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# My Grandfather's Dinosaur

John McDonnell Tierney, Ph.D.



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# Prologue

On the occasion of Sarah MacMurphy's one-hundredth birthday, five generations of MacMurphys, Callahans, Finnegans, Griffins, O'Learys, and Mulligans gathered in a stew of humanity all of whom had direct and common ancestry with Sarah.

On a cold Winter Solstice Eve in the year 2097, Sarah's children; their children; their children's children; and, their children's children's children convened to listen to Sarah speak of her life.

When everyone was quiet and with the youngest of her offspring sitting at her feet, she began...

## Sarah's Story

The advantage of being one hundred years old is that you have a lot of stories to tell. The disadvantage is that you've already told all your stories to anybody who would listen! Or, anyone who'd listen thinks they've already heard all your stories. Well, *I am* one hundred years old today, and you young people have asked me to speak of my life. So, I will tell you a story because the youngest among you have asked for one and the rest of you think you have heard them all.

You have not. Only the ghosts in this room have heard the story of my Grandfather's Dinosaur!



It was the day after my fifth birthday, nearly ninety-five years ago today. I was awakened that morning to the sounds of the chain saws. Father and Grampa Ned were cutting the huge trees in the dark forest where leprechauns and other mischievous sprites lived in the day and from where they emerged at night to steal little children from their beds.

Grampa Ned was very big and very strong, so he and Father (who was also very big and very strong) were not afraid of Leprechauns. They cut each of the huge trees with indifference. I remember being quite amazed at how quickly each of the great trees fell. Grampa Ned would make three cuts, two on one side and one on the other, bringing a mighty oak or white-spotted maple to the ground.

Throughout the whole day the cutting sounds continued, *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ* the first cut, and without hesitation and only a slight dip in pitch, *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ* the second cut! Then, Grampa Ned would whip around to the other side of each victim tree, and *ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ* the third cut!

Each of the great trees came down in a cacophony of crackles, crunches, crashes and commiserations from a variety of annoyed leprechauns, elves, fairies, pixies, sprites, and fire-breathing dragons, not to mention the dreaded Banshee who had the previous spring come and taken Gramma Callahan away in his night-black carriage drawn by four night-black horses!

I did not actually see Gramma Callahan boarding the Banshee's carriage, but I was sure that she had. In fact, she had herself told me many times that this would indeed come to pass. And, as far as I could tell, at only five years old, it had! No other explanation had been provided for her continuing absence, and so I was satisfied with Gramma's own explanation.

I was a precocious child and some times imagined beyond my years. Even at five years old, I could not help wondering where was the Banshee to go after transporting Gramma Callahan to wherever it was she had gone? Was the Banshee so busy with such transportations that he was continually ferrying legions a Grammas to wherever Grammas went when they no longer were attending Sunday dinners? That was hard to imagine. I only knew a few Grammas personally and wasn't sure how many more there could be. No, the Banshee had to live somewhere and I could think of no more better or more mysterious place than a dark forest.

The work continued throughout the day as I began to piece together an understanding of what was happening! There was to be a great fire that night. Many people would come. There would be eating and drinking (and dancing if Uncle Fergus brought his fiddle). And, as I predicted, there was a great fire. It came from the center of a mountain of branches, each broken, turned, and twisted by its fall from grace. I had not seen anyone light it so I imagined the fire was caused by the few remaining fire-breathing dragons that still inhabited the wood.

*Oh? I see you smiling! You're laughing because you think I'm old and that I believe fire-breathing dragons live in woodpiles! Ha! I am old but I'm not a fool! I know that Father lit that great fire, but back then, as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing, I had another perception, another view of the world and it is that view that I am taking now.*

*Yes, yes...you're "sorry"; well then...be quiet and listen.*

I remember being astounded by the flames reaching high into the night sky. The heat, greater than I had ever known, forced me to withdraw into the shadowed periphery (where the dancers were not all human, I was quite sure of that).

From my vantage point, not too deep in the shadows, I watched my predictions come true. Uncle Fergus scratched the bow along the strings of his old Irish fiddle, faster and faster. The dancers whirled 'round the blaze and built a great thirst in the doing of it, for if they were not dancing, they were drinking; and, if they were not drinking, they were singing and laughing; and, the more they drank, the more they danced and sung and laughed! I remember Grampa Ned taking me from the shadows and lifting me up into his strong arms. He carried me 'round the fire in the heat of the dance and he sang to me in a rich baritone, smooth and liquid, filled with energy and humor. Grampa Ned danced and sang and laughed and I giggled until my tummy hurt. That was the last thing I remembered clearly: the music, the fire, Grampa Ned singing in my ear.



