

Summer Episode

by Moe Cidaly

Whether he was named after Mandela or someone else, or if there was any particular reason behind the naming, I don't know. He was a puppy when his former owner sold him to my grandfather, and Grandpa believed that dogs—and animals in general—should be treated like human beings. When you adopt a human child who already has a name, you don't change it. Thus, Nelson kept his name when he came to our house.

He was a great surprise, just like all the birthday presents Grandpa gave me. He once gave me a pair of binoculars. He was a respected birder and wanted me to follow in his footsteps. For me, a child then, birding was pretty boring because I had to be quiet and still for a long time. But the binoculars were new to me and, besides, I enjoyed being with the old man. Though I never made it as a birder, I used—and still use—the gift whenever I go hiking in the fjords or when I choose to spend some time in nature.

Another time he gave me a small wooden horse with detailed shiny muscles; a masterpiece he'd made himself with the magic of his chisel. I started learning sax when he bought me one of my very own. He was a jazz saxophone player himself and a fan of Paul Desmond, and he wanted me to try it, which I did and I liked it too, liked being a smaller version of him. The last gift he gave me was a copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, inside which he wrote:

'Now you are big enough for this, dear Trond.

Grandpa

February 1, 2002'

I think I proved him wrong when, after reading the book, I told him that the 'car accident' was a one-in-a-billion coincidence, and that I didn't buy it.

"Coincidences happen more often than you think," he said, after he was done with laughing. "If it wasn't for them, just think how many stories couldn't be told."

My grandfather was good at many things, but I think the most important one was passing his passions on to me. I was his only grandchild. I still have all the gifts he gave me but one: Nelson.

Grandpa passed away one year after he gave me the puppy. The old man knew he was terminally ill and he wanted me to have reminder of him, a lively one. And it worked; Nelson was the best consolation for the loss of the man I admired the most. Eleven years later, Nelson followed after my grandfather: he'd been suffering and, in early March, the vet put him to sleep. When I buried Nelson, all the grief I didn't feel when Grandpa died was unleashed as if it had

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been locked up inside the dog. Besides, there was the sorrow for my dog's death too. What made the loss even worse was that Nelson was a gift from someone from whom I will never receive another present.

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It was late in June when Dad called me from Oslo to tell me that he wanted to sell Grandpa's home in Granvin. Grandma was too old to handle the big house and Dad needed money to boost his business. Dad's business was a monster that needed to be fed with money so it could shit it out. Only, against the law of conservation of mass, the shit amounted to more than the food it consumed—a lot more. Dad didn't call to ask for my permission, of course; he only called to tell me that if I want to keep any of Grandpa's personal belongings, then now would be the time.

I was still mourning the dog, and upset about selling off Grandpa's house—especially while Grandma was still alive. London is not a good place to be when you are sad: so crowded it makes you feel lonely. Besides, an emergency called, so I took three weeks off, booked a flight to Oslo, and, after staying three days with my parents—mostly because Grandma was staying there for a while—I rented a car and headed for Granvin.

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When I got there, the guy who was looking after the house made a phone call to Dad to make sure that I was allowed into where the best memories of my childhood had been formed: it had always been my dream, when Mum and Dad settled in Oslo, to return to that house.

When I stepped inside the front door, the pattern on the hallway carpet brought back a delicate memory. During Christmastime, when we were there for vacation, early in the morning, Grandpa used to shovel the previous night's snow away from the front. When I woke up in the morning, I would watch him from the front door; Grandma never let me out in the snow when I was just out of bed.

“You were sweating in bed and it's a cold wind outside,” she used to say—though the doctors begged to differ.

As soon as he was back inside, he would hug me and I loved the cold of his worn leather jacket against my face. I felt like what Dad was selling was not the house: it was Grandma's affectionate concern for me and Grandpa's hug. I decided that if I could stop Dad from selling the house I would. And what did he mean by Grandpa's personal belongings? Anything that could not earn him a considerable amount of money when sold? The fact was, to me, the house was his personal belonging and I wanted Dad to realise that.

I didn't bother to go through the whole house, except for the living room, where I only took—against Dad's 'order'—Hans Dahl's painting, *Summer Episode* from the wall. The painting depicted a sunny summer day in a farm near some fjord where a young and beautiful Norwegian woman was standing before a fence—taller than her—made of fresh windrow hung from a wooden rack to dry. Playfully, she was trying to hide by pressing her back and arms against it; her head was a bit tilted towards the sunlight. On the other side of the rack, a man—young and handsome—was peeking over it, trying to find her. What made the painting more interesting was that the girl—in a hurry because she knew the boy was coming—had left her

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knitted fabric and the needles on the grass a meter or two further, and a string from the knitting attached to the wool she was holding—maybe out of forgetfulness—was betraying her hideout.

