The Grandfather

by James Como (November 2019)

Grandfather and Grandson, Maxim Kantor, 1991

The boy, Mac, had just turned eight. His grandfather, William Brundle, who was sixty-seven, called him Mighty Mac. The old man taught comparative literature at the small liberal arts

college nearby, these days one day a week. To some colleagues Brundle was Odysseus, or Dissy, because of the joy he took in teaching the *Odyssey*. His wife said he got enrollment because students thought he meant Homer Simpson when he said Homer.

To the boy he was Poppop. They spent much time together, talking, sometimes rough-housing, often telling each other stories or reading them aloud. They would garden. Mostly the old man, who couldn't bend or kneel too well, would instruct Mac, and the boy would do the actual work. What mattered to each was the other's company.

"C'mon, Poppop. Let's do one-two." The child meant punching the old man's hands as though they were the strike mitts that boxers use. Forty-five years earlier the grandfather had boxed in the Navy. His skills had been inconsistent, but he did have a punch and could take one. Nobody on the ship wanted a piece of him, but a year later when the war broke out that was the end of his boxing. He was five-eight and now still no more than one fifty, his Navy weight, and in spite of his arthritis he hit the heavy bag down at the police precinct regularly.

"Okay Mighty Mac. Give me one. One. One. One-two." Left jabs and straight right hand. "Now—one two-three." And the boy struck crisply, finishing with a left hook. "One-two-three-duck." And the boy did, snapping off his punches quick and sharp then ducking as the old man waved his left hand over the boy's lowered head. "Not bad. In fact, really, really good. Soon I'll have to use real pads." And each messed up the other's hair. The boy was a miniature version of the man: wiry, on the small side, thin faced, sort of angular, and a thick mop of hair, brown instead of snowy white.

The old man's wife, Penelope, called him Dizzy. He had tried correcting her for decades. "It's Odysseus, dear, not Odyzzeus." But it didn't matter to her. She meant it as a joke. "Dizzy," she would say, "how long have you lived here?

Can’t you just get a new light bulb from the closet and change that blown one out there on the back porch? Visitors might just fall down and then they would give us a sue. After all, how many grandfathers does it take—”

“It’s not a porch, dear. It’s only a landing with a roof over it.”

“Grammy, you mean they’ll sue us, not give us a sue.”

“Isn’t one professor in the house enough? Fine. They’ll sue us. Now come get some chicken soup.”

That’s all the old lady had to say. Man and boy loved her chicken soup. All the boy had to do was say “soup” and she would make it, but because that didn’t work very well for the old man, sometimes he told the boy to say “soup” so they could both get some. They would sit around the table together, the boy and the old man slurping. “Such a slurping duet,” she would say.

The old man began to explain to the boy that the Homer who wrote *The Iliad* was not the same poet who wrote *The Odyssey*, because that second poet did not really know details about ships or sailing. “So who wrote it, Poppop”

“Well, it was probably a woman, Mighty Mac. You see, this poet seems to have known a lot about men, for example how they look for adventures, or how to control them, or what they really want, which is to get home to a good wife who can make great chicken soup!” The boy laughed from his belly, a sound that to the old people was like a clear river in heaven rippling across large, smooth pebbles.

“Well, she knew men talk too much, that’s for sure. Especially professors. We all know that!” The old lady was smaller than the old man, nearly as small as the boy. “You’re a dynamo,” her husband would say, “like a star aflame in the cosmos. A sidereal splendor.”

"Because I have to be," she would answer but still become unsettled by such an image coming from her husband after forty-one years of marriage. Flustered, she said, "you're helpless around here. The only old man *ever* who doesn't have a tool box."

He would point to his bookshelves. "There's my toolbox, Pen," and she would come to him and kiss his brow. "I always did say I married you for your brains." And he would answer, "Not my looks?" And she would say, "Oh yes, those too. And don't think I don't know you married me for my name, either!" Penelope had been Odysseus's long-suffering, faithful wife. Then from behind she would caress his shoulders. "Look here Mac, how hard your poppop's muscles are. Like two cinder blocks!" And she kissed the back of his head. The boy saw the old man smile and his eyebrows rise, as though saying "what do you think of that!"

