
GREGORY MARTIN

Macular Degeneration

Just after dawn one day in April, I woke startled to the report of a gun. The crack was loud and close. Out my window, I saw Gramps walking slowly back to the shed, his rifle in his hands.

The shot's echo hung suspended over the meadow and the river and the hills which lay behind my grandparents' place. And then the quiet returned. The wind swirled in the new leaves of the aspens that lined the meadow's edge, and the smell of damp sage, that was the country's smell, swirled with it and was unmistakable and everywhere.

Gramps was eighty-four that spring. I watched him as he walked from the shed to the house. He was a lean man, neither short nor tall, and he walked purposefully, resolved, as though something had just been done which needed doing and now was over. His white hair was uncombed, and he hadn't yet shaved. It was a cold morning, and he was wearing his leather boots, jeans and only his gray long-underwear top. Without the heavy flannel he usually wore, I could see how much he'd thinned from the pneumonia of the past winter, and I thought then that Grandma shouldn't have let him outside without his flannel. And I thought also that Gramps should have known better, but didn't. And I wasn't used to thinking of him that way.

I was twenty-three then and had finished college the year before in Virginia, where I was from. After graduation, I had come to northern Nevada, to Mountain City, to the town of thirty where I'd spent nearly every summer growing up. I had come to live with my grandparents and work in the family store, and I had come to spend time with Gramps, who I'd looked up to all my life, whose health had never before been worse.

Most every morning of the past winter, Gramps stayed behind at the house while I walked down to the store alone. It had taken him three full months to recover from the pneumonia. During that time, his doctor had not allowed him even the briefest exposure to freezing temperatures. He couldn't walk down to the store, shovel the walk, or work in the garage or

the shed. He sat most of the day covered with a quilt in his chair in the living room, his cough scraping the quiet like a plow blade on frozen asphalt. He'd been an active man all his life, and I wasn't sure which was killing him more, pneumonia or restlessness. He still woke before dawn, and we ate breakfast together: oatmeal or eggs or pancakes. Out the window of the kitchen door, in the dark blue light, the large circular thermometer hanging on the tree would read -20 or -7 or 2 or 11. In the meadow below the house, the cattle huddled closely together against the wind, their sluggish heads all lowered and turned in the same direction. I would finish breakfast quickly and go to work.

But it wasn't his pneumonia that led me that spring, for the first time, to think of Gramps differently. It wasn't simply that his body could no longer fight off the hard winter cold. Nor was it that each evening he breathed supplemental oxygen into his nostrils through a plastic tube. Thin and clear and hooked to a droning, cumbersome machine, the tube trailed behind him as he walked around the house, like a strange and awful umbilical cord.

That Gramps' body was failing him was something I'd accepted. But I had never before questioned his judgment. That spring, I found myself thinking that there were things that Gramps shouldn't be *allowed* to do, as if now there were decisions he could no longer make for himself.

Gramps' eyes had been going bad for some time, a year or more. *Macular Degeneration*, the doctors called it. It wasn't blindness. It wasn't that simple. He could still see. But he could see only peripherally, out the corners of his eyes, and Oliver Tremewan was not a man accustomed to looking at life sideways.

For twenty years, he'd been the Justice of the Peace of the Mountain City Township. He was reputed to be a tough judge, but fair, and since his first term in office, his candidacy had never been contested. In his ethics, Gramps' beliefs were simple and uncomplicated. He loved the truth and hated lies, and he believed that being a man meant owning up to your responsibilities. He was quiet by nature, uncomfortable talking about his own weakness, and the pneumonia and loss of vision had only silenced him more. In this way he was typical of the men in that country, a stoic, a man nearly incapable of asking for help.

But that spring, I'd had to tie his fisherman's knots for him; he could no longer thread a hook's eye. Going into the shed in mid-day, the abrupt change from light to dark blinded him. Inside, he felt around with his hands for the things he wanted. He knew his tools, knew where he kept them, and would not wait for his eyes to adjust. Coming out into bright sunlight, he would stand fixed in the yard for seconds, frustrated, unable to gain his bearings, his blue eyes as dim and muddied as floodwater.

At breakfast, I asked Gramps about the shot.

"Got that coyote that'd been hanging around the meadow," he answered, between bites of fried eggs and toast. "Seen it down there for days, moving in and out of the willows by the river. Connolly's letting his cattle out tomorrow."

Jim Connolly was a rancher who lived just outside town and who often ran his cattle on the meadow behind my grandparents' place. Spring was calving season, and Gramps, having been raised on a ranch, had seen what coyotes could do to newborn calves.

"Did you kill it?" I asked.

"It went down," he said.

I couldn't remember the last time Gramps had fired a gun. And I wouldn't have thought he could hit a coyote, even with the rifle's high-powered scope. From across the table, I studied him the way one studies a clock whose ability to keep time is in doubt, its internal mechanisms hidden. I wanted to know if, for even a moment, he questioned his decision that morning. Not the decision to kill a coyote, for that wouldn't be something he'd consider. What I wanted to know was whether he questioned the wisdom of firing a gun at all, at anything. I wanted to tell him that I was wondering these things. And I wondered if that was something I could bring myself to do.

