

## Chapter 3, Robbie

Me and Paw Paw went down to the fishing hole on a Sunday morning. I was eight or nine at the time.

He had these fence poles and a tarp he used as a makeshift tent. Some contraption he made in his spare time. It folded up and fit perfectly in the backseat of his car. He'd also bring these old wooden folding chairs. I swear I'll never find anything that comfy again.

The other kids in the project never wanted to go, but Paw Paw would still invite them. Guess they were scared of him.

I always liked to go. Nice change of scenery. I liked the car ride, too. Way better than sitting on the bus.

I stayed with Paw Paw a lot. Dad was dead (at least that's what I was always told) and Mom was always trying to find a fix. Back then Mom would have strangers stay the night and kick me out. Paw Paw let me stay on his couch. I'd sleep with his cat, Blueberry.

So that particular Sunday we loaded up the fencepost tent and fishing rods up in the back of his old beat-up Ford Falcon. That old

car was beat to hell and smoked more than a chimney. Always had at least one donut on it.

He forgot the tackle box. Asked me to go on inside and get it. I ran inside, grabbed it, put it in the trunk, and off we went. Along the way we stopped and picked up a sack of burgers for lunch. Such a perfect day. Nothing could mess it up. I remember riding in the Falcon with the windows down without a care in the world. Like I was free.

After a few minutes, I realized we weren't going the right way. I asked where we were going. Paw Paw told me about a new lake out west of town he wanted to try out. The papers said it was recently stocked with catfish, and plenty of them. Paw Paw was really good with the reading. He read the paper every day. He even knew how to read books. Most of them in the project couldn't read a damn street sign. Paw Paw read better than anyone I knew.

We ended up at the most beautiful lake I'd ever seen. On one side there was a golf course. I'd never seen a golf course before other than on the TV. Grass greener than St. Patrick's Day. On the other side, the most beautiful houses ever. I asked Paw Paw if people really lived in them houses. He said of course they do.

None of the kids in the project would believe me if I told them about this place.

We parked the car and walked a ways with our gear over a hill and found the perfect spot by a few trees. The shade went over the water, which was good. Fish circulate in cool water when it's really hot outside. I ate a burger while Paw Paw set up the tent and chairs.

We forgot the tackle box. Again. I asked Paw Paw for the keys and headed back to the car. I opened the trunk only to realize I grabbed a small toolbox instead of the tackle box back at Paw Paw's place. Oops. I ran back to Paw Paw to tell him my mistake. He told me not to worry

about it. Almost everything he needed was on the poles, and the bait was in a separate bag. All he needed was some weight for the fishing line. He told me to grab the toolbox. Maybe there was something small inside he could use to weigh the line down.

I went back to the car again. I went around to the trunk and a white man was standing there. His hand was leaning on the trunk. He was tall, with a flannel shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. He had long blond hair and a bushy beard. He smiled at me. His teeth were yellow and stained.

“What you doin’ up here, boy?”

I told him me and Paw Paw were going fishing.

“Really? Is that so. Is that your papa over there?” He pointed at Paw Paw.

I told him he ain’t my daddy. Paw Paw is his name. We don’t want no trouble, mister. I told him Paw Paw read in the paper there’s some good catfish in this lake. We were going to have a cookout back at the project. It’s smelly when you gut them, but the nuggets turn out delicious. Paw Paw’s secret recipe.

“Is that so?” He smiled at me again. Creepy fucker.

I walked away and back to Paw Paw with the toolbox. I told him about the white man. Told him the white man made me feel uneasy. Paw Paw didn’t seem concerned. We were just there to fish. If he wants to come back and cause trouble, well, that was his problem. He told me people been pushing him around his whole life. Why would today be any different?

He looked through the toolbox. The smallest piece was a large spark plug. A lot bigger than what he needed, but it would do the job.

He tied the plug to the line and cast it in the water not too far from the shore.

We waited. Paw Paw said we shouldn't have to wait too long. We were using a chopped up beef liver for bait. Stunk to high heaven, but always worked at the old fishing hole. We dug into the rest of the burgers. I opened a cola. Paw Paw cracked open a cold one. The weather was perfect. Still no bites.

