

Spicer on Men: Boys next door

by Amilia K Spicer

Ok, I admit it. I like the sound of “Spicer on Men”. I should just wrap it up right now and let the beauty of that headline resonate. I’ve been such a fan of men that it always seemed cruel and unusual punishment to have to choose just one. My compromise- one at a time (although factoring in Eastern Standard vs Pacific, oh never mind.) In celebration of them, I’ll start by talking about that yearly ritual, the annual Mother/Daughter banquet.

A few years ago, when I was wearing my best dress to Sunday school and singing in the choir (to be denied during the Rolling Stone interview), deep in the wells of the Methodist church we would gather for something called the Mother/Daughter dinner. There in the basement were long tables covered with that mysterious lay of buffet land- the wares of domestic sport, steaming under corningware, and promising to fulfill all your dreams. You’d anxiously wait as those in charge put each offering out, lining them just so, so as to at once delight and deny. No, you can not get to the deserts before slinking across the miles of good-for- you. Seven kinds of meatloaf, all needing ketchup. If only I could get to the scalloped potatoes and rice krispy treats. Dutifully you’d spoon a few green beans onto the paper plate (green beans made with ham, of course. We were so misled about that “good for you”).

After a few years at this event, you would start to recognize returning assailants, which dishes to stay away from. And whose mother was making them. In a succinct way, it changed your view of that mother, and by default, your friend who came from that mother. You know longer saw your childhood friends the same, now that you knew their mother was responsible for THAT CASSEROLE. Did they have to eat it every day at home? Were their holidays celebrated with those strange, sticky Minute Rice remnants attached to chunks of sirloin? No wonder they are so pale. I triumph in my own offering, my mother’s offering, which was by lineage, my own. Yep, that’s right, WE made that good chicken. That’s our family. After dinner there was entertainment, an assortment of delightful musical moments and comedy, some intended. The final event was the big contest. I am not sure if I will be breaking any secret code by divulging to the male audience what happens after dinner at the Mother/Daughter banquets. But carnations were involved. Small pots of carnations sat cheerfully at various spots on these tables, and one by one, were given as prizes for exciting competitions such as who had traveled the furthest to be there that very evening, or who was wearing the most buttons.

As a competitive youngster, these moments were thrilling. As with the buffet choices, experience was your friend: Before leaving the house, I would count my buttons, anticipating victory over that pesky “grandmother” (probably an interloping Catholic). The year I arrived neatly packed in by 41 buttons (you try it), was forever marred by the announcement that everyone should start counting their zippers. Crestfallen, I realized that they were on to me. I had been too smug in the buffet line.

The kitchen help at these dinners were men. Husbands, fathers. They wore chef’s hats and aprons, and became pink-cheeked early on from the heating and reheating. They didn’t talk much as they gripped the silver handles on those big vats of mashed potatoes, looking slightly more confident than when they carefully chaperoned the jello molds from the kitchen. They were the same men who looked so dignified every Sunday. They were the Ushers, the ones who quietly led you to your seat, the men who wore the white carnations. Those same crisp little flowers that alluded me at the banquet looked so dignified on dark suits, and they seemed to make men stand straighter. If you got to church early enough, you’d see their boutonnières in a little glass, with the pearl tipped pin ready for to puncture their lapel. Sometimes those silent men would give you the carnation after the service, and you could take it home to soak in colored water, and marvel at the streaks of red or blue. But it was in my adult life that I met a man who was tailor-made for carnation-wearing. And I doubt he’d ushered anyone anywhere except perhaps through his living room to get him a Budweiser. He was my neighbor Bob.

Now everybody at some time or another probably has a neighbor Bob. But this particular Bob was one of a kind. He was 70 something, and resembled Clark Gable in his old pictures. Struck by polio as a child, he hobbled around his small apartment, thin and gracious. He’d lived there for over twenty years, and had practically wired himself closed in there with all his electronics and gadgets. Televisions peered through every crevice, VCRs, books, pictures, records, tapes and tools filled every dust free space. He could recite Shakespeare, storyboard Wells, and still find time to fix every appliance dropped at his doorstep by the Armenian children who lived above him. He sat outside his door in the summer time, and saw me swimming not long after I moved in next door to number six. He waved from his lawn chair. Two days later when the moving trucks arrived with my boxes, he walked over and dropped an exacto knife on my doorstep.

It was a curious little thing- bright orange and festive. Something you might find added to the Ginsu Knife Collection as a special bonus (if you called NOW). He dropped it there for me without comment and walked back to apartment five. We became friends. Months later, acclimated to the heat and smog of North Hollywood, I'd sit on his couch and trade quips with him. He fancied me the younger sister to Jodie Foster, and had our pictures hung side by side. We watched movies, an event not at all marred by the fact that he was legally blind, and selectively deaf. He had all the classics taped from cable, marked and indexed alphabetically in drawers. He called me the girl next door, which of course, I was. But as time went on, my neighborhood filled with more hoods than neighbors, and this girl next door was reminded by visiting friends to double bolt the door. I scoffed, confident that this discomfort was helping me write. But the accumulative absence of beauty was taking its toll. As more time passed, it became clear that Bob was the only thing keeping me there. When I talked about moving, he became quiet. And then he stayed quiet for a few days.

The day he told me he was dying, he spit the words out like he just didn't have any room left for them. They had been taking up space in an already cluttered apartment, and now he was feeling indignant. He started giving away things. For me -his reference book, the one he had edited and revised in pen. His notes and exclamations rubbed against the printed ink like an impatient elbow, reminding me not to believe everything I read.

The day I moved, I parked the moving van in front of the building, and made sure he never saw the boxes. On that same day, I helped carry him out to his daughter's van parked in the back of the building, on its way to the hospital. That was the last time I saw him. It sounds so dramatic, but I assure you I've taken no license here. It is satisfying that he never knew I left. He would have liked that kind of ending in a movie, and I would have yelled "Give me a break".

Sometimes the mark of a man is that he's always remembered as the boy next door.

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Spicer is an acclaimed songwriter/singer and tours nationally.