

## A Special Reflection

### *Nobody Talks to Your Grandfather*

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#### Author Note

The experiences and views expressed in this short story are those of the author. My views here do not reflect official policy or the position of those that I may serve. I have no financial conflicts of interest.

#### Introduction

Learning of the dedication of this issue of the Journal to honor the 100th anniversary of the first Veterans Day, the image of my grandfather kept coming powerfully to mind. He was a WW1 Marine veteran. I decided to share my memories of him in a personal short story. I cannot say for sure what my grandfather really thought, or experienced during his service in WW1. I can suppose it all, though, based on my knowledge of war and its effect on those who are sent into it. My suppositions are based both on my own 32 years of military service, and on the fact that I have been a health care provider taking care of our troops for over 30 years. I hope this short story promotes the need to care for our Wounded Warriors, as well to care for all those who suffer woundedness in our world.

Summertime is often the highlight of most childhood memories, at least for a kid growing up in southern Illinois. Summer in the Midwest during my childhood was a time for kids to be outside experiencing life, in tune with Mother Nature, on a day-to-day basis. Even so, there needed to be something special for a child to look forward to, and for me, one of the best was visiting my maternal grandparents at their rural home. My grandparents lived in a small house in the timber country along the Illinois river bluffs in southwestern Illinois. I loved visiting with my grandmother and always enjoyed the wonderful meals she cooked. She nearly always made homemade pies while we were visiting, and they were superb. What I really looked forward to, however, was being out and about in the outdoors. I especially anticipated shadowing my grandfather as he went about his daily farm chores. I never fully understood him when I was a child. Even so, he was the instrument of many great and cherished childhood memories.

Getting to my grandparents' home was somewhat of an adventure all in its own. As my family made our way there in our car we would leave the world of paved roads and travel miles into underdeveloped rural areas sometimes called, in our day, "boondocks" or "boonies." There were cornfields and beanfields strewn about like patchwork, but the overbearing features to me

## Under City Lights

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were the trees and thick brush that bordered the country roads that we had to traverse. It was as if we were deep in a jungle, all alone. My father would gingerly guide our car down the deeply rutted one-lane dirt road that led to Grandma's. The sounds emanating from the seemingly impenetrable vegetation abutting the road captured my imagination. Behind the chirping of birds, and the chorus of countless unseen insects, I could almost hear the trumpeting of an angry elephant, or the cackle of an indifferent hyena. I hardly noticed the thick dust cloud rising up behind our car and chasing us down the road like a giant brown tornado. Even the thick layer of fine powder that invaded our open car windows and coated the car's interior and us went unnoticed. I was focused on watching for the first sign that indicated we were almost there. Precisely, as our car defeated the last bluff nearing Grandma's, I saw the early morning sun reflected by the huge white barn that heralded the entrance into Grandma's driveway. That barn was like the beacon of a lighthouse that brought us into harbor safely.

My grandparents lived frugally and kept no unnecessary items in their home, including toys. They had a small black and white television set that sat unused in a corner of their small living room. It rarely worked anyway. When I was growing up in the '50s and '60s there were no such things as video games, DVD movies, smartphones, or computers. In the summer children were expected to stay out of the house during the daytime and use their imaginations to stay occupied. That was fine with me. As soon as the family car had rolled to a stop in Grandma's driveway I would bolt out the door and head for the woods bordering the east side of the driveway.

My parents and my grandmother allowed me free reign to explore the fields, meadows, and woods embracing the boundaries of Grandma's yard. No one lived very close and the area was so out of the way that my parents weren't worried about the dangers of strangers. Since I was the only male in my family, I wasn't interested in hanging out with my four sisters. Rather, I spent much of my time roaming through the landscape around Grandma's home. It was so easy to be engulfed by nature's surroundings, and I loved it. I spent hours in the meadows, listening, mesmerized by the melodies of birds and chatter of insects. As I sat quietly in the warm summer sun a gentle breeze whispered around me and caressed my face in a seemingly loving embrace. A groundhog foraged in the tall grass a few feet away. The animal kept a wary eye on me, but otherwise did not seem overly concerned by my presence. Occasionally a fox would pop its head through the nearby bushes and peer at me, ever so briefly. This was far better than playing video games. As the afternoon began to wane it was time for me to head back to the house and get ready for supper. Grandfather would be home for supper, and Grandma wanted everything ready when he arrived.

