

RED TRUCK PREFACE

by Jane F. Lee

William Berry Archer Sr., my grandfather, died when he was 51 and I was nine. He wasn't a perfect man, but he was perfect to me. My heart remembers him vividly. He and my grand mother were the first to show me love. Amazing that my grandfather found space to bond with me since my grandmother was all encompassing. Amazing that my memories are so deeply felt because I was very young when he passed.

My slim grandfather had golden bronze skin, dark brown hair and deep brown eyes. His lineage was likely responsible for that tiny bit of Creek Indian in my DNA. He was a lumberman in South Georgia. He loved trees and wood and building furniture. When I was three he took me to his chaotic and loud sawmill. I would play gleefully in the 30-foot tall piles of moist sawdust that collected under the massive wood planer where pine, oak and cypress trees were turned into lumber. I'd return home, much to my grandmother's dismay, with sawdust in the cuffs of my brown corduroy pants and itchy red spots on my tiny waist where sticky bits caught under the too tight elastic waistband. She'd get after my grandfather for letting her precious and only grandchild play unsupervised, in that dangerous place.

My grandfather made wooden toys for me. He created yellow rocking horses with long-lashed white eyes and an enormous green Noah's Arc with hand painted pairs of all the animals. The largest and most long lasting of his creations was a seven-foot tall giraffe siding board painted bright orange-yellow with huge black eyes and large brown spots. This giraffe was made from cypress so it lasted 30 years - long enough for my brother, sister and daughter to slide down in sheer joy.

At night my grandfather would read me Uncle Remus stories* in the deep-rooted Southern vernacular. Amidst the chaos in my life and unpacking from a move, I can easily put my hand on that precious, tattered red book. The stories often ended when Brer Rabbit had angered a bear or fox. Brer Rabbit said that they could drown him as deep as they wanted or chop off his foot, but for "de Lor'd sake, don't fling me in dat brier-patch." The bear or fox always flung Brer Rabbit into the brier-patch. Then Brer Rabbit happily bounce around in the briars, laughing and saying he was born and bred in a briar patch.

Not long ago, I was suffering from ending a 40-year relationship and reeling from sudden banishment. I was no longer welcome in the beautiful, serene place that I called home for many years. I was scared, anxious and desperately searching for a place to go. Fortunately, through dear friends, I found a community called Sawmill. Not only did the Sawmill name call out to me, but I was told that my street name, Mis Abuelitos, is Spanish for little grandfather. I knew immediately I was in the right place. When I discovered the translation was actually little grandparents, my grandmother whispered, "Did you think he found your home all by himself?" I must have been bred in a sawmill. Maybe this means that your get what you need when you pay attention to signs.

My little grandfather has always been with me, hidden somewhere in my psyche, my soul. He sends messages to me when I pay attention. Which leads me to the Red Truck story. A story I thought was about my brother. It's about all my family and so much more.

RED TRUCK©

In August 1993, my brother, John, was in the hospital again. He had AIDS, but this time his doctor didn't know what was causing the unrelenting headaches or why he'd collapsed in his office a few days before. I talked with John on the phone every day. He was not getting better. Then he stopped answering.

John had recently moved from Los Angeles to Miami. I hated his move, so far away from me in California. Only a month before when my sister visited him, she confirmed he had gained weight, was working out every day and preparing for law school in the fall. New test results from his Miami doctor reported only minor issues from his illness. John had been HIV positive for several years. That spring he received a full blown AIDS diagnosed after a short bout with *Pneumocystis Carinii*. I remembered holding him as he sobbed one sunny afternoon on an isolated California beach. My brother admitted he was afraid and so was I. I thought I had a solution for everything, but not this time. Grief and helplessness overwhelmed both of us.

When John didn't answer the phone in his hospital room, I had no way to reach him. I was worried and desperate. After five calls to hospital reception, several recordings and a few real people who had less information than the recordings, someone said he was in stable condition. She suggested I call the floor nurse. I tried in vain to reach her. I gave up and called my parents.

