



by Victor Schneider

He was not always blind. When he was young, my grandfather worked at a Ford plant over in Fairfax, welding cars. When I listened to the stories of his youth I would always picture him standing amongst immense grinding machinery wearing blue coveralls stained with oil. In my mind, as he worked, the lights of the factory would grow dim, and the only true lights would come from his blowtorch, the glowing bits of muffler, and the sparks that would dance like stars in the air around him. He lost his sight to those stars.

Most of my favorite memories of my grandfather took place at Elk Lake. Years ago, my great-grandfather died and left my grandparents a lakeside home in Kentucky. My grandparents built another one next door and sold the first.

The new lake house became a summer retreat for the whole family. It was there that I learned to swim, to water ski, to light a fire, to cook a fish, to respect the outdoors, and to enjoy every moment I have with my family.

One particular summer day stands out in my memory. It began with a holler.

“Close the door!”

I was twelve years old, standing on the porch just outside the sliding door at the lake house, wearing only my trunks and a towel over my shoulder.

I turned to look inside and saw my grandfather sitting in his black leather kitchen chair, his Kentucky Derby coffee mug on the table. He wore a green patterned collared shirt and dark slacks held up by black suspenders. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes.

“If you can’t close the door behind you, don’t go in and out!” he hollered again. I slid the door the rest of the way closed and the latch clicked.

“Sorry grampa,” I said guiltily through the screen.

My grandfather grunted. “Come here, Victor. Give me a handshake.” He turned in his chair to face me.

I opened the sliding door and closed it firmly behind me. Expecting a trick, I cautiously approached my grandfather and put my hand in his. We shook.

“Grip my hand. Squeeze,” my grandfather instructed, strengthening his grip on my hand. I squeezed my hand as hard as I could to balance his hold. “Not that much.” I

loosened my grip and he loosened his. “Good,” my grandfather said, nodding his head.

“Victor,” he told me, “a firm handshake is the best first impression you can have.”

“Yessir,” I replied seriously.

My grandfather released his hold. “Good for when you get a job.” He turned back to his coffee.

I stood there watching him silently for a moment, then I made sure I closed the door tightly when I left the house.

The day outside was perfect, bright, and endlessly hot. The sky was a splendid shade of deep blue, and the trees swayed in the summer breeze. Chickadees and hummingbirds flitted between the feeders hanging over the porch, and in the yard I could see the dogs playing with each other and rolling in the grass. I smiled to myself and began to run.

I ran down the hill, across the bridge, and over the dock, my bare feet thumping on the old wood. I threw the towel on a bench and made a beeline for a cannonball into the lake, but I tripped on the last step. As I fell headfirst into the lake, the sky flipped in a flurry of bubbles. I came out of the water giggling at myself. I took a deep breath and went underwater again. I lingered there beneath the small waves, eyes open, holding my breath, and saw the sun streaming through the murky waters.

I broke the surface and breathed deeply. I swam around the cove and played by myself in the water until I heard the sliding door slam closed up at the porch. I looked up at the house and through the trees saw my grandfather walk carefully out onto the porch.

I saw his left hand reach out for the rail across from him as his right hand firmly held onto the door frame. He hollered into the house. My grandfather hollered a lot.

“Lois!”

No reply came. He reached up and rubbed his eyes, pushing aside his sunglasses.

“Lois!” he hollered again, louder.

“Yes, George?” came a voice from the back of the house.

“I’m going to the water,” my grandfather hollered back.

My grandmother appeared in the door and the two exchanged a few words I could not hear. After a moment she turned back into the house and my grandfather moved along the porch, feeling his way with the smooth wooden railing. When he came to the stairs, he placed each foot solidly upon each step before shifting his weight forward.

At the bottom of the steps, my grandfather reached out with his right hand and gripped the rope that served as his lead. His rough fingers rubbed the twine, threads splitting under his nails. Without letting go of the rope, my grandfather steadily walked down the path, across the bridge, and down to the water. There he grabbed the rail of the pontoon boat and carefully boarded. I watched him adjust the captain's chair before sitting.

Treading in the water I watched my grandfather pull a peppermint from his chest pocket. He unwrapped the candy and sat it in his mouth, sucking thoughtfully as he returned the wrapper to his pocket.

I swam toward the dock as my grandmother brought my grandfather his lunch and his blue plastic radio. I climbed out of the lake and wrapped myself in my towel. I stepped onto the pontoon boat and sat in the sun. My grandmother smiled at me as she passed, returning to the house.

My grandfather turned on his radio, which crackled and settled into a talk show.

'I'm tellin' ya Jack, he'll run this country to the ground before he lets the terrorists attack us again!'

'That's what I'm afraid of, Jim, jus' that.'

"Grampa, it's Vic." I told him, just to make sure.

He lifted his head, his lips moving as he sucked on the peppermint. He hadn't touched the sandwich my grandmother had left for him.

"Hullo, Vic." He said, looking forward with his covered eyes. "Was that you in the water?"

"Yessir," I replied, pulling my towel closer around me. The trees shifted their leaves and the boat sat in the shade. "It's really nice today."

"Sure is."

My grandfather kept his head up, but I didn't say any more. I just sat there, watching him. After a few moments he turned up the radio and began to eat his bologna and cheese sandwich.

'As long as they keep those troops in Afghanistan, gas prices will keep rising.'

'No they won't. Bush has those terrorists right where he wants them.'

I wondered if my grandfather had eyes behind his sunglasses, but I didn't dare ask.

"Georgie!" my grandmother shouted from the house. "You have a cell phone call!"

My grandfather grunted but didn't answer. Up at the house I saw my grandmother open the sliding door and walk down the hill to the water.

"It's Susan," my grandmother said when she reached the boat. "Her car is not working properly." My grandfather put down his sandwich and turned down the volume of the radio. He sat up straighter in his chair and reached out for the phone. My grandmother placed it in his hand and he took the phone to his ear.

"Hello!" he said into the phone. He didn't holler. "I'm fine, Susan. I'm down at the water with Lois and young Victor."

I heard the tinny voice of my aunt come out of the speaker of the phone and my grandfather responded, "Well. Did you check the oil? Do you have a full tank of gas?"

As he spoke my grandfather's hand reached up to his chest pocket for a peppermint, thought better of it, and put it back. Waves from a passing speedboat rocked the pontoon.

"Well." He continued, his free hand resting in his lap. "Let me hear the engine."

From the speaker of the phone I heard a high-pitched grinding of gears rev up and stop. At the same time, my grandfather's hand twitched a little. His fingers curled tight and turned as if they were holding keys.

The grinding sound repeated itself, louder this time and more urgent, and I noticed my grandfather shift his feet forward, pressing down on the floor. His eyebrows folded together, thinking.

Again my aunt revved her engine and my grandfather tilted his head into the phone, as if to hear better the moaning of the broken engine. After a moment his eyebrows relaxed and he sat back, calmly pleased.

“Sparkplug’s busted, Susan,” he said when the noise stopped. His feet relaxed and his hand reached into his pocket to unwrap a peppermint. I smiled at his gift.