When her two boys had finished their slurping—two bowls each—she said, "*now* can you change that bulb, Dizzy?"

"Not now, Grammy, *please* not now. Poppop promised me a catch and it's almost dark and it's about to rain and—"

"Fine fine fine," she said. "Go." The old man was already at the back door with two gloves and a baseball. "I have two children on my hands." But they were already out the door.

The backyard was nothing but grass, except for the small garden. The old man had made an attempt at some hedges but he hadn't keep at it. "A real brown thumb," the old lady would say, and then, "the real Odysseus would have thought of something." The house, a pre-War Long Island antique, was small, no more than a cottage, really, with an attic, two bedrooms, a big kitchen they ate in—the old lady kept it yellow, from the walls to an oil cloth on the table, copied from a *Good Housekeeping* ad for Blue Bonnet margarine—and a

living room. It did have a second toilet in the basement, which the old lady, with no intent at humor, called “the guest bathroom.”

Outside it was gray stucco with some red trim. There was no fence, barely a front yard, a curb but no sidewalk to go with it. The driveway—without a garage or even a car port—led past the house to the right, as you looked at it, and stopped at the end of the house. There the old man kept his car, a two-tone, two-door 1960 Studebaker Lark VIII that he had bought second-hand in 1966. It was a stylish car back then, twenty-years ago, and just odd enough to be interesting, in an independent sort of way. He had kept it in top shape, inside and out, like a fancy birthday cake somehow perfectly preserved and still good to eat.

You might say it was the only distinctive thing about the way he lived.

The boy had his bed-time ritual. His Gram would make sure he brushed his teeth and washed up, then, once in bed, she would lie next to him in the dark so they could pray together. Every now and then the boy would ask Gram for a story, knowing very well how it would begin. “There once was an old man who hated chores” and that was when the boy belly-laughed and would call Poppop for a story. Leaving, Gram would say, “don’t get him all worked up, Dizzy, nothing too exciting.”

This night they were pretty tired out after the catch, the one-two, and the Man Eating Plant (the old man would tangle the boy up in his arms and legs and the boy would struggle to get free), so the old man was worried that he would fall asleep himself before he finished telling his own story.

“Once upon a time there was a rainbow, a field of flowers, and a unicorn, and—”

“Poppop, what are you doing?!” The boy was almost squealing.

What do you mean?”

“That’s not a Poppop story, Poppop, and you know it.”

“But your Gram said I shouldn’t excite you, boy.”

“Listen Poppop. You’re a good story-teller. You can save this. We won’t tell Gram. So please, Poppop, make something out of it. I know you can do it.”

“Okay fine,” said the old man, smiling in the dark, “but if you stay up all night because you’re all over-excited it’s on you.”

The old man started his story by describing a unicorn who, tired of rainbows all the time, walked and walked until he came to a wall. It was a red brick wall that went on and on and on. The unicorn could not see either end of it. He had never seen a wall like this before. When he stood close to it, the wall seemed very high, but when he backed away it looked short enough to jump over. Of course, the unicorn had to wonder who had built the wall, and why, and what was on the other side.

“What did he do Poppop?” The boy was yawning already.

“Well, he thought to explore as much as he could, so he galloped to his right to see if he could find that end. But after running for one whole hour he couldn’t, so he gave up and walked back.”

The boy yawned again and now his eyes were closed. The old man knew he should leave the room in stages, easing himself away from the boy first, then sitting up, then standing, and then quietly sneaking out. But he didn’t get to stage two. The boy reached for his arm and wrapped it around himself as he turned towards his grandfather. With his eyes

closed and his voice barely audible he said, “what happened then?”

