

Grandma Tull's Stories

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Chapter 6

“Will you tell me the story of how you and Grandpa Tull met?” asked Rosie.

Grandma Tull laughed. “Again, but you know it better than I by now, child.”

“I like that story,” said Rosie. “It’s one of the best.”

She was a slim, long-legged, fourteen year old now, growing prettier by the day. It was August, hot and humid, and Rosie wore shorts and a simple top with her reddish-blond curls carelessly pulled back in a ponytail, much as Grandma Tull had worn hers at that age.

They were fishing; one of their favorite pastimes, for nothing lends itself better to storytelling than fishing. Rosie had carried the chair out for Grandma Tull, and now they sat at the end of the dock; Grandma Tull in her chair and Rosie perched on the end of the wooden planks, sandals off, toes dangling down into the water. Their lines were cast, but neither was paying much attention to the fishing. The thing of it, Rosie had discovered long ago, was that with each telling Grandma Tull added bits and pieces of the family history. It was these nuggets of lore Rosie treasured and hoarded. Also, although the story remained unchanged, it never started the same, and Grandma Tull never told it in the same way.

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Well, let me see. That was in the early 1930's, a time when fear gripped the land. People had not yet recovered from the first war, the stock market had crashed, and everyone was going mad. No one quite understood what had happened or how it had gotten to that point. Folks really didn't understand the whole stock market concept if you want to know the truth. It was only after things started getting tight, no one could find work and we all started to run out of those things we had always taken for granted that everyone grasped what all the fuss was about. I was just going on fourteen, so I was plenty old enough to understand the general gist of it.

Things got tight here too, tight enough that mother got her pinched look often, sometimes at the beginning of the day, only truly losing it when she played with Musha's baby or sat down at the piano. We didn't have it as bad as most folks did, though. You see, we had the farm and with the crops, the apple trees, pear trees, vegetable garden, herb garden, cows, pigs, chickens, fresh fish, deer, squirrels, quail, wild turkeys, mother's preserves and dried stuff in the pantry, not to mention the cellar stocked full of apples and potatoes and who knows what else, we ate well enough. And we had Mr. Tundal and we had Musha.

Mr. Tundal and Mother had married by then, and it was a wedding to behold. Folks came from all over to show respect to Mother since her father, Virgil Bishop, had been a prominent man, while his father, before him, had been one of the first to help built the town. My father, Tom Lanford, had served the town well as doctor and, on occasions, veterinarian. He died in the first war, so I never really knew him. He came home from the war in a pine box, and we buried him in the small graveyard beside the church. Mother said I got my height from her side of the family, but the rest of me was all him. He had been well liked in the town and his commonsense approach to medicine was a well-known attribute, as was his generosity when it came time to pay the bills and money was tight. So, out of respect to Mother, and a genuine like of Mr. Tundal, they

all came.

Mr. Tundal had written to his brother, Stanton Tundal, and he came from Boston to help run the store so Mr. Tundal could spend more time with Mother at the farm. Long before the market got into trouble, both brothers realized we were in for a rough time and started putting money aside. He was a shrewd man, Mr. Tundal, and his brother, Stanton, was probably what folks would now call brilliant. Before the crunch came, they knew the demand for their particular type of goods had bottomed out with the market, so Mr. Tundal closed up his shop and no longer went to town every day.

I can't begin to explain what his presence in our lives meant to us, what a difference it made in our futures and memories. It's like trying to explain how the energies of one person can move a crowd, or a nation. But suddenly Mr. Tundal was no longer on the periphery of our lives, in the morning and evening, on weekends and on special occasions, but there every day, all day. The thing you have to understand about Mr. Tundal is that he had enormous energy, so much so that after about four days of seeing to the crops, helping Tanner clean out the barn, mending the wheel on the wagon, going hunting for fresh meat, painting the shed that Tanner had been meaning to do for several weeks now, and getting into Mother's way and on her nerves, he turned his attention to my twin brothers, Myles and Moses, and to me.

