

# “The Old Man”

We never knew him by any other name. My maternal grandfather was “the Old Man”; it was a title, a term of respect deserving of the capitalization with which I continue to endow it. He was something of a legend in our family, especially among us kids. The Old Man: a solitary figure imbued, in our family’s child-lore, with an aura of ambiguity; a presence at once frightening and compelling. Known to be a repository of considerable wisdom, he was also reputed to be an unforgiving judge of stupidity or misbehaviour.

Nana and the Old Man lived close by, so we went round quite frequently to visit. The Old Man was usually in his old weatherboard work-shed at the bottom of the garden when we arrived. Nobody – certainly none of us kids - had much of an idea what he did there; it was considered to be the Old Man’s territory, and we treated it a bit like the cave of an unpredictable animal, a place to be approached with caution.

As a junior in the family’s chain of command, I was often called upon to go and fetch the Old Man for meals, a cup of tea or some other family matter that required his participation. Because of his unpredictable reputation, I was always a bit ambivalent about being the gopher, and most of the time I’d just creep silently up to the door, knock once, pass on the message and race back to the house.

I remember well one of our visits, when my response to Nana’s instruction to “go and get the Old Man” was even more reticent than usual. It was a dark, stormy evening in the middle of winter, and at seven years of age I was still young enough to get the heebie-jeebies. Night had cast the narrow concrete path that linked the house to the shed into almost total darkness. The dense, overgrown garden seemed alive with demonic shadows. I stood at the back door for a while, staring nervously at the shadowy whipping foliage.

When I finally made a move, it was to run hurriedly toward the gleaming sliver of light that showed from under the shed door. Startled at every rattle of the undergrowth, thrashing my arms with scarcely contained panic at the grasping shrubbery, I finally made it to the door of the shed and flung it open. I stood panting in the doorway for a few seconds, composing myself, then shouted my message:

“Nana told me to tell you to come in for dinner! She said to tell you to wash your hands!”

The Old Man was standing in front of his long, wooden workbench. His long, avian head was already tilted in my direction. His words, when he spoke were as loud as mine. “Eh? What’s that?”

I repeated my despatch. The Old Man listened, considered for a moment, then grunted and turned back to whatever he was working on. “Tell her I’ll be there in a minute, will you? I want to finish this.”

I couldn’t see over the top of the bench from where I was standing, and was sufficiently curious to risk a question. “What is it?”

“Eh?” The Old Man barked, “It’s a bag.”

I crept forward and peered over the bench-top. There were tools scattered all over its surface, an assortment of cans and jars. The object of the Old Man’s attention flapped and shifted in his hands. His fingers were stained with dye, the fingernails chipped and criss-crossed with

tiny yellow rivulets. He smelt of tobacco. He wasn't supposed to smoke. The knowledge that we shared his secret indiscretion emboldened me.

"What's it for?"

"To carry stuff."

"What sort of stuff?"

He shrugged. "I don't know: stuff. Anything."

He conveyed his desire not to be interrogated further by focusing more intently on his task, which appeared to be stitching a seam between two pieces of the heavy material. I stood beside him and watched for a while, allowing him to work without interruption, waiting till he'd almost completed the stitching before venturing my next question.

"What's it made of?"

The Old Man sighed, surrendering to my insistent curiosity. "Leather. Rawhide. Here, I'll show you." He draped the flaccid leather over his arm, holding the seam up before my eyes and running his fingers along it. "You stitch it like this, see, inside out. Then you turn it back the other way..." – he inverted the bag in a single deft movement – "... then, when you're finished, you put some handles on..." – he gathered a couple of pieces of thick leather thong and flapped them in front of my face – "... and that's about it."

I had drawn back, a little alarmed by the drooping mass of thong and rawhide. "I don't like it much. It looks ugly."

The Old Man cocked his head again. His grey eyes flickered. "Eh? Ugly, you reckon? Well, looks aren't everything, you know." He brought the bag up again, so suddenly that I flinched, and held it in front of me. "Here. Close your eyes. Tighter, that's it. Now, hold out your hand." I did as I was asked, my fingers pulling back involuntarily when I felt the dampness of the hide beneath them. The Old Man persisted, pressing the leather into my hand. "Here, touch it. Here. That's it. What's it feel like?"

I ran my fingers gingerly over the surface again, probing the stitching; becoming absorbed, despite myself, in the investigation. "Damp," I concluded, "but not wet." I took the Old Man's silence at this observation as a cue to explore further. "It reminds me of something. ..." When I eventually arrived at a conclusion, I responded with more enthusiasm than I'd intended. "I've got it! It's like the beach!"

The Old Man sounded impressed. "Ahh! The beach, you reckon?"

"Yeah, you know when the tide goes out and leaves all those bumps on the sand. Look, feel it! See?"

I grabbed the Old Man's fingers and pressed them against the leather. They glided like spiders across its surface. He chuckled. The sound could have come straight out of a *Mister Magoo* cartoon. "By god, so it does! Good on you!"

He put the bag back on the bench, his tall frame folded over his work. I stood next to him, watching the thick worm of thong appearing and disappearing through the row of tiny holes along the leather's edge.

“Who’s it for?”

“Eh? I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Will you make me one, one day?”

The Old Man threw back his head and whinnied with laughter. “Maybe, one day, if you deserve it.”

“How do I deserve it?”

He considered for a moment. “Well... don’t tell Nana about me smoking out here, for a start.”

I was sceptical of his naiveté. “Nana already knows. She’s known for ages. Everybody knows.”

The Old Man chuckled again. “Ahh, right. But I *know* she knows, see, and she doesn’t know I know she knows.” He straightened and leaned back slightly, as if favourably assessing the components of his argument. “That’s the difference.”

His fingers crept along the edge of the bench and groped beneath the lip, extracting a crumpled packet of tobacco. “Tell you what, go back and tell them I’ll be there in a second, will you? I’m going to sit here and think about this bag and who I’m going to give it to.”

He opened the pouch and from it pulled a sullied pack of cigarette papers and a plug of tobacco. Working the shredded leaf into a thin strand, he settled it carefully within the folded paper before rolling his creation into a thin taper. On the verge of licking the paper down he paused, his head turning slowly in my direction. “You still here?”

I retreated slowly. “I like watching you do things.”

He sniffed, sticking the cigarette between his lips. “You do, do you? And why’s that?”

I groped for a satisfactory answer. “I don’t know... It’s like... magic.”

“Magic?” he bellowed, surprised, then laughed loudly. “Magic, is it?” He patted his pockets for his matches. “Magic. I see.”

*I see.* And maybe he could, although he’d been sightless from birth. The Old Man well knew that eyes aren’t the only way of seeing.

*I see.* And the crumpled sand glittered on the beach.

*I see.* And I turned, scurried from the shed and ran to the house, ignoring the whispering shadows I no longer felt afraid of.

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