

GRANDPA AND ME

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“Okay, Skipper, this one is a good one. ‘The Indian In The Cupboard’, one of my favorites”, Grandpa Grant said to his grandson, who fidgeted a little on his ample lap, then cuddled in under the old man’s arm to hear him read.

“Your whiskers tickle, grandpa,” he said, rubbing the old wrinkled face with his small fingers.

“What’s this story about, Grandpa?” the six-year-old tow-headed boy asked, looking up into the old man’s bifocals.

“Well, it’s about a boy named Omri, who gets a birthday present of a plastic Indian and is kind of disappointed until ... well, let’s read the book and find out.”

“Okay, Grandpa. I’m ready,” he said snuggling his head on Grandpa’s weathered leather vest.

Skipper was the boy’s nickname. His full name was Reginald Simpson Grant and he had lived with his seventy-two year old grandfather for the last two years, ever since his parents had been killed in a terrible freeway accident. Distant relatives had come forward to take the child, but the boy loved his grandpa and wanted to stay with him. Grandpa Grant wanted that too, but his wishes were challenged because of his advanced years. In the end the old man convinced a wise judge that he was fit enough to do the job, and custody of his late son’s boy was awarded to him.

In the courtroom after the judgment was made he picked up Skipper and said, “You and I kid. You and I.”

“You won’t ever leave me, will you Grandpa?” the boy had asked with tears in his eyes.

“Never, Skipper. I promise I will never leave you.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die?” the boy said earnestly.

Grandpa ran his gnarled hand across his chest. “Cross my heart,” he said.

Skipper smiled and hugged his grandfather for a long time.

George Grant read to his grandson every night before bed. Sometimes the boy would stay awake during the entire reading, sometime he would begin to slide down and the old gentleman would gently carry the boy to his room and tuck him in. Then he would go back to dog-ear the page so the boy wouldn’t miss anything.

He had read him ‘Treasure Island’ and ‘The Wizard of Oz’ and many other books. Skipper liked to read, but he especially liked the time his grandfather took to read to him. His grandfather read stories to him that were full of bigger words and were more interesting than the books he read in school. These evening reads were a warm amalgam of story and love.

Grandpa began:

“Chapter 1.

Birthday Presents.

It was not that Omri didn’t appreciate Patrick’s birthday present to him. Far from it. He was really very grateful – sort of. It was, without a doubt, very kind of Patrick to give Omri anything at all, let alone a secondhand plastic Indian that he himself had finished with.”

George liked this book. He read all of the books before he read them aloud to Skipper to make sure the boy would enjoy them. Lynne Reid Banks had written four books now and he was sure the boy would love them all

Skipper listened intently as Grandpa Grant read to him about the other presents Omri got for his birthday including one from Omri's friend Gillon that turned out to be an old white bathroom cupboard with a mirror in the door the boy had found in an alley. Omri immediately decided to keep the plastic Indian in the cupboard. The cupboard door had a keyhole and his mother let him look through her old keys to see if one would fit. He took one of the keys and made a birthday-cake wish that it would fit, and it did! His mother recognized the key as one belonging to the boy's grandmother's jewel box. He put the Indian on the shelf and locked it. In the morning he heard a tiny voice and unlocked the cupboard to find the Indian alive!

Suddenly George Grant didn't feel so well. He was too warm and he was sweating.

Grandpa Grant said, "Grandpa's a little tired, Skipper. Would it be alright if we stopped reading. Just for tonight?"

Skipper looked at his Grandpa's face and saw him wince a little. "Okay, Grandpa, but I've got a question. Can things like plastic Indians come alive like that, grandpa?"

A tiny cloud grew in Grandpa's stomach. Was the boy thinking about life and death or was he just asking innocently? He didn't know, but he pondered his answer and decided to sidestep the question.

"It's a great story, isn't it Skipper? What do you think will happen next?"

Skipper knew his grandfather wasn't answering his question, but most adults were like that. They didn't answer kid's questions.

"I don't know, grandpa," he said with a smile.

He gave his grandpa a hug and went upstairs to get ready for bed. George followed him up and tucked the boy in, kissed on the forehead and said, "Sweet dreams, boy. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

"Right," Skipper joked with a wry look, then he rolled his eyes.

