

The Lion is Dead, Long Live the Lion

by Colin J. S. Thomas, Jr.

PROLOGUE

Six years before this story takes place, on a warm summer day at Oden's Dock in Hatteras, North Carolina my grandson and I watched an old man filet dozens of relatively small fish. We were fascinated by his skill. The following summer when our family returned to Hatteras my grandson obtained the old man's address. Without first calling, he rode his bicycle to the old man's cottage. He introduced himself and asked the old man if he would show him how to clean fish like that.

I have heard the story many times. The old man smiled at the little boy. "Well, son, if we're gonna clean fish, we gotta have fish to clean. I guess we better go catch some fish."

And so was formed a remarkable bond between an old man and a young boy.

I am very close to my grandson. It is hard to tell this story.

STORY

"Thank you so much for calling. I will drive him myself. I am so sorry. Your family will be in our prayers."

The old man's son had called. The old man was dead. He was trying to reach my grandson because before he died, the old man told his wife that he wanted my grandson to be one of his pallbearers. Damn.

My grandson returned my call well after 10 P.M. He had just returned to school. They had won their game. He had played some but not much. He was not an athlete. My grandson was at boarding school, the old man's boarding school.

My son had been caught off guard when the school first called and inquired about obtaining transcripts. A substantial scholar-

ship was available, and they understood that my grandson was very interested. They seemed to believe that he would qualify. The details are unimportant. Now my grandson was in his senior year at the old man's boarding school.

He was not a great athlete as the old man had been. His grades were good. More importantly he was both head monitor and president of the school Honor Council. When he was installed as president, the old man had been there. I still keep a letter about that, which I received from the old man.

My grandson had never expected boarding school. He was scared. He thrived. My son, a fine man in his own right, was thrilled. My daughter-in-law could hardly believe it. She knitted the old man a sweater for Christmas that year. I saw it the following summer. It had obviously been worn often.

"Hi, granddaddy."

"The ——"

"He's dead, granddaddy. I know. The Head of School called an assembly of the whole school. I was with the team, but they told us when we got back. The Head said a lion had died. I have been asked to speak at evening chapel tomorrow."

"You just got back. It's late. Can you be ready to do that?"

"It's ok, granddaddy. It's about the old man. He speaks for himself."

"I'd like to come up there and drive you to the funeral."

"The Head said I could ride with you if you were going. He's going too. He's a pallbearer. I didn't know it until I got back but he and the old man were in the Navy together in World War II.

"Would 7:30 A.M. be too early?"

"No, sir. I'll meet you at the gate."

"I love you boy."

"I love you, granddaddy. I'll be ok."

The old man, older than I, had never sought to replace me. He was my grandson's friend and often a mentor. The relationship was remarkable. I think that I relished it as much as my grandson.

At the end of our vacation time at Hatteras, when the two first met, the old man asked if my grandson might not stay over with him and his wife for a week. Again, the details are unimportant here. They fished together, the old man and a young boy. They were very close from the beginning.

The ride to the funeral was, as I suspected, awful. When I arrived at the school gate, my grandson was there. He had obviously been crying. I said nothing. We rode for a while in silence.

"Granddaddy, I love you so much. Is it ok with you if I loved him just as much?"

I was already close to tears. That did it.

"He was, like your Head of School said, a lion. He was a lion as a lawyer, he was a lion as a man, and he was a lion as your friend. I am not a lion. I am just granddaddy. Very few people are lions. Very few people get to be really close to lions. You are lucky. Had you not loved him, you would have missed so much."

"He was a pretty special lion, granddaddy."

I said the trip was awful. Maybe more so for me than him. We arrived at the church. My grandson joined a group of white haired men—the old man's friends. My grandson's youth set him apart. I watched as he shook hands with all of them.

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Two hugged him. His Head of School was there.

When the pallbearers entered the church, my grandson came first. He was easily the tallest and easily the youngest. There were tears on his cheeks but he walked tall and straight.

I wept—for the old man and for my grandson. At the same time I felt an intense pride in this boy who was becoming a man.

After all these years, I remember some things but not everything. The service was simple. A reading that I cannot recall and the *23rd Psalm*. There was a request that those wishing to speak do so. A judge had spoken first. He was followed by a former law partner. I had not known that the old man had twice refused an appointment to the state Supreme Court. In each instance, he had said that just being a lawyer serving people was all he wanted.

When my grandson rose to speak, my heart both shrank and swelled at the same time if that is possible. Those who were there and who are still alive may have forgotten much of what my grandson said. But I am sure that they, like me, have not forgotten the moment. He spoke of the old man as a student at his school, as a family man and as a lawyer in his small community. He spoke of respect earned and integrity unquestioned. And he spoke of a friend with whom he had spent many hours fishing and hunting. I think that he, more than anyone, said what the old man wanted said. He said a lion was dead and that he would miss him.

There were no dry eyes. When my grandson had finished, he went directly to the old man's widow. He leaned down and kissed her cheek and then returned to his place with the rest of the pallbearers. No one else spoke. I watched with a growing sense of awe and pride as he led that group of old men down the aisle and out of church. It was outside that I heard the words that I will never forget. One of the pallbearers, a man I did not know, looked toward my grandson.

“The lion is dead, long live the lion.” 🦁