

WHY GRANDPA SLEPT IN THE BASEMENT

When I was your age my older brother and my mother and I would travel in the summer to visit my grandma and grandpa who lived in a different town. They lived in a neat little house with two bedrooms, a dining room, a living room and a kitchen. In the back yard they had a very big garden. Grandma and Grandpa worked hard in their garden and grew much of the food that they ate all year long. When the garden produced more vegetables than they could eat right away, my grandmother would take the extra produce and cook it and put it in jars so that they would still have the vegetables when winter came and the garden no longer grew anything. Because of their hard work in the garden and Grandma's hard work in the kitchen, when snow was on the ground and the weather was icy cold, they could open a jar of tomatoes or beets or corn or asparagus or string beans or pickled cucumbers and sit down to eat their meal almost as if it were the middle of summer. They also put potatoes and turnips and onions and Brussels sprouts in a cool, dark place and were able to keep them almost all winter long that way without any cooking or canning or jarring at all. The best part, for me, because I have always loved sweet things, was the fruit. Grandma would cook the fruits

from their trees and bushes with lots of sugar and put them in jars, too, so that she could finish just about every meal all winter long with peaches or plums or cherries from their trees, or gooseberries or raspberries from their bushes, or strawberries that grew along the ground in the garden, or even rhubarb that grows in stalks like celery. (Rhubarb is very bitter when you taste it raw, but very nice when stewed with enough sugar. Yum. The rhubarb would be the first thing that grew in the spring but I thought it tasted even better after soaking up the sugar all winter long. People don't eat rhubarb much anymore. Or gooseberries. I don't know why.) My mother didn't do any of that hard work in our own house except to put up some cherries from our two trees. They were sour and she never used enough sugar for my taste so I didn't see any reason to do it in the first place. We are often harder on our own parents than we are on our grandparents.

Every morning Grandma would bake bread. All the bread they ate was made by hand by Grandma. When my brother and I came to visit she would make cookies, too. I thought they were the best tasting cookies in the whole world, and I was allowed to eat as many as I wanted. My mother would say "that's enough, now" after I had eaten two, but my grandmother, who was my mother's mother, would say, "oh, let him," because that's what grandmothers do. It's called "indulging" and grandparents love to indulge their

grandchildren. So my mother would let me and I would eat as many cookies as there were on the plate-or at least as many that were left after my brother ate his share, too. It's a wonder I didn't grow up to be very fat. If I had lived every day at my grandmother's house, maybe I would have.

The living room of my grandparent's house was small. There were two chairs and a couch. And a radio. They didn't have a television, nobody had a television, but that didn't matter because radio was different then. They had wonderful stories all day long on the radio. The radios were very big, almost as big as a television set today, but they had no screen, only a kind of cloth mesh where the sound came out.

You couldn't see anything, of course, but people would actually sit and look at the radio (which wasn't doing anything that anyone could see) while people somewhere far away told stories and sang songs and acted out plays. The people listening to the radio would have to imagine the characters in the stories and plays, they would have to imagine all the places where the stories took place, too. People who had never been to a big city would have to imagine a big city in their minds, and sometimes people in a city would have to imagine what it looked like on a farm, or a desert, or what it was like to be a cowboy in the old days or a princess in a far distant land. They would have to imagine what those people in the stories were wearing and what

their faces looked like. If they heard a snarl or a growl coming from the radio, they would imagine a wolf or a bear or a lion. And, since you were imagining, the bear could be any size you wanted, or any color, it was all up to you, you weren't limited to what picture there was on the television. Maybe it sounds hard to do, but it wasn't, everybody with a radio did it every day. Just as you're doing it now when you're listening to this story of mine.

To get to the garden we would walk through the kitchen and out the back door. In the kitchen just a few feet from the back door was another door that led to the basement. It was always locked. When I asked, my grandmother said she locked it when my brother and I came to visit because the stairs to the basement were rickety and steep and dangerous for a little boy. "When you're older," she would say. That's what everyone said to me all the time. I couldn't wait to get older. But one day when I was just hanging out around the basement door while my grandmother rolled out the dough to make bread, my grandfather came in from working in the garden.

"That's where I keep the treasure," he said.

"What treasure?" I asked. The idea of treasure was very exciting.

"It's Aladdin's cave these days," he said, with a wink. I had never seen my grandfather wink before. I had very rarely seen

him smile.

"Andrew!" said my grandmother.

Grandpa pulled a long face, pretending to be very afraid of Grandma, and went back outside.

