

Fading Giant

by Alan Nephew

An elderly man sits at his kitchen table. The once perfectly tended house now sits cluttered, furniture pushed aside to clear paths for his wheelchair. On the table sits the reminders of his age: pictures of wife that long ago passed, the names of his children listed on the yellow note pad, beneath them are his grandchildren and great grandchildren's names, a large pillbox that his daughter carefully arranges each week, carefully following the doctor's instructions. Stacks of newspapers, with print that's far too small read, nothing but stubbornness and pride maintaining the subscription, cover the table. His gaze shifts, from staring longingly at the large red barn and the farm manager's car towards the television, a meaningless show is on air. This is his reality.

The barn shows its age. Like the farmer's declining health, paint chipped and faded, cobwebs now covering the corners of stalls. The dimly lit barn shows the years of neglect and haphazard repairs. A wall in a horse stall is kicked through, the sunlight beaming in. The farmer doesn't notice or maybe he doesn't care. His farm manager, the swindler, can do no wrong. This barn, a once pristine palace for horses, now sits on the edge of collapse. The twin barn doors, made of large wooden planks nailed together that once enclosed the large entryway, have come off the tracks again. Wind howls through the open gap. These doors sit disheveled, as a reminder to the farmer of his own pivotal moment of decline, the cause his suffering, the cause of pain. His back had been broken years prior attempting to fix them, yet here they now sit, still off the tracks. This was once a place of joy. Where grandchildren rode bikes and scooters,

racing through the narrow alleys between the stalls, laughing and yelling, “I bet you can’t catch me!”

A walk through the overgrown pastures reveals the great deception. Hay wagons sit abandoned, decaying from the elements. Tires are deflated, dry rotted, submerged into the soft clay. The horse fence, once tensioned and electrified, now rests on the ground. Burdocks and buttercups litter the field, drowning out the Alfalfa. Land by the gates is worn and dusty, manure caked onto the soil, where there should be only grass.

The pride and joy of his farm, the old Case tractor sits in the shed, a covered outdoor portion of the barn. With a little coaxing it turns over, clug, clug, clug, clug, clug. The smell of unburnt diesel and black billowing smoke fills the building. Oil drips from the rear seals, gears grinding, the power take off fails to engage. The tractor is shot. The farmer fails to see it. To him, all is well. Thirty years have since passed when a young boy sat on his grandfather’s lap atop this very tractor. The boy’s hands on the steering wheel as his grandfather guides him. The hot August sun beating down. He steers the tractor up and down the field, guiding the bailer perfectly over the windrows teaching the grandson his art. The boy’s father stacks hay on the wagon while his sister sits atop her throne of neatly stacked bails. The smell of freshly cut hay is overwhelming. It is a mutually shared memory, a happy one, representing what the farm once meant. A memory that shows what the farm still means.

The tiny farmhouse is his home, place of comfort. A nursing home would provide better care that he needs, but this is his home. His claim on the land. The house he raised his daughters in. So many memories are here: summer dinners with children and grandchildren, plaid tablecloths covering the two long picnic tables in the back yard, a row of tall pine trees providing shade from the western sun, charred burgers smoking on the grill, kids laughing as they pass

dishes around the table, Christmas gatherings, kids opening presents, a sense of cheer in the air, his wife playing the grand piano that takes up half of the living room while he plays the violin, the smell of wood burning in the old nineteenth century's wood stove heating the kitchen every evening. The place is darker now, corrupted by time. The house feels empty, like a shell of its former self. The gardens his wife spent years manicuring are now overgrown. Trumpet vines climb the porch columns, tiny hairlike roots digging through and splitting the wood apart, the flaking paint allowing carpenter bees to set up encampments, but it is still home.

A Hospice doctor visits the house. The kitchen is stuffy and sticky, the air thick with humidity and heat, an uncomfortable setting. The news everyone was anticipating, but no one wanted to hear, is being delivered. There is nothing else that can medically be done to enhance life, no revolutionary prescription, no magical treatment. The end of the line. The doctor asks, "Mr. Guenther, do you want to be resuscitated if something happens?" The elderly man replies, "No." The words sink to the bottom of my stomach. It was a logical choice, a respectable choice, a choice that I knew he would make, but why is it so hard to hear out loud? Could I have made this choice so easily if I were in his shoes? Was it even an easy choice? I'll probably never know until one day when I'll make it myself. It was his choice to make.

After his death I tried to guess what his final thoughts might have been. Was he worried about what would happen to his farm? Did he think his family only thought of him as a burden waiting to be shipped off to a nursing home? Did he even realize that I didn't care about the aging process for both the farm and him? He was still my grandfather, even if at times his condition could be a burden. This place was just as much a home to me as it was to him. Did he die thinking he was not loved?

At his final service a cousin gave some insight into his final months. He said, “Pop just wanted to be acknowledged for still being alive and not have everyone treat him like he is just part of the background.” These words stung deep down to my core while hearing them said out loud. A wave of guilt spread over me. We had been more worried about his own health and his care that we overlooked what he really needed: to be listened to and heard, to be part of the conversation, not just the topic of conversation. The farm around him still offered joy and happiness to people who visit. My nieces and nephew didn’t see a dying man. They didn’t see the dilapidated buildings, the untended fields, or the neglected equipment. They saw their beloved great grandfather and his home. That is their memory and their experience of it.

The elderly have many traits that I highly admire. Resilience to the obstacles of aging is one of them. My grandfather was no exception. People often overlook the fact that they are still people with the same social needs as anyone else; nothing has changed just because they got older. My friends and I would go play cards every week with the same group of seniors prior to Covid. They all have similarities in common in my grandfather. They never complained about getting old. They never showed their age. They always put on their best mask while out and about. They never let people see them when they are most vulnerable. I often forget that the card shark sitting next to me was 85 years old and was counting cards better than I ever could. Their dignity was always more important than their hardships.