The Magic Canteen

On Monday, Grandpa was his usual self. The next day, he felt run down. By Wednesday, he couldn't breathe. He died on Thursday. And on Friday he came back from the dead.

The call came from the funeral home early that morning. "Your father seems to be alive," Mr. Schroeder told my mother, who had to sit down and find her breath. Apparently Mr. Schroeder had entered the preparation room at Schroeder & Sons to find Grandpa sitting up on the slab. "I'm hungry," Grandpa was reported to have said.

My parents called Grandpa's doctor on the way to the funeral home. "It's not possible," Dr. Perlman said. "The ICU physician declared your father dead yesterday afternoon."

"Tell that to Mr. Schroeder!" my mother cried. "He says my dad has eaten three apples and is demanding a grilled cheese sandwich."

Mother volunteered my father to go into the funeral home because she feared she might faint upon seeing Grandpa alive. Due to the virus restrictions, she had not been allowed to visit him in the hospital and couldn't shake the image of him struggling to catch his breath as the EMTs wheeled him away two days earlier. She'd known at that moment that her father would die alone in the ICU. It was happening all over the world.

Grandpa sat waiting in Mr. Schroeder's office. He wore a blue surgeon's mask and the brown wool suit my mother had chosen for his burial. The plan had been for the immediate family—my parents, my sister, Joanna, and me—to view the open coffin for a few minutes before Grandpa's interment in St. Luke's Cemetery. But here he sat, one hundred percent alive.

"Thank God," he said when he saw my father. "Get me out of here, will you, Dave?"

My father turned to Mr. Schroeder, who appeared all too happy to say goodbye to Grandpa. “It’s a mystery,” the mortician said through his black mask.

“What on earth happened, Tommy?” Father asked Grandpa out in the lobby.

“Who the hell knows?” he answered. “But I’m very uncomfortable. There were no underpants with these goddamn clothes.”

When she saw Grandpa emerge from the funeral home looking swanky in the suit that still fit him after so many years, my bawling mother climbed from the car and ran to him.

“Daddy! We thought you were gone!”

She clutched him and heaved as he stood looking nonplussed. Grandpa had fought at the Battle of Hue, as he liked to remind us, and was not demonstrative. Nevertheless, he hugged her back for a moment before tearing off his mask and saying, “Okay, okay. Let’s get outta here.”

Joanna and I waited at home, eager to see our dead grandpa. We were sure he’d have a spellbinding story to share, just like those from “the late, great unpleasantness,” as he called the war. Many times he’d kept us riveted well past our bedtimes with tales of derring-do in the fight against the Commies.

Grandpa had moved in with us after Grandma died a year or so earlier. According to my mother, he didn’t know how to boil water, never mind make himself a ham sandwich. Though he had owned his own hardware store for forty years, Grandpa was also useless as a handyman. He once took apart our broken dishwasher, which we then had to replace entirely even though the original problem was not serious. Mostly, though, he sat around the house being ornery and forgetful, but at night, if he had not too much wine in him, he might launch into one of his war stories. My mother would beg him not to—“You’ll scare the children”—but we clamored for them and sat at his feet as he regaled us with his suspenseful, often comical tales.

In one of our favorites, Grandpa and his best buddy Johnny Dutko were trapped somewhere in Hue during the Tet Offensive, with VC shooting at them as they hunkered down in a cobblestone alley. Johnny appeared in many of Grandpa's stories. He had buck teeth and thick glasses, but he was as tough as a son of a gun and could do 200 pushups without breaking a sweat. "Bullets were zipping past our heads," Grandpa continued. "I thought we were goners!" At one point, he said, he felt a wetness on his leg and wondered if he'd peed himself. Jo and I especially loved that part. Then he thought he'd been struck by a bullet, but no, he felt no pain. Only after the Commies had been dispatched with a hand grenade did Grandpa discover a bullet hole in his canteen. "That canteen probably saved my life," he'd announce to our delight, and off we'd go to bed where we lay awake with adrenaline still pumping through our veins like sugar.

