

My face was smashed between my arm and pillow, eyes still closed, yet my Mom turned the lights on to wake me up.

"Time to get up! You said you'd go fishing with Grandpa this morning."
"What?... Yeah I did, but I didn't realize I'd have to get up at four in the morning."

"It's seven! Grandpa's already upstairs having breakfast so you better get going!"

It was the middle of summer, and I was being forced to wake at the time usually only reserved for the school year. I rubbed my eyes, but it was no use, they could not fight off the sleep so early in the morning. It was no different than walking aimlessly down the road to my bus stop for school, zombie-like, often tripping over my own feet.

I guess my brother and I shouldn't have stayed up watching Stan and Ollie the night before. It took Stan twenty minutes to take off one of his boots from Ollie's foot. It was a classic comedy from the 1930s. If you didn't like them, you were an outcast. My Grandpa had loads of tapes from the two comedians, a bit of nostalgia from when he was a teenager... and I guess the same for us. Getting people to appreciate Stan and Ollie these days is close to impossible. The aforementioned story line is reason enough to suggest so.

Trudging up the stairs, I could already hear my Grandma playing cards at the kitchen table. She had the same schedule every day that included getting up too early and playing cards for too long. I'm not sure there has ever been anyone in his or her life that has played as much solitaire as her. Any time I hear the shuffling of cards, I think of my Grandma sitting at the same spot at her kitchen table, working the cards without even looking at them.

I cracked the door at the top of the stairs and more bright light flooded into the room. Fortunately, it was natural and came from the sun that was creeping through the trees, as it descended across the lake and into my grandparent's kitchen.

"Ohh look who it is. You're up early!"

"Yeah. How else are we going to catch the big Musky?"

"That's right. The fish need their breakfast!" My grandpa chimed in from the opposite end of the table, his face already as smooth as the water outside.

He always had a clean-shaven face. And back in those early days, I could be found in the bathroom beside him with a plastic shaving kit, scraping the cream off from my face. Unfortunately – at least for my Grandma who hated beards – shaving was never something I enjoyed.

Maybe my Grandpa enjoyed it, maybe he didn't and it was simply repetition at that point. Or maybe it was a rule they had back when he worked at the postal service: 'Must have clean face to deliver mail.' Either way, that trend wasn't passed down the bloodline.

"What do you want for breakfast? We have bagels and cereal... Grandpa's having Frosted Flakes."
"I'll have the same. Perfect for a morning on the lake."

I took a seat at the table looking out toward the water. It felt like every other morning at their house; the sun shining through the window, lighting up the kitchen by itself, Grandma in her spot with the crummiest cards ever seen and Grandpa on the other end, humming along to whatever was playing on the radio.

And maybe if he didn't have that love for music, I wouldn't have been there in the kitchen... or anywhere.

It must've taken Grandpa plenty of courage to ask Grandma to dance to a little polka. Back in the 1940s, dating was a bit different. Maybe his courage came from a year quarterbacking the Iowa State football team, or playing baseball at Central Michigan. Sports were all around my family and it started with Grandpa. Maybe that also led to his swift feet on the dance floor, and what Grandma noticed about him first.

They'd been together for over 50 years at that point and they still made it work. Maybe their daily repetition was the key.

After I scarfed down my bowl of cereal, I threw on a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans and headed outside. Even though it was summer, northern Wisconsin was unpredictable weather-wise and that morning

was a crisp 50 degrees, although with the sun shining, that temperature didn't really matter.

I scrounged through my Grandpa's shed, battling cobwebs and tired eyes that were finally opening up, in search of life jackets and seat cushions. They were two of the easiest things to find in the small faded green shed, yet that morning it seemed to take forever. I took extra care to not get any spiders on me... I hated spiders.

Grandpa was already down by the dock getting the boat set up. He had all of the needed fishing gear: bait, lures, poles, beer.

Just kidding, no beer.

I headed down to the water with my arms full, and hopefully spider-less. I had to stop and take it all in. The smell out by the lake was pure, especially in the morning, and that day there was a fog hanging over the water – seeping through the air. It gave a kind of eerie feeling combined with the deadness, but also a freshness that couldn't be experienced many other places.

The grass was wet with dew and I could hear a loon in the distance calling out its dominance over the lake.

"Looo-ooooooooooooon!" I sang back.

"Well, that means the fish are bitin!" Grandpa said.

Although that was just a hopeful thought, like many of his sayings.

