

GRANDPA OLSON

My Grandpa Olson adored me. When I was a baby, he lavished me with so much loving attention that my first word was "Bompa." We enjoyed each other's company, visiting and talking for hours. I sat on his knee, looking up into his Norwegian blue eyes, seriously conversing with my grandpa as if I were an adult, instead of a toddler. We shared jokes and crowed with laughter at the punch lines. We were similar in spirit, if not in age, and shared a common outgoing personality. He told his friends stories about my brilliance and I showed him how much I cared by jumping into his arms when we came to visit.

As a child, I remember that Grandpa took my family and my cousins on tractor rides in the summer. He drove the dull red International tractor to the side of the cinderblock garage and attached the two-wheeled trailer to the hitch. Grabbing vinyl sofa cushions from the couch, we piled onto the wooden trailer and off we'd bump down the two-track trail into the woods. We looked for deer and squirrels and admired the wildflowers and trees. Our hands hung over the sides, trying to catch the tall green ferns as we rolled down the path. Grandpa turned his head and smiled at the sight of us jumping around in the trailer, singing and laughing, as he drove along. When we passed the huge gnarled beech tree, we'd holler at him to stop. He patiently waited for us to climb like monkeys into the tree and bounce around on the limbs. Too soon, it was time to head back to the house, but I carried those beautiful days in my heart.

I learned my love of nature from my Grandpa. Many a dusky evening he beckoned me out on the front porch to show me a small herd of deer eating fallen fruit in the orchard next to the house. Just before sunset, he and I listened for the soft, mournful call of the Whip-o-Will. On sunny summer days, I followed him into the corn field, where he pointed out the rock-camouflaged nest of the Killdeer, with three speckled-rock eggs and the long-legged mother kill-deering her warning to us from a safe distance.

I remember many family outings with Grandpa. We sailed on the Boblo boat to Boblo Island Amusement Park one summer. I wanted to go on the Wild Mouse and Grandpa dubiously agreed to ride with me. I shrieked with delight as the pointy-nosed car jerked around corners and sped down the hills. My Grandpa turned white as a ghost and quivered for several minutes after the ride ended. Other family outings included camping trips to Wilderness State Park and Taquamennon Falls. At the falls, I remember the only time I was ever angry at my Grandpa. I was about eight years old and wanted to get as close as I could to the edge of the

copper-colored falls. Grandpa panicked when he saw me so close to the roaring water, and he yelled at me and pulled me by the hand to a safe spot at least 100 yards from where I wanted to be. I was irritated and annoyed at what I considered undeserved restrictiveness, but I know now that he trying to protect me from harm.

I'll never forget the horrified look on my mother's face when she heard on the phone that my Grandpa had been killed in a car accident. It was August 21, 1964, my parents' tenth wedding anniversary. I was nine years old. I learned the details that evening, when I stopped sobbing long enough hear. My Grandpa and three other Besser employees were on their way to work the afternoon shift. My grandpa was driving his new black Corvair (unsafe at any speed, according to Ralph Nader). As he was driving north on U.S. 23 into Alpena, he noticed a station wagon coming southbound, weaving all over the road. The station wagon was coming straight at my Grandpa, so Grandpa swerved into the southbound lane to miss him, just as the car jerked back into its proper lane. The cars hit head on. The front of the Corvair collapsed, as the engine was in the back. My Grandpa died instantly of a broken neck, caused by the whiplash effect, because cars did not have headrests at that time. The other men in his car were seriously injured. The man in the station wagon was drunk and he walked away from the accident, uninjured.

A drunken driver ended the wonderful, warm relationship between Grandpa and granddaughter. But he'll never erase my memories of nine years with Bompa.