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A FEW MINUTES IN GRANDDADDY'S OLD HOUSE ON BLACK BOTTOM BAYOU

THE THUNDERSTORM washed its way closer. The rain pounded on the roof, lightning flashed, thunder grumbled in the night and the dark, damp wind moaned softly at the edges of the big old two-story house.

"A f**king frog-drowner out there," Granddaddy Bill said.

Granddaddy Bill was sick again -- though Grandma Annabelle said it was only a hangover -- so Harold and Johnny decided to tell him a story to make him feel better.

Harold, nine, usually took the lead, while Johnny, six, mostly did chorus.

Even though it was past their bedtime, Grandma Annabelle let them stay up to visit with Granddaddy Bill because he didn't feel good. plus they were going back to their house on Monday, since school started in a few days.

It had been a pretty boring summer so far.

The boys perched on the foot of the old man's musty old bed and waited for Granddaddy Bill to sip more of his toddy. Southern Comfort and lemon juice and honey, Granddaddy Bill said, good for colds, flu, consumption and the rheumariz. Granddaddy Bill's bedroom always smelled like pipe tobacco, Southern Comfort and Old Spice. And mold. Grandma Annabelle's bedroom smelled like perfume.

"So, what story are you going to tell me?" he said. He put the toddy down.

"How about the Creature from Black Bottom Bayou?" Harold said.

"The Creature is o-kkkay ..." Johnny drawled. "Though it's not as good as Jurassic Park. Those dinosaurs were cool!"

Granddaddy Bill sneezed, used a tissue to blow his nose. Threw the soggy clump of tissue on the floor next to the bed where another dozen wads of it already lay. "Where'd you hear this Creature story?"

Johnny bounced up and down on the bed, said, "You told it to us, Granddaddy!"

The old man smiled. "So I did. But you know us old people, we forget things. Okay. How does it go?"

Harold took a deep breath and started. "Once upon a time, in Lafayette, Louisiana, in this very house, many, many, many years ago, there were two brothers who came to visit their Grandma."

"Yeah, yeah, that was you and Great-Uncle-Richie, right, Granddaddy? And you were visiting Great-Great Grandma Phyllis."

"Shut up, Johnny," Harold said. "And sit still."

"I'm gonna tell Grandma Annabelle you said 'Shut up'!"

"Go ahead. You'll miss the story."

Johnny shut up.

"Anyway, they slept in the Piano Room, which had French doors that opened out on the back yard, just like they do now. The yard ran straight to Black Bottom Bayou, less than a hundred feet away, just like it does now. It was a summer night, just like it is now and it was raining, and raining and..."

The rain came down in waves, hard, then soft, then hard again. The wind blew and moaned softly at the edges of the house. When the lightning flashed, Billy and Richie could see Black Bottom Bayou gurgling past, oily, sluggish and as dark as its name. The frogs were going crazy. Every once in a while, Molly -- that was Grandma Phyllis's three-legged pomeranian Molly would wake up and yip, but the little dog's yappy bark didn't make the boys feel any better. When it came down to it, Molly wouldn't be much help. She was afraid of Cisco and Pancho and they were just parakeets.

"F** king stinking parakeets who sh*t on everything," Granddaddy Carl had said more than a few times.

Billy clutched at his Red Ryder BB gun, the plastic stock slippery with sweat. He wasn't supposed to load or cock it in the house but you better believe it was loaded and cocked now. A whole pack of BBs in it. Richie was too little to have a BB gun, which was too bad. Two guns would be better than one when the Monster came. And if ever it was gonna come, this was the night for it.

"I'm scared," Richie said.

"Don't worry, I've got Old Betsy here." He patted the gun. BB's rattled inside it. He'd named her after Davy Crockett's rifle. "If it tries to get in, I'll shoot its eyes out."

"Wh-what if you miss?"

"I won't miss. You remember that water moccasin? I hit it in the head, didn't I? And that turtle? And those frogs? And that mockingbird? And you better not even think about telling Grandma Phyllis about the bird."

"I won't tell, but -- a monster is different, Billy."

