



UP AND COMING MEN OF A FUTURE AGE

by Nathan Willis

HARLOW said it was my fault Grandpa died. That part of him went when Grandma passed but I finished him off when I cracked his head open with a brick. Harlow said what happened was that I got Grandpa good and mad with something or other that I'd done and he started yelling which got me good and mad and I said I was leaving forever and stormed out to the porch.

While I stood there deciding what to do next, Grandpa assumed I was having second thoughts and yelled something snide like, "Well, that didn't take long." That's when I grabbed one of the loose bricks from the steps Grandma had always been after him to fix, marched back inside and

cracked him square on the forehead. He collapsed and died right there in the middle of the kitchen. Then Harlow helped me drag him to the stairs and we pushed him down to the basement.

We put the brick back in place and went out through the field to the creek where we always went to get away. Once it got dark we'd go home and walk around the house calling Grandpa's name, pretend we're looking for him. Eventually Harlow would check the basement and scream and we would both act scared and sad and have to start crying and call an ambulance. We would have to keep this up until the funeral was over and until we figured out where we were going to live next. That was the plan. It sounded convoluted and exhausting but there was no reason to think it wouldn't work. It always had before.

What I like most about the creek, what I have always liked about the creek, is that it is one simple thing that can be many other things at the same time. We like to get up close and examine every detail, like how the clear stones look cloudy when they dry off or how some of the bugs can dart around on the water without falling in. Even the silt at the bottom was different than the dirt in the yard and somehow it hid all the camouflaged homes the underwater animals would disappear to whenever we showed up. And of course there were the sticks and rocks and leaves and trash—

things I would collect in my big glass jar to make our own creek to keep with us; like I had tried to do over and over but it was never the same. There was always something missing, something that kept everything alive and moving. Even if I slushed everything back and forth to match the current it never looked like the creek with its perfect balance of movement above and stillness below.

Whenever we gave up on finding a way to keep what was there we'd try to change it, usually by gathering fallen trees or branches to make a dam or passable bridge. It's not that we couldn't cross without one; we just wanted to build something that would be useful, even if it ended up being for strangers we'd never meet. We didn't care if it was Mr. McDaniels who technically owned the land and hated to see anyone else enjoying it. Whenever Mr. McDaniels spotted us he'd get his gun and yell about how we're destroying his property, even though the whole time he's shooting his own trees. He's a good shot. He never fires right at us. There's one tree in particular he aims for whenever he wants to scare us and it's close enough that it works. Judging by how high the bullet gash goes on the bark, people have been sneaking onto his land long before Harlow and I came along. And there was probably someone else shooting at them before Mr. McDaniels came along.

I didn't feel too bad about what happened with Grandpa. He didn't really want us to begin with. He thought he did, but that was just because Grandma was gone and he thought we would remind him of her. We didn't. She was a sweet old woman who made everyone around her feel loved. We were boys and had no idea how we wanted to make people feel. It only took a couple of days before everyone in the house knew exactly where they stood, which was very far apart.

The reason we had to stay with Grandpa in the first place was because Uncle Harriet got sick. That was also me. Harlow says he doesn't know why I did it and suspects I don't either. Uncle Harriet, for all his quirks, and there were plenty, was really nice and did his best to raise and provide us with everything he thought we needed as up and coming men of a future age. That's what he used to call us. Up and coming men of a future age. Whenever he said it, I imagined Harlow and I in some old black and white TV show on the surface of a far away planet searching for something that would save life as we knew it back on Earth.

It made Uncle Harriet feel good to think he was helping to usher in the next generation. He tried to do his part by coming up with a piece of advice for us every day. Whenever he finished one of his mildly inappropriate and likely half-true anecdotes, he'd reward himself with a

drink. Not the green bottles or plastic tumblers like Mom and Dad used to drink. Uncle Harriet's drinks required steps and utensils and special glasses. While he was off pouring shots and shaking ice and God knows what else, Harlow and I would giggle and roll our eyes and try to guess what his story about fishing or sleeping in a bus station was supposed to mean. But when he came back with his martini or sidecar or manhattan, we always thanked him.

In some ways we probably did learn a lot from him. If I tried to explain what, it would end up sounding like one of Uncle Harriet's stories and the meaning would get lost. But I know its there somewhere. What's important is that we enjoyed ourselves. We were happy.

