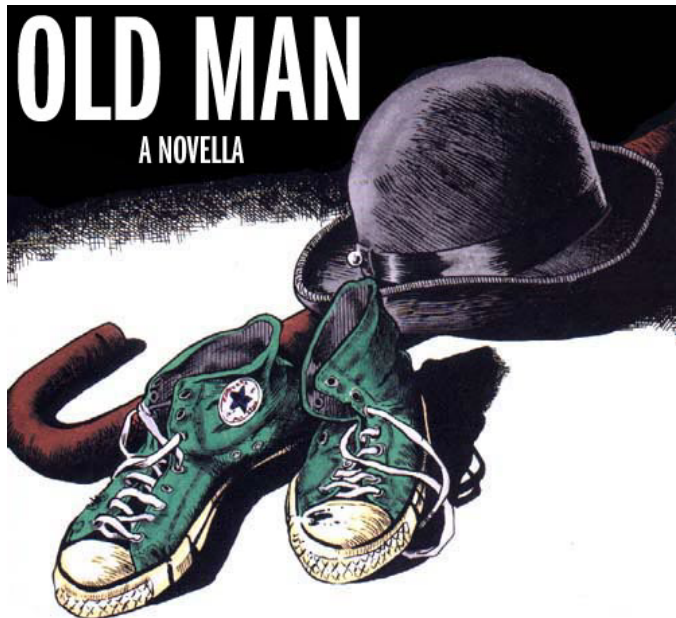


OLD MAN

A NOVELLA



In the prime of his youth,
he couldn't wait to grow old...

Christopher Gronlund

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PROLOGUE

You know you're finally old when you sit in the mall and clean your ears with your car keys. That's what I'm doing right now.

They say your ears and nose continue growing as you age. My ears and nose are still pretty small, but I have no fears of becoming the Jimmy Durante Buddha; in fact, I'm actually looking forward to it!

Phil Johnson
October 29, 1988
San Jose, California
(Age 16)

CHAPTER ONE

FOUR MONTHS EARLIER

I was in my bedroom, jumping around to a Madness album, when mom knocked on my door and came in to tell me the news. I didn't see her at first; my back was to the door. The music was loud, and I was in a groove.

“Phil?” she said, loud enough for me to hear her.

Normally, I'd have been embarrassed. There are few things as bad as one of your parents catching you doing something goofy, but I could tell by the look on her face that something big was up.

“I knocked a few times,” she said.

“Sorry about that.” I turned down the music. “Too loud?”

“No, that's okay.”

Mom sat down on my bed and patted a spot beside her—she wanted me to sit down. I ran through my head all the things I'd done, recently, wondering if I was in trouble. The worst thing I'd done is blast my music, and that's nothing. I sat down beside her.

“I just got off the phone with your grandfather...” She trailed off, like she'd forgotten what she wanted to tell me. I knew it was bad when I saw her eyes glass over—she was trying not to cry.

“The tumor's malignant,” she said.

“That's the bad one, right?”

“Yes,” she said.

I put my arm around her, hoping to offer *some* comfort. Yeah, he was my grandfather and it hit me hard, but he was *her* father. “You gonna be okay?”

“I'm not sure,” she said. “I think it may take a little time for it to sink in. How about you?”

“Yeah, I'll be all right.”

I really didn't know the guy. I mean I *did* know him,

obviously—he was Gramps to me. Like most adults in my life, aside from my mom and dad, I saw him for family things. He was always good for a birthday card with a twenty dollar bill in it, and I didn't mind talking with him when we visited or he visited us. But I only saw him on occasion.

“I'd like you to spend some time with him, Phil,” Mom said.

What could I say but *Sure*?

“He wants to take you fishing Saturday.”

“Saturday?!” I said. “I was gonna hang out with Steve.”

“I'm sorry. Can't you hang out with Steve some other time; you have all summer? It would really mean a lot to me for you to get to know him better.”

“Okay,” I said. But it wasn't okay.

Mom kissed me on my forehead. “Thanks. I'll go call him and let him know.”

When she left my room, I just sat there on my bed. I was numb. I didn't want to go fishing with my grandfather; I wanted to stick with my plans to hang out with friends. What choice did I have, though? I got up, turned the music back up, and did all I could to not punch the wall.

* * *

I didn't care how nice the weather was—I was stuck in a boat in the middle of a lake with Gramps. He sat there eating a tuna fish sandwich that he washed down with cheap, canned beer. All he did was tell jokes.

