

Old Man

By Nick Hayden

As Maggie drove to her grandparents' house, she tried to ignore her growing anxiety. She had too seldom visited of late. Her mother had told her that Grandpa's condition was growing worse; her mother did not often speak of his condition, though she thought on it constantly. Maggie knew she did not sleep well.

Her grandparents did not live far from Vienna, perhaps ten or fifteen miles, depending which country road you took. They lived in a small, immaculately clean, white house. Maggie recalled peering into a back room as pristine as a painting and first understanding the religious fear of being unclean.

An old barn had stood beside the house for many years, a rotting, mysterious place where sunlight illuminated great bodies of dust in the air, and narrow, uncertain passages led to chickens, goats, peacocks. Grandpa had recently torn it down, erecting a smaller, red-and-white barn in its place. His workshop inside had not been touched as the rotting wood outside was replaced by metal. A beautiful flower garden twisted around the barn. A bench stood looking into a goldfish pond.

Maggie smiled as she thought of the barn. Grandpa had demolished the first with his own hands and erected the second in the same way. At the time, he had been receiving treatment for prostate cancer — “the worst kind,” the kaleidoscope of doctors called it.

Maggie wondered what Grandpa would have accomplished if he had had a better kind.

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Maggie pulled into the driveway. Things looked much the same as they had her last visit. Along the driveway was a wooden birdhouse shaped like a castle, three stories tall. A Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle — Maggie couldn't remember which one wore orange — scaled the walls, and a half dozen figurines from Burger King Kid's Meals guarded the rampart. Her Grandpa's creation. Maggie never remembered seeing a bird there.

She parked, entered the garage, walked in. Grandpa was in his chair, and the TV was tuned to an 80's action movie. This one had Seagal in it. Grandpa's wrinkled face beamed at her as she entered.

She pressed the toe of one foot against the heel of the other, pulling off her shoes. “Hi, Grandpa, how are you doing?”

Still smiling, he shrugged. He raised a finger, pushed himself out of his chair, and walked to the TV where a large plastic container full of pretzel sticks stood on top. He brought it over, lid off, offering it to Maggie.

She took one. “Thanks. I haven’t eaten yet.”

He extended the container again.

“Well, I can handle a couple.” Maggie took two more. His eyes bright with amusement, Grandpa extended the container a third time.

“Old man! Put those things back. She doesn’t want any more.”

Maggie’s Grandma, a short, squat woman, entered from the kitchen, brushing her hands together. “He can’t eat the things, but he keeps having me buy them. He drives me nuts. He’s worse than Otis.”

Otis was the golden sausage log, once a dog, that scurried at Grandma’s feet, hoping for some food. “If I’d known you were coming, I could have cooked you something. I don’t cook much now, the way Grandpa’s doing. Every time I’m in the kitchen, he comes in and sticks his nose in all the pots. He pesters me all day. I only make a few small things for myself.”

Grandpa motioned for Maggie and began to scrawl on a small pad of paper. It read, “Makes my mouth water.”

This was a joke, and Maggie laughed. She had been watching Grandpa wave a white handkerchief over his mouth since she entered, and now he had one stuffed inside it to absorb the spit he could not swallow.

A few years after he recovered from prostate cancer, his throat ceased to function, and only in the past few months they discovered the cause — he had Lou Gehrig’s disease. The throat muscles had stopped responding. Soon other muscles would cease to function and one day — no doctor knew when exactly — his respiratory muscles would fail. There was no cure.

“He tries to write me in the middle of bingo,” Grandma said dramatically. “It’s aggravating. He’s been put here to aggravate me.”

Grandpa, catching Maggie’s attention, pointed to a sign hanging off one of the shelves above his chair. These held antique model cars, Indian art, carvings, a few marionettes,

and pieces of wrought iron. The sign read: "I didn't retire. I became a full-time pain in the butt."

"He got that at the auction Wednesday. There was a lovely cherry nightstand there. If I hadn't just bought myself a new couch, I would have gotten it. You should come sometime, they have the most wonderful things for sale."

Maggie started to answer, but Grandpa was pointing at the sign again and holding his index finger in the air meaningfully.

"You bought one of them?" Maggie guessed.

