

Scotch ‘n’ Pickles

From time to time, we'll run essays by [Mirth contributors](#) about offstage aspects of a comedian's life. Here, veteran stand-up comic [D.C. Benny](#) recalls a recent visit to his dad, and shows how old jokes can mean more than they seem.

Since my mother passed away less than a year ago, my father had become more and more obsessed with his own mortality, even for a seventy-something Jew who liked to casually threaten suicide by drinking turpentine.

Other than that, he was doing well in his solo existence after the intense years of taking care of my mom during her illness. He had quit smoking, cut back on the rotgut Popoff vodka from the Korean liquor store, and tried to eat more fish, which he previously had dismissed as tasting too much like fish (unless it was lox). He even had several female friends who had mounted aggressive campaigns to add a physical dimension to their relationships with him, but he always said that there would be no one after my mom, for whom he lit a small, white candle every night.

His resistance to these ladies' aggressive tactics was impressive. One of the more hands-on of the bunch had recently sent him an email with a photo of a volcano exploding and spewing hot lava all over the face of a mountain; nature's money shot. But even with all the newfound attention, Pop was always worried about something.

So when he called me, terrified at the prospect of having a cataract removed - his first-ever operation - I promised him that I'd come down from Brooklyn to D.C. so I could be with him for his recovery.

Pop is an artist, so his greatest fear was losing his vision and not being able to paint, which would be kind of like Kim Kardashian losing her publicist and vagina simultaneously.

My younger brother Gabriel was flying in from the west coast with his boyfriend Ramon for the actual operation, so we had all our bases covered, as they could give him the full gay-son empathy that was sometimes hard for his straight sons to express.

I was psyched to spend a little time with Pop, but as always I dreaded the prospect of going back to D.C., a place I had escaped from 24 years ago.

A sea of cherry loafers, boring political conversations, swamp-like summers, and Iranians pretending to be Italian, for me it was like a warm, comfortable blanket that slowly suffocated you.

As I drove down, Gabi called to let me know that the operation had gone well, and that he and Ramon would probably be asleep when I got there as they had a late night. I could hear Pop breaking on Gabi's jeans in the background; "Explain to me again; you pay extra for the holes in those pants? How are they so tight, yet still falling down? That's a nice California haircut, but I think the one-armed barber missed a spot." I recognized some of the insults as they had been recycled from my teenage years in the 80s, when the targets were my Puma warm-up suits and Prince coif.

When I pulled up to the house around noon, I opened the door and smelled Pop's world class cooking. A Spanish singer was belting out a tune in a quivery voice about someone's "Corazon."

Pop had on a food-smearred denim apron, and under it, his Italian tweed hunting vest and shrunken purple sweatpants. Somehow, the combo worked. We hugged, and I saw the cup-like plastic lens duct taped around the eye in question, with a big magic-markered arrow pointing to it. He explained to me that the nurse drew it there to make sure they operated on the correct eye.

"I can see so good out of this eye, it's amazing! I got some good videos for five cents each from Potomac video before they closed down, so after dinner tonight we can watch a movie. Now let's go pick up a few things."

One ritual that always takes place when I visit Pop is grocery shopping, where he stocks up like a famine is imminent, and hard sausage will never be available again. Growing up as the son of immigrants in Brownsville, Brooklyn, the neighborhood which begat such cultural icons as Mike Tyson, may have had something to do with it.

He has no car, so my driving him instead of his having to take the bus or ride his bike is a treat. These epic trips always start with him saying, "I just need to pick up a few things." Then it takes a good hour before he is finally ready to leave, as he has to check and recheck the locks, the gas range, and the lights. I sit in the Jeep and watch the dance from afar. He comes out, goes back in, comes out, goes back in – the blueballs of departure.

When he does finally get to the Jeep, it takes him forever to actually get inside of it – one leg, a groan, the head, a loud exhale, his bag o' crap which is actually my mom's old handbag with a knot in the strap, a grunt, and then, for the grand finale, the other leg, and a final "Oy." It includes more guttural sound effects than an Israeli yodeling class, and it's exhausting to watch.

I keep my fingers crossed that once he's finalized his entrance, he doesn't remember something he left behind: "Wait! My glasses!" This would restart the

process, complete with gas checks and possibly a conversation with his neighbor Jorge about Argentine steaks in the Pampas.

I put on a little jazz for background, and we drive down the same streets where I used to ride my bike. On the way, we pass the sewer where I would dump the bi-weekly issues of the Northwest Current that I was supposed to deliver; a D.C. tradition (not the paper, but the dumping of it).

Part of doing the rounds is the opportunity to catch up on each other's creative endeavors.

"How's comedy?" Pop asks. "Did you finish the TV show idea you were working on?" He was talking about an indie pilot I had made with some friends based on my monthly comedic story-telling show, "Urban Myth."

