# GRANDFATHER

*Michael Newton, award winner*

THE FIRST TIME I remember hearing thunder, I was lying upstairs in the second twin bed in my grandfather's room. Huddled under the starched cotton sheet, I listened to the long wind-up and boom of a late summer storm gusting about the eaves, huffing through screens into the tall, cool room, batting the white cloth curtains, and whisking the roof down with the first heavy drops of a hard August rain.

Often it would still be light when I was sent up to bed. The west windows would be amber and gold with the evening sun. The shadows of the trees would sway and dapple light, now dark, on the wall above my head. From downstairs voices would float up to me and I would feel wonderfully alone and independent, being so removed and apart from my elders. Already the crickets were buzzing, and if I looked down from the window to the terraced lawn, I would see the first glintings of the fireflies.

I never remember being tired when I was sent up to bed; not until the cicadas began their slow huzzah as it grew dark. Then it became harder to stay awake. The features of the room faded away, and later, perhaps after waking, I would hear the dull mumbling of a storm, as if distant mountains were slowly crumbling in on themselves. A cool wind would come in ahead of the rain, rushing over green, rippled fields, to where the first trees on the north side of town would catch it with long, evergreen fingers and hurl it whistling among the oaks and maples that lined the streets; up, over sunburnt lawns to where the houses stood back among the trees with their windows open and yellow-lit, as if waiting. Shivering, I pulled the sheet up over my bare shoulders, and as I wrapped it more tightly, I would try to stay awake long enough for my grandfather to climb the stairs. If I was still awake when the bedside lamp clicked on he would indulge me with an old man's stories. Then the wind rose and bent the lodgepole pine east towards the house, and the oak trees thrashed their leaves and slow

handfuls of acorns fell patting onto the roof and dribbled into the tin gutters. And then it was morning.

Often he was already downstairs. I lay quietly, looking over my long, narrow feet past the walnut footboard to the trees beyond the windows. Perhaps it was seeing the leaves as they stirred together and hearing the sound carried into the room at the same time. I felt landbound then, I suppose. Whereas at night, it was like going to sleep in a boat in a slip, protected by a jetty that the swells of the open sea rolled into repeatedly. When the wind blew, the house creaked in all its tired joints and this contributed to the effect.

The room was wider now, and held no apparent secrets. Mysterious, forbidding, and incomplete shapes became the coat rack by the window, a walnut dresser with a drawer slightly out, a grey suit coat swinging from its hook on the white closet door, and a pair of bookends, after Rodin's *Thinker*, on the cherrywood table between the beds.

About then the Remington shaver would begin its warbling drone. I could follow the sounds, having stood and watched on previous occasions. With a murky rattle the false teeth would be pulled from their jar, the powder tapped into the gums from a red tin can, the 'Lectric Shave slapped on smartly from a flat green bottle.

Once I remember waking to the sound of the kettle downstairs, piping furiously, while the sharp little bell of the egg-timer chimed; then followed a clatter of pans, plates, and the smell of scorched toast ascended to the second floor. On the table on the screened-in porch were a sugar bowl, a pitcher of cream, and an egg cup, all of white porcelain edged with blue scrolls.

If I hurried I could dress, thunder downstairs in my high-top P.F. Flyers, gulp cornflakes showered with sugar and drenched with Half-and-Half, and be ready to leave with my grandfather when he walked uptown to work.

Weekday mornings he would go down the wooden blue steps at the front of the house, with me clattering behind him. There were acorns on the steps. Some still had their caps on, and those I stepped on rolled smoothly and made a sharp pop when my foot caught them. Going down still more steps, stone this time because the yard was terraced, we would turn left at the walk and amble south toward town, down the long, walnut-lined street named Thorington.