Grandpa shook his head, tried again with the same gesture. Grandma said, "He means he bought it for one dollar."

Grandpa nodded vigorously, then stood, motioning for Maggie to follow. She noticed how thin he was. When she was young, his arms had reminded her of Popeye's — bulging, strong. He had been in the Navy and afterward had worked at Slater Steel. When he retired, the company hired two men to replace him. Now, he could eat only liquid meals.

Grandpa led her to the kitchen. A detailed painting of a small, snow-laden town hung on the wall, the windows of the little houses shining. Looking closer, Maggie saw that the windows were optic fibers stuck through the back of the picture. It was a puzzle, glued and framed.

"You made this?"

Grandpa nodded, leading her into the next room. A colorful depiction of Noah's Ark decorated the wall and also a Native American scene shaped like a bison. Both were puzzles. Pieces for another lay on a card table. The frame and one corner were completed. Grandpa held up the box. It showed a dove flying across an American flag. He pointed at the number of pieces.

"Wow! Five thousand pieces. Are most of these that many?"

He shook his head. Through a series of gestures, Maggie understood that two of the puzzles had been 1000 pieces and that the bison-shaped one had been 1500.

"Is he showing you his puzzles?" Grandma asked. "I can't keep up with him. Your aunt brought him over some more yesterday. I'm just about out of wall space."

Grandpa, imitating a laugh by throwing his head back, led Maggie up the stairs. The wall on one side was packed with framed puzzles, the other with pictures of Maggie's

relatives.

She tried to guess what Grandpa was trying to say as he pointed at different pictures, but she did not do a very good job. She remembered that six months ago he could still grunt, groan, and force out the approximation of words. He took the notebook from his pocket, searched for his pencil, and scribbled a few words to aid her. She did not always catch on quickly from the written words, and he would retrieve the notebook again, stuffing his handkerchief in his mouth as he wrote. A faded picture of the sea prompted an excited hop from Grandpa. He wrote quickly.

“You caught a shark?” Maggie asked, surprised, reading it.

He shook his head and waved her words away. He wrote “man on my ship.”

Maggie knew little of his Navy days. She had seen a picture of him in uniform once; the family ran it in the newspaper for his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Scrawling again, Grandpa tilted the notepad toward her — “Ate it with some natives.”

Shocked, Maggie began to realize how little she knew this man. She knew him for his jovial smile. She knew his crafts, the walking sticks and wooden figures he made in his workshop. She had heard stories of his strength, hard work, and perseverance — once, when injured, he had cut a nerve hanging out of the skin with a pair of scissors and returned to work.

Grandpa began to cough, and he held onto the wall as he stepped down the stairs, making for his chair. Unable to breath, he clutched for a tool at the chair’s side. It was the same as a dentist used to suck saliva from a patient’s mouth.

Maggie watched through a window from the kitchen to the living room. Grandpa could breath again. His face was thin and white, his eyes hollow as he sat staring forward.

“He can’t get a good night’s sleep,” Grandma said as she pulled a box of ice cream from the freezer. “Can’t breath on his back.” She shook her head, handing Maggie a bowl. “Don’t you eat anything? You need some meat on your bones. Have some. I can’t eat all this ice cream myself. I don’t know what I was thinking when I bought it.”

Maggie finished the ice cream in the kitchen. No one was allowed to sit in the living room to eat except Grandpa. On Sundays, when Maggie’s family used to come to dinner, Grandpa would eat from a tray as he watched a western. That was before they fed him through the tube in his stomach.

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Maggie's mother scribbled a few words on the prayer request card at church and handed it to an usher.

They attended the Saint Paul's informal service, which had begun about five years before. Some in the congregation declared the addition blasphemous, but it grew year by year, drums and all.

When the pastor prayed before the congregation, Maggie concentrated hard on the mention of Grandpa. Her mother's cheeks were wet when Maggie opened her eyes. Her father's arm was wrapped around her.

They sang again, standing, then sat as the pastor stood before the podium. He opened his Bible, preparing to formally read the sermon's passage. Guitars he did not mind, but he could not abandon entirely the liturgical scheme he had been taught.

"Please stand. The message for today is taken from the book of James, chapter five, starting at the tenth verse. 'Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.' This is the Word of the Lord. You may be seated."

