Don’t Fade Away

Live life
Long
Or short
Live it large
Not fading
Into the end
Then dying

No
Live it
Going into
Home plate
...Sliding

A grant
Of one lifetime
Make it matter
Live to love
Love to live
Until at the end

Not fading
Then dying
Do it
Going for
Home plate
...Sliding

To the end
Live with meaning
Thoughtful living
Good deeds doing
And
As time’s ending
Not fading

Going
Running hard
Into home plate
...Sliding

Turn up
The volume
Dance like
No one is watching
At strangers smiling
To the music of life
Whistling
Not fading
When end’s nearing

Go instead
With abandon
Head first diving
Into home plate
...Sliding.
June 6, 1955

My father’s health has diminished further. His doctor advised my mother and me the best he can offer is morphine to keep him comfortable. Remarkably, he remains in good spirits. I sometimes wonder if he relishes the end coming. He might live a few more weeks, maybe a month the doc said.

When I called to let Irma know I would not be able to come up, she said she wanted to come to me. She talked to Thelma and said she agreed to let her have the weekend off. She said she would take the bus, but I told her I’d drive up and get her. The nurse we hired watched over mom and dad.

On the way back home it occurred to me that Irma had not met my parents. Fascinating, how could I have not thought about this before. We discussed this epiphany. Irma said that she had thought about it off and on, but assumed it was complicated for me to make the arrangements, especially with dad being sick.

Irma asked what dad had done for a living. I explained that he was an engineer and worked on designing X-ray equipment. He had several patents and had sold the rights to General Electric. Then, she asked about mom.

I told her about mom going to school in Germany, studying the arts - literature primarily. I guess I fell more on her side of the equation. Irma said that made her lucky. If I had become an engineer we would have never met. Fate was our good fortune.

She asked if my parents were German. I realized that I knew more about her mother than she did about my parents. Over two years together and she knows little about them.

My parents were German immigrants, so am I. You are? The surprise on her face evident. I told her that my father is a Jew, but my mother was a protestant. After world war one dad became a very prominent engineer in the electrical field. By the mid - nineteen thirties he and his brother recognized the ugly trend Hitler and his henchmen were on and knew that Jewish people were going to bear the brunt of their hatred. So, he and his brother decided to come to America. Benjamin, his older brother moved his family first. Because of dad’s value to the Reich, he was being watched closely. They had made it clear to him that he was not going to be allowed to leave the country. He was too valuable to their grand plan.

Dad had been moving most of his assets into Switzerland, rather than to America. It was not so unusual for Germans to do this and unlikely to draw attention. In early
thirty-nine, using the guise of a vacation, he sent me and my mother to the coast of Spain. From there we caught a ship to England where we filed for asylum at the U.S. Embassy. My uncle was our sponsor and had already made request for our immigration. Within four weeks we were on a ship to the U.S., landing in New York ten days later. My uncle brought us to Newberry. My father joined us after the war. He and my uncle built a business in Newberry designing and building equipment for General Electric. When dad was diagnosed, he and his brother sold the business to GE.

How much older is your dad’s brother? He’s six years older and has had his own health issues. Failing heart.

Irma stared at me for a long moment, not quite a scowl on her brow. What? I asked. So, you’re from money? Who would have thought, she said. I shrugged and told her that my father was a brilliant man with his engineering and money, but when you meet him you will find that his life is about doing things. Money to him is nothing more than the means to do what he loves, invent things. Even today, as sick as he is, he will retreat to his study, or as he calls it his lab, and work on projects until he’s exhausted. Since I was young, he has implored me to make the most of my life. Not to waste a moment. He chose engineering as his passion, my mom the arts. I found mine in teaching.

When we arrived at my parent’s house, we found Dad in the study, working on some drawings. He apologized profusely for his inability to stand and greet Irma. She just smiled. I knew she didn’t quite understand why he was so apologetic. In her world she had rarely experienced well-schooled, mannerly, old world protocols. Please sit with me, dad said with his thick Germanic accent, then shooed mom and I out of the room. The look of abandonment on Irma’s face, as we deserted her, was precious. I smiled and gave her a wink as I closed the door behind me. Even in his late years and feeble condition, father is a lively spirit who selfishly loves visitors, and generally asks for their undivided attention.

Later in the afternoon I left Irma with mother in the kitchen where she helped prepare dinner food. I helped father into his bed, now in the living room, for a well needed nap. He told me how much he enjoyed his time with Irma and how impressed he was with her spirit and gumption. A much better pick than my first wife, he said. I am convinced, til his last breath, he will remind me of what he told me before we married, “That girl is trouble.” Before he succumbed to his exhaustion, with eyes closed, he mumbled, “She’s perfect for you.”

Mom escorted Irma to the bedroom three doors down from my second floor bedroom, next to theirs. Mom was sleeping in the living room with Dad. Irma and I
laughed about my mom thinking it necessary to separate us by two rooms when it was just the two of us on the floor. My mom is very old school I explained. I don’t think my father would care if we were sleeping in the same bedroom. Near midnight we escaped up the steps to the third floor, which was more of a huge open attic area for storage. My father had a cupola built into the peak of the roof encased in glass panels, both sides and roof. He loved to star gaze on clear evenings.

The windows were a little dirty though and it was quite cloudy so we were only able to enjoy the full moon drifting among the billowy clouds dragging fingers across its face. Nothing much was said. It was a time of reflection. Both of us pondering life, my father’s eminent end and how that could change our lives. When we finally retired, to my room, I assured Irma that, whatever happens, I would still be coming to see her as usual. There is nothing I would let interfere with us.

She smiled and kissed me tenderly, and said, “I know.”

Late Sunday afternoon, after my father returned to bed for rest, I drove Irma home. She said that my mother was a delight and she enjoyed working with her in the kitchen. I asked her if she noticed anything peculiar about my mom. She said there were a few times when she said she couldn’t find a mixing spoon or whisk when it was right in front of her. When I showed her where it was, she would say, “Oh my goodness, I can’t remember anything anymore.” Otherwise, Irma said she didn’t seem like there was anything wrong with her. She is very funny, and gave me a list of books I might enjoy readings.

I’m surprised she didn’t give you the actual books, I said. She usually does. Irma shrugged. Mom has excellent social skills and can easily mask a deficiency with people unfamiliar with her mental abilities, I said. If you’d spent much time with her four years ago, you might have noticed the difference. I realize she is up there in the years, and maybe this is just the aging process, but I am not so sure. I have done a little research on dementia. Medical doctors don’t know much about it accept that it exists and with some people there is no turning that clock back. It’s all downhill, sometimes the slide is gradual, sometimes very fast. My observations make me suspect that mom is slipping fast. Maybe it’s the stress of Dad dying before us. I can’t imagine the emotions, Irma said. It’s tough, I said. She slid across the seat and pulled my arm around her shoulder.

It was a long ride back home.