

## *He Wasn't Always Old*

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Published *GRIT* Magazine May 2004

Please, God, just one night of good sleep. And while You're at it, how about a nice hot meal, too? Is that really asking too much?

Kneeling behind a farmer's rock wall, Sergeant Larson ground the heels of his hands into his already bloodshot eyes. Finally, he lowered his hands and blinked in the bright sunshine.

At his feet, growing next to the wall, were some delicate purple wildflowers he didn't recognize, but he knew Agnes would. She had patiently tried teaching him the names of the bright flowers and plentiful trees they encountered on their many walks before and after the wedding. He had tried to explain that if it wasn't attached to a car or truck, it probably wouldn't stick very long. She had tossed her long red hair and laughed her laugh, saying that it would only take time and she had plenty of that. This was in the summer of '41, before anyone realized time would keep no promises.

Oh, how he missed those times. He wanted to hold her close, to breathe in her lilac fragrance, to see her green eyes sparkle in merriment. He missed the lilt of her voice, now replaced by letters. She wrote of their future, as though she had no doubt they even had one. She wrote of their children to be. And of course, she wrote of her love for him. She gave him hope when things were at their worst. She made him laugh just when he thought he was going over the edge. She made him oh, so careful.

He looked into the cloudless sky and muttered, "Excuse me, God, one more thing: please keep me alive for my Agnes."

Larson's ears, sharpened by combat to the slightest sounds, picked up the scrape of a boot on dirt. He slowly moved his head to the edge of the wall and peeked around it. About fifty yards away, a friendly squad was inexplicably walking down the middle of the road instead of along the edge, near protective cover. Just as he opened his mouth to shout a warning, the unmistakable chatter of a German machine gun broke the silence. Several Americans fell immediately and as the others tried to scramble to cover, bullets whined around them, kicking up dirt and rock.

Larson knew they would all die if he didn't act now. He jerked a grenade from his shoulder strap and zigzagged his way toward the machine gun nest hidden in the trees. When he was about ten yards away a German soldier caught the motion out of the corner of his eye. He whipped his rifle around and raised it. Larson pulled the pin, drew back his arm and launched the grenade. The German fired at the same instant. Larson collapsed. The grenade tumbled through the air. The German shouted and, too late, tried to dive out of the nest.

Janet Larson passed the dinner rolls to her husband, then turned to her son and said, "We're going to go visit Grandpa this weekend, Scott."

Scott's fork froze halfway to his mouth. "What? Why?"

"It's been a while since we've visited him. He gets so lonely with Grandma gone now."

Scott put the fork back on his plate with a clink and released the sigh that grates on parents' souls. "But why do I have to go, Mom?"

She frowned and said, "Why in the world is it always so hard to get you to go visit Grandpa? You used to love going there. Don't you remember all times he took you fishing? And when you were little, you'd sit on his lap for hours while he read your favorite books to you." She looked at Scott and wondered where that other little boy had gone.

Scott rolled his eyes and said, "That's all so boring now. And all you ever do is talk about the old days, about people I don't know and places I've never even heard of. I just get so tired of hearing about that stuff." He leaned forward, face reddening. "You won't let me take my video games and there're never any kids my age to play with. And he doesn't even have a computer, so I can't check email or —"

A quiet voice stopped Scott's tirade. "That's enough, Scott."

Scott looked at his dad and got the you're-about-to-cross-THE-LINE expression. Oh, great, here we go again, he thought. His parents were "reasoners," not "yellers." They almost always made their point with a quiet persuasiveness, but weren't beyond employing the guilt factor on occasion. One time he had wished they would go ahead and holler at him and be done with it, but then he'd remembered seeing his best friend's dad in action. Now there was a "yeller." No thanks. He stopped himself from groaning out loud and prepared for what was coming.

Kyle Larson suppressed the impulse to jab his finger at his son and said, "You *are* going with us and you'll just have to make the best of it. You could try joining the conversation for once, you know. You might learn something. He wasn't always the old man you see now. Why, he was. . ." Realizing his anger was starting to get away from him, he stopped and looked away. After a moment, he turned back and Scott could see moisture in his dad's eyes. "Scott, I love my dad, but more important than that, I respect him, too. All I want from you is for you to be more understanding and patient. So no more arguments on this. Have I made myself clear?"

Scott swallowed the lump that had risen at the sight of his dad almost crying and nodded glumly. He had hurt his father, but didn't quite know what to say. Sometimes it was just hard being thirteen; not a little boy anymore, but not quite a man, either, just caught somewhere in between. He looked down at the plate holding his favorite meal,

Mom's Meatloaf, generously slathered with catsup and mashed potatoes covered with creamed corn. Suddenly, he wasn't hungry.