“...I never saw a goose run faster in my life!” he said, and then laughed at the punchline. I wasn't paying attention to the first part; I was doing my best to just get through the day. He laughed so hard at the goose joke that I was in his blast zone and forced to clean bits of his sandwich from my legs. Still...it was hard to believe he was full of cancer the way he laughed and carried on. I didn't understand how someone could be so close to death and still laugh.

Gramps finished his beer, crumpled the can, and tossed it to the floor of the boat. Without missing a beat, he went to his cooler for another. He popped the top and took a long sip.

“Ah!” he said. Then he looked at me. “Aren't you going to wear your hat?”

I pulled on the fishing hat he bought me for the trip and forced a smile.

“There ya go!” he said. “Hey! Did I ever tell you about the time I was fishing the Mississippi for catfish with my old buddy, John?”

“No,” I said. “But you're going to, though, right?”

“Right! You're a bright one, Philly-Boy!”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Sometimes that stopped Mom from telling a story. Sure, it also led to a lecture about being impatient and rude, but that was still usually better than the story.

“Well let me tell you,” Gramps said, “this ain't just another fish story. We were fishing for catfish. Mississippi cats can get big—bigger than a linebacker! The tip of ol' John's rod goes down—BAM!”

I jumped.

“He tried reeling in, but nothing,” Gramps said. “Just a snag. The Army Corps of Engineers had a frogman in the water, running stress tests on a bridge not too far away. I called him over, tossed him a stick, and asked if he could go down and jiggle ol' John's line loose.

“He dove down, came back up a minute later, and said, 'Hell, boys, that ain't no snag. You got one of the biggest catfish I've

ever seen on the end of your line. Sucker's holed up in an old wrecked car down there; that's why it's not budging.'

"I said, 'Well, can you go back down and try scaring it out? Or poke it with the stick?'"

"And the frogman says, 'I did, but every time I do, the damn thing rolls up the window!'"

Gramps lost it, laughing more than he did at any other joke he'd told up to that point. I didn't—I was busy brushing bits of his sandwich from my shirt!

"It's a joke," he said. "Laugh!"

I fidgeted with my fishing pole, instead.

"What's wrong?" Gramps said.

"I dunno. I guess I just wish we'd catch some fish or something."

"How come?"

"Cause we're fishing."

Gramps laughed again. "That's not what fishing's really about, Philly-Boy! Fishing's about drinking beer and shooting the breeze! Fish would only mess things up."

I was happy when the day was over and Gramps dropped me off at home. I gave Gramps a half-hearted wave when he beeped his horn to say goodbye and headed in. From the living room, I heard mom say, “How'd it go, kiddo?”

I wandered in, and mom and dad could tell by my look that I wasn't enthused.

“That good, huh?” Dad said.

I felt bad, but I couldn't hide it. “Yeah.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Dad said. My dad is a psychologist, so he always wants to talk. It works for Mom—they are the perfect yuppie couple: younger looking than their years and not afraid to talk about their feelings. Me? Not so much.

“Nah, I think I'm good,” I said. “I'm gonna head to bed.”

Have you ever noticed how once you say yes to something, it keeps coming back?

The next day I was chatting on the phone with my friend, Steve, telling him about how much fishing with Gramps sucked. I told him about the fishing hat and how I left it in the car. Steve told me I didn't miss much hanging out, but that next weekend he was

having a party because his parents were out of town and leaving his older brother in charge. He told me this girl I really like, Samantha Taylor, was going to be there. Of course right at that moment there was a knock on my door. I told Steve I'd call him back and hung up the phone.

“Yeah?” I said.

Mom poked her head in and said, “There's someone here to see you.”

She opened the door, and Gramps stepped in.

“Heya, Philly-Boy!”

“Hi, Gramps.”

Mom said, “I'll leave you two alone,” and wandered off, leaving me staring at Gramps. He stared back—talk about awkward silence! I noticed he had his hand behind his back.

“You forgot this last night,” he said. He pulled the fishing hat he got me from behind his back and tossed it my way. I didn't try catching it; I let it hit my knee and fall to the floor.

“I was talking to your mom about an idea I had,” Gramps said.

“What's that?”

“You and me going camping for a few days.”

I didn't say a thing.

He continued. “I've got some time next weekend. I was thinking we can head out somewhere...be regular Davy Crocketts.”

“Mom!” I yelled.

“Look, if you'd rather not, I understand,” Gramps said. I immediately felt like crap; I could tell his feelings were really hurt.

