



essays

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Visiting Day

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Growing up, I had a close relationship with my grandparents and wanted my children to have the same. Sadly, due to our recent cross-country move, we live 2,500 miles from my parents and 3,500 from my in-laws. Spontaneous or frequent visits are not exactly feasible. My kids' distance from grandparents, coupled with them no longer being babies, made me yearn for them to have that kind of connection.

"Not too sick, not too scary looking," I told our rabbi, who offered to find us an elderly person to visit on one of our unstructured afternoons.

A few months later, he phoned. "I have the perfect people: Hilda and Arthur Stein.* She's attached to oxygen and homebound."

I called. A man with a deep, strong voice answered. I introduced myself and ran the visit idea by him. First I would bring Benjamin, then 9 1/2, followed by Daniella, his soon-to-be-6-year-old sister. Three-year-old Simone would stay home with a babysitter. We agreed on the following Tuesday.

"Why are we going to these old people's house?" Benjamin asked en route to the Steins. "Do they have kids?" he asked before I could answer.

"Nope."

"So," said Benjamin, running it through his head, "it's really for them, right?"

"Yup," I said. He couldn't see the smile on my face from the back seat.

"I'm nervous," he said as he rang their bell. I was too. What if we had nothing to talk about? What if this childless couple couldn't relate to kids? What if my kids couldn't connect with them?

Slow, heavy footsteps shuffled across the floor. A short, white-haired man with glasses opened the door. "Oh, hello. You Jennifer?"

"Yes, and this is my son, Benjamin," I said, tapping him gently on his back to take Arthur's extended hand. He waved for us to follow him in and meet Hilda, who was seated at the dining room table half-watching the afternoon news. There



Dan McCoy

was a walker at her side. The frail-looking lady with a thin plastic tube under her nose smiled, revealing a mouth full of part missing, part rotten teeth.

Arthur motioned for Benjamin to sit down in the empty chair next to Hilda. Spotting a free chair a few feet away, I pulled it up to the table and sat down.

"So, Benjamin, what grade are you in?" Hilda asked.

"Fourth," said Benjamin softly. I elbowed him to speak up.

"What are your favorite subjects?" she asked, looking him straight in the eye. Looking back at her, Benjamin answered question after question, first Hilda's then Arthur's: Did he have any brothers or sisters? Was he the oldest? Where were we from?

Eyeing a candy dish on the buffet behind Arthur, Benjamin asked if he could have one.

"Sure, help yourself. You can take some for your sisters, too, if you want," Arthur chuckled. "They're really for Hilda. She loves candy."

Although Hilda's short-term memory was shaky, she recalled an evening at the opera in Washington D.C. when she sat a few rows away from John F. Kennedy. Having just studied civil rights in school, Benjamin's eyes widened. "You really saw him?" he asked in admiration.

An hour later, Benjamin pointed discreetly to the watch on his wrist. "Can we go now?" he mouthed to me. "*Please.*" I told the Steins we had to head home to make dinner.

"When are you coming back?" asked Hilda as soon as we stood up to go.

The following Tuesday I took Daniella. She ran to the door and bolted into the room as soon as Arthur opened it. The news was on TV again. I hugged Arthur and kissed Hilda, but they weren't focused on me. All eyes were on my daughter.

"What's that?" Daniella asked, pointing to the tube running under Hilda's nose. I had never asked what was wrong.

"It's oxygen to help me breathe," she said. "See it comes from this bottle into my nose," she pointed to the canister on the table next to her. "The candy helps, too!"

"Oh." Daniella stared a little longer at Hilda's sunken eyes and almost toothless grin.

"You're so beautiful," Hilda said to my daughter. My kindergartner beamed at me. "How old are you?" Again, the barrage of questions: What grade was she in? Was her brother nice to her?

"You're so intelligent," Hilda said every few minutes. "How old are you?" Each time she asked the same question Daniella would patiently repeat the answer. Each time Hilda complimented her I could sense my middle child blossom from the attention.

