



The Best Boy in the United States of America

I am the best boy in the United States of America.

That's what my grandfather—my “Zaydie”—called me from the time I was a little child in Omaha, Nebraska. I know it's true because this is a true story. All my stories are true.

Zaydie is Yiddish for “grandfather,” but it means much more than that. It is a term of endearment that is wrapped in love like a warm fuzzy blanket on a cold winter's night. Zaydie's name was Louis Paperny, but everyone (besides his grandchildren) called him “Louie.”

Zaydie was short of stature, maybe five feet tall—but stocky of build, with an expressive face featuring sparkling blue bug-eyes and an always ruddy complexion. He was stronger than an ox. His early years as a fruit and vegetable peddler lugging heavy sacks of potatoes endowed him with huge arms and legs. And yet he was one of the most gentle of human beings. He wore his emotions on his sleeve—a man who easily cried at the drop of a hat and certainly at the sight of a grandchild.

Zaydie loved three things: his family, his business, and his adopted country—the United States of America. I never, ever heard Zaydie say “the United States.” It was always “da United States of America,” in his thick Russian accent. He embraced the freedom and the opportunity that America afforded him; and woe to anyone who criticized anything about “mine United States of America.”

Family lore has it that he left Russia for a girl he had fallen in love with in Minsk, his *basherte* (intended one), a young woman named Ida Wolfson. Ida had immigrated to the United States of America a few years earlier, and once Louis Paperny saved enough kopeks, he booked passage to the New World. He found Ida in Omaha and married her, and they began to build their family.

Zaydie's peddler wagon became a roadside stand that eventually gave way to a modern supermarket and liquor store—Louis Market (but everyone called it “Louie's” Market)—in a neighborhood called Benson. The fact that he was able to raise a family (four girls, the baby was my mother), build a successful business, and enjoy a level of affluence he never believed possible—all this he credited to the United States of America, “da greatest country in the voild.”

As a little boy, I loved going over to Bubbie (grandmother) and Zaydie's. We would pull into the driveway of 2619 North 56th Street, right next to a huge evergreen tree that dominated the backyard, and my brothers, Bobby and Dougie, and I would spill out, anxious to see if Zaydie was back from the store. I knew he was home if his enormous, shiny Packard was in the one-car garage.

Bubbie was always home—it was her domain. Sometimes she would be out in the yard, pulling freshly dried *gotkes* (underwear) from the clothesline, placing them carefully into her basket. Sometimes she would be in her tiny kitchen, the entrance to which was just inside the back door to Bubbie and Zaydie's home, opening directly into Bubbie's realm.

After a kiss from my grandmother, I'd grab a handful of “Bubbie's cookies”—mandel bread studded with walnuts and sparkling with cinnamon sugar—and run through the dining room and into the living room, where Zaydie awaited.

Zaydie ruled from a big overstuffed red velvet chair in his living room, where he sat like a king, watching his big-screen TV. Once Zaydie made some money, he always bought the biggest, newest television set, including the first color TV in Omaha. Right next to the chair was a side table where he kept three things: a

pack of cigarettes (unfiltered Camels—he smoked four packs a day), his sterling silver Ronson lighter, and a glass of water for his teeth. There was no ashtray; Zaydie put the butts out in the arms of his big red chair, the upholstery pockmarked with dozens of burn holes. You should have seen the dashboard of his Packard; how he didn't burn down the house or blow up the car is a small miracle!

Rounding the corner into the living room, I would run toward Zaydie sitting on his throne. His ruddy face would brighten like a red stoplight, but his open arms signaled go, go, go. Rushing into his arms, turning my face toward his barrel chest, I submitted to his hug, smelling the smoke on his breath, looking up at his bug-eyed blue peepers that seemed always on the verge of spilling tears of joy.

Just then, he did it: Zaydie would cross his powerful legs behind me like a World Wrestling Federation brawler, locking me in a tight embrace. He planted a huge, scratchy, sloppy wet kiss on my lips and wrapped his enormous arms around my back. I wriggled to try to escape his grasp, screaming, "Zaydie, Zaydie, let me go, let me go!" But it was no use. I was a prisoner of his love. When I finally settled down into his loving hug, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Ronnie, you're da best boy in da United States of America! *Da best boy in da United States of A-mer-ee-ca!*" I struggled some more, wanting and never wanting him to let me out. "Ronnie, you're da *best boy in da United States of A-mer-ee-ca!*" "I know, Zaydie, I know, let me go!" Zaydie wasn't satisfied until he said it a third time: "Ronnie, you're da *best boy in da United States of A-mer-ee-ca!*" and then, finally, he loosened his legs and I escaped.

And when my younger brother Bobby rounded the corner, running into Zaydie's arms, and Zaydie put him in the dreaded/beloved leg lock, and Zaydie would give him a huge, scratchy, sloppy wet kiss right on his lips, and wrap Bobby in his enormous arms, look him straight in the eye, and say, "Bobby, you're da best boy in da United States of America! *Da United States of A-mer-ee-ca!*"—it mattered not which of us he held. And when my brother Dougie jumped into Zaydie's lap, Zaydie would put *him* in the leg lock, and give him a huge, scratchy, sloppy wet kiss right on his

lips, and wrap Dougie in his enormous arms, look him straight in the eye, and say, “Dougie, you’re da best boy in da United States of America! *Da United States of A-mer-ee-ca!*”—it mattered not. And when cousin Laurie Luttbeg jumped into Zaydie’s lap, and Zaydie put her in a leg lock, and gave her a huge, scratchy, sloppy wet kiss right on her lips, and wrapped Laurie in his enormous arms, and looked her straight in the eye and said, “Laurie, you’re da best girl in da United States of America! *Da United States of A-mer-ee-ca!*”—it mattered not.

Because for Louie Paperny, each one of his nine *aineklach*, his grandchildren, was the best boy or the best girl in the United States of America. We believed him. I believed him. And in a certain way, I’ve lived the rest of my life trying to be that best boy.

