

GOING HOME

I never used to like going down to Berea to visit Mamaw and Papaw. They lived on a patch of farmland which was actually a few miles south of Berea, in a county called Bell. There was never anything to do there. I preferred the clean hard lines of the city to the fray-edged texture of the country. I felt that somehow I belonged within those lines, was an extension of them; they made me feel secure. At Papaw's there was too much open space, and I was bored. He considered playing chess some real action.

So you can imagine how I felt the day my father told me that we were going down to Bell County for a few days to visit Papaw. We were actually checking up on him. He wasn't doing too well, and the plan was to talk him into coming back to Cincinnati with us. This was not how I wanted to spend the precious three months of my summer vacation.

"But, Dad, what am I suppose to do in Berea for three days?"

"You could bring one of your scary books," my mother suggested. "All you do around here is read Stephen King horror stories any way."

"It's summer vacation. I don't want to read."

"Well, you could bring a friend along with us. Why don't you ask Jimmy to come along?"

"No way. I can't take Jimmy to Papaw's."

I couldn't believe that she had even suggested it. Papaw was much too embarrassing to be seen by normal people. The man was an abomination. He

was completely uncivilized. He was always making city people eat pickled pigs' feet and kale, and then he'd laugh at them when they tried to be polite and say it was good. And he referred to blacks as "coloreds." I couldn't subject anyone to that.

"Why not?" my mother asked. "He would probably enjoy seeing the farm."

"Yeah, about as much as he would enjoy having monkeys fly out of his butt. I don't think so, Mom."

The trip took two and a half hours, during which time we listened to my dad's Waylon and Willie tapes and watched the vapid landscape roll by outside. Most of the scenery on 1-75 between Cincinnati and Berea consisted of anonymous green hills, scorched then by the summer sun. Much of the land is divided up by white, wooden, picket fences and dotted with lazy Holsteins lying in the shade of the few skimpy maple trees some farmer had bothered to plant for them. The remainder of the countryside is covered with endless rows of crisp, brown corn. Nothing to look at.

I spent most of the ride rolling the windows up and down and complaining. The Geo had no air conditioner because my father said we didn't need it, and every time we passed a pig farm or skunk frying on the blistering pavement, the stench was awful. I hated that drive more than anything. But the strange truth of the matter (although I would never admit it to my parents) was that I usually had a pretty decent time once we got to Papaw's. He was

always telling the wildest farm stories, which as a city kid I had a hard time understanding.

Once he told us about how his closest neighbor, Danny Joe Britt, had been out in his pig pen trying to catch a sow to sell. "He'd almost get his hands on the darned rascal," Papaw explained, "but she'd always wiggle through and get away from him." Danny Jo would brace himself, legs spread wide, and when the sow ran by he'd try to jump on her. Papaw said that the man was just about to give up and go get his grandson to do the dirty work when the pig came charging up between poor Danny Joe's legs and lifted him right up off the ground.

"Sow rode him around piggy back." Papaw said, laughing at his own joke, "all around the yard. It was five minutes 'fore he finally fell off." My grandfather thought that this was about the funniest story he'd ever heard, and I did too, until it dawned on me that Danny Britt was an old man with a heart condition. When I pointed that out to Papaw, he just shook his head and said "That man's a farmer too, son."

When we reached the first road that Papaw took into town, my mother turned around in her seat and said to me, "Papaw hasn't been feeling too well lately. Let's try and cheer him up."

"Whatever. I guess I could tell him about the coloreds at school..."

"Kevin." My mother pointed her index finger at me.

"Looks like rain," my father said.

As we pulled into his rocky driveway, I could see old Papaw sitting in his chair on the front porch. He had a fly-swatter in one hand and a transistor radio in the other. His dirty, blue denim baseball cap sat crookedly on his freckled head. My father tooted the horn a few times, and Papaw waved his fly-swatter at us. His mutt, Shep, stood up and danced a little ways down the porch steps.

I told my mother, "He looks okay to me."

My father was a strong, well-muscled man, despite the fact that he had always lived in the city. He was the kind of man who believed there was a distinct difference between men's and women's work, and my mother seemed to agree. So he and I carried the suitcases into the house, while my mother fixed dinner, Papaw-style fried chicken, mashed potatoes, creamed corn and sweet yeast rolls.

