

Grandpa's Knife

by Roger Deitz

Somewhere there's a whittlin' knife
In a drawer, near a photograph
Next to an old, worn-out pair of socks.

It was Grandpa's prized possession -
Besides me and Ma that is.

Better than his gold watch from the railroad
With the Roman numerals and fancy inscription,
"For Fifty Years of Dedicated Service"

Better than his old Chevrolet
With the bad fuel pump, and the polished fenders
And the gear shift lever on the column,

Better than his black and white TV set
That he rarely watched
Partly because it didn't always work
Partly because he didn't like television
Partly because they took off *I Love Lucy*

Better than anything else - Grandpa loved that knife.

On countless long, hot, lemonade-drinking summer afternoons
We'd sit on the dock, or on the swing on the porch or
Under that shady elm tree in the backyard and

Wood chips would fly around my ears
Like an Indiana blizzard and
In no time flat, (and we had all the time in the world)
There'd be a ball in a cage, or a wood link chain,
Or a deer, or a silhouette of a beautiful woman,
The same beautiful woman each time...
Always a silhouette of Grandma.

There we'd be, knee-deep in flakes of white pine and
He'd say things. Pretty things. Funny things.
He'd say, "That's slicker than deer guts on a door knob!" or
"That'd make a jack rabbit spit in a bulldog's face!" or
"Yonder," or "hoot and holler" or "yonaways."
He'd say, "sorrowful" or "lordy" or "Land o' Goshen."

He'd talk about the Rock Island railroad, or about
Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. He'd talk
about the endless rain or the lack there of. He'd
talk about the big fish he caught and the one that
got away, that big old catfish that's been taunting
him for years. He'd talk about the day he saw
John Dillinger rob The First Commercial Bank. He'd
talk about the first crystal radio set he ever
owned, or about hearing *The War of the Worlds* being
broadcast with Orson Welles. He'd talk often about
my mother dressed up for her first date. He'd talk
about me being born at home in the middle of the
night, screaming and caterwauling like a "raccoon
caught in a beartrap." He'd talk about how to bait
a hook, and my favorite; he'd talk about what it was
like when he was a boy, a boy just my age,

How things were different then,
How they were the same.

The blade was well oiled with sewing machine oil.
Grandpa kept a sharpening stone in his overalls,
In the left front pocket,
Right next to his pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco.

As we talked, he'd take out the stone and
Hone the gleaming blade, sharpen it on the whetrock,
Stroke it so many times that it was a wonder there was
any blade left at the end of the day to make
A few final cuts,
To fold back into the handle
To put it to rest with a click and a snap.

Hone and spit, spit and hone.

Always in the same direction.

Always *downwind*.

I learned to stroke the knife across the sharpening stone

In one direction only, again and again and again.

It took me a good long while to learn how.

I learned never to spit *upwind* -

This I learned quickly.

Hone and spit, spit and hone.

Grandpa whittled and honed with a sense of rhythm

Possessed of by the

Great orchestra conductors of the music halls.

After a few strokes, a few words, or a few chaws,

He'd break into a chorus of "Old Dan Tucker"

Or "Salty Dog"

Or a hymn like "Farther Along"

All to the rhythm of his knife, his silvery baton.

Next to whittling and talking, honing and spitting

There was singing -

That's the part I liked the best!

Grandpa was short on vocal technique, but long on style.

We'd wail until his old dog answered in on the chorus,

Then we'd sing louder still just to drown out the dog

Who naturally then howled even louder.

Three part harmony was our specialty as Grandpa sent a few

Wood chips flying at an already agitated dog.

Blueblood - his name - would catch one

In mid air

And thus quiet down. "Good dog." "Dumb dog."

We'd sing, and sing, and laugh so hard at the dumb dog that
We forgot the time of day.
We'd sing and laugh and not notice the sun
Setting over the far end of the lake.

Grandpa acted as if he didn't know what was so funny.
He'd look around so as to determine the origin of the
Offending music, shake his finger at the dog,
Then wink,
And spit,
And whittle.

Always, finally he'd shrug his shoulders and go on about
the business of whittling.

We'd sit and sing those old songs even in the dark.

Then, suddenly, we'd rush home in terror for our lives -
into the kitchen where my mother would scold us both,
as if we were "both children" late to dinner. She'd
shake her wooden spoon at us, warn us that the day would
come when she'd just let us go hungry, not care a whit
if we missed dinner. We could eat wood chips for all
she cared. She'd march rightously to her altar - the
back porch - to deliver a firey sermon complete with
everything but the Thees and Thous. Then she covered
the collection plate with cold fried chicken. She loved
us both so much, how could she not? Meanwhile, she'd go
on and on in her maternal monotone voice . . .

"Where have the two of you been? as if I didn't know."

"I don't see how you two able-bodied men manage to amuse
yourselves all day long doing nothing, nothing at all.
Fishing? Did you catch many? Did you sell them?
Carving? Did you carve me a new washing machine?"

"Some day you two will just bore each other to death, right to death. That's the way the sheriff will find you, buried in a pile of wood chips, stone cold dead from boredom, with that no account dog too dumb to know the difference."

And once finally,

"You'll lose your appetite from all that chewing tobacco."
Gulp. My God. She knew! Who told her?

Although she did have a point about the tobacco.

Not only did I lose my appetite,
I was well on my way to losing my sense of taste.

I could, however, spit, and
Hit a bullfrog on a lilly pad
Twenty feet away, clean between the eyes.
Grandpa could duplicate that feat, and also
Tickle the frog with a second shot,
This one placed under its chin
Before the leaping amphibian
Hit the water
With a splash.
Amen.

I exaggerate, but not much.

After his daughter's scolding,
Grandpa would wink and shrug his shoulders and
Make a funny face
Just as soon as Ma's back was turned.
As if he were about to send a juicy projectile
In the general direction of her pulpit.
He'd mock sending it.
Then cringe as if he had hit the mark.

Dinner was often cold, Ma was often upset,
Yet, she continued to set the table as she scolded us,
Smiled as she served us, and
Always changed the subject as food was eaten.
I think she envied us our friendship.
I think she wanted to be on that dock with us.
I can't picture her
Spitting at bullfrogs though.

* * *

Grandpa slipped away from us last night.
Quietly, gently, mercifully,
The Lord took back one of his favorite children.

It's silent now on the porch.
And under the elm.
And on the dock.

Gone is the smell of white pine.
The gold watch has wound down.
The old Chevrolet rusts motionless behind the elm tree.
The black and white television
Stands as a monument to *I Love Lucy*.
Grandpa's room isn't his room anymore.

Already my sister is eyeing *her* room when she passes.

Is there something wrong with me wanting that pocketknife?
With remembering yesterday?
With trying to bring an old man back to life?
Singing "Old Dan Tucker" because I can't fall asleep?
Crying, although the memories I have from before he
took sick are all good ones?
Is there something bad about trying to hold on to yesterday?

Is there something worse about letting go?

With switching on an old television set in a quiet room

And watching reruns of *I Love Lucy*?

Kicking the tires of an old car?

Thinking about installing a new fuel pump?

Adopting a dumb dog?

Expertly baiting a hook and

Sitting alone for a few silent hours on a dock

Waiting for a wily old fish Grandpa named

Nine Lives.

A fish who never was very accommodating?

I don't know. I only know that . . .

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Next to an old, worn-out pair of socks.

It was Grandpa's prized possession -

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I wonder if he'd mind me having it?

I wonder if he wouldn't mind at all?