He took us fishing, hunting and riding and we went swimming and rambled over the land. Being more of a city man than a farmer, he quickly decided that he preferred play with us over hoeing the crops or cleaning out the barn, and he became our playmate. This is not to say that he did not do all of those chores, he did all of that and more, but such was his energy he finished rapidly, doing what needed to be done quickly with time left over for us. Mother never felt shirked either, not so that I could tell.

We had chores as well, but ours were the fun chores such as picking wild blackberries; climbing the apple and pear trees to pluck the sweet fruit; picking strawberries, beans, peas and corn from

Mother's garden; and raking leaves to burn in huge bonfires. These were the chores Mr. Tundal preferred, and he came to help us with them. He made a game of them, and when we finished there was always a treat such as swimming in the creek or fishing. He always had a story, piece of advice or quote to go along with whatever task we were doing. I believe that's where I first developed my love of stories.

Sometimes he called a day with no chores; freeday we called it, making one word of it. On freedays mother would pack our lunches and we would set out on foot to explore. Freedays were our favorite thing to do, and from it, I got my love and appreciation of the land. We walked miles and miles, and oh, the things we found: Caves and waterfalls; marshy swamplands; rivers and streams; meadows of wildflowers and fields of lush grasses; great cliffs and deep crevices. We fished the streams with cane poles, hunted deer with homemade bows and arrows, waded streams and walked through fields of grasses grown so tall they came over my head. Climbing hills so high they seemed as mountains, we stared out at the vast expanses revealed in wonder while, below us, the tiny trees seeming as miniatures with lakes appearing as small puddles and winding streams as twine meandered through patchwork fields. We found a bridge made of stone and walked its length, marveling at this thing of nature. We explored caves, staring in amazement at the beauty of the stalagmites and stalactite growing from the ceiling and rising up from the floor. Mr. Tundal tutored us in the way they were formed. He taught us all manner of useful and amazing things. He knew about trees, their names and growing seasons, and he explained photosynthesis and about why the leaves turn in the fall. When we camped out at night, lying under the canopy of the black velvet sky, he explained the layout of the constellations, telling us stories about how they got their names.

We stood in waterfalls, ecstatically happy as we let the deliciously cold water flow over our bodies, faces upturned, mouths opened as the rushing water beat down upon us. Picking dozen of bouquets of

wildflowers, we carefully carried the delicate flowers back to adorn mother's table. Sometimes, when she liked a particular flower, we went back and dug up the roots for her garden. We ate wild blackberries, strawberries and tee berries. We found arrowheads, bullet casing, unique rocks, fools gold, and collected pet turtles and frogs. We swung from vines, sloshed through bogs and creeks, and came home tired, wet, and muddy. We grew brown, lean and tough. We had blisters, cuts, scratches, sore feet, got sunburned, caught poison ivy, and mother almost gave up on my hair. We were deliriously happy.

So throughout this time of panic and doing without, we lived in a different world, a world of fun and adventure. Slaughtering a pig was a project we looked forward to as something new and exciting because we were allowed to participate in a way we had never been permitted before.

The night before this great adventure, Mr. Tundal gathered us around the kitchen table, explaining in clinical detail the reason for killing the pig and the systematic process of cutting up the meat. The whole project became an exercise not of blood and guts and raw hunks of meat, but instead turned into an exciting surgical procedure we would get to view firsthand.

The following morning, the proper tools were carefully laid out, the technique for killing the pig was explained in detail and an expert demonstration was given of the correct way to skin the pig. Unfortunately, even Mr. Tundal could do nothing about the smell. When the pig was put in hot water, I think we all turned a little green. Yet, we got through it all right, and to this day, I remember it as an exciting and fun, although gory, day. We helped with the making of the sausages, the frying up of the cracklings, and at the end of it all, Mr. Tundal led my brothers outside for the most important part of a hog killing.

Building a huge fire in the backyard, they sat around it with green army blankets covering their heads, forming cowls, as they waiting for the precise moment the ceremony could begin. Proper timing,

according to Mr. Tundal, was critical, for even one event out of order could ruin the whole outcome. Dust deepened into dark, and still they sat. Standing at the window, I watched and waited for the event to begin.

Mother came into the kitchen and stood behind me, looking over my shoulder. "What are they doing out there?" She asked.