"It came out great. It went to Showtime, HBO, IFC, Comedy Central, and a bunch of other places. We got a lot of, 'We love it,' but it was really the ole bullshit."

"I just don't understand it; there's so much crap on TV," he said. Then, after a beat, "Except for Tyra Banks. She's a genius."

I agreed.

"Why don't you just call Robert De Niro? He'd like what you do, and you're both in New York." He had been pitching me this plan for years. I would call Robert De Niro, and he would call Martin Scorsese, and they would listen to my CD and then cast me in multiple projects.

"You painting anything new?" I changed the subject.

He was quiet for a minute. "After mommy went, it's hard to paint." My mother was a dancer and Pop's muse, so paintings of her dancing were all over the house.

"You just gotta keep busy, Pop" I said. "Come up to Brooklyn, stay with us."

"Dem Brooklyn bums," he said. "Maybe I could borrow a dolla from the Rebbe."

The last time he had been in Brooklyn he had seen the Mitzvah tank, the Orthodox Jewish promotional vehicle that drives around playing messages from the Rebbe Schneerson. One of the photos on the RV was of the Rebbe handing out a dollar. It was inexplicably hilarious, and became a stock reference for my family when conversations needed some seasoning.

"Ahhh, the promised land," he said as we pulled up to the first destination.

Rodman's, a D.C. institution, began as a discount store, and grew over the years into a discount gourmet supermarket populated by an ever-changing international set of employees, all of whom Pop had given nicknames.

"I don't see Chin-strap," Pop whispered. "Maybe Roy Rodman fired him." I remembered Chin-strap from many years of "Rodman-izing," as Pop called it. He was a big, general-like Sikh who managed the place, and earned his name by wrapping a thick sprig of hair tightly around his jaw, behind his beard. We had spent many hours over the years debating if it was fashion or function.

"It helps anchor the turban; in case he sneezes, it won't unravel," was Pop's conclusion.

We rolled our shopping cart past the snack area where pickles were kept.

"You just can't find good pickles in D.C." had been Pop's lament since time began. "Look at these Ba-Tamptes. See how they're brown when they should be green? That means they're gonna be bitter. No good. Just no good." He looked genuinely miserable. It was a perfect time to bait him with pickle blasphemy.

"What about these Vlasic ones? The commercials say that they're crunchy."

It was like I was doing shots of fresh cow blood in front of a Park Slope vegan, after using my steel toe boots to kick puppies.

"Those are awful! Filled with preservatives! They sit in those jars for years!"

"But since pickles are pickled, that shouldn't matter. I mean, that's part of being pickled, the ability to sit for years."

"Pickles shouldn't sit, they should be eaten. And if they're sitting, that means they aren't good enough to eat".

After a half hour of stocking up, we hit the checkout. The thirty-ish Ethiopian checkout lady knew Pop, of course.

"Where you been, I don't see you long time?" she asks.

"I just got out jail."

"That no true. What jail?"

"Alcatraz. I was with the birds".

"Birds? What you do to go to jail?"

"I took money."

"From who?"

"A dolla from the Rebbe."

"Who is Robbie?"

“He’s an Irishman with lots of dollas.”

“Like Kennedys?”

“But with a nice black wool coat for the summer.”

“That sounds too hot.”

“Well, I’m hot all year round.”

“You crazy all year round.”



After loading the groceries into the Jeep, the whole leg-groan-leg entry begins anew. When he is finally in and we drive off, Pop tells me, “It keeps me going, joking with people. I do my rounds, say the same jokes, and it makes me feel better. Let’s go to Safeway. Their fish is good, but their produce is awful. Then we’ll go to Magruder’s for produce.”

So we got to Safeway, a nondescript supermarket that had everything except character. A manager droned over the intercom asking TaQuan to report to register five. Apparently TaQuan had other plans, because register five remained unmanned.

At the fish counter, a huge black woman greeted Pop.

"Well, look who's here. What's that on your eye?"

"My monocle from Colonel Klink."

"He had an operation," I tell her.

"So I could see you better," he adds.

"You stupid. That's your son?"

"I don't know who he is. He keeps following me around."

"You stupid. He your son. He look like you."

"He's a comedian in New York. He gets his sense of humor from his father."

"Well, he need to tell you some new jokes that you can use instead of these same old ones. Now which salmon you want?"

"One that's wild...like me."

"He say that every week," she says, laughing. "The same joke every week,"

We cut through the nut section, and Pop grabs a fistful of pistachios that he eats as he walks.

"They have a word for that in the retail business," I tell him. "Shrinkage."

"That's what happens every time I get out of the shower," he answers as he steals more nuts.

We get to the checkout lady, who is twice as big as the fish lady, and doesn't know Pop.

"Were you able to find everything you need today?" she asks.

