

Duck

by Marianne Belardi

Tuesday, our father's 113th birthday. Our mother's 99th birthday was the day before. Molly stands at the kitchen refrigerator, hands on handles of the open doors. A years-old note (in her handwriting) is taped to one: USE HANDLES PLEASE.

She peers inside, searching, but what she seeks is deep in the recesses of her mind.

"Did Mommy ever cook duck? Didn't Daddy hunt ducks when he was young? Do you know of any restaurants that serve duck?"

I answer, "Once, I think. We did live on Long Island, home of the infamous duckling. Several local restaurants serve duck, sis, most of them French—your favorite—or we'll get Peking Duck at a Chinese restaurant."

"Ooooooh, I like duck and I like Chinese food!"

The following week, Thursday, at the new Aldi. Molly hasn't been yet, so she's the proverbial kid in a candy store—placing items in our cart almost faster than I can re-shelve them when her head is turned.

As I focus on needed items, she fixates on frozen foods. To my surprise she's suddenly holding—with both hands—a frozen duck.

"Look, it's a duck! Let's get it!"

She's beaming, her eyes wide and turned up at the corners, cheeks rounding. It's medicine for my soul, seeing her smiling, happy, childlike. I laugh, and cajole her into putting the duck back.

"Let's get it another time. We'll look for a good recipe," I tell her.

She acquiesces agreeably and her attention veers to ice cream.

"Anyway, it's too much work. Do you know of any restaurants that serve duck?"

The next week, Thursday, three weeks since the duck questions. Our cousin visits. I make lunch. We nibble Castelvetro olives while I prepare Caprese grilled cheese with roasted tomatoes and fresh basil. "My baby sister! Better than any restaurant," Molly gushes.

Our cousin asks about the Bar Mitzvah we're attending Saturday—the grandson of dear friends and neighbors of 40 years. Molly thinks it's unwise as "there could be sick people there."

As we share a lemon meringue tart, a sundowning episode strikes like lightning with no warning thunder beforehand. Cue heated conversation about Covid, Catholic teachings, faith, her

divorce and remarriage to the same man, now her "primary caregiver." She sneers, tears up and rails against a host of real and imagined slights, especially "the cruel and unjust God who took our perfectly healthy mother when she was only 71 years old."

How I wish my family had been able to "duck" this devastating, dastardly, damn disease!