

Sarah Coffing

# Merry Christmas, Papa



Below the dim lights of the dining room, Grandma shakes me out of my stupor and into hers.

“The doctor told me I need to lose ten pounds by January 1st,” she tells me over the giant mess of Oreo pudding she’s holding. Every square-inch Christmas tree on her plate has been destroyed by white-and-black globs.

I raise questioning eyes to her. “What did you tell him?”

She scoffs. “I said to him, ‘No, I don’t think so, sir. Nooo, sir. It’s the holidays.’”

“Maybe you’ll start tomorrow then.” I nudge her and offer a smile. She shows off all her teeth in the way she and I both do, but her eyes stay put. The day Grandpa died they glassed over, and two rocky shells formed over the blue.

“Mom, go ahead and be the other head of the table,” Dad tells her before assuming his nightly spot. He looks brave there, opposite his mother, but her hands can’t stay still. She’s recently had her wedding ring polished.

Grandma nods and reaches for my hand as we sit down. In the reflection of her humble diamond, I almost see his face.

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What I'm afraid of most is forgetting the sound of his voice when he said, "You betcha," or "I love you, kiddo." It was the kind of voice no one could forget, raspy like that of a long-time smoker even though he never touched a cigarette in his life. I wish I had recorded the last "kiddo."

I look down to the white tablecloth in front of me. There's a small red stain from the time I ruined a manicure. I wanted Rudolph's nose on my thumbnails, but I ended up with lacquer stigmata and a very angry mother.

To my left is the best part: the tree. A few weeks ago I came home and helped set it up, as I always do. Every year, Mom is just an inch too short to wrap the garland—or maybe the tree is just an inch too tall. Dad listens to Sinatra from the couch and quietly chuckles as she keeps trying. Stephanie cackles as strange ornaments seem to appear out of nowhere. Some years it's a creepy nutcracker, one year a bare-midriff Santa on a surfboard, but The Moose from Quebec always gets us.

"Who goes to Canada for a honeymoon?" I always ask. It's tradition.

Mom and Dad glance at each other, shrug, and smile. "We do."

No matter how many times we try to hide the obese winter whitetail, The Moose from Quebec somehow always manages to make himself front and center.

Grandpa liked the moose because he said it had "character."  
*Yep. You betcha.*

As plates get passed around, I find myself wondering less about what's *actually* in Uncle Rodney's root beer and more about why I can't pinpoint Grandma and Grandpa's anniversary.

*Richard Martin Hawthorne died at 11:45 a.m. Tuesday, July 28, 2015 in his home after a long battle with leukemia. He was at peace in his favorite chair, Old Blue.*

I found out when my phone rang in the dentist's chair.

"I know where he went when he died," she had said. "His eyes went up to the ceiling, and he looked so happy. I know who he saw."

Forks clink, my heart pounds, and Grandma breaks the silence again with: "He came to me last night."

Most of us just stare at her, mouths full of potatoes or ham or air. Dad's eyes dart up to the ceiling. *Here we go.*

When he was little, Grandma spent a lot of time with a

psychic who told her all kinds of secrets, secrets that led Dad not to trust Grandma so much. I wonder if the psychic ever mentioned leukemia. I wish I wasn't hearing this.

*I wonder what she did with his hearing aids.*

"What?" Dad asks her. He's coming from a place of annoyance, and I want him to retreat.

"He brought me some Christmas presents," she continues. "He sat and watched me open them, and they were all so lovely." The glass in her eyes starts to shatter. "It was so nice."

Dad shoots Aunt Jill a look, but someone holds a hand out. *Let her speak.*

"I sat on the couch, and he sat there next to me in Old Blue, just like he always did. And he looked so peaceful. His skin was pale, but healthy, and his eyes sparkled again."

Someone hands her a tissue.

"His belly was even there!" She forces a laugh. "I always told him to put down the doughnuts, but I didn't expect the belly to be something I'd miss."

Old Blue was where he always sat. I didn't know until after he died that the raggedy old recliner had a nickname. He sat there and read me stories; he sat there and let me cry. He sat there last time I saw him, just two days before he died.

His fingernails had turned blue, a scary shade I hope never to see again. The only color against his sallow skin was the bright yellow from the socks on his feet. Gifts from the hospital. *Sorry you're dying. Enjoy these free socks.*

At that point, the cancer had gotten to his brain and slowed him down like an anaesthetic. My sister showed off her 4H pictures, and he cried because he couldn't understand what they meant.

When I told him I loved him that day, I could tell by the look on his face that he wasn't sure what I meant, either. I walked out the door with his tears ingrained in my memory and his icy hand imprinted in mine.

I don't want to tell Grandma, but he still haunts me at night, too, because the goodbye he couldn't say is the one I miss the most.