

The Pallbearers

by Colin J.S. Thomas, Jr.

I have, over the years, wondered if the old man planned it out before he died. He thought enough to tell his wife that my grandson should be a pallbearer. He left a small trust. And he left a letter addressed to my grandson that only he has read.

Six years before his death the old man befriended my grandson. They shared a love, close to reverence, for fishing. The two could be in a boat together and fish, in silence, yet be in perfect communication. They were truly content in the presence of one another.

The old man's other pallbearers were his friends. Each was, in his own way, distinguished. The Head of my grandson's boarding school, the old man's school, was one of the younger pallbearers. I learned that he had served on the old man's destroyer in World War II.

My grandson called me on a Sunday night about a month after the funeral. "Granddaddy."

"Hi, boy. What's up?"

"The Head called me to his house after chapel this morning. All of the pallbearers except Judge Harrison were there. Judge Harrison is sick. They said they do not want to interfere, but they want me to know that they are there to help me if I need help. If something comes up I am to contact the Head."

"That's great. Did they say what kind of help?"

"Not really. Advice and things like that, I guess. It wasn't really specific."

When he hung up I thought about it. A group of pallbearers banding together to help a young boy who had befriended the man who brought them together. I had never heard of it before. As much as I have read, I have never read of such a thing. I was impressed. Had the old man done this? What were the limitations?

It was my sense that my grandson's grades, school leadership positions and very high SAT scores assured him of acceptance at some fine colleges. I wondered if the pallbearers had in mind the kind of help my grandson might need. He could qualify for some need-based scholarship assistance, but without a full scholarship it would be a struggle. I was delighted when my grandson called me to say that some of the pallbearers were going to meet with him about college. He said he would call after that.

"Granddaddy."

"Hi, boy."

"I've decided."

"Where?"

"The Head wants me to apply to three places. He says if I get accepted, it helps the school."

Even before he said anything, I thought I knew. Ivy League. With help from the pallbearers.

"That's fine." Do you know where you are going if you are accepted?"

"VMI."

"VMI?"

"Yes, Sir."

"What other school does the Head want you to apply to?"

"Duke and Yale."

"If either one of those accepts, would you consider going there?"

"I don't think so."

I love my grandson. I wanted him to have the very best. If money was a problem, I could help. His grandmother agreed. I called the Head of School because I wanted the school to know. I started to explain who I was.

"I know who you are. Your grandson has spoken of you often. He said that you are as good a fisherman as the old man was. That makes you pretty special."

"I don't mean to interfere, but I wanted you to know that if the boy wants to consider an expensive college, his grandmother and I are prepared to help financially."

"I graduated from VMI. I did not know until just recently that your grandfather was a New Market Cadet. Your grandson said that you were very proud of that and had taken him to VMI twice. He actually knows a lot about the Institute. I think you know his roommate here, Chris. Chris's dad went to VMI. Chris is going to VMI. If it can be worked out, the two will room there just as they have here."

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I knew it was useless, but I said it anyway. "What did the pallbearers think?"

"The options were explained to your grandson. He has heard a lot about VMI and about what he might be giving up. He has thought about it. The pallbearers feel that he has made an advised decision which was his to make."

I knew that my grandson and Chris were close. They had roomed together for three years. His dad was stationed at the Pentagon. My grandson had gone for a weekend to Chris's home. Chris's mom had been diagnosed early with some type of cancer.

The two boys did room together at VMI. They survived their rat year, each looking after and trying to help the other. Their second year was uneventful; however, Chris's mother died at the end of that year.

It happened in their third year.

"Granddaddy."

"Hi, boy."

"You always say that, Granddaddy."

I could tell by his voice that he was upset. "What's wrong?"

"I'm leaving school, Granddaddy."

"Why?"

It was a matter of honor. My grandson had seen Chris cheat. There was no question. There was no other witness. The death of Chris' mom had caused problems. He had gotten behind. He took a short cut.

My grandson knew that his duty and his honor required him to report. He could not bring himself to say nothing and to stay on at the Institute, nor could he bring himself to report Chris. He had decided that leaving school was his only choice. Could I come get him?

I did not tell him that I was no longer supposed to drive at night. "I'll be there as fast as I can."

I was sure he was crying. I called the Head of School who was now the retired Head of School. He didn't ask questions. He only told me where to take the boy. He said he would meet us there.

The Head arrived shortly after we did. Judge Harrison was with him. It was a little after midnight. Two more pallbearers arrived within an hour. I'm not sure how long we talked. In the end, the pallbearers left my grandson and me for about ten minutes. When they returned, Judge Harrison delivered their mutual decision. "Marshall, you are a man. You are faced with a decision that will effect how you feel about yourself for the rest of your life. No matter what you do with the rest of your life, you will forever remember this decision. You must report or you can leave." He hesitated. A single tear ran down one cheek. "Regardless of which choice you make, you are right. You must decide which is the most right to you. You have our full support. We care for you now. We will care for you tomorrow. Talk with your grandfather. We will wait in the other room."

Moments after they left us there was a knock on the door. It was Judge Harrison. There was a phone call for Marshall. It would be put through to a phone where we were.

I don't think that I will ever forget Marshall's words. "No, no, no. I am coming for you. I am on my way."

The caller had been Chris. He had reported himself.

I drove Marshall back to VMI. The pallbearers went, I believe, to the Commandant's home. I knew where it was. There were lights on.

Marshall had been AWOL. There were serious questions about the reasons for that as well as his failure to immediately report. His punishment was, I thought, overly severe. "I'm ok, Granddaddy. I can handle it. The hardest part is thinking about Chris. Get the pallbearers to help him, Granddaddy."

"I will, boy."

I called the Head to pass on Marshall's request.

"That's exactly what the old man would have said. Your grandson is a man. You should be proud. He is a leader. If that's what he wants of us, we will try. That was as tough as I have seen. He handled it well. Be proud of him."

I am. 🙏

The author is a former chair of the Senior Lawyers Conference and is an active attorney with the firm of Timberlake, Smith, Thomas & Moses in Staunton, Virginia.