

The Root Cellar

By Dan Boyts

I spent a lot of time at my grandmother's when I was growing up. She lived in a small and close town out in the country. When we went to pick up mail at the post office, everyone knew who we were and why we were visiting. It was right next to the grocery store, where we could wander around all the small town things on the shelves like rubber boots and overalls and plungers.

There was a railroad station across the street that carried passengers back and forth between all the small towns in the area, until a train derailed and demolished it late one night. It was the only excitement the quiet little town has ever seen.

When my grandfather picked us up (my mother needed a lot of breaks from my sister and I), we would drive through the country on small meandering roads to their house. Sometimes, sitting on my grandfather's lap, I helped steer the large Lincoln luxury car he was so proud of. I don't think I ever saw it out of the garage at night. I know it hasn't been since I've owned it. When we arrived, my grandmother was always there with a hug and some cookies. She spent a lot of time in the kitchen. She kept a supply of Grapette soda on hand just for me. She had the best smile of anyone.

There wasn't much to do when we were there. You had to find things to keep you busy like reading, or exploring. Anything to stay occupied. TV was still young. Just a small black and white screen. When there was no programming on, a picture of an Indian assumed its place. We were only allowed to watch cartoons on Saturday morning or whatever my grandparents were watching, mainly Lawrence Welk, Liberace, or Mitch Miller, which wasn't very interesting at my age. My sister would always beat me at board games. I played anyway.

Once in a while, the Ed Sullivan Show would have someone interesting on. Someone with talent. I remember when Elvis performed. My great-grandmother was appalled at his

swiveling hips, and oh my god, when the Beatles appeared, she thought the world was going to hell. It didn't, well not completely anyhow. It was bad enough that musicians were electrified, but the long hair was too much. My grandfather was a barber.

Reading gave me ideas. It sparked my imagination. One of my favorites things to imagine was being in combat, although cowboys and settlers was a close second. I don't know why I liked it, I'm a pacifist. I guess all boys want to be soldiers when they're young. Until you find out the cost of war. Reading allowed me to be somewhere else. To be someone else. It opened my mind. It made me feel like exploring.

I used to search through my grandfather's tools in the dark basement under the house. You could only get in through the rough concrete ramp that sloped down to the small door with a stained glass window. The old rickety door with its worn metal latch was the entrance to another world. Light streaming in through the stained glass made the room seem like a dream. And once inside, you became part of its musty realm.

The shelves were full of spare parts. Leftovers, odd items, and paint cans just waiting for a quick repair. Dusty and forgotten over time. And tools of all kinds for any type of job. I discovered an old electrical box one day when I was tearing my way through the cobwebs. It had the most realistic machine gun-like tube sticking out of one side, the perfect gun to keep the enemy back. It became one of my favorite props.

An old, stone root cellar stood a short distance away from the basement ramp. The garage and well house at opposite edges of the yard matched it's rough exterior. The cellar held my grandmother's canned green beans, tomatoes, and apples. It was about eight feet high, but it seemed taller. The steps went down into the ground another six feet through a metal door, and was filled with shelves of glass jars in bright colors. My grandfather loved canned apples, and

there were always lots of them. He would have apples for almost every meal. After my grandmother died, he made apple pies to snack on at least once a week.

The cellar was small, about ten by ten, with a flat roof bordered by a ledge, but it seemed larger to me. This was one of my favorite places on the property. I could climb up there, look down on the rest of the yard and survey the land as if I were high on a mountain, or at least a tall building (for that single bound). I could be in a castle defending the faith, on a raft like Huck Finn, or on a battlefield overlooking the troops.

I would sit up on the roof for hours imagining I was in a gun turret guarding the house with my machine gun while the war raged on. The flat roof and raised edge around the top make the perfect place to avoid the steady barrage of bullets. You can duck for cover there, and you can hear the zing of ricochets nearby. Looking out over the battlefield, smoke drifts across the open field, a farmhouse sits off in the distance. Barbed wire crisscrosses the open field held in place by wooden crosses. Craters dot the landscape, and bodies lay in every direction. Occasionally, a fellow soldier appears in the smoke and then quickly vanishes again. You can hear men scream in pain. Men dying in valor, as bombs explode and gunfire blazes. The heavy gun taps like a jackhammer against the noise of the battle.

“RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT. RAT-TAT-TAT. RAT...”

“Daaaaan”

“TAT...”

“Time to come Iiiin.”

“Tat...tat...”

“Wash up! Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Coming, Grandma.”

The war was over...I had won.