When I awoke the next morning and surveyed the devastation from the tree cutting and branch burning, I was amazed. The dark forest, still smoldering from the great fire the night before, was a fit home for neither beast nor Banshee; the dark forest was no longer. In its place were many fallen trees, looking quite different now, stripped of their branches and twigs. Now, from my bedroom window on the second floor, they seemed just long, large sticks, not looking so great and mighty but rather diminutive, like the plastic toys with which I played. And, next to each fallen tree, there was a stump still firmly anchored to the ground.

The dark forest was forever changed and forever different.

The days passed, the months passed. I, busy with being five years old, stopped noticing the fallen trees and field of stumps. And so, on that early spring day when Grampa Ned came by to talk with Father, I did not connect his visit with the formerly dark forest but saw it as an opportunity to listen to his stories. (And, *I* was a good listener!)

On that day, he did not tell me a story but walked with Father out among the fallen trees and standing stumps. Father would point to this tree or that stump and Grampa Ned would shake his head up and down. Yes, he could do something; but, what?

When the men returned to the house, they spoke of how hard the ground would be the next day. I did not understand why that seemed important, but I did gather that, if the ground were hard, Grampa Ned would return to remove the many fallen trees and standing stumps.

As I have said, Grampa Ned was a very big man and a very strong man, but I found it hard to imagine that he could carry away these very large trees and pull these stumps from the ground. And so, I was very relieved when he said to Father, “Dinah and I will be here first thing in the morning if the ground is hard enough so she won’t sink. She’ll make short work of the trees and stumps!”

I was glad Grampa Ned would not have to do it by himself. Someone named Dinah was coming and, I remember thinking, she must surely be very, very fat if Grampa Ned worried that she might sink into the ground. That would have been a very funny sight but, overall, a bad idea to have a very fat lady sunk in your mud, especially if she did not sink all the way but just half way and became a permanent residence herself for who knows what kind of mischief-makers. I slept that night imagining Grampa Ned and Dinah, his corpulent assistant, clearing the dark forest of the remnants of its former glory.

I awoke in the morning to rumbles and growling like I had never heard before. Imagine my utter astonishment when I looked out the window and saw Grampa Ned sitting on the back of the biggest Dinosaur I had ever seen!

*Oh? You laugh at an old woman again, you “adults!”*

*Your children are not laughing; they are listening!*

*That’s better. Now where was I? Oh, yes...*

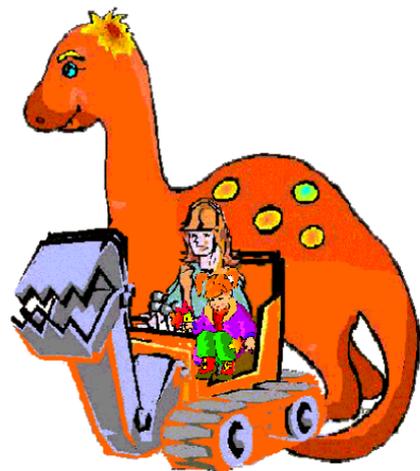
When I was five years old, I thought I knew a lot about dinosaurs, not just the fuzzy purple variety either! I had been to the museum with my Kindergarten class; I had played with tiny plastic replicas, I had seen them on the television looking quite real, although I did not care for the real toothy beasts who looked much too much like the various monsters that had been evicted from the dark forest in the first place. I liked the big, hulking plant eating dinosaurs and everything in my five years of experience told me that was what I was seeing!

In my five-year-old imagination, Dinah was a Dinosaur and Grampa Ned was riding on her back as she dipped to take the formerly mighty oaks and formerly white-spotted maples in her mouth to carry them to his truck where she dropped them with a great bang and boom. And, when all the fallen trees were on the truck, Dinah would reach down and bite hard onto a stump, yanking it violently out of the earth. She would raise it up high in the air and she would shake her great head back and forth as the dirt and dust would fall to the ground. She would play with a stump, dropping it over and over, only to pick it up, shake and drop again. I imagined that Dinah just liked to watch the dirt fall from the tangled roots, because when most of the dirt had shaken loose, she would drop the stump on a pile of other now dirtless stumps and go off in search of ones with more dirt.

