

In the Moment

by James B. Goode

Mamaw's brain has turned into a DVD of her life. She lies in her bed in the nursing home and randomly pushes the invisible buttons. The shiny wheel spins and locates a particular time, a particular place, with particular people. It is filled with people who were there.

"Go on up to the house and eat before you go home," she says as she raises her head from the cloud-like pillow, craning her neck to watch us disappear into the cavernous hallway.

A few weeks ago, Dr. Cornett told us to do exercises with Mamaw to stimulate her and exercise her brain.

Her brain is getting plenty of exercise, I thought. The wheels are spinning and the gears are grinding constantly. But I am always open to suggestion. So, I bring a picture of her three sons standing under the Walnut tree at the home place. I show her the picture in the silver frame.

"Who are these people?" I ask.

She holds the frame tightly in her blue-veined, waxy hands. Her eyes tighten as she stares at the image.

"They know who they are!" She blurts out suddenly.

This takes me aback. There is no argument here. They do know who they are. Maybe she recalled. Maybe she didn't. Maybe who they are has slipped away and is lost somewhere on a shiny disk and the laser light can't locate it. Maybe she will happen upon it and divulge it at some unexpected moment—that's Ivan on the left, then Eddie in the middle . . . Danny is the baby, he's next to the tree, she'll say.

The nurse tells us to rub lotion on Mamaw's skin.

"Her skin will dry out. Old people get these pressure sores from lying around," she explains. "Take this Jergen's and massage her arms and hands, her face, her legs and feet . . ."

I come in one morning. "Good morning sweet Mamaw, how's my Mamaw today?" I ask.

She looks at me as if I am some rank stranger. It is a hollow look, as if she only knows that I am male, but doesn't know my name or how I fit in this family.

"Do you want me o rub lotion on your hands today?" I ask.

A smile slowly moves across her thin lips—some memory appears on the screen—maybe a montage of memories. The image fades to black . . . another image . . . a dissolve to another, then disappears. In her eyes are clouds flying under the sun.

“Others have been there before,” she says, her eyes suddenly warm and focusing on my face.

I am her lover . . . come calling . . . I caress her hand as if we are sitting on the front porch courting in the swing. The silver disc keeps spinning and spinning.

“Others have been there before,” she repeats. I do not want to hear this. Some things you do not want to hear from your eighty-year-old Mamaw.

Mamaw is trying to die. She weighs sixty-five pounds. She looks like leather stretched over sticks and rocks. When she starts to slip away, the people in white rush into the room with their gurney and whisk her away to the hospital. They hook her up to IVs of glucose and other mysterious liquids. The pink begins to chase away the ashen gray. She emerges from the fog—electricity restored after the storm.

“Honey, Honey, Honey . . . ain’t you got fat since I seen you last?” She says to me. At first, my feelings are hurt, but I have learned to be in Mamaw’s reality. Wherever Mamaw is, that’s where I am.

The nurse’s aides tell me stories about when Mamaw first came to the nursing home. Their favorite story is about her trying to court Mr. Turner who had a room across the way and down the hall. They walked up and down the corridors day-after-day holding hands and whispering in the shadows. They caught heads turned and exchanged two-arm hugs and even kisses. Once they were even caught in bed together. This came as no surprise to me. Mamaw likes men. She always has. Every time one comes in the room, she lights up like a Christmas tree. Her eyes never leave them. They follow the men as they move about her room. She flirts with her eyes and mouth. She ignores any women who are in the room. They might as well be fence posts.

They tell about her going down to see Mr. Turner one Sunday morning. When she came to the doorway, his wife, Ellen, was sitting in a chair next to his bed. She eyed Mamaw, forming a sneer by raising the left side of her upper lip. Mamaw froze in place. Mrs. Turner looked at Elijah and said, “Well, who is this Mr. Turner?”

He opened the drawer of the nightstand, removed his black plastic-rimmed glasses and cocked them on his crooked nose.

“I’ve never seen her before in my life!” he exclaimed.

This morning the phone rings. It’s the nursing supervisor at the nursing home. They want me to come right away. I know what has happened. I tell them I will be there as soon as I can get dressed. Outside, the trees are beginning to turn. The wind scatters the dancing leaves across the yard. One tiny bird flicks and flutters in the swirl. I take my time getting dressed. I will go into the nursing home and do as I have done for the last twelve years. I will be in Mamaw’s moment.