That's what Harlow said he didn't understand. It was after one of those stories when Uncle Harriet was about to get up that I said I'd make his drink. He laughed and said there was no way I knew how to make a sidecar. I rattled off the ingredients and told him to sit tight. He was happier than either of us had ever seen him.

I don't remember what I put in the drink. I just remember mixing everything up and shaking the cocktail shaker. It made me think about trying to keep the creek in the jar. Uncle Harriet was doing the same thing with these drinks.

Maybe he knew something was off. Maybe it tasted terrible and he just didn't have the heart to say anything or wanted to imagine he was raising good young bartenders. Either way, he sat back in his chair and sipped his drink the same way he had sipped every other drink before, which was quickly. Then I made him another one.

Ten minutes later he was throwing up in the toilet. Half an hour after that he was writhing on the floor, groaning for help. And after that he was dead.

Harlow said what we needed to do was to go watch TV. Just for one or two shows. Then we would call out to Uncle Harriet like we were hearing him get sick all over again. We would yell and ask if he needed anything. Then Harlow would go check on him. I would hear Harlow scream and run to join him in the bathroom doorway and we would both start crying and acting scared and sad and then we would call an ambulance.

We were halfway through the first show when Harlow asked if I remembered what Uncle Harriet had been telling us about right before. I shook my head.

He said it was a story about going to the casino with Dad and Grandpa before Mom and Dad got married. No one else was going to take

Dad out for a bachelor party so it was up to them. This was important because it was one of the few times Uncle Harriet and Grandpa saw each other after their big fight when Uncle Harriet was nineteen. After that Uncle Harriet hitchhiked to Phoenix and no one heard from him until he came back eighteen months later.

Uncle Harriet said they only got along because they were both uncomfortable around Dad. They had a pretty good run at blackjack and got a chance to really talk about things. He said at the casino anyone can be a stranger, a friend or both and that's what they got to be there at the blackjack table, at least until Dad complained enough that they agreed to play Pai Gow with him and everyone lost while Dad flirted with the dealer lady and drank cheap Pennsylvania beer like it was going out of style. But the heart of Uncle Harriet's story was in how they would bet, which didn't translate well, because Uncle Harriet didn't remember the details. What he did remember was that they both knew Dad was bad news. They never said anything, not to each other or anyone else, but they wished they had stepped in and done something sooner. Then all of this might have been avoided. In the end it didn't matter that no one could prove anything. They knew. They knew from that one time. Anyway, the moral of the story was

that you should always keep one eye on your cards and one eye on your opponent to make sure you're both playing the same game.

I didn't remember any of that, but it sounded right. Uncle Harriet was always trying to find a moment in the past that made all the good and bad things after it make sense.

Then Harlow pretended to hear Uncle Harriet get sick and yelled out, asking if he was okay.

The police didn't seem too surprised. One of the officers said this was bound to happen sooner or later. I guess Uncle Harriet had earned a reputation when he used to go out all the time. That was a long time ago and even though he pretty much stayed at home now, the reputation stuck.

A few minutes later an older patrolman showed up. He knew our family well enough to know that Grandpa was the only other relative we had left around there. He had us pack our things and drove us over to the house. We never even stopped at the police station.

That same old patrolman was the first to show up when we called about Grandpa. He took one look down the steps and pulled Harlow and I out onto the porch while more police and paramedics showed up and let themselves in.

He asked us what happened and said it was a tragedy. Grandpa was so fond of us and even though we were keeping him young, he couldn't say he was surprised. Grandpa and the patrolman still ran into each other every once in a while and he noticed Grandpa seemed to be slipping a little bit. Not long ago he had been called out because Grandpa left a restaurant without paying. Now, he didn't know what they were going to do with us.

"It's a shame he couldn't have held on just a little longer," he said. "If this happened a few years down the road we could have gotten away with letting you take care of Harlow and that would have been that. God knows you already look old enough."

It was true. From the time I was very young everyone has always said I look much older. I get mistaken for a high schooler all the time.

We were all quiet for a minute, thinking about how if the timing were different everything would have been perfect.

The patrolman's radio squawked and he said, "Boys, don't look."

We covered our eyes and watched through the gaps of our fingers as the paramedics brought Grandpa's body out on a gurney, carefully navigating down the crumbling porch steps.