When he returned from the funeral home, Jo and I ran outside shouting, "Grandpa!" and hugged him on each side before he could get two steps toward the door. "Okay, okay," he said, patting us on our heads. "Now let me go so I can get out of this monkey suit and put on some underpants."

We laughed at Grandpa's mention of underpants and followed him inside. Mother and Father followed slowly, their faces showing alternately confusion and relief at this miraculous development. They sent us outside to play in the yard while they discussed the situation in the kitchen, which Grandpa called the War Room. They again rang up Dr. Perlman, who had since spoken to the ICU physician, who insisted that Grandpa's heart had stopped the day before—"No pulse, no brain activity, his body temperature plunged, the whole nine yards!" Dr. Perlman wanted to see Grandpa at his office first thing Monday to run a physical. "How's his breathing?" he asked, and my father said Grandpa was breathing like a champ.

After hanging up, he wondered aloud whether the ICU physician was a quack and terrified of a lawsuit, which, he added, might not be a bad idea. “I’ll call Larry Fink”—their lawyer—“on Monday.”

My mother went upstairs and found Grandpa sitting up in his bed watching MSNBC.

“Dad?” she said, “do you feel okay?”

“I feel fine, though I could use a grilled cheese sandwich and some tomato soup.” He’d changed into the sweatpants he wore for walks around the neighborhood.

On the TV a man was loudly defending immigrants.

“This fella makes a lot of sense,” Grandpa said. “When *my* grandparents came to this country, they didn’t speak much English either.”

“They were from Ireland, Dad.”

“Exactly.”

Mother went downstairs to make his lunch and told Father that Grandpa might have lost some of his cognitive faculties during his ordeal. “He’s watching MSNBC, David.”

My father looked aghast. “Well, his brain wasn’t getting oxygen there for a while.”

Meanwhile, outside, Joanna and I sat on the swing set staring off at the neighbors’ house. We had not been allowed to play with our friends for a long time, though we sometimes spoke to them through the shrubs that divided our yards. I wanted desperately to tell Phil Caserta that my grandfather had died and returned, but I hadn’t seen Phil in his yard for several weeks now.

While she swung back and forth, Jo talked about how Grandpa was just like Jesus, who had also risen from the dead. “Do you think that means Grandpa is the son of God?” she wondered.

“I don’t know,” I said. “We’ll have to ask him to perform a miracle.”

“Maybe he can make Mrs. Krok walk on her own two feet.” Mrs. Krok was our neighbor who used a wheelchair because she’d had polio a long time ago.

"Or maybe," I said, "he could make you get an A in school. Now *that* would be a miracle!"

Jo leapt off her swing, landed perfectly, and proceeded to pummel me. Soon we were rolling on the grass, shouting and poking.

"Hey now, knock that off, you two!"

Still on the ground, with my thumb in her eye and her knee in my groin, Jo and I stared up at Grandpa.

"That's not how siblings are supposed to act. Now get on up and give each other a hug."

We unhooked ourselves and got to our feet.

"Go on," Grandpa said. "Let's see that hug now."

My sister and I never hugged, not even on birthdays. Except for those occasions when we were tossed together into a highly unusual situation—a tornado warning, say, or the death and resurrection of our grandfather—we were sworn enemies who, at best, tolerated one another. We fought over what to watch on TV, who got to sit where in the car, who went first in checkers—virtually everything. Historically, Grandpa left it up to our parents to keep the peace, and in fact he sometimes appeared to enjoy our little skirmishes, as if they reminded him of the good old days of the war. And yet here he was, brokering a ceasefire, an uncharacteristic smile on his face as Jo and I pantomimed a hug.

"There, that's better," he said, taking a seat at the picnic table.

"Grandpa, what was it like?" Jo asked.

"What was *what* like?"

"Do you remember dying?" I asked.

"Did you see a bright light?" Jo asked.

"Did Grandma appear to you?"

"How about angels?"

"Angels?" he said.

"They told us you were *dead*!" Jo said.

