

“Cranes Fly South”

by Edward McCourt

“They fly all night,” the old man said. “First you hear a sound far off and you figger it’s thunder—and it gits louder and nearer, and soon it’s like a freight train passin’ right over your head, and if there’s a moon they fly across it and the night gits dark—”

“But I tell you I saw one!” Lee said. “Honest, Grandpa. Out at Becker’s slough. I was looking for ducks—and all of a sudden—”

“Ain’t no whoopin’ cranes nowadays,” the old man said disconsolately.

Lee spoke very slowly now, trying hard to be patient. “At Becker’s slough. Honest. I saw the black tips of his wings just as clear!”

“And you feel like you want to go, too,” Grandpa said. “Breaks your heart almost, you want to go that bad, when you hear the thunder right over your head—like a big, long freight train passin’ in the nighttime.”

His voice rose in an unexpected harsh croak. “At Becker’s slough, you say? A whoopin’ crane—a real, honest-to-gosh whooper? Boy, I ain’t seen a whooper for forty years!”

“There’s only twenty-eight whoopers left in the whole world,” Lee said. “They fly south in the fall clear to Texas.”

“Me, I’m going south, too,” Grandpa said. “You can set in the sun all winter and see things besides flatness. Man gets mighty tired of flatness—after eighty years.” His voice trailed off. He fell back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Lee remembered what his mother had said. “Grandpa is a very old man, Lee; he mustn’t ever get excited.” He knew a moment of paralysing fear. Maybe Grandpa was dying; maybe he was already dead! “Grandpa!” he shouted hoarsely. “Wake up, wake up!”

A convulsive shudder twisted the shrunken body in the chair. The old man stood up without laying a hand on the arm rest of the chair, and his voice was loud and strong. “Boy, I got to see it. I tell you I got to!”

Lee stared, fascinated and irresolute. “But Mum says—”

The old man’s voice lost its tone of loud authority, dropped into feeble wheedling. “Aw, come on, boy. Ain’t nobody goin’ to see us. Your paw’s workin’ in the far quarter and Ellen she’s off to a hen party somewheres. We can slip out and back just as easy.”

“But it’s three miles. And Mum’s got the car.”

Grandpa wrinkled up his face. “We got a horse and buggy, ain’t we?”

“But the buggy hasn’t been used for years and years,” Lee protested. “And the harness—”

The old man caught up his stick from beside the chair. Fury chased the cunning from his puckered face. “You git along, boy,” he screamed, “or I’ll welt the hide off you!”

Lee retreated to the door. “All right, Grandpa,” he said placatingly. “I’ll hitch Bessie up right now.”

Grandpa had a hard time getting into the buggy. But the moment he reached the seat he snatched the lines from Lee's hands and slapped the old mare's rump with the ends of the lines. Bessie broke into a startled trot and Lee held his breath. But Bessie slowed almost at once to a shambling, reluctant walk, and Lee felt a little easier. Maybe the buggy wouldn't fall to pieces after all.

They drove along the road a little way and turned off to a trail that wound across bleak open prairie. Grandpa stared straight ahead, and his eyes were bright. "Like I say, boy, they go south. Figger they see the Mississippi from a mile up. Sure like to see it myself. Will, too, some day."

The old man's chin dropped toward his chest. The lines fell from his fingers, and Lee caught them just before they slipped over the dashboard.

"Thanks, boy, for takin' me out. Maybe we'd better go home now. I'm tired—awful tired."

The boy's throat tightened. "We're near there, Grandpa," he said. "You can see the slough now."

"Ain't no whoopers any more," the old man mumbled peevishly. "Gone south."

Lee swung Bessie out of the rutted trail into the shelter of a poplar grove. He eased the old man down from the buggy, and slipped a hand under his arm. "Come on, Grandpa," he urged. "We'll make it all right."

They advanced slowly from behind the sheltering bluff into the tall grass that rimmed the borders of the slough. The sun dazzled their eyes, but the wind blew strong and cold across the slough, carrying with it the rank smell of stagnant water and alkali-encrusted mud. Grandpa huddled under his greatcoat.

"What are you doin' to me, boy?" he complained almost tearfully. "You know what Ellen said. I ain't supposed to go out without she's along."

"Down, Grandpa—down!"

The old man crumpled to hands and knees. "Where is it, boy? Where is it?" His voice rose in a shrill, frenzied squeak.

"Come on—I can see his head!"

Something moved in the long grass. For a shuddering moment the boy lay helpless, beyond the power of speech or movement. Then his body jerked convulsively to life and he leaped to his feet and his voice rang wild and shrill.

"Grandpa—look—look!"

He wheeled to clutch at Grandpa, but the old man already stood upright, staring out of dim, fierce eyes at the great, white body flung against the pale sky. "Great God in heaven!" The words were a strange, harsh cry of ecstasy and pain. "A whooper, boy—a whooper!"

They stood together, man and boy, held by an enchantment that was no part of the drab, flat world about them. The great bird rose steadily higher, the black tips of his wings a blurred streak against the whiteness of his body. He swung in a wide arc, flew high above the heads of the watchers by the slough, and then climbed fast and far into the remote pale sky. For a minute or more he seemed to hang immobile, suspended in space beyond the limits of the world. Then the whiteness faded, blended with the pale of the sky, and was gone.

The old man's fingers were tight on the boy's arm. Again the harsh cry burst from his lips—"Great God in heaven!"—the cry that was at once a shout of exultation and a prayer. Then the light in his eyes faded and went out.

“He’s gone south,” Grandpa said. His shoulders sagged. He tried to pull the greatcoat close about his shrunken body. “They come in the night and you hear a sound like thunder and the sky gets dark—and there’s the Mississippi below and the smell of the sea blown in from a hundred miles away . . .”

Lee’s mother led the boy to the door. “He’s raving,” she said, and there were tears in her eyes and voice. “He’s so sick. Oh, Lee, you should never—”

At once she checked herself. “The doctor should be here soon,” she whispered. “Tell your father to send him up the minute he comes.”

Lee fled downstairs, away from the dim-lit, shadow-flecked room where the only sounds to break the heavy silence were Grandpa’s muttered words and his hard, unquiet breathing. Grandpa was sick—awful sick. He had no strength left to lift his head from the pillow, and his eyes didn’t seem to see things any more. But he wasn’t crazy; he knew all right what he was saying. Only no one except Lee understood what he meant. He did not regret what he had done. No matter what happened he was glad that Grandpa had seen the whooper.

“He just had to see it,” he said stubbornly to his father. “He just had to.”

His father nodded slowly from behind the paper he was pretending to read. “I know, son,” he said. And he added, a queer, inexplicable note of pain in his voice, “Wish I’d been along.”

Lee fell asleep on the couch after a while. When he woke much later, he was alone in the living room and the oil lamp on the table was burning dimly. He sat up, instantly alert. The house seemed strange and lonely, and the noises which had troubled him even in sleep were still. Something had happened. You could tell.

His mother came downstairs, walking very quietly. Her face was set and calm. He knew at once what she had come to say. Her fingers touched his hair, to show that what he had done didn’t matter any more.

“Grandpa is dead,” she said.

Suddenly her voice choked and she turned away her head. A moment of anguish engulfed him. He couldn’t bear to hear his mother cry. But when at last he spoke, the words sprang clear and triumphant from his throat.

“He’s gone south,” he said.



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