As the ambulance was leaving a pickup truck pulled into the drive. We knew the truck. And we knew there was a good chance we were in trouble.

Mr. McDaniels got out and exchanged waves with the patrolman as he made his way to the porch.

“You boys know Greg McDaniels? Lives back behind your Grandpa’s place in the big farmhouse?”

He said we knew who he was and that he’d seen the police and ambulance coming and wanted to make sure everything was okay.

The patrolman told us to stay put and walked Mr. McDaniels back over to his truck where they whispered and shook their heads and gestured at the house and pushed dirt around with their feet until they both looked at each other and nodded. I knew what this was. This was how people came to agreements in lose-lose situations. This was something Uncle Harriet had told us about.

They walked back to the porch and the patrolman said, “Boys, Mr. McDaniels has offered to take you in until we find someplace else for you. It might be for a couple of days or it might be a couple months. I’ll see what we can do about keeping this house for you so when you turn eighteen you can come back if you want. It’s paid for so it shouldn’t be too

much of a problem. In the meantime, go on upstairs, gather your things and load them into Mr. McDaniels' truck.”

When we pulled up to the farm, Harlow started asking about the swing set and power wheel in the yard and Mr. McDaniels said he wanted to explain a few things before we went inside.

He didn't have a family like we thought he did, at least not there on the farm, not anymore. He was married before and legally speaking probably still was, and he and his wife had a daughter, Suzy, but she got sick when she was just little, probably right around Harlow's age. Not sick like Uncle Harriet. She had to stay in the hospital until they let her go home for the end. At the time it was the talk of the town, they had prayer circles and rigatoni lunches and everything else for her but it just wasn't enough. We didn't know about it because that was all back before Mom and Dad went away and we moved in with Uncle Harriet.

In the back room, he still had the hospital bed with all the blankets folded and stacked on top, just like the nurses left it. He hadn't been able to bring himself to get rid of it yet and that room was the only place we weren't allowed to go. Anything else was fair game, even the creek and he promised he wouldn't shoot at us anymore.

After Suzy passed, all the bills and depression and everything else got to be too much and Mrs. McDaniels left and moved back to Monterey. At least that's what she said. Mr. McDaniels thinks he still sees her around town and that's one of the reasons he doesn't leave the house much.

Anyways, now it was just the three of us and we had to make the most of the lives we still had in front of us.

Mr. McDaniels wasn't as bad as we thought and after a few days he still liked having us around. Not like Grandpa. And he wanted to teach us things. Real things. Not like Uncle Harriet. He had a workshop in the barn and took us out there and taught us how to make a dining room table. He said woodworking was an invaluable skill because when you make something yourself, you can always fix it if it breaks.

Being able to do this, along with the other things he would teach us, meant we'd never need anyone else. Harlow ate this stuff up, or at least acted like he did. I think he was trying to impress Mr. McDaniels. I went along with it too, acting all excited, but really all I could think about was how that dining room table would make a perfect bridge.

One day, after we had been in the barn helping him sand the table legs, Mr. McDaniels told us that years ago, they used to have sheep and

goats and chickens and pigs and cows. Then Suzy got sick and he started cutting corners, thinking it was okay for everything to survive like he was, on the bare minimum. Back then he thought that if he suffered enough it would somehow help her to get better. But that was a mistake. When Suzy died he came to his senses and realized it wasn't fair what he was doing to those animals and he put them all up for sale. By that time, they had all gotten so bony and weak that there weren't many takers. Everything that was left, which was more than he'd sold, had to be put down. It was the humane thing to do. It still makes him sad to think about. He cleaned and kept what he could in the deep freeze in the basement, but the freezer was only so big. He had to take everything else and burn it in a pile in the backyard. That's when Mrs. McDaniels took off for Monterey, which is the grown up way of saying she shacked up with the Winslow High speech teacher.

Now that we were there, he was thinking about getting the farm going again if we would help. Even if we wanted to move back to Grandpa's after I turned eighteen, he'd love for us to still come out there and work with him. Or we could just stay there and live at the farm. We could be his boys and that could be our life. And he said it was a good

life. Looking at him, broken and pleading with children for more time, I knew that was a lie.

But dammit if Harlow couldn't agree fast enough for the both of us. Mr. McDaniels beamed and said there was a county fair coming up and we would go together to pick out the first new animals.