"I know they told you that, but here I am, aren't I? Alive and fit as a fiddle." He moved his arms in a kind of jig, and we giggled.

"Tell us about the time the Commies shot your canteen!" Jo cried. She loved that story even more than I did. "Tell us about you and Johnny Dutko!"

"Maybe later, princess." He groaned as he got to his feet. "I should probably call up my buddies—the ones that're left anyway—and let them know the reports of my passing were premature."

He walked slowly away, as he always did, with a slight limp due to a bad knee. As far as we could tell, he looked exactly the same as he had on Monday, before he got sick. And yet there was something about him that had changed. Sometimes our mother talked about people's auras, which she described as a kind of bright or dark cloud around a person. Mrs. Krok had a dark aura, I guess because she was so unhappy. Grandpa today trailed an aura that seemed to glow more than usual, the way it might when he told his stories, but rarely otherwise. I thought of what Jo had been saying earlier and wondered if it could be true that Grandpa was somehow blessed.

Supper that night was unusually quiet, at first. It was hard to know what to say with Grandpa sitting in his usual seat across from my father when, just hours earlier, we'd been certain he would never break bread with us again. Finally, Mother raised her wine glass and said, "Well, here's to Daddy. We're just so happy you're back with us."

Father raised his wine glass and Jo and I raised our glasses of milk. Grandpa, after a moment, raised his own wine glass and said, "Thanks, dear. I'm pretty happy to be here too."

Then he set down the glass without drinking, something we'd never seen him do. My parents exchanged glances.

"Say, Tommy," my father said as he cut one of the celebratory steaks he'd grilled for all of us, "I have to ask. What was it like to . . ." He made a circle in the air with his knife as he sought the right words.

"To *what*, Dave?" Grandpa asked.

"To . . . you know . . ."

"What did you think when you woke up at the funeral home, Grandpa?" I asked, figuring he could turn that into quite the yarn.

"Well, that *was* a surprise, I admit. I was lying under a white sheet on a very cold table, naked as a jaybird."

Jo and I howled.

"I had not the slightest idea where I was. The last thing I remembered was lying in my own cozy bed with my lungs on fire. Then that Mr. Schroeder fella came in, and I guess I scared the bejesus out of him because he about leapt out of his socks."

We held our sides, guffawing.

"And now here I am with you lucky mugs, and I haven't felt this good in I don't know how long."

"It's a miracle," my mother said. She had not laughed with us, and her eyes pooled with tears.

"Makes you wonder," my father said, "how many other people are going through this and coming out okay, like you. There's a reason we're not hearing about it, I guarantee."

"Oh, David," Mother said, "not everything is a conspiracy."

"You'll see," Father shot back. He drained his wine glass and proceeded to attack his steak. Grandpa, meanwhile, smiled and gobbled up his baked potato. He didn't touch his steak at all.

Grandpa retired to bed on the early side that night—he usually stayed up to watch baseball on TV, even though he missed the roar of the crowds—and before he went upstairs he gave Jo and me each a hug. This was another new development. Typically, Grandpa would wander into the kitchen, pour himself a glass of water, and then shout goodnight down the hall.

"Sleep tight, you monkeys," he said as he squeezed us. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

The next morning, I was awakened by my mother's scream. Jo came into my room a moment later and announced, "Grandpa's dead again."

Dr. Perlman arrived soon after. He said he wanted to see the body himself. He listened for a heartbeat, felt for a pulse, and pronounced Grandpa officially deceased. "We should probably perform an autopsy," he said through a surgical mask. "That might tell also us what happened the *first* time."

But my mother did not want her father cut open like that. He was gone, that was all she needed to know.

So Grandpa's body returned to Schroeder & Sons, and my mother went to pick out the casket she hadn't gotten around to choosing the first time. At the funeral home, Mr. Schroeder escorted her upstairs to the showroom with its partial caskets lining the walls. Grandpa would have hated an expensive coffin—I'd once heard him saying we should just dig a hole next to Grandma and drop him in like a seed in a garden—but Mother had other ideas. It came down to a choice between cherry wood and mahogany, and while she discussed the differences with Mr. Schroeder, an assistant rushed in to tell them that my grandfather had just woken up in the prep room. "He says he's hungry," the assistant said.

