

Grandpa Knows

By Breck LeSueur

When Cole arrived I was rocking on the porch, drinking in the afternoon sun and watching the sprinklers glitter across the lawn. Beyond the soft snapping of the sprinklers and methodic squeak of the chair, I sensed the thrum of a car engine. Shielding my eyes, I gazed out along the road and saw a car approaching, the glimmer of its chassis in the sun and unmistakable glowing glass wheels. I smiled to myself and found my feet before crossing the porch and stopping at the handrail. I watched as the glossy car pulled into the driveway and hummed to a stop, where its crystal wheels disappeared and the body came to rest on the ground below.

The door slipped away to reveal Cole grinning from ear to ear. “Hi grandpa!” He waved a hand and waited for his harness to come away.

In the seat across from Cole, Gini waved. “Hi dad?” She removed her eye bands. “Not too bored are you?”

“Bored?” I asked ambling down the steps and to a cobblestone path leading through the lawn. “How could I be bored with this?” I spread my arms around, motioning to the lawn, nearby woods and home I had built with my own hands—true, it was thirty years old and as patched-up as an old quilt, but I loved it with all its embedded memories.

Gini smiled in reply and replaced her eye bands. “Stay out of trouble,” she chided Cole. “And keep your cap on.”

Upon reaching me, Cole wrapped his arms around my waist and I examined the thin silver cap formed closely to his skull. “Is this thing really necessary?”

Gini’s car thrummed to life. “If you spent one million on his tuition you’d do the same.”

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “Just take your time.”

After the door slipped shut, the car lifted from the ground and rotated 180 degrees before zipping down the driveway and out along the road.

I rubbed my hand along Cole's hair and patted him on the back. After unlatching his little arms from my waist, he looked up and smiled, and then tightening his brow gave a short frown. "Grandpa, why didn't you tell mom you have conjunctivitis?"

I chuckled. "What?"

"Conjunctivitis," Cole said, scrutinizing my eyes. I bowed slightly as he took my face in his hands. He lifted one of my sagging eyelids and examined my eye. "Inflammation of the conjunctiva, most commonly due to an allergic reaction or an infection—most often viral, but occasionally bacterial."

"The conjunctiva?"

"The outermost layer of the eye and the inner surface of the eyelids."

"Right," I said biting my lip. "Well, I didn't know."

"Yet conjunctivitis has many forms," Cole said checking my other eye. "Blepharconjunctivitis or possibly episcleritis, but most likely keratoconjunctivitis, which is a combination of conjunctivitis and keratitis." He paused and let my eyelid close. "You really should have this checked out."

"Well maybe I'll do that," I said with a chuckle. I grabbed his little hand and walked back toward the porch, hiking the steps and pushing through the old screen door. Stepping side, Cole gazed about my living room, enamored at the strange carpeting, wall decorations and furniture. He proceeded to a dusty bookcase in order corner and spotted a battered copy of *Anna Karenina*. "Pleasure lies not in discovering truth, but in seeking it...chapter fourteen." He seemed pleased with himself and skipped to the other corner of the room where he curiously toyed with the brittle blades of an oscillating fan. "I like your house, grandpa."

"And why's that?" I asked, watching as he ran a hand along the deep brown carpet.

"It's more like a museum, than a house."

I burst into laughter. “Oh, is that so. Well, I’m not that old?”

He shot me a glare.

“Ok, so maybe I am,” I said and motioned him to follow me into the kitchen. “But I like it this way—it’s how your grandmother wanted it.”

“I know everything about grandmother,” Cole said as we walked into the kitchen. I took a deep breath and lifted him onto the counter, a brief pain zipping through my spine.

“Oh do you?”

“Yes.”

“But you’ve never met her.”

Cole frowned. “That doesn’t mean I can’t know her.”

“You may know *about* her,” I said. “But it takes something more to *know* her.”

“I know she was born in Whittier California on a Sunday afternoon, three-thirty to be precise. And, as a matter of fact, it was a full moon that day.”

“Ah,” I said. “How interesting. Did you know she loved daisies?”

He shook his head.

“And that she smelled like rosemary after working in the garden?”

He shook his head again.

“Well there you go,” I said with a smile. “Even one million dollars of college education can’t teach you that.”

He smiled in defeat. I scooted away from the counter and rummaged through a bread box in the corner of the kitchen. “Cookies?”

“Mom warned me about the sugar content—and the calories.”

