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My Grandfather

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My Grandfather . . .

. . . William Neville

When I was very young, the thing that I looked forward to most was the summer when I would be sent to live with my Grandfather on his farm near Montreal. It was a period of my life that was entirely too brief and never seemed to come often enough. I was there the summer of the year that the great war came to Europe.

My father put me on the train at Boston and explained that my mother would come up at the end of the summer to take me with her to Long Island and that he would not see me until I came to live with him again in October. We said goodbye very formally and then I was on my way to Montreal and my grandfather.

He was at the depot with his hired man, Alex. He helped me off the train and each of us carried one of my bags to the car.

"You are growing very tall, boy. Soon you will stand as high as your father." He smiled and ran his hand through my hair. Alex nodded in agreement. I remember how I felt much older and very happy and I was thinking of what a great summer it was going to be.

All the way to the farm we talked of my parents and how I was doing in school and how it was on the farm after having such a hard winter. He told me about the bear he'd killed during the winter and of the fine new rifle he'd bought. We discussed the fishing and I agreed that we would have to go and find out if it was as good as the previous year.

My Aunt Ethel was in front of the house as we drove up and my Uncle Gerard was just coming out of the barn. Their only daughter, Margaret, was away teaching school in Ottawa. But the boys, Claude, who was to be killed in the Royal Canadian Air Force while over Germany in 1941, and Phillip, who would be reported missing in action after the raid on Dieppe in 1942 and never heard of again, were both living on the farm.

"Welcome, David!" my Aunt Ethel said. She hugged me and led me into the house. There were several dogs barking. My grandfather always had several dogs on the farm; fine, healthy dogs.

My room, as always, was upstairs next to Alex. After my bags were unpacked, everyone went downstairs and we sat around the table and drank coffee and talked about everything in general. The

boys brought out my grandfather's new rifle and showed it to me and Alex pointed to the picture on the wall. It was my grandfather standing beside the largest bear I've ever seen.

It was about three in the afternoon so my aunt sent us outside because she had to begin supper. My grandfather and Alex went to the barn to shoe a horse and my uncle Gerard and the boys went out to work in the fields. I ran to the rock.

The rock was about one hundred and fifty yards from the house, but you couldn't see the house from it. It stood in the center of a grain field and from the top the grain looked beautiful. At the other end of the field were the pine woods and they seemed to be full of wonderful things that I couldn't even begin to imagine. Whenever my grandfather had to work or was busy, I went to the rock and fought Indians or thought about what I would be when I grew up. I remember, I was very happy.

That evening I stayed up late listening to my grandfather tell about himself when he was young and used to sail on the fishing ships from Halifax. My aunt and uncle and the boys went to bed early, only Alex and I listened. He told me about whales and the men on the ships and all about polar bears that lived up in the Arctic Circle. It was after midnight when we went to bed.

During the days after I arrived, we often went fishing together. Sometimes he would bring a small caliber rifle and teach me how to shoot. One afternoon we sat on the rock and he told me what the shores of Africa looked like and how the mountains of China were like toy mountains and I swear I could see them. He tried to tell me about women and explain what honour was, but I was too young to understand his words. He said that he was seventy-six years old and that he wouldn't live much longer. I couldn't picture anything without him.

One night he came back from town with Alex and Alex was helping him because he was drunk. He staggered around the house and swore and said awful things to my aunt and uncle and cursed my grandmother's grave. I could hear him from my bedroom, but I didn't get up and after that night I didn't think about it any more. I remember that my aunt cried for a long time after he was asleep. From the edge of my bed, I could see him laying on the couch, through the air vent on the floor of my bedroom.

A man came to the house one day and told my grandfather that he would have to come to court because the neighboring farmers had complained that my grandfather had been cutting lumber on their

land. They argued, but the man said he had no control over it. My grandfather told the man to get off his property. When I asked him what was wrong, he said, "Lies, boy. We have very bad neighbors." That was all that was said about that.

The day that it came was hot. There were no clouds in the sky and the sun was like a breath of flame right over your head. He walked into the house and stood by the door trying to fill his lungs with air. His eyes weren't as blue as they usually were and he had an awful look on his face. His hands were holding his chest as if he was trying to stop something from happening. He went to his bed and I ran to get Alex and my aunt. When they came in, he was hardly breathing and his eyes were very wide. Alex said something to him, but he didn't even notice. On the second of July, 1939, my grandfather died.

I cried.

My aunt and uncle and Alex talked about preparations for the funeral.

The priest came and gave him the last sacraments of the church.

The next few days were quiet. Not very many people came to the wake or the funeral. My father couldn't come and my mother wasn't at home in time to hear about it. Margaret came from Ottawa and my uncle Anthony came from Three Rivers, Quebec. But there was a very small crowd at the funeral itself.

After it was all over, we came home. Everyone went into the house and my aunt Ethel made a pot of coffee. I went upstairs and laid on my bed. They were talking loud, but I didn't pay any attention until my uncle Anthony said something about my grandfather and called him a son of a bitch.

"Don't talk that way, Tony." My aunt Ethel said. "He's dead now."

"It's true, isn't it?" Margaret said. "He put your mother in her grave ten years too soon, the way he treated her. And you! You stay here and work the farm and take care of everything and what does he leave you? A mortgage to pay off, bills for almost everything he ever bought and now this law suit because he stole lumber from those people. He was no good."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I got up and went downstairs. No one noticed me because they were talking too loud. My uncle Gerard was saying something else bad about him. I was starting to cry and I swore at them. Everyone stopped talking and looked at me.

"You're lying . . . you're lying." I screamed at them. "You're all liars. I hate you."

I turned and ran out the door and kept on running til I got to the rock. Tears burned at my eyes and I couldn't keep them back, no matter how hard I tried. 'How could they say those things about him?' I wanted to break something or hit someone.

I stayed there til it was almost dark, but the fields weren't beautiful anymore and the woods didn't seem to be full of anything wonderful. It was all dead and strange to me.

The sun was out of the sky when Alex came to bring me back.

"You better come to the house, boy. It's damp. You catch cold."

"Is it true what they said about him, Alex? He wasn't the way they said it about him, was he?" I begged for the right answer.

"Your grandfather was a fine man," he said quietly.

We started walking back to the house very slow.

"I want to go home."

He understood. "I'll call your parents in the morning."

My chest hurt and everything felt broken inside of me and I wished I'd never had a grandfather.

The Weaver . . .

Swing out from my blade of grass,
Oh spider of my soul,
And cast your gossamer strands
Upon some comet of imagination.

Drift beyond the parapets of convention,
And let dreams desire cross,
Upon the maze of silver bands,
The restraints of social consciousness.

Weave a web of fantasy
To catch the heart of romance,
And to bring the wonders of a lovers lands
To the threshold of my perception.

. . . Dave Marks