"They waiting," said Musha.

"Waiting for what?" asked mother.

"It's the Ceremony of the Pig," I explained.

"The what?"

I shrugged, and we waited.

Finally, when I had given up hope that anything would happen, Mr. Tundal let out a great screech and jumped to his feet.

"The time has come. Arise with me and let the Ceremony of the Pig begin."

Myles rose so quickly he stumbled tripping over his blanket and would have fallen into the fire if Mr. Tundal hadn't caught him. Moses went to stand, but as one of his legs had fallen asleep, he could not put his weight on it, and he began hopping around on one foot in a little circle, moaning and yapping and shaking the leg that had fallen asleep. He, too, tripped over his blanket and was hopping and tripping and yelling every time he came down on his tingling leg.

Behind me where I stood at the window, Musha asked, "that part of it?"

Mr. Tundal, the high priest, finally got order restored to his fledgling assembly and, with blankets replaced and dignity restored, proceeded with the initiation.

"You must stare into the flames and think about the hidden meaning behind the killing of the hog," intoned the high priest in a mystic voice.

Myles looked puzzled and Moses confused, but both stared hard at the fire.

"Search for the significance within the flames. Search for the secret." He was chanting now with eyes closed and head back.



“Search!” he beseeched.

Myles and Moses stared harder, searching for the significance.

“What are they doing?” mother asked from behind me.

“Searching for something,” Musha said, and I heard her snicker.

Moses’ eyes were watering with all the searching. Myles was staring fascinated at the leaping flames. He had probably forgotten he was supposed to be searching.

Suddenly, the high priest ceased his chanting, “We have found it!” he announced.

Neither Myles nor Moses looked as if they had found it, but both looked glad the searching was over.

Picking up two sticks, the priest began circling the fire, tapping the sticks together loudly while starting a new chant. His followers hastened to grab their sticks and fell in behind him while tapping loudly.

They took up the chant: “Virility, procreation, virility, procreation.” Over and over they chanted, marching around the fire.”

They did this for a while. Behind me, Musha asked, “What’s that mean?”

Mother said. “Let’s hope they don’t know either.”

The high priest stopped suddenly. Myles almost ran into him. Moses ran into Myles.

“Now, for the feast of fertility,” the high priest announced. Pulling a packet from his pocket, he opened it and dumped the contents into a skillet placed within the fire. He stirred the mess in the skillet a few times then, reaching into the fire with tongs, extracted the pieces. Dividing the morsels evenly onto three large leaves set handy nearby, he passed one leaf to each boy while taking the last for himself.

Musha asked, “What’s that?”

“You don’t want to know,” said mother.

“Pig balls,” I told her.

Myles and Moses stared down at the pieces of meat on their leaves. Myles looked interested. Moses looked appalled.

The mystic, waving his hand over the meat pieces, muttered

strange words.

“What’s he saying?” Musha wanted to know.

Mother shook her head. “You don’t want to know that, either,”

The priest raised his leaf and, in a loud voice, gave the toast: “To a manly manhood.”

“To a manly manhood, “echoed his inductees.

The high priest tossed his manhood inducing meat into his mouth and chewed fiercely. Myles tossed his meat and chew with equal ferociousness. The other inductee was less sure, eyeing the manhood meat critically. Finally, he placed it within his mouth, gagged, chewed, gagged, chewed, gagged, swallowed, gagged, downed it, and looked sick.

“We have done it,” yelled the high priest. “We are fertile; to the victory dance.” He danced around the fire with wild leaps and shouts. His two followers soon joined him, and all were leaping about with equal abandon. What other mysterious rituals the Order of the Pig would have engaged in were abruptly cut short when Myles trailed his blanket in the fire, and great havoc erupted as the high priest and the inductees tried to put out the blaze. Finally, the blanket was tossed into the fire, and the members of the Order of the Pig shared a silent moment as they watched it burn.

“That part of the ritual too?” asked Musha.

Mother sighed. “Maybe I had better go fetch them in before one of them gets hurt.” She headed for the door.

Behind me, Musha giggled. “I’m glad I’m a female and don’t have to eat pig balls to make babies,” she said.