At the dinner table Dad and Papaw talked about the corn crop turnout, while my mother and I nodded, pretending to be interested. Afterwards, she brought out the blackberry cobbler.

"I'll miss looking after that corn," Papaw said during dessert.

"You haven't worked in a corn field for more than ten years, Dad," my father reminded him.

"Well, I was just out there the other day making sure them two coloreds knew what was what."

I dropped my fork. Everyone got quiet, stopped eating, and watched me bend down to take the fork away from Shep, who was under the table waiting

patiently for just such an opportunity.

“Whoops,” I said, picking up my spoon.

My mother frowned. “It’ll be good for you to spend some time with us in Cincinnati, Dad. It must get pretty lonely out here with Mom gone.” She looked at me.

“Yeah, Papaw. We can play some chess.” I glared back at her. Satisfied?

Papaw nodded absently, but didn’t look any of us in the eye. My mother and father exchanged worried glances. No one talked much after that.

After she had cleared the table, I helped my mother wash the dishes and put them away. It was a good excuse to get away from the weather reports on the radio. About seven o’clock; my father came back in off the porch.

“Looks like a storm’s headed this way,” he told my mother. Then to me he said, “Why don’t you go on outside and talk to your grandpa?”

“He’d like that,” my mother added.

“I’m watching T.V. Jeopardy’s about to come on.” I was whining.

“Just do it, Kevin,” my father said. “He may not be around to talk to that much longer.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure, lay the guilt trip on me.”

Really, he looked okay to me.

Out on the porch, Papaw was sitting in his old rocking chair which he had once paid me twenty-five cents to paint pine green. Now it was badly chipped

and the original chestnut color was showing through. The little transistor was playing softly in his hand.

"Storm's a-comin'," he said. Then, pointing east, he added, "See the storm clouds?"

I shoed Shep away and sat down in Mamaw's straight-backed wooden chair. Years ago she had painted it green to match Papaw's rocker.

"Yeah."

We sat there for quite a while, Papaw listening to the weather reports, I watching the once-white, thick-textured paint on the house turn night-time violet. At some point, my father came out and said that he and Mom were going to watch the news on the tiny portable television we had brought from home. Did we want to come in and watch with them? I guess he'd decided that I'd suffered enough for one evening.

"Naw," Papaw answered for the both of us. "Me and the boy here's just gonna watch the storm. Ain't we?"

He looked at me and nodded, so I said, "I guess so. Yeah. We're just gonna watch the storm."

My father winked at me, then stepped back inside, leaving the door open a little so he could see the sky through the screen.

It got dark real fast after that. The blue-tinted night sky filled in the spaces between the trees on both sides of the house. Before long, it rained like breaking glass.

Whenever it rained at night at Papaw's during the summer, the air had a certain heavy smoothness to it; it smelled of the budding pink dogwoods that surrounded his home. That night, the aroma was especially stifling, the atmosphere unnaturally weighty, like a warm wet blanket lying over our heads and shoulders.

For me, it was a comfortable feeling, but Papaw was having trouble breathing in the humid night air. Little whistles escaped his lungs between inhalations. I could hear his wheezing between lines of the radio man's monologue.

"So how have you been, Papaw?" I asked.

He grunted and ran a work-worn hand through the patch of gray that remained on his scalp. We sat there for another minute or so, listening as the rain drained off the roof into the gutter.

"Ain't been too good since Mamaw passed away, you know."

We both glanced down at Mamaw's whittling box, which was setting on the porch beside her chair, probably just where she'd left it. My grandmother had died of cancer the previous summer, and I wondered if the season reminded him of it.

"Yeah, I miss her too," I said.

The old man's rocker creaked on the wooden slats of the porch, and I remember thinking that it sounded the way Mamaw's joints had toward the end. Every so often, heat-lightning flashed gold through the blue-blackness, and we

could see the cornfield up on the hill, stalks waving. The trees around the house rustled and Papaw said something I couldn't hear over the hissing.

"What was that, Papaw?"

"Said she died in this house, you know." Thunder rumbled somewhere far away, then boomed loudly right above us, punctuating his words.

"I know."

This conversation was beginning to depress me, but I couldn't just leave him sitting out there alone, didn't want to leave him any more really.

