

# The Pecan Tree

By Alex Dalrymple

For as long as I can remember, my family has gone to a small town called Broadway every weekend. This farming community in central North Carolina is the hometown of my parents, the place where they grew up and fell in love. My grandparents are there still, the remnants of a dying generation that grew up during the turbulent years of Depression and World War. They refuse to give up what they struggled so hard to gain, and have such firm footholds in the Broadway soil that it is almost as if they are trees rooted into the ground itself. Although their neighbors, their friends, and their children are all leaving, all emigrating out of Broadway into suburbs and cities, my grandparents linger still in their age-old hometown. Even my grandfather, who was taken from this earth last September, still seems to remain in the place where he spent most of his life.

The earliest memories I have of my grandfather are of his carrying me on his strong shoulders down the path to our creek. It was a small creek, often little more than a trickle. But there was something special about this creek, this small stream that was discovered by my grandfather and me as we walked through the woods one day.

“Hey grandpa,” I asked him one time when I was around four years old, “where does this stream lead to?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure. Les’ go and see,” he replied, with such a sparkle in his eye that I couldn’t help but notice, even at my young age. He parted the thin layer of briars and vines that shrouded the stream and then off we went.

Pecan Creek, as we christened it, wound on for about half a mile, until it finally turned sharply and entered the larger, swifter Thomas Creek. The intersection of these

two streams was shrouded by some of the densest undergrowth in Broadway. But just a few yards to the south of that junction, there was a small clearing. This opening in the undergrowth was only around twenty yards wide, and was bordered by a nearly impenetrable wall of briars, vines, and pine trees. It contained nothing but a patch of grass and a massive tree. This enormous tree had branches innumerable that reached ever upwards, always towards the stars. This tree, undisturbed and undiscovered by anyone, was always special for my grandfather and I. Birds, plants, mammals, Mother Nature itself, were all epitomized by this golden Pecan Tree.

The Pecan Tree and my grandfather are so closely related in my mind that it is almost as if they are one in the same. I would walk with him down to the Tree nearly every Sunday, yet we always managed to keep the location a secret. I distinctly remember one time when I was about eight or nine and we had been gone for over three hours. Walking back to the house, we tried to think of some story to tell my parents.

“Couldn’t we just say that we went down to check out everything on the farm and ride the tractors?” I asked. This story was our usual cover-up, and because my parents had no reason to believe otherwise, they bought it. We knew that if the secret were to get out, if my parents or anyone else were to find out about this Pecan Tree, then the magic would be gone forever. Our Tree would be lost.

“Naw, we cain’t do that this time. We been gone for more’n three hours! Plus you got a little tear in your shirt right there. Your mom’ll notice that,”

“Well, how ‘bout we say that you were showin’ me the swamp? It takes a pretty long time to walk there through the woods, and I could’ve easily scratched my shirt on somethin’ on the way there,”

“Ok, I guess. Yeah, that’ll work,” replied my grandpa, giving me a wink and a warm smile. He knew that if anyone were to find out about our special place then the bond would be broken, the magic would be lost.

My grandfather had a way about him, a smugness that emanated from his face and that always seemed to allow him to get his way. He was a firm man, yet always kind and wise. He was slow to judgement and slow to anger, yet once his opinions were formed it would take more than simply a passing occurrence for him to change his mind. His was that most elite of all personalities, the genuinely virtuous man. He was able to have time for a little boy, able to give his grandson all of the dignities of manhood, able to trust me as an equal. He would lead by example, and that example would guide me throughout my childhood, as it guides me still. My grandfather used to love to walk with me down to the Pecan Tree, where we would sit, sometimes for hours on end, simply talking about school, friends, religion, or any other topic that was on my mind. My grandfather was a great listener, always eager to hear my troubles and joys, alternately suffering and laughing along with me. He had a great laugh. The corners of his mouth would curl up little by little as he cracked his lips open, and his jaw would slowly widen as if it were struggling to contain the joyous contents. Then everything would rupture and his laughter would come rushing out like water from a broken dam. He laughed from his stomach, the kind of deep melody that conveyed true pleasure. He seemed to laugh even harder and more freely in the presence of the Pecan Tree, which was to him a place of supreme comfort and serenity. I think the Pecan Tree misses that laughter just as much as I do, and keeps it as a remnant of a happier time.

