

THE BEGINNING

WE CALLED HIM “Grampy.” I never knew why. I guess it was one of those simple affections that made him special to me as a ten year old boy. And he was special, at least to me. Perhaps because he was my grandfather. But, as I grew older, somehow it seemed to be more. And I wonder even today, as I look back over those years, if I will ever understand all that “The Lord of Cat Bow” was to me.

Some of these were my thoughts as we headed up from our home in Concord, Massachusetts to Lancaster, New Hampshire for the summer, early in June, 1963. As we rounded the last bend in the road, nestled in a grove of pines stood a sign that read:

DRIVERS TAKE CARE,
31 GRANDCHILDREN
HERE AND THERE.

Yes, there were thirty-one of us; at least that was at the last count. But, the sign only began to tell the story.

Grampy lived on a farm, as all grandfathers should, complete with cows, horses, pigs, turkeys, and one stubborn and exasperating donkey named Janie. Janie was quite a donkey. She had the audacity to lie down and go to sleep every time we hitched her up to the cart for a ride. Even Grampy, who lived and died by the old New England proverb, *When the going gets tough, the tough get going*, found the old gal more than a match for his wits. Janie’s breeding was impeccable and her code of ethics unmistakably mulish. Dad swore that she was the first cousin of one

of those jackasses that he had pushed up and down the Rockies during boot camp, as a preamble to the war.

For myself, I never could understand what a former bigwig in the Republican party was doing entertaining a donkey at Cat Bow Farm. *The better angels of our nature*, a Godfather once said. I reflected. . . . Whatever the case, we grandchildren fancied that an elephant would have been eminently more appropriate. But, even though we outnumbered the adults handsomely, a pure democracy was not the practice at the farm in those years. That issue, the Lord of Cat Bow and I would take up in time.

No, there was no getting around it. Janie was basically a hopeless case. How well I remember all those hours, sitting in the cart in front of the old barn, the reins slack in my hands, while I pleaded with Janie to get up. All to no avail. It always seemed to me that Janie was ungrateful and quite arrogant. After all, we fed her, and she had her own stall. I figured the least she could do was take us for a short ride around the barnyard. But no, a member of the loyal opposition, Janie had other ideas. And, at ten years old and eighty pounds, I couldn't very well pick Janie up. So, we had to do without those rides.

Then, there was the hayloft—the scene of countless tomato fights, games of hide-and-go-seek, and of hay castles that always seemed to be in the state of caving in. We grandchildren must have taken at least a bale of hay to sleep with us every night in our hair and clothes—that, along with numerous cuts and scratches. But, these were all a part of those wonderful summer days when children were allowed to be children, and all the worries, responsibilities, and cares of life just had to wait a few years while we enjoyed ourselves.

Yes, those cuts and scratches were overlooked by everyone except Grandma Jane. She was Grampy's second wife. Bea, his first, and Dad's mother, had apparently died of pneumonia when Dad was away at war. Dad never spoke much about Bea's death – except to say that he had plenty of time to think as he was flying back in a cargo plane from the war in the Pacific theater to attend, belatedly, his mother's last rites here at home.

Grampy said even less. The little we heard came from a later account by a devoted secretary: *When Mr. Weeks returned to the office after your grandmother's death, Mrs. Murdock and I arose and stepped forward to*

greet him. Your grandfather didn't say a word, she recollected. He just stood there silently in the middle of the office, head bowed, holding our hands. I breathed in. So it was.

What remained unspoken had found its way into a journal entry on the evening of Bea's death. *Today is the saddest day of my life.* Grampy's words were as straightforward and yet tender, . . . susceptible as the old lord, who suddenly found himself standing before a mystery pointed to in a verse by Whittier sent by a dear friend:

*Yet love will dream, and faith will trust
That somehow, somewhere meet we must.
Alas for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress trees;
Who hath not learned in hours of faith
The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
That life is ever Lord of Death
And love can never lose its own.*

Yes, Grampy loved Bea dearly, and she had understood him well. They were a great couple; so I was told. I wasn't around then, probably not even a thought. As a result, what was such an important event to Grampy and his six children never affected me directly.