Skipper dreamed about the cupboard and the tiny Indian as Grandpa dreamed about fishing in Baldpate Pond for pike and pickerel.

The night flowed on as the world turned its face slowly across the sun on the ecliptic. The earth's many faces looked at the shining father of all planets, now Hawaii, now Asia, now India, now Africa, now the great Atlantic Ocean. Soon America, but not just yet.

Grandpa turned over in his bed, suddenly awake. Something was not right. He had a pain in his left arm. He must have slept on it wrong. He shook it, but the pain remained and then he began to sweat and it was hard to breathe. His heart was pounding as if it would leap out of his chest. He was having a heart attack. He cried out.

"No. I can't die. I promised I would never leave him. Never!" and then the mild light of the moon, lessened by the promise of the sun, closed into a small white dot and extinguished like the screen on an old television.

George Rogers Grant, age 72, grandfather and custodian of the wonderful little boy in the next room, was dead. The bellows of his lungs ceased to heave. The metronome of his heart ceased to measure the seconds of his life. He lay inert, his promise as dead as his old frame.

Somewhere in the universe of inert matter inside the confines of the old man's skull, a spark was sizzling, a spark of will. It cried out, "I promised." The old lids fluttered. The thin fingers twitched, then tightened into a fist. The muscles in his back

contracted and he sat up in his death-bed. He reached over his feeble right hand and pinched his left wrist to check his pulse.

He counted, but could not detect any. He moved his spindly legs over the side of the bed and sat there for a minute, holding his hand to his chest for a heartbeat. Nothing seemed to be happening in there either. What was going on here, he wondered.

Grandpa Grant's body lifted from the mattress and shuffled off to the bathroom. His cold hands gripped the porcelain sink and leaned forward. His nose was less than an inch from the mirror. He tried to exhale. No mist appeared. He was not breathing. He was alarmed, but his heart was not pumping and there was no kick of adrenalin to shock the heart or the mind.

He reached down to feel his legs. They were cold. Everything he touched was cold. He was dead all right.

"Am I a ghost then?" he wondered. He looked back into the mirror and opened his mouth. It was as dry as an abandoned well. He stuck out his tongue. The buds were beginning to withdraw from the surface and a slight blue was forming overall. He snarled to check his teeth. They looked longer somehow. His gums were receding.

"Well, he said, moving his mouth like he had always done, "this is a fine kettle of fish. What now?" He was trying to figure out how he had just uttered those words. No wind was coursing through his vocal cords from a working abdomen. He could hear himself. Could anyone else if they were here? He didn't know.

His eyes were not white anymore, nor his irises blue. They had become beige and his pupils were the size platters. A voice spoke to him from somewhere in that skull housing a brain with broken synapses. No current flowed between connectors there, but the voice said, "You promised."

"Somehow ..." he said aloud, but the thought had gone and he was silent, silent as a grave. "A grave. That's where I belong," he said to himself, "but I am here, aren't I?"

"Maybe," the mirror said back.

His pallor was growing by the minute. His face now exhibited a slight tinge of green infused with a tone like parchment.

A million questions plagued him, but there was no one to ask. No one to answer. He would have to do something. But what?

From somewhere, maybe near the ceiling, maybe from out the window, maybe from under the bed, or deeper, from under the house, an idea assembled. The idea spoke: 'As impossible as this seems, you find yourself dead and still able to move. If you can move, you must move. But in which direction, and to what purpose, mused.

He needed time to think, but then, there was no time. No time at all. His time was up. He had bought the farm. He had shuffled off the mortal coil, kicked the bucket, headed for the last roundup, bit the big one, rode off into the sunset, snuffed it, croaked, cashed in his chips, but he wasn't yet pushing up the daisies.

Maybe the promise he made not to leave his grandson was stronger than death. But if the boy rose in the morning to find his green grandfather walking around not breathing, what would that do to him?

Grandpa Grant went into his late wife's room. He had not had the heart to throw away her things. It was too painful to contemplate. Her passing was the end of his world, the end of his happiness, until the blessing of Skipper coming to living with him had brought him back to life.