Maggie tried to listen to the sermon, but she did not hear the words except in snippets, and these entered her ears and no further. Her mind was full of new thoughts.

Last night she had searched out pictures of Grandpa from her childhood. He looked remarkably young holding her on his knee, pulling her ears in jest. A strange, hollow sorrow had filled her breast, and sleep had not alleviated it. It was not a heavy emotion; it was a gaping hole that nothing filled, and the deeper she peered into it, the larger it seemed.

She had known death. As a child, her dog had died. Later, a fifth grade classmate was ravaged by leukemia. But, in the joy of youth, she had seen only the dead — she had never before seen the hand that pulled all the earth to the grave. As they drove to church that morning, she laughed bitterly at the sunny morning. Winter was in her heart.

She tried to push the thoughts away, knew she was not thinking clearly, tried to focus on the words in her ears instead. For a moment, she thought the pastor spoke of Grandpa.

“...that he would not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick. It is this same man who did not speak out when he suffered unjustly, who did not complain or rage when he was beat by blows he did not deserve. Rather, in utter meekness, he fulfilled the words of Job, living what Job proclaimed: ‘Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him’ and ‘After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.’”

Maggie’s thoughts were again on her Grandpa. She knew that, before she had been old enough to notice, Grandpa had had kidney stones. And her mother sometimes told how when she herself was a child, Grandpa would work six days a week, leaving before dawn each morning, to support the family. When the bills were paid, if there was money left, each of the four children got a cone of ice cream from town.

Maggie heard nothing more of the sermon, but for one line, near the end. She glanced often at her mother, who was listening intently, her face desperate. “We are, all of us, far weaker than we dare to admit, but he is far stronger than we can hope, and his love is more wonderful and more terrible than his wrath.”

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Maggie accompanied her mother to bingo for the first time on Wednesday. The hall was filled with smoke. Old ladies hovered over sheets of bingo cards, their brightly colored daubers poised ready. Grandma and Grandpa came weekly, though they rarely won, and it was for this reason Maggie had come.

“I don’t know why I come to this stupid place,” Grandma said. “Maybe you’ll have more luck, Maggie.”

As they played, Grandma kept looking over at Maggie’s cards, pointing out spaces she had failed to mark and calculating how many numbers she needed to win. Three times she needed only one, and once, for many balls, she waited in anxious suspense only to hear a raspy “Bingo!” across the hall, followed by a murmur of shuffling paper and grunts of resentment. Maggie did not really want to win. She had seen the many sharp eyes beneath puffed hair that glared at the winners.

Grandpa didn’t write much. He smiled weakly when Maggie looked at him and made some gestures indicating his lack of luck. He bought five tips, tickets with pull-taps to win money, once and handed them to Maggie to open.

But when she caught a glance of him unawares, his cheeks were sunken, his face drawn. He stared at his cards, rarely marking a number. Maggie had seen the same

expression on those recovering from surgical anesthesia.

“Doctor Patel, he’s the most recent one, gave him some new medicine yesterday, for the pain,” Grandma chatted.

Maggie knew that his muscles were slowly freezing up but that he still pushed them, working all day on the lawn or in his workshop when he could, sweating torrents of water and calories he could not consume.

“Do you know how many times they’ve switched the medication on us?” Grandma continued. “It’s a nightmare keeping track of all his pills. Maggie, your corner! Maggie, bingo, quick!”

Maggie raised her hand and announced herself timidly. After checking her card, the attendant counted three twenties into her hand.

“Beginner’s luck, I can’t believe it,” Grandma said, chuckling. “It’s my turn to win. I can’t ever win anymore.”

Grandpa, staring at his card, had not noticed.

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Maggie had reached the age when her mother, at times, did not treat her as a child, but as a fellow woman.

“It’s hard to see him like he is,” she confided to Maggie one day as they washed dishes. The comment had no precursor, but Maggie knew that she spoke of Grandpa. She nodded, unable to say anything. All the words on her lips were trite.