After breakfast, Gramps and I walked the quarter-mile down the highway to the store. We were quiet and walked without speaking. Above the town, the water tower stood as dark silhouette against the hills, warmed yellow by the sun's low angle. Below, the town waited in shadow: the old schoolhouse, the few houses and buildings whose lights had already or would soon turn on, the Miner's Club, the store. The highway was empty. In the two-hundred mile stretch of road between Elko and Mountain Home, in the middle of which sat Mountain City, we knew that at this hour perhaps only a few cars were traveling, perhaps not more than ten, and the sense of this magnified the quiet inside us.

Except for a single light above the meat counter, where my uncle Mel would be going over the books from the day before, the store was dark. We turned on the light switches and waited for the first customer to arrive. Despite wool socks and boots, we could feel the chill coming up through the floorboards, and we stamped our feet and kept moving. Gramps swept. I brought ice up from the back to stock the bins of soda bottles. The old heater in the center of the store knocked and clicked and awakened slowly.

Tremewan's Store was a small general store not unlike the kind one finds in many little remote towns of the West. Its three aisles were narrow and crowded with groceries and clothes and liquor and fishing equipment. It was the only store for eighty miles in any direction. People came to shop and visit and escape the loneliness of the landscape. Our family had

owned and run the store since Gramps bought it in 1958. My aunt and uncle ran it now. Gramps had been retired for more than ten years, but he still came in for a few hours each morning. When people in that country thought of Tremewan's Store, they thought first of Gramps. In a place where people are afforded the dignity of rareness, the store was one of the ways Gramps was known.

My uncle Mel strolled up the center aisle to the front. Melvin Basanez was married to my aunt Lou, one of Gramps' four daughters, and he was a short, slightly chubby man, a Basque, with salt and pepper hair, olive skin, and the straight, slightly hooked Basque nose. Mel was a first generation Nevadan, but put him in a red beret and he looked straight out of the old country.

"Which one of you two shot at the river this morning?" Mel asked. Better than anyone, Mel knew how to get Gramps going. The two men had worked beside each other in the store for thirty-five years. "Was that you, Gramps?"

"No cause to shoot the river," Gramps said.

"Gramps shot the town coyote," I told Mel. In Mountain City, there were a few people, like Mel and myself, who had sympathy for coyotes, and when a coyote was shot near town, we called it "the town coyote."

Mel smiled. "Gramps, you oughta know better. Lot of people around here were fond of that coyote."

"If he'd agree not to take them calves, I'd let him go," Gramps said. "But you can't keep a coyote under contract."

"You sure you got him?" Mel asked. "Sounded like I heard a splash after that shot."

"I got him," Gramps said gruffly.

"I've heard that one before," Mel said. "Remember that pack rat out at the Stump Creek cabin?"

"What pack rat?" I asked.

Mel sat up on the counter. "One time, Gramps and I were in our bunks with the lantern out, and I was about half asleep when Gramps said, 'Mel, are you in your bed?' and I said, 'Yeah, what for?' and then BOOM! I about hit the ceiling. Gramps had a shotgun beside the bed and he shot the hell out of the woodpile. Woodchips were everywhere. And I said, 'What the hell you do that for?' And he says, 'We got a pack rat. Listen. Let's see if I got the sonofabitch.' And the cabin's quiet for a minute, and then we hear the scurrying and Gramps says, 'Damn!' and then BOOM! He blows into the woodpile again."

"Never did get that pack rat," Gramps said, grinning.

"No, you didn't," Mel retorted. "Which is why I thought of him in connection with our coyote."

Mel loved telling stories about Gramps, stories which portrayed him in a comic light. It was the side of Gramps that few people knew well, the side that came out rarely as his eyes and health deteriorated and he retreated inside himself. Mel's stories, and Gramps' brief additions to them, were, as much as any other way, how I'd come to know my grandfather.

The day passed slowly. Out the front window of the store the air was damp and cool and gray. Around eleven, Gramps went home to have lunch with Grandma and then take his nap. Near closing time, Lee Chambers came in the store asking if anyone had seen his dog, Fritz. Lee hadn't seen him since early that morning.

Lee had been raised in Mountain City and never left. He was near sixty, divorced, and lived with his mother in a trailer home a few blocks up the hill from the store. More than thirty years earlier, Lee and my mother had been sweethearts, and once, Lee had asked her to marry him. She'd said no, and then she'd left Mountain City shortly afterwards. There was a sadness to Lee which I always felt strangely a part of, as if I were the reminder of what had never been.

Lee and his dog Fritz were nearly inseparable. The dog napped on the front of Lee's pick-up as he drove around town, the best hood ornament in Elko County. Fritz could take corners in his sleep.

"I haven't seen him," said Mel.

"That's not like him to run off," I said.

"I wonder where the hell he's gone," said Lee.

"I hate to suggest it," said Mel, "but a good looking dog like that, maybe somebody stopped and picked him up and drove off with him. Fritz sure is friendly enough." And then Mel paused, as if he had thought of something else.

"What's that?" Lee asked.

"Nothing," Mel said. "I was just trying to think who'd want to take that dog. I wouldn't want to accuse anybody."

