

## Little Blue Jacket

I picked my father up every Saturday for lunch and ice cream. The staff knew I was coming and had him sitting in front of the nursing station, waiting for me to appear at the end of the long hall. Depending on the weather, they dressed him in his floppy hat and lightweight jacket. Both were Carolina blue and dated back to the time when he drove from Shelby to Chapel Hill to go to Carolina football home games with my sister and her family. Now, except for his tennis shoes, the hat and little blue jacket were his only possessions. The rest of his clothes had long since been commingled in the nursing home laundry with the clothes of every other old man in the place. Anything else of value had been acquired by my sister or me.

We had lunch at the All Day Barbeque. I don't remember what we talked about but I expect that some of the conversations were about problems with room mates. The old women, those still with minds, managed to make friends and form societies. They gathered in the dining room and in the hallway (which always smelled of excrement because no matter how often the staff checked – and sometimes it wasn't that often, there had been an accident). Most of the old men kept to themselves. Some, like my father, resembled ancient predatory birds, with hawk faces and wild staring eyes, still dangerous if approached too closely.

We sat at a table by the window, overlooking the traffic on highway 74, and ate chopped barbeque sandwiches and hushpuppies. Mrs. Allen, the owner, greeted him warmly. She was an attractive older woman and my father grinned whenever she spoke to him. However, he liked the young waitress better. When she came by and asked if we needed anything else, he angled toward her as close as he could get and asked for more napkins. When she smiled, he told her that she had nice teeth, revealing his own well-shaped false teeth. I was embarrassed but she seemed to think he was cute. I always left a good tip.

After lunch, we stopped at the Dairy Queen for ice cream. My father got a cone of vanilla dipped in chocolate. He called it “back and white”. The staff knew him from before and was especially nice. They still laughed about the summer he set fire to the trash can when he dumped an ashtray with a smoldering cigarette. One day, Joyce, a large pretty girl who weighed maybe 300 lbs, brought out our order, rather than calling me to pick it up at the counter. As she walked away, weaving her curving bulk between the stools and tables, my father said to me in a loud whisper, “Tom, look at the ass on that girl.” I think she heard him because she never brought out the ice cream again.

He could sense when I was ready to take him back even before I said anything. He became stone faced and stared out of the window.

I stopped picking him up in the late winter of 1987 after I had the heart episode. For a month or so I decided that I was unwell and that the old man would have to make do on his own. However, by the time I was ready to take him out again, it was too late. He had fallen through the plate glass door trying to escape, and had pushed down the old woman

who wanted to talk to him. He also started having trouble with dreams. One Saturday morning, when I brought he and his roommate egg biscuits for breakfast, he attempted to explain to me, with some embarrassment, how he could not tell if he was dreaming or awake.

By the summer of 1987, I was stopping by the nursing home every morning for a few minutes before driving to Charlotte to work. The last morning, walking down the hall, seeing the nurses scurrying out of his room, I knew that something was happening. Although at that moment it was hard to know the difference between life and death, I think that he died while I was standing there beside his bed watching the nurse bent over with her ear next to his mouth. I always wondered if he managed to hold on until I arrived.

Later that morning, I walked around Shelby. Going by O.E. Ford building supply, where my father had worked before he started his construction business, I encountered his old friend and drinking buddy, Big Doanne Hulick, who was also out for a walk.

He asked me, "How's Tom."

I said, "Well, he died a few minutes ago."

Big Doanne, who himself would be dead in two years, replied, "The hell you say."

We buried my father in the good suit from Loy's that he had handed down to me before he went into the nursing home. I still have the little blue jacket.