"Can I have one?" Daniella said, spotting the candy dish.

"Yes, and you can take one for your brother and sister if that's okay," Arthur said.

Sensing Daniella wouldn't last too much longer, I stood and prepared my daughter to leave. "When are you coming back?" Hilda asked.

"Next week. I'll call you," I answered, leaning over to give her a kiss.

The weeks passed and my children grew accustomed to our weekly visits. Occasionally, they would try to protest with "Do we have to?" or "Why me?" whines. Secretly, though, I suspected they enjoyed themselves. The candy dish helped, but it was more than that. For Benjamin, it was about being a part of the grown-up banter. On Daniella days it was about her. Whether she drew a picture or danced around the living room, Arthur and Hilda watched adoringly.

As for me, I loved seeing my kids so comfortable around these aging non-family members. I encouraged them to show respect—to speak clearly, look them in the eye, shake hands or give hugs. I particularly enjoyed the childhood stories the Steins shared, weaving together tales of war, survival and family. I realized the Steins were as old as my grandparents were at the end of their lives. The way I remembered them.

As the months passed that first year, I worked play dates and other activities around the visits. I brought Simone on some occasions as well as my parents when they were in town. All along, I kept wondering what Arthur would do after Hilda passed away. Worse, what would become of Hilda if something happened to Arthur?

Then I got the phone call.

"Hilda's in the hospital," the rabbi said. "She fell. She didn't break her hip, but is too weak to walk or feed herself."

I went to visit Hilda at the hospital. Attached to an IV, she was floating in and out of consciousness. I felt my kids could handle it, so I took Benjamin and Daniella, explaining to them what Hilda would look like.

When we entered the room, her eyes lit up. "Look who's here," she smiled. Unable to lift her head off the pillow, Hilda held out a hand. I urged Daniella to take it. "How was school?" she asked. We stayed only a few minutes—just long enough to cheer her up.

Since Arthur was home by himself, we invited him for dinner. The kids were so excited they dressed up and made place cards. As soon as he arrived, the girls danced around him, vying for his attention.

Over the course of the following year, Hilda was in and out of the hospital and a nursing home. Wherever she was, we visited. And whenever she was away from home, we invited Arthur—for a holiday party with friends or for family meals. I began calling him at other times to check in.

Early fall that second year, I called Arthur. Hilda was back home with full-time care, he explained. I went with Benjamin to visit. Seated on the couch, Hilda's body was tiny compared to the sofa cushions.

"Poor Hilda has emphysema, you know," Arthur explained. I had never known.

Arthur asked about our travels and about school. Slumped over, Hilda dozed off. "Hilda, you okay there?" Arthur would ask every few minutes. Our stop-and-start conversation felt strange without her.

"Arthur, I can't breathe," she gasped. "I can't breathe." He asked if she had a candy to suck on. He called the aide to check her oxygen.

Benjamin looked at me with a pained expression. I knew that as much as it was difficult to witness, he was old enough at 11 to be there.

When we stood up to go, Hilda pried her eyes open. "When are you coming back?"

Five days later Arthur called to tell me Hilda had passed away. When my children returned home from school, I told them the news.

"That's so sad. Poor Arthur," Benjamin said.

"But where will he live? Who will live with him?" Daniella asked, folding her body into mine.

One by one, I answered their questions. Still, I knew I couldn't say anything that would assuage their pain that they would never see Hilda again, that life ends.

My husband and I went to Hilda's funeral the next day, where I took a back-row seat. I couldn't bear to see Arthur suffer.

Later that day, Arthur said, "You know, Jennifer, how much Hilda loved seeing you and the kids. Every time after you'd leave she always wanted to know

when were you coming back."

"Don't worry," I reassured him. "I'll call you, Arthur," I said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

Every week as we set the table for our Friday night family dinner, Benjamin, Daniella and even Simone always ask, "Is Arthur coming tonight?" And every so often I smile and nod my head yes.

** Names have been changed*

