

The Tree Atop the Hill

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Fifty years passing, three ghosts and I still proceed there, fulfilling Granny Anna's wishes as we rooted our lives ever deeper into the rich, eventful soil of home ...

Granny Anna's ashes in hand, we followed the well-worn path toward the hilltop oak—Pop and his spade leading our meandering procession, Mom bearing the urn, Sis clutching a picture she'd drawn of Granny Anna with Skeet, our deceased schnauzer, and I, ready to commit to darkness my favorite cats-eye marble.

Despite the shade, the heat was stifling. Sweat beading on Pop's forehead, he hesitated to begin: "Feels odd, burying her up here with Skeet and Frankie."

Frankie, a homeless cat that had strayed into our lives and stayed ten years, rested beneath a stone painted with his name.

Pop scraped aside some fallen debris, jabbed his spade into the ground—encountering resistance. "Couldn't we just scatter her ashes?"

Mom shook her head. "She said 'bury'. Knowing she'd rest here gave Mom great peace of mind."

Pop shrugged, then struck another blow at the soil—to no better effect.

“What the hell!” Pop bent over to scratch at the ground.

“Fred!”

“There’s a lateral root here, thick as my arm!”

“Then dig a little closer to Skeet. The view will be the same.”

Obligingly, Pop drew a spadeful nearer Skeet’s stone marker, pausing while I nudged Sis aside to retrieve a couple earthworms.

His next thrust resulted in a flinty rasp. He lowered to his knees, brushed some soil aside and grunted. “Wouldn’t you know? A rock!”

Mom sighed. “Well, remove it!”

He probed with the spade: much rasping. He wiped his brow. “Too big.”

Sis reached for one of my worms, but I objected.

“Kids!” She gave us her disappointed look. “Be respectful!”

“... stupid roots and boulders!” We caught the end of his muttering.

Mom spoke before he had a chance. “No, we’re not scattering them.”

Pop stepped toward Frankie, leaned into the spade and brought up an ample amount of soil, again with earthworms.

“Give your sister a chance.” His mild tone encouraged Sis to stick out her tongue. I pretended to hit her.

“For heaven’s sake, you two! What would Granny Anna think?”

Pop shortly uncovered a small skull he cradled in his palm. “Huh! Rabbit?”

Sis spoke before I could. We’d buried there the tiny rabbit—and also in the vicinity a sparrow, a mouse, a baby chick, and others.

Mom spoke softly: “Just dig down the hill a bit. You’ll still be in the ballpark.”

Pausing to lean against the massive oak, Pop rested his eyes on our home and modest farmstead. His demeanor softened as he surveyed the hillside, our meadow with the little creek winding through it, and his family standing beside him.

Once renewed, he stepped forward and positioned his spade a few feet down slope from Skeet and Frankie. “You’re sure she’d still consider this spot in the ballpark?” But he spoke with a smile.

One spadeful, then another and another. Sis and I scavenged the worms, which writhed coolly in our palms.

Pop fashioned the hole to Mom’s satisfaction. Like a priest bearing a chalice, she brought forward Granny Anna, knelt, and lowered the urn into the earth.

“Rest here in peace.” Then Mom began to cry. Pop knelt beside her, put his arm around her shoulders, his head against hers.

Granny Anna had fascinated Sis and me. Her life sounded like a TV show our parents wouldn’t have let us watch. She’d never married, traveling widely with a mystery named Ezra, then raised Mom by herself. She found her “true home” with us after Sis was born. We loved her unconditionally.

Sniffing back tears, Sis tucked her picture alongside Granny Anna’s urn. I released my marble into the depths of the hole, trying to be strong.

“Do you kids have anything to say?”

Our earthworms had wriggled from our hands. We brushed them into the hole with Granny Anna.

“We’ll miss her.” Sis spoke both our feelings, as she so often did.

I burst into tears. Pop gathered me in with his free arm.

“It’s alright,” Mom said. “We’ll all miss Granny, but this place was special to her. She’ll always be close by.”

We knelt there silently, the great oak shading us, its birds singing their simple songs amid the rustle of leaves. Below spread the scene we’d so often enjoyed as we picnicked, or climbed the tree, or simply sat gazing into the distance.

Pop eventually drew the soil over Granny Anna and patted it firm. We lingered briefly before walking quietly down the hill. Pop resumed fashioning a stone for Granny Anna’s resting place. Mom sat quietly, peering out a window toward the hilltop. When Mom called us for grace and our family meal, Sis and I settled onto our chairs—Granny Anna seated forever there beside us.