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**Just sort of out of sight**

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A wisp of nearly pure white hair blew across Grandpa's brow as he squinted to gaze into the beautiful blue summer sky. Dotted with billowy white clouds, it was a truly picturesque scene, more artistic than real. Grandpa loved the summer skies; at his side, his grandson learned to love them too.

Though he was old, he took long strides; at times, it was difficult to keep up with him but he did not intentionally move so quickly for he loved to meander beside the old, dormant canal. He told the boy stories of how boats, barges he called them, once traveled where the water lay shiny and still now, disturbed only by an occasional heron diving for a fish or a turtle slipping into the water from a mossy rock. He recalled that mules, strong animals "sort of like horses", pulled the barges and walked beside the canal while the men leading them, all dirty and sweaty, would holler to the mules to move along.

Grandpa, ambling along, spied a stick beside the dirt path that looked just about the right size to be a walking stick, he picked it up and using his jack-knife, stripped away a couple of inches of the dead bark at one end. In a moment, he had his walking stick.

"Never knew why he liked a walking stick, guess he just did, he didn't limp."

Suddenly he tossed his closed jack-knife to the boy; luckily he was expecting it, he grinned and caught it deftly. Looking about, the boy located a likely stick for himself, shorter, but just right for his junior height. At six years old, he considered himself quite tall however, as a matter of fact in just the last year he had grown a whole inch—well according to the marks beside the basement door anyway. In a moment, he had awkwardly shaved some bark from the end of his stick, exactly as grandpa had done.

"Sshh", Grandpa cautioned, "Look yonder boy, see that big ole bullfrog? He's really a beaut! Why he must be old as Moses."

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“Who’s Moses?”

“Wellll. When we get home ask your Grandma, she knows all about that stuff.”

“Grandpa.”

“Yes.”

“How comes Grandma knows so many things you and me don’t?”

“Well now I reckon that’s cause she’s a woman and the womenfolk just know about certain things such as religion, and cooking and holidays and all sorts of those things. The men folk, well, we sort a know lots about all the real important things such as fishing, and setting traps for rabbits and carving and stuff. Oh yes, and don’t forget about plantin’, you know your grandma wouldn’t know a corn seed from a hayseed if she was to see one.”

The old man’s dark blue eyes twinkled in the bright sunlight and a slight grin spread across his cheeks. He knew he was exaggerating, but still it was important for the boy to be able to distinguish between what women ought to be able to do and what was best handled by the men in the family.

“Well son, we’re just about at the fork, it’s up yonder a piece. I figure today we could follow the fork to the right and maybe walk between the fields while it’s nice and dry down that way. What about it? ‘Be different if we had our poles with us, we could maybe fish a little, but seeing how we don’t, I thought we could just do something a bit different; maybe watch the birds flittin’ across the tops of the corn stalks.”

The dirt path led them down a gradual incline that entered a heavily wooded area where birds chirped and squirrels explored the trees by adeptly leaping from one branch to another. Here and there was evidence of a snake hole and the boy was careful to avoid them, even though he had been told they were harmless he wasn’t so sure the snakes knew that.

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“Grandpa, why do you reckon some trees grow real tall and some don’t? I mean like, if you look down there”, he pointed to a ravine off to the right, “some are little and some are a little taller and some are almost up to the clouds.”

The old man stopped.

“Come here close to me son.”

The boy was quickly beside his grandfather.

“Now take your hand and measure from the top of your head to me and let’s see how tall you are next to your old grandpa.”

He quickly obeyed and as he held his hand firmly against his grandfather’s side, he grinned broadly.

“Wow Grandpa, just look at that, boy am I ever growing up, right?”

“You sure are boy. But being taller isn’t always easy, son.”

“Yes sir.”

“See, one day those big old tall trees will find out that it’s getting to be pretty hard standing up there in the sun, and the rain and the snow all of the time and they’ll just sort of lay down after a while and take a nap. When they do the other trees, the ones down there that are short and those that are a little taller but not real tall yet, will sprout their leaves and stretch their limbs out to bathe in the sunlight and they’ll grow-up to take the place of the big trees.”

“But Grandpa, that don’t splain why the big trees are so tall.”

Amused the old man chuckled but not so as to embarrass the boy; the boy’s curiosity pleased him.

“Well now—see it’s the job of the big trees to grow tall and spread their branches out wide and high so not too much sun, not too much rain, and not too much snow get to the smaller trees. See the big trees sort of protect the little ones so they get just enough of everything so they can grow up safe to be big trees someday.”

