

## Grandpa Was a Wrestler

He stood there and cursed the “imaginaries” and after a while, waved his arms in swirling circles above his head. Then, like every other day, he disappeared into the woods and like every other day, I got bored and restless. At twelve years old, I had already decided this would be the last time Mama and Daddy sent me down here. I’d see to that. I didn’t like the way these people talked or walked. It was too slow. They didn’t have television and they didn’t listen to Rock and Roll like we did in D.C. They couldn’t get it on the radio like we could. All they could get was that twangy hillbilly music and old-fashioned gospel. They couldn’t dance like we could, either. Nope. I was twelve and didn’t need to be coming down here to the “Country” anymore.

The only thing that made this trip bearable this time was Pa’s fights with the imaginaries. From the first time I witnessed it, it was funny to me, but I was very careful not to let anyone see me laugh. From the very beginning, Grandma had explicitly told me with deep reverence, “Dontcha laff at Pappy. He know what he doin’. H’it a sin to laff.”

Grandma was a slight, molasses-colored woman with a high pitched voice and a keen sense of justice. If she said, “Trina, don’t laff.” Then I better not laugh. But being a hard-headed twelve year-old from D.C. and by now accustomed to Grandma’s admonishments, I, with all reverence and respect, went behind the outhouse to crack up. Even though it was a stinky place to hide I thought it the safest. But Grandma, being light on her feet, caught me unawares in a fit of ecstatic laughter for which I paid dearly. After a couple of swift, painful swats to the back of my head with her deadly left hand and short stinging attacks on the backs of my legs with a switch in her right hand, I learned what it was to disobey grown folks in rural North

Carolina, especially in the 1950's. However, this thrashing also taught me to be sneakier and go deeper into the woods of Littleton to spy on Pa's "wrestling matches" and continue to laugh my head off.

Sometimes, Pa would be in the woods for hours. Sometimes he'd switch places and waddle out to the open cornfields. Today, as we road off to Arcola in the back of a neighbor's truck to sell Grandma's watermelons and Aunt Kate's cucumbers, I could see Pa heading away from us, ignoring us as we chugged by, waving and calling his name. I saw him disappear into the thickets, walking and resting on his haunches, head shaking as if it were a bell vibrating from his steps.

That's when I wished I could jump off this slow driving, dusty truck, and follow behind him so I could witness his comical thrashings. To see him act like a wrestler holding his imaginary opponent to the ground. To experience the excruciating laughter that had me rolling on the twigs, holding my stomach and my mouth. He'd be saying stuff like, "And I bind ya, and I take hold of ya and I cast ya in the pigs and run them in the sea . . .and my heel goan bruise yo head . . ." Then he would start sputtering, "I send the Holy Angels on ya, and I send Michael on ya . . ."

I wondered if he'd be there when we got back home laden with strawberry ice cream and big fat cookies in crackling brown bags. Would he be sitting calmly on the porch, reading his raggedy Bible or his favorite almanacs or just reaching the porch's landing and resting a while? I wondered if I'd catch him just emerging from the woods or the cornfields with a faint, mysteriously smile on his face.

Grandma and Aunt Janie always looked forward to stopping and talking to neighbors who lived within five or six miles of Mr. Jake's Country Store. It seemed to serve as a meeting

place where farmers laughed and spoke in that maddeningly slow way. It was a special treat for them to lazily discuss church, crops, fishing, who just died, who got married, who had a baby and how somebody “got drowned” or almost died when they fell in the creek. It made me crazy and lonely for D.C.’s fomenting streets, the quick-flavored slang, the bustling noises from skate-trucks, the up-to-date shiny 1950’s cars that flew up and down 17<sup>th</sup> Street NE, the iceman hawking hot-ice and the secret excitement of gun-shots ever so often in the soft, dark summer nights, lit by lightning bugs and the soft glow of lamp posts on main streets.