I vividly remember my maternal grandfather. He was a tall, stocky man who looked very strong to me. Grandfather worked on a neighbor's farm as well as taking care of his own small plot of land. He toiled in the fields for long hours on most days. I remember him approaching the back door to the kitchen when he arrived home. He would whip up a great tan cloud as he pounded his overalls to clear some of the dust clinging to him, and then walk in through the kitchen door. Grandfather was always dressed in faded blue bib overalls. His skin was darkly tanned from his countless hours working in the sun. He often looked tired, and he always had a stern look on his face. I don't remember ever seeing him smile. Grandfather would walk over to the hand pump on the kitchen sink, pump some water into a basin, rinse his face and his hands, and then turn and pull up a chair at the nearby kitchen table. Everyone else was called to the table and we took our places around and opposite Grandfather. We ate, and talked, as kids and

families do, except for Grandfather. He always ate his meal in silence staring straight ahead out the window opposite his chair or looking down at his plate. He seldom looked at anyone, and he never said a word to any of us. I must admit that this made me a little frightened of Grandfather, but that was more than outweighed by my awe of him. I thought he must have been very tired from his work. I was curious, as any child would be, why my Grandfather never talked to anyone. I once asked my mother about it. She quickly shushed me, as if I had said something wrong, and then whispered, "Nobody talks to Grandfather."

Every evening after supper Grandfather headed outside to take care of the chickens, his hounds, and his huge garden. I loved following Grandfather and watching him do his chores. He didn't seem to mind, at least he never indicated that I shouldn't.

I stood near to him while he was feeding the chickens. I never saw him look directly at me, nor did he speak, and since "no one talks to your Grandfather," I didn't speak either, even as I intently watched his every move. Grandfather would reach out, and gently pull me back a little, if I got too close to the chickens as they clucked furiously and jockeyed for positions closer to the feed showering down from his hand. He wouldn't say anything, just softly nudge me a little farther away from the chaotic chickens.

The next job was nurturing the garden. Grandfather meticulously groomed his garden each day. I think he could have grown virtually anything he wanted to. The cucumbers and zucchini were the biggest I had ever seen, certainly much larger than anything that I ever saw in the supermarket. Grandfather never seemed to notice me standing nearby, scrutinizing his every action even though he obviously knew exactly where I was. He occasionally motioned to me and pointed out a large green tomato worm "gross," or hand me a small ripe tomato to munch on. Once again, he wouldn't say a word, and in my mind, I could clearly hear my mother whispering into my ear, "Nobody talks to your Grandfather."

Grandfather had his hounds tied up near the chicken coop. I think he used the hounds for hunting. He didn't want me or my sisters around the dogs. I suspect he didn't trust them not to hurt us. His coon hounds were quite rambunctious, and probably outweighed me and my sisters. Of course, being the animal loving boy I was, I often managed to stealthily approach the hounds. I quickly glanced in every direction to see if anyone was watching, and then walked right up to the dogs and gave them big hugs. They were tied to stakes in front of their dog houses and I figured that I could easily get out of their reach if needed. Those dogs never acted aggressively towards me. Nevertheless, if my mother or father saw me petting the dogs, they would holler from the house "Get away from those dogs." If Grandfather saw me, he wouldn't say a word. Instead, he would motion me towards the house, or slowly approach me and coax me away from the dogs. He didn't show any obvious signs of anger, just his typical stern look. He would simply walk me back towards the house and then continue what he had been doing before he noticed me playing with the hounds.

After finishing his daily chores, Grandfather would spend the late evening hours sitting in a corner of the small living room, back behind an imposing potbelly stove. He smoked his pipe and stared off into the distance, lost in his thoughts. I stood a short distance from him as he sat straight backed in his huge old leather armchair. He took long slow draws from the stem of his pipe, and then slowly vented the dancing rings of smoke from his pursed lips. I always wondered

## Under City Lights

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what he could possibly be thinking of but I didn't ask. I stood silently absorbing the serenity of the situation. I think I saw Grandfather glancing in my direction when he thought I was looking away, but when I looked back towards him he would be looking off into the distance as if his gaze had been unbroken.