Billy nodded silently. Yeah, that was sure right. Ever since Grandma Phyllis had dropped them off last week for the double-feature at the Paramount Theater while

she'd gone shopping, they'd been expecting to see it. Earth Versus the Flying Saucers hadn't been so bad, but The Creature from the Black Lagoon, well, that was something else. The flying saucers were in Washington, that was a million miles away, but the Creature lived in a bayou. At night here in the Piano Room, where they slept on the pink-and-blue couch and matching love seat, looking straight at the bayou, they knew it was out there. A couple of nights, they were pretty sure they'd heard it splashing around, making weird noises. They'd looked for footprints during the daytime, but the thing was pretty smart, it must have covered them up. But they had found dead catfish that had been partially eaten and they knew: It had been there. Before he went back to his job on the oil rigs, Granddaddy Carl had told them it was the snapping turtles who ate the catfish but Billy didn't believe that was. It was the Creature.

And when it got tired of eating fish...

A gust of wind rattled the French doors.

"Maybe the fence will stop it," Richie said.

"Shoot, the Creature could rip it apart like it was old rotten kite! string. Or jump right over it." The little chain link fence was just enough to keep three-legged Molly in the yard. Even Richie could high climb over it in about two seconds.

"I'm scared, Billy."

"It's okay. I'll protect us."

But he was nervous.

The lamp on the table flickered.

"What's that?!"

"It's okay. Just the lightning making the power ... f**kshuate." That's what Granddaddy Carl had said it did when it stormed.

The light went out.

Richie squealed.

"It's okay, it's okay! Get out your flashlight!"

Billy dug his own light out of the couch cushion where he'd stuffed it for just such an emergency --

Suddenly he went blind.

"Jesus, Richie, get that out of my face! Point it at the door, not at me!"

The two ghostly rings of light danced across the French doors. Lightning flared, thunder rumbled right after it. Close.

"What's that?!" Richie said.

"What ?"

"Outside, I saw something out there!"

Billy was trying to point his flashlight and hold the BB gun at the same time. The light would have to go, he couldn't shoot too good with one hand. "Shine your light on it," he whispered. He raised the BB gun and propped it on the arm of the couch, aimed at the doors. "I got it covered."

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

All of a sudden, Billy needed to go pee, real bad.

Lightning struck the oak tree down by the fence. Thunder boomed so, loud Billy thought it was gonna break the glass, but he couldn't see, because the lightning blinded him again.

This time, Billy's eyes took a few seconds for the purple spots to fade. When he could see again, the first thing he noticed was that the French doors were wide open.

He said the F-word.

"What? What?" Richie said. He had burrowed down in the couch cushions, but he came up to see what was going on.

"The thunder knocked the doors open! Quick, go close them."

"Not me! You go close them!"

"I have to stand guard. Go on. I'll cover you."

"I'm not going."

"Richie..."

"No! You go!"

Billy glared at his little brother. "Go or I'll shoot you." He waved the BB gun.

"I'm gonna tell Grandma Phyllis!"

"I don't care if you tell her. Just go and shut the f** king doors. Now!"

But before anybody could move, lightning struck again.

Outlined against the white flash in the doorway stood the Creature.

Both Billy and Richie screamed.

"Why didn't Great-Great-Grandma Phyllis wake up when the lightning struck?" Johnny asked. "Or when Billy and Richie screamed?"

"Because she was as deaf as toast," Harold said.

"Deaf as a post," Granddaddy Bill put in. "Although toast probably doesn't hear too good, either, come to think of it. Go on."

"I bet it wasn't as scary as the dinosaurs from Jurassic Park," Johnny said.

"Shut up, Johnny. Well, there it was. Just like from the movie. Big, green, scaly, dripping water all over Grandma Phyllis's Persian rug..."

Billy, even though terrified, whipped his Daisy air rifle up and fired. In his panic, he forgot to aim for the eyes, but the thing was so close he couldn't miss.

He didn't miss.

"Hey! Ow!" the Creature said.

The lights came back on.

The Creature, seven-feet-tall if it was an inch, rubbed at his chest with a webbed and clawed hand. Slimy water dripped out of its gills. It looked at Billy, who sat on the couch open-mouthed. "What'd you go and do that for? That stings."

