

The Cruise

By Michael Groetsch

It is Thanksgiving Day. My entire family and I cruise the Gulf of Mexico on the Carnival Conquest. On the massive ship are my brothers, sisters, sons, nieces, nephews, and Dad. There are 23 of us in all. We will arrive in Jamaica tomorrow.

Mom passed away in January. We feel that spending Thanksgiving on a cruise would be an uplifting experience for our father. Dad grieves terribly; we all do. But his zest for life and competitive nature remains intact. Although we found him sleeping recently with Mom's picture in his arms, he refuses to allow his spirit to be broken.

Following an announcement that the game 'Survivor' will be played on the main deck of the ship at 3:00 p.m., our entire family gathers around the platform from which it will be staged. The moderator has a heavy Australian accent that sounds like the guy Steve Irwin who fights the alligators on television. He explains to those who would like to participate, that they must write their names on a ballot and place them into a bin sitting on top of the registration desk. Among the aspiring participants are the three Ewalds: My father Big E, my brother Little E, and my nephew Littler E.

As my brothers, sisters, and nephews line up and enter their names, Big E enters his as well. Big E then returns to the end of the line and enters his name again, again, and again. When I question Dad about his multiple entries, he responds smugly that he entered his name 10 times. A polygraph may suggest 20.

Within five minutes, the Australian guy begins to pull the names of the 10 people who will participate in the cruise's version of 'Survivor'. As the moderator pulls the first ballot, he asks if

there is a 'Yule' present. When no one immediately responds, he again asks if anyone in the audience is named 'Yule'. Recalling the time that I miss-dialed my father's phone number (asking for Ewald) and was rudely asked by the other party, "What in the hell is an Ewald?" I realize that the guy is probably mispronouncing Dad's name.

"Do you mean, Ewald?" I ask assertively, recognizing that I have now become a partner in crime.

"Yes, that's it," replies the Australian, as he still seems insistent on mispronouncing Dad's name. "Eroy," he says, please step up here and take your place on the platform."

The crowd begins to applaud as Little E and Littler E, appear to conceal themselves behind a large support beam.

After selecting the remaining nine contestants, my father begins to size up the competition. He appears undaunted by the four male studs and the five female contenders who are young enough to be his grandchildren. As he glances to the right where we are standing, his eyes suggest that he will prove to us, once and for all, that he is the ultimate 'Survivor.'

Initially, the 10 contestants are broken down into two groups: five men and five women. In the first two games, one team competes against the other. The losing team is then required to vote one member off.

In the first game, members of the teams are told that they must slide their bodies through a hula-hoop and pass it to their partners who must do the same. The team who finishes last must eliminate one of its members.

As the hoop reaches Dad, his small stature passes through the hoop so quick that he receives a standing ovation. His team wins and one from the other team is discharged. Then there are nine.

In the second game, the two teams are sent on a scavenger hunt for 15 items. After five minutes, the Australian guy audits the items found by each group. When it is discovered that neither team has produced a set of loose dentures, the tie- breaker occurs when Dad pulls out his teeth and grins from ear to ear. The Australian guy cringes and declares Dad's team the winner. Then there are eight.

Although Dad is prepared to manipulate his way to victory, I must give credit where credit is due. In games three and four, he seems to be above board.

In a memory game involving numbers, his recall, developed by years of managing his vast real estate holdings without the use of a computer, puts his competitors to shame. Then there are seven.

In game number four, where contestants are asked to mimic a chimpanzee dancing to Swan Lake, he dances across the deck like a ruptured primate while again receiving a standing ovation. Then there are six.

In games five and six however, Dad's style seem somewhat suspicious. In the balloon contest, the remaining contestants, after eating two crackers, are required to blow up, tie, and then pop the balloon by sitting on it. The last one to pop the balloon is to be dismissed. Dad, after eating his cracker, seems to have difficulty inflating the balloon. Realizing that he is about to be eliminated, he goes into a survivor mode. He only slightly blows up the balloon, pretends to tie and then sits on it while puncturing the balloon with his sharp fingernails. He does it with such speed, no one notices his technique and he is allowed to advance to the next level. Then there are five.

