

Grandpa's Cabin

Our ten-year old Chevy Malibu eased up to the four-way stop and came to a complete halt. So irritating. "Dad, why don't you just roll through it like everybody else in the civilized world?"

"Because" Charles, "the sign stays *stop*. If I come across a sign that says *roll*, that's what I'll do."

Charles, always Charles, never Charlie like all my friends call me. I turned my head away and rolled my eyes. There was no point in arguing with my father. You would think that a 17-year-old would know that by now and yet I keep doing it. It won't be long until I have my own car. I worked all summer at a lawn care company and saved my money. I'm looking for a sharp, used Camaro or a Dodge Challenger, but I'm not there yet. So here I sit like a toddler in a car seat being driven around by my father. How humiliating.

"Why do I have to go to Grandpa's house? It's a Saturday. No school. Jana and I were gonna get together at her house and play video games. Why today?"

Dad didn't answer, his eyes steady on the road. I didn't think he heard me, until; "It was his wish and you should honor it. Your Grandpa is getting along in years. He has some health problems, you know. He told me he's been wanting to spend some time with you, just you and him, like you used to do. Maybe reminisce a little, share some of the memories like when you went fishing together, some of the places you've been, that sort of thing. I think he's afraid you'll graduate, move away, and he'll never see you again."

It was true that Grandpa and I hadn't seen much of each other lately, in fact, hardly at all. After my grandma passed, he sold the house in Tulsa and found a cabin in the

woods. It was remote, not on the way to anything. No more dropping by for a quick chat or to share a pizza. Thoughts of the old days and the fun we had together made me smile. It might be a good day after all.

The turnoff was easy to miss, just two red reflectors on tall aluminum rods. From there, it was a hundred yards of rutted gravel to the cabin. Grandpa sat out front in an Adirondack style wooden chair, book in hand, waiting for us. He stood and waved.

Dad waved back. "Go on, Charles. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Charlie, my boy, come give your old grandpa a hug."

We exchanged handshakes and hugs and a few obligatory greetings that felt slightly awkward. How are you? What have you been doing? That kind of talk.

Grandpa's cabin was small but efficient with a compact kitchen, a living room with a wall tv, a well-worn easy chair, and a sofa. One bedroom. The whole place was spotlessly clean with a faint odor of pine. Grandpa didn't get many visitors. I don't think he wanted many.

"Let's go sit on the back porch and visit, Charlie. You want anything to drink? I got water, beer, and whisky." Before I could respond, "Water, huh? Good choice. I'll have water too, but I'm going to put a little whisky in mine."

I had to laugh. Same old Grandpa. He did love his adult beverages.

"Thanks for coming out, Charlie. I've missed you. You know, I hate to admit it, but I'm in the autumn of my years, probably the *winter* of my years. I've got a lot of miles on me and my *check engine* light is on. No matter what we do, that clock keeps on ticking, and

as your grandfather, I feel an obligation to pass on a few words of wisdom, things I've learned over my lifetime, most of them the hard way. Like it or not you're gonna have to listen to a few of them while I'm still around. That okay with you?"

I nodded of course. "Sure, go ahead, Grandpa. I'm all ears."

He grinned. "Okay, here it is. A: Don't do crazy stuff. B: Watch out for other people doing crazy stuff. That's it!"

"Wait, what? That's it? Uh, what do you mean...crazy stuff?"

"You were lucky to be born with good parents, Charlie. They've already taught you about *some* crazy stuff. Don't drive crazy. Don't take crazy chances. Don't break the law. Don't do drugs. Avoid people that do crazy stuff. You know what crazy is. If you start to do something and this little voice in your head says, 'That's crazy,' listen to that voice."

I was still thinking about that when Grandpa said, "Charlie, would you fill my bird feeders for me? I'm a little unsteady on my feet these days. The seeds are over there."

I followed his finger to an aluminum trash can with a chain and snap hook spanning the lid. Inside was a sack with forty pounds of black oil sunflower seed.

I laughed. "A chain? What's with all the security here, Grandpa?"

He shook his head. "Raccoons, the little bandits rob me blind if don't safeguard my seeds."

"You see a lot of animals out here?"

"Oh yeah, that pond out there attracts all kinds of wildlife, mostly raccoon, deer, and opossum. Coyote and skunk every now and then. Had a bobcat once." He paused and said, "I just had an idea. Let's try something, Charlie. Grab a handful of those seeds. Now, lay your arm flat out on this table and hold the seeds palm up, in plain sight. Don't talk and be very, very still."

I saw his plan and shook my head. "No way, Grandpa."

"Sssh"

I swear, it wasn't two minutes until a small black and white bird landed on my outstretched thumb. In the blink of an eye, it had grabbed a seed and was gone."

"Way," said my grandpa, grinning.

"I don't believe what just happened."