My mother fainted. Fortunately, Mr. Schroeder had a supply of smelling salts on hand for dramatically grieving loved ones, and he was able to revive her within moments. By then, Grandpa was waiting in the lobby, still in his pajamas.

"Can we stop by Dairy Queen on the way home?" he asked.

After calling my father, and while waiting for Grandpa's milkshake and fries at the drive-thru, Mother rang up Dr. Perlman.

"But that's impossible!" the doctor said. "I checked him myself!"

"He's sitting right here, Dr. Perlman, drinking a strawberry shake."

Needless to say, my sister and I were surprised to see Grandpa get out of the car and march up to the kitchen door as if he'd just arrived home from running an errand in his p.j.'s.

"Not again!" Jo exclaimed.

"You kids want the rest of my fries?" Grandpa asked.

We assailed the grownups with what we considered logical questions, but they shooed us outside. Grandpa went upstairs to take a bath, and my parents convened again in the War Room.

"I can't take any more of this," my mother said. "I know I should be happy Daddy is still alive, but I'm wrung out."

"Either the physicians in this burg are all incompetent," my father said, "or your father has some kind of condition that no one's ever heard of. *Or* this could be some sort of government experiment gone wrong."

"Oh *please*, David. What're we going to *do*?" Mother said.

"What *can* we do? The man's alive and seemingly well."

"But if this happens again? I tell you, I can't take it."

While this discussion carried on, Jo and I played Frisbee.

"Maybe Grandpa's a vampire," I said. "Remember when that bat got into the house? It could've bitten him."

"Don't be stupid," Jo said. "Everyone knows vampires can't go out in the daytime."

"Oh. Right. Well, what's *your* explanation then?"

She thought on it for a while as we tossed the Frisbee back and forth. It was the longest we'd ever played this game without it devolving into a fight.

"Maybe Grandpa's hibernating," she said.

"Hibernating? Like a bear?"

"In school we read that when bears hibernate their heart rates go down to almost zero and they barely breathe."

"But why would Grandpa hibernate?" I asked.

"How should *I* know?"

"Seems like a vampire makes just as much sense."

"Don't be a retard."

I zinged the disc at her face and she ducked just in time and tore after me. Thus ended our longest Frisbee-playing truce ever.

"Hey, you two!" Grandpa stood on the back porch, his white hair still wet from his bath. "Cut that out!" he hollered, and to me he looked an inch or so taller today, or maybe just less stooped over than usual. "Why're you kids always feuding?" he asked once we'd stopped running.

"She called me a retard," I said.

"Doesn't matter what your sister called you. You two are blood. You shouldn't be fighting all the time."

"He said you're a vampire," Jo said.

"*She* said you're a hibernator!"

We went back and forth like this until we realized Grandpa had started laughing.

"A vampire, huh?" He showed his yellow upper teeth and made his hands into claws. We giggled and soon found ourselves seated on the porch with him as he described for us the look on the assistant's face when he woke up in the preparation room. "That poor guy looked like he might keel right over."

"What'd you say to him?" Jo asked.

"I told him I was hungry."

"Did you say 'I *vahnt* . . . to *suck* . . . your *blood"*?" I asked in between cackles.

"Good one," Grandpa said. "*Next* time."

"How come this keeps happening, Grandpa?" Jo asked.

"I don't know, princess, but I'm getting bored with waking up in that place. It gives me the willies!"

"My friend's grandma died last week," Jo said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah," I said. "And my friend Tony's uncle."

"And Mrs. Bryant's husband," Jo added, Mrs. Bryant being her online teacher.

"Too many people," Grandpa said.

"But not *you*," I said.

He nodded. "Not yet, anyway."

"What's happening, Grandpa?" Jo asked. "Why do you keep dying and . . . coming back?"

