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The Last Old Man by E. A. Graham
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Elders

We all have events, moments in our life we look back and reflect upon. We take from those events throughout life, continuing to learn from them, or hiding from them. Conscience or sub-conscience, they affect our lives. They are the events that make us who we are, or are not. They are our experiences.

Many of these events fight for space in my conscious mind, but lately I have been thinking about those people at the center of so many of the events that effect us most. They are our elders. I guess the reason I've been thinking so much about them is twofold: First, much of what they said at the time didn't make sense and was dashed from the conscience till many years later, when the importance of the words could be understood, reinterpreted. They were planting seeds. Second, they seem to be disappearing. No, the old are still here, growing in numbers but...

Fondly, I remember a time when more elders understood the importance of the

role they had in helping bring to fruition the possibility and potential of the young. In those rare, distant bastions of inner-peace, that time is still present.

It was because of the elders that the young could be whole and secure with themselves, but the elders are vanishing, nowhere to be seen. Too many have turned into the bitter old – foolishly battling nature's badge of experience. With the disappearance of wisdom, we lose the flourishing young. To lose the young, those that go before must first be lost.

The elders, who pay homage to wisdom, and the old, who pay homage to fear and a mirror, would be mired in battle, but the wise who persist know it is a waste of precious time, for they have subtle work to do, their most important work. Some will be fortunate enough to learn from them, quietly, as the fearful old scream into the darkness, afraid their fraud will be unveiled.

I have worried that in my family the elders have disappeared. Yet, I was lucky, as there is one who will always live, I just hope he is not the last. There must be others like him. The beauty of welcoming peaceful eyes. The warmth of a generous joyful smile. The wisdom of knowing wrinkles on a lasting face. I am sure they are around. We just need to seek them out, to welcome them back, and learn.

They must be out there. Perhaps some of us will have to search for elders. Some may be able to awaken them in the old, but they are here, waiting. They must be. They are amongst us. They have to be.

I remember. It seems like today. It isn't, but in my mind... Maybe you know him. Maybe it was different for you, but you could have known him. Or, was it her? Did you know one of them? Do you know one of them? An elder? A real elder? Are you one? Could you be? They are wonderful. Let me tell you what I remember...

Jack

I remember the white envelopes when I was a kid. My father kept them hidden in a shoebox on the top shelf of his closet. I wasn't sure if he was keeping them from me and mom, or trying to trick the thieves. Every time we received one of Jack's calls, dad would send him an envelope. Mom would get upset and ask dad why he was being a bank. I don't think she liked that responsibility. I think dad was just glad to hear from Jack. Between calls, dad waited for the occasional postcard from the "Old Man." That's what dad called Jack, the Old Man. I remember, when I was about eleven, Jack came by the house to pick up an envelope.

We hear this knock on the door. Dad answers, and standin' there is this weathered old man, with a big, giant grin. He smelled like a gallon of cologne. Dad didn't even move, he was so shocked to see him. I wondered who it was, but I think I knew. He looked pretty old.

Dad said, "What's the special occasion?" talkin' all groggy, like he'd just woken up from a dream.

"It's my birthday!" Jack said, givin' dad a bear hug, then pushin' him aside and walkin' into the house, like he was comin' home.

I didn't know Jack very well, mostly what I'd overheard. He seemed to know me, and always asked me lots of questions if I was the one who answered the phone when he called, but I didn't remember ever meetin' him. I was supposed to remember though, since dad said I had seen him years before, when I was about five or so, but I had no recollection. All I recognized was his deep gentle voice. It was soft and strong, and it sure didn't fit the look of a wrinkled ol' man.

The picture of that meeting sticks out clear in my mind today, like I was just there. It was his eightieth birthday, and he looked every bit those eighty years. His skin was loose, and most of his hair was gone, and to a boy who had not spent much time with anyone that old, anybody with overlappin' wrinkles looked pretty ancient. Now that I look back I realize just how good Jack looked, not just for his age, but for someone lots of years younger. It wasn't so much how his face looked, but how excited his voice and eyes were. I don't really think he acted his

age, or maybe it didn't seem so because he actually did.

Jack was hardy, and, being eleven, I remember thinking he was a giant. I had to tilt my head all the way back to look up at him. And hearin' that thunderin' voice. He was a giant. When he saw me he leapt over and picked me up like I was a baby. Scared the heck outta me. Scared dad too, but Jack laughed and gave me a powerful hug.

"Put him down!" I remember dad shoutin'. I think it was because he was worried Jack might hurt himself, but it might have also been him knowin' I didn't like to be treated like a baby. Dad and I had arguments about that many times. I wanted to be what every eleven year old boy thinks they want to be - a Man. Seein' Jack made me realize I had a long way to go. It kind of made me feel like dad still had a long way to go.

"Fifty push-ups a day," Jack said to my father as he put me down. "How 'bout you?" Jack asked dad, clenchin' and curlin' his callused fist, making a muscle to show dad.

"I don't think so, Old Man," dad answered. He walked past Jack into the kitchen, but not without squeezin' Jacks arm and givin' a nod of approval. "Not bad. Fifty?" he asked, smilin'.

"Maybe not today, but when I'm feelin' better I'll be back up to fifty!" Jack shouted, following dad into the kitchen. He bounced after dad, more like a kid than an old man.

Dad began to gather some food to cook a meal. He did not stop, just kept movin' 'round the kitchen, cookin' while Jack was talkin'. It was like he knew he needed to do something when Jack arrived. I was a little leery of Jack and his crushin' bear hug, so I kinda stood back in the doorway. They bantered with such laughter that eventually I felt comfortable enough to take a seat at the kitchen table, and wait, and watch.

I remember Jack telling dad, and I think he was tellin' me too, 'cause he kept lookin' over at me and smilin' when he was tellin' the story, about where he had been the last few years. He spoke loud and said he'd been to Mexico for a long time, then went all over Arizona, spent some time at the Grand Canyon, then worked his way over to California to pay us a visit.

It seemed like he'd been doin' a lot, and dad must have thought so too 'cause I remember him askin' Jack, "Don't you get tired? I thought you old people had aches and pains?" Dad was laughin' when he asked, but Jack was real serious about his answer.

"Nature's way of telling me I'd better hurry up! Probably only 20 or 30 years left," Jack answered. They both thought that was real funny.

I don't remember much about the details of the places he went, I just remember how exciting he made it all sound. I remember him talking about how the people dressed and talked, about the kind of music they listened to, about the food they ate, about the different kinds of houses and trees and mountains and rivers and animals. He made it sound like such an incredible adventure that I started to wish I had been with him, or gone somewhere, but we didn't go anyplace like that. I'd never seen much outside the streets of my town, which weren't so interesting. Dad had been talking 'bout travelin' though, since he seemed to have a lot of free time.

Decidin' what he was to do in life was a big dilemma for my dad, at least that was what it sounded like with him and mom arguin' about it every night after I went to bed. I guess they thought I couldn't hear their shoutin', or maybe they thought that I was asleep, or didn't really understand, but there was a lot of shoutin' goin' on, a lot of angry shoutin'. I didn't like goin' to sleep like that. I remember bein' pretty sad.

Mom and dad felt it was important that someone stay home with me while I was growin' up, and that had always been mom. But, dad decided he didn't like his job anymore and that he was wasting his life, so he said he wanted to quit. Mom liked stayin' home to take care of me, but she agreed that she would go to work while dad decided what he wanted to do. It didn't take long for her to not like her job much and want to be back at home takin' care of me. Dad said they could both stay home, but that they'd have to sell the house, so mom decided to keep workin' a little bit longer, till dad got bored and was ready to go back to work. She started to see that day wasn't comin' anytime soon. Dad seemed pretty bored, but had little interest in work.

I noticed because it had become rare, but there seemed to be a little more of a happy smile on dad's face with Jack in the house. We both enjoyed havin' company for dinner, since mom started staying at work till the late hours too often. Dad still didn't talk as much as he used to, before him and mom started fighting, but he was askin' Jack a question here and there, and Jack would give the most wonderful answers. I kind of wondered if dad was afraid Jack might ask him questions. I could see dad really liked Jack. Maybe it was 'cause everything he said was nice.

Dinner was fun, I got to eat any way I wanted, 'cause Jack had worse table manners than I did. Jack was talkin' with his mouth full, and had his elbows on the table, and ate with his hands, and was reachin' for things, and dad never said a word, just smiled kinda happy. I tried talkin' with my mouth full and looked to dad to see what he'd say, and he just smirked. I could see all those table rules mom was adamant about weren't so important with Jack around. I kinda hoped he'd stay with us for a while, but wasn't sure mom would let him eat that way. It sure made eatin' fun though.