“He taught me, Maggie. He went to the grocery store once to return a nickel a cashier had overpaid him the day before. He used to take off his belt to punish us. I was whipped more than once. He never preached, he only *did*. He must do — he cannot be still. It would be death to him to be a man without action. But that’s what God has given him, a disease to destroy his muscles. I’m thankful it began in his throat. He has a few years, maybe, the doctors say. But I don’t understand God. What has my dad done? He’s worked hard, lived honestly, raised a family. I am who I am because of him, and he....”

Her mother paused, rubbing her eyes. Maggie stared into the sink, watching the water rinse a fork. Her mother spoke again:

“God says there will be no more tears or sorrow or death. He says that, Maggie. I read it. I know he was beat and flailed, but we’re only human, aren’t we? What about his mother, watching him? I’ve prayed for him, we’ve all prayed for him, the entire church.

He switched food yesterday. More calories. He's under 130 pounds now. His stomach's not adjusting well yet."

"I don't know, mom."

Maggie glanced at her mother. She was fighting emotions. In a tired voice she continued.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't burden you with this. No, don't worry about it. I'll be fine." She sniffed. "I know God, Maggie. I know him as much as I am able. It's just ... sometimes it's hard to see him. Let's finish the dishes."

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Maggie visited her grandparents whenever she could, which was not often, for she had begun school and was working part-time.

One day, she heard clattering as she stepped out of the car. Looking around the house, she saw her Grandpa on top of the chicken coop installing a new roof, his bald head gleaming with sweat in the September sun. He mopped his forehead with his white handkerchief and stuffed it in his mouth.

And, to Maggie's astonishment, Grandma was on the roof as well, red-faced and huffing as she tried to make sense of Grandpa's instructions. He kept pulling his notepad from his pocket and scribbling.

After reading one scrawled line, Grandma exclaimed, wide-eyed, "Old man, you'll be the death of me. Working out here, not a cloud in the sky. It's the hottest day of the year, I don't doubt. I need to screw your head on straight." But she clambered down the ladder and heaved a large sheet of corrugated metal over her head to Grandpa.

"Hello!" Maggie said, grinning.

There was some frantic explanation about the chicken coop from Grandma as Grandpa worked with the sheet metal, waving them away.

"It's too hot to talk out here," Grandma said. "It's cool inside. Can't keep it cool enough, I have my fans running all day. You should see my flowers, wilting, every one of them. Not a drop of rain or a cool breeze. I make Grandpa water them but it's a losing battle."

Inside, she handed Maggie a small eight-ounce Coca-cola can from the fridge, but before she could finish explaining her dislike for the regular 12-ounce cans, the phone rang.

“No,” Grandma spoke into the receiver. “No, he doesn’t need it. No, I mean it, he doesn’t. He’s out on the chicken coop roof right now. Fixing the roof. Yes. I got the number. Thank you.” She hung up the phone, sighing and rolling her eyes. She turned to Maggie. “He answers it sometimes, the man, just holds it to his ear and listens. He never answered it when he could talk. How’s school? Your mother says you still want to be a nurse. That’s a good career.”

Maggie said yes, she still wanted to be a nurse, and tried to explain why as Grandma interrupted with stories about a person Maggie knew she was related to, somehow. Seizing a break in the conversation, Maggie asked, “Who was on the phone?”

“Oh, just some people from assisted living. They wanted to know a time they could come over to assist Grandpa. Third call this month. I keep trying to tell them it’s useless. What would they do, enlarge the pond with him? That’s his next plan, you know. They’d just as well come and take care of me. He’ll be the death of me, the rascal, you wait and see.” She looked beyond Maggie and began waving her finger with a stern look.

Maggie turned to find Grandpa panting hard in the kitchen doorway. He looked exhausted, but he grinned at them. He was waving for Grandma to follow.

“No, you don’t! I’m done with it. I’m staying in here where it’s cool. You don’t need to finish that thing now, you’ve been working since you got up. Come and sit down, will you?”

Grandpa, smiling, shrugged and entered the kitchen. He looked as if he might drag Grandma out the door by force. Grandma batted him away and he continued to approach in a humorous pantomime.

Maggie, laughing, said, “I’ll help, Grandpa.”

His grin widened, and he threw back his head in a mock laugh. Motioning her out, he stuffed a new handkerchief in his mouth, making sketches on the notepad that Maggie did not understand, even after they had finished.

THE END