“Hey there! Uh-huh, hey you!”

We looked behind us. There he was, walking toward us. The tall white man by the car.

“My name's Lee Ritz, and you got me all kinds of fired up! You!”

When he said 'you' he was pointing at Paw Paw.

“What are you doin' here, boy?”

I wondered why he would call Paw Paw 'boy'. Paw Paw was an old man. Grey hair and everything. He was at least fifty years old. Older than Mr. Lee Ritz for sure.

Paw Paw kept his cool. He explained we were just there to fish. Minding our own business. Also, there weren't any 'No Colored' signs posted by the lake.

“Are you kidding me? Project Niggers. Here. Fishin' on my golf course lake. In this part of town we don't need no goddamned signs. I'll tell you what, this here world is going to hell in a handbasket. You got some fuckin' stones on you nigger for coming up here. Now pack your shit and get. The. Fuck. Out.”

He pointed at the car. He raised his voice.

“Now, Niggers! I ain't got all fuckin' day!”

Now I was scared out of my mind. Paw Paw sighed. I saw a flash of anger in his eyes, but he still kept cool.

I wasn't scared of this Lee Ritz character.

I wasn't scared because we were out of the project.

I wasn't scared because this guy was at least a foot taller than Paw Paw.

I was scared because I didn't know what Paw Paw was going to do. See, Paw Paw was old school. A real gangster from the old days. Fought in the streets against the Italians.

And that ain't no joke.

When the Italians wanted you dead, you died. Simple as that. But Paw Paw survived time after time. I've seen him down at the dumpster taking out the trash without a shirt on. I've never seen so many scars.

Bullet holes.

Cuts.

Burns.

Lashes.

We all heard the stories.

How he crawled four city blocks with three bullets in his gut.

How he was missing a few toes on his right foot after a pipe bomb explosion at a late-night poker game.

How when he was in prison he spent more time in the infirmary than in a cell because he kept getting stabbed.

I don't know where the burn scars came from, but there were plenty.

Paw Paw always said nobody is lucky. People go when their time is up. Ain't no two ways 'bout it. They called him Paw Paw not because he was someone's daddy, but because he had the biggest hands anyone had ever seen. And he fought to the death. He was the animal. The beast.

Paw Paw asked Lee again to leave us alone. All we want to do is some fishin'. Please leave us be.

“Are you serious? Get out of here! Pack your shit and leave now. You. Are. Not. Welcome. Here. What don't you understand? You got ten seconds to get your shit packed or I'm going up the block and getting the boys over at Sullivan's Place. You will be in a world of hurt. Your choice, nigger. What you want to do?”

Paw Paw reeled in the line. Leaned the fishing pole up against his chair. Lit a cigarette and took a long, cool drag. Told Lee to go over to wherever the fuck Sullivan's was and go get dem boys. Tell dem boys to come down by the lake. Let's dance, white boy.

“Your funeral! Idiot!”

Now I was terrified. How many would come back?

Lee turned to walk back up the hill. Paw Paw locked the line on the fishing pole. It wasn't fully reeled in; the spark plug was still hanging about five feet down. He followed Lee Ritz up the hill and swung the pole as hard as he could. Cracked Mr. Lee Ritz right on top of the head.

Lee took maybe ten uneven steps, each slower than the last. He was so disoriented he couldn't walk straight. His hands couldn't reach his head. He twitched as he tried to regain his balance. Paw Paw still had the line locked on the pole. He ran over and cracked him in

the head again. Swung with both hands over his head straight down. Crack. Like a ripe melon falling on the curb.

Lee Ritz dropped. Hard.

Paw Paw came back over and started to disassemble the tent. I helped. We gathered the gear and put it in the car. It took us two trips. We didn't go fast.

Paw Paw told me that the world's a hard place. You can be pushed around or push back. It's that simple.

The difference between Lee and Paw Paw is that Lee *thought* he was a tough guy.

Paw Paw *was* a tough guy.

Before we left I asked Paw Paw what we should do. Was he dead? Paw Paw said he wasn't dead. It wasn't a big deal. Just another white man sleeping in the grass.

We didn't have a fish fry that night.