

A Scary Time

North Street Tales

I opened my eyes reluctantly. This was the last day of school before Christmas recess. Morry was still asleep so I slid out of bed into the icy air of our room as quietly as possible. I grabbed my clothes, ran downstairs as quickly as possible to dress behind the living room heater. Strangely, there was no fire in the heater and the door between the living and dining rooms was shut. Then I began to think that this morning was not like every other morning in the immediate past. The house was too quiet. Why hadn't Ma called Morry and me to get up and get ready for school? What was wrong, I wondered. I ran for the kitchen to find out what was going on and the warmth of the Home Comfort kitchen stove.

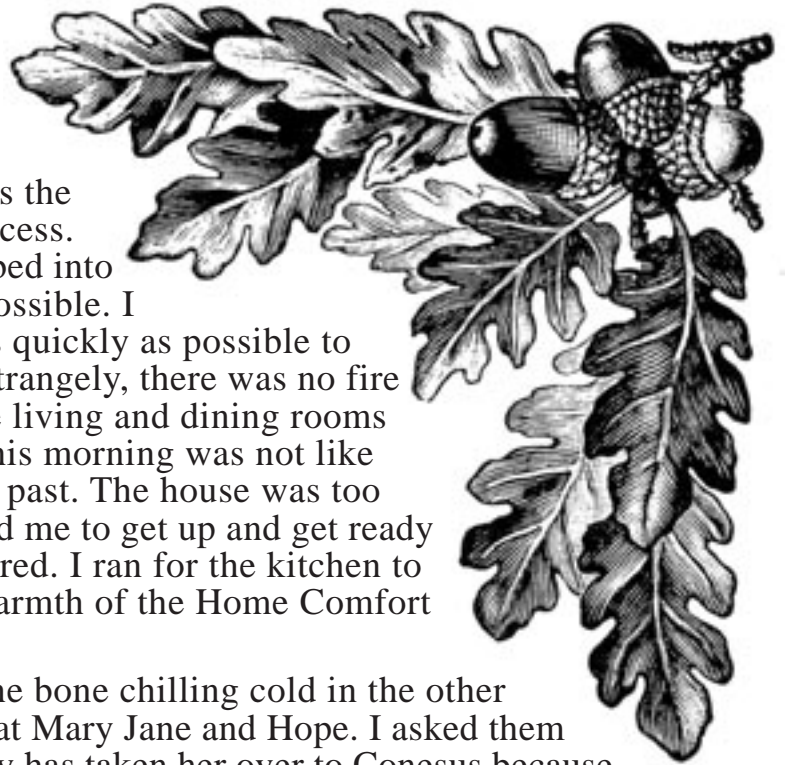
The warm kitchen felt so good after the bone chilling cold in the other part of the house. There are the table sat Mary Jane and Hope. I asked them where Ma was. Mary Jane said, "Daddy has taken her over to Conesus because your grandpa is sick. She will be gone for a few days." My mind was relieved because I was sure that something awful had happened to Ma.

I quickly got into my clothes while Hope fried my egg and made my toast over the coal fire. Then, I remembered that Morry wasn't up yet and he had to get ready for school. I ran upstairs and into our room. The covers were pulled up snugly around his neck. There was no sign that he had heard me call as I ran up the stairs. I yelled at him, "GET UP! You're going to be late for school." He slowly opened one eye, then the other. "I don't feel like going to school today," he replied. I responded by yanking the covers off and threatened to tell Ma if he didn't get up. That moved him. He picked up his clothes and ran ahead of me downstairs where Hope had our breakfasts ready. Mary Jane told Morry where Ma was but that didn't faze him. He was looking at Mary Jane and with a pleading look asked her to cut up his egg and toast, "like Ma did." Mary Jane obliged, which made him happy. Our breakfasts finished, we were off to school.

That day passed quickly. School was fun that day because we all got a cookie to eat after we had our daily dose of "Sunshine" (cod liver oil). Then there was a Christmas program in the gym after which we were dismissed for the day.