“Bah to calories,” I said and pulled the bag of cookies from the box. “When you get to be my age your back goes out whether you ate chocolate cake or bean sprouts for every meal.” I slid two cookies onto a plate and poured him a glass of milk. “A visit to grandpa’s isn’t complete without

some sweets. Besides, your grandmother would've insisted." I watched him take a bite. "Ah, *there's* something else you didn't know about your grandmother."

I turned to the window and rested my hands along the sink as he quietly chewed the cookie. My gaze rested on my little garden ripe with watermelons and cantaloupe, two rows of plump tomatoes and the leafy heads of cabbage; my eyes then wandered down a little stone path which led out to a clapboard shed and the rusty red chassis of a deteriorating pickup truck.

"One million dollars," I whispered. "Is that really what they spent on your 'education'?"

"I sensed the sarcasm," Cole said wiping the thick milk from his lips.

I smiled. "It's just different than the way we did when I was a little boy."

"I know how you did it, grandpa."

"Of course you do," I said.

Cole placed the empty glass of milk in the sink and slid off the counter and to the floor.

"Did they teach you to make cookies like that?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "Hmm, no."

We walked through the next room and out onto the back porch, where the screen door slapped shut behind us. "Well, what did they 'teach' you then?"

Cole laughed. "You want me to tell you *everything*?"

"Just the courses."

He giggled again. "The list is over a thousand courses long! We'd be here all day."

"I have all day."

"Grandpa, you're being facetious."

I grabbed his hand and we walked along a little path that wound down through the garden, out past the derelict pickup truck and ramshackle shed. Cole gazed about and seemed to enjoy the oddity of the land, the tall, crisp grasses and gentle slope leading up into the woods. We followed the trail, me

shuffling along, he skipping and laughing, running his hands through the grass and against the rough skin of evergreens waiting into the woods.

“*Quercus robur*,” Cole said grabbing an acorn in his little fist. “Of the magnoliophyta phylum and magnoliopsida class...order fagales, family fagaceae.”

“Isn’t that interesting,” I said inspecting the acorn myself. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Cole prepared to toss it away, but I stopped him. “Wait,” I grabbed his arm.

“What?”

“Before you throw it,” I said. “Take a minute to smell it, feel it, rub it in your fingers--look at what a beautiful thing it is.”

He followed my advice and felt it for a minute before holding it up to his nose and sniffing. “It smells good...so smooth...and it shines...it’s beautiful grandpa.”

“See Cole,” I said. “There’s much even that million-dollar ‘education’ can’t teach you.”

We walked a few yards further, and seeing a blue jay stopped to observe it. It pecked around at the tree, cooing and fluttering its brilliant blue wings. Cole prepared to rattle off the bird’s scientific name but I put a hand on his shoulder and he understood. Suddenly blue jay lunged from its branch and swung upward before disappearing through the trees. Cole seemed pleasantly amused by this and smiled before skipping on.

We followed the trail along a winding path and down into the woods, across a small creek and then back through the woods to a clearing of low brush. Beyond the clearing I could see my small home framed against the boundless blue sky and beyond it the muddy-green smudge of distant hills. The air was crisp and clear, the sun dropping in the west, a sough in the high grass and fresh scent of oak leaf drifting out along the breeze. Cole was crouched in the dirt inspecting a procession of fire ants, poking at them, trying to

disrupt their journey. I beckoned him to follow and he hopped up, jogging in tow. When he reached my side I spoke: "Can you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"The music," I said. "Listen." We stopped momentarily and he perked up his ears, holding his breath. I saw his eyes light up as he understood. "The trees, the birds, the insects, and wind," Cole said.

"Yes," I said. "This is another marvel even the most expensive degree can't give you. The music of life, the smells, the sights, what you *feel* in a place like this. You know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder." He nodded. "If that is the case then you must beautifully behold all things."

Cole's small nostrils dilated as he closed his eyes, drawing in a long breath. I put a hand around his neck and felt the metallic coldness of his cap. His small chest contracted as he let out a breath and reached for my hand.

We made our way through the scrub brush and grass, around the watering hole and across a side road to my home, where Cole broke into a run and clambered up the steps to the porch. He plopped onto one of the chairs and began rocking, laughing as he did so. I followed slowly behind and when reaching the porch, pulled myself up the steps. Dropping into on a chair beside Cole, I sighed and rocked back, glad to finally rest.

"I didn't tell you about the university yet," Cole said as he pushed his little feet off the white plank porch, rocking back and pushing off again.

"No, you didn't," I said.