“Gosh Grandpa you know everything. How am I ever going to know all the things you know? Boy, I guess I’ll just never learn everything like you.”

“Whoa none of that now! Why, I guess you wasn’t listening to what I was telling you about the trees. See Grandpas are a lot like those tall trees in that ravine there. We sort of keep our arms stretched out over our youngins so they just get the right amount of everything too so they can get big and strong just like those fine tall trees. Then one day when I just get too tired to keep my arms stretched out to take care of you, I’ll take my rest just like them and it will be your turn to watch out for the tykes that follow you.”

“What are tykes Grandpa?”

Again, the old man smiled. His wrinkled face gleamed as he looked lovingly into his grandson’s beautiful, youthful face.

“Such innocence”, he thought to himself, his face beamed with love. “Well I reckon a tyke is sort of like those little trees in that there ravine.”

“Oh, yeah, so one day I’m going to be big like you and ...”

The boy paused, deep in thought for the moment, contemplating what he was about to say. Clearly, the old man had taught him well. His mind was churning away.

A short distance ahead the sun shown brighter and the path led out of the woods, it straightened out, stretching ahead as far as the eye could see between two fields of tall corn plants. Rough-hewn fence posts planted securely in the earth bordered each of the fields just

beyond the path's edge; taut barbed wire stretched from post to post as far as the eye could see.

The old man and the boy emerged from the shelter of the trees and stepped into bright hot sunlight that beat down upon them. The old man tugged at the dirty brim of his wide straw hat pulling it down at a slight angle to keep the sun out of his eyes; the boy eyed his Grandfather and tilted his.

They walked on in silence for a short distance, then, the boy spoke up.

"Hey Grandpa I been thinking."

"Go on. What you been thinking"?

"Well remember what you said about them trees back there? You know how they get old and tired and after a spell they just lay down."

"Sure I do, so what?"

"Well when I saw some of those old trees on the ground they didn't have any leaves on them and they just looked like they weren't alive anymore, like Mom's flowers when they die and she throws them out."

"That's right son. You're thinking right. That's exactly what happens with them trees."

The boy looked directly into the eyes of his grandfather. There was a troubled, puzzled look upon his face. He licked his lips and heaved a short sigh.

"But Grandpa, don't you remember you was telling me that Grandpas are pretty much like those tall trees that get tired and then just lay down in the woods?"

There was concern written across his face, his brow wrinkled and his gaze into the old man's eyes became intense. The breeze had quickened and the broad long leaves of the corn

stalks rustled as the wind blew through them. The old man looked skyward checking for any changes that might indicate that a storm might be brewing; it was darkening.

They continued the long trek between the seemingly endless fields of corn, after a few moments the boy spoke again.

“Grandpa what will happen to you when you get tired and lay down like the trees?”

The old man cleared his throat and looked straight ahead. The question bothered him. He didn't like to think of leaving the boy. He couldn't imagine him faring for himself, why who would keep him from making mistakes, who would coddle him when he encountered sad times, like the time when his only gold fish died and floated quietly at the top of its tiny bowl. Why, wasn't it Grandpa who had promised he'd get another? And wasn't it Grandpa who carefully carried the fish out to give it a decent burial? Who'd make him laugh?

“Well I reckon I'll just go to eternity. All the good folks go to eternity.”

“Wow, is it nice Grandpa? Is it pretty?”

“I reckon so. Your Grandma always says it is. She says it's the nicest place ever.”

“Gee Grandpa; do you know where that place eternity is? Is it far from here?”

“Well son, can you see yonder where the last fence post is?”

“Maybe... sort a. I mean that's pretty far Grandpa, I really can't see the last fence post.”

“Ahah! And right you are son. See eternity is just a piece past that last fence post I reckon, not really far, just sort of out of sight.”

“Wow Grandpa! You're really so smart. I wanna be just like you when I get growed up.”

The old man laughed loudly, his lips spread into a wide smile that wrinkled his weathered cheeks. He looked proud and his chest pounded with love for the child.

Gazing again at the darkening sky the old man raised his plaid collar about his neck. He surreptitiously glanced at the boy. He was raising his own shirt collar and drawing it about his neck just like his grandpa. The old man felt a lump in his throat.

“We best be getting back now.”

They turned abruptly and retraced their steps between the cornfields in the direction of the woods; from there it was only a short distance to the battered old red pick-up truck that Grandfather had driven within a couple of hundred feet of the canal.

In moments, large raindrops plopped down upon the woods, some found their way onto the backs of the old man and the boy. It chilled them through and through but they giggled and laughed while most of the rain splashed upon the leaves above them. The sky grew darker and a sudden clap of thunder resounded across the woods for a moment or more.