I don't remember much about Grandma Jane either—except that she fussed over our cuts and scratches. And also, she was a Southern lady—a charming belle from Nashville, Tennessee. That, in itself, would have been fine, if it hadn't been that every time Grandma Jane greeted me, she would grab my cheek and purr, *Hi, honey chil, how's ma babe?*

Luckily, in those days we kids weren't allowed in the Big House very often, as it was. You know: *Children are to be seen and not heard*—all those formalities that lingered between the generations, biding their time until we grandchildren would grow up and set things straight. So we figured. In any case, I didn't mind not being able to run in and out of the Big House whenever I wanted. The barn was not only more inviting, but more spacious still. And, if we got bored there, we always had the lake, fields, and mountains of our Northern Kingdom to engage our awakening curiosity and perpetual motion.

But, even though Grandma Jane had the rather irksome propensity

to indulge herself at the expense of our cheeks, I managed to overlook that. For her arrival at Cat Bow meant five more grandchildren—and, more importantly, one my age, Wade. Yes, in the time it had taken to repeat the vows, another ten members were added to the clan, and an impromptu grafting on our staunch New England family tree was arranged, so as to accommodate the new kin from south of the Mason Dixon. The more the merrier, as far as I was concerned. With time, even Grandma Jane's indulgences became a little easier to stomach.

Unfortunately, though, the new in-laws weren't around very long. One day I was told that Grandma Jane was very sick. Dad explained to me that she had some new disease with a complicated German name, *Alzhe*. . . , that only a few people had ever gotten, and that Grandma Jane would probably never get better. I was only ten at the time, and, sadly enough, the worst thing about the whole deal was that my new pal, Wade, stopped coming up to the farm. I really liked Wade. After I got around his Southern accent and saw that he could throw the crab apples as well as the rest of us, Wade was accepted right off. Looking back, it all seemed so simple as kids.

Anyway, a little more of Grampy died as Grandma Jane's condition got worse. The only time our Grandma came out of her room was when Grampy would wheel his "Jane," her pale hands gripping her shawl, into the Pine Room during cocktail hour or into the dining room for a meal. But, Grandma Jane didn't seem interested in eating, and eventually even those visits became less frequent. Finally, Grampy set up a new room in the north wing of the house for Grandma Jane, with a fancy hospital bed and nurses around the clock.

Your grandfather did not recognize illness; for him it was a weakness to be overcome, an old friend wrote after Grampy's death. So it was. Before we would leave from a visit to the farm, Grampy would make Nat, Bea, Brad, and me go down the long hall with him and give Grandma Jane a kiss good-bye. Grampy felt strongly about us sticking together as a family and figured it made Grandma Jane feel better. But, I wasn't sure. To tell the truth, I was a little scared. When I leaned over Grandma Jane's bed and kissed her, she never said a word or even looked at me. She just stared off at the wall.

In time, Grandma Jane's shadow faded away, too. The only bride to soundly outlive Grampy was Teenie (along with her miniature schnau-

zer, Tippy Toes), who, in Grampy's latter years, brought to Cat Bow Farm from the West Coast a welcome California blend—along with another half-dozen game cousins. By that time, despite ourselves, we had become a pretty cosmopolitan clan, although our roots remained firmly set in the New Hampshire soil that had become a part of the family over the generations.

For some reason my most distinct memory of those years is a retiring nook in Grampy's stately Governor Winthrop desk, which filled a quiet corner of the old Pine Room. Nestled within the nook was a small, gold-framed photograph. A sunbeam glanced over the shoulder of a kindly-looking, middle-aged lady, awakening traces of a smile on her pensive face and lighting up the shades of gray that had begun to touch her hair.

We called *him* Grampy. Grandmother, Grandma, . . . smaller than Teenie, I never knew what to call Bea; I never knew her as a mortal. Summer was passing on into autumn. Poised beneath the fleeting embrace of the old elm, Bea's gaze rested silently on the camera. In the background, the field led up to the old farmhouse, before blending into the flanks of Mt. Orne that rose up—with a happy-sad melody—over our small universe:

All night, all day, angels watchin' over me, my Lord.

All night, all day, angels watchin' over me. . . .

No, Dad never talked much with us about his mother. It was only years later that I discovered that it wasn't pneumonia that Bea actually died of. Though Grampy got her to the hospital in time, the oxygen tent didn't work. Instead of getting air, his beloved Bea suffocated.

I also had much to reflect upon over the years, as that, too, was part of the sad reality of life that took a back seat to our exciting capers.

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Cat Bow Farm to a ten-year-old was just about the most exciting place in the whole, wide world! Situated at the end of a long dirt road that ambled past fields, forests, and the Baker Farm—a clump of barns where Grampy kept various animals, equipment, and drowsy winter sleighs—Cat Bow nestled among the flanks of Mt. Orne.