He looked off toward the big oak tree in the yard, the one that every fall dropped enough leaves to make a pile as tall as my father. "I wish I knew," he said, turning back toward us. "But I figure I'm getting more chances to do things better."

"But why *you*?" Jo asked. "No one else is rising from the dead."

Grandpa smiled, showing the gap between his two front teeth. He always said this gap made him the best spitter in all the Marine Corps.

"Why *me*? I wonder that myself, princess. But maybe it's less to do with me than with . . . I don't know . . . *You*?"

"Me?" we both said.

"Why not? Who's to say all this isn't more for *your* sake than mine?"

We sat in silence trying to get a handle on that.

"I dunno," Grandpa said. "It's just a theory."

That night we ordered Chinese food because it was Grandpa's favorite, and also because my mother was too worn out to cook.

"Mmmm," Grandpa said, digging into his dinner. "This is delicious."

"Don't you usually get moo shoo *pork*, Dad?" my mother asked.

"Do I?" Tonight he had ordered moo shoo vegetables.

"Yes," she said. Mother looked around at all of us for confirmation. "You *always* order moo shoo pork."

Grandpa shrugged and continued scooping shredded veggies onto his little pancake. Mother gave my father a look of bafflement, as if Grandpa had spoken in Swahili.

"What's going on, Dad?" she asked. "You seem . . . different."

"Different *how*?"

"I don't know. You're eating differently. You turn down wine for dinner. You're watching MSNBC."

Grandpa didn't answer. He just rolled up a pancake and took a large bite. As he chewed he shut his eyes and smiled.

Mother went on: “It’s like you’ve been replaced or something. Like that movie . . .”

“*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*!” I shouted.

“Yes. That one.”

“Are you an alien, Grandpa?” Jo asked.

“No, princess,” he said, “but lately I feel like one.”

“What does *that* mean?” my father asked.

“Or maybe *you’re* the aliens,” Grandpa said, smiling.

“That’s crazy, Daddy,” my mother said.

“Is it?”

That ended that conversation, and we all quickly ate so we could get up from the table and go about our business. Grandpa went upstairs to watch his shows and my parents sat in the den watching their shows, while my sister and I went outside and watched the sky turn dark.

“I’m scared,” Jo said. I was scared, too, but I didn’t want to admit it. “Grandpa does seem different,” she added.

It was true, but I couldn’t figure out exactly how, beyond his newfound love of moo shoo vegetables and MSNBC, and I didn’t think Jo would understand about Grandpa’s bright aura.

“He’s not an alien,” I said.

“I never said he was. *You* said he was a *vampire*.”

“I’m just trying to figure it out.”

We sat on the swings until the lightning bugs came out and then went up to bed.

The next morning I woke up early. The house was silent and silvery in the pre-dawn light, and I could hear the steady breath of my parents sleeping next door. I walked down the hall to Grandpa’s room. His door was open a crack, and inside I could see him lying on his back, eyes closed, his arms straight along his sides. His chest did not move.

"Grandpa," I said, but he didn't budge. The house remained quiet but for the occasional settling creak. I touched Grandpa's hand. It didn't feel cold, exactly, just not as warm as usual.

"Is he dead again?" Jo asked from the doorway. She rubbed her eyes as she stepped into the room.

"Yes," I said, but, still, something nagged at me. We stood there together for a long time, waiting for him to rise up again. Cars started passing as the morning wore on, and someone mowed their lawn down the block.

"Maybe he's not coming back this time," Jo said.

Soon we heard our parents brushing their teeth and flushing the toilet. My mother went downstairs, and when she didn't find us there she called up the stairs for us.

"I guess we have to tell her," Jo said.

This time my mother acted as though she'd expected Grandpa to die again. She and my father told us to leave the room, and they stared down at him for a while.

"Well, he looks dead to *me*," Father said.

"David!"

"Just sayin'."

He called Dr. Perlman, who drove over and once more declared Grandpa deceased. When he repeated his request for an autopsy, my mother said, "Absolutely not. What if he wakes up again?"

