

Mind the Gap

You're sitting there at the foot of his hospital bed. Your pop-pop isn't wrinkled and thin like the guy behind the curtain that separates them, but he's plump and slightly yellow. You've been here before. One time is enough, but you keep coming back. Again, they call you down to the principal's office and deliver you to your parents' hanging faces.

He asks you about school but you don't say much and he replies with two how-'bout-thats, just like always. No one belongs here; not the cheap curly-haired nurses, not the swift winking doctors, not the patients whose charts linger nearby, waiting to leap onto tags stuck forever to naked toes.

He asks you if you want to see his scar and you say yeah and try not to look too interested in what lay under the worn-in-by-death gown but he's not looking at you because he started to cough a second ago and it's a rattle-y thing happening somewhere deep inside, maybe near his back, spouting out in huffs and hacks through his fingers.

You don't think of death. You think instead of your father's best friend and his *em-feh-zee-ma*. He coughed a lot too. They started as boys with fishing rods and egg pranks and stolen cigarettes and grew into two men until the smoke separated them, growing blacker one's lungs and not the other's. It didn't matter. Medicine, seizure, stroke, your father re-taught him the alphabet, spoon-fed him, snuck him dirty magazines and sandwiches from Sal's. I heard his cough-laugh-cough for weeks and months until my father removed himself from his pal's quiet hospital room and told the machines to quit bothering his friend, to leave him "in peace". He watched him puff his last breath, destined for déjà vu years later another time another place another disease.

Your pop-pop picks up his bloated fist—so swollen it looks like a mallet--and, still coughing—he points at the pitcher on the bedside table. It's filled up with ice cubes and a tiny alice-in-wonderland spoon and he aims his fist right at it and then at you, desperate to do something, you get up off the chair that wasn't comfortable anyway, and you hand him a spoonful of ice which he picks up real slow and slides between his lips. This is when you realize that his lips are all wrong and you think it's not supposed to be his lips that are wrong, it's supposed to be his chest, somewhere inside where a pink pump goes on all day and night, but it's his lips that are wrong. They're cracked like a lizard's skin and you notice this and maybe grimace a little, but he doesn't say anything because his eyes are closed and he's wetting the desert that is his mouth and dreaming rain.

Those lips have told you a million and one facts. You watch Jeopardy and he calls out all the right answers, with lazy grace, too, and you watch the over-hairsprayed contestants hang their heads in shame. Eventually it's wheel of fortune then the ball game. You always fall asleep to the commentary, you can't help it, it's such a nice sound. Your pop-pop there in his brown chair with his de-shoed feet on the footstool and echoes of your mom-mom cleaning the entire kitchen, just like she does every day. She clangs and he comments and you doze and feel safe in their orange and brown home of buzzing safe sounds.

You remember your mom-mom for more than just the kitchen. You remember how she used to take you for walks around the block and hand each of you—her favorite grandchildren—a plastic baggie and say “pick 'em up. all the good ones” and you'd walk down the crooked pavement blocks with your sister, squatting to put the acorns in your bag. She'd inspect them and pronounce them good and give them her blessing. Then you'd run with your grins to play in the backyard, and she'd begin the clothesline ritual—you love the pins, how they split into three simple pieces, how they work in a perfect handshake. She'd hang clothes and you'd play until pop-pop returned from the shop, a quiet force, disclosing nothing about himself to anyone.

Niggers and Jews and queers all of 'em, he says. You refuse to sit at the same dinner table as him. You've got a cause so you stand up for Rosa Parks, even though it's not about her, you're righteous and you show him your book review with its yellow-bus cover that you worked on for hours. You chastise and preach and he listens to you with wide German laughing eyes. Not knowing quite what to say so saying nothing but 'how bout that'. He tosses a wink to onlookers but starts behaving, at least with me.

You stare down at him, at his body that's yellow like a plucked and refrigerated turkey, and you realize that his arm hair is white and that this fact shouldn't be strange for an old man, but it is. He's stopped coughing by now and you relax your face a little and he opens his eye and huffs out an OK and starts to untie the gown. He pulls it down so it's just above the dividing line and you open your eyes a little wider and he pries apart the gown to reveal the path that descends into his depths. It's puffy and purple and moves like a snake down all the way down to his belly. I-shaped staples make a railroad across his flesh, tying down fat and skin. A rainbow blossom of bruises surrounds each staple and you can't stop noticing it because it's beautiful in a repulsive way.

You want to look anywhere but there on the chest of your living grandfather, but you move your face closer instead and his chest is wide wide wide. Then he says, how 'bout that with a smile and a cough and starts to stow it away somewhere inside him.

Someday not far off the railroad of his chest will melt into him, will shrivel, will thaw instead of cut, will disappear.

'A tank, a god-damned German tank'. They talk about him, all the men that have been coming to McDonald's every morning for a decade—bent-neck Carl, fat Mel, Jack with greasy yellow hair, Stan the pilot. They sit there with their 40-cent coffees and extra syrup packets and argue about everything, but call you doll face and show you card tricks and winks. Then they turn to themselves and go 'He'll make it through, he's a tough one, twice it's cancer—hot damn. You're wrong, we'll pray, I read in the newspaper..., I told you that last week'. You sit at the counter behind them and learn how to fight death with words.

Someday not far off, he will become smaller, less man more white sheets more cynical green more respirator, and he'll move away to another place that you can't go and you'll think it's beautiful in a revolting way and you'll try not to puke.

You'll want to be far away. You'll want to be up high where mom-mom looked up between clotheslines, watching you both swim up the sprawling branches of the biggest fir tree. They weren't branches they were stairs, stairs to the castle that was in the depths of an ancient forest. But you and the branches were not enchanted, you both grew up. One day you look out of the back porch window for the last time and see that they chopped it down. They chopped the castle down and part of you with it.

It's the last time you speak to him, you don't know how to function, you're false, you're a liar and he knows it but he's lying too. Today is the last day he will ever be a living cantankerous old man. After today he's a blessed family man hard worker sacrificer, not an abuser, penny pinching hot-aired racist bastard. Instead he's the man that had a family instead of a real career. And sacrifice makes a man good. You wonder what it would have been like, what the burden felt like and what it feels like now. He wants to be happy, but no one is.

He dies when you're on a train, look both of you "headed home" and you decide to stay where it's safe, where you fit in, where everyone's not a liar. You stare out the window, watch rails pass and people walking backwards and flying away and you realize this is it. But it must be a joke because he's still there somewhere still giving you an uneven kiss goodbye and wearing a hat on his hairless head.

Wandering through his house, you feel like his ghost, but could you ever? It doesn't matter now. The M&M candy dish that's been empty for years. The sweaters and sweaters and sweaters and ties he got for Christmas. The withered tomato plants that will soon dry up. The honeysuckle bushes that made your lips pucker. The clothesline. The bathroom with mold between the tiles, the toothbrush with dried paste in the sink, the creaky noises in the living room, the World War II books, the jeopardy question-of-the-day calendar. You pull open the junk drawer ask what meaning did these things hold for him. What place in his thoughts did it all occupy? You will never know. You hold open the drawer and watch the contents turn to gold. Now it matters—the cross above his bed, the dried out palm leaves, the fake rose, the clock that still ticks—now that you can never ask him, it matters.

You inherit his radio, eight records and his World Almanac 2006. You inherit his name and fewer bitter memories of him than most, the youngest Frattura left.