"Last Saturday evening Mom and I took a shuttle to Chicago and stayed the night in one of the nicest hotels in the city," Cole said. "The next morning we drove to the University of Nexus where I met my professor, Dr. Wentworth, and he explained the overall vision of the university, course material, my degree, the operation and

possible short-term side effects. After Mom signed all the financial and legal papers, I followed Dr. Wentworth to an operating room where I changed into a gown and laid on a large, white bed. Dr. Wentworth pressed a scope to my arm and I don't remember anything after that. However, Mom was watching and told me exactly what happened. After I went to sleep Professor Wentworth sat behind a set of controls and used a mechanical arm to cut open my head," Cole touched his forehead, which was now protected by his metal cap. "He used the robotic arm to pull away my skin, cut through the frontal bone of my skull, and open the prefrontal cortex of my brain. With my skull exposed and cortex opened, he used his mechanical arm to insert my degree." He paused and stopped rocking. "You know what they look like, right?"

I nodded, still staring out into the yard. "After attaching the degree to my brain, he fused the cortex shut, and replaced my bone and skin."

My chair had not ceased to rock, breathing slowed, hands holding tight to the arm rests. I thought to myself how fortunate I was not to be witness to the operation.

Cole then pointed to his metal helmet. "And then he gave me this—my cap."

"And what about your gown?" I asked.

"Gown?" He gave me a quizzical look and thought for a moment, searching that million-dollar brain of his. "Oh, that's what graduates used to wear—a cap and gown. And how silly to think the degree was just a piece of paper!"

"The value of the degree wasn't in the piece of paper," I said. "It was what it represented."

"Still, it doesn't make sense."

Five-hundred exabytes of information and they still can't make the connection, I thought. "When was the last time you went to the beach?" I asked.

"We went to the Florida Keys last summer," Cole said.

"Did you see any shells?"

He thought for a moment. “Yeah. Brought a bucketful of them back to the beach house.”

I leaned back in my chair. “When I wasn’t much older than you we lived in Rhode Island, not far from the ocean. I loved to wake up early when the tide was low and scour the sand for shells, sea life, anything I could find. During my early morning walks I’d discover the most beautiful of shells—some whose interiors glittered gold and others who radiated like rainbows—the most dazzling of specimens. I’d sit on the beach and spend hours examining them, enamored at their unparalleled natural beauty.” I looked over at Cole who was leaning over, eyes fixed on me. “Over time people in town began to see some of these shells and word spread until a local shop wanted to buy them from me. At the time, I reluctantly traded some of them in for a little extra dough. But what the shop didn’t know is I had an extremely rare shell—one possibly worth hundreds of dollars—but I hadn’t told anyone. It was mine, I had found it, and there was something extraordinary in the feeling that I had discovered it on my own. I spent countless hours admiring this shell, polishing it, glorying in my possession of it.” Cole was leaning over the chair, his hands resting against his chin.

“So for the rest of that summer I spent long hours scouring the beach and selling shells to the shop. Soon my walks along the beach became a business, every new shell converted to quick cash which I summarily spent on movies, books, CDs, clothes, whatever I wanted. By the end of the summer I hated the beach since every minute was spent searching for shells, hurrying about to fill the next bucket for the shop. Eventually I quit going to the beach.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t enjoy it any more, it had lost its magic.”

“But you loved the shells.”

“I loved them when I started. I used to spend hours admiring their colors, unique shapes and intricate designs.

But after a while it became routine. It was about the money, not the shells—not about joy in the discovery.”

Cole paused for a moment, his eyes still transfixed on me. “And what about the rare shell—the one you kept?”

“Oh,” I sighed, looking out toward the garden at the ramshackle pickup truck suspended on cinder blocks; Cole followed my gaze. “I sold it to the shop. Used the cash as a down payment for my first car.”

“That car?” He gasped pointing at the pickup.

I nodded. He seemed disgusted at me, incredulous at what I’d done. “Why’d you do that?”

“It was what I thought I wanted,” I said. “It made me happy at the time—but oh how I wish I had that shell.”

Cole seemed to ponder this for a moment, looking at me and then at the pickup, then back at me again. He looked completely distraught, unsure if he could ever recover from the knowledge of my lost shell.

“Well, there’s other things in life,” I said. “Your grandmother, for one. She was more valuable to me than that shell—or the pickup—or anything else in my life. And then there’s you, my beautiful children and grandchildren.” Cole smiled.

“You miss her?”

