

GRANDPA'S MEDICINE

When I was five, at Grandma's house for Sunday dinner, I pointed up at that big brown bottle with the two red horses on the label, sitting on top of Grandma's china hutch. "What's that?"

Grandma patted my hand. "That's your grandfather's medicine."

Staring at the bottle, I asked, "Why so big? Don't pills come in tiny, little bottles?"

Mom shook her finger at me. "You ask too many questions."

But Grandma just smiled. "Your grandfather is a lot bigger than you. He needs more medicine."

At the time, her answer satisfied my curiosity. But as I grew older, I came to realize it was a whiskey bottle, yet Grandpa didn't just not drink. He was strongly opposed to anyone using alcohol.

My senior year in high school was a prime example. When he found out I came home drunk from my senior prom, Grandpa rushed right over to our place and started lecturing me about the evils of alcohol. He even pulled out his Bible and read. "Strong drink is a mock and he that is deceived there by is not wise."

Being a typical mouthy teenager, I fired back. "If drinking

is so bad, what's the deal with that so called medicine bottle of yours?"

"Sometimes the medicine can be worse than the disease."

"How can that be?" I shouted.

He shook his finger at me. "Hopefully, you'll never find out." I wanted to ask what he meant by it but the look on Mom's face, standing behind him said don't.

Grandpa died my sophomore year of college. After his funeral, Grandma insisted I drive her home. "There's something back at the house your grandfather always wanted you to have."

After we got there, she took me to the dining room and handed me Grandpa's medicine bottle.

"What's the big deal with this thing, anyway? I asked. It's just an old empty whiskey bottle."

"A very special whiskey bottle. Open it and see what's inside."

I took off the cap. Inside was a small tube-shaped something. I turned the bottle upside down and shook it. Into my hand fell a rolled-up index card with a rubber band around it. I removed the band and unrolled the card. Written on it were these faded words *No matter what the disease, this is not the cure!*

"I don't get it."

Grandma pointed at the bottle. "I nearly left your grandfather because of that."

"No way! He didn't even drink."

"For five hell-on-earth years he did." She pulled out a chair. "Have a seat. It's time you learned something about your grandfather you never knew."

She sat across from me and took my hand. "Your grandfather and I married just after high school, two months later he was drafted and sent to Vietnam."

"The Vietnam War? I never even knew he was in the army."

"That's because he refused to talk about it after he got back, other than to say Vietnam was the closest thing to hell he ever wanted to see. For years, as soon as he got off work, he'd go to a bar, and drink. Sometimes until the place closed." She nodded to the bottle. "He called that stuff his forget-about-the-war medicine."

She sighed. "He'd get mean when he got drunk. When he got mean he got into a bar fight. When he got in a fight, I'd get a call from the police station to bail him out of jail."

Grandma sighed again. "After five years and having to bail him out three times in one week, I had enough. Once he sobered up, I pointed to that very bottle and told him, 'Decide which you want to keep, me or your medicine. Because one or the other of us is leaving you and never coming back.'"

Grandma wiped away a tear. "He begged me not to leave him. Swore he'd never drink another drop. That's when he wrote that

note, put it in this very bottle and told me, 'Stick this where I can see it every day. It'll keep me from ever taking another drink.'"

That was ten years ago. And even though I never had a problem with alcohol, I've kept Grandpa's medicine bottle. I'm a married man now with two sons of my own. There's always the chance one of my boys could come down with his great-grandpa's disease.