We got up especially early to finish the table. By Mr. McDaniels' estimate if we started early and got the last coat of sealant applied, by the time we got back from the fair it would be dry enough for us to move into the house to cure, and as long as we kept the windows cracked the fumes shouldn't bother us too much. Then we could move his workbench and tools into the shed to make room for what he was certain would be the prize cows we would be bringing back. Just listening to the plan was exhausting, but I knew better than anybody that sometimes that's exactly what it takes.

Once we finished the final coat, Mr. McDaniels sent us out to the field while he went upstairs to get ready.

Before we left, Harlow said he wanted to grab something. He ran inside and came back with my glass jar tucked under his arm. I didn't move.

"What?" he said. "I want to do it, too."

I couldn't think of a reason to stop him so we headed out like we always did. He was so excited. I felt sick to my stomach. When we got to the creek, I said we should try and make the bridge one last time on our own before we used the table. Harlow knew Mr. McDaniels would never let us do that to the table we worked so hard on. We both did.

Instead of looking for fallen trees and branches, Harlow twisted the lid off the jar, held it in the water until it was almost full, put the lid back on and lifted it up to the sky.

I was waiting for the disappointment but his mouth fell open and he whispered, "I did it."

He knew I didn't believe him and held it out so I could see.

He was right. There were little specks in the water that were falling to the bottom and smaller specks that kept moving around above them. They'd probably been there every time, but I couldn't see them with all the sticks and rocks and leaves I'd put in. This whole time I had always tried to fill the jars with everything I wanted it to become instead of just letting it settle on its own. It was my fault this had never worked before.

Harlow knew what this meant before I did. He probably always knew.

We looked at each other and the smile drained from his face.

For as far back as I can remember Harlow has never been a fighter. Not even when Mom and Dad were around, back when he should have been.

He crumpled when I tackled him. The jar shattered and the broken glass disappeared in the water. I clenched my teeth and pushed his face into the creek, getting angrier when he still wouldn't fight back. I let go before it was too late. I know just how far I can push things before they go too far. But when I did, he didn't move. I lifted his head and that's when I saw the jar had broken right where I held him down. The glass had sliced his face and neck.

I fell back on the ground and made a plan, or at least tried to.

My first plan was to go back to the farm, sneak into the room where Suzy died, climb on the gurney under the blankets and hope Mr. McDaniels never came looking for us. That was a terrible plan. Eventually I would get bored, try to sneak out and get caught.

The second plan, the plan I decided on, was to go back to the farm. When Mr. McDaniels was ready to leave and asked about Harlow I would offer to go look for him. I would check the yard first, then head to the creek. When I found him, I would go running back to the house, calling for Mr. McDaniels like he could fix everything. I would have to cry for a long

time. At least until after the funeral. And then I would leave. I don't know where I'd go but I'd leave.

That was it. I was sure it would work. It had to. It was the best I could come up with.

When Mr. McDaniels came down in his good plaid shirt and overalls, he asked if we were ready to go. I nodded and climbed into his truck. It was harder to do now that I was alone. I couldn't wait until this was over. I couldn't wait for Mr. McDaniels to ask about Harlow. I couldn't wait to make my way around the yard to the creek. I couldn't wait to find him and come running back to tell Mr. McDaniels there had been a terrible accident, something we would never be able to figure out or make sense of, something we would never get over. I couldn't wait to be scared and sad.

Mr. McDaniels climbed into the truck and started the engine but we didn't move. He looked at the empty space on the bench seat, checked the yard in his mirrors and asked about Harlow. I knew my plan wasn't going to work. My stomach dropped between my legs.

“He's not coming.”

Mr. McDaniels asked what I meant, but he knew. Then he asked again. And then he said why wasn't I talking to him and he wanted to know if it was bad. He said was it something I could show him.

I walked him out to the creek and pointed.

Mr. McDaniels ran into the water, grabbed Harlow's body, put it on dry ground, yelled at it, and tried CPR. There was no response. Mr. McDaniels held Harlow against him with one arm, and pulled out his cell phone to call the patrolman with the other. Seeing someone hold on to Harlow so tight like that even when he was already gone, that was when I started to cry.

Mr. McDaniels hung up and didn't say anything. He knew I didn't have the right answers for the questions he wanted to ask. All we could do was wait and look at the creek as it took away and kept everything at the same time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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