“Dearly,” I said, staring out into the fading sky. To the west a mountain range of mashed potato clouds flushed pink and blue above the setting sun. To the north an avalanche of thickening thunderheads were rolling in—a slight growl shook the sky and we saw flashes of lightning going off like gunpowder.

“I’ve seen her on videos,” Cole said. “I know all the facts about her--and what Mom’s said.”

I rubbed my hands together, examining my stiff fingers and mottled palms, skin stretched thin over a web of ruddy veins. The years were written in my hands. “You know, Cole, it isn’t quite the same. What we know and what we feel. What we see and hear, and what’s in our brain,

compared to what we experience first hand.” I flexed my fingers. “I’ve seen those videos, too, and I have all the memories—they’re still here,” I touched my head. “The smells, recollection of the touch of her hand on mine. It’s just never quite the same.”

Cole nodded and seemed to understand.

“We’re not machines,” I said. “And our brains hard drives meant to be filled with faceless facts. In my day learning was something different—knowledge was something we struggled to attain. In this day and age it has become the cold accumulation of endless information, with no thought of the meaning of it all.”

Cole was sitting on the edge of his chair, watching new chaos in the northern sky stirring a witch’s brew—another tremor in the earth and small flashes in the darkening clouds. Moments later the dirt driveway was speckled under the drift of dark rain drops, and we smelled the fresh sky. Cole stood up from his chair and walked up to the railing; he leaned out and let the slow drizzle fall across his face. He pulled his head back in and turned to me. “If transplant education isn’t the best way to know something then why did it happen? Why are universities across the world competing for the best degrees?”

I paused for a moment, bringing my hands together and considering the sky. “Do you remember three summers ago when I drove with you and your mother to the coast, and we spent the day playing on the beach?”

“Yes,” Cole said. “Of course. We picked you up in the morning and drove half the day to get there.”

“Do you remember what you spent the entire time doing?”

He thought for a moment. “Yes. I was using the new bucket you gave me to try and collect the water.”

I chuckled. “Yes, that’s right. When we arrived you burst out of the car and ran right up to the waves. It terrified your mother at first.” I exhaled and sat back in my chair.

“After your mother was calmed and we set up our chairs, we watched with curiosity as you dug a gaping hole in the sand, and then proceeded to wait for the next wave with your bucket. When the gigantic wave came crashing onto the beach you would reach out your bucket and try and catch it. After the water subsided, you returned to your hole in the sand and filled it with the water from your bucket. You were determined to catch the entire ocean and contain it in that little hole.” We laughed as he rocked back in his chair.

“What a stupid thing to do,” he said with a smile.

“Oh, it wasn’t stupid,” I said. “You thought you were doing something great. You saw some glory in those majestic wave and wanted to keep them all—you wanted to contain all that boundless, breathtaking ocean in your little hole in the sand.” I paused for a moment, and we listened to the rain clinking down on the roof and sluicing down the aluminum gutters.

“Your intentions were good,” I continued. “Just a little misled. The waves were too fast and the ocean too big to ever catch it all in your little bucket. And the saddest part is you spent the entire afternoon trying to catch it all. You didn’t even take time to swim out into the water and *really* get wet, dive down and see what else the ocean had to offer.”

“Really?”

I laughed. “Yes.”

“Well, next time I’ll be sure to enjoy myself more,” Cole said. Surprised at the relentless pounding of the rain, he looked up to the roof. “Is this old place going to hold up under the storm?”

“Of course it will,” I said. “This is far more stable than any of those new constructions. Built this with my own hands--solid wood--brick and mortar.”

Drawing his knees up onto the seat, Coal shivered and folded his arms.

“One second,” I said and stood up, pushed through the screen door and retreated to the kitchen. Rummaging

through the refrigerator, I found a large bottle of apple cider and poured a cup before sliding it into the microwave. I walked into the living room and grabbed a small quilt, and then returned to the kitchen in time to hear the microwave chime. After removing the hot cider, I walked out to the porch, draped the quilt around Cole's shoulders and handed him the mug of cider.

"Thanks grandpa," he said, cautiously sipping the cider. I sat down and resumed my rocking, savoring the grand pageant of thrumming rain and grumbling earth. The sky was now a maelstrom of warring clouds blushed brilliant by the receding sun. Cole was enjoying his cider and the intensity of the oncoming storm, safe under his warm blanket and protection of the porch. He took another long sip, the steam swirling in evanescent wisps above his cup. "What I don't understand," he said after swallowing the cider. "Is why *you* are so opposed to transplant education?"

I took a deep breath, knowing it would come to this.

