

# Palm Springs

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*We're not fifteen minutes into my visit,* and my father's already embarrassing me.

"Hello there, Kenny Rogers," he says to the maitre d'; then he turns to my stepmother and me and jerks a thumb at the man as if he were made of wax. "Don't he look like Kenny Rogers?" My father lets out a horse laugh and pokes the maitre d' in the ribs.

Kenny Rogers touches his gray beard and tries to smile.

"Where's the old lady that's always here?" my father asks.

"Mama Nicoletti?" the maitre d' says, bowing his blow-dried head. "She died."

"Oh, dear," my stepmother whispers.

"Yes," the maitre d' says solemnly, "it was very sudden." He continues the story as he seats us at our table. "Pneumonia. The hospital sent her home, but it spread to her other lung, and she died in the night."

"I'll have an iced tea with Sweet'N Low," my father says.

The maitre d' looks confused. I know the look: he's trying to figure out if my father's hard of hearing or just insane.

"We all loved Mama very much," the maitre d' tries again.

"And bring us some of that bread, too," my father says to his menu.

The maitre d's mouth hangs open. He turns and walks away.

"I guess we'll just have water," I say to my father.

"Oh," he says, realizing his rudeness. "Waiter!" he yells across the room, snapping his fingers. "Waiter! They want something to drink, too!"

My stepmother and I sink in our seats. "It can wait, Dad," I say through gritted teeth. I'm forty-eight, a father of two, and I still feel like a fourteen-year-old whenever my father and I are together.

"Best Eye-talian food in Palm Springs," my father says to me, and he looks at his wife. That's her cue to talk.

"Yes," she says, "we love this place."

It's a little joint like all the other little joints he takes me to when I visit, a box wedged between other boxes in a strip mall, one of many strip malls that line boulevards named after Gerald Ford, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Shore, Sonny Bono. The decor is nondescript: brown tablecloths, white walls. We hear people laughing in a banquet room off to one side. A leather-clad biker couple sits a few tables to our left. The other tables

are empty. The audience for my father's performance is, thankfully, limited.

When Kenny Rogers brings the bread, my father asks, "Is that a Kiwanis Club meeting over there?" He means the group in the banquet room. My father never drank when I was a boy, but now he gets drunk at clubs: Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions — any kind of civic organization that will fill his cup with what he calls "good Christian fellowship." They're also customers for his "motivational talks," thirty-minute routines designed to remind businessmen that "we're all winners"; to deliver the ABC's of success — "Attitude. Belief. Concept. Determination. Enthusiasm" — mixed with a dash of God and patriotism. I went to one once, and he was actually pretty convincing. I didn't feel like a winner, but I was proud to see my father engaged in his favorite pastime: talking about himself.

Kenny says it's a Porsche-owner's club. My father looks disappointed. He knows nothing about cars (other than that they're good for displaying magnetic flags and ribbons that "Support Our Troops") and therefore can't crash their party with a joke. So he turns to the bikers.

"How are you all doing tonight?" he shouts.

The woman looks a little startled. The man looks surly.

"I'll be eighty-five years old this April," he tells them.

They nod. I close my eyes and lower my head.

My father's always been a salesman. He sold salvation as a married preacher, dry burritos as a divorced lunch-truck driver, and security as an insurance representative. Now it's like Tourette's: he can't stop selling himself to total strangers. His age is his final calling card to the world. "Yep, eighty-five this April," he repeats for the bikers, dropping in his Tennessee Ernie Ford impression, "the good Lord willing and the creek don't rise."

The bikers do what most people do: mumble their congratulations. I withdraw and then feel guilty for withdrawing. I should be able to handle this, but his public shenanigans are just as embarrassing to me now as they were when I was a kid. "Corn pone," my mother called it after the divorce. I'll never forget her eye-rolling asides — as if to say, "What a phony!" — whenever my father offered up one of his *Hee-Haw* handshakes or big Baptist backslaps to a member of the flock at the grocery store. I'd seen some of these same men laugh behind his back. They'd whisper and stare at his undershirt and fleshy arms and grass-stained Saturday shorts. And I'd feel ashamed.



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My father always encouraged me, told me, “Just do the best you can.” But then he’d beat me with his belt when I’d done wrong — this from a man who preached the love of Christ from the pulpit every sleepy Sunday morning. I’m not saying I didn’t deserve most of the beatings, but it sent a mixed message — not to mention created a Christian guilt complex that drove me to drink for twenty-five years. I felt guilty because,

after my mother left, my father raised my brother and me on his own. He put me through school, suffered, sacrificed, and advised me on every professional move I’ve ever made — and still I’m embarrassed by him whenever we’re in public.

*(end of excerpt)*