When Grampa Ned left that night, there were still many stumps left for Dinah to pull. I supposed that was why Grampa Ned left Dinah sleeping there in the formerly dark forest, obviously very tired from her hard day's work.

Work began early the next day. I watched from the back porch, only a few yards from where Grampa Ned rode upon Dinah as the great beast played joyfully with the stumps and shook clouds of dirt to the ground. Grampa Ned smiled and laughed for he truly enjoyed riding upon Dinah's back.

Then, much to my surprise, Grampa Ned yelled, "Come ride up here with me, Colleen!" Grampa Ned lifted me up onto Dinah's back and I sat happily next to him. For the rest of the afternoon, Grampa Ned and I rode upon Dinah's back as she would pull the stumps, and raise the stumps, and shake the stumps, and drop the stumps until they had no more dirt to drop and the pile of stumps was almost as big as the pile of branches that made the great fire on the previous Winter Solstice Eve.



By sunset, the last of the fallen trees lay on Grampa Ned's long truck and the last of the dirtless stumps lay upon their funeral pyre. Dinah at last did rest and fell silent in her fatigue (for she had indeed worked very hard these two days.) It was then, just when Grampa Ned was about let me down from the sleeping beast, that I asked him what seemed to me a very obvious question, "Is Dinah a *real* Dinosaur?" Grampa Ned did not answer. He would start to answer, but he would always stop and be silent. So, we were both were silent.

*And now, I will tell the part that was most amazing to me and I will ask you children to show your parents how to listen...and believe.*

Grampa Ned had been quiet for a long time when I felt the movement. I wasn't sure at first, maybe he was shifting as I sat upon his lap, but when it happened again, I knew it wasn't Grampa Ned; it was Dinah! The movements were not at all Dinosaur-like, they were gentle, like the shrugs Old Nick the hound dog would make as he half slept, shrugs that just let me know he did not want to play.

Grampa Ned reached down and touched Dinah's back. He left his hand there for a while, not speaking. Dinah moved again, I felt it and I knew that Grampa Ned felt it too! The nudge was soft, it was gentle, barely perceptible, but it was there. Grampa Ned looked down at Dinah and smiled. He shook his head up and down very slightly as if agreeing and I, at only five years old, sensed that some wonderful thing was about to happen.

Grampa Ned spoke very quietly to me as though telling a very, very important secret. No one but I would have heard him here high up on Dinah's back, but still he whispered. "Yes, Colleen. Dinah is a real Dinosaur." This of course did not surprise me, and I thought it a very nice thing. After all, how many children had Grandfathers who owned real Dinosaurs?

Grampa Ned's face changed then. He became serious and spoke in a deep voice, like the one he used when he told Father that the Banshee had come for Gramma Callahan.

“Would you like to hear a story, Colleen?” It seemed to me a strange place for a story, sitting there on the back of a Dinosaur. But, Dinah was very quite by then and I so loved to hear Grampa Ned’s stories...like when he and his horse were chased by a swarm of killer bees and he had to dive into a deep river to save himself and when he came out he found that his poor horse had been eaten down to the bone by the bees! I always kind of knew he was making-up these stories, but at that age you’re willing to suspend reality for a while and believe the unbelievable.

And so, all you children and parents, believe at least that I believed when Grampa Ned told me his most wonderful story; how Dinah had come to him in his dreams when a little boy and beckoned him to ride up her back, and how the dreams continued until he had grown to be a man. Dinah would come to him and say, “Come ride, Ned! I will make you strong! We will pull ancient stumps from the ground and shake the dirt from their tangled roots. You and I can do anything you can imagine!”

And then one day, when he was fully a man, Grampa Ned went to a place where very great machines were sold, machines that could move mountains. And there, living amid the excavators and bulldozers and the many other great machines, was Dinah disguised as a great machine herself. But Grampa Ned recognized her when he heard her call to him. “Ned, it’s me! It’s me... Dinah. Take me out of here! Take me home and we will play together like in our dreams!”

Grampa Ned did take her home and, for many years after that he and Dinah pulled many ancient stumps from the ground and shook the dirt from their tangled roots. But, surprisingly, no one else but Grampa Ned had ever noticed, until now that is, that Dinah was not a machine at all, but was in fact a real dinosaur! In the beginning he told everybody about Dinah; that Dinah was real! But then after a while, Grampa Ned said with a sadness in his voice, people started making fun of him, calling him things like “imaginative” and “creative” and “delusional!” So, he decided it was much better if everybody else just went on thinking Dinah was an excavator. I guess that was why Grampa Ned was so surprised when I too saw the truth.