When dinner was done - it took longer than usual 'cause Jack had a lot of food, like he hadn't eatin' for a long time - we all went out back to sit on the small porch I had painted red. I remember followin' Jack closely, 'cause I wanted to sit next to him to hear some more of his travelin' stories, and see what else I might be able to get away with, but when we took those seats dad and him started talkin' real slow, sayin' almost nothin'. I started to yawn.

Jack and dad kept looking up into the night sky. They just stared at the stars. I looked up to see what they were lookin' at, and kept lookin' over to see if they had stopped. They just kept starin' at the stars, barely sayin' nothin', so I watched

with them. I stared, and stared, and stared and yawned.

"You look out there long enough, and you'll see yourself," I heard Jack whisper in my ear. I rolled my eyes to look over at him, but his eyes were up lookin' at the stars again. I wasn't sure what he meant, but I kept starin' at all those tiny bright flickerin' lights in the sky, wonderin' how I could see myself, trying a bit harder to see somthin'.

I finally relaxed my neck and looked back at Jack when he told me he knew my grandma and grandpa. This put a huge smile on dad's face. He kept starin' at the stars, but I could tell he was listenin'. I think Jack knew he was listenin' too, 'cause he spoke pretty loud to just be talkin' to me. This was exciting news, 'cause I didn't really get to know my grandparents so well. I really didn't know anything 'cept what dad told me.

Turns out Jack was grandma's brother, and he and grandpa were best friends. He had lots of stories to tell me. Stuff dad had never before told me. I think dad was hearin' some stuff for the first time himself. He had a good story tellin' voice - clear, soft and gentle, and loud. I remember one of the stories he told me 'bout grandma.

"When my sister, your granma, was a little girl, she used to have to stick up

for me. There were these three boys, the... the Brown boys we all called them, who liked to pick on smaller kids, and I wasn't very big. Now your granma, she was a couple years older, and real strong and smart, kind of a tomboy, but always very lady-like. She always wore a dress and pigtails with pink ribbons, no matter what she was doing. One day, she comes around the corner and the Brown boys are holding me over a big mud puddle, about to drop me on my face.

"Sis', she didn't even say a word, just ran right up and jumped on Randy, the biggest of the boys. Of course they dropped me on my face in the mud, but she wrestled Randy into the mud, and the other two didn't want to get muddy, or fight a girl, so they stepped back. I jumped on Randy, too, but he was big enough to throw us both off. We weren't going to make it easy, though.

"We're all standing, and your granma, mud all over her, except for the pink ribbon in her pig-tails, put up her fists ready to fight. Randy looked at her, laughed and called her 'Crazy,' then chased down his brothers and beat the tar out of them for not helping him. The boys never bothered me again. And that Randy sure got a crush on your granma."

I'd never really thought about grandma as a little girl, but Jack brought her to

life. I could see her, not as grandma, but as a little girl my age, in a bright red and white dress, with pink bows in her hair. I didn't have to say, "Tell me more," he just saw the anticipation on my face and smiled as he went on. He told me more 'bout grandma, then told me about grandpa.

"I remember one time, when your granpa and I were traveling, and your granma's birthday was coming up, and he decided he wanted to be there. Now you must remember that they weren't dating, or anything, he was just real, uh, fascinated with her.

"We had been working, doing odd jobs all around to make money to eat and travel from one town to the next, but when your granpa decided it was time to go back to see your granma, he was a man possessed. It didn't help either that he was a little spontaneous with his decision making.

"We were modest folk, and didn't have a great deal of means, so we had to find a way to get across a few states cheaply. Your granpa decides we're going to ride the trains back. You know, jump on them as they go racing down the track. So, we get our few belongings, throw them in our tow sacks and head for the tracks on the other side of this little rundown town.

"We get to the tracks. There are these people up by a curve, where the train has to slow, waiting to do the same thing we

wanted to do, jump the train. The train comes and everyone makes like they're just standing around the campfire warming themselves. Then everyone makes a mad dash for the boxcars a few moments after the engine passes. Your granpa and I get on no problem, but there is no place to stowaway on the car we get onto, so we climb up to the top of the car and begin to move forward, coming awfully close to falling off, when suddenly there is this big jolt and a loud crash. We both cussed and fell.

"I must thank those lucky stars up there, because I'm not sure how we survived. We both flew forward then backward, but didn't fall off the train. We were pelted with lettuce, but not hurt. The train came to a long, painfully loud screeching stop, and we got off the train to see what we hit. There was a big rig hauling lettuce that had been stuck on the track, and it was destroyed. The train went through that thing like it was paper. Pieces of the truck and lettuce were everywhere. You couldn't tell which end was the front and which the back. Fortunately the driver was all right, because your granpa went looking for him to make sure. He was worried. He was always worried about other people, your granpa.

"It's amazing how things work. Your granpa said he wasn't ever going to get on

a train like that again, and the truck driver asked him where he was heading. Next thing you know, we're sitting in the front seat of a lettuce hauler, on our way to see my sister - safely."

I remember Jack finishin' up that part of the story, then makin' an addition in a voice pretty clearly directed at dad. "They never were apart, after we came back for her birthday, but they had some real ups and downs in their relationship. The hard work on something so special paid off for them though, 'cause they found an eternal happiness I'd never seen."

I thought it was a nice thing Jack said, but it seemed to make dad uncomfortable. I think he was uncomfortable 'cause him and mom were having so many problems, and he didn't like to talk 'bout things like that. I think it bothered him that Jack seemed to sense somethin' was wrong, when dad tried so hard to pretend everything was just fine. Dad was still starin' at the stars, but it didn't look like he was seein' them anymore.

I guess dad was still trying to protect me, 'cause he sent me up to my room to go to bed. Jack shook my hand, and promised he'd be there in the morning. I didn't want Jack to leave, but I was afraid when dad sent me to bed that he would start arguin' with Jack. So, instead

of goin' right to bed, I got in my pajamas and went into the bathroom, 'cause the bathroom had a small window that was always open, and that window was right above the porch where we had all been sittin'. I'd eavesdropped from there before.

I listened for dad to get mad at Jack, but it was pretty quiet. Jack didn't say anythin', or ask anythin'. Dad started to talk, first about his father, grandpa, and then his mother, grandma, and Jack would answer questions and acknowledge dad with short words or laughter. Eventually dad started talking 'bout mom, and 'bout the problems they were havin'. Jack still didn't ask any questions or say much, but dad kept talking so much. I think dad was trying to answer the questions Jack might have before they could even be asked.

For a long time dad talked, and I listened, kinda feeling sad, and a little scared. He talked so much I think he talked himself out, 'cause then it was quite. I was yawnin' so much I started to fall asleep in the cold of the tub. I decided to head to my bed, but then Jack started talkin'.

"You know why I'm here?" he said.

"Yeah," dad answered.

"Your dad wanted me to take the boy when I turned eighty, if he couldn't. I

promised I would, and I'm sad to say he isn't around in the flesh."

I didn't know what they were talkin' about, and got really scared, 'cause I thought Jack was going to take me away.

"I know, Jack. I'm just not sure he's interested. Maybe he's not ready, yet. Maybe he's too young?"

Jack laughed at what dad said, then told him "Interested? How could he not be, and he sure is ready. I think, maybe, you're not ready to let him go. I think there is something you might need to find yourself. I'm going to carry out your dad's wishes, but I want you to come too."

Dad hemmed and hawed. They argued gently for a little while, but dad finally agreed to go, which made it so I wasn't so scared anymore, but I wondered why mom wasn't going. I wasn't sure where we were going, why we were going or what we were going to do, only that it was something so important that my grandpa, dad and Jack all knew about it a long time ago.

If I wasn't so tired, I don't think I'd have been able to sleep, being that I was nervous and excited. I don't remember gettin' out of the tub, but I woke up in my bed in the morning. I musta been really tired.

A Journey Begins

I remember being awoken by a loud thud. It scared me for a minute, till I could tell mom was shoutin' at dad and realized it was the two of them fighting, again. I had never heard them fight before the sun came up, though. She was real, real angry.

They seemed to be fightin' about the same ol' thing. Mom didn't want dad to be goin' out playin' while she had to get up early in the morning to work. Mom didn't want dad doin' anything, 'cept look for a job, when she was gettin' up early to go to work. I don't really remember what she was doin' at the time, but she musta really hated her job. Dad was yellin' at mom to "Shut up!" I tried to pretend I couldn't hear them, but it made me feel kinda lonely.

