

The most fun I had when I was small was in the turret of our old Victorian. My sister and I loved playing with our Grandad in that room at the top of the house. He called it his office, because, as he said, “A man of my station oughta have an office,” and he spent most of his days up there. But it was much more than that to him: it was a fort, a pirate ship, or a raft on the river. And we were happy to pretend along with him that we were being chased by robbers or pirates or going on secret missions.

When he called me up there that Thursday, he said “this may be the most challenging mission I ever send you on.” He raised his bushy gray eyebrows and gave me a steady look with those steely blue eyes. “Do you reckon you can handle it, Becky?”

I straightened my shoulders and gave him a serious nod. It had been months since Grandad had felt well enough to send me on any kind of mission, and I didn't want to disappoint him.

With a sedate nod and a wink, he handed me a scrap of paper. “These are the important people, and I need for you to call them. Have them get down here before Sunday because I want to talk to ‘em. In fact, they'd better get down here *before* Sunday if they want to do any talkin' to me.”

Then he gave me a second list: “Call these folks too. Tell ‘em to come next week.” He waved his hand, “I don't need to talk to ‘em, but don't tell ‘em that.” Then he leaned closer and gave me a sly wink. “Just say'n that I asked for ‘em will make ‘em feel good.”

The first list were all the old guys: the people Grandad had known forever. Just seeing their names made me smile because they always had such good tales to tell. None of them could tell the stories as good as Grandad, of course, but they always kept trying to outdo him. He'd let them think they'd done good – until they left the room, that is. Then he'd wink at his “audience,” and tell about his part of the adventure that they'd neglected to tell, and we'd all get a good chuckle. Next time, you could be sure they wouldn't omit that tidbit. No siree, they'd tell it proudly, and Grandad would gaze up at the ceiling and his eyes would get that far off expression in them like he was off again, chasing robbers or riding a raft of logs down the river, evading a group of pirates.

The second list were people I'd known all my life. It was long enough it looked to include the rest of the people of St. Petersburg, Missouri: mostly women, lots of the town folk, and the people Grandad had done business with. They were all good, respectable people, and I wondered at his comment about not needing to talk to them. They might want to talk to him, I thought: he owed most of them money.

His steely eyes were on me as I tucked the lists into the pocket of my pinafore. “Now Becky,

don't you confuse the two," he said.

"I won't, Grandad." I said, patting my pocket to reassure him.

"No, I know you won't," and he pushed back an unruly lock of white hair that had fallen into his eyes. "You'll want to be here for the stories that one group's got to tell. And you won't give a hoot any more'n I do about anything the second group says."

I gave him a look of mock exasperation at that, just as I knew his Aunt Polly must have done when he was my age. "You'd better get on those calls right away, girl," he chuckled as he waved me away. "Sunday'll be here sooner than you're ready. Sooner than either of us is ready, I reckon." He rolled his chair around and sat gazing out the window, through the trees to that place where you can catch sight of just a scrap of the river. I knew I wouldn't get another word out of him if I waited 'til the cows came home, so I left the door ajar and trod quietly down the curving stairs of the turret, hurrying to my task.

When I was born, my mom had been hoping for a boy, just as her dad had hoped for a boy when she was born. It never seemed quite right, she said, that a man like Tom Sawyer should have nothing but girl children for progeny, but you can't question Providence.

They named me for Becky Thatcher, because she had been the bravest girl they'd heard of in these parts, wandering through that cave for three days and nights when she should've been out on the decks of the steamboat, enjoying her own party.

I liked it best when Mom told that story. Grandad had his take on it, of course, 'cause he was there and he ultimately rescued the both of them. But when Mom told it, we'd giggle at the romance of the moment: Becky falling asleep in his arms there in the dark, and him kissing away her tears. We thought we'd never heard a more romantic story. Grandad would just grin at her telling, then he'd shake his head and get that faraway look in his eyes. He never said any more about what happened than he'd done before. It was the whole truth, he said.