So, for the third time in as many days, Grandpa's body was transferred to Schroeder & Sons Funeral Home, where Mr. Schroeder received it with a mounting sense of anxiety. He assured my mother he'd wait twenty-four hours before attending to the remains—just in case.

Meanwhile, at home, we waited for the call.

It came later that afternoon. This time my mother refused to accompany my father to the funeral home. “I just can’t take it,” she said. I volunteered to go with him, but Father said no way.

At Schroeder & Sons, Mr. Schroeder, bleary-eyed and visibly shaking, handed my father the business card of a rival funeral home. “For next time,” he said.

Grandpa waited in the lobby, still in his pajamas and itching to get home. “I’m dying of hunger,” he said, to which my father replied, “I very much doubt that.”

As he drove, Father remained silent in that way that says he’s been put out. Grandpa ignored this and chattered away.

“I don’t expect this will happen again,” he said at one point. “Everybody knows people die in groups of three.”

“Yes,” Father said, “but that’s usually three *separate* people.”

At home, everyone went to their now customary neutral corners: Grandpa upstairs to change, Jo and I to the yard, and my parents to the War Room.

“What is *happening*, David?” my mother asked, her eyes red-rimmed. “This is *insane*.”

“I don’t get it either, Louise.”

“You saw him this morning,” she went on. “He was dead as a doornail.”

“And yet,” Father said.

On the phone, Dr. Perlman was similarly baffled and demanded again that Grandpa come in on Monday for a full battery of tests.

“What if he’s dead again on Monday?” my father asked, and Dr. Perlman had no idea what to say to that.

Jo and I sat at the picnic table. We’d brought out coloring books and crayons but were not doing too much drawing.

"Do you think this is going to happen every day?" Jo asked. "From now till forever?"

"Boy, I hope not," I said.

That night, after putting on our pajamas, we went to Grandpa's room, where he lay in bed reading a book. I couldn't remember seeing him read a book before.

"G'night, Grandpa," we said, climbing onto the bed with him. "Tell us a story," Jo said.

He set the book down. "What kind of story?"

"A war story," I said.

"Tell us about the magic canteen," Jo said.

"Oh, you want to hear the canteen story again, huh?"

"Yay!" we cried. This felt like something normal.

"Okay, settle down now. Except this time it'll be a little different."

But the first part of the story was essentially the same. Grandpa's platoon slowly made its way through Hue engaging the enemy. "The city was split in half by the Perfume River," he reminded us, prompting Jo to ask, as always, if actual perfume flowed through the city. Usually Grandpa would answer, "Of course, princess. Chanel Number 5," but this time he smiled and said no, it was just water.

Jo and I exchanged looks. I took her hand.

North of the river, Grandpa told us, was the Imperial City, surrounded by walls. "We were on the south side, which they called 'the new city.'" They spent weeks there, he said, taking Hue back from the VC street by street, house by house. One night, near the river, as his platoon made their way through a warehouse district, they were fired upon. "Everyone scrambled, and we got separated," he said. "Johnny Dutko and I ended up on this deserted street—"

"The cobblestone street?" I asked. I always liked that detail for some reason, but Grandpa said no, the street was of packed dirt, and I could feel this story start to veer off course toward someplace new and strange.

"It was pitch black," he said, "and we had no idea where the others had gone." His eyes grew soft as he spoke, as if he'd lost his sight or was looking inward. "I was scared," he said. "I was scared half to death."

"I don't like this story," Jo said.

"It's a true story," Grandpa said. His eyes refocused for a moment as he turned to us. "It's true," he repeated, "and you need to know what really happened."

More gunfire erupted, he said. "We couldn't see where it was coming from, and there was no place to hide right there in the middle of the block—no doorways or alleys, but there was a dip in the street, so we lay flat on our bellies." The shots continued, and the bullets kicked up clods of dirt all around them.

This part of the story was familiar, but it had a different feel to it—Grandpa spoke quietly, as if he was afraid to draw attention to himself lying there in the street. Jo sniffled and squeezed my hand.