I specifically remember this one time when my grandfather and I went to our Pecan Tree. It was a little more than a year ago, and summer was just drawing to a close. It was still hot, yet there was a small bite in the air that signified the coming fall cold. We were walking through the newly mown field towards the woods where we picked up the Pecan Creek trail. We were slapping at the occasional mosquito and discussing his memories of the Vietnam War. This topic was especially close to him, and he rarely ever spoke of it.

“And we were walkin’ through the jungle, swingin’ our machetes hard as we could, clearin’ everything in our path. We sprayed some of that chemical stuff and the plants just withered up and died right there.”

“Whoa. That’s pretty cool grandpa. Did you ever shoot any of the Vietnamese?”

“Well, do you think I did?”

“Of course, grandpa! You could’ve shot every one of ‘em. That would be so cool!”

“Do you understand what happens to someone when you shoot them? They stop breathing, they stop living. They’re gone forever. They can never ever see their mom or their dad or their brothers and sisters or their kids or anyone...ever again. You wouldn’t want that to happen to anyone, now would you?”

“Well I guess I never thought of it like that. I mean I never thought that they would have families too.”

“Well now you know. And from now on I want you to always think about how other people might feel whenever you do something. You need to understand how your actions can affect the lives of others, ok?”

“Alright, grandpa. I’m sorry.”

My grandfather had pulmonary fibrosis, a rare condition wherein a person’s lungs fill with mucus and the person eventually suffocates. Some of the chemicals used in Vietnam, including Agent Orange, are said to have caused his disease. My grandfather had shown relatively little signs of the disease though, and was still the able-bodied stallion that he had always been. So we continued our walk to the Pecan Tree and eventually arrived at our destination. When we sat down under the shade of the colossal branches of the Tree, I noticed my grandfather was much more out of breath than usual.

“Hey Grandpa, are you alright?”

“Of course, of course,”

“But you sound tired. You don’t normally sound this way. I think we should go back to the house.”

“Naw, naw. We’re fine right here. Under our Pecan Tree.”

So I trusted my grandfather’s judgement and stayed with him at the Pecan Tree, talking for a while about school and such. Yet I perceived that his laugh was different, that there was something missing from his normally buoyant spirit. I began to insist more firmly that we return to his house,

“Are you sure you’re ok? You sound out of breath. I really think I should take you back to the house.”

“Look, I’ll be fine. I just need to sit down for a while.”

But this time I looked over at my grandfather and his lips were tinted blue. His fingers were quivering, and I could tell he was having a difficult time breathing. I laid my foot down and demanded that we return to his house that very instant. This time even

he agreed with me. So I supported his supple body with mine, and together we trudged back alongside the Creek towards his home. My grandfather, the strong, slender man with that genuine attitude that makes him so friendly, was leaning upon my shoulder. Just as I had once leaned upon his.

My grandfather was admitted to the hospital on the very same day, diagnosed with an acute lung infection, and given a 5% chance of surviving the night. He came home in two weeks. That's just the sort of man he was, unwilling to give up and always striving to give his best effort. He simply did the best he could in his life, and that turned out to be all he needed. When he was finally allowed to come home for the first time in two weeks, one of the doctors described it as a miracle. But I believe something else. It was simply my grandfather, refusing to give up his life.

Looking back upon it now, the year following his first admission to the hospital seems like a blur. He came home for a while, but then was admitted to the hospital once again with a minor infection and released three days later. He began to go to the hospital more and more, each time with his life nearly hanging by a thread. And each time he managed to hold on to his life just enough to go home again. I prayed continually, sometimes as much as four or five times a day, for someone to find a cure for my grandfather. I wanted to see him well again, to see him as he once was, the shining stallion with a body of fortitude and a mind of steel. Every time I found that my prayers had been answered, that my grandfather would come home once more.

