Lonely Grows the Child

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Abstract

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by
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Animal Ecology 1

WHY IS it that screen doors always slam in warm weather? Is it because they are stiff with winter cold for long white months, then limber in the sun to rap the doorsill in ecstasy? When the ground was covered with snow the door made but a pathetic thump, not even loud enough to disturb the sparrows feeding in the yard. But in summer, ah, the door thundered, causing all the clothes-hanging housewives to look up, and causing one dishwashing mother to holler, "Millicent Anne Reynolds, how many times have I told you not to slam that door!"

As usual, her only answer would be the staccato rhythm of her daughter running upstairs.

The girl would burst into the room at the end of the hall that was dim like the inside of a hollow tree. Among the old souvenirs, the beer stein, the moth-eaten uniform, the tintype photo of a soldier at attention, sat a replica of a man in a highbacked chair. His face was dry as dust, and the sallow cheeks were lined with seams, but his eyes glittered like tethered starlight, and the arms that wrapped around the child in embrace were wiry under the flannel shirt.

"Grampa! Grampa!" Milly would say, "look what I got!"

"My, my," the old man would chuckle, "and where did you find all these treasures?"

"Treasures? These aren’t treasures, Grampa, they’re just some things I picked up. Look, this is a piece of quartz, and this . . ."

"Wait a minute, child, let me see that rock." He would part the faded red curtains and let the sunlight spangle on the stone. "Quartz? No, this is no piece of quartz! This is the famed Jewel of the Incas, used by the priests of that powerful nation to reflect light rays into the sky, summoning the very gods! Legend says that the carrier of this
stone will always have sunshine and good luck. And what is this?"

"That's a piece of aluminum foil, Grampa."

"No, no, look closer. See how ragged the edges are, and there is a burnt spot! This is a piece of hull lining from a crashed spaceship, I'll bet! Better get back to where you found this and look for the rest. You never know what might land in a spaceship! You could save the world from invasion!"

"Come with me, Grampa, come help me stop the invasion, please," the granddaughter would plead.

The old man would chuckle, and rustling his papyrus skin, rise and totter to the door and down the stairs, his granddaughter clutching his hand like she was holding a dead leaf in an October wind. Out in the meadow they would go, and Milly would say, "Here, over here is where I found it." Grampa would find a smooth boulder to sit on while Milly searched for the downed spaceship.

"What do they look like?"

"What do who look like, Milly?"

"The people from the spaceship. Do they have fangs and green skin, or seven legs? Are they Martians?"

"Well, a-ah, yes, they probably are Martians, but they don't have fangs or extra legs or green skins. In fact, they look very much like you and me. Except for their tongues."

"What about their tongues, Grampa?"

He beckoned her to him and whispered in her ear, "Their tongues are bright blue, bluer than a bluebird."

"No!" she would exclaim in disbelief.

From across the meadow would come a voice, thrown like a rock through a window. "Milly, Father, suppertime!"

"Grampa, do you think Daddy and Mommy are . . .?"

"Sh-h-h, they can hear for long distances. Watch their tongues while they eat. Of course, if they were clever, they would have disguised them in some way—"

At night, after Milly was tucked in and the sheets held her close, she could hear her parents' conversation as it
sifted up through the floor boards.

"... and tonight she wanted me to stick out my tongue for her. I asked her why, and she said she wanted to see if we, you and I, were Martians from the spaceship in the meadow! He told her that, my own father! He's getting senile, and I'm going to do something about it."

"Now, Margret, I'm sure you're just upset. This will all seem funny in the morning."

"No, it won't. In the morning I'm going to look into a home for him. I can't take it any longer. She's only five now, what will it be like if he keeps feeding her these stories?"

Milly wondered what 'senile' was. It sounded bad. She would ask Grampa about it in the morning. Nothing bad could happen to Grampa. She had given him the famed Jewel of the Incas, with all its good luck and sunshine.

When the dawn chased the night-shadows back to their hiding places, Milly was already up and dressed. Quietly, so not to disturb her parents, she tiptoed to Grampa's room, where she found him at his dresser, brushing his grizzled hair. He saw her in the mirror and turned with a smile, but let it slip when he saw the troubled look on her face. He bowed before her, sweeping low to the ground. "Princess Millicent, ruler of smiles, heir to tomorrow, what troubles thy royal countenance?" he asked.

"Isn't this your home, Grampa?" she asked with a frown, "Or do you live somewhere else and right now you are just visiting us?"

Kneeling, he took her hand and said, "My queen! I abide here to serve thee and thy palace." He gestured to the four walls.

"No, Grampa, stop playing!" demanded his granddaughter, "I heard Mommy and Daddy saying you were 'senile' and that they were going to send you home. Are you going away?"

The old man sobered and stood up. He patted the auburn head and said, "Not if I can help it."

Milly hugged his waist. "I love you, Grampa. Don't
leave me," she pleaded.

"If only I could promise that, little one, but I'm old
and I don't have much say in my future anymore. When I
was a strong young soldier, then I would have—" he
sighed, and Milly released her hold on his waist.

"Tell me about the war," she said quietly.

