

The Fortune Cookie  
by May Cotton © 2021, 2022

My father was a consummate storyteller. Like a bard he had a penchant for funny stories and loved to make people laugh. I heard his stories over and over as the audiences changed, or as he forgot which ones he had already told us, so he'd tell them again. He never wrote his stories down, but he told them so often that, in spite of my difficulties with memorization, I have committed many of them to heart.

Most of my father's stories seemed fairly harmless, though they were often at someone's expense. He had no sense of propriety, no tact, and seemed totally unaware when his stories hit his audience wrong. I believe the time I was most embarrassed by my father was when he came to visit and we took him to a potluck at the Japanese American church we were attending.

After making various wisecracks about the unusual food, he proceeded to tell his joke about the Japanese dentist who set his patient's appointment at "tooth-hurty" in the afternoon. Not realizing that he was sitting across from several appalled but very polite Japanese couples, he went on to regale them with stories from his childhood. He lived in San Francisco in the late-1920s and his parents employed a Japanese houseboy. In this story he liked to describe how the young man ate fried eggs with chopsticks, which my young father had observed by spying on the fellow from behind the partially closed kitchen door.

Daddy was very good at caricatures. You could almost see his eyes become slanted as he looked carefully to the right and then to the left, imitating the Japanese boy, and then dropping his face quickly to his plate to demonstrate the slurping up of the egg yolk after the whites had been carefully cut off and eaten with chopsticks. My father the card. In the right audience, this story went over very well. Instead I was left apologizing for him when we returned Sunday morning without him.

My father knew every derogatory name his generation used for the various shunned cultural groups, which he was sure were beneath him. I had grown up thinking they were all just white folks from different countries. But the Irish and the Germans were every bit as bad as the Asians, a designation he would never have deigned to use. His lily white pedigree included no tainted blood at all. He was 100 percent English in spite of generations of ancestors in American dating back to the 1600s. Even other members of the British nation were suspect for not being English. He used such slanders with ease in his stories, bashing all races and genders equally — except, of course, his own.

You might say my father was something of a handful, but along with his cruel characterizations, he was charming and charismatic. Because of this he got away with murder in the storytelling department as he busily enlightened so many with his crippled witticisms.

When he told the story of his kidnaping at the age of 3, his cruelty was directed at his maternal grandmother, the woman who stole him after his mother's funeral and took him halfway across the country, where it took my grandfather 6 months to find him. He was especially fond of the part of the story where he described all the one-armed men he saw who worked in the Klamath saw mills. He was less forthcoming about the teenage uncle who accompanied him and the grandmother on the trip from Ohio to Oregon, the man my mother thought molested him and set him on the path of pedifilia. (As secretary to two military psychiatrists, she knew full well what went on in the lives of those whose case files she typed up; she learned all about how the abused becomes an abuser.)

I once had a therapist who informed me that my father's telling of dirty jokes was tantamount to sex abuse. I have to think about that deeply when I am tempted to repeat one or another of those horrific jokes he told. Fifty years or more of water has passed under that bridge, and I am fortunate that I no longer recall most of my father's jokes. Instead I remember the stories he told about himself; my favorite is the story of the fortune cookie.

I wasn't there to witness it myself, but my parents had gone out to dinner with the church group they belonged to, 2 x 2s (pronounced "tuba twos"). They had joined this group a decade earlier when they first began attending the local community church right down the street from our house. We had just moved from Ohio, and rather than travel a couple of miles to the closest Presbyterian church, they decided the community church a block away made more sense. It sure beat getting three kids dressed and into the car when we could just scamper down the street and take ourselves to Sunday School while they dawdled behind and met us afterwards for worship.

There were many fellowship groups at this church, since there were many booming families with 3 or 4 or more children, and the Administrative Board understood the need to capture the attention of the parents as well as the kids. Thus there were groups for single folks in their 20s, for adults in their 30s and 40s with school age children, for working adults without children, for the gray haired group sending their brood off to college and for the retired folks. Two by twos was for married couples, most of whose kids were the same ages as me and my brother. So my parents knew their fellow diners quite well. It was a group accustomed to both my father's stories and my mother's embarrassed reserve.

The dinner was at a popular Chinese restaurant and the group sat around several large tables for 12. My dad loved an audience this size, and he took great advantage of their attention to regale them with his latest stories, like the one where my giant brother totaled a stolen car which had hit him as he was speeding downhill on his bicycle, or the one where my brother shot himself in the foot during gun safety training.

At the end of the dinner, the waiter came around with fortune cookies for the crowd. As my father tells it, they all cracked open their cookies and silently read their fortunes. Then they began sharing with the table. As the turn to read one's fortune aloud passed around the table, my dad popped the cookie, fortune and all, into his mouth and chewed. He was swallowing when it was his turn to read. He claimed he hadn't gotten a fortune, that his cookie had been empty, and a big deal was made about getting him another cookie, but he demurred.

Later he would tell a different audience that not only had he gotten a fortune, but he didn't dare share it with those religious types, because the cookie said: "You will run away with your mistress!"

That story delighted my dad and he told it many times. So it should not have surprised me — 10 years later, when my parents got divorced and my dad married a much younger woman — that Mom refused to believe my dad when he told her the new wife had not been his mistress and she was not the reason for the divorce.