“Wait for me Grandpa.”

Grandpa, not realizing that his longer legs were outpacing the boy’s short strides, slowed himself to a walking pace that allowed the boy to catch up.

“Well lands sakes alive! Look at the two of you! Go and get dry! There’s hot biscuits with honey and tea and milk awaitin’. Now skedaddle!”

The old man and the boy continued to laugh. Heaven only knows why, nevertheless, they laughed and carried on even after they began munching on the biscuits, two each.

“Grandma”, that was great! Now, I think I’ll a nap for a while. Can’t really do nothing ‘til the rain passes.”

Soon the old man was nestled upon a warm down quilt with the boy curled up close beside him. Moments later, he snored softly.

Sometime during the next two hours or so, the snoring stopped and Grandpa lay there quietly with the boy still clinging lovingly to his waist with one small arm. The storm moved on and knowing there was still a couple more hours to dusk, Grandma entered the room, gently shook the old man, and said, "Come on get up. The rain's stopped."

Grandpa did not respond. He lay there still, his chest not moving, no sound coming from his throat. Grandma realized that the moment she had dreaded for so long was now with her. Grandpa was dead. Doing her best to maintain her composure she quietly woke the boy and urged him to wait in the kitchen. Then, with the reverence of a loving wife of nearly fifty years, she drew a sheet carefully over him concealing for the moment Grandpa's peaceful face. Even in death, he seemed to be smiling.

Grandpa was waked in the front room. A funeral wreath hung on the door which was enshrouded with purple bunting. Neighbors and friends came from everywhere to say goodbye to the old man; and after gazing down at him for a few seconds they would pray silently for his soul and move on to the dining room where there was tea and cake for everyone.

Grandma seated herself close to Grandpa in his old rocking chair. It was his favorite and he had spent many pleasant hours just rocking in it, sometimes reading a book, sometimes musing. He was heard more than once chuckling to himself. One could only guess what crossed his mind during those private moments; one thing was certain, he enjoyed them.

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Three days later the kitchen was a flurry of activity as women from everywhere converged on the pantry and the stove to prepare a meal to be eaten after the funeral. Once in a while, a pot could be heard clanging unceremoniously from behind the closed door; but, for the most part, there was silence.

It was not long afterward that the hearse arrived. It was all black and draped with purple and there was not a speck of dust or dirt to be found anywhere on it. The undertaker, tall, dressed in black except for his heavily starched shirt, entered, and removed his black hat at the door. He knelt on one knee beside the old woman who rocked slowly to and fro close to her beloved. The undertaker gently took her right hand in his, quietly consoling her.

“We’ll be taking him now ma’am. I’ll step outside and get things ready while you have a moment with him.”

The old woman arose and stroking Grandpa’s head gently, she whispered something that no one heard except him. Then, mustering a soft trace of a smile, she quickly moved away, tears rolling slowly down her cheeks.

The boy’s parents stood momentarily before the casket bowed their heads and holding the boy by each of his hands walked out to wait nearby. Then the undertaker followed by six men bearing the casket walked the short distance to the waiting hearse.

Suddenly without warning, the boy broke away from his parents and raced toward the old red pickup truck, it was parked exactly where Grandpa had left it the day he died. Much to the wonderment of everyone standing outside the house the boy leaped onto the open tailgate in a single bound and probed for something in the truck bed.

A moment later, he jumped down, and with the old man's most recent walking stick gripped tightly in his small fist, he raced back to the hearse where he was accosted by Grandma.

"What in the name of Heaven are you doing?" Her voice was subdued but nonetheless stern as she eyed the dirty long stick with a bare point at one end.

"Grandma, Grandma! It's Grandpa's walking stick. He can't go without."

"What on earth are you talking about child?"

"Well, ain't Grandpa goin' to eternity?" His innocent, but desperate eyes bore into her there was urgency in his every word.

Tears fell from the old woman's cheeks as she looked lovingly into the child's face.

"Of course he is. Of course he is," she said weeping. She wrapped her arms completely about him drawing him close to her. "But I don't understand. What has the stick to do with it?"

"See Grandma, Grandpa told me eternity is someplace just past the last fence post in the long cornfield out yonder. Grandpa said, 'See eternity is just a piece past that last fence post I reckon, not really far, just sort of out of sight'. That's a pretty long walk and I know Grandpa never walked very far without his walking stick. And I ain't taking no chances; I just gotta know he can make it to eternity."

The procession moved away slowly, the dirty old stick went with beside Grandpa's casket.