He sat down at the vanity where she used to do her makeup. Dust covered everything. He reached for a jar, brushed it off with his dead hand. His bony fingers clinked against the glass. He lined up tubes, and ointments before him. One by one he opened them to see what they contained, chose a few and experimented on his left forearm.

Soon he was covering the ever-changing colors of his lifeless flesh with base makeup, toning it with different shades. He coated his fingers, then his entire arm, then the other hand and arm, his neck and parts of his chest that would be visible above his shirt collar. He touched up his blanching face with powder until it looked fairly believable as living flesh, adding here a little red, as if blood still ran in the capillaries.

Finally, satisfied that he would not scare the boy to death, he went back to own his bedroom. The sun had nearly risen now and he could hear the boy get up to pee into the toilet.

“Grandpa? the boy called out, “Are you up yet?”

“I’m up, boy,” he shouted, wondering if the boy could hear him.

George really knew he was dead now. Hearing the musical tinkle of Skipper relieving himself reminded him that he hadn’t had the urge to pee in hours. His old prostate was probably the size of a grapefruit and it had ceased to prompt him.

Dead. Just plain dead, he said to himself.

The boy bounced into the room in his Star Wars pajamas to see his grandfather standing rather stiffly in his red flannel Long Johns.

“Time for breakfast, eh, Skip?” grandpa said, trying to form a smile with sagging lips.

“You don’t look too good this morning,” said Skip.

There were having a conversation. Grandpa was relieved the boy could hear him.

“Had a hard night, boy. Too much sleep, I guess,” he said wryly.

“I sure am hungry this morning, Grandpa” the boy exclaimed. Ah, to be young again, George thought. Hell, to be alive again, that’s the thing.

“You go get washed up and dressed and I’ll go down and make some eggs and bacon, maybe some hot chocolate. How’s that for a deal?”

“Okay, Grandpa,” the boy said, skipping to his room.

He found he could do anything he wanted to, though he seemed a lot slower than when he was alive. He had no trouble cracking the eggs, scrambling them in a skillet, sizzling the bacon strips, mixing the cocoa, pouring the orange juice, buttering the toast. He’d done it a hundred times when he was still breathing. Maybe the memory was still in his fingers, he mused.

The boy hopped down the stairs to find breakfast on the table. He sat down to wait for his grandfather to sit. Grandpa shuffled over to the table in his apron and eased into the chair, scraped it forward on the floor and offered up a short grace.

Skipper dove right into the food.

“Easy boy, don’t hurt yourself. That fork can be a deadly weapon, you know,” he jibed. Skipper grinned up at the old man and slowed down his assault on the eggs.

Grandpa lifted a fork full of food to his mouth and pushed it in. It just sat there. He didn’t taste a thing and found he could not swallow.

“Hmmmm,” he said and got up and went to the sink and let the stuff drop out of his mouth. He turned on the water to wash it down into the Insinkerator.

“What’s the matter, Grandpa” Skipper asked.

“Oh, I guess I’m just not hungry, boy,” he said.

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, Grandpa. You taught me that, don’t you remember?” Skipper sipped his chocolate.

“Yes I did, didn’t I? I’ll eat something later,” he said.

When Skipper had finished his meal and emptied a glass of orange juice in one draft, he went up the stairs to get ready for school. In a short while the boy was back down as Grandpa was just finishing up the breakfast dishes. The soapy water had washed the makeup off his hands and he hid them in the dishtowel from his grandson.

“Your lunch is in the bag in the fridge, boy, don’t forget it.”

Skipper retrieved the bulging paper sack from the refrigerator, slung his backpack over his shoulder and hugged his grandfather goodbye.

“Grandpa, you seem to have a chill. You’d better go put on a sweater,” he said.

“I might just do that, my boy,” he said, “Listen to your teachers today,” he added to change the subject.

“You always say that, Grandpa,” he said laughing.

“I always mean it too, boy,” he said smiling back.

The door slammed shut behind Skipper followed by the bark and screech of the screen door and he was gone for the day.

Now George had some time to think, or at least try to find out how to think without a functioning brain, he thought. “A lot of people do that everyday,” he chuckled out loud to himself.

