

## Lunch with Papa

Just lunch would be fine. Would do. He will order a turkey sandwich on *soft* bread. He will order a regular Coke. He will try to joke with the waitress. She won't understand. Or maybe she will. Some did. He looks like he could go golfing in whatever it is he will be wearing: a light blue or yellow windbreaker, and pressed trousers. He will take the bus to come meet me, even if it is very cold out, even if he had a *bad* night. We meet at our place. They know us there, motion us to sit down anywhere. He has a newspaper folded under his arm and is carrying a worn plastic bag with what looks like papers in it. He limps slightly. He is eighty-nine now. Handsome, still. He orders tea. It will not be hot enough, or will be too hot. The tea is meant to come when he is eating the *second* half of his sandwich, but he doesn't say this. The waitress brings the tea right away. He sticks his hand out over the mouth of the cup as she goes to pour. Papa, I say.

He calls me Kiddie, like this: So what do you have to say for yourself, Kiddie?

He clears his throat a lot, thunderously, and spits something into a napkin. It still makes me a little sick when he does this. I do not say all the things I wish I had said before he died. We don't say much. It is just a regular lunch. I can tell he likes his pickle. His socks match his windbreaker. He mentions some family news or something about the Cubs or a surprise visit someone paid him. He says, I can't get over it! And then he says, I couldn't get over it! Or, wait, none of it happens like this.

We are at a baseball game sitting in the bleachers and it is a sunny, spring day and he gets us hot dogs with mustard which is dripping off of his hand and is messing up the scorecard which he is keeping close track of with a short, orange pencil. When he gets up to go to the "Boy's Room" he doesn't limp, not even slightly. He still wears the yellow windbreaker, and the matching socks. That part is the same. The trousers are the same. He comes back with a Coke, and drinks it down in loud gulps and orders another hot dog from the *fella*, and I want one too and he gets me one. His maroon Cadillac is in the parking lot. We are going to have trouble finding it after the game.

Or we are back at the deli now, and we are finishing up and he takes the check and pulls out some bills held together by a rubber band. We share a halvah as we make our way up the steps and back out onto the street. We do it this way every time: I stop at the cashier and buy a halvah. I break it in half and hand half of it to him.

Or, maybe he comes straight to my apartment and I make him lunch, a simple turkey sandwich. And he is reading the story that he wrote and I typed. He can't believe what it looks like all typed up. He says, I can't get over it! Or we are listening to Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong or Jackie Mason on a crackling cassette tape. No, we are listening to live jazz and eating fried shrimp at a bar. It's a Thursday evening in August. He is moving his feet and clapping.

Or we are playing checkers.

Or I am giving him a manicure.

Or we are taking a little walk.

Or he is pulling a bill out of his worn, leather wallet. The bill is a hundred, that has been folded many times into a tiny square. He tells me he has been carrying it around with him for over twenty years, *just in case*. He gives it to me, because I am leaving to go to Europe. I will spend it right away, and then replace it with another one that I fold up that same way. Or I am leaving to go to New York, where he grew up. Or I am going to college, which he never got a chance to do. Or we are going to get his razor fixed, and the old men in the store know him and they talk about the score of a game or stores that used to be there or just good razors. Or it is evening and I am home alone and the phone rings and it is him. Or I am just sitting there with him while he makes a list. Or I am helping a nurse hold him down. He thinks the hospital is plotting to kill him, and he is onto them. It doesn't matter. He is walking towards me. We are about to meet. I see him. He is walking towards me with or without the limp. The newspaper rolled under his arm. We kiss hello. I feel his stubble, smell his smell. Hold his hands. His face is cold. His hands are his. He says, how are you, Kiddie. Really, I do. I see him walking down the street in the windbreaker, the trousers. I would recognize him anywhere, even from very, very far away.