

about 2,500 words

Sixth Grade Swing

She put a frowny face on it.

My first sixth grade assignment was given a frowny face. I wrote two pages about my Grandpa dying, and all she did was put a red pen frowny face on it and give me a C. I stared at the notebook paper as I sat on a swing in the mostly abandoned school playground. The frowny face laughed at me.

And she was so mean about it when I asked.

I went up to her desk after class. "Mrs. Adams?"

"Yes, Sebastian?"

"I think you gave me the wrong grade."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's a C."

"That's what I gave you, yes."

"Right. Well. It's wrong."

She tilted her head to the side and crossed her arms. "The assignment was a chronological essay titled 'What did you do this summer?'" she said.

"I know. My grandpa died in June." That settled it. She didn't say anything. "This June," I added for clarification.

"Yes. But you only wrote about that one event. You were supposed to write about a sequence of events. I am sorry to hear about your grandpa. I believe I wrote a note to that effect in the margin."

A frowny face is not a note. That's like saying a picture of mayonnaise is an ice cream sandwich! I was so frustrated I wasn't even making sense. I balled up the paper and started to swing, kicking and pumping my legs to go higher. I was going to get the swing going as high as possible, jump out, and throw the paper as hard as I could while in midair.

"Yo loser! Stop!" I heard someone yell from behind me as I was at the top of my forward swing, so I dragged my feet in the dirt as I went backward and clumsily came to a stop. My best friend, Gabe, was running toward me.

"Dude. We're in sixth grade now," he said, eyes scanning the surrounding playground equipment and trees for predators. "No swinging."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because. We're above it. That stuff's for fifth graders and shit."

I wanted to tell him that my swinging was an act of defiance, but I just shoved the balled up essay in my pocket and walked with him away from the swing before anyone saw us.

When we were far enough away, Gabe stopped and turned to me. "So?"

"So what?"

"Did you get the stuff?"

Oh that.

"You mean snuff?"

"Yeah. I call it stuff," he said. "Like a code."

Ever since Gabe found out my Grandpa had a bunch of chewing tobacco in his bedroom the night he died, he had been bothering me to sneak some while my grandma wasn't looking. So far, I'd kept him at bay by giving lame excuses like *My grandma never leaves the bedroom any more. She's always crying.* Which was partly true.

"Well?" said Gabe.

"No, man. My grandma got this big cat, and it sits in there and, like, guards it."

"You're so fuckin' full of fuckin' shit, dude."

He never talked like that in fifth grade. I scanned the area for adults.

"Dude, let's go get it now," he said.

"What? No way."

"Don't be a pussy." He slugged me on my arm and walked away. It really hurt. So far, sixth grade wasn't the best.

"You comin'?" Gabe yelled.

I followed him toward my grandparents' house.

My *grandma's* house.

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Gabe decided I should sneak in and grab a can while he kept watch through the back window.

"But if we just go inside and say hi, she might give us both a bowl of orange sherbet," I reasoned.

"I ain't got not fuckin' time for sherbet!"

I shushed him, certain my grandma was going to round the corner from her garden and wash our mouths out with soap. My reward for shushing him was another chorus of "Don't be a pussy" and another punch to the arm. In the same spot.

"Don't you tell me I walked all the way here just so you could pussy out."

I looked over my shoulder. I could see the swing I'd been swinging on from here.

"Dude. Come on," he said.

I stepped up onto the porch just to get him to stop saying curse words and punching me. The back door usually squeaked when it opened, but I had snuck in and out of this house too many times to be worried about a squeaking door. The trick was to throw it open fast so the hinges didn't scrape the whole way. Plus Grandma never wore her hearing aids anyway. It drove my dad crazy. So I threw the door wide open and went in. It was kind of dark. Grandma didn't like wasting electricity. I could hear the TV on in the den, so I knew she was in there.

I would have to pass by the open doorway to the den to get to Grandma and Grandpa's room.

Grandma's room.

I peaked around the corner. I was lucky. Grandma was sitting in Grandpa's old chair, facing the TV the opposite direction from the doorway. The chair was rocking, and the giant cat

(I wasn't lying about the cat!) sat on the armrest. It looked like I was gonna be home free.

Passed the den and snuck up the hallway toward the bedroom, dodging creaking floorboards I'd memorized during the summer when I would wake up in the middle of the night and sneak to the kitchen to get some orange sherbet. I could probably steal some sherbet now, get the chew, and still make it out without getting caught.

Nah. Why take the chance?

I reached the bedroom door. It was open just enough so I didn't have to move it, which was lucky again because the carpet in the bedroom was too high for the door. Every time you moved it, you had to push real hard and it made a noise Grandma could probably hear even without her hearing aids.

I walked around the bed to Grandpa's side.

Nothing had changed here. His pocket knife was still sitting on the bedside table with some quarters and a pocket tire gauge.

He used to give me a quarter every time I saw him. He would make a big show of pulling everything out of his pockets until he found one. He'd always ask me to hold the tire gauge while he dug.

I opened the drawer in the bedside table. Here it was. Enough chewing tobacco to keep Grandpa in supply for at least a week, which was saying something. I grabbed one can and shut the drawer quietly.

I turned to leave, but I stopped. I reached back and took the tire gauge, too.

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I swung the back porch door open fast and took off out of the house. I heard the door behind me hit the frame as it shut, but I didn't look back. I was hauling. If Grandma caught me with this snuff, she'd do way more than wash my mouth out with soap.

"Did you get it?" Gabe ran alongside me.

"Yeah!"

We sprinted to a spot between my grandparents' house and the playground.

Between my *grandma's* house and the playground.

There were a few trees, and if you crawled under a few branches, you could be hidden from view completely.

I handed the snuff to Gabe. He opened it.

