

'Uncle Bobby' glanced over at Grampy, "What do you make of the growing unrest that is shutting down the college campuses across the nation?" My gaze settled with Grampy into his seat. He dipped his fingers in the finger bowl, cleaning off the ashes. Governor Reagan's recent words to the California legislature, asking them to drive "criminal anarchists and latter-day Fascists off the campuses" still echoed in my mind.

"I don't like it; I think Reagan is right when he says that higher education in our country is not just a right but a privilege." Grampy reflected, "The tensions have their root in this 'Great Society Program' that Johnson has foisted on the people. Too many Americans live within a system that they do not understand. Our economy is unique in the world. It is free and private, as opposed to being government-controlled, or one in which government is a party to cartels, price agreements, and the division of markets—so often the case in Old World Capitalism. When you find civil unrest, you often find a struggling economy that has lost sight of these principles that underlie a free enterprise system."

'Uncle Bobby' leaned forward, "There is an old expression, which could use a little more currency in our time: 'The reason why a dollar won't do as much for people as it once did, is because people won't do as much for a dollar as they once did.'"

'Uncle Ned' drew on his pipe thoughtfully, "You don't think that government has a role to play in making sure that small chicken farmers like myself don't get squeezed out of business by some brawny monopoly?"

Grampy glanced over at 'Uncle Ned,' "I'd be more worried about regulators snooping around dressed in white." 'Uncle Ned' smiled. The joke was apparently a private one. Grampy went on, "The point is that one can't always have one's cake and eat it, too, not even in this country. Our government has gotten too big. We have been spending beyond our means and creating large and growing deficits. The Keynesians, as they refer to themselves, haven't grasped the full picture that Keynes presented. They've picked up on his notion of 'Deficit Financing,' insisting that the government needs to help finance the economy in down cycles, when business is slow and people are needy. What they've forgotten, however, is that Keynes went on to emphasize that when the economy was up again, you have to pay the money back into the

treasury, so that the debt can be paid off with the surpluses that have been created." Refrains from Congressmen Crockett returned to mind. Grampy reflected, "People don't like to pull in their belts. Too many of them would rather have the government take care of them, than to roll up their sleeves and work for their living."

My eyes lowered to the finger bowl; its ripples spread. Grampy set down his coffee cup, "The generations to come are going to inherit the excesses of the last years, and there are going to be some very serious consequences unless we wake up."

'Uncle Ned' lit up his pipe again, "I don't know much about politics." Blowing out the match, he turned to us, "But I'm interested in what you boys think. You're the next generation."

Nat reflected. I paused, turned from 'Uncle Ned' to Grampy, "I think the students are concerned about something more than our economy, the 'bottom line.'" The adults were quiet. 'Uncle Ned's glance rested on me. I considered, lifting my eyes to the picture of the old North Bridge above the fireplace, "I sense there is a growing feeling among my generation that the words, 'liberty and justice for all,' do not apply equally to everybody in this land."

Grampy sat forward, "There are a lot of myths that have grown up around these concerns." A firmness returned to his voice, "However, nobody in this country has a right to assume a position they didn't earn. America has always been a fluid society, where the person on top, at one moment, could find himself on the bottom, the next. Any man, regardless of his birth, could better his position and, if he applied himself, make something of his life."

"How about the women," 'Uncle Ned' glanced about the table, "... who seem to have abandoned us?"

Grampy looked over at 'Uncle Ned,' "The women may have had more opportunities than many realized or took advantage of."

"And the black people?" The words broke unexpectedly from my lips.

Grampy turned to me. Our gazes met. "We fought a Civil War over that issue, Stuart, and were the *first* country to do so."

I looked at Grampy intently. The truth I could recognize in his

words. And yet for the first time I found myself questioning whether it was the whole truth.

Grampy leaned back into the flames, "Today these are often considered 'conservative' views." He paused, "That may be, but critics easily forget that conservatism also has its place in life. It bespeaks a philosophy that is not merely caught up in change, but is interested in change *when* that change also signifies progress. Continuity and steadiness on the course are no less important. When changes are made, they should be made with a full sense of accountability to the labors of those who went before and the expectation of those to come." I looked at my grandfather; his words were distant, "In this regard, conservatism takes a longer view than people often give it credit for." Grampy glanced across at 'Uncle Ned.' "John Sloan Dickey, president of Dartmouth College, used to say, 'Everything of any consequence is fastened at one end to the past and at the other to the future.'"

Dad rested his arm over the back of my chair, "There is an expression, boys, that has been around for quite a while now: 'In our youth, we are liberals. In our middle years, we become more moderate. In our old age, we take on the conservative mantle.'" I nodded. The expression I was familiar with. And yet, as I thought about it, I realized that, though I understood its meaning, I wasn't sure I understood the point. An assumption, unspoken, seemed to underlie the words.

Grampy returned to the main thread; the theme had grown with the years. "The strength of America lies in our free enterprise system. Prosperity is dependent upon the continuous and unlimited growth of our economy."

I listened, as the undertone arose once again in Grampy's voice, awakening an uneasiness within me. Growth—"continuous," "unlimited." The terms Grampy was using were being used, I realized, by more and more people to describe cancer—our consuming/consumer ethic. I breathed out.

As Grampy, 'Uncle Bobby,' and Dad went on to speak of our free enterprise system, the undertone grew—along with a sadness that welled up within me. Yes, my relationship with Grampy was changing in ways that I did not fully understand and yet that I knew were significant. Nat listened to the adults. 'Uncle Ned' set down his pipe on his

saucer and leaned back in his seat. My gaze settled in the flames—yellow, orange, streaks of blue. . . .

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“... Your generation has a lot of challenges before you.” The streaks of blue settled into yellow, into white. I drew my gaze out of the flames and lifted it to Grampy. Chimes from the old grandfather clock gently interceded into the conversation, . . . eight, nine, ten. Patting a yawn, Grampy placed his napkin on the table, “I’m turning in; it’s been a long day.” The Lord of Cat Bow rose with ‘Uncle Bobby’ and Nat. ‘Uncle Ned’ tapped his pipe against the ash tray, dislodging the ashes, before glancing across at me. Pausing, Dad rested his arm on my shoulder, “Don’t stay up too long.” I nodded, as he and ‘Uncle Ned’ pushed out their chairs and followed the others upstairs.

The dining room was quiet. My eyes passed across the table. Empty coffee cups, cloth napkins, a bowl of sugar, pitcher of cream, and a scattering of finger bowls lingered from the meal, harboring gathering reflections. My sights returned to the old cherry hutch, laden with its gilded treasures. An uncertainty filled me. Amidst the outer comforts and abundance of life, I realized that a certain longing, dis-ease lurked within my grandfather, the “lord” himself. My eyes searched the portraits that lined the walls—passing glances in the night—before resting once again on the battle scene above the fireplace. I looked at it long and then lowered my gaze beneath the span of its rude bridge, down into the still embers of the hearth. Words broke to the surface; I breathed in deeply: *The failures of success? A person cannot know his or her own value, even greatness, Grampy, unless we have a higher standard up against which we can measure ourselves.*

Sleep eluded me that night, as a dream, no longer young and innocent, awoke out of my depths—*America is great, yes, because America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good. . . .*