Yet, this lazy time at the country store was a kind of outlet for me, too. Mr. Jake’s Country Store did have a few of the goodies I was used to in D.C. Stuff like Mary Janes, Tootsie Rolls, Mr. Good bars and Good N’ Plenties - but I still yearned for my corner store’s parade of penny candies, sour pickles, Kool Aid straws, jawbreakers, Slim-Jims and most of all, those juicy orange popsicles! None of these commodities were in the Mr. Jake’s Country Store. I had to settle for healthier things like homemade ice cream, huge cinnamon-smelling apple pies and pickled watermelon rinds.

They didn’t have a lot of movies down there, either. In fact, it was just one movie theatre six miles away from Grandma’s house. They called that close. In D.C., all you had to do was walk from my home just a few blocks to H Street and the Atlas Theatre was right there. Plus, I my cousins told me you had to sit up in a balcony so you wouldn’t disturb the white people on the first floor. At the Beverly on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, another theatre close by in another direction, you could sit anywhere you wanted. The white people by the late 50s had left for the suburbs. If they were caught in our territory, they got beat up pretty quickly and fled to the safety of their homes across the DC line into Maryland.

I missed the noise and the popcorn boxes flying from the balcony, the excitement of talking back to the screen if the actors weren't acting or reacting the way we thought they should. And the sheer pleasure of "bucking" the show twice or maybe three times without paying another fifty cents! I missed the steamy streets of concrete where we played tops or kickball or pick-up-sticks, or tossed jacks or shot marbles. I missed hand games, like "Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack...All dressed in black, black, black, with silver buttons, buttons, buttons all down her back, back, back...." I tried to show my cousins how to position their hands and keep rhythm, but they were boys. They weren't interested. Instead, they made me go fishing at the creek with them or fetch their baseballs from the bushes when they played their endless baseball games. Both of them wanted to be famous baseball players. Secretly, I feared that creek. I kept thinking about what they said at the country store about how somebody had drowned or almost died in that creek.

The only thing that I would miss down here would be Grandpa wrestling those imaginaries. Otherwise, the city was the place for me. I couldn't understand why North Carolina did not have streetlights and traffic lights. But as my cousins so nicely explained, "We ain't got no streets you dumb ole gal." All they had was dusty roads. I didn't understand all the bugs, and how, in spite of the trees and woods, it was still so hot. When we got hot in D.C., we'd fight for turns in front of the window fan or we'd jump in Rosedale Playground's swimming pool or get sprayed with the fire hydrant at the bottom of the street. Boy, was that fun! The water would sting our bellies, backs and faces as we spun round and round. I remember opening my mouth and letting the water hit the back of my throat and I'd laugh with my friends as we bounced up down, dodging, then charging, into the spewing water. God, I missed that! What kind of summer was this?

If it wasn't for Pa and his imaginaries that last summer in Littleton, I don't know what I would have done. I sure didn't like fishing or baseball or going to Mr. Jake's Country Store in Arcola all that much. And my cousins were boys who hit me and pushed me and told me at least once a day, "Why doncha goan back to Wash'non D.C. if you lack it so good!"

I guess I brought this on myself because I did brag about how much better D.C. was than down in "this stupid country, bama-town." And then they'd push me the in my back. "Ole stanky gal!" They'd say. I'd run and tell Aunt Janie or Grandma who simply did nothing about it because, by now, I was labeled.

"That gal just got the devil in her. Trina just like her Mama. Fulla tempa."

Now that burned me up because they were talking about my mother! I wanted to knock them all out and go back to D.C.! They talked about my "tempa" because in one particular incident when the boys started teasing me and beating me up, I fought back, picking up anything available: An old pot, a broken tree branch, a kitchen chair. If they had had a phone during the kitchen incident when I crashed a chair over one of my cousin's heads, they would have had Mama and Daddy down there pronto. But we all cooled down after a good night's sleep.

It was a little before supper time when we got back to the house. Aunt Janie and Grandma were rushing in to begin preparing our meal. If I were really honest, there were a few other things I'd miss besides Pa. Lord knows I'd miss Grandma's and Aunt Janie's cooking! And that Kool Aid! *It was like nectar from heaven in Carolina because the water from the well was so soft. And it was so cool you didn't need ice cubes!*

When we got back from the Mr. Jake's Country Store, I looked for Pa on the front porch, but I didn't see him. I looked to the edge of the woods, searching for his short, chunky silhouette with its slow rocking gait. There was no sign of him.

