Too Young or Too Old

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Abstract

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It was Sunday — a day at Grandpa's — just like it had had been for years and years, but it was the last one for me — for a while at least. The army had seen to that.

But it was a nice Sunday — a winter day without a cloud in the sky. People should have been huddled in heavy overcoats breathing smoke as if their rosy cheeks were on fire, but they were walking around in sweaters. They should have been wearing heavy overshoes plodding through the snow, but they were wearing their Sunday shoes dodging little puddles of melted snow. I should have been happy because my last day was so wonderful, but the thoughts of leaving clouded my eyes and left my hands cold.

I wanted to leave now —
Not have to watch the clock to see how many hours were left —
Not have to look in Mom's eyes —
But that wouldn't be fair, and there were still a few things to be done. See a certain girl — a farewell to some close friends — and say good-bye to Grandpa.

As the family and I climbed the old steps in front of the house, I could see Grandpa's face in the window watching us as if we were a line of bill collectors. Grandpa was a funny looking man — a large black mustache and a few strands of black hair lying close to the top of his otherwise bald head. He never wore a suitcoat — he covered most of his shirt with a tattered old vest which couldn't quite reach his belt. He had a loud voice and spoke with authority — that was grandpa, an authority on everything. I don't know how the country's administration could get along without him, but they would rather. He was a retired railroad man, but specialized in armchairs — of every general still in the business. He was a gruff, moody old man, but I looked forward to those one-sided conversations held every Sunday afternoon in his parlor. Grandma would serve the coffee and cake, and grandpa would provide the entertainment.

Grandma met us at the door as if we were long lost relatives from the North Pole even though the house was filled with them.

Grandpa just sat in his chair smoking his pipe.
Aunts and uncles were all over the place, and in-between them were little cousins. Aunt Bess and Uncle Hank were there with their daughter who had just been released from some rest home—a social drive had been thwarted and she needed a change—very understandable considering the town we lived in, South Holland, where everyone is everyone else's relative. They grow onions and sugar beets during the week days, and on Sunday they go to church and visit their relatives—all twenty-two hundred of them. Aunt Irene and Uncle Herman had brought their two children—a sweet little girl who had to baby sit twenty-four hours a day with a selfish spoiled brat of twelve. And over in the corner were Aunt Minnie and Uncle Milton with their little girl—a shy little thing who was just a hair cross-eyed, but like grandpa used to say, "A hair cross-eyed is just as bad as being a hair pregnant." Now with our family added to this it was quite an oddity. Absolutely the queerest bunch of individuals to ever come from one family tree.

I sat near Grandpa—the income tax policy and the Korean war policy were the subjects of conversation.

I listened for a while.

I had to smile at Grandpa. He talked with such earnestness—as if the fate of the world hung on his very lips. He argued with great intent—none of his offspring would ever get the best of him during one of these discussions. He would always have the last word, if there was one. There were no conversations with Grandpa—just arguments. If there was no argument, Grandpa wouldn't say anything.

I finally decided to say something.

"Grandpa, you don't have an open mind on the subject." I shouldn't have said that.

"You're too young," he said. "When you have been on this earth as long as I have, you will be able to know more about what goes on around you." He went on for at least five minutes more. Someone stopped him then. It was Grandma—it had to be.

"More coffee, anyone?" she asked.

That stopped Grandpa long enough to let Dad say a few words. And it took only a few words to say that I was leaving for the army that night.

I don't like to remember the look on Grandpa's face. For the first time in his life I think he remembered what
he had said — all that talk about the foolish policy in Korea, and the waste of lives — people getting rich on the blood spilled by the boys at the front — the army, an unorganized mass of puppets. Grandpa’s eyes looked at the floor. His hand went to his pipe, very slowly — he placed it on the ashtray. He shuffled his old fashioned high-top shoes around on the floor.

He was hurt.

With all of his gruffness and loud talk, he still had a tender feeling for his grandchildren — at least I thought he did, but evidently not very much.

“The trouble with the army is the leaders don’t. . . .”

Things were back to normal again. Grandpa went on for another fifteen minutes. The women went back to discussing the cook book, the cousins, the comic strips; and the men tried to act polite to Grandpa.

Finally the family decided to leave. I said good-bye to everyone, and Grandpa repeated Grandma’s words about taking care of yourself. We started down the old steps to the car and I thought about Grandpa. I wondered how much of what he said he believed. I wondered whether he really thought I was too young to know what is going on around me. He must think I’m the same little boy who used to come in and ask for a penny to buy some candy. I wished I were a boy again, but the country thought I was a man; and with all a man’s responsibilities. Grandpa was old — too old to realize the world changes and people too. He would never be able to understand all of the conflicts within me concerning my place in the world. I was his grandson, but still just another puppet. He’d never believe I was a man with individual feelings.

I turned to take a last look at the house.

I saw Grandpa in the window. He raised his hand to his forehead — a sort of salute and a little bit of farewell gesture. I smiled and waved back. No, I was wrong — he didn’t think I was too young. And Grandpa is not as old as he looks.