

Shunpiking

Sarah Murphy

Draft #3

(A woman sits at a table with a pad of paper and pen before her.)

This is ridiculous. That's what you said in your note. And this is ridiculous too. How am I supposed to write a eulogy for a man who went out like you did? Most of the people coming think it was a heart attack. It's not something we want people to know. I'll have to talk around it. It'll be hard. But I guess some families are good at keeping secrets.

What am I supposed to say? That your light was fading, that your body was betraying you? That you decided to leave on your terms, when and where you chose? I want to talk about what you loved, what you wanted to stay here for. I want to talk about fishing.

We loved summers on our little lake. There are hundreds of little lakes in Michigan, a good deal in the southwest of the state, but you thought ours was the best. You had fished in so many different parts of the world, but the Midwest was where you would end up...you started and ended here.(She writes that down.) I won't mention the time you left your regular glasses on the dock and had to drive us back through the dark in your prescription sunglasses. Did you realize how scary that was for us, for me? Not only that you had put us in danger, but because we could see how you were fading. My dad was fading.

Okay. Back to the present tense, the pretense. How we went there together. How we had our monster talks, our philosophical discussions, talking about my plans for the future. Your views of religion. I'm not sure about mentioning your religious views. Myself, I like the story of how you told my pastor your thoughts. You said, and I quote, "Every day I get down on my knees and thank God I'm an atheist". She laughed at that. I told you how much she influenced my choice of church. How she was at the pulpit when I came in, and I figured any church that had a woman at the head was good by me. Did I ever tell you how she reacted to my queer test? When I told her about a member of my church in San Francisco who had been kicked out of his original church for being gay, and how he had been accepted by MCC, and how would she feel about that. She said she would welcome and rejoice with him, and so she was okay by me. But that's not your story, that's mine. Got off the subject there for a bit. You would call it shunpiking.

Shunpiking—when we got off the highway to take a backwoods route. We used to do it all the time on our way to the lake. We would be going along, the shortest distance between two points like a hypotenuse, and then we would get a wild hair up our asses to get off and see what else was out there. And we would leave off our right triangle way and go find something like a roadside attraction, or a little copse of woods, or a Pizza Hut. Somehow there was always a Pizza Hut waiting for us.

That was how you lived your life really, shunpiking. You saw the world in a different way. I'll put that down. "He saw the world differently, as a novel to be interpreted with questions written in the margins with a soft pencil". It's no wonder that your favorite book is—no, was—was Moby Dick. Most of that damn 800-page behemoth is fricken sailing. Seems aimless, but there must be a point to it somehow, right? I think a lot of people, more driven people, saw your life as

a bit too laid back and dreamy. I'd like to show people a different side of you, that you were actually quite driven in your pursuit of truth. For God's sake, you wrote two major books! One of which is featured on a Read poster. I don't know if anyone remembers those. The one your book is on—I'll tell people it's the Davy Crockett one—is a picture of Phil Collins holding your book in full Davy Crockett costume. So that's my one degree from Phil Collins.

So, the writing and the fishing. That's a start. And the atheism. That may offend some people. But that's on them. You were never offensive about it. You didn't really talk about it. I got wrapped up in the idea of the afterlife at one point, very worried that I would end up in the wrong place, and I remember you saying "It's either nothing or it's beautiful". I like that. It's either nothing or it's beautiful. I guess you know now.

Why did you do it?

That's always the question at the heart of it, isn't it? I know better than to be angry at you. I understand being in a dark place, feeling like you can't get out. But you can get out. There's always a way out. You may not have been able to fish any more, but there were other ways. Walks. You liked watching fishing shows. Maybe you could have taken a trip, just a road trip. Maybe I should have taken you. We could have shunpiked. Maybe I could have done more.

I could have done more.

I'm sorry.

What else can I say?

You loved the Gulf. I sometimes feel like things would have been different for you if you could have stayed there. It's easier, without the winters and getting to be right on the beach. I know I'm happy at the beach. Michigan is definitely grey compared to the blue skies and white sands of the panhandle. But we had our blue days. Remember Grandmother used to say, "The sky's Michigan blue today". We really appreciate those days here in Lansing. Did I ever tell you Lansing is second only to Seattle in number of cloudy days? Makes me feel like I'm living in a big city.

God, I'm talking to you like you're still alive.

I think I really got off track with this eulogy. I don't know why Mom wanted me to do it. I remember you did it for Grandmother. I don't remember what you talked about. She had stuff to talk around too. The darkness. I wish you could have stayed in the light, Dad. Get outside more. Something.

I should have been there for you more. We always had this, I don't know, this special relationship. I feel like we grew closer the older I got. You were always there to give advice, until you weren't, of course. Until you started to lose touch. In a way, I'm glad you're not here to see how I've ended up. Not that I ended up badly, but really different from how we had talked about. I was going to go to Yale or something, get my degree in playwriting or theater crit, teach somewhere, Michigan maybe. Get set to go for the Pulitzer. Things didn't go that way. I guess I am a shunpiker too.

Were you a family man? That's the kind of thing people talk about in a eulogy isn't it? "He was devoted to his family". I think you were in your own way. You didn't let work get in the way of family. You shared your brain with us, you could show us how you looked at things. You helped

me with projects when I had to put something together or make something, because you could work with your hands too. You were a Renaissance man. I'll put that in, "He was a Renaissance man."

"He was a Renaissance man who balanced work and family. He loved the Gulf of Mexico and the white sand beaches, but he came home to Michigan and its perfect, infrequent, precious blue skies. He wrote books, books that were used in classrooms and on 'Read' posters. He was a poet, and these were published too. He loved fishing with his family and frequently talked philosophy with his daughters. He always said he was glad to have daughters—my sister and me—and was the first male feminist I knew. He would say, 'I have the perfect situation: two daughters and a vasectomy.'" Nah, that's TMI. "He often did what he called 'shunpiking' which was our way of getting off the highway and finding some out of the way place, and a different way to get where we were going. And he shunpiked in life. He got off the academic highway early and took early retirement to be with us and to write and to fish. He would read what I wrote and give me feedback—good feedback, not just 'It was good, I liked it'. He was proud when I won the Dennis McIntyre Prize at Michigan. He was also proud later when I started my very different career working with people with disabilities. He was proud of whatever I did, same as my sister, who made him proud in a more successful and lucrative way for herself." (Smiles.) "He also shunpiked in his views of religion—he was not a *traditional* Christian. He believed the afterlife was beautiful." Yeah, that's how I'll get around that. "We hope he is in a beautiful place. Thank you, Dad, for bringing beauty to our lives."

I think that will work. Short and sweet. I'll add more to it as I think of it.

God, I will miss you. I like to think the last thing you saw was the perfect Michigan blue sky through the late summer yellow leaves. I wrote a poem for you, when I was sitting on my porch after a storm. There was a breeze through the leaves of one of our trees and I felt like it was your voice, telling me it would be all right. It's a haiku, and it goes like this:

You are in the trees

You are in the dancing leaves

And the clean blue sky.

I don't blame you, Daddy. I hope it's beautiful.