

Why I Eat Broccoli

I'm here at my mom's funeral with a few of her friends. I wanted to say a few words, because I spent most of my life hating her. In the end, I'll miss her. I want to tell you about the CIA, LSD and my old dog Spot. For my eulogy, I'll tell you why I eat broccoli.

When I graduated from college, dad took me out to the local pub to celebrate. We had a couple of drinks, a couple of laughs, a couple of stories about school, and then he said "You know your mother isn't well. She won't be around much longer."

I felt bad, but my face twisted up and he could see my mixed reactions.

"You know she's not right in the head?"

"Yeah, whoever says 'sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me' never met mom."

Then I flashed back to when I was a lad of six. My mother put a big serving of broccoli in front of me. I couldn't stand the look, the smell, the texture – everything and anything about it was disgusting. I pushed it away. She explained that it was very healthy food, and bla-bla, hoo-rah for broccoli.

Then, when I was 8, another plate of the disgusting green vegetable was on the table at Thanksgiving dinner. I didn't take any. However, she walked around the table and plopped a big scoop onto my plate. She explained how good it was for me. I wanted to puke from the smell. I tried to eat around it, but the smell got to me and I left the turkey, potatoes (2 kinds), cranberry sauce, giblet gravy and dressing behind. I went outside to escape the dreaded broccoli. My dad hollered after me, but not very much or for very long.

And when I was 10, it was the turning point of my life. When mom scooped the dreaded vegetable onto my plate, I gagged and brushed the plate off the table – Crash! Dad was pissed off at the broken plate and I was about to get his belt across my backside when my mother looked at me and said in a cold voice: "That was a horrible thing to do. Broccoli is good for you. You think you can get away with anything, but you can't. I know how to torture you so that you will eat anything that's put in front of you."

I saw my dad's face twist. "Your mom used to work for the government," he said. I had no clue what that meant, but he had a disturbed look on his face.

She raised her voice. "First, you're going to be whipped within an inch of your life," then she took a small step closer. "I'll use a pair of twisted coat hangers. And then I will burn off your feet with the blowtorch. Harry, bring me the blowtorch from the basement, and light it. And before I'm done with that, I'll rub cayenne pepper on the leg stumps, and then listen to you scream like the little sissy you are. And then I'll use the blowtorch on your eyes, one at a time. If you're still screaming, your tongue's going to come out with the knife that's sitting right next to you." She crept closer and looked at my meat knife.

And then she bent down and looked right into my eyes. "And then I'm going to order Spot to gnaw off your little pee-pee. He's been trained – he thinks that it's a hotdog. I bet he can't wait...look at how he's looking at you right now. German Shepherds are very clever dogs. When that's done, I'm going to use the blowtorch to seal off the raw wound, while Spot gnaws on your only other man-parts, until they're gone, too. Now you're going to the kitchen and get yourself a big plate of broccoli and while

you're eating it, you'll be telling me and dad how great it is. And we'll see how mean and tough you really are. Or should I call Spot over right now to turn you into a screaming little girl with no feet?"

"Stop your crying right now. Go get your food, and clean up the mess on the floor. And in the future, Spot will be watching you, to make sure you eat all your broccoli; right Spot?"

Spot looked at her and at me. Dad raised one eyebrow. Mom was 1 inch away from my nose, and I could see her sneaky hand reaching for my knife.

I have eaten broccoli ever since – and I've actually come to like it. I never talked back to my mom again. And in my whole life, nobody's been able to bully me or scare me – and I've been in combat.

Dad looked at me across the bar table and knew what I was thinking about. "I know you hate her, but let me tell you about your mom."

"I met her at a government agency called the CIA. She worked in the human intelligence service, and she was working with a doctor on some chemicals that would help break tough spies down quickly – get them to talk about their secrets. The doctor was a friend of Dr. Timothy Leary, the LSD guy. Your mom's boss was trying to recruit 'test volunteers', and your mom was patriotic enough to step up and try the drug, and then document its effects on her. She was well-qualified for the job. They never told us what chemical they used, but it was either LSD or psilocybin mushrooms. Leary and his pals did some experiments at Harvard University and a place called Concord Prison and they were like rock stars at the time. They preached 'tune in, turn on, drop out', but they never talked about the extreme risks of a failed 'trip' caused by hallucinogenic chemicals."

"I was there when your mom got the injection. We weren't married yet, just really seriously in love with each other. There were two large Marines in the room, in case she freaked out, and the chief researcher and his assistant were there to put her through a simulated interrogation session. A few seconds after they gave her the shot, she started 'tripping' – reacting to the drug. The researchers screamed and threatened her with grave bodily harm if she didn't follow their orders. They were shouting at her about eating broccoli – it was supposed to be innocent enough that she would react to the interrogation, but not be seriously harmed. She resisted for a couple of minutes, and then started screaming and screaming. She never came all the way back. She lived the rest of her life on that bad trip – she had a permanent compulsion about broccoli."

"The CIA paid for 10 years of mental therapy, so she was finally able to cope with day-to-day life. But she told me many times how she was only 2 seconds away from screaming her brains out, or blowing them out with a gun. I married her later that year, mainly so I could help nurse her back to normal. And then we found out that she was pregnant when the drug test began, and doctors watched you for years after. Fortunately, you never seemed to have been affected directly – only by the results of her fried mind."

All this was news to me and it took a while for it to sink in.

"So your mom got a secret medal and thank you note from the Agency, and then they let her go. I retired a few years ago when my code breaking skills were surpassed by a new IBM computer. I loved your mom, but it was very hard to go through what we encountered. I remember how you hated broccoli, and how her ugly acid-trip wound up destroying your relationship with her – and me, too, I suppose. I couldn't do anything or say anything, because we were both covered by the Official Secrets Act and we had to remain silent."

"Over the years, I've just tried to be a good husband and a good dad. I know that we drove you away, but I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive us. Your mom needs you now, and I hope you'll reach

out. And if she starts screaming about broccoli, just don't argue, okay? Tell her how much you like it and smile."

So now you know why I eat broccoli, and how I know that mom didn't really mean the horrible stuff she said. She's gone and dad's fading fast – they were really tightly-bound together. I realize so late in life how much they loved each other – and me. Tonight, I think I'll order a plate of broccoli and a glass of dark beer and have a good remember of my childhood nightmares – it's time to put old 'sticks and stones' in the past.