

Down By The Berry Patch

"Grandpa Wilcox"

Rita Luks

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"My Grandpa's gonna die today. That's why we can't go in the house."

"My friend and I were out in the playhouse. It used to be a chicken coop when Daddy raised chickens but it got all scrubbed out and now it was our playhouse. It had a rounded roof that was perfect for playing Annie, Annie Over because it wasn't too high to get the ball over but it was plenty high enough that you could stand up really good on the inside. When you peeked out the front windows, you could see right where Grandpa's bedroom was.

"We were in the playhouse for a long time and then Daddy came out and said it was time for Loretta to go home and us kids needed to go in Aunt Mary and Uncle John's house. Grandpa was dead. He said the hearse was coming from the funeral home to pick up his body and it would be too upsetting for us to be home when it came so we needed to go next door and stay in the house.

"Uncle John built their house next door to ours right after he got out of the service. He used some wood salvaged from the old movie theater downtown that had burned down years ago. Aunt Mary said she spent most of her time in the kitchen so she wanted it to have lots of windows and be in the front of the house. That way she wouldn't miss anything that was going on. I parked myself right in front of those windows so I could see everything that was going on.

"The hearse backed up the sidewalk to the front steps and, in a few minutes, they wheeled Grandpa's covered body out on the porch. Then they carried it down the steps and put it in the back of the hearse. After that, Daddy said to come back home. I guess there wasn't anything else we weren't supposed to see.

A lot of grown up people had gotten to stay in the house. Before I went outside, I heard some of them talking about taking a turn going in Grandpa's room to tell him good-bye. I really didn't understand about that because nobody was going anywhere. I also heard them say Dr. Pelzer was coming to the house and that Grandpa was going to die today.

Later that night, I heard them saying that Asa was such a great man that even Doctor Pelzer cried when he died. Daddy said the doctor cried because he liked my Grandpa so much it made him sad when he couldn't do anything to help him live longer. He said sometimes people die even when they have a good



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Photo Caption: Asa and Oma Wilcox, 21 September 1945

doctor. They never saw a doctor cry before. Mother cried because now she didn't have a mother or a father.

Grandpa had been living at our house for a year since Grandma had a stroke and died when she went out to California to be with Aunt Naynie and the new baby. Aunt Naynie was really Aunt Naoma. One of Grandpa's favorite stories was about how she got her name. Grandpa used to say when Naynie was born he wanted to name her Oma, after Grandma. He said, "Shall we call her Oma?" Grandma replied, "Nay-Oma." So that's what they called her!

Right after Grandma died, Grandpa had a bad stroke so he couldn't talk like he used to and he didn't remember a lot of things anymore. When he came to live with us he couldn't even tell stories any more.

I loved it when he played cribbage. When it was time to count the score they'd tell him, "Say 15-2, 15-4, Asa."

He'd tell them, "I can't."

When people kept after him and tried to get him to say it, he'd get really angry and shout, "I can't say 15-2, 15-4!"

He got really angry with me one time when he demanded "Pants In the Soup!" I knew he wanted something but didn't really believe he wanted what he was asking for. I knew he was frustrated, but not any more than me. So I just went back to cranking my phonograph and playing records. I needed to listen to something funny just to make me feel good because I felt bad when I couldn't figure out what Grandpa wanted. I thought about playing "Animal Fair" but decided on "Who Threw the Overhauls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder." Grandpa was so happy. He kept repeating, "Pants in the soup. Pants in the Soup." I was playing exactly what he had requested!

Grandpa didn't just shout after he had his stroke. I remember that it was never good thing to cry around him. When he heard me cry he'd holler, "Beller! Beller! Beller!" and it would make me stop crying because he was making so much noise it made me laugh.

Lowell Thomas always began with Grandpa's, "Shhh!" His "Shh!" could be deafening and the slightest peep out of any of us brought it on. He thought people should appreciate the news and he couldn't understand why we wouldn't want to be informed.

One time Grandpa and I were the only informed people in our house. He woke me up to listen to the radio broadcast of Princess Elizabeth and Phillip's wedding with him while everyone else slept. There were no "Shh's" that time. The house was dark and quiet. There were only three sounds. The steam radiator hissed as it spewed out that special going down the steps on Christmas morning smell. The wind rattled the windows in the front bedroom. The broadcast from England crackled because it had to come so far to get to the little radio on the dresser. Grandpa couldn't "Shh!" any of those competing sounds so we just tugged the covers up under our chins and listened harder. She would become the queen someday and only Grandpa and I could say we cared enough to listen to her wedding. It felt good to be informed.

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Grandpa did lots of tricks with cards and coins, but they weren't really tricks like Daddy did. Grandpa called them, "Slight of hand." That's harder to do. I would brag that my grandpa could break a half a dollar in two. When someone insisted he could never do that, he would flash a fifty cent piece. After that he'd carefully place it in his palm, then reach behind their ear and, when he opened his hand again, there was no half-dollar. Just two quarters.

Grandpa was really good at memorizing poetry. Grandma would recite "Little Orphan Annie's come to our house to stay—" but he said that was easy to learn because it was so short. He claimed it only took him 15 minutes to memorize "Casey at the Bat." I believe that he did memorize it because he could recite it by heart. I suspected that he was stretching the truth when he said it only took him 15 minutes to memorize it. It must have taken almost that long just to recite it. I knew he was really smart and it was hard for him when he couldn't make people understand him any more.

He was great at gardens. In Detroit, he had a victory garden in an empty lot next door. He also planted tomatoes in the flower beds along the fence by the alley. He'd come to our house in the Spring and plant a garden there, too.

