

Gramps

2 April, 2020

The little girl across the street was the first one to call me 'Gramps.' It was summer and I was in my shop with the roll-up door open, concentrating on cutting dovetails in a piece of walnut, which means I really was concentrating. So the little voice behind me coming out of nowhere just about made me color my culottes.

"What are you doing, Gramps?"

Upon recovering my composure and putting my chisel and mallet safely out of harm's way, I told her I was making a box. And I introduced myself using my given name, asking her name (Fallyn) and then asked her why she called me Gramps.

"That's what we call you," she said with a shrug, as though that closed the subject once and forever. Which it did. This proclamation was followed immediately by, "Can I make something?"

And so it began.

Since that afternoon, Mary and I've learned to expect a visit from Fallyn, sometimes with a friend in tow and sometimes alone, anytime the door is up and one of us is visible from the street. She'll greet whichever of us is available with an oh-so-proper side hug and if it's Mary, proceed to tell her all about her day - who's who in eight-year old society, who's fighting with whom, who has a new dog, whatever is happening in her world. If it's me, she will invariably look around for an offcut from my scrap bin to turn into something. She built a pretend castle one day out of the leftover corners of maple that fell away when I cut a round for turning. Other days, she'll grab a piece of paper or the lid of a cardboard container and rummage through my pencil and marker jar to find just the right implement for her artistic endeavor de jour.

Mary and I've had quite a parade of youngsters through our garage but Fallyn is our most consistent visitor. Well, not just now, with social distancing in effect but this, too shall pass. And every time she sees me, she applies the same sobriquet as on that first day - Gramps.

I really like it.

I never knew a Gramps growing up. I understand my grandfather on my father's side was a great guy but he passed before I could know him. My other grandfather I did come to know, but not as someone to whom I would assign a loving nickname.

Growing up, my maternal grandmother was very much a fixture in my life and I loved her dearly. But she was more comfortable with girls, having raised four of her own, so she wasn't someone who would teach me stuff. Every now and then, I would see a doting grandfather in a movie or even a cantankerous geezer like Grandpa McCoy and wonder what it must be like to have a Gramps in one's life. And I missed it. Missed the connection with an adult with whom I could be totally comfortable and perhaps even share an hour of harmless nonsense. Or who could teach me to tie a knot or hammer a nail.

I hope to have grandchildren of my own someday that I can dote on. Meanwhile, I'm happy to fill that role for the neighborhood kids. I never aspired to be the harmless old coot who is willing to listen to kids' tales and maybe let them make something from whatever's laying around. But I find I've really warmed to the experience.

I sometimes wonder what Andrea (Fallyn's mom) must think when her daughter comes home with an armload of wood scraps. I suppose she might wish I was less generous with my castoffs. And that's okay with me. After all, what's Gramps' role if not to exasperate parents?