I waited for Morry to get his winter wraps then we set off for home. Morry was only six so I, being the eldest at nine years, had to make sure he got across Main Street safely. When we got home, we expected to see Ma there because Dad's car was in the driveway. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table having his tea when we came into the house. He told us to take our winter wraps off and then sit down because he had something to tell us. Right away that awful empty feeling came over me. I knew something awful had happened. Even Morry kept quiet. I noticed that he too had a sense of something wrong.

We sat down and then Dad said that Ma wouldn't be home today and perhaps for the next few days because Grandpa Willison was very sick. His sisters, our aunts Hat and Ida were also in bed with the flu so Ma was needed there to help out.



I still was afraid. I felt that grandpa must be very sick because Ma had never had to go over to Conesus and stay there for several days.

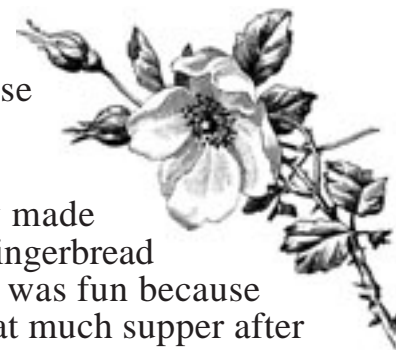
Mary Jane and Hope tried to keep Morry and me busy. They made Christmas cookies which we decorated. Morry decorated the gingerbread boys and girls while I was given the angels to decorate. That was fun because we could also eat as many cookies as we wanted. We didn't eat much supper after gorging ourselves on those delicious sugar and molasses cookies.

Mary Jane was earning some extra Christmas money by helping our neighbors; Sukie and Mary Welch make Christmas wreaths. She got fifty cents for each one she made and gave Morry and me five cents each for helping. We couldn't wait to take our money and go to the Ben Franklin five and ten store on Main Street to get presents for Dad, Ma, Mary Jane, and Hope.

Christmas was on a Thursday that year. On Tuesday, Dad went to Conesus to get Ma. When they got back I noticed that Ma looked very sad. She told us that our grandpa had died that morning. She started to cry and that frightened me because I had never seen her cry. She motioned for Morry and me to come over to where she was sitting. Then she explained to us that grandpa had been very sick and couldn't get well. That is when God told him to come with Him. Now grandpa was in God's home and was with grandma. It was puzzling to me how God could tell grandpa to come home with Him. I had thought that heaven must be a nice place but it was a mystery how grandpa could get there. Perhaps God just picked him up and carried him. That was a comforting thought. There were presents under the tree on Christmas Day. Ma and Mary Jane got Christmas dinner which was so good. Mary Jane and Hope had made pies and Mary Jane had even made an angel food cake covered with white frosting. When Morry and I went to bed that night, Ma tucked us in and then said that we would be going to Conesus the next day for grandpa's funeral. Neither one of us knew what a funeral was. Morry said, "Will they have cookies and cake to eat at the funeral?" Ma chuckled over that remark and replied that we would have something to eat after the funeral.

Early in the morning of the 26th Ma called for Morry and me to get up. She had laid out our "good" clothes the night before by the living room heater. Today it was sending out welcoming warmth which felt really nice. After dressing we went into the kitchen where Ma gave us each a bowl of oatmeal along with a slice of toast. As we were eating Dad came in from outdoors. He looked like a snowman. He brushed some of the snow off and told Ma that he needed another cup of coffee to warm him up. "It must be zero or below out there and the snow is still coming down," he told us as he sat down to drink his coffee and smoke another Chesterfield. "I put the chains on the tires or else we would never get to Conesus," he said. Ma replied, "I didn't think it was that bad out there. We had better leave now before things get worse."

I wondered how we would ever get to Conesus if the roads were as bad as Dad had said. I finished my breakfast and soon after Morry finished his. I put on my winter coat, pulled on my arctics (rubber boots), donned my hat and mittens and was ready to go. We went out and got in the car. I started to shiver, not so much from the cold as from being afraid. "What if we get stuck and the snow covers the car over?" I thought. Just then Dad started humming a little tune that he



always did when he felt good. I took some comfort from that. If Dad thought things were OK then they were.