"You can go inside with your folks if you want to, son."

"No, Pap. I'd rather stay out here with you."

The old man nodded and a hint of a smile wrinkled the flesh around his tired blue eyes. Then he leaned over and picked up the fly-swatter from the little wicker table that sat between us. He used it to fan some gnats away from his damp face.

Lightning flashed again and Papaw started counting, "One one hundred. Two one hundred."

I joined him, "Three one hun..." Boom.

"Three miles away," Papaw said softly, smiling at me. I could just make out the whites of his eyes in the half-light.

"Closer than that," I said. And then, embarrassed by the loudness of my voice, I whispered, "you'd think it was right over the house."

Papaw nodded, then whistled one of his famous birdcalls. The wind was

picking up, but the rain had slackened.

"Where is he, Papaw?" I asked.

He pointed straight ahead to where a cardinal hovered, then perched at the top of the nearest Dogwood. He raised his hands to his lips and repeated the call, then returned them to his lap. We both watched the bird, silent, until it flew away.

"Hey, Papaw. Tell me one of your famous farm stories."

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, "I don't want to leave here."

"Why not, Papaw. It'll be good for you to come live with us in Cincinnati for a while. We'll have a great time."

He didn't answer me. A bug got stuck on the insect-lamp and made a popping sound.

"I mean, it must get pretty lonely living down here all by yourself without Mamaw."

"Got a lot of work to do, that's for sure."

"But at our house, Mom'll do all the work."

"Hell, I don't mind the work. I've worked this land all my life."

I watched him as his eyes wandered over his stretch of farmland. In the distance, beyond the pasture gate, a cow was lowing, an eerie haunting sound that made me think of ghosts. I shivered.

"Hear that cow?" She's singing.

"Papaw, there's a lot more to do in Cincinnati than there is here. You'll

love it once you get there.”

“You ain’t got fields in Cincinnata. And you ain’t got corn and livestock and Mamaw’s strawberries. I still got a few jars of her strawberry preserves left, down in the cellar.”

“You can bring them with you, Pap.”

“But the rest I can’t.” We sat there quiet for a moment, listening to the wind and the cow and the rain in the gutter. “I believe a man should die in his own home. That’s where he belongs.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Being so young, it scared me the way he was talking about dying.

“I’ve worked this land,” he was saying. “This is my space.” Then he paused, searching for the words that would convince me. “Your mamma was born in this house, you know.”

“I know, but she wants you in Cincinnati with us.”

He was shaking his head. “I’ve taken my life from this place and…”

“And you don’t want to leave it now,” I finished for him.

I felt his eyes on me, and reluctantly I met his gaze. Something glistened there. He nodded.

We stayed out on the porch until the storm passed over, but as I recall, we didn’t talk anymore. It was nearly midnight by the time Papaw nudged the dog and headed off to bed. A single cricket chirped as I opened up the screen door and watched the old man and his dog amble off down the hall toward

Papaw's bedroom. I thought it sounded lonely.

The next two days were spent packing up Mamaw and Papaw's things in boxes and covering up all of their furniture with bed sheets and plastic. We loaded what we could into the trunk of our car and the bed of Papaw's truck and left the rest for another day.

On the morning we were to return to Cincinnati, my mother had me in the kitchen packing up Papaw's blue ceramic dishes. I didn't know how to explain to my mother the way I felt about what Papaw had told me. I had to tell someone what Papaw wanted, though, because he obviously wasn't going to. So I gave it to her straight.

"Mom, Papaw doesn't want to go to Cincinnati with us. He wants to stay here."

"What In the world makes you say that?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"Because he told me. He said he just wants to stay here."

"Kevin, are you sure it's not really you who wants Papaw to stay here?"

That pissed me off. "For God's sake. I'm telling you. Papaw says he wants to die in his own freakin' house. Is that so hard for you to understand?"

After I'd said it, I immediately wished that I could take it all back. The words had cut my mother, and she stopped wrapping her saucer and adjusted the pins that held her dark auburn bun. Her pale blue eyes, the same shade of blue as Papaw's, strayed to something outside the window.

"Kevin," she began, but her voice cracked and she had to clear her throat. She looked away from the window and into my face. "Papaw has been alone in this house for over a year. He needs to be with people now. Can you understand that?"

