

Grandpa's Vessel

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Before he developed Alzheimer's, my grandfather was stern and taciturn, but after the plaque started to build up around his synapses, he turned into a different man, and in many ways a better one. He started to laugh at things, like the way one of our pigs would chew bubble gum, or how the barn kittens played in the hay. Normally these sights would have caused him to grumble or even throw a rock at the animals for not acting the way he felt they should. A few times, when my brothers and I were fooling around and not doing our chores, he'd pitched shards of limestone at us. My grandfather frightened me, and I tried to avoid him, going out of my way to make sure we didn't spend time together. But the disease changed him.

Fred Crandell was my father's father, and he'd spent his life moving from farm to farm, renting the land, living in run-down houses, and keeping less than 30 percent of the profits from the harvest, after the loans were paid back and the landlord had subtracted his share. When he got too old for farm work, he and my grandmother Rose came to live next to us, in a trailer we towed along and set up on whatever land we were farming. The trailer didn't even have a proper skirting, so the tires showed underneath, and sometimes I'd stare into that dark space, where cool loam and writhing earthworms could be found in abundance, and I'd ponder the fact that my grandparents lived in a home that could be pulled behind a truck.

One spring morning, a Saturday, I was walking from the barn to the house when I saw Grandpa strolling about the side yard and smiling widely. This expression seemed so foreign to him that I thought he might have just inherited some money from a long-lost cousin. I stopped and used the hose to spray manure off my boots and wash my hands, the ice-cold water blasting my arms. My mind was occupied with a plan to call a girl from the nearby town of La Fontaine, Indiana, and ask her to a middle-school dance, so I didn't pay much attention to what my grandfather was doing. When I looked up, he had gone. I walked briskly toward the house to call the girl. I was supposed to be helping my father and brothers prepare a field for planting, but I would make it quick.

I was halfway up the steps when I heard giggling. I stopped and listened intently. The air seemed to pulse with the crisp notes of chirping sparrows. Then the giggle came again, as if a child were playing a solitary game. It echoed slightly, like someone laughing into a kettledrum. I walked back down the steps, pausing on each one to listen. Three more times I heard the sound from the direction of my grandparents' trailer. My grandmother was grocery shopping in town with my mother and sisters, and my dad and brothers were expecting me in the field, so I was alone. Dad had lectured us on how we had to make use of the warm weather to get the seed in the ground, but I was curious about this strange laughter, which sounded

fake, as if someone were pretending to be tickled. I imagined it spelled out in a cartoonist's dialogue balloon: "Tee-hee-hee."

As I approached the trailer, I bent down and looked underneath. At first I couldn't make out anything; my eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark. Then I saw Grandpa lying on his side with a coal miner's hat on. He had a bucket of the red paint that we used for the barns, and he was dipping a brush into it and slathering the trailer's tires and rims with the thick russet pigment. He was talking to himself, but not grumbling like before, when he'd complain that something hadn't been fixed right on the farm; he was cheerily commenting on how pretty his work was. Red paint covered the raised veins on his hand.

"Grandpa," I said, "what are you doing?"

He looked up at me, his gray-haired head almost bashing the axle. I wasn't sure what to expect; maybe he'd turn angry or suddenly slip into one of his sullen moods. I certainly didn't expect the reply I got: "I'm giving this chariot the speed it deserves, that's what," he said, and he started to whistle.

I had a feeling something was wrong, so I watched him for a while, listening to the tune he whistled. After a bit I asked him to come out from underneath his house.

"My house?" he said as I helped him crawl to his feet. "This isn't my house. This is a place of worship. A holy temple worthy of a good paint job."

In the past few minutes he'd spoken more words to me at one time than I could ever remember him doing. I was enjoying this new person, even if I didn't understand what had caused the turnabout. His eyes actually twinkled, their dark brown seeming to flicker with silver as he explained that his goal was to get the trailer ready for liftoff into the great unknown. I escorted him inside the trailer and helped him to the couch. He was grateful and chattered on about what a good boy I was. Then he drifted off, and I rushed to the field to tell Dad that his father was painting a spaceship.

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