

THE HOPE OF AN AGING MAN

It is official: I look like my grandfather. A long, vehement stare at my fifty-eight year old reflection confirms it. I am no longer the young, hubristic, overambitious soul who was never intimidated or apprehensive about life's omnipresent challenges.

Life's wear and tear is inescapable. My upper lip that once eloquently moved to form patterns of speech and a seemingly ever-present smile has shriveled like a once inflated balloon that now appears flaccid, pathetic. My eyes that once burst with emotions are now couched beneath drooping eyelids that have encroached upon my vision the same way ocean waves continuously erode an aging seawall and take prisoner everything within its path. I wonder if I will live to see my eyes covered and my vision disappear entirely like the alluvial soil of the Mississippi Delta.

A once coveted hairline of rich auburn hair has thinned and receded like ever-expanding runways that intersect at a barren oval-shaped terminal at the crown of my head. In coming years, this will propagate further like suburban sprawl. A study of my loosening skin covering the front of my neck induces fierce consternation. I crane my neck in an attempt to exercise and mitigate the forming of further lines and geometric patterns on my skin that will never be repaired or surgically altered.

Most curiously are the lines that spread from the outer corners of my eyes and up to my temples and down across my upper cheeks. These wrinkles surround a section of my face that has escaped the spider-like crevices caused by these indentions. I smile to myself how this oasis on each upper cheek reminds me how Eden was bordered by four great rivers that served and protected paradise on earth. How absurd to equate signs of my eventual

mortality with God's perfect creation.

Then I reconsider. These lines, crevices and other aging traits must represent something more than just the beginning of my inevitable demise. I think back to my grandfather whose reflection mine most resembles. I recall how as a child my grandfather's aging identifiers fascinated me. His fair Scottish skin was parched from years of exposure to the Mississippi sun. His eyelids drooped causing his stare to intensify his expressions to the point where his cogency caused me to fawn over his every word. I understood, agreed, and mimicked his every expression, mood and even his leaning gait and whistling breath through his puckered lips as he concentrated on a tedious assignment like untangling my fishing line that spent more time in trees and weeds than in pond water. Did he ever complain? Oh, hell yes. But he always ended each curse word with a smile before going back to teaching his grandson the art of fishing. All the while I watched and marveled at him and how unselfishly he cared for and loved me.

Once my grandfather showed me a photograph of him when he was a much younger man. He proudly commented that he wasn't a bad looking fellow. Standing next to him as he sat at the kitchen table with my little arm resting across his hunched shoulders I looked at the image of what most would certainly agree was a very handsome young man. I then looked down at his thinning patch of gray hair, his parched face, and his thinning and sometimes quivering lips. I noticed the lines and crevices covering his face and his drooping eyelids that prevented my viewing all of his deep brown eyes. His pink nape was wrinkled creating ridges that caused me to wonder if he himself knew what the back of his neck looked like.

I squeezed my grandfather's shoulder and put my head next to his. "No, Papaw, I love you now!" He, of course, let me know I was stupid for thinking such. What he couldn't understand was that a

grandfather with burnt skin, droopy eyelids, wrinkles and crevices was the only grandfather I ever knew. The image in the photograph meant nothing to me. I would never know or care to know that man in the picture or about his accomplishments or his failures. I loved who he was then, not who he was before, even if his appearance then was more aesthetically pleasing to others.

As I look at my own sun-parched, wrinkled face and eyes that are slightly encumbered because of sagging, languid eyelids, I can only wonder: will someone ever see me as I am now and find me as appealing and fascinating as I saw my grandfather? As I walk away from the mirror I accept the deterioration of my appearance with not a grimace but a smile. Like my grandfather, I have made mistakes that I hope against hope can one day be forgotten or, at the very least, accepted and overlooked. Will people who know me now see an older, much wiser person? Will my obvious signs of aging allow them and others to discern a different, better man who my younger self could never have been?

My life experiences that include ghastly mistakes and behavior created these wrinkles, my thinning hair and other signs of aging. And, like they did for my grandfather, created a new being. I can only pray that like his did for him, my aging signs will permit others to see past my errors in judgment and discover a more humble, caring man whom they can accept and, hopefully, find a way to love me.