

Maw Maw

Lance Felps

Course: English 101

Instructor: Paul Crawford

"Come on in here and have a seat." Maw Maw Maudee's scratchy, cigarette smoke-burdened voice takes me back through the years. At just under eighty years smart, Maw Maw lights a cigarette and places it between her lips. She takes a puff of the cigarette and exhales, all the while talking as the smoke jets from her mouth and nostrils. She moves with care, as her back is deteriorating from osteoporosis. This deterioration reveals a Quasimodo-type hump that has made her considerably shorter over time. Maw Maw Maudee looks out with her beady little eyes from huge coke bottle-bottom eyeglasses. She invites us into her home with the love and care any grandmother has, and as we enter, the smell of the South floods our nostrils, excites our nerves, and elicits memories that sweep us into the past.

Maw Maw grabs her purse off the countertop. She remembers to throw in her Virginia Slims and pocketbook before she walks out and locks the door; we are going to the Argosy Casino. She takes us along with her because she does not have much of a choice; she is babysitting. "Maw Maw, where are we going?" my cousin Amanda asks.

"Well, we're going to the boats," Maw Maw replies.

"What's the 'boats'?" I ask.

"The gambling boats," Maw Maw answers once again; her patience never once wavers.

"Oh, is it going to be fun?" Michael, another cousin, asks. We do not have a clue in the world what the gambling boats are supposed to be, but it has to be fun because Maw Maw wants to go.

"You kids'll have a fine time," Maw Maw answers with a smile on her face. At this, we get into the old raggedy Winnebago, and proceed to head out of town. We do not get to gamble ourselves, although we are able to be on the boat. Once Maw Maw arrives at the casino, she delves into the clinks and bangs of the slot machines. We watch as she steadily places coins into the machines and pulls the long levers sending the screens whizzing away. We have never seen her enjoy something so much, besides her cigarettes, of course. For most of the afternoon, we kids watch her and she, from our endless interrogation, tells us what is going on. She never condones gambling, in that she never directly tells us that gambling is okay; we just know she loves to "gamble," being too young to realize what that means. She loves to spend time with us and we bring her joy by wanting to be with her, no matter where she goes. We have spent many weekends with our grandmother and one of the best memories involves her cooking every morning at the break of dawn, literally at the roosters' crow, for her grandchildren.

We awaken one morning to the smell of Maw Maw cooking breakfast. Amanda and I stumble sleepily into the kitchen to see our grandmother standing over the stove stirring something in a cast-iron pot. "Y'all hungry?" she asks as we sit down at the table.

"That smells good, Maw Maw," I say as I try to rub sleep out of my eyes.

"Yeah, do you have scrambled eggs?" Amanda asks groggily.

"I sure do, collected them this morning from the hens," Maw Maw replies.

"Yummy, thanks," I say as she places a plate of food in front of me.

Amanda has the same sentiments as she receives her plate. Maw Maw putters around the kitchen cleaning up from breakfast and chatting with us. "I'll be right back y'all," she tells us as she leaves the kitchen and meanders down the hall. We have never been the most well behaved children, so once she leaves we deviously find something to get into. She has matching salt and

sugar containers that spark our imagination. Abandoning the food, we decide to pour some salt into the sugar. Amanda immediately realizes she might be in trouble with me so she runs to tell Maw Maw what I have done. As I sit there listening to Amanda tell our grandmother this, I cannot help but get mad. Maw Maw is mad as well because she grabs a bright yellow fly swatter off a hook above the countertop and comes into the kitchen. "Lance, did you put salt in the sugar?"

"Maybe a little..." I reply meekly.

"Well, what do you think should happen to you?" Maw Maw asks me.

"I don't know," I say, knowing what is going to happen, and realizing tears are beginning to fill my bottom eyelids.

"Well I'm going to show you then," Maw Maw responds, growing larger and larger as she gets closer to me with the damn yellow fly swatter. Maw Maw takes me by the arm and swats me with the fly swatter. I know that what I have done is wrong, and the disappointing look in her eyes is overbearing.

"Well, now I want you to scoop the salt out," Maw Maw tells me.

"But Maw Maw, I'll never be able to get all the salt out!" I reply through sniffles.

"You had best be on your way to seeing just how much you *can* get out then," she says.

While I scoop the salt out of the sugar as best I can, Maw Maw takes Amanda by the arm and swats her with the fly swatter because she "tattled" on me. Maw Maw instills in me that tampering with things not my own is unacceptable—she makes it a point that I understand. She also teaches me, indirectly by way of Amanda, never to tattle on anyone because it is inappropriate. Maw Maw disciplines us sometimes, but mostly she has a soft nature and appears to be harmless.

Maw Maw has a heart of gold and an attitude to match. Not that she is yellow and makes pretty jewelry, but she always seems to brighten everyone's mood. It is in her personality to make people feel welcome in her home. On Sundays, she cooks a massive dinner, complete with her famous home-fried chicken and fresh cut French fried potatoes. We walk into her house and the smell of her cooking strikes us. She is at the stove when we come in and stops what she is doing to give everyone a hug and peck on the cheek. White flour covers her hands if she is making biscuits or egg batter covers them if she is frying chicken, but something always sticks to her. "Get y'all something to eat now, don't be shy," she tells everyone as we file in one by one over the course of a Sunday afternoon.

She shakes a cigarette from the pack of Virginia Slims after she tells us to get our plates. Maw Maw has smoked for over fifty years and it is one of her favorite pastimes. As a favorite pastime, sadly, she has visible and audible signs of the effects of smoking. Maw Maw's face is sunken in, leathery and old, and her fingers have been stained yellow from the nicotine of the cigarettes; she coughs in massive heaves producing phlegm from deep in her lungs. The house resembles a pool hall because of the lazy cigarette smoke she exhales in plumes.

Maw Maw Maudee's amazing attitude and outlook on life keeps her upbeat despite her problems. A horrific side effect of smoking cigarettes is lung cancer, and Maw Maw has smoked for over fifty years, which allows her cancer ample time for development. Smoking does not contribute to her already spiraling health, but while she is a strong and bright-minded woman, she is also stubborn in many respects. She frequently tells us not to bother over her because she can "handle" it.

Despite her health issues, she tries to be as vibrant as possible-knowing her time on earth is growing shorter and shorter with every year.

We always tell her, "Maw Maw, you have to let the doctors decide what's best for you, you know."

She looks at us, smiles, and says, "I know what's what. I've lived in this body for nigh on eighty years; no doctor's gonna tell me what and what not to do."

This tends to end those types of conversations—she is a stubborn woman. She continuously denies our requests to bring her to a doctor, even though her health is decreasing with more rapidity as each day passes. Maw Maw's central concern is not for herself, but for others, as she does not want to bother anyone. Her strength amazes us until her day comes in the summer of 2003.

After suffering for over a year, Maw Maw dies of lung and pancreatic cancer on June 21, 2003. Her death leaves a gaping hole in our lives as we remember the memories she leaves us. A final memory she has imprinted into the foreground of our hearts and minds is a saying of hers—one that makes us wish we can go back to her again and again: "Y'all ain't leavin' yet, are ya '?"