"I guess so, but, I mean, if Papaw wants to stay here, he should be able to."

She shook her head, letting me know in a motion that she was fed up with me. She picked up another saucer, wrapped it in a page of the Sports section, and placed it carefully in the box.

"Papaw has Alzheimer's," she said. Maybe to me, maybe not.

"I know."

"No you don't. I don't think you do. Papaw is a lot sicker than you seem to realize, and I want to take care of him. I need to be there with him when he..."

She fell silent and stopped wrapping again. She turned to me then, and her eyes were uncharacteristically helpless. "He's my father."

"I understand that. I really do," I said, but really I thought it sounded a little selfish. "I just hope my kids don't drag me off to the county somewhere when they decide I'm too old to make up my own mind."

One evening, Papaw and I were in the living room playing chess with the television on. We had the whole house to ourselves until late, so Shep was

snoozing next to me on the couch. My parents were out having dinner and playing cards with their bridge group. Papaw had been living with us for over two months, and although he acted a little strange at times, kind of rambling on about the farm and the "Great Depression", I had gotten used to having him around. I'd become a real whiz at chess and he no longer expired on the first maze of Pac-Man. We were getting along.

Because we'd gotten pretty close, I decided to ask him the question I'd been trying for months to get up the guts to ask my father.

"Hey, Papaw. How old were you when you learned how to drive?" I already knew the answer, it was merely part of my plan.

"Well, I'd say I was about ten years old when I learnt to drive the tractor, about twelve when my father taught me the truck. Why you askin'?"

"Well, uh, how would you feel about teaching me to drive your truck? I'm almost fourteen. That's two years older than you were."

He took off his hat and scratched at his head. I was sure he'd see the logic of this. "I reckon we'd better ask your dad about that one, son. Your mamma don't even want me drivin' around here in the city. How do you think she'd feel about the two of us out in that old truck?"

"She probably wouldn't like it because she's so paranoid. But she wouldn't have to know, would she? We could just take a couple spins around the block; that's not dangerous. Or we could go out in some field and ride around where there's no traffic."

Papaw thought about that for a moment. "I reckon we could go out in a field and do a few donuts."

"All right, Papaw. I knew you'd say yes." This was easier than I'd thought.

And then a thought came to him. My heart sank.

"Come to think of it, I ain't seen my keys around here for a while. You ain't seen 'em have ya?"

I was prepared for this. I knew where his keys were. My father had put them on the big key-ring that hung on a nail in the garage. He didn't want Papaw driving in the city. He and my mother thought that Papaw was an incompetent.

"They're out in the garage. Can we go driving tomorrow afternoon before Mom and Dad get home from work?"

"I thought you started school tomorrow. You can't miss the first day of school."

"We can go as soon as I get home. I get out at two-thirty. They won't be back until after five."

"Sounds good to me."

"I'll go get the keys." I hopped up from the sofa, disturbing Shep, and ran out to the garage.

When I returned to the family room, my grandfather looked confused. "Why do you suppose they put my keys on that ring without telling me? I never

would've noticed less I'd needed to go somewhere."

Without thinking, I replied, "Maybe they were afraid you'd just get in your truck and drive back to Berea." I said the last few words real slow, wondering whether Papaw was listening, half hoping he hadn't heard me.

I looked up at him. He was listening. His brain was running full speed; I could see it in his eyes. The keys turned hot in my hand, so hot I had to lay them down. I set them on the chess board in front of Papaw.

"Here Papaw. You hold onto them until tomorrow. They're your keys."

Papaw nodded and covered the keys with his right hand.

"Gotta go to bed now," I told him. "Tomorrow's the big day. First day of school and all."

Again Papaw nodded, but I could tell he was no longer listening.

I returned home from school the next day to find no one at home. Both the car and the truck were gone from the garage, and immediately I knew that something had happened with Papaw.

My mother called home around supper time and told me that she and my father were out looking for him. I didn't say anything. An hour later she called again to tell me that the police had found Papaw's body in his truck in a ditch off I-75; he was three-fourths of the way home.

"Can you believe it?" my mother asked me. I could hear her sniffing on the other end of the line.

"He was going home," I told her.

"Why in God's name would he want to do that?"

"I told you. That's where he wanted to die."