When I made it to the boat, gear in hand, Grandpa was playing with the motor, making sure we wouldn't get stranded in the middle of the lake.

With the loon likely under water hunting for its food, there wasn't a sound to be heard that early in the morning. Apparently, no one else decided that it was a good day to fish. The fishing boat rattled up against the dock, as Grandpa kept fiddling with the motor.

I stepped in, slapped down our cushions and threw the life jackets to the floor.

"All set?" Grandpa asked.

"All set." I replied, handing him a cushion to sit on.

It was a small boat; basically a canoe with a motor, in the same faded green as the shed, along with a spider web seemingly in every corner (I flicked them out so they didn't get in my face once we started going). My Dad or brother would often join us, as well, but that day it was just me and ole Red, the nickname he got back in his football days.

The boat had been around since probably the '70s when my grandparents first started coming up to the lake in northern Wisconsin. It was nothing special, as could be expected from a 30-year-old boat, but it got the job done. There were four elevated surfaces to sit on, but having more than three people in that thing wouldn't have been a good idea.

I sat on one of the middle seats and Grandpa was closest to the motor, still fidgeting with it. The motor fit in well with the boat, a small 9.9 HP Evinrude outboard. It was newer than the boat, yet still had been used for almost a decade, and that was apparent as Grandpa struggled to get it going.

He pulled the starter a number of times and nothing happened. After resting for a few seconds, he was at it again and it finally began to putter, slowly, but surely.

We had the lake to ourselves as Grandpa set off toward the island, straight across from the dock, in the middle of the lake. As expected, it took us forever to get out there, but that didn't matter much without any other boats around. Plus, Grandpa knew the lake like the back of his hand.

It was a bit chilly, especially on the boat with the wind blowing in our faces, but it felt good nonetheless. The deadness gave a feeling of

freedom – similar to that of a crisp day in the woods – with no pressure or anything to worry about.

Everything was calm until we shredded through with a motor that probably woke up the entire lake. Grandpa had on a faded light beige jacket that may have been as old as the boat and a yellow Packers cap that he wore with pride. He had a look of determination on his face; eyes slightly squinted, scoping out where to set the anchor and to start the morning. Even though he lived on the lake and enjoyed it every day, I could tell that he was soaking up the scenery just like me.

Enjoying things of beauty never gets old, that's for sure.

We slowed into the opposite side of the island where the vegetation was and supposedly where all the fish hung out. Grandpa had probably fished at every spot on the lake, but he had his favorites and this was one of them. We slowed down right next to some weeds, but still a good ways from the shore of the island. He let the anchor go slowly and it seeped to the bottom.

"Only about four feet or so. Try and cast over by the weeds right there. They should be waitin' for ya."

I breathed in the air and let it out.

"This is the spot, I can feel it."

I opened up the container of worms and stuck my fingers in, looking for a juicy one. I only went fishing one week out of the year – when I came up to my grandparents – and I always forgot the basics.

"Those are big night crawlers so you can just cut them in half. Just squeeze him right between your fingernails."

I looked at the slimy things as they squirmed in the dirt and after a couple attempts, finally grabbed a succulent one that was writhing for its life. I wished it well and then squeezed him dead, although the other half that I didn't use still lived on in the container.

I grabbed the hook on my fishing line and wrapped the sucker around, white guts and blood goo-ing over my fingers. I tied him up so he wouldn't fall off easily, but Grandpa knew better.

"No, let me see that. You want to leave some dangling off here so the fish can see it. Otherwise, it's just a balled up worm. Wouldn't you rather eat this guy dangling from the hook?" Grandpa asked as he put the worm level with my eyes.

"Uh yeah, he looks super delicious."

I cast a little ways from the boat, but not too far – mainly because I was a weak child – right on the edge of some taller weeds.

"Yeah, that's the spot. They're all hanging out by these weeds, waiting for breakfast."

I leaned forward, elbows on my legs, eyes lasered in on my bobber, waiting for the fish to take it under at any moment.

Grandpa scrounged around in his tackle box for a few minutes and picked out a long, shiny, silver and black lure.

"Musky bait."

At that point in my life, I didn't know any better and thought that he was serious and he'd be reeling in a musky at any moment. But in reality, muskies are one of the hardest fish to catch in freshwater lakes. They are called "The Fish of 10,000 casts" for a reason.

And so the fishing began. Grandpa casted out closer to the shore of the island and I probably reeled my bobber in every three minutes because I was bored with the spot that I was at.