After a while, there was enough of a lull in the yellin' for me to feel safe. I was always afraid, 'cause sometimes they yelled at me and told me to go back to my room. But it got kinda quiet, and I remembered 'bout Jack. I knew they

couldn't be fightin' like this with Jack in the house, so I got dressed and went to look for him. He was sittin' quietly in the kitchen, still smilin'. He looked like he was goin' to have a great day.

I remember feeling safer than I ever had before when mom and dad fought, seeing Jack sittin' at the kitchen table eatin' a banana. I hoped he hadn't heard them fighting, but then mom started yellin' again. I didn't know what to say. Jack jus' winked and smiled at me, happy, so I tried not to worry. I guess there wasn't much to say.

Jack took me back to my bedroom and told me what kind of clothes to get. I found what he asked for and he put them into my school bag. I also took the Indian knife my dad gave me when I was a little kid. Jack told me to take the bag, gave me a banana and took me outside. He told me to wait in the driveway and went back into the house.

Mom and dad had been shoutin', but when Jack went back into the house it got quiet again, which made my kinda scared. It was cold. It was still dark outside, and really quiet on the street. A dog started barking and I jumped a little, got kinda nervous, but I didn't want to go back into the house, so I stayed outside in the cold. I felt a bit safer when I moved from the middle of the driveway and

stood against the house, pressing desperately toward all that I knew.

After a while I sat down on the ground. It was still quiet, so I decided to lay back and put my head on my school bag. I musta fallen asleep, 'cause next thing I remembered was waking up between dad and Jack. The sun was up and we were goin' down the road. Dad and Jack didn't say much, but dad did wink at me when he saw I was awake tryin' to look out the window.

We drove down a narrow road for a long time, everyone bein' pretty quiet. I started to get a little hungry, and noticed we were driving down a road where there wasn't much to eat. I didn't want to say anything, 'cause I thought dad might still be upset about his argument with mom, but I felt my stomach growl, so I asked dad if we were goin' to eat.

Jack said he'd been wondering when I was going to get hungry, 'cause he was pretty hungry himself. Dad laughed and patted me on the top of my head, and promised we'd stop to feed my growin' body. This made me happy. Jack said he knew a great place a little up the road, where we'd be turning off anyway. I still didn't know where we were goin'.

When we stopped at this little restaurant - it was in an old building that was kinda leanin' and looked like it

was going to fall down – I asked dad where we were goin', and when we were goin' home. I think he got a little angry about me askin' when we were goin' home, 'cause he thought I already wanted to go home, but I really just wanted to make sure we would be goin' home. I hadn't had a chance to say good-bye to mom, and I just wanted to make sure I was goin' back. Jack seemed to understand I wasn't askin' about going home 'cause I wanted to go. I knew this 'cause he winked at me when I asked dad. I was just glad Jack was there, otherwise I think dad would have gotten really angry and started yellin', tellin' me I was just like my mother and taken me home right then.

While we were eatin' breakfast, Jack told me we were going camping at a special place he had been to with my grandpa when they were young. Dad said he had never been there. We'd never been camping before, so I was pretty excited.

Jack told me to eat well, as there wasn't such a convenient restaurant where we were going. So I did, but as I ate I started to fear we weren't going to get anywhere.

During breakfast, I remember dad started talking to Jack like I wasn't there, and saying that maybe we should be goin' home, since mom was so mad. I didn't want to go home. Jack laughed and smiled

at most everything my father said, without really answerin' him. Eventually, dad had talked himself out of goin' back again.

I was sure we were goin' to have to go home, but Jack seemed to know what to say to my father, even when it was nothing. When he said, "If you wanted to be at home we wouldn't be here now. Is backwards the direction you feel comfortable flying?" dad did a lot of thinkin', 'cause he couldn't yell at Jack.

I wasn't sure what Jack was talking about, but dad didn't say much about goin' home again. What dad did begin to talk about was why mom had been so mad. Again, Jack didn't say much, and I didn't really understand what dad was talking about. He kept saying mom was unhappy 'cause this wasn't the life she'd wanted, and she thought it was his fault. Dad seemed to be makin' a lot of excuses to Jack about mom and his yellin', but Jack kept kinda quiet. He did look at me to give me a wink, which I liked 'cause I was thinking they forgot I was there. Jack had a good face, the kind that can say a lot without talkin'.

We were there at the restaurant for a long time, and Jack kept remindin' me there were no comfortable bathrooms where we were headed, so I made myself go. Dad seemed to be feeling a little better, 'cause he started askin' Jack a lot of

questions about when grandpa went on trips with Jack.

When we finally left, Jack said we'd be to the place soon, and started to tell a story about when him and grandpa went to where we were goin'. He said it was when dad was a boy, and had got in some trouble.

"Now, your father wasn't one to get so angry he got physical, but this time you'd done something that really upset him. I don't remember what it was, but your father was really ticked."

Dad got kind of a sad look on his face, like he remembered what Jack was talkin' about. I was real curious, and I knew I was safe with Jack, so I asked, "What did dad do?"

"I'm not sure I remember what your father did, just that your granpa called me up and said he had to get away for a couple of days, and wanted me to come along. He was really upset, but I don't think it was at your father, I think it was at himself. He never could stay mad at his boy," Jack answered, lookin' at dad with a wink and a smile.

"We spent the day hiking over mountains pretty hard, till your granpa and I were exhausted, but that didn't seem to chase away the little voices in his mind. When we sat down to eat that night around the fire, he looked really

disheartened - hadn't said but a dozen words all day. Then he starts telling me how he lost it and was pretty out of control with your father. I could see he was just sitting there thinking about what he had done. You could see by the emptiness in his eyes that it was something he wished he could have changed."

Jack smiled at dad, before finishin'. "He was really upset with himself, because he knew inside that what he had done was wrong for him. He kept wanting to know why he did it, and all he kept saying was he didn't know what else to do. I think he would have cried if he wasn't so frightened.

"I wish I remembered what you did," Jack added.

Dad kinda smirked, then said, "He never hit me again after that."

"I know that. He had a hard enough time accepting what he did. He was really disappointed in himself. He could not believe what he did. He just didn't know how to make you understand what you did was wrong. He did the same thing to his boy that his father had done to him. He hated his father for the way he was beaten, and now he had done it to his boy. He just stared at that fire with a real heavy heart.

"I tried to cheer him up, but he would have none of that. Even when I told him he was doing the best he could, he just looked at me real hard and said, 'That's not good enough.'

"He insisted that he wasn't going to let his own limitations be an excuse for doing wrong. If he didn't know any better way then he said he'd learn one. That's when he got on the idea of learning," Jack explained, like it was real important.

"Here's where we're going," Jack shouted, interruptin' himself.

I was hopin' Jack would finish the rest of the story. I think that's what dad wanted also, but Jack seemed too busy with our destination.

We got our stuff together. I carried my school bag, while Jack brought a small pack with a sleeping bag and a couple of guns with him. Dad carried this huge pack, with two sleeping bags and lots of water. I thought he was going to fall over from the weight of the stuff. He looked a little bent and was stumblin' a lot just tryin' to stand still. I'd have asked if I could help, but that thing was way too big for me, it was about as tall as me, and probably heavier.

Before we started walking, it seemed to get really hot standing there in the sun. Jack put this giant broad brim hat on his head, and gave me a small hat to wear.

Dad had brought a baseball cap for himself. They kept the hot sun off our faces, so we started walking across the dirt and bushes toward some boulders and mountains. It didn't take more than a few steps before Jack started tellin' the story 'bout grandpa again.

"Now where was I?" Jack shouted. He had that smile on his face, like he knew we were waitin'.

"Learnin'!" I shouted back. I didn't know if dad was going to answer, 'cause he was behind me. I was behind Jack.

"That's right. Your granpa started talking about learning. I could see it was something he had been working out in his mind, because he wasn't paying much attention to me. He was looking at the fire and the trees and the bushes and thinking. 'Learning is what we do,' he said. He had to understand why he did what he did, your granpa.

"Now, I hadn't thought about it much, but he kept saying that all we can do is learn from what we do. He started saying that everything we do should be a learning experience, and he started to feel a little better. He seemed to be a little happier, knowing that what he had done need not be repeated, because he had learned from it, not just learned it. This all seemed pretty reasonable, so we laid back against a rock and stared at the stars

for a while. That's when he got all excited. Interrupted my stargazing, that granpa of yours.

"We were staring at the stars, being real quiet for the longest time, and your granpa starts laughing to himself. I like a good joke, so I wanted in on what was so funny, but he just kept laughing to himself, ignoring my questions. What did he find so amazing, after being so serious and sullen all day?

