

Grandpa

My grandpa was an ornery cuss. He seemed to have been carved whole from a dark oak tree - tall, hard and indestructible. He never used two words when one would do, and he never used one word when a stare or a grunt served just as well. I think deep down he believed that every man had a finite number of words available in his lifetime and he darn sure wasn't gonna waste a one of 'em on a scrawny 15-year-old brat like me.

My parents had driven their yellow Ford the 200 miles to my Grandpa's' farm, where I was – to my horror – to be left for the summer. Pa had to take Ma to some fancy sanatorium down south for her consumption. She clung to me fiercely when they left, and I was ignorant enough to be embarrassed at what I assumed my hard-as-nails Grandpa would think of this unmanly exhibition. In my mulish way, I considered it completely unfair that I should be abandoned on a farm with this man who terrified me. I didn't know I would never see Ma again.

My family lived in a mid-size town with a real library and all. My Pa was an accountant and the absolute opposite of his father. Pa was helplessly accident-prone and completely ham-fisted around tools of any kind. He compensated for this by chattering away non-stop. My mother's constant refrain was "Henry! Please let me have some peace." and that became a family joke. I had inherited my parent's love of books and I was hardly an outdoors child. So, to be left here at this farm where everything was just so dirty and teeming with life-forms that scared the bejesus out of me – cows, horses, goats, chickens - filled me with dread. My previous visits had only been for an hour or so as family courtesy demanded we drop in on the way to my cousins further north once every couple of years. But I had seen enough to know this life was not for me.

Looking back now, I can see what a dumb kid I was. Because I lived in a town, I automatically knew I was better than those stupid rural hicks. I went to school and had good grades, so I must know more than them, right? In reality, I was merely a lump of clay on the potter's wheel, unformed and not yet fired in the heat of the real world.

Grandpa lived alone. I never knew my Grandma as she died of pneumonia 10 years before. He worked dawn 'til dusk, six days a week, with the assistance of a local Indian boy, Hogan. They actually got on well as the Indian was stoically taciturn, so Grandpa was quite content with the level of conversation. They were in fact peas from the same pod, dark brown in complexion, Hogan from nature and Grandpa from working outdoors all day. They both seemed tapped into a bottomless well of knowledge. There was nothing they couldn't turn their hand to. If such did occur, they would purse their lips for a few seconds, wipe a sweaty hand across a brow then one would mutter "We could try...". The other would grunt in agreement and the matter was resolved.

I, by comparison, knew nothing. I messed up everything I tried from feeding the chickens to fixing a broken fence wire. Hogan kept me under his grudging wing as I was harnessed like an extra donkey into the daily grind of endless chores. Grandpa never shouted at me or lost his temper with my clumsy efforts. He would occasionally sigh, which was as bitter a recrimination as if he had whipped me, then just indicate with a flick of his hand that I should try again.

I hated it. But as the summer grew so, inevitably, did I. I grew a couple of inches and started to fill out. I did learn to milk cows, brand calves, check the horses' hooves for stones, plant vegetables and chop wood. But I never ever gained the easy grace and economy of action that Hogan and Grandpa had. They seemed to live in thinner air than I did; everything just seemed to come so effortlessly.

On Sundays, we drove into town for the church service in Grandpa's pick-up. This was ancient but purred like a kitten, as did all the machinery on the farm. Grandpa would nod and raise his hat to some of the folk who purchased his crops and meat, but rarely spoke to them. Sometimes I was able to explore the town after the service before the spine-thumping drive back to the ranch along the dry, ridged track. The town was a caricature of a so-called urban sophisticate's prejudice – small, dusty, with a bank, general supply store, gun shop, barber shop and saloon. But, even my carefully manicured condescension had to admit it was fine – folksy, decent and with an almost forgotten sense of a community.

Before service we'd all been up since five, of course, feeding and mucking out and watering. But, after Sunday lunch (always turkey) I could have some time to myself, testing my lariat skills or refining my newly discovered appetite for whittling. Grandpa would sit on the porch and read. There were only two books in the house – a bible and the latest Sears catalogue. The Bible I could understand. He identified, I was sure, with the unforgiving patriarchs of the Old Testament. But the catalogue puzzled me. Until one afternoon, as he perused it carefully, I heard him whisper to himself "You'd like that, Flora." Then I realized that his wife had been the shopper and dreamer, that the alternative magic universes revealed by all the items on the hundreds of colour pages had been her fascination. Reading it now kept him close to her.

I knew from my Dad that Grandpa had been in the war and seen terrible things. Dad had warned me never to bring up the subject and I never did. It was many years later before it occurred to me that Grandpa had probably also been forced to do terrible things and that the "quiet" life he professed to enjoy now was as much a reaction to those events as to Flora's death. By exhausting himself all day, every day, he could find undisturbed sleep at night.

In August, it was my 16th birthday. I had a letter from mother and father wishing me well. Ma had written an extra note at the bottom sending special love. Grandpa staggered me by handing me a long wooden box with a handle on the top. My excitement was unbridled as I recognised the shape of the box. It was a brand-new Marlin underlever .22 rifle, what nowadays many folks would call a "John Wayne" rifle. Urban sophisticate I may well have considered myself, but which boy doesn't want his own rifle? What baffled me is how did he buy it? You could see the mailman coming from two miles away and we worked on the farm together every second. Then I noticed Hogan twitching his lip and I realized he had purchased it from town for Grandpa.

I couldn't wait to try it, but Grandpa made me go agonisingly slowly. Firstly, I had to learn how to strip it down and clean it. Then, how to aim at near and far objects. Only then was I allowed to shoot it and, yes, it was literally against the barn door. But it was only when I could group shots into the size of a quarter at 25 yards, that he took my out hunting for wild turkey. The stern rules were only shoot for meat that you need and only when you can make a clean kill.

This led to the one occasion when I knew he was disappointed in me. We were out in the woods above the creek, when I glimpsed a deer feeding ahead. My heart swelled as I thought how proud I could make Grandpa if I could bring down an actual deer. As I tentatively raised the barrel his forearm smashed into mine like an iron bar. I could tell from the force of the blow that he was mad. "Firstly," he said, "we don't need the meat. Secondly, you'll never make a clean kill on an animal that size with a puny .22. We all live in a cruel world but there is never, never a need to add to it. And thirdly, and most importantly..." he tailed off and continued to hold down my arm as two fawns came out of the bushes and approached their mother. That was one of the longest speeches he ever made to me and it was forced out of him by my immature and ill-considered thinking. I was mortified and I learned yet another life lesson.

Inevitably, the day came when I was to be picked up by my folks and taken home to start the new school year. By this time, though, I didn't regard myself as a helpless child being rescued from a sentence of hard labour. I was going to miss all this.

From the porch of the house I could see the dust from the familiar Ford as it approached across the dry landscape. The long straight road ran in from the east, so I had to shade my eyes with my hand. But even with the sun in my eyes, I could soon make out that there was only one person in the car. At that moment, I knew. My heart closed up like a fist and the lump in my throat pulled at my face. Ma had found her peace at last.

I looked at Grandpa in helpless appeal. He could fix anything - couldn't he fix this? He just looked back at me with an expression that was half grim and half proud. As always, there were no spoken words, but I could hear them anyway – "You can handle this, son." Then it hit me like a punch to the stomach, that the whole summer had been preparation for this moment. Grandpa had set out to turn this skinny, clueless kid into a man, because now that's what I would likely have to be – the man of the family.

I walked across the porch and hugged him. He didn't move or say anything, and, of course, I never expected anything else. But I don't think I've ever felt so close to someone as at that moment.

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