

The Legacy

by Robert Lamb

We all knew the old man was dying. I say "we," but I was too young, going on six, to grasp fully what dying meant. Grandpa would go and not come back — I knew that much. My pet rabbit had died, and so had Scuttle, my dog. But I knew my grandfather was dying because I heard the grownups say so again and again. They, mostly my aunts and uncles, were gathered in a deathwatch there at the house and from time to time would say, nodding gravely, that the end was near. Hours, some said. A matter of days, said others. Some of them cried; all of them looked stricken.

But I doubt that they knew, not then at least, that the old man also knew he was dying. Mary Grace told me so. "He will die at five o'clock," she said, whispering in my ear.

I looked at her and glanced at the clock on the mantle. I had been telling time for more than a year. It was two-thirty. I looked at Mary Grace again, a questioning look, and she nodded. She knew.

"Daddy told me so," she said, putting a finger to her lips to seal mine.

But I wasn't about to tell. We had lots of secrets, and I never told. It never occurred to me to doubt her, either. The old man was always telling her things he didn't tell the others. They resented it, but she let them go right on resenting it. She was the seventh daughter of a seventh son, Grandpa had told her, and that gave her certain rights over the other children.

I was too young to understand all that, but I did understand this: The old man had always known things, was feared and revered up and down the valley for knowing things. I'd heard the stories since the day I was born. If John Noble looked into your future and predicted that something was going to happen, you'd best get ready; it was coming as sure as night followed day.

He told the widow Harkins that she would marry again, to a stranger, and leave the valley forever. She snorted and scoffed, but eight months later she left for Oregon as the new bride of a

traveling salesman who had been promoted to a job in the company's home office in Portland. Machine tools, I seem to recall.

He told Ella Morgan, who feared that she was barren, to align her bed north to south and sleep with her head to the north, and she would conceive. One year later, Ella and her husband Ed became the proud parents of fraternal twins.

And when Earl Spivey refused one August to repay Mr. Noble some money he owed him, Grandpa told him, "It's all to the good, Earl, for your widow will need it; you'll be dead by Christmas." The Spivey household went into mourning on the next Dec. 23, when Mr. Spivey was shot through the heart in a hunting accident.

Of his own end, Grandpa had often said to me and Mary Grace as though teasing us with a riddle, "I will spring into my eightieth year, but I will not spring out of it." He had turned eighty in November and now it was spring. Mary Grace whispered: "Spring. Get it?"

I didn't, not right away. Children tend to be literal, and word-play was new to me. But when I did get it, I looked out one of the windows of the small back bedroom where he lay. Just outside, bobbing in a soft April breeze, a branch of dogwood rubbed against the screen as if signaling for our attention. Beyond, across an alley, red and white azaleas nodded to each other as if in solemn agreement on a serious matter. I wondered if they knew what was going on inside.

Suddenly a raspy voice pierced the quiet of the room. "Catherine," the old man called. The voice, though weak, was still authoritative.

My grandmother went to his side and he beckoned her feebly to bend down. A moment later, she asked the other grownups to leave the room. "And close the door," she said.

She bent to him again, an ear cocked to his lips, and then stood up. Hands on her hips, she said, "I know what you're about to do, Mr. Noble, but I think you should pass it on to John, not Mary Grace. She's too young. She's barely fifteen."

I saw Mary Grace stiffen, but she didn't say anything. We both knew that John was my grandmother's favorite child. Mary Grace wasn't even her favorite daughter. That was Julie Anne, but Julie Anne was my age.

The orange quilt under which Grandpa lay lifted fitfully with labored breathing. "It has to be a female," he said in a small, weary voice. "I've told you that."

"Eddie Lou, then. She's the oldest."

He struggled to speak. "She's *your* oldest."

Actually, Harriet was the oldest girl, their oldest child, but Harriet and Carla were his children, not hers.

"Tell me, then. I'm a female and I'm your wife."

The way she said it made me think that that was what she had wanted all along. She was like that, angling, cunning, but even a child like me could see through it.

"Mary Grace is the one," he said. "Send her to me."

Grandma gave Mary Grace a withering look. "She's right here."

"Now leave," he said.

I was afraid she would make me leave, too, but she stalked out of the room without me. I had already learned that grownups sometimes lived in a world in which small children were invisible.

"Stay here," Mary Grace said as she walked to the other side of the bed.

She perched on the bed beside him and leaned down so he could whisper, her caramel-colored hair falling like a curtain to shield his lips. The whispering buzzed in the room for a long time while I stood at the window and watched bees move among the blossoms outside. I wondered if the bees were telling secrets, too.