Surrounded by the drone of adult conversation, Scott's eyelids drooped; the full stomach from lunch was taking its toll. He blinked and forced them open, afraid he'd fall asleep any moment.

He looked around Grandpa's familiar and unchanging living room, grateful that it didn't have the old-person smell of Aunt Olga's house. A restored Victorian with nine-foot ceilings, it would be an antique lover's haven solely for its lamps and tables, but the oak mantle held the PRIZED POSSESSION, a large, dark walnut clock, trimmed in brass.

Scott had once overheard his grandpa talking with his dad about it. He had taken it from a German family's deserted house, not far from Berlin. Wasn't that stealing, he'd wanted to ask, but hadn't. His grandpa had gone on to say he had turned down many generous, even outrageous, offers over the years from people wanting to buy it. Then he had said he would never sell it because no one could ever pay him in dollars what he'd paid for it, the meaning of which had escaped Scott.

Scott quietly watched his grandpa. Every so often, one of Grandpa Larson's hands strayed to his almost, but not completely, bald head to sweep back a wisp of the remaining white hair. An old habit maybe? He noted the thick glasses and idly wondered why old people didn't wear contacts. On one of several trips to the Royals' Kauffman Stadium the previous summer, his grandpa had picked him up wearing goliath-sized, black wrap-around sunglasses. Scott had barely suppressed the urge to laugh at the sight of those things. Then when he found out they were because of Grandpa's recent cataract surgery he was thankful he hadn't laughed.

He twisted in his chair so he could see out through the dining room's bay window where the large backyard and summer sunshine beckoned. He wondered if he could sneak out and play, but when he checked the time on the mantle clock he was dismayed to see that only twenty minutes had passed. Too soon to escape.

His gaze traveled over the one thing that did occasionally interest him, the bookcase covering an entire wall. When Scott had once asked his grandpa if he had really read all those books, the response had been a wistful smile followed by, "Sure I have, some of them many times." Grandpa Larson had a diverse taste and Scott found everything from Hemingway (who he didn't like at all – too depressing) to Stephen King (who had scared him just this side of a trip down nightmare alley). Mercifully, he felt the tingle of renewed curiosity. Stifling a yawn with the back of his hand, he rose and ambled toward the books.

As he tried to slide by his grandpa's recliner, a gnarled, liver-spotted hand reached out and gripped his upper arm with surprising strength. His grandpa motioned for him to lean closer. When he did, the old man put his lips close and whispered a few words.

Surprised and pleased, Scott grinned and said, "Really, Grandpa?"

Grandpa Larson nodded.

"Okay, thanks!" Finally, something new to do! He darted into the hallway and soon everyone could hear him pounding up the stairs in the manner of boys, two at a time.

Scott's parents waited patiently for an explanation. Grandpa Larson smiled and shrugged. "I thought he might like to root around in the attic. The old trunk and stuff, you know? You remember, don't you, Kyle?"

Kyle grinned and nodded. He knew that trunk well.

When he reached the attic, Scott found a large freestanding wardrobe closet with a heavy, dark brown steamer trunk nearby. He quickly stepped over to the wardrobe and yanked open the door. The musty smell of old clothes drifted out. Peering inside, he saw some army uniforms hanging, neatly spaced apart. He pulled one out, amazed by its weight. Boy, this must have been miserable to wear in summer, he thought. There were staff sergeant stripes on the sleeves; he'd learned all about army stripes from movies. Above the left breast pocket was a row of multi-colored ribbons. Below them was a medal dangling from the pocket flap which he recognized (everyone knew what the Purple Heart looked like).

A blue silk ribbon was draped around the hanger's hook and a golden medal lay across the center of the uniform. It was an upside-down star, hooked to a bar grasped by an eagle. The bar had just one word on it: VALOR. Curious, he turned it over, but the back was blank.

He put the uniform back, then picked up a helmet sitting on the closet's floor. He slipped it on, but it was a bit too large and it slipped over at an angle, giving him a rakish appearance.

He knelt and pushed down on the trunk's huge brass release, which flipped up with a loud snap. Placing a hand on each side of the massive lid, he opened the trunk, which was filled to the brim with shoeboxes of varying sizes. He picked up the largest and lifted off the lid revealing a wood-framed certificate. He sat down, put the box on the floor beside him and pulled the certificate from the box. He had to angle it to avoid the reflected glare from the bare bulb above him.

He read:

*The President of the United States in the name of  
The Congress takes pleasure in presenting the*

*Medal of Honor*

*to*

*LARSON, AMOS*

*For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty on 17 July 1944, near Rouen, France, Sergeant Larson charged and single-handedly destroyed a machine gun nest, suffering a serious bullet wound in the process . . .*

Scott gingerly put the certificate on the floor, then pulled the shoebox onto his lap again. The next item was a well-worn, five by seven, black and white picture. A group of grinning soldiers was sitting around an outdoor cafe's large round, wooden table, which had a tattered green and white umbrella. All had taken off their uniform shirts, obviously due to the heat, since their army tan undershirts were soaked with sweat. Bright sunlight glinted off a few dog tags.