It was cool and shadowy under the trees. The white-painted houses with their wide porches and railings were quiet as we went by. Blue-jays screeched in the backyards, and mourning doves made sad

solitary whistles from the telephone wires overhead. The pitted sidewalk was littered with sticks and large green walnuts that were fun to kick and send spinning and bouncing ahead. They had a peculiar, very strong smell which was almost permanent if you picked them up and held them tight in your hand; some of the green would come off too, but it wasn't so bad, and my grandfather never restrained me from doing such things. He was a lawyer and had an office on the southeast corner of Thorington and State Streets, upstairs, over the old Security State Bank.

From the house to the center of town it was a ten minute walk. The sidewalk was pitted and cantilevered because of frost heaves. Grandfather never said much, and I didn't mind; there were walnuts to kick and follow as they rolled away. Squirrels paused breathless ahead, flicked their tails, and then scrambled into the leafy safety of the trees. Even higher in the branches we could hear others scraping their teeth on acorn shells. And now and then a walnut would fall "crack!" on the walk, as if in punctuation to mark the end of one movement of morning, and the beginning of the next.

We would cross State Street together and climb the stairs to his office. Pencils, pens, an eraser, and a ruler, with plenty of paper were thrust at me in hopes these would amuse me for a time. This ruse worked for twenty minutes or so, until I discovered the office safe with its big steel door just ajar. The safe contained wills, deeds, bills of sale, and other important papers, and was always left open because the lock didn't work, or the combination was lost, something anyway, that made Marilyn the secretary nod at me from under her dyed blond curls whenever I looked up, as if she already knew.

The trick was to shut it when no one was looking, give the handle a hard yank so the bolts would go home. And though it wasn't necessary, I liked to give the nickle dial a quick spin, just for the flourish of it. Though everyone clucked at me reprovingly, including my grandfather who appeared in the doorway with papers in his hands, I believe they all rather liked the mild little commotion I caused. Grandfather had a theatrical "harumph" which always had a smile right behind it as he turned away. The attention was glorious for as long as it took the locksmith to arrive. Afterwards I was told to be a good boy, which I imagined I was anyway, and grandfather would dial home and tell them he was sending me first to the Carnagie Library to return some books, and that I would be home shortly. I would walk back of course, down Thorington; the town being small, I could never get lost.

"Home" was Seven-Twenty-Six North Thorington; a big house with

a wide front porch and a painted green swing. It was wonderful to read in the swing in the mornings: then the painted wood was cool and damp, and in the afternoons it was dry and warm to the touch. The chains squeaked and ground in a solid, comforting way, so that as I read the print in the book would go slowly in and out of focus until I would surrender and lie down and be rocked to sleep.

There was a rose garden out back with a cement bird bath, and a bench near the dogwood, where the wren house was hung. I was free to explore it all, and I did, especially when I first learned about fire and discovered the alluring secret of matches. When it rained I sat at the big picture window that looked out over the back lawn and the garden and the dripping oaks and the flowers nodding in the downpour. And when it thundered the stately silver tea service rattled with faint majesty and warning from behind glass cupboard doors.

As I remember, it was a civil house, where order and quiet reigned with a small town's dusty summer grace and leafy dignity: from the quiet of the lawns and the trees surrounding the house, to his handkerchiefs that smelled of soap flakes and a touch of starch, folded neatly in a dresser drawer. Altogether there were four rooms on the main floor: the den and living room to the west, and the kitchen and dining room to the east. The ceilings were tall, ten-feet or so, and there were heavy wooden panels that squealed on their rollers when the panels were pulled out from the doorways to close off the rooms.

Even in the late afternoons the den was cool and shadowy. I spent a lot of time rummaging through the books on their shelves, and secretly searching my grandmother's leather-topped desk for treasures like foreign stamps, inkpens, and stiff-backed photographs of solemn, dark-eyed people in high white collars and ruffled dresses. And I would arrange the photographs with the severe, whiskered men on the bottom and the young ladies with their dark curls and lace sleeves on top. The desk was near a west window, and from there I could see past the pine tree, down the hill to the street, and from there into the stand of oak trees that grew on the sloping green of the corner lot across the way.