We were actually gonna do it. We both grabbed big chunks and put it in our mouths.

I chewed.

It was worse than sixth grade..

"You're sposed to put it in your lip," said Gabe. I tried to use my tongue to push the tobacco between my lip and my teeth, but it ended up just falling out of my mouth.

"It's disgusting!"

"I like it," said Gabe with a grimace. "You only got one can?"

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Gabe made me take the snuff home to hide it. He said his mom would find it no matter where he put it. So I was walking home with the can stuffed in the front pocket of my shorts, trying to hide it with my hands every time I saw someone. It made a big circular imprint, though, and I was a nervous wreck.

As I walked past the big, green dumpster that sat in front of the Harris's house, I saw Mrs. Adams walk out of her front door not too far away, frowning.

Then Mr. Harris rounded the corner of his house. And a car was coming down the street. There was no way for me to hide the can in my pocket from all three at once. Someone was gonna see.

I started breathing hard, and I did the only thing I could think of: I pulled the can out of my pocket and threw it in the dumpster in one quick motion. Then I took off sprinting again up the street and around the corner on the street to my house.

I sprinted all the way home, which was just a few blocks. And when I made it to our gravel driveway, I doubled over, wheezing. I braced myself against this giant rock my dad found and put in our yard for decoration.

That's when my dad came out of the house.

"Sebastian!" he yelled. He looked weird. "Mr. Harris just called! Get in the truck."

Mr. Harris? The truck?

My lungs froze. He'd seen. He saw me throw the tobacco in the dumpster.

My dad jogged over to the truck and got inside. He must be really mad, I thought.

"Get IN!" he yelled.

I opened the door and climbed inside, sitting as far away from my old man as I possibly could. He started the engine and pulled out of the driveway, turning toward Mr. Harris's house, the dumpster, and the evidence.

It only took a about thirty seconds to drive to the dumpster. Why did my dad drive? Why not just walk? He was taking me to the orphanage or something afterward, probably. Or the police station.

We came near the dumpster.

“Dad-“

“Hush.”

I obeyed. He passed the dumpster without even slowing down. My heart wasn't slowing down, either, even though I felt a slight breath of relief.

He stopped in front of Grandma's house. Relief gone.

He shut off the engine and got out of the truck, slamming the door behind him. I opened my door and slowly got out. As I walked around the front of the truck, Dad was halfway up the front sidewalk. He turned back toward me and said, “Get back in the truck.”

Mr. Harris walked out of the front door to my grandparents' house. To *Grandma's* house. I turned around to walk back toward the truck, and I heard Mr. Harris say it.

“She followed him, Robert. She's with your pops now.”

I stopped and turned back toward where Mr. Harris and my dad were standing.

My dad stood there, halfway between the truck and the front door. Mr. Harris stepped toward him and patted him on the back.

“It looks like it was peaceful. That big ol' cat you got her was with her. Wouldn't leave her side no matter how hard I tried. Just sat there with her, like he was rocking her to sleep.”

Dad stood there for a few more seconds, then he turned around and looked in my direction. “Go tell your mom. She was in the basement when I left. Tell her not to bring you back

over here. I'll be home in a little while. Then he turned around and walked into my grandparents' house.

My *grandma's* house.

The house.

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I turned and, for the second time in less than five minutes, sprinted up the street, past the big green dumpster. I was running so fast I couldn't feel my legs, like I had already pushed past all the pain. I glided all the way to my yard before I felt pain again. Fast.

I was on the ground suddenly after my toe hit the edge of the big, decorative rock. Nothing had ever come flying at my face as fast as the ground did. My stomach came down right on top of a different oversized rock, and it knocked the air out of me.

Ages were going by and my lungs wouldn't let me breathe. I needed air. I needed air now. Every other part of my body was sending the same message to my lungs: get us air.

I think I started crying before I started breathing. I clutched my stomach, wanting to yell but not trusting my lungs to take any extra responsibilities.

I finally, finally got my lungs to take in a full breath.

I tried to calm down. My shorts were ripped. All the way up to the pocket. They were new. Mom was gonna-

Wait.

The tire gauge was in that pocket. I felt around. Nothing.

"NO!" I jumped up, looking around desperately for the shiny metal and the little off-white plastic part that popped out to tell you how much air.

Grandpa showed me how to use it once. He'd shown me how.

"NOoooo!" I looked all around that stupid rock. And I could not find it. I looked up the street where I'd been sprinting before. Nothing. It was gone.

I ran back to the rock and started kicking it.

"YOU ARE SO FUCKING FULL OF FUCKING SHIT, YOU FUCKING DUMBASS PIECE OF SHIT ROCK!!!!!!!"

I kept kicking. My foot hurt, but I kept kicking and yelling and crying so loud I didn't hear my dad's truck drive up. I didn't hear him get out of the car. But he heard me.

And he walked over and pulled me back from the rock, exhausted and hurt. Blood, dirt, and tears on my face from the fall. In one big heave, he scooped me up and held me up almost over his shoulder, but close to his chest. My tears only fell harder. He didn't say anything. Just started walking to the house.

"I lost it," I confessed between sobs.

"It's okay," he said. He didn't understand.

"No, I lost the tire gauge. Grandpa's tire gauge! It's gone!"

He stopped in the middle of the front yard and put me back on my feet. He knelt down so his face was right in front of mine and he looked he in the eye.

For the first time ever, I saw a tear on my dad's cheek. And more followed, He was crying hard, too. But he sucked in some air and shook his head, almost frantic, "It's okay."

"No. It's not--"

"It's okay, son."

He nodded at me now, just as fast and frantic as before.

“I’ve got a tire gauge, too.”

He checked his pockets. Nothing.

“I mean-“ he said, “It’s not with me right now, but I promise. . . I promise, I’ve got one.”

The End