He always put up stakes around the killdeer's nest so when the ground got worked up the tractor would have to plow around that spot. We'd tease the killdeers by going close to the nest just to hear them call "Killdeer, killdeer!", and pretend they had a broken wing as they tried to lure us away from the eggs or babies in the nest. The birds made a big ruckus but it wasn't half the performance that came from Grandpa if he caught us up to our no good tricks. It was safer to go by the nest when Grandpa went back to Detroit.

When I would go to stay with Grandpa and Grandma in Detroit, before he had the really bad stroke after Grandma died, he had his own bedroom. Grandma had a smaller one of her own. I couldn't understand why he had a big room and a double bed and she had a small room with a single bed and an electric sewing machine. She said since Grandpa had a stroke he didn't sleep very well. He needed to rest and she did, too. Dza Dza and Babusha¹ in Grand Rapids had separate bedrooms but I think that was because they didn't like each other very much. I thought this was sad for Grandpa and Grandma because they did like each other.

Grandpa was diabetic so Grandma made him muffins and jam without any sugar in them. He said it was good to be diabetic because he didn't use up the sugar rationing points. He was really patriotic. They had a beautiful embroidered banner hanging in the living room window with two stars on it, one for Aunt Mary and one for Aunt Naoma. Grandma kept special boxes of stationary and stamps on the buffet and she used to write letters to all my aunts, uncles and cousins in the service. I never saw Grandpa write letters. He had a special cigar box that had silver pennies in it that he claimed Aunt Mary got in her Army Nurse pay envelope. He used to get the box out and let me line the pennies on the living room floor behind the rocking chair while Arthur Godfrey was on the radio. You could talk when Arthur Godfrey was on. Quiet was just for Lowell Thomas.

When he got really sick and was staying at our house he would get up in the middle of the night and put the coffeepot on the stove. Then he'd cut a grapefruit in half and go back to bed. He would forget to turn off the stove and the rubber ring would melt on the Corey coffeepot and fill the kitchen with black

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smoke. Mother couldn't make herself eat fresh grapefruit for a lot of years after Grandpa died. It would upset her when she saw a grapefruit cut in half so we didn't have them in our house any more.

Aunt Mary went back to France after she got out of the army to marry Uncle Jack. Grandpa said she spent all her insurance money from her first husband to get herself another one. He thought she really wasted her money on a pair of sandals she bought to get married in that he was sure didn't have enough leather in them to even see it. She came home for a visit when Grandpa was sick and he really missed her when she went back. He'd crank the phone and tell the operator to call Mary in France so he could tell her to come home.

One time we had lamb chops for supper and he really liked them. There were only enough so each person could have one. Grandpa wanted more. He really fussed about it and when Mother left the table he went to the phone to have the operator call Mary and tell her Rachel wouldn't give him any more lamb chops. The operator would get very upset about Grandpa's calls. Mother and Daddy told her to just tell Grandpa she would keep trying but it was very difficult to get a long distance call through to France and not to worry about the calls he tried to make.

Grandpa would sit in the chair with his swollen feet propped up on the footstool. His feet and legs kept getting bigger and bigger. Mother said it was because his heart wasn't pumping very well. Grandpa would hold Bruce in his lap, and Bruce would hold his Teddy bear in his. There wasn't any way he could get shoes on so mother knitted the same kind of slipper socks for him she used to knit for soldiers in the Veteran's Hospitals. She used different colors of yarn for Grandpas instead of just army khaki. They were knitted rings of assorted bright colors, or else she used variegated yarn. She said he needed something besides "shitty brown". It was shocking to hear her say "shitty." I felt very wicked when I'd say mother's favorite colors were shitty brown and pea green. Grandpa's socks were neither of those colors. I wonder if she really liked those colors or if she just liked to say she did.

Grandpa was buried in Caro because that was where he and Grandma felt home was. They sold their house to Mother and Daddy when they moved to Detroit to take care of the egg business there. Then my parents moved the egg grading part of the business to Unionville and sold the house to Houston's, who made it into a funeral home. People who came to the funeral home to see Grandpa would say, "Asa is really home now. He'd like that."

When I went to the funeral home, Mr. Houston took me into the basement to show me another man's body. He was dressed in a blue uniform and there was a flag in the casket. His name was Orlando LeValley and Mr. Houston said he was famous because he was the last Civil War Veteran living in Michigan. It was strange that he'd say, "The last Civil War Veteran living—." They were going to move his body upstairs after Grandpa was moved to the Methodist Church next door for his funeral but he said there was no hurry. Asa's family could stay in their home as long as they wanted.

It used to be fun to go to the Methodist Church with Grandpa and Grandma. He would give me one penny for each year that I was old to put in collection basket when it got passed around. It must have cost them a lot of money to take us kids to church. Methodists had a special Sunday school for kids. You didn't have to sit in the church the whole time and you got to take home a Sunday school paper. If mother hadn't converted to the Catholic Church when she and Daddy got married, we could have gone there all the time.

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When I looked around in the church on the funeral day, I just kept looking back at the casket with Grandpa in it. I tried to think about the time we went to church with Grandpa and Grandma and the lady sitting right straight in front of my brothers had a long string of dead mink with beaded eyes wrapped around her shoulders.. Andy and Bruce kept reaching out and petting them. I knew they shouldn't be doing it but I wasn't going to tell them to stop, or tattle on them, because it was really funny. Funerals weren't fun or funny. There weren't any pennies for a collection basket and there wasn't going to be a Sunday school paper to take home.

It was hard to sit there and look at Grandpa in his casket. Then it got worse. Two men went over to the casket and closed the top down.

¹Dza Dza and Babusha are Rita's paternal grandparents.

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