In the living room my grandfather's stuffed grey chair was in a corner facing out into the room. Opposite was a fireplace with its wooden mantle carved to resemble leaves. There were light colors here in the furnishings; softly mixed hues of burnished reds and blues and muted golds. There were waxy decks of cards in the drawers of the coffee table, wooden matchboxes with gold paint, and several cribbage boards. And in the short hallway between the dining room and the kitchen, at the foot of the stairs, was a large wooden key with little brass hooks for car, house, office, and post box keys. Whenever

I went past I ran my hand over them, and they responded like tin Christmas bells.

During a long series of visits, I explored the whole house from attic to cellar. I knew its secret corners, its musty upstairs room where the family pictures were hung, its rusted tools on basement workbenches, its ancient mousetraps that I snapped with a pencil in the canning room under the basement stairs. It was a mileau of blue porcelain dinner plates passed over my head at the table, heaped with steaming corn-on-the-cob, mashed potatoes, roast beef, and fresh sliced tomatoes. It was an awkward, sticky surround of mosquito repellent in a yellow tube kept on the windowsill of the back porch that grandfather would rub around my ankles and wrists and neck. When I protested that he had neglected himself he replied, "Oh, I'm too *old* for mosquitoes—they don't like me anymore." The house was also a center of calm, where people read in bed, under sun-dried summer sheets until late in the evenings to the sound of cicadas; where all sounds, even laughter, were muffled; where order and stability did not seem to require any effort to exist.

Perhaps being a child is simply to have the senses constantly startled awake; mine were touched by the creak of old trunks as I pried them open, by the must and mothball smell that rose from collections of letters tied with string, a wedding dress, a pair of iceskates, by the feel of waxed paper in coffee tins filled with chocolate chip cookies, or by the sound of a pushmower, whirring in the grass on a cool August morning with fall in the air. Perhaps it is the recognition that childhood is immeasurable, and that any attempt to recall it will be in fragments wrought carefully over time. They will be the remembered images cast here and there in the back rooms of the mind; for me, these are the preferred ones, that waver like thin shadows falling on colored wallpaper on dewy mornings or in the dry, heat-thickened afternoons.

Sometimes, after lunch, my grandmother would send me uptown with a message for my grandfather. Usually it was a grocery list in her neat, stylized letters I would never come close to imitating. I fancy my letters are like his: crooked, bold, and indecipherable to any but those who care to take the trouble.

If he was not in the office I would try Honsbruch's Drugstore. At ten and two the short, wobbly stools were topped by inveterate jawers and coffee drinkers. Their heads swiveled in unison when the bell rang as I pushed open the door. Someone would slurp their scalding coffee while another would ask as I slipped out, "Whose boy iz-zat?"

Next I would try Charlie's barbershop, which was a two-chair establishment on the north side of State Street.

If he was there, with lather around his ears, I would sit down and wait, pretending to read the fishing magazines while trying to steal peeks into the one with the half-clad female on the cover. It is comforting to watch a relative get a haircut. I don't know why; perhaps this reaffirmed his humanity, his vulnerability to a barber's dull scissors like everyone else.

Charlie cut my grandfather's hair for forty years. It was a sign of unmistakable trust and confidence that grandpa used to go immediately to sleep in Charlie's barberchair. People talked about it. Some thought he was risking the lobes of his ears, or perhaps more than a little of his skinny neck. The less polite came to the window to watch and point, hoping maliciously that Charlie woud at least nick an ear to confirm their suspicions. But it never happened. Grandpa might come home with one sideburn gone and the other in shreds, or the white hair a little too short in the front and forgotten altogether in the back. Or sometimes it was the other way around, so as to leave a long lock like a snowy overhang resting on his eyebrows and the back of his head shaved to the skin. Charlie had cut hair in the army and perhaps some of it came back to him now and again.