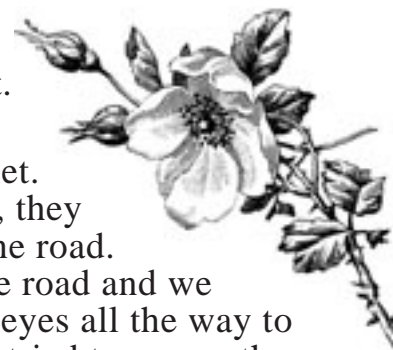
Bump, bump, bump went the car as Dad drove up North Street. The chains made a funny noise and jiggled the car. However, they seemed to be getting us through the snow that had covered the road. Being a worrywart I thought that what if Dad couldn't see the road and we ended up in a ditch someplace. I finally decided to close my eyes all the way to Conesus. About two minutes passed and I opened my eyes. I tried to scrape the frost from inside the window, but that didn't work because it froze over again as soon as I had a spot cleared. I wished that we could somehow get to Conesus faster, but that wasn't to be.

Finally, after about an hour and a half traveling over snow-covered highways we reached Conesus. Dad turned up Railroad Avenue and parked the car in front of Aunt Ida's house. We were soon inside taking off our winter wraps in the front hall. I noticed that the double doors to my right were open. Across the living room I saw some flowers around the fireplace. "I wonder where grandpa is," I thought. I asked Ma, "Grandpa is in heaven, isn't he? We won't see him today." Ma looked at me then she said, "Boys, come with me, I'll take you up to see grandpa." "What," I wondered. "How are we going to get up to heaven to see him? Is God coming down to carry us up there? How are we going to get back home?"

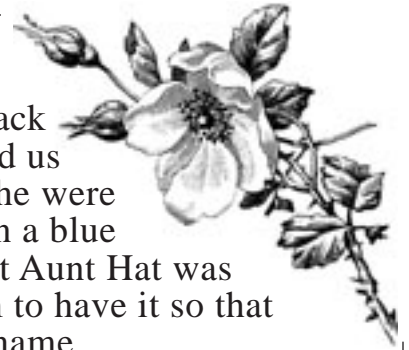
Ma took Morry and me by the hand and led us upstairs to grandpa's bedroom. There on a sort of bed with wheels was grandpa. He was covered with a white sheet. I wondered at all this because I thought he was in heaven. Yet, here he was sleeping! It was icy cold in that room, the window was open. Morry asked Ma why grandpa was still here. "He went to heaven, didn't he?" Morry asked. Ma explained that only grandpa's spirit had gone to heaven, his body would stay here. That answer made me wonder where grandpa's body was going to stay. I didn't ask any more questions because a man came into the room and said that he was here to take grandpa downstairs. "Who was this man?" I asked myself He certainly didn't look like god. In fact he looked as if he wasn't a nice man to be around because he was all dressed in black and he had a very sorrowful look on his face.

Ma took us downstairs. The double doors to the living room were closed so she led us out into the kitchen. The kitchen was nice and warm. There were platters and bowls of food on the table. Some dishes were being kept warm on the stove. "Well," I thought, "at least we are going to have something good to eat." Morry asked Ma if he could have one of the cupcakes that were mounded high with frosting. She said, "Not now," in a tone that prevented me from asking for one.

There were lots of people in the kitchen and the dining room. Some were cousins that we had met at the annual family reunions. Others were strangers to me. I saw that my aunts, Ma's sisters were there and they too were all dressed in black. Uncle Earl, Ma's brother was sitting out in the kitchen. He and Dad were talking about Indians. Both Uncle and Dad liked to walk up and down freshly plowed fields looking for arrowheads. After a while the man we saw upstairs came into the kitchen and said that we could go into the living room. Ma and Dad went in first, then Dad came out to get Morry and me. The first thing I saw were the



flowers that had been there before. Then I saw grandpa. He was lying in a shiny looking box. I wondered if that man in black had brought in that box while we were in the kitchen. Ma told us later that that was what had happened. Grandpa looked as if he were sleeping but he didn't have his pajamas on. He was dressed in a blue suit with a necktie that had a big C on it. Ma told us later that Aunt Hat was going to give grandpa that tie for Christmas. She wanted him to have it so that was why he was wearing it. The C was for Charles, his first name.