The old man filled up with love. He didn’t realize he could have so much of it in him. In all of heaven and earth there was no goodness, no innocence, no nobility to surpass what was in this little boy. And the idea that he loved the man so much was almost intolerable to him. No longer a religious man he would not pray, yet still he knew he had been given a great gift.

“Well, the next day he ran for one hour in the other direction, but the same thing happened, so he decided that the wall had no end and that he would never get to the other side, which of course he wanted to do more than anything.” Now the boy really was sound asleep, so the old man kissed his head and slipped away.

The old folks never spoke of how the boy actually had come to live with them. They told him a tale. His parents—their daughter Chloe and his father—had died in a terrible car accident when a drunk driver crashed into them and killed them. Gram and Poppop had been baby-sitting for one-month-old Mac when they got the news. Of course they took Baby Mac home to live with them and to raise. They assured the boy that his parents had not suffered, were wonderful people who loved him very, very much, and were now in Heaven, watching over him.

What actually happened was demonic. This Freddie had been dating their daughter for months. They did not understand the attraction, especially with so many other good young men interested in her. “Bad news,” the old man would say. Then, when Chloe told Freddie she was pregnant and that he didn’t have to marry her, he demanded that she have an abortion, that he didn’t want a girlfriend with a big belly and wasn’t near ready for a family. She wouldn’t do it. For months he sulked and demanded and drank.

Then, one week after baby Michael's birth, while Gram was at the doctor with the baby, Freddie shotgunned Chloe and himself to death. If Gram and the baby had been at home he probably would have killed them, too. The old man, who had arrived home earlier than usual, discovered the bodies. The chaotic, blood-drenched brutality was worse than any he had seen in the war.

The old lady arrived before the police. The grandfather did not let her in the house. When the police arrived one of them said he'd seen such things before. The old man tightened and said he hadn't. Later at the morgue he alone identified his daughter's body. Neither he nor his wife did the same for Freddie Conroy. He had no family, and the old lady said, "he must have had his own story of torment." Then the old man stopped praying.

Probably because the old lady had not beheld the murder scene she was not haunted by the horror. It was different for the old man. Sometimes it was a revenge dream, sometimes his daughter miraculously rose and came with the boy to live with them. Sometimes he dreamt the whole savage act, as though he had been there. That's where hitting the heavy bag helped. The police, half of whom had gone to the crime scene, knew Willie and liked him, and they respected him.

The morning after the first half of the unicorn story, Gram told the old man she needed some groceries. "I've made a list," she said. "There are eight items and you'd never remember."

"But I could remember four, and Mighty Mac the other four."

"I could remember all eight!" the boy nearly shouted.

"Okay," said the old lady. "Here Dizzy, here's the list. Now you, boy, here's what I need. You ready?" The boy nodded and listened. All the usual stuff. This would be so

easy.

"Two strong men!" the old lady said. "Still," she added, "as your Poppop's own father would say when my Willie was still a boy like you are now, 'he can write the best letter you'll ever read but won't know how to mail it.'" The old man, who had loved his father dearly, smiled at the memory. "And make sure you go to Harry's, next to the bank on Main," she added, "not that ugly chain supermarket."

Once they were in the Studebaker, which was the quietest car the boy had ever heard, and the shiniest, he said, "Poppop, how come you don't know about tools or even can't change a light bulb but you can keep some old car running longer than I've been alive?"

"Well boy, here's the deal. Women know a man's car is special to him, so they make allowances. He can be incompetent in everything else but they'll understand that he can take care of his car. Especially this one. Do you know the Studebaker brothers began making coaches in 1852? And that they made electric cars—electric, Mighty Mac!—in 1902?"

"I didn't ask about Gram, Poppop."

"I see. Okay. I suppose you are ready for the truth. I'm not incompetent. I think you know that. But I *make believe* I am so that—"

"I know I know!" The boy was practically shouting. "If Gram thought you *could* do stuff she'd be asking you all the time and—" The boy was excited by his insight when the old man cut him off.