He didn't marry Becky Thatcher if that's what you're wondering. And though my sister was named after Amy Lawrence, he didn't marry her, neither. He'd asked both girls in turn to marry him, in that one room schoolhouse in St. Petersburg, and he'd stayed friends with both for many years. But most of the girls Grandad courted as a young man had gotten tired of waiting for him to finish growing up and had long since settled down to raise families with someone else.

When Mr. Clemens first met Grandad, he took down all his adventures – his and Uncle Huck's. Then he stopped writing about them – because, he said, he wanted to write "strictly the history of a boy," not a man. He could've written for another 20 years, as long as it took that boy to grow up.

It took someone like Nana to quiet him down and grow him up a bit. While Becky Thatcher's two rowdy sons were fixin' to graduate high school, Nana was pointing out the things a man could do with his own children and the adventures he could have with a willing woman. He must've been taken in, because they had some hellacious adventures together, even if they'd only had the three girls.

My own mother, Polly, was the firstborn, and so far, the only sister who'd married. Aunt Mary got engaged to Joe Harper, Jr., in high school, but no date had yet been set. Aunt Sally, on the other hand, hadn't even taken the time to meet any men. She was devoted to Grandad and claimed there was no one who could live up to him. Both my aunts were pushing 30, and some thought they'd be old maids forever, but I figured it's the modern age: women can wait awhile to marry. I know I wouldn't want to be tied down to a bunch of kids until I was through with my own adventures. I planned to wait 'til I was 29 and I was barely halfway there.

His girls' names were on his first list, of course, but we all lived in the one house now, so he'd have had a hard time putting them off 'til next week.

Mom had moved us back in after my dad died. I was just a toddler and Amy a babe in arms. When Nana took sick, Mom and her sisters started doing the cooking. Then when Nana died, Amy and I were big enough, so we did the household chores. Grandad would look at us all at our work and chortle about how we were all one big happy family,

That evening, when he came down to supper, Grandad announced that he was going to "retire" to the fold-out bed in the turret and he wasn't coming down again. He said the people who came to visit were to be brought upstairs as they arrived, and he'd ring if he needed something. It wasn't that he didn't want us around, he said. We'd be welcome, but we'd be hearing the same old stories. This time, he said, they'd get them just right. He wouldn't be having to embellish them.

The turret room was large and airy. It had always been his favorite, but after his big fall, when he lost the use of his legs, he had it re-outfitted to his own particular needs. The middle was empty, with nothing but Nana's big, hooked rug. Around the edges, were low cabinets and ladder-back chairs and a writing desk – the odds and ends of furniture we didn't use downstairs anymore.

When he left the supper table that night it was in the wheeled chair that he used on the main floor. There was another one upstairs, too, because his daughters said it was undignified for him to be scooting around on his butt the way he did going up the stairs.

But he didn't worry about that in the room at the top of the house. "I gotta stay low, so the pirates don't see me," he'd say, and as kids, Amy and I would crouch beside him.

"Keep your heads down!" he'd warn. "Watch out behind you or you might get a musket ball

through your bonnet.”

We spent hours reliving his adventures. As toddlers, we’d spent so much time crawling around on the floor with Grandad that our mom was afraid we’d never learn to walk like “proper young ladies.”

Those adventures hadn’t affected our ability to walk, but the means by which we pretended to outsmart pirates and robbers with Huck Finn and Grandad didn’t exactly prepare us to be proper young ladies. Still, mom couldn’t object too much: she’d had her own share of adventures when she was our age, when her dad was still afoot.

Mom had been there when he fell. Our dad had been there, too. As we heard the story, the log raft that crushed Grandad’s legs had carried away our dad. Mom said Grandad had rescued her, had gotten her pulled to safety on a steady place away from the edge and away from the holes, but he couldn’t reach Dad. It was the one adventure he never recounted, though we suspected he ruminated about it plenty. There’d be those far off looks when he’d forgotten we were there. Then he’d say something about how the rafts were not as good as they used to be or that girls just weren’t built for adventure. When we heard that, Amy and I would slip away and leave him to his thoughts, wondering if we’d ever learn the truth.