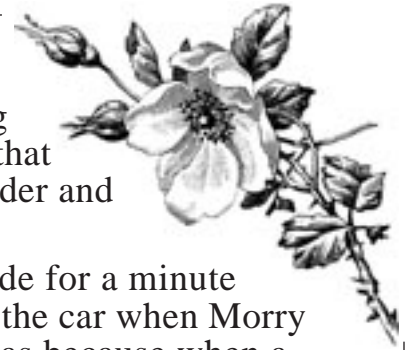
Then the man in black and his helpers began to bring in folding chairs. They set them up in the living room, the dining room, and the hallway. Ma seated me in one of them right next to the box that grandpa was in and told me not to move or cause any problems with my brother. He had a chair between Dad and Ma where he felt safe. He gave me a look that said, "Don't you wish you were sitting here?"

Another man in black came into the living room. He smiled at me. Perhaps this is God, I thought. I wondered if he was here to take grandpa's body to heaven. When this man said, "Let us pray," I said to myself, "If this man isn't God, then perhaps he is God's angel, but then he doesn't look like an angel. Angels are supposed to have wings." The man prayed what was to me a long time. Then he read some things from the Bible. I knew about Bibles because Ma had one on our library table in the center of our living room at home. Finally, the man said once more, "Let us pray," closed his Bible, and left the room. Now what was I to do? Would I just be left sitting here? Then I saw Dad peeking around the door to the dining room. He motioned for me to come with him. We went to get our coats, and other winter wraps. Everyone else was doing the same thing. Then we went outside into a snowy world. The snow seemed to be coming down faster than it was when we came over from Geneseo. I asked Dad where we were going and he told me that we had to go to the cemetery. Now, I knew what a cemetery was. That is where they put dead people. Morry didn't know what it was so Dad told him. He got a funny look on his face, then he asked Dad, "Are we going to have to stay there for a long time with all those dead people?" Dad told him that we would only be there for a few minutes, then we would come back to Aunt Ida's house to have sandwiches and cake. That brought smiles to my face and to Morry's.

The snow was still falling when we left Aunt Ida's. We got into our car which was at the end of a line of cars all headed for the cemetery. Ma said that she had been told that a gang of men had been working all morning to shovel out the road into the cemetery. I sat on the edge of the seat as the procession of cars began to slowly move. I was sure that we would get stuck and then what would we do. However, we made it up the hill to where a green tent had been erected. We got out of the car and began to walk towards that tent. Ma went inside; Dad stood with Morry and me at the entrance to the tent.

I looked inside to see that big box with grandpa in it resting on what looked like a big box covered with green stuff that looked like grass. Ma, her sisters and brother were standing at one side of the box; that man who had put grandpa into the box and the man who said all the prayers were at the other side. I kept looking at Ma and saw that she was crying. That made me feel really bad and scared too because I had only seen Ma cry once before.

Then the praying man read something from his black book. Then he prayed and finally threw some dirt on top of the big shiny box. "Why did he do that?" I asked Dad. Dad told me that Ma would explain it later. I just gripped Dad's hand a bit harder and wished that we could get back into our car and go home.



Ma came out of the tent, stopped a minute, looked back inside for a minute and then we all went back to our car. We had hardly got into the car when Morry asked why were we leaving grandpa there. Ma said that it was because when a person died their spirit went to heaven. They no longer had any need for their body so it was buried. I couldn't understand that at all. I had lots of questions twirling around in my mind. "What is a spirit? Why doesn't God take a person's body to heaven too?" "Do I have a spirit? What does a spirit look like?" I didn't ask Ma any of my questions because I knew she was feeling very sad.

We followed the other cars out of the cemetery and back to Aunt Ida's. We stopped there for short while because Dad and Ma wanted to get back home before the weather got any worse. Morry and I each had a piece of angel food cake covered with great gobs of white frosting. We also managed to get two cookies to eat on the way home. Home seemed to be so far away. We were all anxious to get there. As we left Conesus, I turned and looked back. Through the falling snow everything looked beautiful. I thought of grandpa all alone up there on the hill. Then, I realized that the snow was covering the place where he was buried like a beautiful white blanket. My fears went away. Grandpa was OK, asleep under his blanket of snow.



Edward Barkley