The Creature's voice was burbly. He coughed, hawked, and spat something onto the rug. It was a crawfish. The mudbug bounced onto its back. Righted itself, then scuttled backward under the couch. "Shoulda chewed you better," the monster said.

"Grandma Phyllis is gonna be mad about the wet rug," Richie said. "And she don't let us bring crawfish into the house. Or snakes."

"Why don't you put that thing away," the Creature said. He waved at Billy.

Billy had forgotten to recock his gun anyway, he was so surprised.

The Creature said, "Boy, it's a terrible night out there. Got the gar all stirred up."

Billy and Richie looked at each other.

"You can talk. How come you didn't talk in the movie?" Richie asked.

"Oh, you saw that? I thought I did okay, but I'm not writing my acceptance speech, if you know what I mean. Being mute, that was for dramatic effect," the Creature said. "Director had his own `vision.' Pah. Reason I don't do much work out there, if I can help it. They all got 'vision.' Okay if I sit down?"

"On Grandma's couch? Are you crazy? You're all wet!" Billy was horrified.

"Yeah, well, I live in a f**king bayou, now, don't I? What'd you expect? I'll sit on the rug. It's already wet."

"Grandma's gonna be mad."

"Hey, I'm tired here. F**k Grandma."

"Can't," Richie said.

"Can't sit down?"

"No, can't f**k Grandma. That's what Granddaddy Carl says. That's why he goes to the oil rigs so much," Richie said.

The Creature laughed. It was a wheezy, wet sound, but it was a laugh. "Ah, your Granddaddy Carl, he's a character. So he's gone again, huh?"

"To the oil rigs," Richie repeated.

"Just between us, kid, he stops off at a place in New Iberia on his way to the rigs. A fancy cathouse -- not that I've been there myself. Guy like me doesn't have to pay for it."

"Pay for what?" Billy asked. "A cat?"

"Why would he do that? Granddaddy doesn't even like cats," Johnny added.

The Creature made that wheezy, wet sound again.

"What's so funny?"

"Give it a few years, kid, you'll understand when you're older."

The boys looked at each other. Morn and Dad said that a lot.

The Creature sat. He crossed his legs. A puddle formed around his body on the rug. "I don't suppose either of you play chess?"

"No. But we play poker. Granddaddy Carl taught us."

"No sh*t? Hey, great. Get the cards. Play for matches?"

"You have matches?"

"Do I look like I have a lot of use for matches, kid? We'll use yours. I'll give 'em back after I win."

"Billy. My name is Billy. This is Richie."

"Billy. Richie. I'm Howie. I usually play chess with your Granddaddy, but poker is okay."

"You play chess with Granddaddy Carl? He knows about you?"

"Sure. We've been playing for years. Usually on rainy summer nights. When lightning strikes the water out there, it gets real uncomfortable, you know? Dead fish floating around, the gar get to snapping at everything, the turtles get spastic. Tingles like hell, too. You know how nasty garfish can be when they get squirrely? Like big ole mosquitoes. Not to even mention the `gators. I try to avoid the place until the lightning stops. So, you want to play poker or what?"

"I'll get the cards," Richie said.

"That's three matches to you," Billy said.

"Keep your pajamas on, I'm thinking here," Howie said. He looked at his cards. Howie had at least one ace, Billy knew, because the fish man had accidentally put a claw mark on the back of it a couple of hands back and Billy saw it. Probably had a pair of aces, since it was jacks or better to open and he'd opened.

"I think you're bluffing," Howie said. "I see your three and raise you two."

He tossed five matches into the pot.

"I fold," Richie said. He threw his cards down on the rug. "All I had was a f**king pair of threes."

"Don't say f**k," Billy said.

"Howie says it. Granddaddy Carl says it. Daddy says it, you say it --"

"They're grownups and I'm older than you. You can't say f* *k until you're at least nine."

"You said it last year when you were eight," Richie allowed.

"Fine. When you're eight, you can, but since you're only six, you can't, so shut up." To Howie, he said, "Okay, I'll see your two and raise you two more."

Howie glanced down at his cards, then at Billy, then back at his cards again. Billy kept his poker face on, just like Granddaddy Carl had taught him.

"All right. Take it." Howie tossed his cards face down. "I had a pair of aces. What did you have?"