Often, on a warm summer's eve, my Grandfather sat in a lawn chair in the huge front yard, peering out over the fields and woods. My father typically sat outside with him on these evenings, whittling on a stick with his pocket knife. I followed the two of them outside and sat in the cool grass near my father, who talked about various things. He didn't seem to be talking directly to Grandfather because nobody talked to Grandfather. But he didn't seem to be talking to me either. Grandfather didn't respond as far as I could tell. I listened to the chorus of crickets, the serenading tree frogs, the soulful wailing of coyotes, and the occasional screech owl's unnerving cry, emanating from everywhere in the darkness around us. I was never scared. My father was there; and besides, I couldn't imagine that my Grandfather was afraid of anything on this earth.

As I grew older and pondered those summers of long ago I always wondered why Grandfather wouldn't talk to me? Why wouldn't he look directly at me? WHY did nobody talk to Grandfather? These things I could never understand at the time. On one occasion when my questioning mind got the best of me, I again asked my mother why Grandfather never spoke, and why he would sit alone for hours at a time. My mother said "Your grandfather was a Marine in WWI. Don't bother him." I didn't understand what being a Marine had to do with his behavior. My father used to watch WWII movies on TV. I saw the Marines in those movies. I knew what a Marine was. The Marines in those movies were fearless, heroic men, men to be proud of.

One November day in 1962 Grandfather died. My mother was very upset, not only because of his death, but the day he died was her birthday. After hearing the bad news, my family piled into the family car and headed to Grandma's house, a little over a two-hour drive from where we lived at the time. Strangely, this was the first time it was only "Grandma's house," even though we had always called it that. During the drive, I didn't feel the same excitement I had always felt previously when we were going for a visit. Instead I felt strange inside. I knew what death was, but Grandfather's death was the first one in my young life that I had to deal with in a personal way. I knew this visit would be quite different. What would Grandma's be like without Grandfather there doing the things that I loved watching him do? How could it ever be the same? How could I be the same?

My mother had 15 brothers and sisters, so when we arrived, the house was full of people I barely knew, most of them crying or whispering to each other. I almost never saw any of them visiting Grandma and Grandfather before he died. It seemed odd that so many people were there, crying and carrying on. Why hadn't they visited Grandfather more often while he was alive? I loved visiting him, even without the talking. Why didn't they? Surely Grandfather would have loved to see them. It crossed my mind that maybe that is why he never talked and always looked stern. Maybe he was unhappy that most of his children seldom visited him. There was something else very strange about that visit. To my utter amazement, on that day I spotted something in Grandma's home I had never seen before. Sitting on the dining room table stood a faded picture of my Grandfather when he was young. He was wearing a WWI Marine Corps uniform.

A few long days after the family had gathered, we attended Grandfather's funeral. If I had known that that my last visit was to have been the last time I would ever spend with him I would have been more attentive. Even though he never paid me much attention he always knew I was there. He knew he wasn't alone.

Grandfather looked peaceful lying in his coffin, more peaceful than he had ever looked when he was alive. He was wearing a suit and tie. I had never seen my Grandfather in a suit. To me, he would have looked more natural if he had been wearing dirty overalls. Even now when I think of Grandfather I usually picture him in those dirty bib overalls. It was rainy and cold the day of the funeral, downright dreary as everyone proceeded to the graveyard in a long line of cars with their headlights on. It looked like a parade, a parade for my Grandfather. My mother had ensured that I was dressed to keep out the cold brisk November wind that day, yet I still felt a distinctive chill running up my spine as I looked at Grandfather's casket resting above the large hole that would soon engulf him forever. Immediately before his casket was lowered into the ground, a group of men in uniform raised rifles and fired shots in unison. Then one of the uniformed men on a bugle played what I later learned was Taps. To this day when I hear Taps played I am transported right back to my Grandfather's funeral. I nearly always tear up.

After the funeral, I asked my mother why the men shot guns and played the bugle. She said, "Your Grandfather was a Marine in WW1. He earned it." Curious, my mother had mentioned, once again, what we were not supposed to talk about. This was only the second time I could remember that she mentioned Grandfather having been a Marine. Men in uniforms were shooting guns to honor his service as a Marine. I was proud of Grandfather that day, but still I wondered why I was not allowed to be proud of him when he was alive? Why did I have to wait until he was dead?