The folks from the first list began arriving as soon as we started calling on them. All day Friday and Saturday there’d be old guys at the door and old guys up in the turret and there’d be laughing and crowing, and then there’d be silence and sniffing, then a guffaw and a quiet chuckle. I wanted to hang around and hear the stories, but any time I brought up a pot of tea or a fresh pitcher of lemonade, a plate of sandwiches or deviled eggs, Grandad would send me off on another errand saying I could get caught up next time. “A week from Sunday,” he said, “you’ll get to hear them all. The whole story, told right –” Then he gave his friend Joe Harper a wink and added, “no omissions, ain’t that right Joe?”

By Saturday night, the stream of visitors had ended, and my sister and I took a supper tray up to the turret. Grandad was propped up on pillows, still fully clothed, and his big toe sticking out of one old argyle sock.

“I want to tell you something while your mom’s still busy,” he said, “You haven’t heard all of the story.” Amy sat on the end of the bed and started plucking at his sock until his toe was covered, and I sat down on the edge of the bed beside her.

“I always thought I needed a son,” he began, “and I was so proud when your mom fell in love with Billy Fisher’s boy. Nate was the best son-in-law a man could have. He took to me like a bee to honey, and I have to say that I thought I could see a reflection of my own youth when I looked at him. Of course, I was no longer a young man when your mom started bringing him home – I was near-on

60. But I wanted to show him some of the adventures – the bolder adventures – that I'd held back on with my girls.

“You know we've always had boats – canoes and rafts and sailing skiffs and catamarans – anything that moves on the water and provides a bit of a thrill. But the old days of folks riding log rafts downriver to the mills – those days were gone.

“I never liked the big tugboats that towed the log rafts. Why burn up fuel towing a thing at three times the speed? Give some poor fool a pole and a steering oar and let him float the raft himself – why, he could earn himself enough money to feed his kids.

“So, we was out sailing one day and I sees this tugboat towing a long log raft. That raft must've been five miles long – the tugboat out of sight, around the bend.” I stole a glance at Amy and she rolled her eyes.

“I told your mom and Nate – we're going to get a ride like the old days – so we sail up to the edge of the raft and we grab hold. We all hung on for dear life.

“It was probably movin' 10 knots, and we'd been going half that. Nate and I had to hang on like fury and thought our arms were going to be torn from their sockets. We finally got a good purchase on the thing, and I secured the boat alongside. Polly slung herself out onto the logs, and Nate scrambled out after her. Then I lowered the sails and lashed the tiller so the rudder would stay straight.”

“We must've ridden that thing for an hour, and I showed them how we'd hop from log to log. We explored the whole aft end, not wanting to get too far forward and attract the attention of the crew.

“It wasn't until we decided to cross back over to where the boat was that we hit a loose place in the logs.”

The stairs creaked, but Grandad didn't notice. His eyes had that far off look like he was watching the whole scene in a moving picture show, and this time he wasn't smiling. “They just don't build those rafts the way they used to. Back in my time, the logs were 2-3 layers deep. We'd hollow out areas to sleep on 'em and we'd build a wigwam over us for cover. We walked on 'em, worked on 'em, cooked on 'em; we fished from them and even lived on 'em for weeks at a time. But this one wasn't even two layers deep most places. It was just a loose-knit mess, and when your Daddy made a leap toward us, the log he landed on wasn't even tied to the others. It rolled – and he rolled with it. He went in between, and the hole closed up.

“I got over there as quick as I could get, and I saw his hands up over the logs like he was trying to clamber up out through the hole. I grabbed his wrist, and he held mine, and we tried to get him through.” I felt Amy quivering beside me, and I put an arm around her.

“Polly was at my side,” he went on. “She’s agile as a cat on them logs; been that way since she was a little girl, trying to impress her Pa.” His voice cracked and his eyes faded into the distance again. Then he sighed.