"When according to my degree," Cole licked his lips. "You practically invented the technology—were the first engineer to perform a bioinformational implant."

I stopped rocking. "I thought you might discover this. When did you find it out?"

"Dr. Wentworth mentioned something to me about 'my grandfather being the founding father of transplant education.' I was a little confused and not until after my degree was implanted did I do the mental research and discover it for myself. I learned that you did the preliminary research, wrote the first papers, with the help of your colleagues engineered the first chips, and performed the first implant."

There was a long pause as I contemplated which way to best answer his query.

"So why?"

I sighed. "Cole, there are some things we do when we are young that we don't come to fully comprehend until we

are much older, have lived a long life and can look back and make sense of what matters and why things are the way they are. Often time and experience are irreplaceable by empirical fact-finding and research.

At the time I was passionate about science and the biotechnological revolution. I suppose I dove into it all without considering its long-term implications. That's what you do when you're passionate about something—you pursue what you love and go down that road without considering where it leads. It's what it means to be young, open-minded and excited about discovering the world. And in retrospect I don't know if I'd undo what I had done—I don't think the problem lies in the technology itself. You'll find that humankind tends to abuse even the most useful of tools.” I reached over and touched his hand; it was warm from the mug of cider. He must've sensed the chill lifelessness in my bony fingers because he grabbed them back, sharing his warmth.

“In our struggle to harness the vast world of information the means became the end, and my tool simply became the vehicle to get us there. We became so consumed with the mechanical accumulation of information that we forgot what it was all for, what it meant, how it was to be attained and applied, and that it about more than owning it.”

I reached my free hand out to the falling sky and shook a finger at the clouds. “This is meant to be experienced, slowly savored and enjoyed. And like learning, there was to be meaning in the journey, joy in the quest for knowledge; not just raw data and discrete bits of information existing in our heads, but *wisdom*,” I said. “The application and connection of it all. Great knowledge and wisdom aren't separate but connected—made meaningful by an intricate web of relationships. And with these degrees,” I said motioning to his cap. “They implant exabytes of endless information in your head; but the real miracle is in its discovery--and in how it's all connected.” I gazed out over

the lawn sweeping out to the road and the surrounding woodlands growing fierce under the sinister sky. “See here, you have a tree, the sun, the air and the grass. By sight they all seem singular, as if they could exist on their own. But under the hood that isn’t so. All of it is connected, the sun, the grass, the air—the connection is where the magic happens, this is where they all find meaning. You know the science.”

Cole nodded in agreement. He reached up and scratched his head below the silver cap and then ran his hand along its smooth surface.

I continued: “You have all of these discrete chunks of data swimming around in your head, but if you’ll ever make anything of yourself you’ll have to find a way to connect them all—something even the best engineers have yet to discover. It is you,” I poked toward him. “That must bring them all together. And this requires long hours of introspection and engagement of the world—embracing the minds of others and venturing out into life. Only then will those memories matter. Only then will you discover the principles and patterns upon which the world turns.”

Cole sat his empty mug on the railing and watched raindrops splash into it. For a moment he seemed to be ignoring me, but I knew he was thinking. “I see,” he said. “Is that why you had your own degrees removed?”

I nodded slowly. “With them I lived under the weight of knowing *everything*, the hollowness of arriving without a journey to appreciate, forever trapped at the destination with no where further to go. When the degrees were removed I felt unimaginably free; I feasted on the world with the mind of an insatiably curious child. That was when I moved out here and built this home, hoping to rediscover the world. Here is where some of my greatest memories have taken place—your grandmother, your mother, you.” I squeezed his little hand again. “I’m glad you came here today.”

“I’m glad, too, grandpa,” he said and grabbed the mug from the railing; I watched as he brought it to his lips and drank the rainwater. When he finished we both laughed and sat and watched the torrents of rainwater washing down the road and flooding the lawn. Beyond the lawn puddles glistened along the road where wind was whipping the trees in a torrid frenzy. By now the sun had disappeared and daylight consumed in the disarray of the thunderstorm. Far off, bright bolts punctuated the sky, accompanied by distant growls. Bizarre beauty in chaos, I thought to myself.

Suddenly we saw headlights glowing through the downpour, bright eyes skimming along the road. A moment later Gini’s car whipped into the driveway and hummed to a stop, idling above the mud. I pulled the quilt up around Cole’s head and reached down to give him a hug.

“I love you Cole.”

“I love you grandpa,” he said and then hurried down the steps and into the waiting car.