In another hula- hoop contest, where the participants are required to swing their hips while keeping the hoop from hitting the ground, he manages to advance as well. Having

difficulty swaying his aged hips, he defies gravity by holding up the hoop with his hands as he quickly manipulates it around his waist like a conveyer belt. Then there are four.

Game number seven, in which four contestants remain, is the turning point of the competition. It is also the beginning of the end for Dad's remaining opponents. The participants are told that they can personally eliminate one participant by a majority vote.

"You now have the opportunity to get rid of the challenger who most intimidates you. Simply write his or her name on the white card and drop it into this box," instructs the Australian guy. "The one who gets the most ballots is eliminated," he says smugly.

It is at this pivotal moment I know that Dad will win the 'Survivor' title.

"Barb," I tell my wife, "there is no way that those who are left will see my aging 83-year-old father as a threat. Unfortunately for them, they don't know Dad is like a fox. If they did, this is their chance to get rid of him. Instead, they will allow him to advance to the next level and then they are his."

"You seem sure about what you are saying," Barb responds.

"I'm not sure about what I am saying," I reply, "I'm certain!"

Within minutes, the ballots are filled out, counted, and read. I could swear that I saw Dad try to enter an extra ballot.

The first ballot pulled is for Amber. The second ballot pulled is for Troy.

"The third ballot is for Eroy!" states the Australian guy who still seems to be having trouble with his English.

As the last ballot is read, Amber is dismissed while Dad seems to salivate. Then there are three.

In game number eight, an ice cream eating contest, the contestants are told that the last one to finish their ice cream is to be eliminated. Having had years of practice in which Mom gave him ice cream each night before he went to bed, he seems to inhale it like an Orek vacuum cleaner. Then there are two.

In the final game, Dad and the young stud Troy are blindfolded and required to kneel down with their hands behind their backs. The moderator tells them that they will have to eat something they cannot see. The first one to eat the entire plate will be declared the winner.

After blindfolding Dad and the stud, my father pulls up the right side of the black blindfold and eyeballs his opponent. The Australian guy then places two plates of food in front of them that makes Purina Dog Chow look appetizing. He mixes it with catsup, mustard, hot-sauce, gravy, and things not identifiable. The combination dish is then stirred until it begins to resemble dark sludge inside an old car.

“Okay, Troy and Eroy,” says the linguistic expert, “at the sound of go, you are to eat the entire substance. Before the moderator could get the ‘g’ off his lips, Dad’s face was sucking up the stuff on his plate while the stud seemed somewhat hesitant to continue.

“ Barb, Dad wants to win the contest so bad that even if he throws the food up, he’ll inhale it to avoid detection.” Before I can even finish my statement, Dad begins to gag and inhale simultaneously as the stud suddenly vomits his food back into his plate. Then there is one.

After finishing off the young stud, Big E (aka Yule-Eroy) is asked to step up on the stage to receive his awards. Beaming with pride and wearing a tee shirt that reads FBI (female body inspector) he doesn’t have to be asked a second time and jumps onto the podium like a 20- year-old.

As he is named the ‘Survivor’, the Australian guy asks Dad if he would like to make a personal statement. Without hesitation, Big E grabs the microphone and speaks to his adoring fans while pointing to his FBI tee shirt.

“Okay, all of you young women who would like to have your body inspected should line up in front of the stage,” he says with a crooked grin.

As I look to my right, I see Little E and Littler E once again hiding behind the steel column.

After getting his awards, Dad stands on the podium surrounded by his grandchildren. He raises both arms and gives us the victory sign.

Suddenly I see black and white images of Dad as a young boy after he won his first Golden Gloves championship. In colored images, however, I see what Dad has provided us on this first Thanksgiving without Mom. I see us smiling and laughing in the face of adversity. I see 23 of us coming together in the name of love. Like Dad, I see all of us as ‘Survivors’.

I look to the southern sky and can only hope that Mom is watching. As the echo of her voice is heard in a western wind that blows across the ship’s deck, I whisper within myself the words, “This one’s for you Mom, this one’s for you.”