



ONE MORE DAY WITH PAPA

The summer of 1939 rolled up fast. We had one more day with Papaw before Daddy and the T-Model would come to take us back to town – and school.

We finished breakfast before dawn. My 13 years old sister, Laomi, sacked sausage patties and biscuits for our lunch. Being three years younger, I was assigned the task of carrying the gallon water jug that was covered with parts of a burlap toe-sack. We followed Papaw to the woods. He carried his bucksaw under one arm and waved over his shoulder, swinging his axe. “Come on you two or it will be too late for any timber cuttin’ today.”

Early morning sunrays pushed through the soft white mist between shadows of tall trees. Mocking birds and red birds competed in song with tree frogs joining in on a chorus now and then. Papaw set his bucksaw on the ground and slowly straightened his

stiff back. His younger years remained in his memory and he still preferred working in his woods; that was far better than sitting in a rockingchair.

He talked to the woods for awhile. "All my children are scattered and my Madam for over sixty years is buried on that hill cemetery less than a mile from here. Time to work," he said and sent us a safe distance away. We sat on two old dried tree stumps, watching his every move.

"Looks like a good day to cut timber," the old man spoke aloud to birds and mist but mostly to his bucksaw. He seemed to forget we had come with him. He pulled a wrinkled red bandana handkerchief from his faded overalls. After a wrist popping snap opened the handkerchief, he ran it across his dry brow more by habit than need so early on this cool day.

"Never saw a better bunch of pines to start on," he said as he lifted the saw while slightly bending his knees, yet keeping his back straight.

The smell of moist rotting leaves on the forest floor weakened as the smell of turpentine from a small brown bottle that he shook onto the saw blade captured the air.

"A few drops of this will make a heap more easy cuttin' and the first pine is about to fall today." (Papaw talked to himself but we listened) The early mist continued to slide towards the creek.

Soon the huge tree crashed to the ground and took several small pine saplings with it. Blue jays flew off, screaming their protest before drifting back to see what the old man would do next. He wiped with his handkerchief again and walked slowly along the fallen trunk. Baggy overall legs flopped and whistled like a teakettle with each step he took. Comfort seemed more important to him than how a fellow looked to others.

With his homemade measuring stick and his double bit axe, he measured and marked the cuts to be made in motions as smooth as a surgeon with a knife on a rich patient. Papaw worked from the butt-end up along the trunk until it became too small for lumber making.

He looked up through the tall trees into a clear sky and smiled. I knew this old man knew this territory – he was at home. The mist lay only on the cool creek water now and the tree frogs dropped their singing contest with the birds. The forest quietness blended with a floating white fluffy cloud passing overhead.

“Whew. My breakfast ain’t stayin’ tolerable well with me. I’m getting hungry already. A man has to eat to keep up his strength,” he said, pulling the saw quickly and cutting through each marked spot. Sounds of saw teeth chewing wood echoed through the forest and Papaw talked between strokes. “I wish the Madam could still hear me working in these woods.” Sweat covered his face and neck as he set the saw on the ground again. He wiped sweat and straightened the wet blue denim shirt under his overall shoulder straps. Fresh sawdust added its smell to the woods, leaf decay, creek moisture, and Papaw’s sweat. Roses offered no sweeter perfume to Laomi and me.

For the first time since early morning, Papaw acknowledged we sat watching. He said, “You know this fresh air and sawdust along with a drink from Hurricane Creek will make you never want to leave these woods.” He lived in a peaceful world and his family and neighbors knew his love. Of course, sometimes folks wished he could cut conversations down as easily as he cut down pines.

Daddy always said Papaw never rocked the boat or stirred troubled waters. “It’s true no history book holds his name, but then again he never read a history book either.”

Four score and more years Papaw enjoyed sunrises, and only at his last birthday gathering had he noticed that no one older than our Papaw ate cake. “Guess I’m the old folks now but I didn’t know it until I looked around,” he said to us, remembering that special last birthday.

We ate our lunch sitting on tree stumps, and then Papaw went back to work. Laomi and I sat with our elbows dug into skinny legs and our hands cupped under our chins, watching Papaw.

The afternoon sun weakened as it filtered through the timbers and a long day closed on us. Papaw sat on the damp ground and pushed his back against the new stump. We heard him say, “I guess I’m tired, Madam. I ought to go on home.” He closed his eyes. A whippoorwill called out the first night song and sounded what our family called a death notice.

We knew those birds carried death calls – because of Daddy’s sister, Ruby, who died when Daddy was just a young man. A whippoorwill had perched on the open windowsill of Ruby’s death room. None of Daddy’s brothers let that night bird fool around their houses after that. Sometimes, they lost sleep chasing night death callers away.

We waited a long time; darkness kept us even longer. “I think something’s happened to Papaw.” Laomi nudged me while leaning forward to watch for any movement around the stump. I held my legs with both hands, trying to keep from jerking around. We breathed together and hummed a little. Fear stirred us from the black trees and deep lower darkness. Papaw felt cold.

Holding hands, stumbling, falling, and shoving through briar bushes, we ran back to the house. I ran on to the closest neighbor's farm for help. Before I faded down the dirt road, Laomi yelled, "You hurry up and get back here."

It seemed late in the night before Daddy and others came. We talked out loud but only in whispers. I felt more like screaming or shouting but the grown-ups whispered, setting an example for us. Laomi had more experience at death scenes because she had already been to Grandma's funeral.

"He looked like a happy Papaw, just resting one more time," Laomi explained to the women folk milling around the house waiting on the men to bring the body from the woods.

"I think only lucky Papaws go that way," I said wiping tears and letting thoughts of losing my dear friend soak into my soul.

"That old man would have it no other way," Laomi said as she held me close, helping to hold down our sobs. Some of the grown-ups patted on our shoulders and others just stared. Most of their eyes were dry. Laomi's and mine puffed and I wiped my nose more often than I did with a bad cold.

The long ride back home choked us, and it was to be our last trip to Papaw's farm. I heard Laomi humming in bed until I fell into disturbed sleep. She hummed most of the next day. I found the same tune and hummed while counting marbles. There didn't seem like much else to do with everybody being so quiet.

"There ain't no pleasure in losing a Papaw."

Mama and Daddy talked about the funeral but decided it would be best if Laomi and I stayed home. Laomi said, “I don’t want to see Papaw in that box, nohow. I looked at Grandma in her casket and that’s the last time I saw her.”

I said, “Mama told me that funerals ain’t for kids, anyway.” We missed the funeral and we missed our Papaw.