"He finally got done with his girlish giggling and told me what a wise fool he was. He said how he felt so much better, because he realized he had made a mistake and could learn from it because he was a wise person. That's all anything does or can do is learn. He said how he just realized that his daddy learned to whip him because that was what he was taught worked, and nothing ever learned him any different. Your granpa was a good boy, and his dad figured part of the reason must have been because of the whippings.

"Now he lost me a little bit here, because I didn't know how someone learned that whipping was a good thing, but he just kept saying, 'Because that's what they learned.' He started going on and on about learning, and how everything we do is about learning, and how some learn differently than others. 'Wise fool, I am,' he chuckled every once in a while."

I started getting a little confused about what Jack was talkin' about, because I wasn't sure how mom and dad would learn to scream at each other, or why they would learn to scream at each other, especially when they taught me not to scream. It didn't make sense to me how a lot of things would be learned, so I had to interrupt Jack and say I didn't understand.

Jack didn't mind that I didn't understand, 'cause he stopped at the foot of the mountain and waited for me and dad to catch up with him so he could explain. Dad already looked really tired, and was sweating a lot, so he had some water while we all stood there. Jack pointed to some trees that were leanin'. Before he started answerin' my questions, we rested, and when he answered me, he seemed really to be talkin' to dad, kinda.

Jack took a few minutes to look around, then pointed to the patch of trees about fifty yards away. "See those other trees over there? They are all leaning, not going straight up like most trees. We know it's not because the earth is crooked there, and it has nothing to do with the angle of the soil, because those trees up on the side of that other mountain over there are growing straight up. Those trees are all leaning that way because they learned to lean that way."

I listened to Jack, but I wasn't sure how a tree learned to lean. Dad stared at the trees, real quiet, drinkin' water and Jack looked at him. Before I could ask Jack why, he answered my question.

"Those trees learned when they were growing that they had to bend their shape that way to survive. It was something the wind kept telling them, and they listened." Jack pointed toward a bunch of perfectly straight trees. "The trees learned, but now what if you tried to make that tree bend? What if you wanted that tree to bend like those others right now? Those that learned to grow straight-up, tall and proud, could you make them bend?"

Jack was quiet for a while, letting us think about it. I thought and said, "Sure."

"How are you going to learn it to bend?" Jack asked me. I remember he had a big grin on his face.

"Get a big rope, tie it to the top of the tree and pull it over," I insisted, pretty proudly.

"Only if you teach it, son. If you try to bend that tree over like the others, all it would know how to do is die. It hasn't learned how to lean like that, and it's not the kind of tree that takes to that kind of quick learning. It would snap. Like some people, it's not known for its flexibility. But, maybe if you tied

the rope to the top of the tree and pulled it ever so gently just the tiniest bit and tied that rope down, then came back next month and pulled just a tiny bit more, you might be able to learn that tree to bend, but you'd have to be like the wind, gentle and persistent. And you'd have to learn it while it's still growing"

I could look at the trees and kinda understand what he was talkin' about. I couldn't think of why I would ever want to make a tree bend though, and I really wouldn't want to come and bend it just a little every once in a while. I was thinkin' it would probably be best if we let the tree go the way it felt it needed to go - go the way it had learned was best to survive.

"People are kinda like trees, as long as you try to change their direction like the sweet blowing wind, they'll most always bend a tiny bit." Jack was speaking right at my dad now, still smilin'.

Jack turned and began to walk over the rocks and up the hill. I followed. Dad was actin' a little strange, 'cause he just kept starin' at the bent trees for the longest time. I thought maybe the bag was too heavy, or somethin' was wrong, so I was going to shout to him, but when I stopped and turned to shout Jack put his hand over my mouth.

"Let him be, son," he said, and we kept walkin'.

If Jack were a tree, I think he'd be one of those really giant ol' trees I'd seen. Standin' tall, lookin' strong, givin' shade and bendin' a bit with the wind.

Pause

We had been hiking for a long time. I was really tired, and dad looked like he was about to die. Jack and I were way ahead of him, but every time Jack shouted back and asked dad if he wanted us to wait, he just waved us to go ahead. I was really thirsty, and getting hungry, and kinda wanted to rest, 'cause my legs were getting tired too, but I didn't want Jack to think I couldn't do it.

I think he figured I was tired, 'cause he said he was getting tired, but he didn't look too tired. He said we would be at the top of the mountain in a few minutes, but he wasn't sure he could make it without a rest. He asked me if I could make it without a rest. I didn't think so, but I wasn't goin' to quit, so I said, "Sure." It didn't look to be too much further, especially when I looked behind and seen how far we'd come.

By the time we made it to the top of the mountain, my shirt was drenched, all sweaty. I threw my school bag on the dusty ground and sat down. Dirt was sticking to

my sweat. I could feel my leg muscles throbbing. Jack stood there and looked around. I kept lookin' back to see if dad was almost up, but he wasn't in sight, so I rested and tried to catch my breath, trying not to be obvious about breathing so hard.

Dad finally made it to the top, but it took a lot longer than it took us. When he got up to the top, he threw his pack off his back, flung it on the ground and fell to his knees. He was more tired than I had been. Jack kinda laughed, which made me smile. It was kinda funny - dad lookin' worse than an old man and a kid, on his knees gaspin' loudly for air.

Jack went into his pack and pulled out a few apples and some crackers. I was so hungry I was sure it wasn't goin' to be enough, but I remember that apple, 'cause I think it was the best apple I've ever eatin' my whole life. I remember how sweet, and crunchy, and juicy, and perfect it tasted, like it was the only thing my body ever wanted. It was really juicy. After the apple, I had some crackers and water, and felt ready to go again, but still a bit sore. Dad looked like he needed to rest some more. He was eatin' real slow.

Dad laid back against his thick pack, looking out on the view like Jack was, so I stood up and looked around too. All I

saw were mountains and canyons in every direction. I didn't see a city or a building or a road or nothin', just red, and brown and purple, and yellow and pink mountains and stuff. I decided to ask dad what Jack was lookin' at, and he told me if I wanted to know what Jack was lookin' at, I should be askin' Jack, so I did.

"What do you see?" Jack asked me in return. I told him I didn't see anything.

"Shhhh," he whispered, puttin' his fingers in front of that funny, wrinkled grin. "Don't say that too loud. These mountains you see, the mountain you're standing on, do you know how long it took to make these?"

I shook my head no, 'cause I only knew they'd been there as long as I could remember.

"So long, to us it is forever," Jack whispered. "Did you feel the big earthquake last year?"

I said, "Yeah," 'cause I really remembered that one. It shook so hard it knocked me down when I tried to get outta bed. It was the first time I heard glass break and it wasn't anyone's fault.

"That earthquake was helping make these mountains. It was nature working, and it goes about its business whether we're here or not. When I look around I see a majesty that I can not and would not wish to comprehend. It is too wondrous,

yet it is here for me to enjoy. These mountains are going to look pretty much like this your whole life, yet they're always changing. They're always alive. The animals braver than us who live here, the plants that seem to rise without cause, they all have their purpose, and I can stand here and look at it and say it is all for me, as I am all for it. When I look out there I see life. I see that I am a part of something real. Something bigger than any imagination."

I remember really havin' no idea what Jack was talkin' about, but he wasn't really talkin' to me, he was talking to himself. He seemed so happy and admiring of what he saw. I did look again at what he was looking at and remember feeling like everything around us looked so small compared to these mountains, then I felt really small, too, and kinda scared. I went to sit next to dad, where I was sure I couldn't fall off an edge. It seemed scary big, but the red ants I watched at my feet didn't seem too concerned.

"Pretty spectacular?" dad said.

I just gave him a "Yeah" grunt.

We rested, but not so long, 'cause Jack said we had to keep movin'. Jack pointed to a large purple red crevice between the mountains, which looked like cliffs I had seen in books. He said we were goin' that way, and wondered to me

where I thought we should go. I told him I didn't know, but he said we weren't goin' anywhere till I decided how we were heading.

I stood on my toes and looked everywhere. I saw things I hadn't really noticed before. There were barren dirt mountains. Areas of rock that had plants growing around them, and places where there were clumps of trees. I wanted someplace that looked a little safe. Someplace I could get to. I noticed that at the bottom of the mountain near the crevice there was a small area that had a lot of trees and bushes. For some reason it looked like the best place, but I kept lookin' a bit longer to see if I could find a better place. Eventually I pointed to the spot, and I think Jack was pretty grateful 'cause he got a big smile on his face.

"That looks like the best place I've ever seen. Most alive spot in the area, I'm sure. You've got good eyes, son," Jack said, pattin' my head with his big hand, grinnin' ear-to-ear.

