Granddad was not a robust man, and for as long as I was alive he did not move with the ease of everyone else including Nanny, my grandmother. Sitting in his recliner in the den where I would sit when he was sleeping, he would say hello to everyone as we came to his and Nanny’s house in Hom, Louisiana for visits. Not too long after we had exchanged pleasantries, he would ask me if I wanted to fish. “Hey, patna (partner). Let’s go catch us a fish,” he always said.

Taking me into the back yard, where the moss covered the trees like snow, we went to a gate in the wire fence surrounding the house. When I opened the cold latch, the gate swung open leading to the fish beyond.

“Get us some worms,” Granddad said when we walked through.

He handed me the same shovel we had used many a time or else I just used my hands. The ground was soft where I would dig for the worms. It was the same place we got our worms everytime we went fishing and so the dirt had been overturned many times. Dropping each slippery piece of bait into a plastic bucket with dirt, we would walk down a green stretch of land between the thorny, berry bushes and the neighbors’ fences until our destination was achieved.

The lake was fairly large with the usual stumps and branches pecking their tops out of the murky, mosquito-ridden water. The narrow strip of land we stood on always looked like it was far above the surface of the water, although now I know that if our fishing poles were able to reach the water we must have been on the bank. I thought it was neat to have a lake so close to one’s house.

Granddad always said before starting, “Bait your hook,” and I would. He had taught me
how to bait a hook, even though it is such a simple task. The first few times I had ever fished with him, he would put his old, wrinkled hands on mine and help me cast the line in a nice ark over the water. Following the same procedure, his line would hit just as smoothly, if not better. He then began the waiting process. As a young child, patience was not a virtue; it still isn’t.

Waiting for a simple fish to bite could seem like hours, but if Granddad could do it so could I, and I would sit waiting, just like him.

One of our fishing trips rewarded me with my first fish. Naturally, I had known what to do when I pulled the hooked prize out of the water. Knowing, however, is different from doing. When I could not get the hook out of my fish, Granddad was there getting his blue jumpsuit wet with lake water as my catch writhed and twisted in my grasp. Once the hook left the fish, it was put in a big bucket full of water so that I could display my reward for being so patient. We carried our rods to the house, with Granddad and the fish bucket in the lead.

“Look what my patna caught,” said Granddad, after I had already showed my parents, Nanny, and my sister with pride in my face.

Shortly after, I returned to the lake with the bucket to let my fish go. Granddad watched as the fish slid into the water.

After a hard day of fishing, Granddad always retired to his recliner. The old worn-down chair had little brass button-like embellishments running up the edge of its front that I constantly ran my fingers over. Granddad would pull the wooden lever on the side of his seat and lean back while the foot rest fell into its rightful position. It was a position suited for sleeping, and sleeping was just what my grandfather did. Over time, Granddad’s recliner became just as much a part of him as his balding, white hair.
In his much older age when he was deteriorating more rapidly, fishing became a part of the past. No fishing only meant that Granddad would relax more in a plastic, white chair on his concrete patio. He would listen to the sounds of the outdoors and see the round stone path leading the gate of fish. The glasses he wore outside were the extremely dark sunglasses that cover the sides where normal glasses don’t reach. They were the kind that doctors always recommend wearing to prolong visionary acuteness. Granddad already had failing eyesight and no one desired for him to be completely blind. He always wore those dark glasses anywhere when he was outside including when he came to Tennessee to visit my family.

The few times I had had the experience of his visits were marked by Granddad’s love to sit on our wooden deck. Suspended above the ground, our deck was perfect for enjoying warm weather. Sitting there in a cushioned chair, watching the wildlife if he could see it, Granddad never failed to ask me for a small apple or two off of our apple trees. “Patna, go get me one of them apples.” I would and he would munch on it happily. They were one of his favorite snacks. Sitting on our deck, he seemed happy in his old age.

Although there were happy times, overall my grandfather’s health deteriorated quickly. Falling, eyesight, and hearing could have all contributed to an early death if he wasn’t so cared for. Instead, my entire family had to accept the fact that a nursing home close to family was the only way to prolong his life.

My grandmother moved to Gulfport, Mississippi to live close to her oldest daughter, and Granddad was put in a nursing home. My sister and parents along with myself went to see him every visit. We rolled his wheelchair outside the building and let him have his peaceful air and quiet. We told him our big events, although I doubt he ever really understood. It comforted us to
talk to him just the same.

In the very last years of his life, my family brought him to my Aunt’s for Thanksgiving. Surrounded by his grandchildren, wife, and his two daughters, he sat on the couch in his light blue, medical gown. He arm wrestled me, and I fought back, but in the end I think he got some satisfaction from still being able to beat me.

We cut up turkey, stuffing, and mash potatoes with gravy for him, and he ate his last home cooked meal before we had to take him back to the nursing home.

In July of 1995, I went to visit my grandfather in the nursing home for the last time. On the way there, Nanny informed my sister and I that death was only a matter of time. I had already seen him in the cafeteria eating with strangers, thinking they were friends he had known for years, possibly from World War II or possibly from Home. I knew his mind hardly processed anything but his family and his favorite chocolate covered cherries we sometimes brought. So seeing him that fateful day should not have shocked me.

I still remember his open mouth trying to intake more air and the tubes in his nose trying to give it to him, while he lied on his bed. He could not see much, although he could recognize the pink in my sister’s shirt. He called her his little nurse while she stood holding his hand, a perfect ten-year old, grandfather moment.

I reached out to give him my hand, and he found it. He squeezed my hand with his wrinkled one has hard as he could and said happily, “That’s my patna.”

He died five days later. We went to his funeral and I saw the bin with the orange and black colors where his ashes were kept, ironically, fitting colors for a dedicated New Orleans’ Saints’ fan.