

Patty Watson
ENG 124
10/21/2013
Creative Nonfiction Piece

Saving a Life

Treasure hunting for me as a child consisted of a hoe, a pile of dirt, and mounds of potatoes. With Papaw Jones as my guide, I excavated the potatoes from the earth like I was on a mission from God. It was the most exciting part of the garden for me. How many would I find this time? 5, 7, or maybe even 10! Of course, I had to be very careful with my treasured potatoes as not to damage them. I didn't even mind all the dirt that impacted my fingernails and toenails which would eventually end up in a tub washing later that evening. All I knew was that I was happy, and it was a lot of fun. My papaw was my number one fan. He would cheer me on, "Well, look there Sissy! You hit the jack pot on that one!" His larger frame would provide me with shade as he towered over me wearing his usual bib overalls, button-up shirt, and short-brimmed hat. And of course, the handkerchief, tucked ever so slightly inside his bib pouch. That handkerchief, once white, was now stained yellowish-brown by a hard day's work and a dip of Bruton snuff.

Our gardening adventures began early in the morning and with a dog or two tagging along. Dog and cats were all the animals that remained on our quaint little farm now: I think Papaw was either too old or just too tired to take on many more than that. I loved having Papaw all to myself on these early mornings. My older brother, Will, had to catch the school bus, so I was the lucky one left behind to follow Papaw around like a lost pup. I had turned into his handy little "taste-tester" or guinea pig, I dare say. He would whip out his pocket knife on the spot with an enthusiastic, "Try this Sissy." Oh, and I would! Even if I had to hold it in my jaw until he

turned around in order to spit it out. I would not let Papaw down. Cucumbers, some other green things that I could not recognize, tomatoes, and okra. . . all tasted on the spot by Sissy.

My favorite mornings were the ones when he would crack open a watermelon or cantaloupe which served as an early morning desert after a belly full of biscuits, gravy, and country ham. I would let the watermelon juice run down my chin and spit the seeds out like Papaw did when he chewed his Bruton snuff. This would get the gnats to swarming and lead to sticky, bare feet. But, papaw had a remedy for everything. He would drag out the old wash tub and fill it full of cold creek water which would become transformed into a heated swimming pool by day's end. I was ready for it too! We had no running water in our house, so this was a real treat.

After a good soak in the wash tub or rather—"swimming pool", we would end up on the front porch of Papaw's house. He would loan me one of mamaw's Mason Jars after he poked holes in the lid for an airway, in order to catch "lightning bugs" with. The more I caught the prouder he would become, "Well, lookie there Sissy. You caught a dozen." His praise meant more than any amount of "lightning bugs" that I could catch. I was his little buddy. All that running around would wear me down eventually and I would end up curled up on the porch glider asleep resting up for another adventurous day with Papaw, my number one fan.

Sundays were a special treat around our homestead. Papaw was a holiness preacher and even though he could not read, he could quote the King James Bible word for word. After church, all my aunts, uncles, and cousins would gather around his front porch. The porch seemed huge with its old benches and wooden chairs. The smell of pinto beans always flowed through the screen door out onto the porch. There would be guitar picking and singing of old gospel songs such as—*I'll Fly Away* and *Ain't No Grave*. I would gain the spotlight every so often as I was chosen

to belt out—*Keys to the Kingdom*. Being that I was only four, they found it quiet adorable. My missing two front teeth added to their enjoyment. My mother would become angry with me and accuse me of blaspheming the Holy Ghost when I would become carried away and sing too fast. I just thought it was fun, and I loved the attention.

The best part of those Sunday afternoons to me was when my uncle Lewis would catch June Bugs for us and mom would tie a piece of thread to their bottom legs. I know that seems cruel now, but it was an Appalachian tradition then and we always let them go. We would fly them around like a buzzing kite. I was amazed at their resilience and toughness. They were so much fun until one of my June Bug kites swarmed into my long brown hair and became tangled up. Its extreme buzzing made it that much scarier. The more I yelled the louder Papaw's old dog Ted would howl. I was so relieved when my mother finally freed me from the June Bugs buzzing, and I am sure it was too.

