried to make them happy and responsible, as they themselves were. They didn’t ask me about my religious background. Though Millie might have told them earlier, that was apparently not one of their priorities, unlike her best friend at college, who told Millie that her family would never have tolerated her dating a Jew.

But I was so used to encountering subtle and not-so-subtle prejudice, that I expected it, and was surprised not to see evidence of it.

I didn’t know it at the time, but there were a few Jews in Kansas in the 30s during the Depression and Dust Bowl when Millie’s parents were in their formative years. Some of the banks were owned by those few Jews, and when they failed and closed their doors, there was a surge of antisemitism layered between the prejudices against Blacks and Native Americans.

Jim’s family and his last name had originally come from Germany, the crucible of pogroms during the Hundred Years War and the Crusades. Millie’s father, she told me, despite being a pillar of his community, was averse to most organized religions, much like me, but he kept his feelings private.

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Fast forward. I’m sitting next to Jim, both of us in recliners in the chemotherapy treatment room, me reminiscing, Jim quiet with his thoughts, opaque as usual. It was his last visit, and it had been almost 40 years since that evening that I had met the Mullens, and they had taken us to dinner. Millie was a whiz in the kitchen and later that night, over a piece of apple pie that Millie had just baked, I proposed to her on the spur of the moment and Millie promptly accepted. She joyfully announced our engagement to her parents, who were already in bed, while I called my parents, who didn’t know I was seeing anyone.

“What would you do if we told you we thought it wasn’t a good idea?” said Anne to Millie when she heard the news. “I’d marry him anyway,” Millie replied, “but I’d be less happy.”

“Just checking to be sure,” said Anne. “It’s obvious that you love each other and we’re happy for you.”

We were married two months later in Mexico City.

The Mullens eventually retired in Durham to be closer to Millie and our children. Someone needed to take Jim, who had never been sick in his life, to his chemo treatments and someone else to keep Anne busy, to distract her from the fact that Jim’s prognosis was very guarded. It was decided that Millie would be better suited to that task, and I would sit with Jim.

There was no conversation for most of those hours. I got Jim a portable CD player so he could listen to his favorite singer Marilyn Maxwell, but he left it on the top shelf of a closet.

I was left to reminisce about my own life and about Jim’s. I thought about his having to scrub the steps of the football stadium at Kansas State after games, to make ends meet after a Jewish banker had absconded with his money.

Millie’s kid brother had developed a melanoma after working in a chem lab for 10 years. He was still in his late thirties. Surgery had removed the first few metastases from his brain and intestine but then there were more recurrences. Somehow, without intending to become his therapist, I spent hours on the phone with him, listening to his anger and grief, his self-recriminations, and regrets, including his alienation from a father who couldn’t tell him that he loved him. I did my best to comfort and console, to try to stand in for Jim and to be the brother he hadn’t had. I sent him a tape recording of us singing “Eres Tu” for him in Spanish with Millie on the piano, me playing guitar.

That had all taken place some 15 years before Jim got sick. The Mullens, Millie and I and our children were all devastated by her brother’s death. But especially his parents.

After a long wait, Jim and I are told that his oncologist Dr. Morgan wants to have a conference with him. Jim asks me to come along. The three of us sit on wooden chairs in a small treatment room and the doctor tells Jim that there’s no point continuing the chemo, the tumor in his liver is not responding. There is silence. I ask what treatment alternatives there might be. He says that he doesn’t have any other treatments. I protest, “But surely there are some ongoing experimental studies for the kind of cancer that Jim has. What about other medical centers? Do you know of any leads we could pursue?”

The only answer Dr. Morgan offers is a referral for hospice care. Jim speaks: He’s not interested in seeking some new treatment. He’s satisfied, he understands that nothing more can be done. “Thank you, Dr...is it Morgenstern?” he says as he stands up. I drive him home without another word.

A few days later Jim asks a heartbroken Millie to be his executor and when she agrees, he takes her down to the local bank where Jim and Anne keep their checking account, to meet a nice lady teller whom he’s gotten to know and to sign a power of attorney.

I know that Jim has had a fulfilling life, by most measures. Escaping from a life of farming, which he despised, he had achieved an engineering degree. He took the only job available to him at the time, a hardship post in rural Mexico, and he provided needed expertise and leadership at a petroleum refinery.

Over the months and years, he and Anne mastered the language, became as acculturated as Norte americanos in Mexico can be who socialize among themselves in an American “colony” and are better off than most (but not all) of their Hispanic neighbors.

Jim earned the respect of workers at the plant and managed to invest enough of his salary in U.S. stocks to be able to take early retirement back in the states. He provided fine schooling for his kids, who grew up to be warm, generous, and kind people. Anne was financially secure. He had more than his share of adventures and challenges, all of which he faced bravely. He is a beloved grandpa and dad.

He quietly accepts the loss of his future and of the hope that has been taken from him. But there is no chance that he might trust me with anything more than my mere presence and my medical degree, and even that is precarious. There is a needed place for me in what remains of his life; a place for bankers, doctors and this scrawny irreverent know-it-all, with his bad table manners—who somehow has come to believe that he deserves to be the father of Jim’s adorable grandchildren!

Roger Spencer has taught for over 50 years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he is a professor of psychiatry. He graduated from Yale College, received his M.D. from Harvard, and graduated from residency at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is also certified in psychoanalysis and studied creative writing at the University of North Carolina with Doris Betts and Jill McCorkle. His short stories have appeared in previous issues of Iris. Roger has been active in humanities groups such as Literature and Psychiatry and Freud Theory which are open to students, staff, and retired faculty. He has written and performed plays at national meetings including, “A Letter Bit of Therapy” and “Tapes From the Dead.” “Raindrops,” a brief account of early years at the University of North Carolina, will appear online as a feature of the 50-year commemoration of the Consolidated University. He can be contacted at roger_spencer@med.unc.edu