“Colleen,” Grampa Ned said quietly and not at all in the voice of an adult talking to a child, “Dinah truly is a real Dinosaur. I am telling you this now and asking you to remember when you are old, because when people get old, they forget the truths they knew when they were children; they find other explanations for magic. So Colleen, when you are old and you think maybe Dinah was not a real Dinosaur; maybe Dinah was just a machine like other people said, or maybe your old Grampa Ned really was “imaginative” and “creative” and “delusional”...when you think these things, remember this...”

Grampa Ned took my hand, gently placed it on Dinah’s back, and said quietly, “Dinah, tell Sarah you are real.” At first I expected a great booming voice...but there was no booming voice, there was no voice at all.

I barely felt it at first, a little ripple, a little pulse. I remember focusing on the feeling under my hand... thump... thump... thump-da-thump-da-thump. I had felt that before...I had felt it inside Old Nick as I lay on his belly; I had felt it in my Mother as she held me; I had felt it within myself.

And now, my own heart beat in cadence with the heart of the great beast. Dinah was real all right! Dinah had a heart and both Grampa Ned and I thrilled to its pulse.

Grampa Ned spoke quietly, “When you have touched the heart of a Dinosaur, you are changed forever. Now, Colleen, remember, people may not believe you if you tell them about Dinah. They will think you are making up a story.”

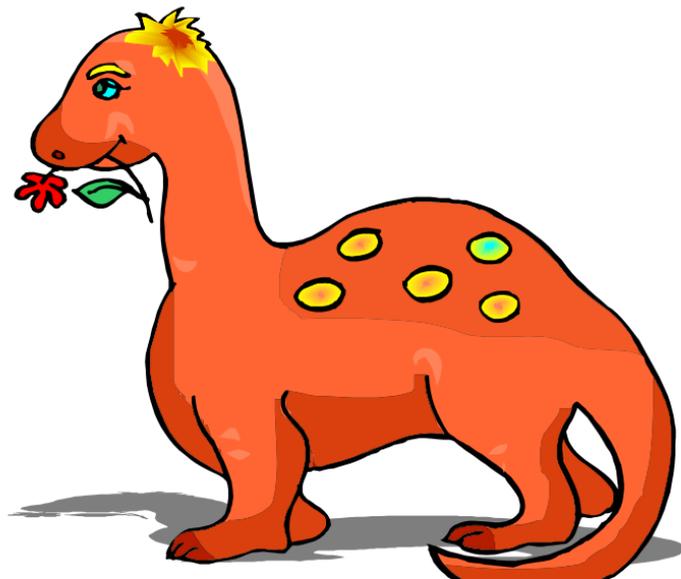
“But why,” I asked perplexed, “Dinah is real...she is!” And then whispering in my ear, Grampa Ned said something I did not understand until many, many years later.

He said, “Yes, Dinah is real, but she’s *my* personal reality!”

You may say that Dinah really was just a machine, not at all real. But to Grampa Ned and me, she *was* real, and for many years thereafter I remembered my ride on Dinah's back and how it felt to touch the heart of a Dinosaur. These were the beliefs of childhood and I did believe. But when I grew to be an adult like you, I let go of childish beliefs, and I forgot about Dinah.

It has been many years since I sat next to Grampa Ned and rode upon Dinah, and it has been many years since I have spoken of my experience. You young people live in your own personal realities, making sense of things that do not make to sense to me, and I am just a very old storyteller. But I will tell you this, that after riding a Dinosaur at five years old, the next ninety-five years were not so tough. Imagined or real, when you have touched the heart of a Dinosaur, you are changed forever.

I can see on your faces that you do not believe my story, but I know that you enjoyed hearing it and that is enough for me. I ask only one thing, grant me “my personal reality” and when I have heard the call of the Banshee, do not forget the story of my Grandfather’s Dinosaur!



## Epilogue

On the night of her one-hundredth birthday, on a cold Winter Solstice Eve in the year 2097, Sarah MacMurphy joined her Grampa Ned and the many ghosts who had listened to her story that day.

Only the children of the MacMurphy clan believed that she had boarded a night-black carriage and had been driven away by four night-black horses. So, as you can imagine, they were quite surprised to see in the early fallen snow on that solstice morning, not the tracks of the Banshee's carriage, but four very large indentations, looking curiously like the footprints of a plant eating dinosaur!



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