"You gotta pay to see 'em," Billy said.

"Jeezus, kid, who do you think you are? Bret Maverick? We're playing for matches here!"

"Well, okay. I had two pair, sixes and nines." He turned his cards over.

"Your Granddaddy teach you how to deal from the bottom when he showed you how to play this game? Gimme the cards. My deal. Five card draw, nothing is wild, jacks or better."

Howie picked up the deck. Considering how big his hands were and his claws and all, he shuffled pretty good. He started to deal, but Billy stopped him. "Don't I get to cut?"

Howie shook his head. He looked up at the ceiling. "Spare me. Amarillo Slim here thinks I'm cheating for matches." The crawfish he'd coughed up earlier suddenly scuttled out from under the couch. Billy didn't know where it thought it was going. Howie reached over, real fast, and grabbed the crawfish. It wriggled in his claws for a second before he popped it into his mouth and ate it. It crunched in his teeth as he chewed. "Gotcha this time, Houdini." Howie said.

"Eyuuw," Richie said.

"Tastes just like chicken, kid. Here, cut."

Lying in bed, propped up on four pillows, Granddaddy Bill smiled. "Pass me the toddy, would you, Harold?"

The old man took a big drink. "Ah. Okay. So then what happened?"

Richie lost all his matches trying to draw to an inside straight pretty early. After Billy cleaned Howie out on a hand of showdown, Howie said, "Jeezus. Beaten by a nine-year-old kid." He glanced at the ceiling, then outside through the French doors. "Still coming down pretty good out there. You know where your Granddaddy keeps the chess board?"

"Sure. Under the kitchen cabinet, next to the bug spray and the Old Crow and Camels."

"Why don't you run get it and I'll teach you how to play. Maybe I can beat you at that. So far this evening, my ego's getting the sh*t kicked out of it."

"Go get it, Richie," Billy said.

"Why do I have to go get it? It's dark in the kitchen. I'm afraid."

"You're stupid, you know that? What are you afraid of? We got a monster sitting right here on the rug with us. What could be worse in the kitchen?"

"Thanks, kid. You ain't no prize yourself, you know. Some jug must be real unhappy you swiped its handles for your ears."

"Go on, Richie."

Richie went and got the chess board.

"Okay, here's the deal. These are the pawns, they only move like this..."

Howie won all the chess games, but that was okay. They played for a long time. Richie fell asleep on the floor and Howie put him on the couch and covered him with the sheet. A little while later, the rain stopped, and just before dawn, they heard somebody flush the toilet down the hall.

"Unless that gimpy little dog is a lot smarter than it looks, that's your granny. I better hit the water, kid. I don't want the old lady to find me here. Carl would never hear the end of it. Probably ought to keep this visit to yourself, too."

He stood, pretty dry now, though the rug was still wet.

"Thank you for teaching us how to play chess, Howie."

"No sweat, kid. Thanks for the poker game. Billy, right? See you later."

The sun wasn't up but it was getting light. Billy watched as Howie padded across the squishy back yard, opened the gate and closed it behind himself, then waded into the bayou. After a second, he disappeared into the murky water.

Grandma was mad about the rug and she took away Billy's BB gun for three days but that didn't really matter -- he didn't much need the gun after that.

What was going to bother them with Howie around?

"That's a pretty good story," Granddaddy Bill said. "You think it's true?"

Both Harold and Johnny laughed.

"Come on, Granddaddy! A seven-foot-tall monster coming out of the bayou? No way," Harold said.

"And not even as scary as a dinosaur," Johnny added.

"Oh, really?" said a burbly voice from behind them.

Harold and Johnny turned as one, eyes going wide.

"I got your Jurassic Park right here, kid," the seven-foot-tall monster said.

"F**k!" Harold and Johnny said together.

Granddaddy Bill laughed so hard that some of the toddy came out of his nose, but after that everything was just fine. Howie and Granddaddy Bill played chess.

Granddaddy Bill beat him two out of three.

"I never should have taught you this game," the Creature said.

And, when you got right down to it, the summer turned out not to be so boring after all.

This new story deserves a Hollywood banner ad like "He's Back...And He's Looking to Mate!"