Just months ago, my grandfather was again admitted to the hospital, this time with an even more serious infection. He wound up in the Intensive Care Unit, with a full-face

oxygen mask and a feeding tube inserted into his stomach. My grandmother, my aunt, and my father were at his bedside day and night, and I went to the hospital as often as possible. The second time that I visited my grandfather during that hospital stay he was actually sitting up and talking. He was able to carry on a light conversation with everyone, and he could smile and nod and laugh. He was nowhere near his old self physically, but he was conscious, he was sitting, he was talking.

That hospital visit was masked by a false sense of happiness, of joyfulness, of hope. My entire family was clinging onto the tiniest shred of hope, wishing intently for the faintest possibility of my grandfather recovering from his illness. I would sit back in the over-large armchair in my grandfather's hospital room, trying to remember every single trip to the Pecan Tree that we had taken...the time when we saw the baby deer jump out from our path and scamper away on its thin, unsure legs into the deep forest...the time when I tripped on a root and fell down, scraping my knees and losing a tooth in the process...the time when my shirt was caught in briars and he used his powerful fingers to tear them apart, unaware or unconcerned with the wounds he was inflicting upon himself in the process. I looked back upon all of those memories, all of that time that I spent with my grandfather. I took it all for granted then; children are unable to realize that loved ones can be taken away from in an instant. That day I would have given anything, I would still give anything, to have one single Sunday afternoon alone with my grandfather again, underneath the Pecan Tree.

Eventually all of my grandfather's friends and distant relatives cleared out of his hospital room, and all that remained was my immediate family. We used the time to talk personally with him, to reminisce and remember every single moment that we shared

with him. We made small talk with him, anxiously awaiting the nurse's visit so that she could relate to us his progress, if any. But it was a Wednesday night, and I had school the next day, so at ten o'clock my mother, brother, and I had to leave the hospital. First my mother said goodbye to everyone, followed by my brother. Then it was my turn. I knelt down at my grandfather's bedside and told him, "I'll see you in Broadway in a few days, right?"

"Of course! We can walk together like always to our Pecan Tree. Promise me you will remember the Pecan Tree,"

"I always will,"

"Well thanks for coming, man,"

"Anytime,"

That's just the type of person that he was, so selfless that he actually had the nerve to thank me for visiting him on his deathbed. Those turned out to be the very last words that my grandfather ever spoke. He died on a Friday night, exactly one year after he was first admitted into the hospital with an acute lung infection.

He was always so kind, so generous, so loving that he would brighten the spirits in any room. His wisdom and physical strength were legendary, as the Preacher mentioned at the funeral. It was a military-style funeral, complete with a seven-gun salute and a United States flag draped over my grandfather's casket. That entire weekend, packed with the wake and funeral, now seem ethereal in retrospect. The funeral came so fast after his death that I was still in shock, and did not grieve until that Sunday night. I realized that my grandfather was gone from me forever.

Today is the first day since my grandfather's death that I have been able to visit the Pecan Tree. I walked there earlier this afternoon, alone and deeply saddened. For some reason, I had been wanting to go to our special place ever since the funeral, yet something had been holding me back. Today I realized that I needed to confront my grandfather's death and move on with my life, with my future. I found the Creek and meandered along its bed until I got to its junction. I crawled through the thin stretch of woods and into the clearing that houses the Pecan Tree. And there it stood, the emblem of my time with my grandfather. I went and sat under its branches, just like I used to, and all of a sudden I felt a flood of memories rushing through my brain like a torrential river. I envisioned every aspect of my grandfather, from his large hands and wide smile to his fibrous body and keen intellect, from the way he laced up his hiking boots to the way he wore his hat on the very top of his head. I looked up at the Pecan Tree above me and all I could see was my grandfather's face, smiling back down upon me like my own guardian angel. Though my grandfather has now departed from this earth, I know that his spirit lives on, and will live on, guiding me through any hardships and suffering that I shall have in my life. If I should ever need his solace, his comfort, all that I have to do is return to the Pecan Tree. He waits for me there.