“I don't want this to sound like a guilt trip,” he said, “but there's really nothing the doctor's can do. I don't want my last days to be spent in pain trying to prolong the inevitable. I just want to spend a little time with you. I may not feel up to it down the line.”

That *really* made me feel like crap. I don't know if I'd ever seen a person look more sad than Gramps at that moment.

Mom poked her head back in and said, “Did you call me, Phil?”

I had no choice. “Yeah,” I said. “I just wanted to tell you...I'm going camping with Gramps next weekend.”

CHAPTER TWO

Just because I agreed to go camping with Gramps didn't mean I was happy about it. The first day was just like the weekend before: sitting in a boat listening to Gramps babble and tell jokes. The least he could have done is give me a beer or something. We at least caught some fish, which Gramps showed me how to clean. I couldn't get the smell off my hands, but I gotta admit, cooking the fish over the campfire was fun. Tasted good, too.

After dinner, Gramps lit a cigar and cracked open a beer.

“Ah! Ain't this the life?” he said while examining the end of the cigar. “Now that I'm sick, I plan on smoking as many of these

damn things as I want. I think I'll see how many I can smoke in a day, just for kicks!"

While dinner was good, I still wasn't in the mood to talk.

"Hey, have I told you the goose joke?" Gramps said.

"Yeah. Twice."

"I see. You're hating this, aren't you?"

"Nah."

"Sure you are," he said. "Nothing wrong with that. You could probably be out running with the boys or hanging out with a pretty girl, but you're stuck camping with your sick old grandpa instead. If you aren't having fun, I can take you home."

I looked away, at the setting sun.

Gramps stood up. "I think we should get you home."

I don't know why or where it came from, but I said, "What's it like?"

"Huh?" Gramps said.

"What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Cancer," I said.

Gramps sat back down.

“Hmm. I haven't given it much thought,” he said. “I imagine when I feel it a bit more I'll think about it, but all I've felt so far is a little weakness.”

“Does it make you think about your life a little more?” I said.

“Not yet, if you mean do I think about dying?”

“Yeah.”

“I think about dying sometimes—yeah.”

“Does it scare you?” I said.

“Not anymore. It used to when I was younger.”

Gramps balanced his cigar on a rock and shifted to his left. He lifted the right side of his shirt, revealing a huge mass of scar tissue.

“You see that?” he said while pointing from his armpit to his knee. “That's what a mortar can do to you if you're lucky. You don't want to see what they can do to the unlucky ones. You know I was in World War II, right?”

“Yeah, Mom's mentioned it.”

“A lot of people died in the war and it was my job to take the pictures. Sometimes it was quick—other times it was slow. But it was never pretty. Except once.”

Aw, hell, he was gonna tell another story!

“There was this old winemaker in France,” he said. “We were waiting for orders and he was kind enough to let us stay on his vineyard, even though it could have sealed his fate. He gave us wine and bread, and every once in a while, he'd drink with us.

“He'd get really drunk and make up songs about the Nazis. None of us understood a word he said, except for one guy in the unit who spoke broken French. He told us the old man swore a lot when he was drunk and that he liked us.

I have to admit, the story beat hearing the goose joke again.

“Every morning the old guy got up and tended to things around the vineyard,” Gramps said. “He was all alone and didn't have any help. We always offered to pitch in, but he told us we needed our rest. He did all the work himself, and you could tell he wouldn't have had it any other way.

“Every afternoon he'd take some cheese, bread, and wine and go eat lunch under this tree on a hill that overlooked the vineyard. I was beautiful up there—you'd never guess there was a war being fought in the country from the looks of things. After he ate, he took a nap.”

Gramps picked up his cigar and puffed on it, keeping it alive.

“One day the winemaker took his nap and never woke up,” Gramps said. “When we found him, he was smiling. After all I had seen, it was nice seeing someone die in peace. That was the day I knew there had to be a way to live life while not fearing death. We buried the old man under his tree and toasted him with a bottle of his wine.”

Gramps had me hooked. I turned toward him and leaned in, hanging on his every word..

“A week later the Germans moved in and his vineyard was destroyed by shelling. We held them off awhile, but they kept coming. We had no choice but to retreat to the east. As we moved away, I turned and looked back.

“Everything around us was gone, except that hill and that tree...this perfect green finger rising above the charred land and pointing toward a bright blue sky.”

“Wow.” It's all I could say.

“That's what I said. Later in the war when I got hit by the mortar, I was terrified. I thought, 'This is really it, Ben—you're

going to die!' I thought about the winemaker and tried forcing a smile like he did when he died. But I couldn't."

"Why not?" I said.