“Why you frownin”, gal?” asked my aunt. I didn’t realize she was looking at me.

“I don’t see Pa. I thought he would be here by now.”

“Aw, don’t worry ‘bout him, honey,” she said. “He git out there in the spirit, you know.”

In the spirit? No. I did not know. All I knew is that when he wasn’t wrestling in the woods with his imaginaries, he and I would have some good conversations on the back porch at night, with the light from the moon and stars and a crack of illumination flowing from the kitchen. It would be so quiet in between his nuggets of wisdom. He’d talk about the constellations and how they affected farming and chickens laying eggs. All this he got from the monthly Farmer’s Almanac. Then he would start to talk about the Lord. He’d have this worn-out black Bible with several loose pages, sitting on his chunky thigh. He constantly thumbed through it back and forth, whispering in his gravelly voice, words, verses and phrases. His light-skinned, freckled face with bulbous eyes that crinkled on the sides would always look half-shut as he talked. It seemed as though he would be talking into another time. And after a while, he was not even speaking to me. He may have been speaking to his imaginaries.

He told me the stories of Daniel, and Ezekiel, and David and Solomon.

He loved to talk to me about Jesus. The last time I sat on the porch with him, Grandma had brought us two big glasses of iced-tea and two big biscuits, and we sat out there way into the night. The boys would start out listening until they got sleepy – or bored – and went to bed. Then it would be just me and Pa.

Finally, Pa did emerge from the woods. Before I went home this time and maybe not come back for a long time, I wanted to clear up something once and for all. This particular night, I felt brave. Brave enough to ask him about the imaginaries. You see, it was like an open secret. Everyone knew about his visits in the woods, but no one ever, ever questioned him about it or

ventured to discuss it even lightly, not even Grandma, who was the queen bee of that nest. It was whispered about or referred to very reverently and I was the only one who found it to be entertaining. I was the only one who, though I hung on to every word in our evening conversations, thought it was a silly superstition that “old people” did, especially old people from the country. I still felt it was hilarious to watch an old man pretend to wrestle with an invisible opponent.

Before Pa came out of the thick woods, I had started to sneak down there, but the sharp eye and tight lips of Grandma told me don’t even *think* about slipping out of the house or off that porch. Besides, it was getting dark and you do not want to be in North Carolina woods at night because it was a pitch black blackness and some people talked of ghosts out there.

Now that Pa was positioning himself on the porch in his rickety chair, he began to explain this kind of blackness when I asked him why it got so dark at night down here in Littleton.

“Like during the time when the Pharaoh in Egypt was cursed by God”, Pa began to explained. “But it was a dark ten times blacker than this dark.”

“How was that, Pa?” I asked, just waiting for another delicious saga. I looked around for an old box or chair to sit for a while. I had to admit. I loved Pa retelling me stories from the Bible. This time he went on to retell the biblical story of Moses delivering the Hebrew children from “that devilish” Pharaoh and how God miraculously “made their water turn to stinkin’ blood,” put frogs in the Egyptians’ beds, put lice all over their bodies, and “sent so many flies on them peoples that all the fly swatters in the world couldn’t kill’em!” He looked me straight in my eyes.

“Do you know that devilish Pharaoh still wouldn’t let them Hebrews go? He still was goan wrestle wit God!” He got quiet. “God got madder and madder with the Pharaoh and decided to kill all his cows and then put boils on the cows and the Egyptians. He paused again, thinking.

“And then what, Pa?” I was on the edge of my crate.

“And even after all that”, Pa concluded, standing up with triumph in his voice. “To convince Pharaoh of his evil ways, Moses just let him know if you get in a wrestling match with God, you goan lose!”

Pa then sat back in his old rickety chair. It squeaked and groaned. His voice quieted to a low gravel. This time, it was scarily quiet like when he told ghost stories.

