

A poignant dad-daughter connection

By Teresa Acosta

This past Thanksgiving was a mixed blessing to me. The good part was having dinner with a longtime friend and her family; the bad part was being without my own children or family. Christmas would be the same, as I did not want to travel this year.

The day before Thanksgiving I felt down and out, grasping at things to comfort myself. It was a struggle to get through my to-do list. I wanted to visit Dad in the nursing home, but I could not seem to find the time. I was so depressed that the thought of seeing him without his wife or family depressed me even more.

I decided to take coffee, eggnog and glazed doughnuts to Dad on my way to Livermore. I woke early that day, packed, put together my pug dog's necessities for his stay at a friend's house and then went to see my father.

"Joaquin, Joaquin," a nurse

called to him. "Your daughter's here."

I looked down the hall and saw my father pushing an empty breakfast cart with Tony, an aide, and two other residents. My father was clearly happy to be helping, and wanted to continue pushing the cart even after he saw me.

"Teresa, Teresa," he said, smiling, his usually well-groomed hair sticking up slightly. "How are you doing?"

"Good, Dad," I answered, relieved to see him smiling and seemingly content this morning.

"Follow me," he said, as he pushed the cart back to the cafeteria. Tony and he exchanged their usual secret handshake, then my father turned his attention to the doughnuts and me.

"Let's go eat those in the dining room," he said.

My father loves glazed doughnuts and eggnog. He also appreciates a good cup of cof-

fee, so I knew he would eat despite just having finished a light breakfast.

He ate a doughnut and drank the eggnog while we chatted.

"I'm sorry I can't stay long," I told him, feeling guilty. "I'm meeting Heidi in an hour."

"That's OK," he reassured me. "I remember Heidi. Nice girl."

He walked me to the door. "I really like the mornings here," he said, as we neared the large exit.

"I'm glad, Dad," I answered, relieved that he could still feel a sense of enjoyment.

I leaned over to kiss him goodbye. He suddenly gave me a direct look, the kind he had used to get people's attention before Alzheimer's disease intruded into his life.

"What are you going to do in heaven, Teresa?" he asked.

My mind quickly sorted through what that meant. Was I supposed to be going there soon, I wondered?

Instead, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"You're so nice," he said, surprising me. "You're just so nice," he said again. "I was just wondering what really nice people did in heaven."

Everything anxious and petty melted in me at that moment. I looked closely at his face, feeling a rare, warm connection with my father, a man who had neglected his children the way most people neglect weeds.

"Thank you, Dad," I said. I turned to leave, then watched him wave at me as I drove away.

I was glad I had stopped. I no longer felt guilty about not staying with him. He did not realize it was Thanksgiving, yet he had given me a wonderful gift. In his own way, he had truly thanked me for being there when he needed me.

I know that this Dad-ism will be right up there with, "Teresa, you're better than a boy."

Teresa Acosta lives in Saratoga.