We all picked up our stuff and got ready to go again, but dad was not lookin' forward to carryin' his pack, and let all of us know.

Jack kinda laughed, and said to me in a loud voice, "You're daddy has a lot of baggage he won't part with."

I looked at that big pack my dad was carryin' and told Jack he was right. Then I told dad, "Why don't you just leave what you don't need here? We'll get it on the way back." Dad didn't answer me, he answered Jack. I guess they weren't just talkin' 'bout the pack.

"This stuff's expensive. I'm not going to leave it here and lose it. There's nothing in this pack we don't need!" dad shouted.

"You and I have a difference of opinion on the word need. You fall down that hill and kill yourself trying to carry that pack and you tell me how much of that stuff you *needed*," Jack answered, laughing.

"I'm not going to fall down any hills, so don't you worry about it. There is not a thing in here we wont use."

"It sure limits your freedom, though. Doesn't it?"

"Don't worry about it!" Dad was raisin' his voice, strugglin' and gettin' a little agitated through his heavy breathing. I wasn't sure why they kept talking about the pack. It was up to dad if he wanted to bring it or not.

"I'm not worrying about anything, son. You can choose any kind of anchor you wish, but don't spend too much time wondering why you have no mobility," Jack said to dad, then turned to me.

"You ever see a hot air balloon?" he asked.

I nodded my head, "Yes."

"You see how high in the air they go?"

I nodded, "Yes," again.

"They can't go until they get rid of dead weight, the anchors they have on the ground. Then they soar as high and far as they wish with the wind."

Jack started walkin' and I quickly followed. Dad came along too, not sayin' much. Jack kept talkin' to me about anchors and weight and baggage and such. I found it all pretty interesting, but I think he was really trying to say something to my dad, who every once in a while let out a purposeful grunt, and sometimes it seemed like a growl.

One of the things I remember him saying was about some kinda monkey, or somethin', and how you captured one. He said that what you did was put a hole in a box just barely big enough for the monkey to fit its arm into, and put its favorite food inside, like a banana. He said the monkey was captured as soon as it grabbed the banana, which made no sense to me. He said the monkey was captured because it wouldn't let go of the banana and the hole in the box was not big enough to pull his hand out with the banana in it.

Now, I figured that all the monkey had to do was let go of the banana, but Jack

said the monkey would not, could not, let go of the banana, 'cause he had learned that the banana was more important than anything, even his freedom. He said the monkey wouldn't let go of the banana even when you came right up to it. "Didn't know how to let go," Jack said. I told him I thought it was a pretty stupid monkey, and he said the monkey thought he was pretty smart, 'cause it had a banana in its hand and you didn't.

I thought the story was pretty interestin', 'bout the monkey, but I wasn't sure why he said to dad, "Ever feel like a monkey?" Dad thought it was pretty funny and laughed.

Dad said not only did he feel like a monkey, but he thought he might have his arm caught in a box. Then he shouted, "And there ain't no way I'm lettin' go of that banana!" and laughed. Jack laughed too. I laughed too, thinking of dad with his arm in a box holding onto a banana and not knowing how to let go.

We hiked down the other side of the mountain at a slow pace, 'cause dad was tired and needed to have a lot of water, carryin' that big pack and all. Jack offered to carry it a few times, which made me a little nervous, 'cause that pack seemed to be almost as heavy as Jack, and I thought he might be a little too old to carry it. Fortunately, I think dad thought

the same thing, 'cause he wouldn't let Jack near the pack, sayin' he could carry his own baggage.

Taking the time to go slowly down the other side of the mountain, I noticed a lot of things. I noticed how some areas where I thought there was only dirt were actually covered with lots and lots of flowers, but they were tiny flowers. I also saw lots of different bugs and lizards and stuff that I had never seen before. I remember one bug really scared me, 'cause it was kinda big. It had a red and black shell and looked a little like a cockroach, but it looked like two cockroaches attached end to end, fighting over which way to go. One end was trying to walk one way, while the other end was strugglin' with all its might to pull the other way. All it ended up doin' was goin' round and round in circles.

Thinkin' 'bout that monkey and that bug made me think nature's got some pretty interesting things. I'm not sure what they were learnin' but for me I guess they helped me learn.

Campsite

It took us some time to get down the mountain, and when we did we were in these crevices, these giant cracks. I remember the cracks because we were at the bottom of these tall walls that were close together and had a lot of color. It was mostly shaded in the crack, which made it cool. The walls were a reddish purple with drops suspended on the wall like frozen raindrops, but they were dirt. It's difficult to describe, but when I close my eyes I can see it. I can take myself there.

It took some time to walk out of the crevice, and when we did I didn't know where we were. The sun was gettin' lower on the horizon and I couldn't see where we were supposed to be going anymore. Jack waited a few minutes for dad to come, and had a drink of water. He asked me where to go, so I had to tell him I wasn't really sure, not wantin' to lead anyone astray.

Jack told me that since I had seen where we were goin' I needed to find the way. He said his eyes weren't so good

anymore, and dad was too tired. Dad did look like he was goin' to pass out. Since I picked the spot, I should have no problem findin' it, Jack said. I had no idea of where to start lookin', but Jack asked me where we started from, and I noticed right away the peak we were on, 'cause of a bush I remembered. It was pretty high up there. Jack said we'd come a long way. I thought I knew the way now.

I started to lead off, but dad, barely able to talk he was so tired, said to let Jack lead the way. I stopped to let Jack go.

"He found the spot where we're going to set camp, so he can take us there." Then Jack smiled at dad and said, "My eyes are kinda bad when the sun starts to go down." I started to lead the way.

Dad said, "Yeah, right," to Jack, in a way that if I talked I woulda been sent to my room.

"We don't talk in that tone," he'd have said to me, but Jack just laughed.

I kept walkin' in the direction I thought we should go, but I wasn't really sure, so I went really fast to get ahead of Jack, that way I could change directions without them noticin' too much. Dad was way behind, with is heavy pack. I did pretty good for a while, not havin' to change direction at all, I didn't think, but then I came to a spot where I didn't

know which way to go. I stopped and looked around a while, then I told Jack.

"You can figure it out," he answered. I figured he was right, I could figure it out - maybe.

I told the two of them to wait there a minute, and I'd find the way. I could see dad liked restin', 'cause he took his pack off again and had some more water. I thought he'd drink all the water before we ever got to camp. I figured I'd better find the way real quick, 'cause they both looked tired, and my legs were gettin' a little slow too.

I figured the best way to find where I was goin' would be to climb this rock next to us, but it was kinda a big, and it seemed kinda difficult to scale. I walked around it a few times and found a place that looked like I might be able to climb up. I took my school bag off and set it on the ground, then made sure Jack and dad could see me. Jack was watching pretty carefully, and dad was still sucking on the water, gaspin' for air.

I reached up and grabbed an edge grooved into the hard rock. I remember the pain I felt when I grabbed the rock, 'cause it was really sharp, but I made myself hold on. If I wasn't goin' to start, I'd never finish. It was really scary. There really wasn't much of a place to put my feet real well, or to grab onto.

I hadn't gone up very high, when I slipped down the rock and ripped my pants. I caught myself from falling all the way off though.

I looked over and could see my dad was startin' to come over, but Jack wouldn't let him. I guess Jack figured my dad was too tired to climb the rock, but he gave me a nod with his head and a smile. He was right, I could figure out how to get there. My pants weren't ripped that bad, and it didn't seem I was bleedin'.

It took me a while to climb the rock, but when I got to the top I could see which way to go. I shouted the directions back to dad and Jack. I waited for them to start headin' that way, but they said they wanted to wait for me to lead the way. I wanted them to start, to make sure they went the right way, but I was glad they waited. Gettin' down that rock was different than gettin' up.

When I was goin' up the rock, I could see where I was goin', but comin' down was different - I couldn't see that well. What made it worse was that when I was gettin' ready to go down, the rock looked different. It seemed that the best way to go down was not the way I came up. I thought this was a little strange, but it made goin' down a lot easier. When I got to the bottom, dad and Jack were waitin'

where I had gone up, not expectin' me to come down somewhere else.

They looked at me funny as I walked back and forth between the place where I went up and the place where I came down. It seemed strange to me that the best way to go up was different than the best way to come down, but as I looked at both places, I knew that if I went back up the rock, the place I thought was the best when I first went up would still be the best way to go, and I knew it wasn't the best way to come down. I thought it was strange, then I figured it must be 'cause goin' up and comin' down are really two different things. Maybe they were supposed to be different, each with their own best way. That was pretty interesting - made me feel like I was learnin'.