In those days I didn't know much about WW1. In time I became a history buff and I knew much more about that war. Long after Grandfather had died I learned he had been in Europe during WW1. A few years ago one of my aunts gave me a photo of Grandfather wearing his WW1 Marine uniform. On the back it had Grandfather's name, and written beside that, age 18. By this time in my life I knew the date that Grandfather had been born. He was 18 years old in 1918.

I have read and researched WWI in Europe. I know that it was a brutal, bloody, godforsaken conflict that snuffed out the lives of many servicemen and civilians alike. Mass gas attacks killed hundreds. Soldiers were forced to live in rat infested trenches, mere feet from the rotting corpses of their friends, their comrades, and the enemy. Troops had little to eat, and warmth was hard to come by. Worst of all, those soldiers and Marines, including my grandfather, were forced to launch human wave attacks across the no man's land separating the warring armies. They were under heavy machine gun and artillery fire as they surged forward. Their comrades, dropped like flies all around them, as far as the eye could see. They never knew when they would be hit, dead or mutilated before they hit the ground, never to fight again, never to see home again. Most didn't expect to leave Europe alive.

It is impossible to imagine the horrors my grandfather experienced. I cannot fathom what he witnessed, lived through, and participated in; and he was only a teenager. Grandfather never spoke to anyone about his wartime service. I understand now that WW1 never ended for him

## Under City Lights

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and that explains the grandfather I knew. I could never know the demons infecting his mind when he returned from Europe as an 18-year-old youth. I have no doubt those terrors were quite real to him. They must have tormented him relentlessly. I think that Grandfather did his best to protect his loved ones from the demons by locking them up inside himself, away from us.

After WW1 no one truly understood “Shell Shock,” as it was called back then, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as it is called now. No one suspected how many “wounded” Grandfathers like mine came home in that condition. No one knew that they could possibly be treated. “Nobody talks to your Grandfather.” My grandfather, and all the other grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and brothers of WW1, were left to deal with their terrors as best they could, and mostly on their own. Grandfather kept his demons at bay by retreating into himself. He constructed a prison within his soul where he kept the demons confined, and none were allowed to enter. I believe Grandfather feared his demons would still consume him, right up to the day he died. And in a manner they did. What we don’t understand even today is that my grandfather’s PTSD affected his entire family. I was denied the grandfather I might have had. I loved the man I knew; but how much did I miss of the grandfather I should have had if he had developed into the man he could have been?

World War I stole Grandfather’s adulthood. It eventually dawned on me that all the experiences I enjoyed so much at Grandma’s house were inaccessible to him, even as he was surrounded by them, and lived them. He couldn’t, or wouldn’t, reach out. His life experience and wisdom were not all dictated by his service in WW1, even as that conflict is what ultimately overwhelmed and consumed him. I hope that death finally rid Grandfather of his demons. He had finally earned some peace.

What his country required him to do wasn’t Grandfather’s fault. The nation sent a child to fight a horrific war. He faithfully performed his duty, but came back broken with no one to try and put the pieces back together. Some may say he didn’t ask for help. I strongly disagree. He asked for help every single time I saw him, but we didn’t understand. We, as a people, owe an apology and a helping hand to my grandfather, and everyone else who has suffered the aftermath of war.

As we approach another November 11<sup>th</sup>, we must remember that Veteran’s Day does not mean another day off from work or merely a parade down main street. The parades may reflect our gratitude to our veterans, but there must be more. The United States has now been at war for 17 straight years, the longest stretch of conflict in our nation’s history. Hundreds of thousands of young men and women have been sent into harm’s way. War is sometimes necessary; we all know that. As our current generation of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen do their nation’s bidding, we must in turn do **our** duty. We must embrace our warriors when they return home and do everything we can to heal not only their broken bodies but their broken souls as well. As a nation, we CANNOT leave them to my grandfather’s fate. We are in this together. We must be.

Grandfather, you done good! I am proud of you! Thank you for your service! Please forgive us all for not helping you in your time of need. I promise we will do better this time!



*Soldier of Company K, 110th Regiment Infantry (formerly 3rd and 10th Infantry, Pennsylvania National Guard), just wounded, receiving first-aid treatment from a comrade. Varennes-en-Argonne, France.*

National Archives public domain World War I photograph from 1918. Website: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/530760>