

From the Smell of 'Backie to Big Red

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My grandfather, Pawpaw as I called him, worked hard his whole life. He was orphaned very young and lived with relatives who made him work night and day while their own children got an education. He had, at the most, a sixth grade education. Pearl Harbor and World War II scarred him as well, but I remember him differently.

My mother and I would drive to my grandparents' house in Belle often. Pawpaw was always the first to greet us, scooting out of the house with a huge grin on his face like a little boy who was about to get into the biggest trouble of his life. The smell of chewing tobacco, his one vice, was overpowering to most, but I had gotten used to the pungent Mail Pouch packets stuffed in his front shirt pocket. The only time they bothered me was when he'd spit a sweaty wad into our front yard, and our dog would come and gobble it up, swallowing the dark mass whole.

"Mawmaw's got whiskey in the trunk of the car!" he cried, laughing. My mother shook her head and glided inside ahead of us. All I could think of was that Mawmaw didn't drive, so why would she have whiskey in the trunk? Pawpaw impatiently interrupted my thoughts with a hurried question.

"You want some gum? I won't tell your Mom," he whispered. Pawpaw always had gum in his front pocket behind the Mail Pouch 'backie: spicy Big Red, sweet Juicy Fruit, and perfect Double Mint. "Here, mix 'em. It'll make you tap dance." He demonstrated the effect.

"Dad, she can't have that! She's got fillings and sealants on her teeth!" How do mothers always know when something like this is about to happen? We headed inside; I walked with hurried steps to keep up as Pawpaw tapped and sang: "Dance all night, for four days, flop yor' wings and fly away..."

I took his hand as we went in the house, always kept dark, and went to the back where the kitchen was. His hand was wrinkled, yet strong and rough as a worker's, yet soft as though covered in lotion. I never understood it.

We passed through the living room in front of the television where Mawmaw watched her "stories." In the doorway to the dining room, we navigated around the huge opening to the floor furnace. My brother had burnt his feet on it, so I always remembered to inch around the edge. Pawpaw strode over it. We passed by the dining set and china hutch that are now mine and entered the small kitchen with the little breakfast table, which was always filled with bananas, papers, jelly (never refrigerated), and cookies.

"You want a bologna samwich? I'll fix you one." It wasn't really a question, considering my pawpaw wiggled around the room, grabbing the bologna, mayonnaise, and cheese out of the refrigerator, and the bread out of the cupboard as he asked. There was a red ring around the outside of the bologna slice, which he careful peeled off, then shook in my face. He quickly slicked mayonnaise on two slices of enriched white bread and slapped two slices of cheese with the two slices of bologna.

I *had* to eat the whole sandwich. Pawpaw grew up in the Depression, and while he was not worried about waste, he was worried about me getting enough to eat.

“Are you still hungry?” His foggy blue eyes inquired as he was already slicking another two slices of bread with mayonnaise. I was full, but knew it was pointless to say so. I nodded as he slapped the bologna on the bread and cheese with a wiggle of his butt.

I ate the other sandwich more slowly, trying to let it fill in the edges of my full stomach. He sat at the table with me, laughing and talking. As I finished the sandwich, pushing my tongue against the roof of my mouth to remove the white bread that had lodged soft and wet, he started again.

“Hey, let’s go to Quincy!”

Quincy was a small town right down the road, whose only claim to fame was a McDonald’s, a Dairy Queen, and a shopping center that had a Magic Mart and a Kroger’s. I knew Quincy meant more food.

“Pawpaw, I’m full.”

“Of course, you’re not. You’re growing.”

Pawpaw explained to Mom that we would drive to Dairy Queen for ice cream or a hot dog. She smiled, knowingly. He skipped and scurried out the front door, tapping down the green Astroturf that covered the porch, and jived out to the golden car. I followed closely, giggling as he danced. As I reached the car, I struggled with opening the large door and pulled myself up to the cloth-covered front seat. Pawpaw got ready to turn on the engine and turned to smile at me.

“Buckle up you hound dog,” he sung as he turned the car on. We began to cruise. As we arrived at Dairy Queen, Pawpaw immediately began to dig in his front pocket, not for the Mail Pouch chewing tobacco, but for the gum. But this time, the gum wasn’t for me. I was having ice cream. The gum was for the waitress. We went in and ordered a small ice cream cone for each of us.

“Hey, sweetie, why don’t you have some of this gum?” Pawpaw pulled out three packs: Juicy Fruit, Big Red, and Double Mint. “You should have some; it’ll make you sweeter. Not that you need it,” he crooned with a wink. Pawpaw could never resist the chance to flirt. The lady laughed and took a piece of Juicy Fruit. “Oh come on, take two, one for later.” She laughed again and obliged with a Double Mint. We went to an open table.

As we sat in the cold restaurant, Pawpaw reached his hand into his pocket. He slowly pulled out a handful of coins, full of lint, gum wrappers, and the tops of Mail Pouch packs. He piled the coins on the table between the two of us and grinned.

“Here’s my change. If you can count it, Long-fingers, it’s yours.”

I set to counting the change. Usually there would be around ten dollars in change in Pawpaw’s pocket. As I got older, I realized that he would often go to the bank and cash his bills in order to get change for me to count for this activity. The cold coins, now warm from me sorting them into piles of tiny dimes, thick nickels, smooth pennies, and dirty quarters and then counting them, slid into my pocket. We laughed as we finished the ice cream.

“All right, let’s head home, I guess.” I waddled out to the car as Pawpaw called “goodbye” to his waitress and offered gum to the little boy at the counter. The car, warmed now by the afternoon sun, smelled of the Mail Pouch spit can left in the front seat to cure. I struggled again with the car door and slid into the seat as Pawpaw started the engine. We soon began to sing one of his favorite songs as we passed

Witcher Creek and steered towards Belle, his deep voice coming through on his favorite part.

“I’ll fly away o’ glory. I’ll fly away – *‘in the morning’* – When I die, Hallelujah, by-and-by, I’ll fly away.”