I led the way. It didn't take long for us to find the campsite. It was a pretty neat place. There were lots of trees and bushes, and you could hear a lot of birds. We set our stuff down and checked the place out. Jack and I did anyway, dad just laid down, 'cause he was really, really tired. I think what he was carrying might have been too heavy. Jack and I walked into the thick of all the bushes, and the ground got really soft and muddy. The mud almost sucked my shoes off when I stepped. I asked Jack what it was.

"Life," he answered. I looked at him funny. I didn't understand what he meant by that, then he just gave me one of his smiles and said, "Water."

I looked around, but I didn't see any streams anywhere. Jack told me it wasn't a stream, but a natural underground spring, which was why all the trees and bushes were there, because there was so much water to give these things life. He showed me where he thought the spring was. It was a big puddle he had found behind some bushes. I wasn't sure how it got there, but he said it worked its way up from deep underground, like water seeping through a crack in a glass. We walked the ground around it, and the muck in the middle of the puddle was warmer than the rest. He said it was because the earth made it hot before it came out. I thought it was pretty amazing to find water like that, in the middle of nowhere, but Jack said we weren't in the middle of nowhere, we were definitely somewhere.

It was a lot of fun playin' in the bushes. Jack said that enough water was here for us to live forever. I thought the water was a little muddy for drinkin', but he just laughed and said he'd show me how to get some clean water, even if it still looked a bit dirty. It was pretty amazing, that we had water, but I didn't see how

we'd stay there for too long without any food.

Jack and I went back to the camp, and dad was asleep. He musta really been exhausted. I told Jack to be quite, so we wouldn't wake dad. Jack went to get his rifles from his stuff. He said we'd better hurry, 'cause we wouldn't be able to find any food if we let the sun get all the way down. He gave me a rifle, and showed me how to carry it. We left dad there asleep.

It was cooling and getting dark fast. I thought we should go back, but Jack said we needed to find some food. I thought he, or dad, had brought some, but he said we didn't 'cause we didn't need to, since it was already here.

I followed him for a long way. He seemed to know where he was goin', but I was curious, and a little nervous, so I had to ask, "You know where we're goin'?"

Jack said he was following a food trail, and that maybe I could help him. I had never seen a food trail, but I was willing to try. He stopped for me and had me stand in front of him. He said, "There are two kinds of animals you should be looking for, the kind that feed us and the kind that feed *on* us."

"Feed *on* us?" I said. I was a little anxious that somethin' might want to eat us, and Jack didn't do much to alleviate those concerns, tellin' me it was only

fair. I didn't get much time to think about it though, 'cause he said it was gettin' late and we had to hurry. We needed to get to trackin'. He asked me what I saw.

I looked around and didn't see anythin' that made me think of a food trail, but I guess I was lookin' the wrong direction, 'cause Jack put his hand on the back of my head and pushed it toward the ground. Lookin' down I noticed some prints that looked kinda like dog paws, and some prints that looked kinda like chicken feet, or somethin'. I didn't want to follow the ones that looked like paws, so I started walkin' in the direction of the bird feet.

We walked a little ways, and it was sometimes hard to see the prints. Jack musta been grateful I was there to help, since he had that problem with his eyes not workin' real well. I don't think his eyes were so bad though, 'cause when we came to a spot before some large brush, he pulled me back from followin' the trail. He had me stand behind him and aimed his rifle. I can tell you that I was shakin' nervous - even standin' behind him - 'cause I remember him earlier sayin' that there might be mountain lions in the area. Maybe he spotted a mountain lion. Honestly, I was a little frightened, and

held my rifle real tight, even though I'd never fired one before.

I think it was the loudest noise I'd ever heard. There were two crackin' quick shots, and Jack looked pretty happy. He said we had something for dinner. We walked over to the bushes and there were a couple of birds on the ground that were dead. This is what Jack had shot. I felt a little bad, 'cause I'd never seen anything killed before, and Jack asked me to carry one.

I held the warm limp neck in my hand, with my arm extended out a little. I didn't want to squeeze too tight, but I didn't want to drop it either. I just kept lookin' at it, followin' Jack back. I remember hearing my mom talk about how people are cruel to animals, and thought this musta been what she meant. I asked Jack if it wasn't mean to kill the bird. "Maybe it had kids?" I said.

"Do you eat chicken, or beef, or any other meat at home?" he asked me, as we walked back. I told him we did, but only sometimes.

"Well, if you had said no, than I would have told you that you couldn't survive out here." He held up the bird he was carryin', and said, "This is what you need to live out here, and it's honest."

I wasn't sure what he meant about honest, but he explained it a little

better when he said that the stuff we bought from the store never had freedom and was raised on chemicals and stuff that wasn't real. He said they were raised only for slaughter, but here we only killed what we needed, when we needed, so the rest of nature gets strong and makes more. He said we were "natural predators," when we were honest about it.

I thought some about what Jack said, but I kept comin' back to the fact that there was a blood drippin' dead bird hangin' from my hand. I missed some of the things Jack was sayin, 'cause I just kept starin' at the bird, feelin' a little sad inside. I knew Jack didn't want me too. I tried not to show it, but it was the way I was feeling. Jack said I was just showin' respect. "It's good you respect life. It's good," he assured.

When we got back to camp, dad looked a bit angry. He didn't say anythin' to me, but went up to Jack and talked with him quietly. He looked like he wanted to yell, though. Jack told me later that dad was scared when he heard the gun shots. Woke him up and I was gone. I could understand, 'cause I was scared and I was there.

After Jack shot the birds and woke dad up, I guess dad had a lot of time, 'cause he built the camp real nice. He had a tent set up, and had our sleepin' bags set out. He'd put a bunch of rocks in a circle and

had some wood in the center. There was also wood gathered in a neat pile a few feet from the stone circle. He even cleared away the rocks and sticks and stuff in the camp area, so the ground under the sleepin' bags and tent was smooth. It looked nice.

Jack said if dad and I wanted to eat we would have to clean the birds. I thought he meant to wash the bird like when I washed myself in the tub, but that wasn't it. Dad hadn't cleaned a bird himself in a long time, so Jack kinda stood over us and told us what to do. I didn't think I'd be able to do it, but I sure didn't want them to think I couldn't. I figured if dad could do it, so could I.

I remember pullin' the feathers off – it seemed like the bird was holdin' on to them, even though it was dead. I remember slicin' the bird open with Jack's sharp knife. I remember the warm blood that ran over my hands. I remember the insides of the bird that I pulled out. Jack kept pointin' out all the parts in the bird, the organs like the ones inside us. I thought it was kinda neat, seeing the things inside of me. I thought about someone pullin' out my guts and eatin' me. I remembered what Jack said on the way back about the lion.

Jack had asked me if I thought a hungry mountain lion would hesitate if he

saw me. He said that since I could out run him, the lion would get the old man first, which Jack said was the way it should be. I thought about the stuff coming out of the bird, thinking of the lion takin' it outta Jack. Jack said the lion would never take more than it could eat, and anything left over would be used by the other animals. "There is no waste out here," he said. "It's honest."

I could understand what Jack meant about the no waste thing. After cleanin' the bird, I sure didn't want to kill for nothin'. It took a while to clean the birds, and dad seemed to have a pretty good idea of what to do. He cleaned so that I could see what he was doin', then waited for me to do it before he went on. I don't think he was listenin' to Jack, but maybe he was 'cause Jack kept talkin', and he didn't seem to usually talk for nothin'. Maybe dad already knew what Jack was talkin' about.

The wood inside the rock circle was set afire by dad, who had made a thing to cook the birds on. It was kinda neat. It was a long stick that went through the birds, then each end of the stick was held up by other sticks at both ends. I was real surprised that dad made it by himself, 'cause I'd never seen him do anything like that before. He said he hadn't remembered till he started buildin'

it that he had watched his dad build one when he was a kid. Dad really seemed to be proud of it. I was proud he'd done it.

The sun had gone down, but it wasn't really dark, 'cause of the big fire dad had built. I heard some noises around us every once in a while, but was more interested in watchin' the birds cook. I was really hungry, and as I watched and listened to the crackles of the fire, I wondered what it would taste like. Jack and dad were talkin' about somethin', but I just wanted to watch the fire and the birds.

It seemed like it took a long time to cook. Dad said it only takes a little longer to do it right, and I think he was right, 'cause when he took them off the fire they looked real done. Dad had brought a couple of metal plates for him and me. He ripped the bird into pieces with his hands. Jack didn't have a plate. I offered him mine, but he said he didn't need one. "Too heavy," he said. He just held what he was goin' to eat in a clothe, like a small towel.

