

Open Heart Surgery

"Come here. Come over here, I need to tell you something." My grandfather called me to his side as they were wheeling him away in the gurney. The orderlies stopped, and waited. Grandpa's voice was weak, and his eyes were almost completely closed. He still had complete authority over the room. The morphine dripping into his bloodstream from the I.V. was starting to kick in. He looked uncharacteristically mellow, and small, a little jaundiced. I went to him, wordlessly waiting for him to speak. Whatever it was that he wanted to say might be the last thing he ever said, to me or anybody else. He was going in for another bypass surgery, his body was being killed by cancer, and he had been fighting for a long time. Nobody told me the odds, but I knew that there was a chance he wouldn't survive the procedure. It was 1986. I was sixteen.

My whole family was there, in the room with him. My Nana, my mom, dad, sister, uncle and aunt. But Grandpa wanted to tell me something, give me advice from what might be his deathbed. I felt like I was in a scene in the *Godfather*--Was he passing on the family secret, telling me who the rat was, tapping me as the new Don--what did he want? Why me? Why not his son, daughter or wife? He called me over.

Grandpa had a business—"the Shop"he always called it—a toy factory in Paterson, New Jersey. He manufactured bubbles, putty, clay, and a knock-off of Slime, called "Bucket of Yuk," "Ugh," or "Bahh!," depending on the customer.

Grandpa was a chemist, really, an inventor, and cooked these things up in his lab. He'd bring stuff home in plastic cups code-labeled "R702" or "16-B" and let my sister and me play with it as he watched and asked questions. We would run it through our fingers, and offer feedback like "the yellow one is too runny," or "can you make it glow?" He could make anything glow. He called these things "formulations," as in, "I've been working on a new formulation--what do you think?"

For a couple of summers, amazing hot long real summers, I worked for him at the shop. I called him Boss, and he treated me like someone who had worked with him for a long time. Not like his grandson, but like someone he could trust to get the job done. Like a Man. He had me re-organize the assembly line, pick up chemicals from suppliers, do inventory, fix things. Once, he picked up a handful of orange Wonder Clay and said to me, "that's a shitty color, isn't it?" My Grandpa wouldn't swear in front of the family. My Boss ran a factory of 40 people in a bad neighborhood in a tough town. He said whatever he wanted to say, and I worked for him.

When Grandpa broke his leg, he insisted on coming to work anyway. I picked him up in his Ford LTD Country Squire wagon with the fake wood-grain paneling on the sides. When I got him to the factory, we put him on the conveyer belt to get him up the two floors to the office. He lay there, unable to walk, being moved upstairs like the boxes of plastic eggs the assembly line ladies put the putty in, and still yelled at Wayne the foreman as he went by--"Use your

head for something besides a hatrack!" And Wayne cautioned him to duck as he went through the opening in the wall-- "Yo, watch your nugget, Sam!" Because he loved my Grandpa too. Everybody did.

He wanted to tell me something. I stood next to him. He was helpless, slipping into morphine bliss just before they cut his chest open and operated on his heart. He could barely speak, and beckoned me to bend down. I did. This was it. My face was inches from his, my back blocked the rest of my family from seeing or hearing him.

He spoke, in an intense whisper. He said:

"Bucket of Spit."

I was silent. I didn't know what he meant. His eyes were almost shut.

"Bucket of Spit. Clear, sticky. You can stretch it. Comes in a bucket.

Bucket of Spit. What do you think?"

He was going in for heart surgery, and he thought up Bucket of Spit.

"Bucket of Spit, huh?" I considered. Wow. That was a really good idea.

"Why not? Slime was huge, why not Spit? I think it'll sell." I was serious. I told him what I thought. I said it again, because it's the kind of phrase you tend to repeat, once you say it the first time. "Bucket of Spit."

"Bucket of Spit," Grandpa echoed, dreamily.

"I'll see you later, Boss." I said.

He seemed satisfied. He signaled to the orderlies that he was ready, and he closed his eyes. They wheeled him out the door.

My mother asked, "What did he say?" Nobody could hear him but me. Nobody knew what his words were. They all looked at me. They wanted to know.

"Bucket of Spit." I said. "He wanted to know what I thought of Bucket of Spit. I told him it'd sell."

"Bucket of Spit?" said my mother.

I nodded. "Bucket of Spit."