

Going to Grandpa's wasn't something most kids enjoyed. I enjoyed it a lot though. It was a secret hideout full of trees to climb, hills to hide behind so we could fight invisible soldiers. It was where the pond was that seemed to always be full of fish. It held such wonder and spectacle for a young pup like me. I had lost my milk teeth by then and was quickly growing in a full set of regular bone munching fangs. I'd been brushing my own fur out for a few months now, and couldn't wait to show Gramps my new bat and glove.

His house sat on the edge of the property on one side. The trees and hills and pond all pushed to the east, diving down into a forest near the back that was pressed against some sort of state park or other. It must have been a vast one, because I had never seen a park ranger or another soul when I went exploring. And as a pup, I climbed all over the woods, tracking deer and finding turtles, and sometimes catching snakes and other fun things. The scents were enough to drive you wild, and if you had a notion, you could chase game all day long back there in that park, running each trail down until the end of daylight.

But that day, we weren't going out there to chase game or fish. We weren't going to fight invisible soldiers and defend our land from an endless horde of an unknown enemy. He had called us all together for some reason. A hidden secret of some kind, something that had my parents and aunts and uncles all worried over. They tried to pretend that it didn't affect them in front of us children, sure. But we could tell there was something wrong.

When you're eight years old, you can sense these things in the adults. It's in their actions, their smells, the way their eyes shift and ears move when they look at you, the way they speak in such soft and hushed tones about the how the "little ones will take it." We didn't know what was happening, but we knew something was up. "Grandpa is making an announcement," my sister said, matter-of-factly. She held her head high as if she had an air of authority that could only come with age and experience.

“It’s going to be about his will.” Her own ears were tilted back, the black tips of them blending into her dress. She was dressed in somber clothes, just like I was.

“Nuh-uh,” I growled, “You don’t know that.”

“I do too!” She snapped back. “I’m older. Mom and dad tell me things they won’t tell you, cause your too little.”

I wanted to hit her. I didn’t know why, but I could feel anger welling up inside me. “You don’t know nothing.”

“I bet he’s gonna die soon,” Looking back, there was no snark in her statement. But right then, it was the sharpest, most bitter thing anyone could ever have told me.

“You’re lying,” I growled.

“Joe, you got to face facts,” Samantha placed a paw on my shoulder, and knelt down to look me in the eye. She was only two years older than me, but right then she looked so much bigger than me. You tend to not notice things like your sister’s growth spurt as a child until she’s kneeling in front of you trying to tell you something you don’t want to hear. “Gramps is not getting any younger. You gotta face facts.”

I slapped her paw away, pushing away my sisters lame attempt to comfort me, then wiped a hot tear from my eye as I turned away from her. I tried to hold in my snuffle. Little pups cried. Adults don’t cry. Soldiers don’t cry. I couldn’t. I shouldn’t cry. I had lost my milk teeth. I wasn’t a little pup. I held the pain in as best as I could, shoving it down as I quickly wiped the hot tears away from me.

“I...I’m sorry,” She began.

“What are you two kids doing?” Looking up, mom was standing there. Her fur was a mottled patch of white, black, brown, tan, and grey. She was wearing a simple black dress over it. “Joey, are you okay?”

I nodded. “Sam was just teasing me,” I lied.

She gave my sister a knowing look, her ears turning back in disapproval. “Just get in the car, you two,” she said. “We’ll be leaving in a minute.”

The ride out to Gramps place was usually filled with excitement and questions. Were we going to chase frogs? Fish? Did he want to try and hunt deer again? Can we track some raccoons when we get there? An endless barrage of questions that come from the never ending well that is youthful excitement. Today though, it felt like a funeral dirge. We rode in silence, my sister on her side staring out a window, me doing the same. Dad sat in the front of the car, quietly praying as he drove, with my mother muttering her own prayers beside him.

For what? I didn’t know. I didn’t want to know. I just sat there and watched the world turn and change out my window. The houses grew farther and farther apart. Trees started to spring up between them. Rolling ditches began to line the sides. Asphalt turning to clay. Then we were there. Grandpa’s house.

The house was a three-bedroom ranch style home at the bottom of a slope. There was a brick façade on the outside, though no other part of the house actually had any bricks in it. The drive way was filled with cars. Relatives from all over had come, all arriving at the behest of Gramps, who had done so much for them through the years. They were there to show respect and now to for him. I felt I couldn’t quite possibly count them all, there were so many. They lined the driveway, and ran into the road, clogging the already narrow dirt road. That was just fine though, since his house was so remote

from town, it wasn't likely there would be too many people driving by. Chances are, if they were driving on this road, they were invited by Gramps to come here.

We went inside and crammed into Grandpa's living room. He sat in his easy chair, gently rocking as everyone packed in, crowding around him. I weaved and pressed, moving my way to the front as best as I could, like most of us pups. "Everyone gather round," Grandpa said, "I've got a few announcements to make." Grey fur tipped his ears, his muzzle, frosting his chocolate brown coat. One eye had a small cataract over it, giving it an almost milky appearance in the light. He had his cane. His 'beaten' cane as he called it, in front of him, with both paws resting on it. Many times, when I got too rowdy, he'd threaten to strike me with that old polished, gnarled wooden cane.

