

## Mississippi Sunset

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I stumbled out of bed like Frankenstein getting off the operating table and put on the oldest clothes I had brought. “Well I’ll be; look who finally decided to get up,” my grandfather remarked sarcastically as I shuffled into the living room.

“It’s four-thirty, Paw-Paw,” I replied in mid yawn.

“I’ve already had breakfast, jus’ waitin’ on you to get the boat hooked up.”

My step perked a little as I strolled through the quaint house full of my grandmother’s knick-knacks crammed into every available space. Freshly brewed Community Coffee sat on the stove steamy and inviting as I eagerly poured a cup and stepped onto the handmade back porch of my grandparents’ home in rural southern Mississippi. Surrounded by woods, it is the perfect retreat from a fast-paced city life; it is a quiet place to gather one’s thoughts or simply not to think at all. I like to call it my “fortress of solitude” like I’m Superman going to ponder all the misfortunes of the world. I smiled as morning birds started gently replacing the soft chirp of crickets. It was going to be a good day. My grandfather and I had planned this fishing trip for weeks.

He was in his late sixties with barely any hair on top his aged and wrinkled head. His hands were scarred from a lifetime of grueling work to support a family of five. Tiny purple splotches were scattered up and down his arms. His skin gave the appearance of leather left in the sun too long—cracked and worn. He was a tall robust man who never said much but always managed to get his point across. Usually, he dressed in shoes stained with dirt, worn out

Wrangler jeans, a tattered flannel shirt, and a baseball cap. Today wasn't any different. I skipped around the house to his beat up Ford truck and lent a hand while he picked up the trolling boat to secure on the trailer hitch. I jumped into the truck as he pulled himself through the door of the old Ford and waved goodbye to my grandmother.

The sun had just started to break through the lingering night, casting its rays gloriously across the water like it was the first day of creation and the two were meeting for the first time. We skimmed across the lake in a boat barely big enough for the two of us, not saying much, merely enjoying the time together that had been long overdue. Thousands of mosquitoes danced like fairies that were up to no good on the serene surface of the murky pond. I cast my line clumsily, like the city girl I am, and to both our surprise I had cast with perfection into the outstretched branches of an oak tree. I yanked on my line as he was telling me not to, and we both began to giggle. Our laughter echoed in the woods, and if there had been any fish around, they were long gone. SNAP! The line broke and catapulted directly into his big belly. We didn't catch a fish that day, but we came home closer than we had ever been. My grandfather told that story over and over of the day his favorite grandchild, his golden child, tried to catch "tree-fish" but had been sadly unsuccessful.

The years rolled by as years often do; we planned another excursion, but I didn't go. I can't recall why I didn't, but that has lost its relevance now. All that matters is I wasn't there. Being a backwoods country man, there were a few things my grandfather believed strongly in—church, good food, and fishing. I had received those precious words, "I love you" from him twice in my lifetime, words which so many people take for granted. I remember both times and treasure those moments as an old miser covets his pennies. One such time was on his birthday, so I called to sing. I finished my off-key tribute and asked,

“There you go! Wasn’t that just like an angel’s hymn?”

“I reckon,” he chuckled “I sure do love you.” I was shocked! He had said those magical words before but only in response, and now here he was saying it first!

“I love you too, Paw-Paw,” I stammered.

That was his last birthday. Shortly after that day we learned he had cancer which had metastasized beyond hope. There was nothing the doctors could do except treatments of chemotherapy to help alleviate some of the pain. He reluctantly agreed due solely to the pleas of my grandmother and mother. The first cycle went smoothly; however, the second treatment wore down all his strength, so he could not even get out of bed. He didn’t go back for a third round; he had put his foot down.

His health decreased dramatically over the few months that followed while I spent every available minute by the side of my fishing partner. I cried endless tears while looking down at the man who had always seemed invincible in my eyes but now couldn’t summon the strength to even sit up in bed. One hundred pounds less than the robust, healthy, strong man he had been merely months earlier, he faded fast. He became like a leaf, strong and proud in the summer but pale and fragile as the winter drove on mercilessly. I stood sobbing while holding his limp hand; he struggled to turn his head, smiled and said,

“What are all those tears for?”

I tried to return the smile but could not as I choked, “I’m just real sad right now Paw-Paw, but I’ll be okay.”

“Me too, I gotta go to heaven.”

That was the last thing he said to me. When I think of him now, as I often do, I try to think of the day I almost caught tree-fish and how he shined as the rising Mississippi sun reflected in his deep-set eyes.