He busied himself with the simple chores of housecleaning following the same habits he had formed for so many decades. “Try to act normal,” he said to himself. “It’s the only sane thing an insane dead guy can do.”

About one o’clock in the afternoon, following the second missed meal since his untimely death, George decided to fix the back steps. Skipper had stepped right through one of the slats the day before and he was afraid the boy might hurt himself.

He went out to the shed and got some wood, a saw, some deck screws, a power drill, and a metal tape. Pretty soon he was measuring and sawing. He was about to pre-drill holes for the screws. Picking up the drill he pulled at the trigger but couldn’t get a grip on it. He looked at his hand and realized that he had cut off his left index finger just above the second joint. “No brain, no pain,” he said. “And no blood. Cool!”

He looked around until he found where his severed finger had fallen and retrieved it. “What to do, what to do,” he murmured. He was thinking, ‘How do you fix a dead guy’s finger?’

“I’ve got it!” he exclaimed. He carried his finger to the garage and laid it on the bench. He got out a roll of duct tape and reattached the stub and wrapped it several times.

“One job always leads to another,” he quipped, but then it occurred to him that Skipper would ask what the duct tape was for and he’d have to explain, so he got a pair of gloves and put them on over his handiwork. “That’ll do it,” he whispered to himself.

He went back to the project and finished replacing the plank nicely. Proud of the effort he went back into the house and turned on the television. He couldn’t find a thing he was interested in, but then, that was exactly the experience he had while living.

Plopping himself into his overstuffed rocker he reached for a magazine. Flipping through the pages he realized he wasn’t interested in anything there either. It was all

about living people, and he no longer had anything in common with any of them. Except for Skipper, he noted.

“Am I missing something here?” he queried, eyeing a fly rising to the rafters.

George Rogers Grant, or what was left of him, decided to just sit and wait for whatever it was he was supposed to do to come to him. Maybe there was no afterlife, but if that was so, what was he doing sitting in this chair, no blood coursing the miles and miles of veins, arteries, capillaries; no breath expelling from now empty lungs; no thoughts forming in the buzzing gray matter now turning so dark?

He sat for an hour, still as death itself, and then it dawned upon him. He didn't know how he knew. He just knew. It was like he was in a skyscraper and could see forever. He saw Skipper getting off the bus, coming into the house. He saw the paramedics, the caring social workers who would place Skipper in a wonderful home with loving parents. He saw the boy grow into a strong, intelligent man, attend college, get married. And he saw his beautiful great-grandchildren, all three of them growing up happy, prospering. Maybe he didn't need to hang around.

The old man got up and slowly shuffled off to the old oak roll-top desk that his father had built when he himself was only a lad like Skipper. He reached into one of the many cubby-holes and got a pencil, reached into the drawer beneath the desk top and got a lined pad.

For the next few minutes he wrote, stapled the sheets together and finding a roll of Scotch Tape he headed up the stairs. Just then two teeth fell out of his mouth and a tuft of hair dropped onto his shoulder. These he gathered up and put into the pocket of his shirt.

The late George Rogers Grant taped the note just eye-high for Skipper to read when he came looking for his grandfather and placed the book directly below on the floor. Another tooth fell and bounced off the book. He retrieved the errant incisor, entered his bedroom and closed the door behind him. Then he locked it from within.

“I'm just falling apart today,” he said. “Can't pull myself together fast enough. Guess I still have my sense of humor. That hasn't fallen off yet.”

Slowly sliding open his clothes closet, he selected his finest suit, a clean shirt and tie, and a shiny belt. He took off the apron and casual clothes and stood before the mirror looking at his now blotched skin. He was feeling stiffer by the minute. Protein was coagulating in his muscles.

“Rigor mortis!” he yelled. “Got to hurry!”

His bones had begun to poke out at strange angles. With great effort he put on a clean pair of black socks, donned his shirt and suit, and after several stumbling attempts was able to achieve a very impressive double Windsor knot in his tie. He stepped back to check himself out.

“Pretty good looking for a corpse, but something's amiss,” he mused.