"What's Aladdin's cave?" I asked.

"A lot of nonsense," said Grandma. "Go find your mother."

My grandfather was a very quiet man, at least he was quiet when I was around. He was a professor, a special kind of teacher at a university, and he was very smart, but I suspect that my grandmother or my mother told him not to talk too much around me because I was little and probably wouldn't understand what he was talking about. I think that he really wanted to teach me things because when he did talk to me it was to ask questions so that he could learn what I knew about this and that. There were two big overstuffed chairs in the living room and one of them was so big that I could skotch down so far I could almost hide in it. Grandpa would sit in the other chair and look at me for a long time as if he were trying to figure me out before he began to ask me questions.

He might start by saying, "Well, young man,"--he often called me 'young man'. I wasn't even five years old yet.--"Well, young man, what do you know about mushrooms?"

Once he started talking my mother and grandmother would hurry in from the kitchen and stand at the edge of the living

room, their arms crossed over their chests, looking very serious and stern.

Grandma would speak his name, sharply. "Andrew!"

And Mom would say, a little softer, "Dad."

My grandfather would fall silent again. I know the women were just trying to protect me from too many questions that might make me uncomfortable because of course, being so young, I didn't have many answers; I certainly didn't know anything about mushrooms (but they are very interesting, by the way). But another result was that I didn't really know my grandfather very well. Just staring at each other in silence, or staring at the radio and listening in silence is not a very good way to get to know someone.

My grandmother slept in big wooden bed in one bedroom and my mother and I slept together in a smaller bed in the other bedroom. My big brother slept on the couch in the living room. My grandfather...well, I didn't know where my grandfather slept because all the adults always went to bed after I did.

My grandparents didn't have air conditioning in those days, and no one else did, either. What they had was fans. In the summer we had fans going in our bedrooms, little fans that turned slowly from left to right and back again so that you would get a slight breeze on you every once in a while. When in bed you had to position yourself so that the breeze would hit whatever part

of you needed it the most, your face, your body, your legs. If you slept on the side of the bed against the wall and someone else's body blocked the air from the fan you wouldn't get any relief from the heat at all. Summers were always very hot there and sleeping was sometimes hard unless you had a fan blowing directly on you all the time. Sometimes it was so hot that you would wake up with the sheets soaking wet from your own sweat. Any part of your body that touched the sheet would stick right to it and when you rolled over it was like pulling away from scotch tape-under water. Of course we slept with all the windows open, too, but on bad nights that didn't seem to make any difference at all.

One summer night I woke up and heard voices. I thought it was the radio in the living room but that was strange because my mother was asleep in the bed next to me and she never went to bed until everyone else did, too. There were no lights on in the house but the moon was big and bright and I could see what I was doing, so I got out of bed to turn off the radio. I thought maybe my brother had turned it on after my grandparents went to bed. His bed on the couch in the living room was right next to the radio and I could imagine him lying awake with his ear up close to the radio and a big grin on his face as he listened to stories that I didn't get to hear. Sometimes brothers and sisters are envious of each other if one of them gets a treat that the other

doesn't have. Because my brother was older than I was he was always getting things ahead of me. "You'll get to do that when you're older," my parents would say when my brother got to ride his bike without training wheels, or go to the store by himself to buy some bread, or cross the street without holding hands with a parent. I didn't think it was fair that he got to do things that I didn't, even though he was older, and sometimes I would pester my parents until they let me do it too. Of course sometimes they wouldn't let me do it if they thought it was bad for me, like crossing the street by myself.

But when I got to the living room I saw that the radio was not on even though I could still hear the voices. And even stranger, my brother wasn't in his bed on the couch. Where was he? Where were the voices coming from? As I listened closely, they seemed to be coming up from below. I put my ear to the floor and the voices were clearer. They were coming from the basement!

I didn't know why anyone would play a radio in the basement but it was certainly a deep man's voice that I heard, just like the ones that read stories on the radio. I was wondering what was going on when suddenly I heard a boy's voice interrupt the man. It wasn't just a boy's voice, it was my brother's voice! How did my brother get on the radio? It wasn't fair! If anyone should be on the radio, it should be me! For a minute I was so upset that he got on the radio and I didn't that I didn't pay attention to

what the voices were saying. When I settled down I realized that the man's voice would go on for a while and then my brother would interrupt again and every time he spoke he began by asking why or what. "Why did he do that?" or "What does that mean?" The man's voice would pause until my brother was through with his question, then patiently answer him. You could hear the patience in his voice, and after he answered the question he would start reading again.