Dahl was a childhood friend of Grandpa's great-grandfather and the painting had been a gift, one that had been passed on in our family. A white sheet had been laid over it to protect it from light and dust. With meticulous care I remove the painting from its frame and wrapped it up. Then I hung the frame back on the wall and covered it with the sheet again: I didn't want the caretaker reporting it missing to Dad. The rest of the things I needed to save were in Grandpa's study.

When the sheets had been removed from the objects inside the study, it was zero kelvin; like a photograph, nothing had changed since the last time I was in there—except for the strong smell of naphthalene. The Persian rug still had its vivid colors. I remember lying on it as a child, looking up at Grandpa sitting at his desk under the sunshine coming in through the window. He was reading something and I fell asleep. When I woke up, I found myself on the couch in his room with my shoes removed and a thin blanket covering my body. Now the window blind was closed, concealing the beautiful lake view.

His saxophone, his *Gatsby*, his birding equipment - they were all there, along with many other things I recognised. The only change I could see was the wallpaper behind the door, which was peeling off a little. In a frame on his desk was a photo of me. It was taken when I was seven and, in it, Grandpa's sunglasses seemed unusually huge on my childish face. The photo seemed funny when I was a child, embarrassing when I was adolescent, and now—as an adult—it was very much nostalgic.

On the top shelf of the closet there was a small chamber where he kept his photo negatives and albums. I took one of them down and sat behind the desk to take a look at it. It was new to me. In between the pages I found a black and white photo—Grandpa must have taken it out of its place to read what was on the back. It was a photo of an old man wearing a suit and chapeau. Unaware that the photograph was being taken, he stood tall and firm, grasping one wrist behind his back with the other hand, his head tilted slightly upwards, looking at something outside the frame of the picture. His posture made him look as if he was in total command of the world and utterly contented—the closest to redemption one can be. On the back, Grandpa had written:

'My grandfather—the man I want to be at his age.

The first photo I took with the camera he gave me.

July 19, 1950 – 13:18'

Grandpa used to tell me a lot about him but he'd never showed me his picture—his only picture. It was another thing that Grandpa and I had in common; we both wanted to end up like our grandfathers.

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The next morning, when everything was packed in the car, before the caretaker could check me, I headed back to Oslo. I already knew what I was going to do with *Summer Episode*. I didn't want to—and I didn't know if I could—take it out of Norway, and it would need to be taken care of while I was in England. The painting did not have a provenance, and Dad wanted to take 'necessary measures' to determine its authenticity before selling it. I didn't want it to end up

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in some private collection, so I decided to take it to Nasjonalgalleriet. There, it could be taken care of professionally, remain in Norway and I could see it whenever I was in Oslo.

I was welcomed there. They accepted the painting and gave me a receipt and wanted me to wait until the experts and tests confirmed its authenticity. Then we could sign the donation papers under my two conditions; I needed to make sure that the museum would put it on permanent display, and that they would never sell it. I knew that Dad would be mad if he knew anything about it, if the caretaker informed him about the missing painting, but I hoped that, by then, my work would be done.

I spent the next two weeks trying to conceal all of this from Dad, until the process of authentication was complete. When the painting was accepted as a genuine work of Dahl and put on permanent display some newspapers wrote about it; Dad was pissed off.

“You are proof that a man can live without a brain!” he’d shouted.

“And you are proof that a man can remain alive without a heart!” I shouted back and left the house. I had to spend the last two days of my stay in a hotel. It took a year for us to reconcile. He is my dad, after all, and I loved him, but not as much as I loved his dad.

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The first night back in my apartment in London, I missed Nelson again. When someone loses a dog, the worst sympathy to offer is saying ‘get another one’—dogs should be treated like human beings, as Grandpa said. But I had to move on—just as Grandpa wanted me to when he gave me Nelson as a puppy. I needed a friend—a dog—and I already knew what its name was

going to be, and this time the reason behind the naming was obvious; the memory of another friend—Nelson.

That night, I played Desmond's cover of a standard with Grandpa's sax. The photo of me wearing Grandpa's glasses sat on my desk next to the photo albums and the Persian rug lay on the floor.

When I was finished playing, I sat at the desk to turn the pages of the albums and came across a photo from our last family gathering. Behind the posing crowd, unaware of his surroundings, Grandpa stood tall, looking at something outside the frame of the picture serene and redeemed.

He was right when he said that coincidences happen more often than you think. But this one was not a coincidence. This was the destiny of men who knew how to find a way to become who they wanted to be before their time was up.