My family and I lived next to my Mamaw and Papaw in a small, four room shack. We had a creek running around the property which served as our main water source. An outhouse stood close by. We did have electricity, but we burned coal for heat. I loved to wake up on cold winter mornings and go out into the main room to stand beside the old coal-burning stove. My dad was a coal miner just like my Papaw had been. But, Papaw had developed black lung disease and had to retire. All I knew was that coal kept me warm.

Our little house served as the night time gathering place for all my relatives. Mom would fold up an old pair of jeans and light the end of them to provide a gnat smoke and mosquito repellent. My cousins, brother, and I would race around the old house trying to see who could catch the biggest frog. We would compare them and quickly let them go. For some reason, the frogs

always chose to urinate on us before we could release them. Mom said I would get warts; however, I remained free and clear. After our frog hunting expedition, we would star gaze and try to locate the Big Dipper which proved to be quite difficult through four-year old eyes.

One of my favorite games to play with all my cousins was Hide-N-Seek. I would most often run to the old smokehouse and hide, or I would hide behind the outhouse because they hated the smell. I rarely thought of the snakes that could be lying around in the dark, but I did fear the infamous, Appalachian “Booger-man” that fed upon misbehaving young children. I just knew he would get me one day, and I would never make it to high school. Every night, the search began. First, I would check under my bed that I shared with my mom and five year-old brother. Next, I would look in the small closet even though I knew it was too small for him to fit in. Lastly, I would peek out the window through the plastic hoping not to see his hairy face. I often wonder how many other Appalachian children performed this nightly ritual.

This was also a drawback to being thirsty in the middle of the night. I dreaded having to get out of bed and head in to the kitchen where the water bucket and dipper were stored. Since we had no running water in the house, we stored our drinking water in a metal bucket and dipped it out with a ladle which we referred to as a dipper. I would rather run into the kitchen if I were needing a drink of water in order to avoid the Booger-man. If I got up enough speed, I could jump from the door to the full sized bed. I did not want my little feet anywhere near the bottom of the bed. I just knew that the Booger-man would reach out, grab my ankle, and take me off into oblivion with him to reside. This leap of faith would always scare the daylights out of my mom and brother. They would be deep into sleep when I would come hurdling into the bed at

two or three a.m. in the morning. Even though I was frightened then, I can laugh now at my trepidation.

At this time, my dad appeared to be closer to my Mamaw than his own dad. Perhaps, this was because she understood him better. Mawaw Jones was considered to be a tough old character. She probably only weighed ninety pounds soak and wet. I loved her too, but I was honestly a little scared of her. She always smelled of spearmint gum and snuff which was an odd combination. Often, I would see her sitting on her porch with a long neck bottle of RC cola beside her. She guzzled them down like the RC Cola Company was going out of business. Dad said this is why she only had one kidney left. I loved her long, jet black hair that she twisted up in a bun and fastened down with dozens of bobby pins. She had more Cherokee blood running through her veins than Caucasian. I cannot recall ever witnessing her shed a tear in my lifetime.

Consequently, the only time Mamaw ever really reprimanded me was when she caught me in the dog food bowl that always set on her front porch. "You better get outta there! You will get worms," she warned. I recall thinking that if the dogs like to eat it then it must be good because I often fed them what I ate. She would not whip me, but my mother often would. I hated the dread switch walk. I would have to retrieve my own switch, and I knew not to bring back one that was too small or big. I had had extensive practice in choosing the appropriate switch for punishment. I often deserved the punishment I received; however, I attributed most of my misfortune to my brother, Will. He was my best friend at that time in my life due to the fact I was not old enough to attend school. We would go from friends, to enemies, and back again by the end of the day. He protected me and I annoyed him, I am certain.

My brother was a genius to me. He came up with all these cool ideas such as building a time capsule and burying it in the yard. We collected such peculiar items for our time capsule. We stuffed corn cobs, old meat bones, rocks, and flowers into a large empty can and equated it to a time capsule. Our only impediment was our lack of patience; we would not leave it in one place. We dug it up and buried it over and over again. Our actions irritated Papaw's dog, Ted, to the extreme. He wanted those bones, and we had them. Ted came out the winner in the end due to our short attention spans and his determination. It was just a game to Ted, but to us an important legacy. . .