"Boy! Listen. You found the secret. But it's a secret amongst men. You must never, ever, never repeat it. Please tell me you understand."

Very solemnly the boy answered, "I do. I promise never

to tell Gram that you really can do stuff."

"Fine then," The old man tussled his hair. "But listen, I'm not saying *you* should do the same thing. It depends on the woman. Gram likes to keep busy. That means she likes busy people around her. And I'm the one around her. But when the time comes you'll decide on your own tricks, if you have any."

"I don't think I will, Poppop. I know you need them sometimes, like when I tell Gram I need some hot chocolate to settle my stomach."

"She falls for that?"

"Oh sure, almost every time."

"There you go."

"Yeah but . . . that's sometimes, Poppop. Not a regular thing like yours. I'm more like Odysseus and that horse. It was one trick."

"True, but he had many other tricks, Mighty Mac, like when he tied himself to the mast of his ship so he could hear those beautiful voices that drive men crazy but not *do* any craziness himself."

"I know Poppop. But he used one trick for each problem not one trick all the time no matter what."

"I see. So that's what you wouldn't do."

"I don't think so. I'm not sure. I'm only eight, Poppop."

"And about Odysseus, Mac. I admire him, you know that, but that doesn't mean I approve of everything he did. He was always ready, that's for sure, but he wasn't steady. He was too tricky, and he had a really bad temper. But mostly he should've been home long before he finally got there, and he

should have stayed put. That was his job. To be steady. No matter what happens, that's what a man is, Mighty Mac, steady."

"And ready," added the boy, smiling.

The old man had parked right in front of the grocery store. Of course the boy had remembered all eight items, to which the old man had added two Eskimo Pies all shiny in their silver foil. With his hands full, he leaned into the back seat, put the two bags in the car, then stood with an ice cream pie in each hand. The boy knew the rule: no food inside the Studebaker! But they could lean against the front fender, so that's what they did, passenger side near the sidewalk, eating their ice cream.

Just then a big man, a duffle bag slung over his left shoulder, ran out of the savings and loan next to the grocery. His right hand was in his pants pocket. As he was passing the car he suddenly pivoted and hooked his left arm around the boy's neck.

The old man bolted off the fender, but the big man said, "I'll snap his neck fella and then I'll shoot you." He took out the gun he had in his pocket. The sun was so bright and glinting off the barrel that the old man could barely see the gun. He could tell the big man was improvising.

That's when the sirens screamed and the police pulled up. Little by little the old man had been shuffling to his left so that the big man had to open his arm to keep the gun aimed at him. But the big man's head was turned toward the police, so at first he didn't see the old man two-step—left foot in toward the man, right foot up to the left heel, then left foot further toward the man, a classic shuffle – well inside the open arm. The robber caught some movement with his peripheral vision, and when he turned his head to his right, Willie pivoted on the ball of his left foot, rotated his hips

clockwise, and hooked him on the chin.

The big man's head snapped to his left, his left arm dropped, the duffle bag dropped to the ground, and the boy twisted and ducked away. But the robber still held the gun, which he now smashed into the back of Willie's head. The old man was about to go down and he knew it, so he grabbed the big man and held his arms. The boy was frozen in place. As the police rushed forward the big man crooked his right elbow and got a shot off towards one of the cops, and that slowed them. That shocked Willie back to his senses. He drew his head back and then jerked it forward hard into the big man's nose. Blood spurted onto the old man's face.

Willie remembered how to close when he had his man hurt. He let go and threw a right hand, then another left. The big man dropped the gun and tried to cover up, but now Willie Brundle was in a war zone of his own, maybe on the fields of Troy or at his Palace in Ithaca or on some Pacific atoll. The man was on the ground now with Willie on top of him. There were no tricks here. He was pounding the big mans' face into raw steak ready for grilling.

