

“What’s for Lunch?” by Graci Melbourne

We’ve all been there.

We’ve all done it.

We’ve all made mistakes.

*“What’s for lunch?”*

-- Aka...your biggest mistake...

-- Your death question.

Mama tolerated a lot of things;

*“Hey...I mighta’ punched a hole in the screen door.”*

*“You know that rug Nani gave you for your wedding...? I might’ve (insert vulgar happening that could happen to a rug).”*

*“Ma, I think I’m gay.”* [Well, okay, she didn’t *tolerate* it...she kinda locked herself in her room and mourned for three days and threatened to kill herself, but that’s probably the least dramatic thing a Romanelli has done over homosexuality.]

But the lunch question?

You might as well consider yourself a dead man.

When I was younger, I made this mistake several times...I mean, picture this—it’s a ninety-degree day in the sunny ghettos of Queens, and you, being young and defenseless, mosey into the tiny kitchen to spot out some grub. It’s been a long day- you’ve been playing pickup with some of the black kids from across the tracks, you got sunburned...a guy’s gotta be a little hungry! There’s Mama- leaned over her Queens’ Holy Family Catholic Church Calendar scheduling out the next Sunday dinner with Rosie Hollins over the rotary, when you decide to pop the question- not the marriage one, but the other life-altering one;

*“Hey, Mama, what’s for lunch?”*

And slowly, VERY SLOWLY, she lifts her head-

She taps her pen on the table-

The sound of the little fan in the corner of the room eats all the hunger you had, and points out the obvious...the regret, the shame, and how Mama drums her chubby fingers on the table slowly...like a death march.

And in her very shrill, once-classy, now-trashy New York accent she bellows,

*“AFTER ALL I’VE DONE FOR YOU, ANTONIO ROMANELLI—”*

And then she gets on her tangent about birthing you, and feeding you, and dealing with all your shit and broke bones, and how you steal your sisters’ perfume and date boys, and how she just got in a fight with Rob (dad, I guess) and how they’re sex life will NEVER BE THE SAME, and---

You get it.

You got a mom.

And all the while, there’s you—I get it, Mama. We’re poor as beans. I just wanted to know what’s for lunch.

Nowadays, I’m much smarter than that- much more educated. I kinda come in quiet, squeeze myself between the counter and her GIANT butt, and (once I get through, assuming, successfully), I start paroozing; kinda mess with the cookie jar—look through the cabinets—kiss Mama on the cheek if she’s been especially nice...and I open the Frigidaire. Considering it’s been alive longer than Mama and Daddy combined and still has got ice, I’d say it’s doing its job nicely. I

scan the shelves, amidst all the olives, cheap wine, and expired pastrami—the peanut butter my dumbass sister insists be REFRIGERATED (it’s peanut butter, idiot, not ice cream). I kinda scan, pretend nothing good’s in there, like we ain’t got food (we’re doing good these days...Daddy’s making double for his taxi shifts) and sigh. A big ol’ discontented, “what do I eat for lunch” sigh.

And Mama will look up.

VERY.

SLOWLY.

And, in less of a bellow, and more like an annoyed squawk, she asks “what’s a matter with you? You fail junior year again?”

She likes to make that...ahem...*joke*.

And I just slump a little, partly hurt, partly acting, and sit down at our rickety old table and say,

“Just hungry. Can’t find nothing that suits my fancy, I guess.”

And she’ll kinda look at me...her “finely” plucked eyebrow going up, her messy, lipstick-stained mouth turning...

She points to the fridge.

“Leftovers from last night.”

Or even BETTER;

“Daddy brought home a sandwich.”

OR THE BEST;

“I decided not to eat that pizza Gina brought. You want it?”

Oh, boy, when Mama decides not to eat...It’s like the Thanksgiving cornucopia.

You know how it is—you’ve got a Mama.

I’ll admit, I never act too eager after getting some chow. I “think about it for a minute”, I shrug a bit, and I give in, without a word, changing the subject to holiness or what my older sister’s slutty outfit looked like today- and I am forgotten.

I’m able to take my spoils of war across the rusty shag carpet and the stained walls all the way to my room in the back.

And I eat like a goddamn king.

So that, ladies and gentlemen, is how to ask, “what’s for lunch?” ...

Without getting killed.

You’re welcome.