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Saved by a Better Daughter

Dawn Hackett

Fifteen with a thickly greased duck tail, my father arrived in St. Petersburg from New York with my Grandmother after his own father died of tuberculosis. He promptly fell in love with fishing the Gulf of Mexico and became entrenched in a sodden way of life. He would enter the Gulf in an old johnboat from the Bay, through John's Pass. He met a squatty, barrel-chested man named Calvin Wylie at a launch one day, a baitshop owner and fisherman extraordinaire. They were a perfect match; a fishing-teacher in need of a student-son, and a fatherless-son in need of a fishing buddy. Having left the Brooklyn Dodgers and a young Sandy Koufax for the move south, my father quickly filled the many gaps in his life with his new friend. My father's first Florida job was in Wylie's Baitshop and he eventually named my brother after him. Dad was never far from salt water after that, always able to sniff the rotten sweetness of a baitshop, hear the danger crash of a storm swell.

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Forty years later on a muggy June day I sat in my car on a large patch of weeds where Wylie's Baitshop once stood, my father next to me on the passenger side, Calvin Wylie's ashes adrift in the Gulf for decades. A cancerous tumor snipped from my father's bladder, he was into his second month of non-radiated denial on his 60th birthday. The occasion was my treat – my sorrow, a tumor in the pit of my stomach. I charged tickets I couldn't afford three rows above the Devil Rays dugout, and a couple of decent hotel rooms in St. Pete. Like a sightseeing trip to Krakow, we braved the memories of past

events, tried pounding the unseen future into hopefulness while we went looking for signs of his youth. We had some time to kill before the game.

“Nothing but weeds,” Dad sighed.

“I see some gravel over there,” I said, pointing to our left.

Slowly, he grinned. “Well, Koufax is still around. Love dem bums.” We sat for awhile with the windows down, holding hands.

At the stadium we walked through the gates and together took deep breaths, then turned, smiling at each other. Dank toilets, dogs, mustard and fly ridden onion, and just underneath it, a hint of freshly spread dirt and line chalk. An hour later, the Devil Rays were losing to the Dodgers. We had the best seats in the entire world while we sat in them. I was just in front of a guy who complained constantly and loudly that no one in Florida knew a goddamn thing about baseball. My father stretched his long legs into the aisle, grinning, melting into his seat. He leaned into me and said, “Must be from the Bronx.” There was no Koufax that day, just a Dodger grand slam top of the ninth. We stopped on the way out at John’s Pass where my father knelt in the sand. His arms stretched for the water. His hands touched down lightly as I watched from above him on the boardwalk. It seemed a sacred type of moment, one many would have turned away from, but I was a better daughter that day and stole quietly behind him while he said goodbye.