

Midnight Story for a Sunny Day

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The door quietly opened, throwing a plane of L-shaped light on the boy lying in bed. "Grandpa," the boy said softly, "I couldn't sleep. Will you stay with me for awhile? . . . Maybe a story . . . one of your stories."

The old man gently patted the boy's knee. His boy. His blue-eyed Davie around whom he and Grandma had centered their lives for six years. "You like my stories, do you, son? But it's so late. Almost too late for stories . . . Davie, Grandma would have wanted you to be asleep by now." The old man's shadow hung lean and bent upon the wall, his shadowy fingers absently raising and lowering, tapping a pattern on David's knees. He tilted his bearded head toward the darkness behind the upraised knees. "All right, Davie—a short one. What kind of story would you like to hear? I guess by now you know them all, and can choose your own. Is it old Hinson for you, or maybe old Jacob Jackson? Shall it take place in the day or in the night?"

Letting out a short breath, the old man lowered himself into a wicker rocking chair near David's bed. His thin, veined eyelids slid down, covering his eyes, as he set up a slow, rhythmical rocking, punctuated by the wicker's time-keeping squeaks. His hands cupped the ends of the worn arm-rests, and he let his head rest against the woven chair back. Behind him, dark and liquid, his silhouette danced upon the wall.

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The light falls on him funny tonight. He could be part of that big, jagged-edged boulder on Hinson's Ridge, when the sun shines on it at sunset, and jagged edges throw the light into all kinds of little cracks you never saw before.

Grandpa says Hinson made that rock. Made it from the sun. Made it for himself. But one day the sun will get farther and farther into those little cracks, and that rock and the whole mountain will come falling down. And Hinson will sit and watch. Grandpa says that . . . always has I guess . . . and last week when Jimmy Marche said it wasn't so, I punched him right in the mouth. I just couldn't help it. Because Jimmy Marche says that Grandpa is old and that his father says that Grandpa's crazy-senile-like—for "living out there. . . . for living out there, scratching the dirt like a fool chicken." Jimmy Marche got a new train set last week—got it in Alocot City. That's on Highway 15, right below Hinson's Ridge. And I couldn't help it. I punched him hard. We don't have enough electricity. Couldn't plug the thing in.

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"Grandpa, tell me a story about a man who lives in a forest. And he's got a farm"—David laughed and the covers vibrated—"a little farm in the forest. It's rocky, like ours." And David smiled at the shadowy, rocking figure, then paused, and his smile slipped inward, and he touched the bedcovers around him, and his body leaned closer to them. "And, Grandpa, the man on the farm in the forest—he can't come out."

The wicker ticking caught in the darkness, and David turned and listened as the rhythm once again found its tempo. He pushed his head deep into his pillow, held by the sound, remembering.

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A heavy fall rain on the corn, when the wind slaps the rain and interrupts its splattering beat and sends it in icy ripples across the field. And it always seems like Mr. Marche from town comes when it rains or when it's cold. He wears an orange plastic raincoat that sends shivers down my spine. And I guess he figures Grandpa won't be out and about when it rains, though he always is, and so Mr. Marche hunts him up, and they talk together under the tin shed. And Mr. Marche waves his arms and points

to the red, muddy ground and the old gray sky, and Grandpa just hunches his shoulders, looks toward the house, and fiddles with his watch. And it's not right, but I don't like Mr. Marche, or cold rain, or Jimmy Marche either.

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"Grandpa, if you don't think it will scare you too much, could we have something quiet in our story, something that you think lives only at night, but it's got a big, thumping heart, and you hear it in the daytime too?"

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Grandma got sick at night, 'though when I think about it, she'd been so quiet for a long time. I woke up because the floors squeak and the light in the hall flickered under my door from people moving around. She died in the morning. Grandpa said she was so tired and went to sleep. So tired of being Grandma I guess. It was a sunny day, and Mr. Marche came. . . . It wasn't even raining . . . He shouldn't have come. Grandma would have died anyway, without him to tell her to.

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The old man in the chair stopped rocking. "Davie, it's late and it sounds like your story will take a little while to tell. It probably ranks with my old Hinson. You tell me it tomorrow, in the morning. Now, it's time to sleep. I'll stay with you for a while." And the reedy ticking began again, sending the shadow on the wall pulsing slowly up and down.

Pulling the tangled blankets up under his chin, David lay listening to the tapping of the rocker, matching his breath to its pulse. "Grandpa, my story wouldn't have been that good. I like your Hinson, I do."

Grandpa . . . do you know? Grandpa? When will I be old? As old as you? . . . As old as Grandma?"

"Grandpa, are you asleep?"