Neither of us said much. We didn't need to.

Other boats were still missing from our vantage point and the only sound that could be heard were birds off in the distance. Everything else was calm.

Roughly a half hour later my eyes were already averting from my bobber; a young kid could only fish so much. I scoped the shorelines out. Along the island there wasn't much, just trees on the shore. There was a family of ducks, paddling around in search of something to eat.

"Look over there, above the trees."

I followed the tip of Grandpa's finger to the other side of the lake to a large bird soaring above the trees. Squinting, I noticed its white head.

"Eagle?"

"Yep. They usually have their nests at the tops of trees. We've seen that one flying around here a lot this year.

"Speaking of eagles... the pole you're using has some experience with them."

"What do you mean? Isn't this Grandma's pole?"

"That's right."

"I didn't think she fished that much."

"Ohhh yeah, well, it probably wasn't her favorite thing, but your Grandma, she fished. We'd always come out on this boat actually, after dinner. She'd mainly come to keep me company, but there's a story that comes with that pole," he said as he shifted in his seat and recast his lure.

"Grandma had a big fish on her line, actually, a musky, and she kept reeling and reeling -- this was when she was younger of course -- and when she started to pull it up out of the water, an eagle came out of nowhere and grabbed the fish with its claws and flew off."

I stared at him, questioningly. He was known for embellishing stories.

"A musky? An eagle? You're telling fibs now. Grandma didn't catch a musky... or an eagle."

"No, no. No fibs, your Grandma did. You better ask her when we get back."

"Whatevvvver you say Grandpa! What about the musky that you caught?"

"Oh, well, that's a story for another time. Your Grandma is the pro,

though, but she won't tell anyone."

"I'll have to ask her about that too then, huh?"

We had been fishing for about an hour – it seemed like five hours to me – and were still waiting for something to take our bait. The sun was a tad higher in the sky, yet the lake was still quiet, void of other human life. Along with the ducks trudging around, a couple loons were out in search for breakfast, diving under every other minute.

My Grandpa's humming/whistling/singing was in full force at that point. He always had some kind of tune stuck in his head and most of the time it seemed like he was making it up on the spot, especially when he sang. Or maybe it just seemed like that because the only thing I understood him say was 'Suzy.' There was always a girl named Suzy in the songs he sang. And Suzy also happened to be the name of any girl I had ever known. According to him, I always had a girlfriend named Suzy in elementary school. And yet, I didn't know anyone by that name.

"La la di di da da la la di."

I never knew what songs he sang or hummed along to, but it brought a sort of calming, especially while fishing.

"Well, time to move. Where shall we go?"

"Wherever the fish will bite."

"Hmm... I know just the place."

After a couple pulls on the motor, it started and we were off again. We wrapped around the island and finally saw some other fishing boats. Maybe they were catching something.

Unfortunately for us, it didn't really matter that day, as nothing wanted to bite what we set out. When you're catching fish, time seems to fly by. Without the fish, it slowly crept by, but that was fine by us. It was an almost perfect morning on the lake, outside of the lack of action.

For all of the fish stories that my Grandpa told, it sure seemed like there were no fish in the lake.

After fishing at the new spot for a while and getting nothing, Grandpa must've noticed my anxiousness to get up and move because he set down his pole and started getting all his gear together.

"You're done?!" I asked him.

"Yeah, we better get back. Don't want your mother wondering where we got lost."

"Right... don't want that."

I reeled my bobber in and set my pole down, right next to the large black spider that had taken up its home in the corner of the boat.

Being a couple hours later, the water was no longer like glass, and was a tad rough from the wind that picked up and an influx of boats that had overtaken the lake while we fished on the other side of the island.

"Hold on!" my Grandpa yelled, looking ahead as the boat got going. He grabbed his hat and held it tight in his hand, a Popeye-like smirk on his face as the wind rushed past him and blew his white hair high into the air.

We made it back in one piece and while it wasn't a successful morning on the lake fishing-wise, we wouldn't have changed a thing.

I ran back up to the shed and threw the life jackets into shambles, while Grandpa walked behind with the gear. I clambered into the house, finding my Grandma and Mom chatting at the kitchen table.

"Where's the fish?!" Grandma asked.

"Uhhh..." I began, but Grandpa interjected, walking in the door behind me.

"We had a big one on the line, but it got away. They were bitin' all morning, but we were waitin' for that musky. Nothing else would do."