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## Rosemary and Olive Oil

by Gail Gauthier



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It's hard to know what to say to someone who's dying. My uncle, Victor, for instance. He's so close to the door that the hospital is afraid to send him home to die. Afraid he won't make it back to the house. He's still lucid, though. He understands what's said to him, and he talks back, too.

Talking with Uncle Vic is a problem for my brother and me, though. What, exactly, are we supposed to say to him? Better luck with your next life? If he got along with his kids and ex-wife, we could have just waited and gone to the wake. As it was, we felt we had to pay a few visits.

"What we need to do," Ben said as we stood in line at the hospital cafeteria, "is think

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of one all-purpose thing we can say to anyone who is dying. You know—the way I say, ‘Oh, it’s so small’ to anyone who has a new baby, so I don’t have to talk about how ugly the kid is.”

“That was my thing to say about babies,” I reminded him. “You stole it from me.”

“Don’t be petty at a time like this.”

Ben bought one of the lunch specials. I was leaning toward making due with potato chips instead. I’d been avoiding chips because fat and salt were two of the reasons Uncle Victor was up on the fifth floor. But a package marked “Rosemary and Olive Oil” had caught my eye on a chip rack near the cash register. Olive oil was supposed to be some kind of miracle drug, wasn’t it? And I was pretty sure rosemary was a vegetable. A plant, anyway. So I bought a bag along with a diet Coke to offset the empty calories.

We sat down at a table, and Ben told me, “You know, Leonardo da Vinci once said, ‘A life well used brings happy death.’”

“You going to steal from da Vinci now?” I asked just before I tossed the first chip into my mouth.

“No,” he said. “What if I say that to someone whose life wasn’t well used? He’ll know I’m just blowing smoke. Besides, I don’t want to actually use the word ‘death.’ Too depressing.”

I only caught bits and pieces of what he said after that because my mind was totally absorbed by the sensations running from my tongue down to my throat and out to my jaw. I think he might have suggested telling all the dying people he would run into in the future that they sure had traveled each and every highway, hadn’t they? I could have pointed out that that was Paul Anka he was robbing, but I was too focused on the wonder of the rosemary and olive oil moment I was living.

“I think I’m going to go with a journey metaphor,” Ben said. “Maybe something about the longest and the best voyage.”

“Thomas Wolfe,” I whispered, not wanting to open my mouth too wide and ruin my bliss.

“Some other kind of metaphor, then. Yeah,” Ben muttered to himself. “I need a metaphor...”

“Life is full of surprises.” The words just burst out of me as I realized how close I had come to never knowing rosemary and olive oil on deep-fried potato slices.

“I said a metaphor, not a cliché,” Ben objected. “Besides, that’s totally inappropriate to the occasion.”

I forced myself to save four, maybe five, potato chips and carefully slipped the folded bag into the breast pocket of my shirt.

“There’s always a rainbow after the storm,” Ben said after we’d left the cafeteria and were on our way upstairs. “Now there’s a metaphor. Hopeful, suggesting life after death without having to actually bring up the subject.”

“You got that from a greeting card.”

“So?”

Retreat:  
October  
on  
Copper  
Mountain  
by M.E.  
Parker

The  
Sandwich  
Diaries  
by Angus  
Woodward

But  
There  
Was No  
Star  
Anise by  
Andrew  
Martell

Fruit  
Route by  
Susan  
King

When we entered Uncle Victor's room, Ben gave me a push toward the bed so I'd have to break the ice. Fortunately, I was prepared.

"I brought you something, Uncle Vic," I said. "From the cafeteria."

"I can't eat," he moaned, nodding his slack, stubble-covered chin toward a tray that held full cups of broth and Jello.

"I brought you some rosemary and olive oil potato chips. I just had some for the first time down in the cafeteria. It was one of the most incredible food experiences of my life."

"A food experience?" he just managed to say. "Neh."

I hadn't expected an argument. I had assumed Uncle Victor would just eat the chips and enjoy a transcendent minute or so of happiness.

"But eating them would be something you've never done before," I said, feeling a little disappointed about the way things were going. "It would be an adventure."

Uncle Victor gave me a look that I think was supposed to be filled with pity. But he turned his hand over on his blanket so that his palm was up. I definitely got the feeling he was humoring me. I put just one chip into his hand in case he was too weak to lift it to his mouth. He managed. His expression didn't change much, but he did turn his palm up again as if to say, "More." And then he did it again.

Okay, I'm not certain Uncle Victor had any kind of transcendent anything right there on his death bed. I do know we passed the time. And he asked me to bring him some crab flavored chips he'd heard about but never tried.

On our way back to the elevator, Ben said, "Oh, that potato chip talk was so awkward. I can't go through anything like that again. There's got to be a metaphor to help us out."

"Hmm," I said, feeling I should say something or he would get suspicious. He could have the "It's so small" line for new babies, but there was no way I was letting him take my rosemary and olive oil potato chips for the dying.



**Gail Gauthier** is the author of eight books for children and young adults, which include an ALA Notable Book, two Junior Library Guild Selections, and four foreign editions. Her essays have appeared at *The Millions* and *Literary Mama*. She maintains a [website](#) and the blog [Original Content](#).

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