"Is everyone..." he began. Chatter had started to rise up inside the relatives as brothers and sisters who haven't seen each other in months or years began to catch up. The low rumble of voices started to drown out Gramps. "Quiet!" He tried to shout, though his voice wasn't strong enough to shout over them. The sound of shushing, like a thousand leaky tires pushed through the crowd, pleading for silence. Then all ears trained on him, on Grandpa.

"Now," he smiled. "I guess everyone is here?" After a low rumbling of 'yes's and 'seems to be' and 'looks like it' and other ways of agreeing with him rolled through it, he continued. "If you can't hear me, I apologize. But that's why you're all hear, I spose. You see, I have lung cancer. It's quite bad. They may take out a third of my lung. Even if they do that, they may not get all of it. This maybe my last hurrah. I wanted all of you to hear it from me first in person, and not over some damn phone. I'm gonna need y'all's help even if'n this surgery works."

Someone had cried no. All eyes were staring at me. Was it me? Did I shout it? "You can't die," I heard myself say. My chest felt tight. My breath came in shallow gasps. I pressed through legs and tails, shoving through the living room, to the kitchen, to the front yard. I began running. I didn't know

where I was going until I got there. Our special spot, on the edge of the pond, near the woods. Out where the fish bit the most. That was where I stopped and made my stand. That's where I broke down.

It could have been five minutes. It could have been an hour. I don't know how long I knelt on the ground and cried. I do know when I felt a familiar heavy paw on my shoulder. I turned and embraced him hard, gripping his pants and crying. "There, there. What's got into you Joey?"

"You can't die," I said. Well, tried to say. The words were choked on tears, forming small balls and knots in my throat, that I'm not sure if they came out.

"Why not," he said with a smile. "You will someday."

"B-but," I began. "You can't. You can't be dying."

"Is that what this is?" He leaned down and gripped me hard. "Okay, Gramps has got to sit down," he huffed, then curled his tail around me as he plopped into the grass and held me close. "There we go," he heaved. "Now then. If I die, I die. But it doesn't mean I'll be gone." He touched a claw to my chest. "I'll always be here when you need me. Right here. But I'm not dying."

"B-but, in there, you said you were dying." I was confused now. He did just say he was dying, didn't he?

"No. Now this may sound bold, but I never said I was dying. I said I have lung cancer. I could die soon. Never said I was dying." He hugged me close.

His warmth, his scent, of chemicals and leather and tobacco comforted me. But his words they left me confused. "What?" I looked up at him.

His heavy eyes looked at me with love and concern. "This is going to be a bit heavy for your age," he began. "Look out there." He pointed to the water. "Remember your first-time fishing?"

I nodded. "We were out here a while."

His ears cocked back as he smiled. "I know! Five hours! But you caught something, didn't you?"

I sniffled a bit, but laughed. "Yeah, we threw it back. You said it was about to be eaten by the bait."

"We didn't give up though, did we," he asked.

In my mind, I played through the scene of what he talked about. I was about four then. Had a Mickey Mouse fishing pole. As the bobbers hit the water, I'd catch sea weed, grass, one time I caught Grandpa's pant leg. I caught just about everything except fish. He was so patient with me then, kept me going with stories and jokes. We sang silly songs and sat on the bank of that pond while the sun sank below the horizon. We stayed out there until the fire flies came out. I shook my head. "No, sir. We didn't."

His voice had a world-weary wisdom quality to it as he spoke. "Some say, 'The moment you're born, you begin to die.' I always think of it like fishing. The moment we begin to fish, we don't begin to stop fishing, do we? Why that don't even make sense."

"So, we don't die unless we quit?" I looked up at Grandpa. His eyes glistened a little in the sunlight.

"Well, we die when our time is up. When we're called back home. But the moment we give up, is the moment we begin to die. Until then, we're still living. Look at that out there," He waved a paw towards the water. "This is life. All of this, is a gift to us. Let's not waste it worrying about when the end might come. Whether its tomorrow or next year."

I didn't know what else to say. I embraced him hard, burying my muzzle into his chest. He wheezed a bit then chuckled, patting me on the shoulder. "It's alright, Joey. It's alright." He whispered. I could feel his tail wag a little next to me. I guess mine must have been going as well then.

He led me back to the house, him walking noticeably slower than he did before. Whenever I visited after that day we still played. At first him by my side moving just a bit slower, then after the surgery, with him directing me from his wheel chair. Teaching me about the different scents and how to tell what each one meant. How to identify exactly how old it was down to the hour and chase it down to where it's going. How to set traps for wild rabbit and squirrel.

We never spoke of his cancer much. I did help him around the house when I was over and allowed to help. Those last few months that we did have left, he never let me think of him as 'dying', despite his withering weight, slower gait and even when his fur began to fall out. Gramps taught me that day, that we don't begin to die when we're born or even when we're diagnosed with anything. We begin to die when we give up. On ourselves. On life. On each other. On all those things that matter. He never gave up on living or on us. The day he died, before he went in for that last fateful surgery, he called us pups over in the hospital and wanted to hear about our days. How we were doing in school. Wanted to hear about the new squirrel that I had found in our yard and what we would name it. He didn't want to talk about dying. Gramps was never dying. He lived until he died. And he taught all of us to live life the same way.

So, that's why I say to this day, and to my own pups that we must be alive until we die. Cause dying is simply the act of waiting for death. Cause, like Gramps said, "It's going to happen anyway. Why wait for it? Why waste such a beautiful gift waiting for it to be over?"