Scott easily recognized his grandpa, who was sitting in the center, but was astonished to see how big and muscular Grandpa Larson had been. He looked, well, athletic. His right shoulder was wrapped in a large, mostly white bandage. He was smiling, but wore a funny expression that Scott couldn't quite place.

One soldier draped an arm over Larson's good shoulder while another boisterously tousled his hair. All of the soldiers held up a bottle of wine, as if toasting the camera. Clearly, they were celebrating. Being alive, Scott figured.

He put the picture on the floor beside him, and peered back into the box. Next on the pile were several bulky packs of letters. He grabbed one and carefully unwrapped the brittle rubber band binding it. Fanning through the letters, he noticed they were all from the same man and in chronological order; the first one in 1946, the last in 1998. His curiosity aroused, he looked more closely and realized that, with few exceptions, they had all been mailed on the same date. What the heck? He opened the one from 1946 and read:

*Dear Sergeant Larson,*

*I know you don't want to make a big deal out of what you did in France for my buddies and me, but I still have to thank you again for saving my life.*

*I plan to send you a letter every year on my birthday to let you know how my family and I are doing.*

*With gratitude and affection,*

*Norman Palmer*

*P.S. By the way, I talked to the other guys and you should expect letters from them, too.*

He gently refolded the letter and slipped it back in the envelope. Then he read a few letters from each packet; all were similar to Palmer's. Finally, he opened Palmer's last one and a color picture fluttered into his lap. It was of a large, smiling family surrounding an older man and woman sitting in the center of the front row. Taken in someone's backyard, it seemed a typical family reunion picture with mothers holding babies, young girls and boys sitting on the grass cross-legged, mothers and fathers beaming proudly.

Scott stared at it, running his finger across the faces, as though touching them made them more real. Suddenly, a flash of insight struck him. Some of these people are alive because of my grandpa. Pride rose in his chest and with boyish enthusiasm he began to rummage through the rest of the trunk.

After he finished exploring the trunk, he put things back, more or less the way he'd found them, except for the certificate, which he picked up again. He stared at it and wondered why Grandpa had never mentioned it. Grandpa's proud of it, right? If I did something like this, I know I'd tell everyone, they wouldn't even have to ask. Then an unbidden memory popped into his mind. It was of a television news story he'd seen where a passerby had dragged a woman from her burning car, saving her life. When asked what he thought about being a hero, he'd looked embarrassed and said, "I was just

doing what anyone would do.” Now it hit Scott. His grandpa’s expression in the photo was identical.

He made his way back downstairs and found everyone out on the deck. His dad was flipping burgers and talking with Grandpa Larson and his mom who both were sitting at the table. Dinnertime already? Had he really been up there that long? He opened the sliding door and stepped out onto the deck. They all looked at him expectantly, his dad’s spatula paused in mid-flip, the burger precariously hanging on.

His dad grinned at the sight of his son wearing the helmet, still tipped to one side. He flipped the burger into its rightful spot on the grill and put down the tool. “So what did you do up there?”

“Oh, just looked around a little bit. Grandpa’s got some neat stuff.” He pulled out a chair and sat down next to his grandpa, eyeing him closely. He saw not the white-haired old man, but the one in the picture with the thick, black hair, the heavily muscled arms and the broad chest. He placed the certificate gently on the table and saw something flicker across Grandpa Larson’s face briefly, then disappear. Sadness?

“Grandpa?”

“Yes, Scott?”

“Did it hurt a lot when you got shot?”

Grandpa Larson replied, “Oh, my, yes, it sure did.”

Scott started to speak, then hesitated. Grandpa Larson watched him intently, aware that his grandson wasn’t sure whether to ask the question burning his tongue.

“Why’d you do it, Grandpa? You could have been killed. I mean, weren’t you scared?”

“I know. Scott, I’ll let you in on a secret.” He paused and Scott leaned forward. “I was scared every single minute! We all were. And why did I do it?” He glanced at his son, then turned back to Scott, “I had no choice.”

Scott recalled the photo of Palmer’s family and understood. “Would you tell me about Norman Palmer and the others?”

Grandpa Larson’s face lit up in a wrinkly grin and he winked at Scott’s parents. Then in a practiced storyteller’s voice he began, “Palmer was a seventeen year-old kid from east-Texas. I met him in France in the summer of forty-four . . .”

Across the deck, his son closed his eyes and listened to a story well-told.