My grandpa leaned back and closed his eyes. I wondered if he might be going to sleep, but then, "Charlie, have you ever heard anything about animal spirits?"

I shook my head. "What's that? A video game?"

Grandpa looked at the sky. "Lord, have mercy on this ignorant boy. No, Charlie. You can believe in animal spirits or not, your choice, but I like to think on it from time to time. It works like this: somewhere out there there's an animal that you can identify with. It could be any animal; a horse, a shark, a bat, a sloth, a butterfly. Doesn't matter which one. But you and that animal will have some things in common, characteristics that are similar...or not. It could simply be an animal you envy and aspire to be like. But here's

the thing, Charlie, sometimes you don't pick the animal. Sometimes the animal picks you. Like that Black-capped Chickadee, just now"

"What was it, a Chickadee? That little thing? That's my spirit animal?"

"Absolutely. You've been chosen. Couldn't be clearer."

"If you say so, but how about you, Grandpa. You got a spirit animal?"

"I do, the hawk, the Cooper's hawk to be specific."

I shrugged. "Why?"

"He comes in from time to time. We acknowledge each other. He watches the birds. I watch him. He's a patient bird and waits for just the right time to make his move. If the odds are in his favor, he'll swoop in and snatch a little bird right off that feeder, kill it, and eat it right in front of me."

"That's awful! I would hate that bird."

"The hawk must eat too, Charlie. To quote a wise man by the name of Aldo Leopold, 'You cannot love game and hate predators. The land is one organism.' It's all a part of nature, Charlie. That's why I live where I do."

"Nature's interesting and all that, but don't you get lonesome out here in the woods, all alone?"

Grandpa looked at the floor for a while, then raised his head. "Sometimes, but I have the TV and Netflix. I have the Internet. I have my books and that shed out back where I

can do a little woodworking if it suits me.” He pointed at the feeder. I recognized a Cardinal. “And there’s always the birds. I’m okay, Charlie.”

We sat in silence for several minutes, watching more birds come and go. It was late October. The leaves were in their prime with orange and yellow everywhere you looked. Sumac bushes with their shiny red leaves were like cherries on dessert. I was beginning to see why my grandpa loved it out here. Too soon, I heard the familiar honk of the Malibu.

A week had passed since my visit to Grandpa’s cabin. It was a Friday night. We had a football game with East Central. I went but wished I hadn’t. Shortly after kickoff, an unexpected cold front moved in with intermittent freezing rain. Fearing the roads almost as much as the wrath of my father if I dented the Malibu, I left early. No biggie. We were getting our butts kicked anyway.

As was my custom, I slept in on that Saturday morning. It must have been around eleven when I heard a knock on my door. It was my mom. She wasn’t smiling. Unusual. But it was the tone of her voice that made me suspicious that something wasn’t right. Something had happened.

“Charlie, get dressed and come down to the kitchen.”

Mom and Dad were at the table, sipping coffee. One look at my Dad’s red-rimmed eyes told the story.

I gulped, “Is it Grandpa?”

"Sit down, Charles. As you know, I call your grandpa every day, usually in the evening. Yesterday, he didn't answer. I kept calling. Straight to voice mail, every time. I left messages. Nothing. Normally, I wouldn't have worried all that much. He's always forgetting to plug his phone in and probably had a dead battery. I thought about going out there last night to check on him, but you had the car and with the ice...well."

Dad tried for another drink of coffee, but the cup didn't make it. He returned it to the table with a faint clatter. Mom put her hand over his.

"I found him early this morning, out back, under the bird feeders. Looked like he'd slipped on the ice and hit his head on a rock. If the blow to the head didn't kill him, the weather did."

Dad tried to hold back the sob but couldn't. It was the first time I'd ever heard my father make that sound.

I felt my breath leave me, like someone was sitting on my chest. I needed air. I was halfway to the door when mom called out, "Charles. Stop. He left something for you, a package and an envelope, with your name on it. It was on his kitchen table."

I hefted the box with the familiar Amazon logo. It had some weight to it.

"He must have ordered it the day you two had your chat," she said.

My hands were trembling. "Dad, you got that little knife on your key chain. Will you open it for me?"

I unfolded the flaps and held my gift. It was a figurine, about 5 inches high. *Hand painted* the label said. The Chickadee was beautiful, maybe the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Inside the envelope was a note, handwritten on lined paper.

Charlie, the Chickadee is known as the indicator bird. With its sharp eyes and awareness, it's usually the first bird to find the food. The Chickadee is a leader and, as you observed, quite brave. When the Chickadee goes in, the other birds follow. That's how you will be, Charlie, a leader, brave, going in where others fear to tread. When that bird chose you as his spirit partner, Charlie, it made a wise decision. I love you, grandson.

It was hours before I could get my emotions under control. When the tears finally stopped, I took a deep breath and whispered, "I love you too, Grandpa."

I wish I had said it more often, when he was here, when it would have meant something.