"He was not in his right mind."

"I think he was."

My mother hung up on me.

A few days after the funeral, my mother and I drove down to Bell County to collect the rest of Papaw's belongings. Dad had to work, so we took Shep with us for protection. I spent the day packing, and cleaning, and loading the car, while my mother took care of all the necessary paperwork.

That night, after eating a cold dinner, my mother and I played a game of checkers; there really wasn't much else to do. Papaw didn't have T.V. or VCR, and, anyway the electricity had been turned off. So we listened to the transistor as we played, and we talked.

"You know what I still can't figure out?" my mother asked, waiting for me to make my move.

I shook my head, concentrating, only half-listening to her.

"I still can't figure out how Papaw got a hold of those keys."

My stomach sank, but I didn't look up.

"I mean, he must have been plotting and planning for weeks before he ran across that key."

My concentration was completely shattered, so I just made a move and reached for my Pepsi glass. "Your turn, Mom."

She looked down at the board with disinterest. I could tell she wasn't going to let this drop without a suggestion from me.

"I wonder, Mom, if maybe Papaw wasn't a lot smarter than we gave him credit for. He could see, you know. Maybe he just went out in the garage and saw the keys hanging there."

She jumped two of my pieces in a row.

"Even so, why didn't he ask me or your father for the keys when he noticed they were missing? He must have thought we were plotting against him or something. I can't stand it that he thought that."

"Well, mom, in a way..." I started, but then thought better of it. I had done enough accusing and it was too late for it to do any good.

"You understand, don't you Kevin, that if he had come to me and said that he wanted to go home, I would have driven him back here myself? I loved that man. I would have done anything for him."

I still couldn't look at her. If she was telling me the truth, what had I done? I told her he wanted to die here. Either way, it was too late. Papaw was gone and I felt sick.

"It doesn't matter, Mom."

"I guess you're right. I just wish I knew that he was happy. I wish there was some way to know what he was thinking right before..."

Tears welled in her eyes. I couldn't stand knowing that much of this was my fault. I reached across the board and picked up her hand, the first time I'd ever made that gesture.

"It's okay, Mom. He was going home. I know Papaw and that was enough for him." Even as I said the words, I had to fight back my own tears. I knew I was right, but that did not prevent my mother's pain. Or my own.

She squeezed my hand, then went to get a tissue. While she was gone, I stood up and went out to the front porch. The night was still; it was a quiet darkness except for the chirping of that one cricket. I walked over to Papaw's chair and sat down.

A moment later, my mother appeared in the doorway with a jar of jam in her hand.

"So here you are. You want some biscuits and jelly?"

"Is that Mamaw's strawberry? I thought Papaw took it all with him to Cincinnati."

"This is my own private stash. You want some or not?"

"Sure."

"She came out a few minutes later carrying a plate of fresh biscuits slathered in dark red preserves. We ate in silence, taking tiny bites, savoring the sweetness and letting our memories wash over us in waves.

We weren't sitting there long before the wind started picking up and the night grew cold. My mother stood, picking up the empty plate. "I'm going to

bed. We have an early day tomorrow, Kev."

"I'll be there in a minute."

She bent down and kissed my hair, then pulled open the screen door.

"Don't be too long."

"Mom?"

She turned back around to face me. A breeze stirred her hair.

"Where is home to you? Cincinnati or here?"

Without hesitating, she answered, "Wherever you and Dad are."

The following morning, we made the long and tedious trip home from Berea for the last time. I sat in the front seat looking out the window, but I don't remember seeing the hills or the cows or the endless rows of corn. What I do remember is the cityscape as we neared the bridge and passed over the Ohio River. I recall the buildings, like enormous concrete trees, so much more vivid and alive than they'd ever seemed before, yet so familiar and full of dignity.

And I remember rolling down the window and breathing in the smell of the city, all smoke and gas and that butterscotch smell from the distillery. When I did, Shep stuck his head out the window and started to bark. I rubbed him and patted his behind, and excited, he continued his yapping.

"Put his leash on my, Kevin," my mother said. "I don't want him jumping out the window."

"He's not going anywhere, Mom," I told her, pulling Shep's leash out of

her purse and snapping it onto his collar. "He's almost home. Isn't that right, boy? We're going home."