"Cause I wasn't ready to go; there was still a lot I wanted to do. I'm sure it was easy for the winemaker because he lived his life. I felt cheated though! I was so mad that I couldn't let myself slip away. I fought harder than I've ever fought for anything, and I've never been a fan of taking the easy route. Because I fought, I got the chance to do the things I wanted. And I haven't feared dying since."

I felt like I should have gotten the point, but I didn't. I mean, I knew what Gramps was saying, but I didn't feel it. He could tell.

He looked right at me and said, "At some point in your life, Phil, you have to die in order to live. I'm not saying run out and take a mortar in the side; it can be something as simple as facing and overcoming your fears. You just let go of all the little concerns and realize that life's a big gift, even when it may not seem that way. When you're no longer afraid, that's when you spend the rest of your life living—not thinking about dying."

He took another puff off his cigar and tossed it in the fire, even though he'd barely smoked it.

“Well, I think I'm gonna turn in—you know how it is with us old fogies. You coming?”

“I think I'm gonna stay up a bit,” I said. “Watch the fire.”

“All right. Goodnight, Philly-Boy.”

CHAPTER THREE

I didn't make it to the tent that night; I slept beside the fire ring, warmed by the coals. I would have probably kept sleeping had Gramps not started the fire back up to make breakfast. I had stayed up late, thinking about what Gramps had said. All the things that scared me—things like tests and what people thought about me—were nothing when compared to taking a side full of shrapnel from a mortar. That's not to say that my concerns about things weren't valid, but Gramps's story made me think about how I let things get to me that I probably shouldn't have let get to me. I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

“Good morning, sunshine!” Gramps said. “Slow riser, eh? I’ve got something to get you going.”

He extended his finger to me. “Pull my finger!”

Without thinking, I did—and Gramps let loose with a fart so loud, I’m surprised birds didn’t scatter from the treetops! Gramps grinned and I laughed. That’s all it took for the two of us to end up hysterical, holding our guts laughing and struggling for air. Finally, Gramps regained his composure and handed me a cup of coffee. I took a sip.

“Whoa, that’s strong,” I said.

“Yep! Put hair on your chest. You’ll need it, we have a big day ahead.”

He wasn’t kidding. We went fishing again, and I didn’t even mind the times the fish weren’t biting. Hell, I even wore the fishing hat without being asked! We hiked through the woods; I was surprised that Gramps was able to make it up some of the bigger hills along the coast. Sure, he was winded at the top of some of the steeper climbs, but so was I. He seemed to know what every bird we saw was, and did a good job mimicking their calls. Back at camp near the lake, we skipped stones and chatted while looking

out over the water, watching all the fish that weren't biting taunt us with their jumping.

As I helped Gramps cook dinner, it hit me: being old wasn't so bad. You could do damn-near anything you wanted and get away with it. Up until that point in my life, I thought growing older meant getting a decent job and preparing yourself for a secure retirement like Mom and Dad talked about. But I was wrong. Growing old meant the freedom to do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted. It meant reaching an age when what others thought meant nothing and contentment was a stranger's tug on the end of your finger and a quick release of gas!

* * *

The next morning when Gramps came out of the tent, I was stirring the embers from the previous night's fire with a stick.

“Did you sit here all night?” Gramps said.

“Yeah. I dozed a little, here and there, but I was mainly up. Thinking.”

“About what?”

“All kinds of stuff,” I said. “Just how it has to be neat to be old.”

“How so?”

“All the stories you have. And all that wisdom. I wish I were old like you.”

“Just because you're old, Philly-Boy, doesn't mean you're wise. Wisdom doesn't come with old age. It starts with youth; it comes from growing up. It's all about learning from your mistakes along the way.”

“But what if somebody really wise told all their secrets to somebody younger who was receptive and wanted to understand? What if the younger person really listened and learned?”

“You can listen all you want,” Gramps said, “but it's the experience that really matters. Take people who read a book and suddenly consider themselves an authority on a subject.”

Gramps pointed to the sunrise. We couldn't see the sun, but we could see it coloring all the clouds high above the trees in so many colors.

“Take a look at that,” he said. “You can all the books in the world and listen to stories about how beautiful sunrises and sunsets are, but to truly understand their beauty, you have to see them first hand. No words can describe that.”

I wasn't about to give up. "But if you read about them and heard stories, when you finally see a good one, you'd know more about them than people who didn't have a head start. Right?"

"Where's the fun in that? The fun's in the discovery. You know something? In all my years of taking pictures, I never took a picture of a sunrise or sunset. It's just one of those things you can't truly capture. It's a picture you take with your heart; all you can do is feel it."

