

The Milking Quarter

Grandpa's house rested contentedly on a Tennessee hillside framed by the shade of ancient water oaks. The house was equipped with the necessities of rural life, like the wood fired cooking stove in the kitchen, and the coal fired pot-bellied stove in the dining room. And under the house was a root cellar, with stone steps leading into its dark, dank interior like the entrance to Pharoah's tomb.

The grandson was at his grandparents that summer due to the early arrival of a baby sister. The city boy exulted in this banishment; he loved going to the "country." For an eight year old the possibilities of exploration were endless.

The morning after his arrival, the grandson and his Grandpa went to the field next to the barn to find the milk cow, Sadie. The city boy had to high step over the clumps of thistles and also be mindful of cow patties. The Grandpa performed his sing-song "Sue-ee" call, and the brown cow lumbered toward the barn. Tying her up, the Grandpa fetched the milking pail, leaned under the milk cow and began the rhythmic cycle that produced thin white streams of warm milk.

"Come-on son, you give it a try. That's right, hold it at the corner of your thumb and your finger. Nah, you gotta squeeze just so. Ok, here, let me help ya."

The Grandpa took his grandson's hand in his and guided his fingers to the udder and its appendages. Working together a trickle of milk appeared. The city boy had to press the side of his face against the smooth soft side of Sadie to reach the operational point of milking.

The city boy on his own produced a short stream. "You got it now, keep goin'," said the Grandpa.

The thin streams made a tinny sound on the side of the pail. "I'm milkin' Gran'pa," he bent his neck up to look up at his Grandpa with a joyous grin.

"Yep, you are, keep goin'," and the smiling Grandpa settled back on his stool to supervise.

On the way to the house, his Grandpa remarked, "Your first milkin' deserves a reward," and he handed his grandson a quarter, "Here ya go."

The grandson reached up with his one free hand, careful to maintain his balance with the milk pail in the other hand, and with a wide smile stuck the small prize in his pocket.

Grandpa taught Sunday School at the white frame Methodist church. The city boy had often observed him at his spindly wooden desk in the front bedroom bent over his black leather Bible preparing the lessons. Sometimes he would catch his Grandpa with his white head bowed, pencil down, and his shoulders rising slowly and falling with each breath. The city boy knew he was talking with God. Or maybe he was asleep, it was kinda hard for the city boy to tell.

In late July, the Methodist church had a revival on a Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The Baptists took a whole week for revival, but the Methodists, being more 'methodical,' could accomplish a revival more efficiently. In truth, the congregations visited each other's revivals. Nobody wanted to miss good preaching. To be clear, no *adult* wanted to miss good preaching.

The city boy sat resigned on the hard wooden pew on a revival afternoon and day dreamed. He heard the evangelist drone on about a road, some place called Damascus, and a blinding light. He wondered if the preacher would finish before his summer was over.

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It was during the invitational hymn that a plan arose. Being on the outside end of the pew, with everyone standing and looking to the front, could he ease over to the open side door and escape to the general store next door? Upon the second call to the altar, and a new verse, the city boy made his getaway. He told the Bratton boys beside him to shush as he slipped away. Hitting the grass, he ran to the store. Pulling out his milking quarter, he eyed the bounty of factory packaged delights. Ah yes, Tootsie Roll. Perfect. He returned to his seat before the amen and bribed the Bratton boys with a token portion of his treat. The crime was executed with perfection, except that his Grandpa on the dais had a clear view out the open windows toward the store.

After the service, the Grandpa let his grandson in the back of his black Chevrolet and he sat behind the wheel and they waited for Grandma to finish gathering the social news.

“What’d you think of the preachin’ son?” the Grandpa spoke benignly, looking out the side window at the gabbing women.

“Fine.”

“What was the best verse you heard?”

The wheels in the city boy’s head spun at breakneck speed to assemble all of his limited Bible knowledge into a credible response. The city boy assumed the blinding light he had heard spoken about from the pulpit was bound to apply to all Biblical characters. The only characters he knew of, on short notice, were Jesus, Goliath and Noah, giants and floods being intrinsically noteworthy. The apostle Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus had not yet been logged into the city boy’s apocrypha.

“I liked the part about the blindin’ light when Noah was on the road to Damascus,” he responded.

The Grandpa nodded in way that puzzled the city boy, as if his answer was expected but disappointing.

“What’d you think about Billy Bratton comin’ forward?” Now some defense attorneys would label this entrapment.

That stinker Billy Bratton, the city boy thought, he didn’t tell me he went forward.

“I prayed he would!” The city boy feigned enthusiasm to bolster his lie.

On the way home, the grandson sat in the wide back seat and observed his grandparents in the front. The grandson realized how much he respected his Grandpa. As he did, the knot of his lie, that tight feeling in his chest, began to fester.

The Grandpa bided his time.