"I couldn't find the vodka. Where is it?"

"This a supermarket, ain't no vokka up in here."

"Well why not?"

"Cuz vokka ain't food. This only food. Now is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Could you carry me home?"

Every now and then, Pop would bomb, and to me, as a comedian, it didn't get better than that. To this day, I don't think anything is funnier than watching

someone try to make someone else laugh, only to find that person has no sense of humor.

The lady stared icily at Pop, and said, "That will be \$27.98. Paper or plastic?"

"Can you just put it my purse?" Pop said as a last ditch attempt, and opened my mom's old handbag. He was breaking out a prop in desperation. She put the fish in and shook her head.

"I'm sorry about that," I tell her.

"He act like he know me but I don't even know him," she says.

"His name is Volcano," I say, and Pop is already out of the door.

Our last stop was Magraders, which had a built-in liquor store – the icing on the cake.

"I don't think that last lady liked you," I said.

"Next time I'll tip her a dolla," he says.

Magraders had a little bit of Rodman's hominess topped with the Safeway supermarket size. The produce guy with a country twang knew Pop, and beat him to the punch.

"When they let you out?" he said.

"They didn't. I ex-scaped. I have a bionic eye as my disguise."

"Well, if they come around looking for you, I'll say I didn't see you. The beets are really good today. Buy you some beets."

"Why are they so good? What's the secret?"

The produce guy pulled us both close and whispered, "My horse peed on them. Horse piss is the best."

"Isn't that what you sell in the liquor store?"

"Only the best horse piss money can buy!"

The both started laughing, and a goth college student walked by.

"When did you start letting vampires in here? They buy up all the toothpaste!" Pop said a bit too loudly.

The produce guy was rolling. The goth kid had earphones in and was fortunately oblivious.

We made our way to the liquor store.

"I haven't had any vodka in six weeks," Pop announced. "But I do feel like a nip of something."

"How about shum shingle malt shcotch?" I asked him in a Sean Connery accent.

"Yesh," he replied. "That would hit the shpot."

The whole ride home we talked like Sean Connery. When we got back, my brother and Ramon were out for another night of clubbing. I told Pop about the time Gabi had come back with a black eye from a bar fight, and because there was no steak, he fell asleep with a frozen chicken wing pressed against it. It had melted by morning and was perched against his snoring face, all pale and flabby.

"All that talk of chicken has got me hungry," Pop said.

We cut up some peppered sausage, cracked the scotch open, poured a round of belts, and toasted with "Nutrishush and delishush."

"If only we had some noo yawk pickles," Pop said.

"You mean pickles like these?" I said, reaching into the back of the refrigerator, where I had stashed a plastic container of new pickles I brought from the pickle section at the Fairway in Red Hook – light green, garlicky, crunchy, and crammed to the brim with all the bells and whistles.

"Is it really happening?" Pop said. "Look at these real New Yawk pickles! The Rebbe has answered my prayers!"

"The Rebbe had nothing to do with those pickles," I tell him. "It wash Mish Moneypenny."

That set off another round of Connery's scotch.

Pop alternated covering one eye with his palm and then the other.

"Here I was so scared I was gonna go blind from my foist operation ever. But low and behold, it was alright, and now I can see better in this eye than the other," he said.

That evening, after dinner, we watched one of Pop's five cent VHS selections; "Taras Bulba," starring Yul Brynner and Tony Curtis as Cossack father and son. Tony Curtis' Brooklyn accent was brilliantly uncontainable, popping out like a ass from a hospital gown.

After hurling insults at the screen, Pop started to reminisce.

"When I was growing in Brooklyn, there was a lady with no legs who would sit by

her window and throw nickels down if the kids sung the “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Then we’d go buy candy with the money, or sometimes maybe a pickle. They’d have them in the barrels. And Tony Curtis lived right around the corner. Back then he was Bernie Schwartz.”

“I’m gonna come down again soon, Pop,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll get the other eye done,” he said. “Then next time, we can stop by Trader Joe’s. They have really good hummus.”

I dozed off, only to be abruptly woken by a windy burst of Pop’s snoring as Bernie Schwartz rode off into a golden sunset. Pop smacked his lips, yet somehow didn’t disturb the position of the ragged toothpick hanging out of his mouth.

I remembered how he had developed a habit of digging in his ear with toothpicks until he got overzealous one night, punctured an eardrum, and had to go to the emergency room.

After that, my mother banned him from using toothpicks. But he was a hardcore addict and couldn’t shake the habit, so he kept a secret stash he would dip into after she went to sleep. Around midnight, Mom would tiptoe down the stairs, find Pop asleep in his chair, and gently remove the toothpick from his mouth.

I got up, carefully extracted the toothpick, cut the old TV off, and the room went dark, except for the flickering of my mom’s candle from where it sat on the dresser.