I was so hungry by the time dad filled my plate, I thought I could eat almost anything, but when I looked at the bird I thought about cleanin' it and holdin' it in my hand and Jack shootin' it. I almost lost my appetite, but I remembered what Jack had said about wastin' it, and I had

no desire to allow the bird to go to waste, so I peeled a piece of meat off the bones and put it in my mouth. You wouldn't think eatin' a bird would be so memorable – maybe it was because I was so hungry – but I sure remember how that bird tasted. It was the best meat I'd ever eatin'. It was so good and needed. It reminded me of the juicy apple I ate earlier in the day. It was good, very good.

Dad and Jack really seemed to enjoy the birds. It was tasty food, and I didn't feel so bad about eatin' them after I was done. It seemed like it was reasonable, and we sure didn't waste anything. We probably could have eatin' another one, but we didn't need another, and we didn't have another. I just wondered if something was goin' to eat me for dinner that night.

We sat near the fire for a long time after we ate. Jack and dad stared at the stars. It was my job to make sure the fire kept goin' by throwin' a piece of wood in whenever it started to get too small. I wasn't lookin' so much at the stars, 'cause I was takin' care of the fire. I kept watchin' 'round the campsite to make sure there weren't any animals comin' up. Jack said the fire'd most likely keep them away, but I wanted to make sure, 'cause I heard noises that I couldn't identify. It was a little spooky, but dad and Jack didn't look like they were worryin'.

After a while, I got sorta tired, but had to keep the fire goin'. Dad said it was time to go to sleep, though. Jack stretched out on his sleepin' bag, and dad told me to get into my sleepin' bag, which was in the tent. Jack said I could sleep in his tent if I wanted. He said it had lots of room, but he was kiddin', 'cause he didn't have a tent.

"Bring the sleeping bags out," dad said. "We're goin' to sleep in the Old Man's tent," he laughed. I still didn't see a tent.

I brought the bags out and laid them next to Jack, puttin' my bag between dad and Jack. I threw some more wood on the fire, and said "Mighty big tent," kinda as a joke.

"Biggest tent there is," he said. "As high as the eye can see, and as wide as the ears can hear. They don't get any bigger, and its never crowded, even though we've got a lot of creatures stayin' in it with us." Jack kinda perked up his ears as we heard a howl in the distance.

I was scared, thinkin' it might be safer in dad's tent. I crawled way down inside my sleepin' bag, then closed it till there was a hole just big enough for me to breath through. I told Jack it was because I was cold. He said he'd do the same thing if he was cold. I just really thought it would be safer if I was covered

for the night, and it was a little cold, kinda. Dad and Jack continued to look at the stars, talkin' occasionally, but I was listenin' for those noises. Every time I heard one I was sure I would be awake all night, but those thoughts didn't last long, 'cause I went to sleep, fast. It was a tirin' day.

A Morning's Turn

Dad and Jack musta had a lot to talk about, 'cause when I woke the next morning, they were still talkin', layin' on top of their sleepin' bags. They musta slept some, though, 'cause dad didn't look so tired anymore.

I managed to roll a few feet from where I started, but nothin' got in my sleepin' bag, for which I was grateful 'cause the fire that was to keep them away was out. I got outta my bag and stretched. My body was really stiff, especially my legs, but I remember that the air tasted really good and cleaned my lungs. I was able to take a breath twice the normal size.

Dad and Jack said, "Hi." They both had on pretty big grins. Whatever it was they were talkin' about seemed mighty agreeable.

My stomach started growlin' right away, so dad gave me the cereal he'd brought. I would've liked it with milk. I'd never had cereal with water, but I was hungry enough that I was gonna eat it any

way. It didn't taste as good as it did with milk, but "when hungry, your body isn't really asking for taste," Jack said. Dad had some cereal with water in it like I did, and Jack had an orange he brought with him.

After we got done eatin', I was expectin' to pack up, thinkin' we were goin' to hike some more, but dad told me that we were stayin' at the same campsite again. He told me that I had better roll up my sleepin' bag and pack up my stuff, though, so a snake or scorpion or somethin' didn't crawl inside and make it into a home. It made me think that I'd better check things real good, just to be safe from all the "neighborly critters," as dad called them.

Jack said that we'd better get goin' before it was too hot, or we wouldn't have much of a chance to catch food. He said the cool of morning and evening were the best times for huntin', 'cause most animals were smart enough to stay out of the day's heat. I wasn't so anxious to hunt again, so I asked if we could be vegetarians for a day.

Dad kinda laughed, then said, "Your mother was a vegetarian for a while, but it was too much work, trying to cook healthy and hearty for a growing young man without meat."

"Why, you don't want to do anymore hunting, son?" Jack asked me.

I remember not knowin' how to answer him, 'cause I wasn't really sure what the answer was myself. I guess that it wasn't that I minded huntin', it was more that I wanted to make sure we had to hunt. I just kinda shrugged my shoulders in answer to Jack.

"Son, let me tell you, if you want to eat you have to hunt, and you have to kill, or nature has no use for you," Jack told me real stern.

"Technically, you can be a vegetarian," dad said to Jack.

Jack didn't look to dad when he answered, but to me. He said "Everything that grows is alive, so if you want to eat rocks and dirt, you don't have to kill anything, but you wont survive too long on such a tasty diet." I remember he laughed, and picked up some dirt like he was goin' to eat it. "Fruits and vegetables grow, taking from the water and soil around them, and they breath. When these living creatures are at their prime, you pick it, you kill it, and have great tasting produce. But you've got to kill it."

"It's not like killing a cow, or a bird," dad said to Jack, who kept lookin' at me.

"You know what a pyramid is?" Jack asked. I nodded yes. "Put us, or a lion,

at the top, now move all the stones from underneath. The pyramid falls. Without the bottom there is no top, so what is more important, the stuff like the plants at the bottom that feed the cow, or the cow itself, which could not exist without the plants?"

"The plants," I guessed.

"But plants don't bleed," dad said.

"Is that how you choose the importance of life? Sounds like you're afraid the food chain might be getting a little too close to home.

"Don't plants bleed? Maybe not like you and I, but they bleed their own way when you rip away their fruit, or you break a branch like you break an arm. They try to heal themselves. Just because it is not as fast and furious as the warm dark blood that would flow from your flesh does not mean it isn't there. They need water, as any animal does. They need to breathe, as animals do. They learn, as life does." Jack was answerin' my dad, but kept lookin' at me and tellin' me all of this. He was very excited, serious, so I listened real closely, but he turned and stepped toward my dad to finish. "Life is life. Each living thing doing what is solely in its best interest to survive, which allows what lives to survive together in an always changing, balancing harmony. Don't believe the top of the food

chain, as you might call it, is more alive or more important than the bottom, because it could not exist without the bottom, while the bottom would flourish, over flourish, without the top to harvest. Together, they create a balance."

Dad's face was stretchin' to speak. I could see dad wanted to answer Jack, but he didn't seem to know what to say. It seemed like every time he got ready to say somethin', his mind told him Jack was right, or what he was thinkin' was wrong. I'd never really seen dad lost for words like that before, so I just watched him and waited. When he started cleanin' up, I could see he'd not been able to answer Jack in his mind, so what Jack said musta been pretty honest. It was real quiet for a long time after Jack told us about life. Dad kept thinkin' about it, I could tell.

We finally got started, but we weren't doin' serious huntin'. I was runnin' around lookin' at all of the plants and holes in the ground and rocks and stuff. We were really learnin' that morning, and I didn't have to carry a gun or my school bag, since we left our packs at the camp, and dad carried the gun.

We went up a narrow path in the mountain, and in the middle of the path was a giant green tree, providin' lots of shade. Jack sat on a boulder under the tree and pointed to what looked like big

sticks. He said, "Go pick those up," so I went over and tried to pick them up, but they weren't sticks. They came out of the ground and went back in a few feet later. They weren't comin' up, and when I sat down next to Jack, he pointed to the veins in his arms, then to the buried sticks. "Those are the roots to the tree we're sitting under. They might not look like our veins, but to the tree they're just as important."

I'd never really thought about roots as veins, so I went over and looked at the roots that came out of the ground. I remember that I spent a great deal of time lookin' at the veins I could find in my skinny arms and hands, and anywhere else, including Jack's veins, which were easier to see. I noticed dad was sittin' a little behind Jack and watchin' me, lookin' at his veins every once in a while.

Jack sure was showin' us a lot, but he said we'd better get back, 'cause we'd done a poor job of huntin', and now we had to see if we could get some water out of the mud we found the day before.