Mel looked over at me quickly, a look Lee didn't catch. Then it occurred to me. Fritz was a Malamute, a big dog, bigger than any coyote, and unwary, something Gramps might be able to see.

"God I hope nobody took him," Lee said.

Mel and I were quiet.

"Okay. Thanks then," Lee said. 'I'm gonna keep asking around.'

Mel waited for the door to close behind Lee, then motioned to me with his head and walked back to the kitchen in the back of the store. I followed. Mel sat down at the table. We ate lunch at this table, and it was stacked high with old newspapers, two bags of opened potato chips, half of a loaf of bread, a near empty jar of mayonnaise, and a knife. I leaned against the door frame. Mel was looking away to the shelves of shoe-

boxes that covered the wall opposite the table. He looked as if he were searching for some answer among the different brands and sizes of shoes. His shoulders slumped and he looked weary.

"You figuring what I'm figuring?" he asked me.

I nodded my head. "You think that was Fritz he shot this morning?"

"Nobody took that dog."

Mel went on, "What I can't figure is how he could have hit the damn thing. I wouldn't take a bet he could hit an *elephant*. But that old bastard's cagey. You can't tell what he sees or can't see."

"He hadn't shot that gun in a long time," I said.

"That's part of it." Mel said. And then his voice slowed, and it grew louder as he spoke. "Gramps knows he's slipping and he's fighting it. If there's a coyote in that meadow, and Connolly's running calves out there tomorrow, Gramps has got to do something. If he doesn't, then he might as well hang her up. He's got to shoot it or try to shoot it or he won't know who he is anymore."

Mel looked away from the shoes, and then he looked up, as if he'd heard his voice echo through the small room and come back to him.

"I don't know what to do," he said.

"I know what the right thing to do is," I said.

"Yeah, and what good's that gonna do. That dog's dead," Mel said fiercely, replacing the quiet and the sadness that had been coming on. "I can see what'll happen. Gramps will be sorry as hell and he'll apologize to Lee. And Lee will be sore as hell but won't show it, not to Gramps. And Gramps will take it like a man, or he'll act like it anyway, but he'll doubt himself more now than he ever did this winter. And you know what else?"

"What?"

Mel was practically yelling now, but not at me. He was yelling at the situation, at the choice we were facing.

"People are gonna hear about it and think it's funny. The old man thinks he's shooting a coyote and ends up shooting the neighbor's dog. People are gonna come in here, and they're gonna want to laugh. And I won't think it's funny, but I'm gonna have to hide that, cause I can't blame them for thinking that way. They don't know Gramps like I do. And what if Gramps hears them talking or laughing or even senses people are laughing at him? How's he gonna take that?"

Mel stood up, and now everything about his posture suggested decision.

"I say the hell with right and wrong."

"That's not what he'd want," I said.

"I know it, but hell, what he'll never know won't hurt him."

"What about Lee?" I asked. "That's not true for him. He's just going to keep looking. He loved that dog."

"Maybe that's something we're gonna have to live with."

For a minute or so neither of us spoke. Mel looked back to the shoes as if for confirmation. He ran his finger along the edge of a shelf, displacing a thin cloud of dust. He looked at me again as if he intended to speak, and then looked away, down from the shoes to the worn tile of the kitchen floor. And I knew then that Mel would never tell this story to anyone. He would never expose Gramps as a fool. And I knew also that this untold story would color and constrain every future story told, and that, right then, as Mel sank back into his chair, spent and heartsick, something irretrievable had been lost. And I knew that we would never speak of this again.

I left Mel there in the kitchen and walked down the store's center aisle and on out the front door, onto the roadside, where a diesel truck pulling a horse trailer was shifting from a lower gear to a higher one and easing its way up the slowed highway and out of town, past the Forest Service building, past Mel and Lou's, and past my grandparent's place, where they would be preparing the night's dinner for all of us. Grandma peeling potatoes. Gramps stirring the gravy, his oxygen cord coiled in his free hand like a rawhide rope.

At the edge of the meadow beside the river, I found Fritz's body. It was neither warm nor cold. There was little blood; the bullet had passed through its spine. The dry yellow grass was matted flat where it had fallen. Standing over the dead dog, I thought back to the morning and the gunshot and my waking to its noise. I hadn't thought then that the sound could signal the end of anything.

For the first time in my life, I pitied my grandfather, though I couldn't have named the feeling then, for it was the one feeling I thought I'd never have for him. Never pity. He could not see the terms that old age had given him, terms that I could see clearly, barely a man by comparison in years and things seen. In this way, he was altogether blind, as blind as he would become in the other, unfigurative way, in the years that followed. And I resented this blindness, and I resented the dog at my feet which I should have pitied but couldn't, not until much later. And I resented Gramps for killing a thing that meant so much to one man and so little to me, so that my choice then could not be balanced or fair or just, which was all I wanted. The same things Gramps wanted. I knew those things. And I knew what Gramps would have done, had he been me.

In the sky above the meadow, streaks of copper were fading into coal and iron, and dark was coming on. I dragged Fritz's limp body down the five-foot bank and dumped it in the river.