His stomach grumbled.

"Right now, I'm feeling hungry," he said. "Help me get the fire going?"

That day was almost exactly like the day before, only when Gramps went into the cooler for another beer while fishing, he came out with *two* cans. The fish were also biting; in the process of reeling one in, I spilled my beer after only a few sips. Gramps joked that it was such a travesty, that I was clearly not old enough to handle my liquor, and that was it.

On our hike, while Gramps was trying to mimic the calls of a sandpiper on the beach below (he said he liked them because they reminded him of the sound one of his camera auto winders made),

we saw a golden eagle. I'd never seen anything like that before. I saw it first, and pointed it out to Gramps, who told me what it was. We were high enough up on the trail, and just enough in the trees to get a great view. It turned our way and then flew along the trees above the beach. It came by so close that we could hear it cutting through the wind. I was speechless.

“Can reading a book make you feel like that?” Gramps said.
Point taken.

* * *

I slept beside the fire again, and was up before Gramps. I had the fire going and coffee brewing when he came out of the tent. We made blueberry pancakes and drank coffee while stretching the remains of a good night's sleep from our limbs. I kept looking up at Gramps.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing.”

He returned to eating, and I kept looking at him here and there. He looked up, ready to speak, but I beat him.

“Gramps, can you teach me how to be an old man?”

“Huh?” He definitely wasn't expecting *that* question.

“Can you teach me how to be an old man? I want to know what it feels like?”

“Hell, I can tell you that! You pee more often, even though it takes longer to start, and you creak—that's how it feels,” he said.

“No...”

“Yes, trust me, Phil. I'm not even done with this coffee and I'm ready for a stroll over behind the bushes, there. And watch this.”

He stretched; when he did, sure enough, he creaked and popped.

“That's not what I mean,” I said. “I've been thinking about this plan I came up with all night. It's kind of goofy, though.”

“What's that?”

“Well...if you teach me everything you know about being an old man, at sixteen, I'd have the wisdom of a 64-year-old. That's a great head start! Then, when I'm actually 64, I'll be as wise as a 112-year-old!”

“It doesn't work like that, Phil,” he said. “Trust me. Have fun being a kid. There are a lot of old people who would do anything to relive their youth.”

Gramps's tone suddenly changed. He furrowed his eyebrows and said, "You're not doing this because it's a way to hold onto me after I die, are you?"

"No!" I said, even though I suppose that's what I was doing. "I just want to know what it's like, that's all."

"To really know what it's like, you need to wait and just let it happen. You'd be missing out on a lot of stuff. What about your first love? There's got to be someone you have a crush on?"

"Well, there's this girl named Samantha I like..."

"You should ask her to go out with you, then! Give that a go before trying to be something you're not. I hardly think Samantha is going to be interested in you if you're acting like a 64-year-old man. Loving relationships are an important part of growing old, and that first love is a great thing. Don't rob yourself of that."

"I'll get to spend more time with you," I said. You'd think I'd slapped him the way it made him stop and look at me.

"You're stubborn, like your mother. I don't know how your father deals with *two* of you..."

He looked at the fire for a moment, and then looked back up at me. He smiled.

“Ah, what the hell! Don't think I'm gonna do this because I think it'll work, though. It's a neat idea, and in the end, I think you'll learn a thing or two. Probably not what you're expecting, but that's probably good.”

I was shaking my leg in anticipation. Gramps leaned over and slapped me on the shoulder, and then leaned back with his hands wrapped around his coffee mug, hugging it to his chest.

“Lesson one, Phill-Boy: relax!” He savored the steam rising from the mug. “Kick back and take it easy. That's an important lesson for any age, let alone us 64-year olds...”

* * *

I was bummed when the day was over and Gramps dropped me off at home. I gave Gramps an enthusiastic wave when he beeped his horn to say goodbye. I watched his car go all the way up the road until it disappeared from view, and then I headed in. From the living room, I heard mom say, “How'd it go, kiddo?”

I ran into the living room. “Great! Gramps is so cool!” I said. “He's gonna teach me how to be an old man!”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Gronlund helps and entertains people by moving words around pages and screens. His writing has appeared in newspapers, magazines, comic books, and the Web. He lives with his wife somewhere between Dallas and Ft. Worth, Texas.

Christopher blogs at thejugglingwriter.com. You can listen to him read his first novel, *Hell Comes with Wood Paneled Doors* for free or buy the ebook at roadtripfromhell.com.