And he thought, how strange is unbridled violence. One's senses stay sane as the mind goes on autopilot. There was the smell of fresh bread from the bakery to the left. He wanted to break off a piece and share it with the boy. And he saw the display of wines in the window of the liquor store right in front of him with of all things a fish tank with one small fish in the middle of all those wine bottles. And that crack he just heard, so like the crack of a whip.

"Poppop! Poppop! Please stop! *Poppop*!"

The old man stopped cold, his left hand around his victim's throat, his right in the air about to crash down yet again. He turned his head to the boy and saw the tears pouring down his face. "Yes Mac. Sure. That's enough. Thanks Mighty

Mac.”

As he was rising—the police were now turning the big man to cuff him—he heard the man say, “I’m coming for you, old man, for you and for the boy and for anybody around you.” At that one cop lifted Willie away while another struck the man hard on a knee with the baton he had cracked open.

A lady from the grocery store brought over two new Eskimo Pies. Willie thanked her, but the boy was crying and clinging to the old man. Eventually the scene was cleared. As they drove home the man said, “come on, Might Mac, let’s eat these Pies. They’ll work miracles. You’ll see!”

Right there, inside the Studebaker.

By the time they arrived home Gram had heard the whole story, or versions of it, from three different people, one an eye witness. Now she was sitting still sipping wine. “Dizzy, what did you do?”

“Gram, please don’t go yelling at Poppop! He saved me, Gram! He beat up a bad guy and saved me! Gram—”

“Oh, I know sweetheart. I know. I’ve always known how brave your Poppop is. And I’m so proud of him . . .” She rose slowly and walked to the man. She took him in her arms and squeezed as tightly as she could.

“Ay. Careful Pen. I’m kinda sore.” They heard the boy sobbing. “Mighty Mac Mighty Mac. There’s nothing to be afraid of now.” It was the old man.

The old lady hugged the boy and he settled down a bit and she carried him to the bathroom. She had already drawn the bath. “Time for the tub, little boy. Then a story from Poppop. Do you still need one?”

“Yes Gram. Poppop has to finish the one from last night, about the wall and that silly unicorn.” He forgot

nothing.

"Okay. Fine. Then I'll make coffee, Dizzy. *Real* coffee."

The boy, already in the tub, just couldn't resist. "It's all *real* coffee, Gram, some of it just doesn't have caffeine. But it's still *real* from *real* beans."

"Oh *really*? Well then maybe the young professor will *really* change that . . . that . . . *real* light bulb *really tomorrow*!" And then she dunked the boy.

It turns out the boy didn't need to hear the rest of the story. The old man reviewed it to the point where he had left off and asked, "what do you think happens next?"

"That's easy, Poppop. The unicorn finally realizes that he hasn't *touched* the wall yet. What kind of wall is it? So he presses his horn to it and it just opens up, sort of turns to mush. It wasn't as solid as it looked."

The old man was astonished. "How did you know that, Mighty Mac?"

"Poppop I've been listening to your stories my whole life. Do you think I wasn't paying attention?"

The old man shook his head. Lying there in the bed with the boy was just what he needed, for both body and soul. His body was more sore than he thought, now that the adrenalin was gone, and the realization of what had happened—and of what could have happened—was settling in. "Well, I'm amazed, boy! But tell me, is there a lesson here?"

"Of course there is Poppop. Things aren't always what they look like."

"Is that all?"

The boy knew the old man well enough to hesitate. He had something up his sleeve. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“Right, and this is it. When something stumps you, or threatens you, and you’ve thought it out a bit? If it’s important enough, don’t back away from it. No. Instead go right at it.”

The boy said nothing. They both waited. Then the boy said, “like you did today, right? That guy was big, but after you hit him that one time you went at him.”

“Yes Mac, like that.”

Again, silence.

“Poppop. I didn’t do *anything*. I just stood there. I didn’t help. I dunno. I was so scared, Poppop. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” And the boy wept.

