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Out Fishing

Nonfiction • Sarah Miller

Papaw loved to fish. Mamaw, too, but her interest seemed more like an offshoot of her husband's. An *OUT FISHING* sign greeted visitors at the front door, but you could usually find Mamaw on the left side of the couch, watching Animal Planet from her sunken throne, while Papaw “rested his eyes” next to her or, on work days, pushed carts up and down the halls of Baptist Hospital. They had a boat—I never saw it—that they'd take out on the lake in the early hours of the morning. I'd imagine the two of them in a wooden canoe on a placid, ethereal sheet of blue glass, fishing line piercing the surface like an acupuncture needle, vessel tipping back and forth on a rippling melody, softly, so as not to wake the earth. I know now that the reality was less like a painted silhouette than I thought then—but my fantastical imagination was less inclined to envision Papaw driving his motorized fishing boat out of a densely packed marina and into the polluted brown lakewater.

When I was really young, they'd take me fishing at Cove Park sometimes. Mamaw would pack me a paper bag lunch with a cheese sandwich and crackers and a fruit cup. We'd take two fishing poles: my little pink one and an adult sized one. Papaw's gentle, sun-spotted face would beam as he packed the poles in the trunk, and beam as he'd put half a worm on the hook. He'd even beam as I decided fifteen minutes after arriving that I was ready to eat my lunch at 10:30 in the morning. *That baby's hungry*, he'd say. *Babe, she just ate breakfast*, she'd say. *Bob, give her that cheese sandwich*, he'd say and smile at me. Something like that. Everyone called Papaw “Babe” and Mamaw “Bob.”

I'd sit on the park bench next to Mamaw, who usually didn't fish on

these outings. Wrinkled hands and curved, yellow fingernails adorned with chipped red paint would hand me the paper bag, rolled up at the top. I'd unroll it eagerly, reach inside, and catch the cheese sandwich in my tiny grip like it would escape if I wasn't quick enough. I was much more interested in the cheese sandwich than in the actual fishing part. Most of fishing was waiting, which was boring. Fifteen minutes felt like a day's work. And then, even if I did feel a little tug on the line, I didn't actually want to catch the fish. I hated seeing the hook poking through the mouth of the helpless thing while he flopped and struggled, desperate gills working for nothing. I knew he had been hungry, just like me. What if I had reached into that paper bag and felt a hook go through the center of my palm? Papaw always told me it was okay and that we weren't hurting him, but I didn't understand how a hook through the skin could be painless.



As I got older, we stopped going to Cove Park, and I lost my appetite for cold cheese sandwiches. I'd visit them about once a month, and when I did, I'd want to lie in their bed and watch old black-and-white TV shows while they sat in the other room. I had grown too old for the innocence of imagination, too lazy for small talk. Once my mom got me a cell phone, Papaw would leave me frequent voicemails. *Sarah, call me. Bye.* I usually didn't, but when I did, I could hear that he was beaming at the sound of my voice. I could also hear desperation, pleading, the sorrow of being forgotten.

Papaw got shingles. When I did venture out of the bedroom to sit on the couch between them, I'd look at him and see his tired face twisted in pain. He'd take off his glasses and rub his eyes with his thumb and index finger. I'd ask him if he was okay. *Shingles*, he'd say and smile a feeble attempt at assurance. Months passed. He didn't get better. Dad said shingles didn't last that long. Then the doctor said he had lung cancer. He hadn't smoked in years, but he had lung cancer. He spent more and more time at the hospital, and I'd go see him, try to smile and make positive conversation with a weak, hospital gown-wearing shell of a man. He tried to keep radiating gentle joy like he always had. He really tried. I told myself that when he got better, I'd go fishing with him, and I'd wait for the little tug, reel it in, and tell him that I understood why he loved fishing so much, though I still don't.

Visiting Papaw in hospice was the worst part of all this. I remember Mom and I walking into a quiet room lit only by the sterile light in the hallway. A ghostly old man lay on his back in a small bed, taking up too little space in the center of a too-big room. His mouth was open, searching for air like a fish that had been lying on the shore for far too long. Mom walked to his side and took his cold hand. *Hi, Daddy.* Her whisper filled the empty space. I floated at the

foot of the bed, trying trying to look at his face, which was now more like the fossil of a kind fisherman. Mom took one of the pink sponges on a stick from a table next to his bed and brought it to his lips. I thought I saw his mouth move a little. Grateful, desperate. *Sarah's here*. She motioned for me to take his other hand.

I moved my legs (through air that felt as cold and dense as icy water) to the other side of the bed and reached my arm out to take his other frozen hand. I wished that I'd feel his fingers close around my palm, but I didn't. I don't know if he knew we were there. Mom and I both stood, floated, and forced our blurred gazes on his face, our hot tears making spots on a white comforter. I wanted to tell him I loved him. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for not calling him back, for not spending more time watching Animal Planet on the couch with him and Mamaw, for never going out on his boat even though he asked me to. But I didn't. I couldn't.



When I found out Papaw had finally passed away, I didn't cry. It felt more like relief. I went to school that day, sat through English and chemistry. I didn't tell my friends because I thought they would find me cruel and unfeeling for not being unraveled by grief.

His funeral was open-casket, but I couldn't look. I couldn't see that fossil of a face again. Regret clutched my heart in a fist, and I knew that if I got any closer than the second-row pew, it would burst it like a bloody balloon.

It's hard to say how many times I sat on the bathroom tile, phone in hand, sobbing against the locked door. *Sarah, call me. Bye*. I'd listen to voicemail after voicemail. *Sarah. Please call me. I love you. Bye*. Sometimes I really would call his number, hoping that I'd hear his voice on the other line. But of course, it always went to voicemail, and I'd hear the greeting I'd recorded for him years before. *This is Clarence Beets. Sorry I couldn't answer the phone! Bye!* I don't know why Mamaw still paid the bills for that phone. I guess she couldn't let go either.



We visited Mamaw more frequently after that. She seemed to get crazier and more paranoid each time we saw her. She was sure that the government was watching her with a drone through the window. She kept a gun and a ziplock bag of mismatched bullets on the table next to her, even when Dad and I would visit with my little step brother and half-brother, who were probably 7 and 4 at the time. We would drive her to K-Mart sometimes since she couldn't drive herself. Her vision was bad, her motor skills were poor, and I doubt that she could have even reached the pedals. (She got shorter and shorter as she aged. By the time she died, she was about the same height as my step-brother

and at least a foot shorter than my own 5'1".)

Mamaw's death didn't break me in the same way. There was something vain and cruel about her. She'd look at her own reflection in a handheld mirror about twenty times a day. She'd let her pancakes soak in the grease for a long time, and they'd always make me sick. She'd criticize Papaw's kindness and scold him for falling asleep on the couch. I looked at her corpse, dressed up and posed in a casket, and I didn't feel much. Is that terrible? My older sister cried, and I rubbed her shoulders, but I couldn't conjure up a single tear.



I have a framed picture of Papaw and me in my room. He's crouching next to me, smiling under an orange University of Tennessee ball cap. His right arm is on my shoulder, and his left holds up a fishing line with a green-blue scaled prize dangling on the end. I'm smiling, too. I don't care about the hook through the mouth of the hungry creature we've fooled. I'm proud of myself. He's proud of me. Mamaw is behind the disposable Kodak camera, probably sporting a knit green tank top and cotton navy shorts, bleached blonde hair hardened by layers of hairspray. I can see our favorite park bench in the corner of the frame, decorated with a crumpled paper bag. I'd already eaten my cheese sandwich by then.