Dad stayed back, said he was gonna keep lookin' for food while Jack and I gathered water. Jack yelled to him, as we were walkin' away, "It's important to make yourself useful, no one does any good sitting all day."

"Quiet, Old Man!" dad yelled back, but it was in a kiddin' voice.

When we were walkin' back, I spotted a huge rabbit. Instinctively, without sayin' a word, I grabbed Jack's shirt, tugged on it to get his attention and pointed to the little rabbit.

"Jackrabbit," he whispered, just starin' at it with a smile.

I was lookin' at it too, but was also watchin' for Jack to take his gun out and shoot the critter, but he just kept starin'. I ended up watchin' Jack till the rabbit ran away. "We'll save that one for your father," Jack said, but the rabbit was goin' the other way. I guess Jack wasn't up to huntin' that particular moment.

Continuin' back to camp, Jack told me most everything he knew about rabbits. How they make lots of babies, and how they eat, and how they're eaten by a lot of the other animals. About how fast they were, and a lot more things. He also said that they weren't named after him. I didn't know there was that much to know about rabbits, but I learned that there was a lot to know about everything. More than anyone could rightly ever know.

When we got back to the campsite, Jack grabbed some things and went under the bushes to where we'd found the puddle. He started diggin', and asked me to help. It

was real muddy, so we couldn't really dig very well, but we kept workin'. It was takin' a while, and Jack and I got to talkin' 'bout dad and mom, then I asked him if he had a wife. Jack, who was always smilin', seemed like a guy who was always happy, so I was a little surprised when he got quiet and stopped diggin' for a minute. I stopped too, till he started again.

When Jack started diggin' again, he got to talkin' 'bout his wife. He said, "Yeah, I was married. It seems like a long time ago. It was a long time ago.

"About fifty, no, sixty years ago I met the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I saw her in the grocery store looking at fresh produce, and I knew I had to talk to her. I'd never done anything like that before, but something in my mind said I'd regret it forever if I didn't do something, so I went up and introduced myself. It was awkward for a moment, but that beautiful big smile of hers made it all worthwhile, except for the fact she walked away without speaking to me." Jack was talkin', not really noticin' whether I was listenin' or not. He seemed happy again. He motioned for me to step back, so he could finish diggin' the water himself. I climbed to sit on the branch of a tree and listen, 'cause Jack was talkin', happy and smilin'.

"I didn't know what to do, since she didn't talk to me. I didn't want her to be afraid of me and think I was strange, but I had to talk with her. So, I went up and introduced myself again, but this time I also told her I lived in the area and where I was working, so she would know I wasn't unstable." Jack was quiet for a minute, thinkin'. "It wasn't easy, but I did talk her into giving me her name and number, and after that I knew we'd be together." Jack laughed to himself, kinda happy. "I just didn't know it would take six weeks of talking to her on the phone and telling her about myself, my family, my friends and my life before she'd go out with me. But it was worth it, because all of that talking to her made me feel like she was the best friend I'd ever had.

"When I was with her I felt like I was on top of the world. She made me feel like I could do anything, just because she believed. She believed in me, so I believed more in myself. I started trying things I had never done before, and I started making some headway in the company I was working for, working my way up. Everything seemed to go so well when she was around that I knew I had to have her with me always.

"I took her away for a weekend, and under a starry night's full moon on a lapping beach, I asked her to marry me. It

wasn't like I was asking, though, because I knew what her answer was going to be before I said the words.

"When she said yes, I felt like you could put the world on my shoulders and I could carry it without a second thought. Those were some of the happiest days of my life. Young and in love. Conquering the world, it seemed.

"A couple years after we were married, we had a little girl. Most precious little thing you'd ever seen. Seemed like every time I thought life couldn't get any better, it did. The gifts were abundant, maybe too abundant." Jack got quiet for a few minutes, just starin' into the hole he was diggin', shakin' his head in disapproval.

"She really wanted to give me a son, so we tried again, but she couldn't get pregnant, and when the doctor told her she wouldn't be able to have anymore kids, she changed. I don't know, maybe I changed. Maybe we both changed."

Jack had taken to resting on his knee, as he was tellin' me his story. I could see he liked tellin' it, but he looked like the more he told the less happy he was gettin' - like he knew what was ahead, and didn't want to go there, but didn't know any other way.

"She started getting real protective, worried something was going to happen to

the one little baby she did have. I didn't think it was right, but I understood why she was so protective. She was scared, but it didn't do my little girl any good, I don't think. She became spoiled, soft, and I let it happen, just because her mother was scared. Overprotective also meant she kept the child as her own, so we started to grow apart, and I let it happen, but it did give me time to start thinking about things. I went hiking with your granpa a lot, which was when we would talk and think - clearly.

"When I came home from work one day and told her I'd quit my job, the person standing in front of me was not the one I had married. She started yelling and screaming at me. 'How could you do something so stupid?!' she shouted. I couldn't understand why. I felt I had good reasons for quitting, but she didn't even want to hear them. We didn't need the money, at least I didn't think so." Jack was quiet. It looked like he was seeing the images in the ground before him, just watchin' for a long time, sayin' nothin'.

After some time, Jack started diggin' again, slowly. "She'd come to a point in her life where all she wanted was security, and not me. Security for her and her little girl meant money. I thought we had enough. She thought we didn't. I said if she wanted more, she could go and earn

it. She said that was my job. I'm not sure how everything happened after that - why it happened so fast - but next thing I knew, we were divorced. The woman who had made me feel like I could conquer the world made me feel the world was cheap. We didn't see each other much after that."

"What about your daughter," I asked.

"I made a mistake. I didn't take much of a role in raising her up right when her mom and I were together, so when we were divorced she came to hate me with as much passion as her mother."

Jack stopped diggin', 'cause he wanted to tell me somethin' real important, at least that was what the look in his face said. "I didn't take the time to help raise her right, and it was the biggest mistake I've ever made. I used to say I wouldn't change a thing about my life, but when I'm honest, I'd change the way I let her be raised."

Jack started diggin' again, lookin' kinda bad. I thought I saw tears in his eyes, but I couldn't see Jack cryin', so I figured it was sweat.

"She grew up like her mother, only she never went through a time when she had the joyous glow her mom had when she was young. Her mother didn't pass that on, just the bitterness she'd collected. It's sad. It is what my daughter learned, because I didn't teach her any different."

Jack was diggin' real slow. I was sure he must've been cryin' now, 'cause it looked like a lot of tears were comin' from those eyes.

I was quiet for a while, 'cause I didn't know what to say, but I had to say somethin', I thought. So I asked Jack where she was now. He stopped his diggin', put the shovel down and came to sit next to the tree where I was sittin'.

"San Francisco. At least that's the address I've been writing to for the last twenty or so years. But after she got married she said she never wanted to see me again, so I respected her. Just write her, now. About once a month. Don't know if she gets them, or if she reads them, but I sure like writing to her. I'm still trying to see if I can teach her right, when I'm writing her. Her mother died a few years ago, so maybe she let some of that bitterness go. I hope, anyway."

Jack stood up and pulled me off the tree to finish diggin' the water hole.

"I'm going up that way after I take you two home, so I thought I might stop by to try and see her. She's got kids - 'bout your age now, I think. That's what her mother told me."

We were real quiet, as we finished diggin' the hole. It seemed like we spent a long time diggin', 'cause it was so quiet.

There was water in our little hole. Jack had me scoop all the water out of the hole, then we both stood there and watched the hole slowly start to fill back up with water again. It was pretty amazin', and Jack said there was enough water here to last as long as we needed. He started smilin' with those ol' teeth again. I think he started to forget about his wife and little girl, but as we started to walk from under the trees and bushes to the campsite, he talked about them again.

"You know, son, when I think about her, I think about how she was when I was courtin' her, and when we were married, and when my little girl was a baby. I remember the bitterness she found later, but it seems so insignificant to the beauty I remember. I don't know when she changed, or maybe it was me who changed, but whoever, I remember what we had at one time. It was the most beautiful, real feeling I'd ever known. Your granma and granpa had it their whole lives. I envy them, because life is something special, worth sharing."

It kinda made me wonder 'bout mom and dad. I wanted them both to be happy, but it seemed neither of them were happy anymore. I remembered when they were happy, or acted like it anyway. I wanted them to stay together, like grandma and grandpa, but only if they were goin' to

stop fightin'. I kinda wished I wasn't there for a little while, so they could figure out what they wanted to do without havin' to worry about me, but I didn't have anyplace to go. I was kinda scared about the whole thing. No one had any answers and no one was happy - at least no one acted like they were happy.

I wasn't so happy.

There's More!

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Again, thank you for your time.