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Gramps

by Greg Garrett

I guess I finally realized how serious it was when I walked through those automatic doors—as slow as the ones we had in the grocery store—and saw a nurse pushing him down the hall in one of those shiny metal hospital wheelchairs. Gramps seemed embarrassed that I had caught him sitting down. When he first saw me coming his way, he looked like he wanted a hat to hide under, like he didn't want me to see him like this; it was all a mistake.

Or at least, that's what it seemed like to me. I grew up thinking that John Stringer was larger-than-life, a combination of Gary Cooper, John Wayne, maybe Sam Shepard in *The River*, strong and silent and capable of making crops grow in a desert or defending the honor of his family against a band of outlaws. He rode without a wasted motion, drove his pick-up truck like it was an extension of his body, and he was one of those people who somehow don't look complete without a greasy Co-op cap or a cowboy hat perched atop their heads.

I called him "Gramps," and he called me "Scout," after a character in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, although he must have gotten that from the movie, since I don't remember Gramps ever cracking the cover on anything besides Louis L'Amour westerns. When I was a kid, I guess I was that kind of tomboy, but "Scout" didn't really fit me anymore: on that day in the hospital in Oklahoma City, I was sixteen, going steady with a senior on the wrestling team, and I hadn't climbed a tree in years.

When images of Gramps

came into my head, I saw him tossing hay bales into the back of the pick-up while Granma drove, or doctoring a sick calf while he held it still with his mixture of strength and gentleness, and although the idea had never entered my mind, I guess I figured that if he ever had to die, that he would die in the saddle, if not in a gunfight at the OK Corral.

I never thought I'd see a nurse pushing him down a hospital corridor like a weak old man.

"It's just for a few days," my grandmother had said the first time he went to the hospital, with a stern edge to her voice that dared anyone to contradict her. She looked at us around the cafeteria table. "They want to run some tests. There's some things they're not clear on. Then we can take him right back home."

My mother sat next to her, quiet for maybe the first time in her life as she stared into her coffee, and my father too looked very small and very tired.

"Gram," I said, "can I go in and see him?"

She shook her head. "It'll be a while, honey," she said. "They said it would take all afternoon."

I was supposed to go to work at four. There was no way I could get back to Watonga in time, not even if I left now, but I thought I could call my boss and explain. She would understand. The store could probably get along without me for one night. "I have to go use the phone," I told them. "I'll be right back."

As I walked through the cafeteria, I looked around at all the other people there. Some wore crisp white uniforms, but most were regular people, families, maybe, sitting quietly around the tables. The atmosphere was edged with tension. These people

were eating in the hospital because someone they loved was sick, maybe dying. I felt lucky; we were only in for tests. Gramps didn't belong here.

When Mom came home and told me the test result, told me that the cancer had spread so far that nothing could be done, I told her not to talk like that.

"There's nothing wrong with him," I insisted. "It's all a mistake. A mistake."

I kept saying it until Gram took me by the arms and pulled me close, and said, "It's all right, honey. It's all right."

I didn't feel all right. I didn't think I would ever be all right again. But if Gram could act this way—Gram, who had more reason to cry than anyone did—then what could I do? "Doctors make mistakes," I said. "Everybody does."

But nobody said anything; they just looked down at the floor.

When I saw them pushing Gramps down that shiny hallway a few weeks later, dressed in one of those blue hospital gowns and his favorite pair of slippers, I knew it must be true. He should have been pushing that nurse—he still made two of her. But his face was drawn and gray and his shoulders were slumped, and his hair had already begun thinning out from the treatments they were giving him. *Before he came to this hospital, I thought angrily, he was fine*, but that didn't hold up. He was sick before he came here; he just didn't know about it.

And learning about it seemed to have hit him hard, taken some of the grit out of him. Why wouldn't it? This was something he couldn't lift out of the way or fix with baling wire.

For the first time in my life, I realized that Gramps was a flesh and blood man, that

somewhere behind the granite face, he thought, and hoped, and felt.

And that right now, what he felt was fear.

Until he saw me. Once he saw me, what he felt was embarrassed. They had him, like I said, in a hospital gown, and he probably didn't have much on underneath it, so he put his legs together and smoothed his skirt like I might when I was trying to look refined and grown up, and I saw the one quick dart of his eyes as he looked to see if there was any way he could escape.

But there wasn't. "Hey," I said. He raised a hand from the armrest in greeting. He didn't know what to say, maybe, although he was never much of a talker.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Okay," he said. He scratched his head, then looked quizzically at his hand, as though

"Sure. Just don't tell them where you got it."

it was to blame for the state of his hair. "I thought you was supposed to be in school."

"We got out last week," I told him. "I'm free for three whole months."

The nurse had stopped the wheelchair to wait for us. Gramps looked over his shoulder and said, "Annie, darlin', do you suppose Scout here could push me back to the room?"

She was a tiny woman who probably welcomed the break. "Sure thing, Mr. Stringer, if you'd like. I'll be in later to check on you." She left us, and Gramps and I were alone there in the hallway.

"So, Scout," Gramps said, "did you do real good in school this year?"

"Pretty good," I said. I didn't want to talk about school. "Algebra was tough. I made a 'C' and I was lucky to get that." I went around to the back of the wheelchair, let my hands rest on the black plastic handles, but I didn't see how I could possibly

"Doctors make mistakes," I said everybody does."

move the chair. Gramps was too big.

He understood my hesitation, reached back over his shoulder, took my hand in his—swallowed it up—and said quietly, "It's okay, Scout. You just give 'er a shove. The two of us will get there."

He helped a little with his hands on the wheels, and we made our slow way down the hall in silence. When we came to a big picture window, he held up a hand and asked me to stop. From here, we could look out over a

stretch of wheat pasture in the distance. It reminded me of when we used to stop in his truck at the top of a hill looking out over the pasture and the farmhouse. He would just park it there, where we could watch the white-faced cattle graze below us, and he would roll down his window and smoke Winston after Winston while he pointed out to me different things he had done or was going to do around the place.

"Scout," he said now, as he gazed out that hospital window, "I need a favor. I need something out of the truck."

I was still thinking of those days at the top of the hill, I guess. I told him, without hesitation, "No, Gramps. No cigarettes. Those things are bad for you."

He looked at me in surprise; I'd never stood up to him like that in my life. But he just smiled and shook his head gently and said, "Now, Scout, don't get in an uproar. I don't want a smoke. But I'd be much obliged if you could get the keys

from that wife of mine and fetch my cap off the dash." He patted his thinning scalp sheepishly. Gramps wanted his John Deere cap—it was green and coated with grime and the nurses would probably pitch a fit about bringing that thing into their nice clean hospital—but I nodded and we went on down the hall.

"Sure. Just don't tell them where you got it."

We had gotten to his room, and the nurse stood by to help Gramps climb into bed. "Don't forget," he said.

I kissed him on the cheek. "I won't forget," I said.

His head sank back into the pillow. He looked very tired, but I had seen him tired before; every day of his life he had gotten up at dawn, worked until suppertime.

Maybe this was just one last job he had to do.

"Bye, Gramps," I said, leaning in close.

"So long, Scout," he said. He slowly raised a hand to pat me on the cheek, gave me the first tiny smile I had seen since I got there, and then he closed his eyes.

I stepped back to take one last look at him before I went downstairs to get the keys, and right away, I knew it was true. Even flat on his back, he still looked like Gary Cooper to me. ■

(Greg Garrett is a member of the English department at Baylor University.)