When he was finished, Charlie would remove the sheet and make several light passes with the whisk broom before touching my grandfather's shoulder to wake him. "Don," he would say, giving him a small shake. "Don!" "Hmmmm . . ." he mumbled, looking up nearsightedly into Charlies' gold-toothed smile. "I must have fallen *asleep*!" Standing up from the chair he would put on his glasses and begin searching through his pockets. It was something of a minor joke in town that although he had a tolerable law practice, grandfather never seemed to have any more than a couple of quarters on him at any one time. The silver dollar he reserved for coin tricks somehow did not enter into the accounting. Inevitably, "Charlie," he'd mutter as concern and color both made their appearance on his face, "I don't have any *money*!"

There was the same bewildered tone in his voice that appeared when he went through his office accounts. The thought of it, the mere thought of it, of *charging* people just for talking to him in his office was tantamount to stealing. It was almost as if he disliked or suspected the stuff, or what it was capable of bringing out in people. Shrugging on his coat he would excuse himself and stride up the street to the Security State Bank and withdraw five dollars and then hurry back with apologies to hand Charlie two. Charlie said this went on for years.

If I had been moderately good during the day I was allowed to go meet my grandfather as he walked home from the office. We usually met on the northeast corner of Thorington and North. This is still called the "elephant park" for a grey slide with an elephant painted on its sides. In the center of the park there is a large rock, five feet high by three across. Set into the south face is a bronze plaque that marks the site of the first cabin built in that part of the Iowa Territory by one Asa Cyrus Call.

Asa was a young man from Ohio when he joined the California gold rush of 1849. Although he didn't *pan* much gold, he apparently *made* some by establishing a vegetable farm and selling produce to the miners and settlers who came pouring into the valleys of southern California. Quite understandably, fresh vegetables were as scarce as gold and almost as hard to come by, and Asa, being from an Ohio farm, apparently preferred to work on top of the earth, rather than burrow down *into* it. The farm was so successful that when Asa sailed from San Francisco for New York via Panama, he had several thousand in gold sewn into his vest. With this he hoped to build a settlement somewhere in the open territory of the mid-west.

Several years later, in July, 1854, Asa and his younger brother Ambrose laid claim to a grove of walnut and maple trees and a portion of the land surrounding it. Later that year they built a cabin for Asa and his wife Sarah, who decided to name the new community "Algona." As the town grew, Asa established the first bank, while Ambrose began the first newspaper. And there were floods, and blizzards, Indians, and the coming of the railroad. "Ambrose," the old man explained, "was *my* grandfather." Standing in the shadows beneath the oaks, I would run my fingers over the raised letters of the plaque, a relief of a log cabin, and the numbers of the dates, and say nothing.

If he was in an especially fine humor, grandpa might suddenly sing out "Eins! Zwei! Drei! Vier!" to which I would add "Hinky Dink and a bottle of beer!" and then in chorus we would holler "Eins! Zwei! Drei! Vier! Hinky Dinky parlez vous!" After several verses grandpa would break off and laugh as he looked sheepishly up at the houses, as if there were someone who might hear this ditty recalled by a former ensign who served aboard ship in the "Great War."

In addition to being a lawyer, my grandfather was also a juggler, and thus contributed to the early demise of a Tiffany lamp that had belonged to his mother. This no doubt helped persuade him to engage in more successful acrobatics like making a silver dollar

disappear. His coin trick was legendary throughout the family for its obviousness.

After dinner he would suddenly cease being a lawyer and become transformed into an inept, although determined, magician. "Have you seen *this*?" he would drawl at my sister and me, pulling a silver dollar from his pocket. Nooo, we lied. While pretending to wad the coin into his left hand, he would try to conceal it in his right. Often the coin fell into his sleeve where it would lodge near his elbow. In the midst of his magic he couldn't very well go reaching for it, so he'd mutter a word or two of deep incantation like "Kalamazoo" or "Timbuktu," take a deep breath, put his left fist to his lips and blow the "coin" out of existence.

