

Remembrances

Jennifer Thompson

When I need time to think, I go outside and sit beside a lilac tree in my backyard. It must be as old as the earth; it has big gnarly branches that twist and turn in every direction. The bark is old and falls off in big scaly pieces if you touch it or a hard wind blows. The tree still blooms every spring. I have pictures of it from two years ago, before it began to dwindle. The branches are bursting with beautiful purple flowers and vibrant green leaves. Just looking at the picture, I can remember how sweet the flowers used to smell. But the flowers get more sparse and less fragrant with every year. Now that it's winter, the tree is barren, without leaves or flowers to look pretty or smell good. But I can remember. That's why I like to sit out here any time of the year--to think and remember about things.

Lately, I've been thinking about Uncle Fred. He died around this time of the year. He really enjoyed nature. He liked to hunt and fish. I remember one time when I went fishing with him. I thought it was going to be something I would enjoy. But I was wrong. He showed me how to bait the hook and use the fishing rod. That was all O.K. The bad part came when he showed me what to do when I finally caught a fish; rip him out of the water as fast as I could and throw him in a bucket with a pile of other fish, gasping for air (or water, rather). A grave in the shape of a five gallon bucket. I was not happy about this arrangement. My uncle had always told me that he fished only for fun; for "sport" he would always say. This wasn't sport, it was murder. I told him so. He grumbled, but finally said he had to agree with me, so that day we threw back all the fish we caught. And every day after that he threw back the fish he caught--so he said. But he made me happy by saying it.

You have to understand. For my uncle to bend to someone else's will was a tremendous thing. He was incredibly stubborn; cantankerous and mean for the most part and to most people, except for me it seemed--on a rare occasion when the mood hit him and the moon was full or his medication had taken effect or something. Suffice it to say that generally he was not a pleasant person. An example of his "unpleasantness" was the time that he tried to help me with rounding numbers in math. He was a whiz at mathematics, like a computer on

speed (I was like a computer on valium). He could figure out answers to problems in seconds, while it took me minutes to get the same answer. Take rounding; I couldn't understand it. He could but didn't have the patience to explain it to me. When I wanted to give up, Fred proceeded to shout a list of exactly how many things this skill would help me with. I didn't care, I wanted to quit anyway. He didn't want to hear that so he yelled even more. And I did finally learn how to round, thanks to Fred and his iron will. That's how I thought of him: indestructible. I never thought he was vulnerable in any way or susceptible to sickness. I was wrong.

He had a stroke and it was devastating. He couldn't talk, he could only hear and nod and make gestures with his hands. That was probably the only time he was silent during his whole life; it was the one time that I wished he wasn't. Whenever I looked at him lying there, unanimated in his hospital bed, I couldn't help but remember how he used to be. Where was the grouchy fisherman? Where was the demanding mathematician? I saw none of that spark now. The light had gone from his eyes and was now replaced with a quiet emotion I didn't recognize. He was a different person, someone older than his years. Someone who knows he is going to die and is O.K. with that idea.

He should have asked me; I wasn't O.K. with it at all. Just letting go of life? How could he, after he'd been so tough with me about everything? I thought he was being a hypocrite. I told everyone in my family what I thought, but they just told me to wait and see what happened. Maybe he'd get better. . . .

He died a few days after I last saw him. My family was in shock. They never thought this would happen to him. He was so strong, so full of life. They hadn't seen what I'd seen. They didn't know his life had left him long before he ever really died.

At the funeral everyone cried. My grandma couldn't even come, she was so grief-stricken. So much sadness over a man who was so mean and grumpy. He probably wouldn't have expected it. I was surprised myself at how upset everyone was. The family members who had argued with him, people he wouldn't speak to for weeks at a time--they were sobbing like water fountains. They should have spent more time talking with him instead of arguing. They would have had more good things to remember him by.

That's what helped me feel better about his death.

Remembering the good times we had together. Maybe I understood what kind of person he was better than anybody, because I made an effort to do so. He was like a tornado--all wound up and unpredictable. That was the fun of him; you never knew what he was going to do or say next. He built up my vocabulary of four-letter words. He gave me something else too: confidence. The desire to succeed. I'll always be thankful for that. It was something that only he could have taught me. I'm glad he was there to teach me, and I'm glad I got to know him the way I did. I can remember him the way that he really was, not the way everyone else thought of him.

So, as I sit beside my lilac tree, I sometimes think about Uncle Fred and smile. He's a lot like this tree. I like to think he is this tree: completely unique, rough around the edges, old as the earth (just kidding), but still able to show its beauty when the seasons call for it. The flowers may be dwindling and the fragrance may not be as sweet, but I can still remember when the tree was younger and the flowers sweeter than anything outdoors. And that's all that matters.