

# Grandfather Clock

*by* Mark Manselle

On a cold November afternoon I stood in the foyer of Sampson and Sons funeral home and paced silently back and forth across the purple carpet. They have that deep pile and rich color of carpeting that you only really see in a small town funeral home. It's just; it's purple. I was thinking about my basement office at home and even in the basement I didn't think I could get away with that. I was also listening through the open door to the office; where my father sat on a rickety old office chair that's probably been in that room for sixty years, with his hat in his lap.

I had just been politely asked to leave the room. We had gone in together, my father and I, and we had both reached across the desk and shook hands with old Sampson himself. Then my father had listened quietly to the many options as to what kind of box he would lay his own father to rest in. When it was time to talk money, my father turned to me and nodded towards the door. He's done this all my life. And yeah, I was irked. That's why I was pacing and looking at the carpet and trying to distract myself with the look on my wife's face if I put that in the den.

I'm forty-two, and I make more a year than my father did before he retired, but I'm still a kid as far as he's concerned. Not in any mean way, it's just for my old man his brain can't encompass the idea of me as an adult. I'm his kid, so, if I'm always a kid, he can't be that old.

It's the truth, he hates birthdays.

Anyway, I got over it. We buried my grandfather next to my grandmother in a small church cemetery four miles down a gravel road from the house he was born in, raised my father and his five siblings in, and died in. He never even left for World War II because he was too important to the war effort as a farmer for them to send him into the army. There have never been more than two hundred people who ever lived in that town, in the hundred and sixty years it's been there.

I spent a week in that old farm house the next spring, with my father, cleaning out the house and the barns of my grandfather's home. Northern Minnesota is beautiful that time of year; the birds are back, the trees are blooming, and the air is just fresh. Almost, like nobody else had breathed it before you did. The reason it took an entire week was because we were having a good old-fashioned estate sale. We had to get the yard looking good, and place an add in the local paper, and make signs to put out along the gravel road. That part was fun actually.

My father had made the signs over the winter. Big sandwich board signs made out of  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch plywood, all cut and sanded and painted white in my father's woodshop in his garage. For the sale itself, my father's five siblings were present, with their families, and most of their children and grandchildren. It was a big family event. And my father brought the signs out and gave all the grandkid's paintbrushes and a gallon of black paint and got them all painting - ESTATE SALE!!! With all three exclamation points on every sign.

The kids had a ball, but a couple of the mom's were upset about black paint all over the brand new outfits they had just bought for the kids to come up to grandpa's last sale.

Of course nobody said anything to my old man.

My uncle Gary brought a batch of fireworks from South Dakota and we shot them all off in the back pasture at dusk, right after the sale finished up. All three of my auntie's cried when they sold the old out of tune stand up piano in the dining room. None of them had room in their houses for it, but they were sad to see it go, and talked of how every one of them had learned to play on that piano. We had a barbecue going all day long, and I stood right there tending it, catching up with my brothers and my cousins. It was a good day.

There was nowhere in that little town for so many people to stay, so some of us went home, others had reserved rooms in a town about forty miles away along the freeway. I sent my wife home with the kids right after the fireworks; it's a three and a half hour drive back to the cities. Which put me there with my truck after everyone left, all alone with my father.

I was thinking about his wood-shop in the garage, and how much work it was going to be when he died, I'd have to hire an auctioneer. He waved me into the house and I remember walking in and hearing the absolute stillness of that structure, it was as silent as an empty church. There was nothing left in that house, not one rug, not one chair. The floorboards creaked and I could see light through the kitchen window over the sink from the yard light out by the barn. I could remember being about four feet shorter, and seeing my grandmother doing dishes at that sink one Christmas eve, and humming to herself as she looked out that window.

In the dining room my father was standing next to the old grandfather clock he and I had bought when I was ten years old, at an estate sale not unlike the one we'd just had. We had bought it in June or July, as I remember, and my father had wrapped it up and we gave it to my grandfather that Christmas.

I didn't want that clock. I was under specific orders from my wife, not to bring that God-awful thing home with me. But, there he stood. He had out-bid my uncle Gary by fifty dollars for that clock.

I grew up in a good home. My parents tried. I get the kind of work that's involved in trying. I'm trying, really hard, to be a good husband and father. All that.

But you grow up with things like your old man waking you up at six on Saturday morning because it's your turn to go with him all day long and walk through estate sales, and car auctions, and garage sales, he even liked the scratch and dent aisle in any store. As an adult, I have found myself avoiding purchases like this clock, that when you wind it up it runs for a week. And it chimes on every hour. I've stayed in this house as a kid; at Christmas time, and listened to that thing go off twelve times at midnight.

Want to know what he said to me?

"I'm proud of you, son. It was a lot of work putting this sale together, and I appreciate your help. So, I wanted to give you this old clock. You remember when we bought it, up at that estate sale in Bemidji?"

What was I going to say to that?

I haven't heard those words come out of his mouth since I graduated high school. At my wedding he was going through a divorce with my mother and he just plain wouldn't even look at anybody, much less stick around and talk to them. And then I had kids, and I was busy. And we saw each other, but we lost touch.

But he said it. And he meant it. And I heard it.

So, my wife threw a fit. And the kids wanted to wind that old clock up; so we did, and spent a week listening to the thing chime away all night long. We laughed about it for the first couple of days, and then we cringed our way through it. Now we only wind it up at Christmas time.

For the old man.