Unimpressed, we would stand gazing serenely at his elbow while he would try to direct us to search for the coin in the lampshades, under the sofa, and in our own pockets. We looked semi-earnestly until we saw him fishing surreptitiously in the sleeve, whereafter we stood solemnly in front of him, looking up at his struggles. Invariably he would retrieve the coin for a moment only to drop it, and my sister, being much sharper in such things than I was, would pounce on it yelling "Look what *I* found!" Chagrined, he would "harumph" smiling, "Yes, you found my coin." "*Your* coin," cried the little innocent, "You blew *yours* away! This is mine!" About then I would excuse myself from being party to any further mysteries, and leaving my sister begging for more exploits of magic, I would run upstairs to explore until bedtime.

I am not certain I know what history is to an individual. It is not dates or names so much as stories, I think, that go with brittle photographs, with (where I am concerned) little towns huddled together on the Great Plains, along with our own conjurings of what we are and why. Perhaps it is a sense of belonging *in* something larger than a single life. And then, at some vague point, for a few people, this ceases to be a preoccupation with individual history and becomes one with Time. It could be that an interest in history is simply an attempt to use this smaller subject as a foothold to step past, toward a further point of engaging the larger issue.

Upstairs in my grandfather's room, on the cherrywood table between the two beds, two bookends, miniatures of Rodin's *Thinker*, watched over the books. During one of my rambles through the house I pulled the books out, to heft their weight in my hands, touch the old scarred leather with its stamped gilt letters, and smell the fresh ink and paper of a newly bound book. An extra pair of grey-rimmed

spectacles lay next to a bottle of eyedrops, a big magnifying glass, and a crumpled handkerchief. There was a whitened ring at the base of the waterglass.

The two single beds were on either side of the table and the floorboards creaked under the rugs as I walked around them. Lying in bed, I would watch the light sift through the windows, go off beyond the trees, and fade at the horizon. Crickets wheezed in the grass. Cicadas shrilled from the branches. I lay with my head high on the pillow, against the headboard, to watch the light go. And I waited for the sound of feet on the stairs that would be my grandfather, rising slowly, deliberately, toward bed.

I am inextricably connected with this room, and with the man who lived there; every object, every sound, smell, even the pattern of shadows on the walls are a part of me. Sometimes I muse to myself that the beds were parallel, and say to myself that our lives *are* alike in ways, that his values of reading, reticence, calm deliberation, quiet, and order, are shared, extended through me, and that these span the distance between us.

Toward dark the streetlight below the hill at the corner stuttered on and began to buzz. Nightmoths and June bugs flew in slow sweeping circles, batting at the light, and sometimes one or the other tapped gently at the screens.

I was awake a long time it seemed, before I heard voices on the stairs. The floor creaked beneath their quiet feet, and I heard their whispered good nights, and I pretended to be asleep. His step was so soft that I was never sure he was there until I heard the handful of coins emptied from his pocket on the dresser top, and the faint ring of hangers from inside the closet. The starched sheet rustled and the bedsprings squeaked. I heard the abrupt snap of the lamp and the creak of an opened book.

Tall, even in bed, he looked down through the spectacles into the book on his knees. A lock of white hair hung over his forehead. He always pretended to be surprised that I was awake. And when I asked, the story might be about the time there were Indians frightening the settlers. And if I asked for more it would be about the runaway slave, or the circus in summer, with the elephants pushing the wagons from the Northwestern station up State Street to the bottom land at the south edge of town, near the soft water pond.

I lay there under the cool and weightless summer sheets, and when he looked down again into the book, I listened to the dry wisp of turned pages, and to the raspings of the locusts. The small island of light spilled across my grandfather's hands into the book on his knees,

drawn up under the sheet. From there it slipped silently to the floor and climbed stealthily up the bed where I lay quiet and still with my eyes open and watching. Secretly, I put out a finger, and then a whole hand to touch the edge of the circle of light where it fell. It is still there, this little island of light, and it goes with me.