The man waited for maybe a full thirty seconds before he spoke. “You’re wrong, my Might Mac. First, at exactly the right time you twisted away and got free. That was pretty quick. Then don’t forget this. You saved me.”

“I didn’t Poppop. I wanted to but I didn’t know what to do.”

“Oh yes you did, Mac. You stopped me from . . . And just in time, too”

“I was so scared, Poppop.”

“Of me?”

“No Poppop. But I was scared of what you were doing. You—”

“Well then, there you have it. You stopped me from doing more of a bad thing!”

“I just stood there.”

“Yes, you did. But may I remind you, as the little boy said, you’re only eight years old! And one more thing. If something like this happens again, when you’re older, you will be ready. I promise you that, Mighty Mac. I really promise you that.”

“Poppop. Poppop. I saw the way you turned into that punch, Poppop. And just when he turned his chin toward you, bam! I knew you wouldn’t miss, Poppop, I just knew it! Good thing we practiced.” Within seconds the boy was asleep.

The next day the doorbell rang. The old lady was doing laundry so the old man answered. It was the policeman who had cuffed the robber, the closest one. Willie knew him well.

“Teddy, come in. What brings you around? You need a statement?”

“No, Dr. Brundle. Thanks for the invitation but I’m in a bit of a hurry so I’ll just give you the news and be on my way.”

“What’s that, Teddy?” Willie liked Teddy Bunz. He had dated Chloe when they were teenagers; he thought Teddy had really fallen for his daughter.

“The guy is dead, Dr. Brundle.” The policeman’s face showed nothing: a bad actor trying hard to convince you he wasn’t acting. “He tried to escape. He had gotten that shot off at the scene, winged one of our guys, so I suppose he was desperate.”

The old man regarded the policeman.

“Had no reason, really. Anyway, he went for one of our guy’s gun but another guy was faster. He shot him once center mass.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you suppose it was what you all call suicide by cop?”

“Don’t know. We knew of him. He was a really bad guy, really bad, but no Dillinger. He bungled it, knew we were showing up quick, so maybe he panicked and was thinking hostage. We’ll never know. Yeah, maybe suicide by cop.”

“Who was that second guy, Teddy, the one who shot him?”

“I was, sir.”

“Well, thank you, Teddy. Thanks very much. For the news. And thank the others too, will you?”

“I’ll do that, sir. And you be sure to come by to work the bag, Dr. Brundle.”

The two men looked at each other as they shook hands.

That afternoon the old man took Gram and the boy to the Howard Johnson’s. They stayed for two nights. He knew there would be busybodies wanting to talk, and do interviews, and know how he felt, and all that foolishness. They’d probably want to talk to Mighty Mac. He couldn’t allow that. He thought it best to avoid it all. People would soon lose interest. They always did. Best to let the police answer the questions.

It was dark when they got home with ice cream to have as dessert. Once they were sitting around the table, the old lady said, “what’s that I see?”

“What Gram?”

“Look there,” she said, pointing at the back door. The boy and the old man looked. A porch bulb was glowing bright.

“Poppop—”

“Don’t look at *me*, boy!”

“Gram, did you change the bulb?”

“Of course not. We were all away together. It had to have been your Poppop. Dizzy, fess up. You did it before we left, didn’t you.” It was a statement, really.

“Now, Penny dear, how in the world could I have done that?”

“Just out of the blue, I suppose,” the old lady said. She wanted to kiss him right then.

“That’s life, Pen,” the old man said, severely, “out of the blue.” And, with a smile this time, “that’s life.”

When the old man finally lay next to his grandchild, the boy said, “it was you, Poppop, right?”

“Remember our secret Mac.” The boy nodded, turned away from his grandfather, wrapped the old man’s arm around his body, kissed his hand, and fell asleep. And the old man too wafted off, remembering that smell of fresh bread as he listened to kitchen noises—spoons and forks chiming into place and pots clanging into theirs, and the woman humming “Begin the Beguine” —all sublimely reassuring music played merrily by his good wife.

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