“Then he sent big ole hailstones and some fierce locuses that ate up every plant in sight.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “And after that, wasn’t nothin’ but pure darkness. Damnation darkness.” I held my breath. Seemed like the moon was fading and it was getting extra dark. Even the stars weren’t twinkling as usual.

“Pharaoh would not listen. He was hard-headed and hard-hearted.” Pa gave me a sharp, warning look, “I said he was *hard-headed*.” I knew what he was saying, but I was so enthralled with the story, I let that warning go over my head. At least he didn’t say “hard-hearted.” I was known to cry easily if someone hurt my feelings. I did have a soft heart even though I didn’t like to show it.

Pa was looking far off. I was waiting. Then he broke the silence.

“That darkness was so thick you could touch it. Feel it grabbin ‘round ya thoat, like invis’ble hands, chokin’ ya . . .” I loved when He dramatized as he spoke.



“Wrestlin’ with God and wrestlin’ with the devil ain’t the same thing. See, Pharaoh was wrestlin’ with God and Moses was wrestlin’ with that devil. If you belongs to the devil and you wrestles with him, you goan lose. If you belongs to God and you wrestles with the devil, you goan win. Depend on the wrestler. Now God let you wrestle with Him for a longtime, even if you act like Pharaoh. He patient. He overlook a lotta foolishness. But then he git tired.” Pa pauses and then his fingers started making little waves in the air. His voice oozes out just above a whisper, eyes bulging.

“It started coming up like smoke.”

“What, Pa, what come up?”

“Death,” he whispered, “Death come up like a vomit-smoke and it creep ‘round all the places in Egypt. And if them places didn’t have no blood on the doorpost, the first born child inside was goan die. Even the first born animals.” I sucked in my breath. *I was the first born in my family.* My heart started racing.

His fingers still rippling, he said, “And Death, it creep and creep all over Egypt and they scream and scream. Cludin’ that devilish Pharaoh. He scream the loudest.”

“His oldest child died, too?” I asked. Pa nodded his head reverently.

“Don’t pay to wrestle with God.” he said. “As for me. I wrestles *for* God and *wit* the devil.”

So that’s what it was. It dawned on me about the imaginaries. The thing that I thought was so funny while spying on Pa through the bushes. Should I say something to him? To my southern grandfather who was *strict about “fast” and “grown”* children? Would I get hit in the mouth for my impudence? For my “D.C.” ways? For being curious and boldly irritating?

“Pa,” I ventured. “Is—Is that what you be doing? Out in the fields and stuff, when ain’t nobody looking?” The silence was so long and deadly, I could feel the smack before it came. But it never came.

“Yep. I wrestles them spirits that try to come against me and my family. I fights ‘em in the spirit world and I wrestles ‘em out in the fields. I sees ‘em and I wrestles ‘em. Sometimes angels come to hep me. Sometimes it just me and them spirits with God givin’ me the strength.”

“But what kinds of spirits? Ghosts and stuff?”

“Naw”, he said in that gravelly voice. “Spirits that attack yo’ family, yo’ mind, yo’ soul. Them kind. They ain’t ghosts. They just evil spirits with no bodies. But you got to have a special eye to see ‘em. . .” He trailed off into another time.

I don’t know if he would have told me more. I wanted that special eye, but Grandma came peeping through the screen door.

“Yall need to come. It late. Trina, you tiring out your Pa with all that talkin’. You need to come in.”

“Yes ma’am,” I answered very respectfully. Her eyes were on me hard as I followed Pa into the house. You had to act very humble around Grandma. She was quick with those trusty dogwood switches. She always had at least one at her side.

The summer flew by so fast after that. I always wanted it to fly by quickly, but this time I yearned to talk with Grandpa more about his secret wrestling matches. I never mentioned it again. He never mentioned it again. I stayed two more weeks. We did not say goodbye.

On my way back to D.C., sitting beside Aunt Janie in her old 1952 Hudson, we passed the corn fields. Out the corner of my eye, I thought I saw Pa flailing his arms and tossing his

opponent to the ground. Aunt Janie's eyes were straight ahead. I looked straight ahead.

*Beat 'em, Pa. I know you will. Cause I'm your family. And you're wrestling for me.*

The End