"All right. World War I. Yes, I certainly was witness
to that one. So were thousands of other men. Not men,
really. Little more than boys, just past their first shave,
cold rifles thrust into their hands, and shovels for digging
trenches." His gaze had wandered around the room and
settled on the tattered uniform that hung solemnly on the
wall. He crossed the floor and fingered it gently, like he
was patting an old friend on the shoulder. "And we dug
those trenches deep. The bombs would come and shatter
the air into a thousand pieces with their screaming. They
would explode, and shatter those boy-men into a thousand
pieces, too. Every time we heard the bombs, we dug a
little deeper. Once, I left my company to deliver a
message for my captain. The planes came with their
bombs, and I couldn't return until the attack was over.
When I did get back, there was no company, no captain, no
trench, even, just a muddy hole."

"That must have been horrible, Grampa. Weren't you
sad and scared all the time?"

A young man's grin flickered on the ancient face.

"No, not at all." He picked up the beer stein. "I filled
and drained this so many times it must be worn to fit my
lip only. I had many good friends, and we laughed at night
at small inns and in warm rooms. We couldn't obliterate
the war or take away the bullets, but we could remove it
for a small while with smiles and beer foam." He returned
to the mirror and studied the old-sidewalk face. "I wish I
was in the war again, when I was young and sure and
proud, not depending on anyone, and . . ." he paused,
"where no one would toss me away like old magazines."

Then, with a shriek and a tickle, he grabbed Milly and
raced her to breakfast. She won, of course.

No more was said about Grampa's leaving until the
day Milly's father brought the clock home. Perhaps, once
long ago, the clock had graced the mantelpiece of a fine country home, striking the hours with dignity. Now, it was covered with pink enamel paint, and Milly's father had gotten it cheap at an auction. He gave the clock to Grampa, saying, "Here, take this. Here is the key. See if you can make this thing respectable again. It'll give you something to do until . . .," he stuttered badly, "un-un-till you get it done." His eyes avoided the questioning eyes of the old man.

Grampa loved the clock. He and Milly spent hours in his room, his desk covered with newspaper, the newspaper covered with a curious assortment of springs and gears. He would place his hands on the painted surface of the timepiece and say, "I can feel Time here. There is joy and sorrow in every tick and tock this clock has ever made. We will allow it to speak again."

He stripped away the ugly pinkness, and replaced it with a fine finish of stain and linseed oil. He touched up the Roman numerals on the clock's face, and accentuated the gold inlays.

One day the clock was finished, its pendulum ready to begin its ponderous swing. The rejuvenated chronometer gleamed like a sweat-flecked thoroughbred in the sun. But Grampa never got to wind the clock.

He morosely surveyed his new room at the Shady Days Care Center, then turned his beagle-soft eyes on his family. It was very clean here, and extremely orderly. The bed proved to be hard, the walls a cold blue that sent shivers up the old man's back.

"Don't make me stay here," he said.

"Dad, it's just for your own good . . .," his daughter began.

"Out!" bellowed the old man, suddenly angry, "Out of my room, except for you, Milly."

Like two whipped dogs, his daughter and son-in-law left. He lifted Milly into his lap as he set his skeleton down in a chair. The chair was hard, too.

"I have a secret to tell you. The clock at home is not really a clock," Grampa said in a low voice.

"It's not?"
"No, not any more. When I rebuilt it, I made it into a Time Machine. I want you to carry out a very special mission for me." He took off the dog-tag chain he always wore around his neck and removed a key. "Here is the key that winds the clock. I want you to take it, wind up the clock, and when it strikes twelve tonight, I want you to turn the hands backwards six times."

"Why, Grampa?"

"To take me away from here. Everytime you spin the hands, it equals ten years' time. By doing it six times backward, you will send me back to the war, when I was a young man."

Disbelief showed on Milly's face. She did not doubt that her grandfather could build a Time Machine from an old clock, but she was shocked that he would leave her.

"Grampa, why do you want to go?"

"Child, do you want me to rot here like garbage, to get so forgetful that I won't recognize even you? Nurses, old people with minds like barren deserts, no privacy, no place to dream or remember, is that what you wish for me? Do as I tell you, and take me away from all this."

"Take me with you, PLEASE!"

"No, little one," he said thoughtfully, "it isn't time for you to ride the Machine. Now, scoot, and remember to do what I told you." He hugged her a final hug, and a tear moistened his cheek.

The rich tones of the clock disturbed the darkness twelve times. Milly awoke and stepped out into the hall. The moon, a great buckle on a belt of stars, left its light in the hall for her, and she could hear her parents snoring fitfully as she made her way past their room to her grandfather's. Opening the clock's face, she said softly, "Good-bye, Grampa, have a good trip." The clock hands moved backwards, past eleven, ten, nine..."
"Of course, but it wasn’t in there. He must have had it concealed on himself. Oh, I feel so terrible!"

"Calm down, let’s go into the office and have some coffee," said the policeman gently.

They had found him that morning in bed, wearing the old uniform, a bayonet, World War I issue, imbedded in his chest, and a smile that creased all other creases on his face. On the next day, after the mortician had pried at the rigored joints to remove the uniform and replace it with a suit, they held the funeral. The cadaverous face smiled up at them all, and Milly smiled back.

After the twenty-one gun salute, after the crowd left, Milly’s mother turned a tear-stained face to the cheerful face of her daughter. "You vicious child, don’t you feel any sorrow for your grandfather’s death?"

"But Mom," Milly protested, "Grampa’s not dead. The clock took Grampa back to the war. It’s really a Time Machine," she said proudly, "he made it that way."

Milly’s mother began to cry again. When they got home, she sent Milly to her room without supper. Milly did not go to her room, but went instead to her grandfather’s, and placing her ear against the clock, she heard the mesh of gears that sounded like an old man’s heart.