On Monday the city boy’s two favorite cousins showed up right before dinner. His aunt was there to help out the Grandma for the afternoon. His two cousins were 18 months apart and his birthday was right in between theirs. The older cousin, Jake, was the natural leader. To the city boy, Jake was fearless and had the physical abilities of an Olympian.

They headed to a swimming hole in the creek about a quarter mile down the chert road. The creek made a broad sweep huddled against a rocky bluff. On the inside of the creek bend was a coarse grained sandy beach, but next to the bluff the water was deep and cool. The best fun was to climb up the bluff to a limestone shelf that was a few feet above the water and jump off to see who could create the highest splash.

“Come on up you wimps,” yelled Jake.

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As the city boy pulled up, he looked into the shadowy void behind his stony handhold. And lying there were multiple coils of brownish gray diamonds. At the same time, the city boy and a triangular head looked each other in the eye, maybe two foot apart, and he heard a faint rattle.

“Jake!” he shouted. His cousin turned and swiftly sized up the situation. With one fluid motion, he grabbed a piece of driftwood and jabbed the wooden branch like a spear into the center of the mass of snake and wedged it into its cleft. The city boy and his younger cousin yelled, but Jake just grunted as he leaned into his prey. The serpent wrapped what loops it could around the javelin. The rattle was now accompanied by a hissing from the lurching triangular head.

“Look out!” shouted Jake, and with one sweep of the driftwood harpoon, he hurled the snake out of its hiding place and into the creek below, where his brother was churning his legs through the shallow water to reach the beach. The city boy’s last view of the snake was it undulating through the water downstream.

The boys sprinted to the house and breathlessly recounted to the women folk the encounter with a serpent some dozen (more or less) feet long. When their Grandpa came in, the size reached Biblical proportions.

“Boys, the best thing to do with a rattler is to back away real slow.” said the Grandpa. “Don’t ever stab one, there’s halfa dozen ways he coulda gotten outta that.”

Turning to his grandson, “Son, if he had struck you on the head or neck there’d be no way to tie off the poison.”

At the creek, the city boy had felt panic. Now, upon his Grandpa’s assessment, he felt cold, stark fear.

The cousins headed back to the city after supper, and the boy was alone with his thoughts. What if I had been bit? If I had died, my lie to Grandpa would surely send me to hell.

“God, please forgive me for lying. And help me make things right again.” The city boy didn’t know if God was listening.

But He was.

The next day, he went to the barn with his Grandpa for the morning milking. The city boy pressed his cheek to the silky side of Sadie and plied the ancient skill he had acquired. The pail began to fill.

The Grandpa mulled how to broach the topic.

“Son, I thought we’d head into town after dinner so you could spend that quarter you earned milkin’.”

Silence from the city boy. He tried to turn his head but the only way to milk was with his face toward his Grandpa.

“Yep, that’s what we’ll do,” the Grandpa advanced into the silence. “Grandma will want to come too, and see what you buy.”

The city boy weighed various responses. He could say he lost it, or he could say he gave it to Billy Bratton for going down front. No good. Every excuse worsened the knot in his chest. The contorted conscience already hurt the young heart terribly.

“Gran’pa.” The boy stopped milking and looked down. The inner turmoil was unbearable.

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“Yes son, something you need to say about your quarter?”

The city boy looked up at the gentle face of his Grandpa. His lip quivered but no word emerged.

“Tell me son, what is God tellin’ you to say.”

“Gran’pa. I...” again he faltered and looked down to locate his strength.

The patient Bible teacher waited.

“Gran’pa, I already spent it,” he confessed into the packed earthen floor of the barn.

“Were you the boy that ran to the store during the singin’ last week?”

“Yessir,” his head moved in a shallow nod.

“There’s something you need to tell me.”

The city boy’s tears ran down his cheeks and dropped one by one into the brown dirt.

“I...I lied Gran’pa. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all I need to hear son.” And with that, he pulled the boy to his bosom and kissed the top of his head.

The city boy sobbed into his Grandpa’s faded overalls. “I’m sorry Gran’pa.”

“That’s alright son, all you needed to do was to tell me. I love you.”

“I love you Gran’pa. I won’t do it again.”

“That’s alright son. We don’t ever need to talk of this again.” The wise old man let the sobbing continue until the head lifted up and sniffed sharply.

“Come on now, let’s finish that milkin’.” And straightening him up, he helped the young man wipe his cheeks with his sleeve, and he blew his grandson’s dripping nose with his white handkerchief. The young man sat down again and with a last snuffle, set back to his milking. The twisted conscience was relaxed, and the knot in his chest had melted away.

And so, my Grandpa taught me the value of truth; that truth is more valuable than whatever your heart might pursue instead. And with this simple lesson, he also revealed to me the forgiveness that flows from the love of God.