I was lying on the floor with my ear against the floorboards. I moved a little in one direction and realized that I could hear things a little better. The more I moved in that direction, the better I could hear. I kept moving until I came to the basement door. I put my ear to the crack of the door and could hear really well. I turned the doorknob and to my surprise the door opened. For once, it wasn't locked. I pushed the door open a little wider and the voices stopped. After a minute they started again. I remembered that my grandmother always said the stairs were dangerous so I went down them one at a time, on my bottom. Halfway down one of those rickety stairs creaked and the voices stopped again. I held my breath until they started again and then inched down another step.

Now I noticed something very surprising, even more surprising than the voices on the radio. I was cool. The air all around me was cool! The basement was as if it were in some other

country where it wasn't hot, hot, summer but a nice evening in autumn. While I was trying to figure that out, the voice changed.

"You might as well come all the way down," the voice said and I could tell it was talking to me. "There's only one bad step and you're already past it."

"He's too little," my brother's voice said.

"He made it this far," said the other voice. I realized it was my grandfather.

"I'm not too little," I said. "I made it this far." And with that I walked down the last few steps and was in the basement.

The first thing I saw was a great big brass bed--yes, a big brass bed in the basement--and on that bed, looking very pleased with themselves, were my grandfather and my brother. Grandpa held a big book with a real leather cover and I realized that he had been reading aloud to my brother which was why their voices sounded like the voices on the radio. The next thing I noticed was that although I was in my underwear because it was so hot upstairs, my brother was in his warm pajamas and Grandpa wore what was called a nightshirt buttoned beneath his chin. A night shirt was like a very plain, warm shirt that went down below the knees. Men used to wear them to sleep in the old days before they started wearing pajamas. They looked a little bit like a dress but because all the men wore them, they didn't look funny the way they might look to you today.

I looked all around, there were so many surprising things to see. One whole wall was covered with shelves and on those shelves were all the jars that my grandmother used when she preserved the jellies and jams and fruits and beans and beets and pickles and all the other wonderful things from the garden. Even though it was summer, there were still some tomatoes and peaches that had been put in the jars a whole year ago.

Do you remember that I told you that my grandparents would save potatoes and turnips and onions and Brussel sprouts in a cool, dark place? Well, this was that cool, dark place. In a wooden bin with a lid there were still some carrots and potatoes from the year before.

What I didn't see was the treasure. I looked for pirate's chests spilling over with pearls and jewels and gold coins and silver goblets but there was nothing like that.

"Where's the treasure?" I asked.

"Don't you see it?"

"No. You said you kept the treasure in the basement."

My brother snorted in that special way he had that said that I was so stupid he didn't even need to say it. As usual that made me very angry.

"Where is it?" I demanded.

Grandpa patted the bed and moved over so there was room on the side of him opposite my brother.

"Well, young man, why don't you come and see for yourself?" I got up on that big brass bed and pulled a blanket over me, that's how cool it was down there.

"Tonight's treasure is about Aladdin and *his* treasure is in his cave," said my grandpa. He held the book open so I could see the beautiful picture of a boy in a magical cave with treasure all around him and a magic lamp in his hands. Coming out of the lamp like smoke was a genie. "But the real treasure is here," he said, and he tapped the book. Somehow I knew that he meant *all* books, not just the one he was holding.

Grandpa read the story to me and he answered all of my questions patiently, just as I had heard him doing with my brother. It was a wonderful story and he kept reading until I fell asleep. In the morning I woke up in the bed with my mother without knowing how I got there, and that was kind of magical, too.

After that first time I started every night in the basement where my brother and I snuggled under the covers on both sides of Grandpa and listened while he talked and read. The stories were exciting and funny and scary and my brother and I loved them all, but what I loved even more were the things Grandpa told me when I asked him questions. He seemed to know everything, and if there was anything he didn't know he would find out. He told me about those mushrooms and how spiders spin their webs and where dust

comes from and how butterflies come to be and why the moon is where it is and why the basement was always so cool when the house was hot and all kinds of amazing things that no one else ever talked about, or didn't have the patience to explain. The books were wonderful and reading was wonderful but those were only a small part of Grandpa's treasure.

Grandpa's treasure was his mind and all that was in it and the way he used it. It wasn't the secret of the jars of fruit or the old potatoes, it wasn't that wonderfully soft and cosy bed with that perfect sleeping temperature. Grandpa's treasure was Grandpa himself and when he could he shared that treasure with me. I was a lucky boy.