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Portrait of a Superhero

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Grandpa towered over my thin, five-year-old frame. He probably measured over six feet, weighed a lot, but fat never crossed my mind. He must have been attractive with his white hair and friendly smile, because the ladies gathered around him wherever we went. He displayed super strength which I often witnessed. One time I saw him pick up an entire wall section of a house during demolition and he carried it to his construction trailer. These tricks astounded me. He loved to dance, especially with me. Grandpa was the perfect superhero.

I spent every summer at a lake with my grandparents. Usually at the beginning of my stay, our cottage for that season consisted of basic framing with two-by-fours, windows, and cold-water plumbing, and a cot for my bed. By the end of the summer, we had painted walls, soft furniture, pillows, and fancy dishes on the dining table. Each summer we stayed at a different lake. My grandfather constructed cottages for his income. He purchased an old

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house in the spring in the city, took apart the house in sections, transported them to a picturesque lake lot and reassembled the house. In late fall, he sold the cottage “as is” to a handy man.

My summer routine each day began early. Grandpa gathered tools and equipment and I trailed behind him.

“Judy, hand me that hammer over there,” and I scooted across the work area, grabbed the tool, rushed to his side, proud and happy.

“Grandpa, how do you hook the two walls together?” I questioned as my eyes surveyed the assortment of boards propped against the ladder.

“Well, you put a nai...,” he responded, but with three nails sticking out from his lips, it sounded muffled. Regardless, I stared at this remarkable trick, and considered trying it, too, but never accomplished more than one nail in my lips. He flabbergasted me.

Our routine usually included a trip to the small gas station/grocery store a short distance from the cottage. The dust and stones popping behind the car seemed appropriate for a superhero’s vehicle. Grandpa always wanted a snack and a cigar. He let me get a lollipop and a soft drink. When we pulled into the parking area, he honked the horn at a friend.

“Howdy, Wayne. Fish bitin’?”

“Not so good this morning. Plan to try at the cove later today,” the friend said.

“Probably see you there. Need to finish the concrete pour under the porch in the back,” Grandpa mumbled.

One day, returning to the large black sedan after our purchases, I planned to practice another trick my grandpa did. He started the engine, shifted the stick, pressed the pedal three times, and then opened his door and slammed it as the car bumped forward. I was ready.

Grandpa moved the stick, pumped the pedal three times, and I carefully began to open my door as the car moved forward. Suddenly the heavy door opened wide, me clinging to the handle, and the next moment I found myself in the gravel, face down. I heard some shouting and knew grandpa stopped the car and turned off the

engine and he jumped out of his seat and rushed toward me.

“Judy, Judy, what happened? Oh, my God, are you hurt?”

I heard him shuffling around the car and he picked me up, smothering me with hugs. “Oh, my God! Thank heavens, you are okay. Thank heavens! Do not ever try to open a car door again!” he said sternly.

“No,” I cried, tears rolling down my cheeks. But as always, I felt comforted by my superhero who rescued me with his big arms and gentle touch. Later when we told my grandmother about the trick, she scolded grandpa—which I never completely understood.

At the end of the day, when grandpa finished his building tasks, we sat on the screened porch, welcoming the cool breezes off the lake. Grandma fanned herself in her wicker chair. Mosquitoes buzzed around the door, eager to enter and stir up trouble. Fireflies flickered around the lot, but only on occasion did we try to capture them. Grandpa stood in a far corner, playing his fiddle. “Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” “Oh, Suzanna,” and “Turkey in the Straw,” were my favorites. I did not sit still, instead twirling and moving my feet to the fiddle tunes.

By the time I was 10, grandpa taught me to play two chords on his old piano and he would play the fiddle. We played the music for at least a couple hours. Grandpa played one song after another, tapping his foot to the beat. Even then, his size impressed me. I thrived on the attention he gave me and tried to do all he said. When I reached middle school, my grandpa often conducted square dance workshops for churches and clubs; he demonstrated dances with me and so we practiced in their dining room.

Once I began college, however, my time with my grandparents dwindled. Unexpectedly, my grandmother



died at a young age, and my grandfather seemed lost. Before school started in my senior year, my mother begged my help; she wanted me to drive Grandpa to Florida for his annual winter vacation. Reluctantly I agreed but made it clear to her I would not go square dancing with him even though he would ask me. As a college student, my tastes geared to rock and roll. Grandpa's kind of dancing was embarrassing.

Our drive to Florida began with little commotion. We needed to stop nearly every hour for a restroom and finding acceptable restaurants proved difficult. McDonald's worked, but reluctantly. At our first meal, Grandpa introduced me to every employee there.

"This is my granddaughter. She is driving me to Florida. She is a wonderful dancer."

When he ate two double burgers and two orders of large fries, I recalled my amazement at his appetite.

Returning to the car after eating, Grandpa said, "There's a nice little band over at Palmetto. They will be there on Tuesday morning, too." A few minutes later, he repeated the comment, adding, "I think they will know the Jesse Polka, too."

"No, Grandpa, I told you there were no dances included. I meant it."

"Now, Judy, you know I should get at least one dance ... and Palmetto is the best. You will know many of the people there, too."

"Grandpa, that makes it even worse! I am 21 years old and do not want to go to an old people's dance," I exclaimed. Whenever these conversations came up, my speed picked up. He ignored me. Soon it would be necessary to begin looking for a gas station.

"I will plan on Tuesday at Palmetto. You know, your Grandma liked that one best," and he gazed out the window with determination.

After a three-day drive, we reached our destination in Bradenton as scheduled, and Grandpa immediately knocked at his neighbor's door to let them know about his arrival. He hurried up to the pavilion and the shuffleboard court before even taking his suitcase into the house. He was happy and relaxed.

At breakfast on Tuesday morning, I ignored his mumbling and read my book. But soon, he mentioned "Palmetto" again, and I looked up.

"Grandpa, how many times do I need to tell you. No! I do not want to go to a dance."

"Now, Judy, I arranged for my friends to pick us up. We will be home by 2:00 and that will give us plenty of time to reach the airport," he stated as he moved towards the door and banged the screen door behind him. I sighed and shrugged.

Later that morning, I found myself on the Palmetto dance floor with my Grandpa, twirling around the floor smoothly performing the Jesse Polka. In the gallery around the floor, friends applauded as we passed. My misery grew. Grandpa walked with a bit of a prance to his step.

A man approached behind my grandfather, "OK, Grandpa, it is my turn. I would like to dance with this lovely lady." Grandpa let go, stunned. Soon I was dancing off to the other end with my new partner. Not used to sharing me, Grandpa moped on the sidelines. He struggled when my dance card eliminated him but when it came towards the end, he asserted, "It is now my turn, young lady." He truly danced the best of all.

Later, after a long drive to Tampa's airport, we walked together to the gate. The stars shined in the sky brightly. Grandpa seemed very quiet, so I chattered away.

When we reached the outdoor gate at the cyclone fence, a red carpet stretched to the bottom of the steps of the airplane. No one else waited for the trip. He shed tears as he always did when I left.

"See you this spring, Grandpa. You be good, now," I said giving him a hug.

"Yea, yea," he mumbled. He still towered over me, with his white hair, and his arms returned with a bear hug, I entered the gate and walked to the plane. Before climbing the steps, I waved once more as he stood there at the gate on that starry night, my superhero. My hero died three days later, instantly, of a heart attack on the dance floor.