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G. Hoffman

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The Generation Gap

by G. Hoffman

Granddad Lewis Grimes was a crochety old Oklahoma pioneer who, in his seventy-ninth year, tolerated his grandchildren as the inevitable results of nature and not as objects to be doted on and cherished. He valued them according to their usefulness, and affection had no part in the relationship. It was not an unusual attitude for his kind and his time.

But Anna, my grandmother, was different. She cherished her many grandchildren.

Her life was hard, for the times were hard, and they were made harder by a husband who was often selfish and inconsiderate. In their later years, Anna was forced to do the chores formerly done by her growing children. The cow had to be milked, the chickens tended, the garden hoed. In her seventies and suffering from hernias and arthritis, Anna was the one who had to drive in the cow for milking each morning and evening while Lewis spent much of his time lying on the old-fashioned couch smoking his pipe. Though creaky with age, he seemed to be reasonably spry and capable of doing those things he liked to do. He could fetch in the buggy mare, harness her, and hitch her to the buggy. He could drive her the five or six miles to the home of my parents, which he did on numerous occasions.

One of those occasions was in 1930 when I was 13. The wheat harvest was in full swing, and my family was busy. Grandmother Anna was ailing, and Lewis wanted help. He had come for a sturdy Hoffman son. But the two older boys were working in the harvest, and the two youngest were too small to be useful. I, the middle son, was picked to go.

I remember the ride in the buggy, with its top raised against the June sun, and the rattle and grind of the wheels in the dry sandy ruts. And I remember the steady clip-clop of Old Gail's hooves as she stolidly maintained her measured pace under the threat of the buggy whip held aloft by the whiskered old gentleman at my side.

He spoke little. I never knew if he considered me incapable of intelligent conversation or if he had long before lost the art of talking to the very young. But the ride was pleasant enough, and Old Gail's steady trot soon had us at the Grimes' homestead. My three-week stay at my grandparents' house was about to begin.

I was eager to be of help. I felt needed. And, too, the amount of work required of me promised to be somewhat less than what I would have had to do at home. I looked forward to some work, some leisure, and my grandmother's cooking.

That evening, when I went down the pasture lane and crossed the creek to bring in the cow, I anticipated no trouble. What could be more problem-free than driving in a docile old cow? But the cow was neither old nor docile. She was, in fact, so young as never to have known a caretaker other than my grandmother. I was an energetic alien creature and, to the young cow, capable of much mischief.

The moment she spied me, she broke and ran. She paused briefly to take a second look, and then lifted her tail and stampeded to the far corner of the pasture. She seemed as bent on escaping my presence as the fabled cow which had jumped over the moon, and I saw quickly that a direct approach was impossible. I circled far to the north and came up along the west fence of the pasture. With nothing between her and the safety of her home corral, she raised her tail and fled in a panic to disappear into the crossing of the creek channel. In minutes, I saw her racing up the hill, her udder swinging wildly, as she sought the safety of the fenced enclosure where she customarily received her ration of grain before being milked by an old woman in woman's clothing.

When I went to the house later for the milk pail, I expressed my befuddlement. I described the cow's behavior. Grandmother could not explain it



either. She went with me to the corral, and we approached the frightened animal. The lure of grain in the old bucket carried by Grannie was not enough to ease the cow's fears. Her entire attention continued to be on the strange alien which had so threatened her in the far pasture. Needless to say, Grandma milked the cow again that evening.

Later at our supper when we discussed the problem of the cow, we concluded that her fear was not directed at me personally but at the strange creature she perceived me to be. It became apparent that I must change my image, and for the next three weeks I never went to fetch her in for milking unless I was dressed in one of Grannie's old cloaks or dresses. Strangely enough, she seemed to develop a genuine affection for that other old woman who twice daily brought her the ration of grain and relieved her swollen udder of its milk.

Other problems also developed that were both hilarious and a bit sad. It was a daily challenge for the three of us to adapt my thirteen-year-old's world to that of two people in their dotage. But I cheerfully did the chores assigned to me and when done, I was permitted to be a boy again. My ramblings along the creek sparked Granddad's interest. He wanted to go fishing.

But it was midsummer, and the earthworms had long since retreated deep underground. The fishing venture did not look promising.

"If you can find worms, well go," the old man said lazily as he lay on the couch smoking his pipe. From the tone of his voice I could tell that he was already losing interest. It was midday and warm. The windows and doors were all opened to catch the breeze, and the house was cool. The creek was a quarter mile away, and the long walk under the hot sun for catfish sulking in the muddy waters was not too inviting. I understood the old man's problem. I was determined to find worms.

I dug in the rotted straw next to the old barn. I spaded a portion of the drought-stricken garden. I tested moist areas near the well and horse tank. The earthworms had deserted their usual haunts to escape the heat.

But one place I had neglected to try. An early

vintage automobile lay wheelless in a corner of the horse corral. Its rusty hulk, held off the ground by ancient axles, had kept shaded an area which appeared favorable. There it was cool and damp. I worked with a broken shovel beneath the old running boards and in the deep recesses under the old chassis. The worms came out big, fat, and lively.

I took the can of worms into Granddad. He was surprised. He studied them carefully and grunted. Without a word he swung his creaky legs off the old couch, and we went fishing.

Besides the two primitive poles and the can of worms, I carried my ever-present slingshot and a pocket-full of small round pebbles. Granddad watched me plinking at fenceposts and an occasional bird. He sniffed and smirked. It was old age regarding sourly the foolishness of youth. I said nothing, for I had learned long ago to respect my elders.

I do not recall the extent of our success at the fishing hole. I just remember the dark still water under the huge elm tree in the bend of the creek and the small green frog that emerged on the opposite side. After a short appraisal of the strange silent forms across its home waters, it hopped a short ways up the mud-bank and sat resting. Granddad grinned and made a snide remark about foolish boys who carry slingshots. It was plain that he did not believe that a thirteen-year-old boy could send a small pebble across twenty feet of water to demolish a green frog the size of a fifty-cent piece.

I selected a smooth round pebble and loaded it into the leather pouch. With great care I aimed and let fly. The frog exploded under the impact. I shall never forget that moment. Nor can I ever forget the loud whoop from my grandfather. He shouted and rocked with his laughter. I had never seen him so animated and so lively. Nor did I ever again!

From that day on he seemed a little warmer and friendlier to me. But I doubt that I was ever an object of affection in his eyes. And yet, I cherish his memory and the memory of my grandmother that long ago summer when I was thirteen.