"That's when my canteen got hit," Grandpa said. "That part really did happen. But no one tossed a grenade at the sniper. In fact, it seemed like we lay there for days while he took shots at us, and . . ."

Jo started quietly weeping, and while I did my best not to cry, tears had formed in my eyes. I wanted to run but felt stuck there on the bed.

"I don't remember much of it," he continued. "It was like a bad dream. And then, all of a sudden, the sun came up, and the shooting stopped."

The room became eerily silent except for the wind blowing through the trees outside.

"What happened?" Jo asked, being the brave one.

"He was dead," Grandpa said.

"What?" we asked. "*Who*?"

"Johnny. Lying there beside me. Dead. He'd been hit. I'd been lying next to a dead man all night long."

"No!" we cried. "No!"

My mother came into the room. "What's going on?"

Jo and I leapt from the bed and ran to her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, but we were too afraid to answer. The story had frightened us, but even worse was Grandpa's face: tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks, and his eyes and mouth had contorted into an ugly mask.

"I'm sorry," Grandpa said through the snot in his nose. "I'm so sorry."

Mother took us to our rooms and tucked us in. She told us everything was okay, Grandpa was just tired and confused by all he'd been through lately.

That night we could hear our parents talking to Grandpa in his room. They had shut his door, so we couldn't catch the words, but we heard their anger. Jo climbed into my bed and we clutched each other waiting for it to stop.

A little later, after our parents had gone to sleep, Grandpa appeared in my doorway in his pajamas and sat on the edge of my bed.

"I owe you two an apology," he whispered. We didn't respond. I, for one, had never heard Grandpa say he was sorry before. "I shouldn't have told you that story," he said, and I worried that he would get weepy again, but his eyes shone clear and blue even in the dark. I'd always thought his eyes were gray.

"Anyway," he continued, "no more war stories. Deal?"

We nodded.

"I'd hate to think you're scared of your ol' grandpa," he said. "But I understand if you are. Especially lately."

He bent over and hugged us, his cheeks scratchy on my face, and went back to his room.

We lay awake all night listening to Grandpa snoring down the hall, waiting for his breath to stop, which happened every few minutes, but then would come a loud snort and he'd begin snoring again.

Finally, sunlight crept like fog through the windows, and Jo and I went into Grandpa's room and watched as his chest rose and fell.

I recognized then what had nagged at me the day before, when I'd found Grandpa dead in his bed. His aura—it had still been around him. A kind of light, even when he'd stopped breathing. And it was there today too.

He opened his eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, staring up at us. "Did it happen again?"

"You didn't die, Grandpa!" Jo shouted.

We leapt onto the bed and hugged him.

After we had calmed down Grandpa smiled and said, "What's for breakfast?"

*

Several years later, while taking an afternoon nap on a dreary Sunday, Grandpa passed away for good. He'd spent those years in relatively good health, laughing more than before and reading a lot of books, and not once did he die and resurrect. Nor did he tell any more war stories, but on the morning he left us, he did remark to Mother that a helicopter was coming to airlift him out of there. She thought that was strange, but then for days Grandpa had also claimed to be talking to a young man in the room with him.

After he was gone, we let him lie in his bed for a full twenty-four hours, just in case, and when he didn't wake up we called Dr. Cartwright, who had replaced the late Dr. Perlman.

I sat in the room with Grandpa while we waited for the ambulance to arrive. His body was empty of life, I could see that, with no more aura than a piece of furniture—his dresser, the old military trunk at the foot of his bed, the television. He was gone.

I thought of Johnny Dutko with his thick glasses and buck teeth, lying dead for hours beside Grandpa, his blood soaking into a dirt street on the other side of the world. Since Grandpa had told us that story a lot of other people had died, including Mr. Schroeder and my friend Phil Caserta, and as far as I knew not one of them had come back to life. Why Grandpa and not them? I never understood, and probably never will.

We buried Grandpa in a simple pine casket next to Grandma at St. Luke's cemetery. Because of restrictions, there was no funeral.