He shuffled slower now and it took him almost a minute to get to the end table by his bed. There he snapped off one of the daisies he had gathered from the yard the previous day and set in small vase of water. He stabbed the stem into a buttonhole on the suit coat lapel, eased his stiffening frame down on the bed and heard a creak. Was it the bedsprings or his joints? He did not know. His energy as all but spent. The last calorie allowed him to pull his leaden legs onto the bedspread and with almost imperceptible movement his hands moved to cross above his silent heart. His duct taped finger rolled

off his chest and to his side. He mouthed the words, 'Fleeing beneath the shadows,' and ceased to be.

At 3:30 p.m. Skipper exploded through the door with a math test paper in his hand that sported a shiny red star and a 100% emblazoned across the top beneath his name in red pencil, written there by his teacher. "Grandpa, I'm home! Wait 'til you see what I did!"

There was silence.

"Grandpa? Grandpa?" he said, walking around the rooms. "Where are you?"

The boy sensed something was awry.

"Grandpa?" he said as he slowly climbed the stairs to the upper landing. He looked to the closed door of his grandfather's room. There was something taped to the door and his book was on the floor.

As he scanned the words he could hear his Grandpa's voice in his mind:

Skipper,

Here is a riddle for you: What do you call 500 Indians who don't have any apples? (The answer is on the back. Don't look until your finish reading this note.)

Life is a very interesting thing. Just when you're planning something, something else happens. I love you, boy, just like I loved your mom and dad. I am proud of you beyond anything I can write in this note. You have been more than my grandson. You have been my friend and I have been yours.

I promised you I would never leave you. Never. You will not understand what has happened, but I am keeping my promise. You are in me, and I will always be in you, in your heart, in your mind. As long as you remember me I am with you.

Someday all that has happened to you in your young life will make sense to you. Love can be the strongest bond there is. Time cannot break it. Separation cannot break it. Only forgetting can do it in. Don't ever forget the things you love.

What you need to know, and what I do know, is that everything is going to be all right.

Right now, right this very minute, you are to pick up your book, go downstairs and call 911 and tell them your Grandpa left a note telling you to call them to come right over to your house and give them our address. When you are finished with the phone call you are to sit in my rocking chair and read the book we started last night until someone comes.

I know you will do this because you are a good boy and I have never known you not to do what is right, and this is the right thing to do. By the way, Skipper, there are three books with further adventures of Omri and his tiny friends at the city library.

*All of my love,
Grandpa*

Skipper turned the sheet over and read:

The Indianapolis Five Hundred.

Chuckling, Skipper said, "Good one, Grandpa." He picked up the book, went downstairs to the telephone and dialed 911.

“My name is Skipper Grant and my Grandpa George and me live at 699 Washington Street and my Grandpa left me a note telling me to tell you to come to our house right away.”

“No, ma’am, he can’t come to the phone,” he said politely. “I think my Grandpa is upstairs in his room ... Yes, ma’am, I’ll be in the living room reading.” He hung up, carried the book into the living room and climbed up into the big stuffed rocking chair. As he opened the book he could feel Grandpa’s arms around him, his old whiskers scratching his ear.

Skipper began reading aloud, but it was Grandpa’s voice he heard.

“The Indian gave a fantastic leap into the air. His black hair flew and the fringes on his leggings fluttered, His knife, raised above his head, flashed. He gave a shout, which, even though it was a tiny shout to match his body, was nevertheless loud enough to make Omri jump ...”

He heard sirens and something large pull up in front of the house and stop with a screech. The front door opened wide and paramedics burst into the hallway. A fireman said, “Where’s your grandpa?” Skipper pointed upstairs, and they rushed up with their black bags and a stretcher. The boy kept reading as he heard the door being forced open at the top of the stairs, then a lot of walking around up there.

Two ladies, social workers, stood watching the boy. “Are you all right, Skipper?” one said softly.

“I’m fine, ma’am,” he said politely as he watched the men carry a stretcher down the stairway. Something was under a white sheet that was cross-tied with straps. He didn’t know what it was, but he was sure of one thing. It wasn’t his Grandpa.

Something was sticking out of one of the men’s breast pockets, something wrapped in duct tape.

He looked back to the lady. “Grandpa and me are just reading a story about a tiny Indian who lives in a cupboard.”