“When I lost Nate’s hand, I lost my own balance, and I fell between ‘em too. I felt that cold water come up to my waist, then I felt the logs move. Then I felt nothing. And I saw nothing – for a bit.

“Then it was like I was standing off up in a treetop somewheres and I see this little mite of a girl on a log raft pulling at some bag of rags. I watch as she pulls and pulls and drags it over to the side and rolls it into this little boat.

“Then I felt my cheek hit something cold and hard, and I opened my eyes, and it was the centerboard trunk. Then I closed my eyes again to utter darkness.” Amy hugged me and I buried my face in her hair.

Grandad’s voice cracked once more, and his eyes glistened, but there was pride in his words as he finished. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you girls can’t be brave adventurers. Your mom is the bravest girl I ever knew. She saved my life that day.”

We heard the creak of the top step, and Mom pushed open the door and peered in. Her eyes glistened like Grandad’s, and she hurried over and sat down close to him and gave him a long hug. “Oh, Dad, I thought I’d lost you both that day!” she mumbled into his neck. “I couldn’t find Nate, but I found you. I left you on the boat and looked for him again among all those logs, but there was no sign of him.”

Grandad petted her hair as she leaned into his neck, weeping. He made sshhing noises as he patted her shoulder, and he told us, “They dragged the river for two days. Your dad’s body finally surfaced downriver in Arkansas. It must’ve gotten caught on the logs and broken free much later.”

Mom’s sisters crept into the room then, and coming up beside me, they each gave Grandad a kiss on the forehead, then pulled chairs up close. We all sat there, talking long into the night, and Amy and I heard more than we ever had about the adventures they’d had as girls growing up with the notorious Tom Sawyer.

Every now and then he’d stop them in a story and advise them how to embellish it. “You may only get one chance to make an impression,” he told them, “So make sure it’s good. Tell them we were being chased by robbers at the time, and that you had to stop to get your sister’s leg out of a snare.”

They all laughed at that, and the next stories had even more embellishments than the last ones. At last mom patted Grandad’s hands where they were folded on his middle, then stood up and said it was time to get some rest. “You need to be fresh for your visitors next week.”

He looked at me and winked “I don't need to talk to that bunch,” he said, “I just called them for you girls.”

The next morning when I took up his breakfast, Grandad was sitting up in bed. The covers around him were mussed from his movement, and his big toe had mysteriously reemerged from his sock. Like an impish boy seeking adventure, his eyes shone as he gazed toward that scrap of the river, and I tiptoed up so as not to interrupt his thoughts. But he was no longer present. He had kicked this earthly dust off his heaven-bound feet and charged into the hereafter, pursuing those robbers and pirates that had too long eluded him.

The people from the second list began to arrive on Monday. Grandad was laid out in the drawing room as he had long ago asked to be, and the people came and sat with us and told us their own stories of knowing Tom Sawyer, the man. Mom and her sisters listened graciously and told them how sorry they were that they couldn't have told their tales to him personally. But Amy and I didn't hang around long. Their stories weren't nearly as adventuresome as Grandad's. He would have had to coach them a lot and even then, it was doubtful they'd have stuck with his embellishments.

That next Sunday, however, the old guys were true to their word, and they honored his last wishes. They had been around for Tom Sawyer's first funeral when he and Huck Finn and Joe Harper had floated down river and hid out on an island for several days. They didn't know 'til Mom told about the raft that he'd died a second time as well. He'd have been proud of how Mom embellished the story with Dad fighting pirates on that raft.

Grandad's last funeral was held at the church. The old guys all sat in the first pew together – Huck Finn and Ben Rogers, Joe Harper and Johnny Miller. My other Grandad, Billy Fisher, stood up first. “I hope you folks are comfortable in your seats,” he said, “because Tom has asked that we say a few words over his body. He's had a lot of adventures in his time, as you know, so this may take a while.”