John had been estranged from my parents for years. He'd been adamant about not wanting them at the hospital. He was fine, he said. He'd call if he needed us. That was typical of my strong-willed brother. After reaching John's doctor, my parents were in shock. It was happening so fast. The doctor said my brother had lost his sight and use of his legs. He might have cancer. Because of their relationship struggle, my mother tentatively asked if I thought it would be OK with John for them to visit. "Definitely," I said, "and tell him not to be afraid." My parents left for the long drive to Miami and I scheduled a flight as soon as possible. I couldn't eat, sleep or think straight.

How could my baby brother be dying at thirty-five? Why would this devoted doctor suggest cancer? Was my brother actually blind and paralyzed when he was seemingly healthy a month ago? Little was known about AIDS and its progression in 1993. Doctors didn't understand the seesaw of AIDS-related sickness and health but we all knew there was no effective treatment or cure.

Over lunch with a savvy friend, I shared my grief and anxiety. He gently said to me, "This is not about you. He is gifting you with his death process." I was stunned and later, grateful. I wanted to be there for John, to help him and to hold his hand, even if that was all I could do.

I knew the next days would be the most challenging of my life. Feeling helpless, I needed a healing place where I could nourish my body and fortify my soul before this painful trip. The nearby Esalen Institute came to mind. Maybe I could forget my worries for a while.

At Esalen, a petite topless masseuse greeted me with a blast of powerful energy. I lay on her table in the fresh air as the Pacific Ocean crashed below me and the early morning sun caressed my nude body. She began to work my back and shoulders. My body was tense with helplessness and fear.

My distress translated into a resistant and rigid body. "Come on," I said to myself, "it's OK to relax for a moment." The masseuse worked methodically on my stubborn flesh. As she began humming soothing tones I felt myself drifting with the waves. Visualizing the ocean in my mind's eye, I saw a tiny, old red truck floating in the distant, glittering water. That red truck wouldn't go away.

Funny red truck. Ahhh. I'm finally letting go. Exceptional massage, I thought as I drifted into quiet bliss. After waking from this tranquil state and dragging myself off the table, I sank into the hot baths suspended precariously on the steep cliff over the Pacific. I had a broken place in my heart, but strangely, I let the tension go when visualizing that red truck.

My mind began to wander. Being a new ager, I asked myself, "What is the symbolic meaning of the red truck?" The answer came immediately. "The red truck is a reminder for you to relax. You can use this symbol when you find yourself worrying about your brother." Later that night, I thought of the red truck when sleep wouldn't come.

I reached Miami after routine airport nonsense and went straight to the hospital. My brother was in intensive care after a non-approved brain biopsy. He was awake, aware and hooked to noisy machines. Immediately he asked when I was going to heal him. I failed to hold back tears because I knew that I would fail him. I began a gentle hand massage and Reiki. I told him how much I loved him while worrying silently about his blindness and paralysis and marveling at his handsome, suntanned body.

We were not allowed to stay in intensive care, so my parents, my sister and I left for dinner. On the drive to the restaurant, we shared our concerns and pain. I thought I might cheer them up by telling the red truck story. My family often teased me about becoming the next Shirley MacLaine. Maybe they would get a much-needed smile at me trying to find the metaphysical meaning in a silly red truck. I ended my tale dramatically with "Nothing, the truck means absolutely nothing."

Startled, my mother, the staunch Baptist, replied, "I know what the red truck means." "Yeah, what?" What did my mother know about metaphysics? She told me that my grandfather had owned a red truck when I was a toddler. And the words "red truck, red truck" were some of my first words! "You would stand in the driver's seat of that truck demanding that your grandfather take you for a ride." I remembered an old black-and-white photo of me in that truck. I didn't remember it was red.

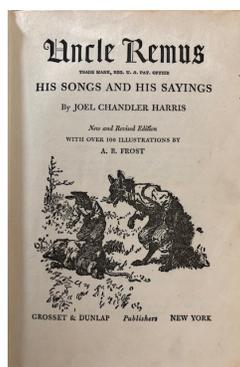
The next day I asked my brother if he was still afraid. He said, "Yes, a little." When I asked him what he was afraid of, he said, "Of going where no one loves me." John was adopted and had dealt with abandonment issues his entire life. I tried to reassure him, telling him that he would always be around people who loved him.

As I tossed in bed that night, my grandfather came to me in a vision. He assured me he would be there to “catch” my brother when he crossed over. The next morning I mentioned that I had heard from our grandfather. I told my brother and sister that I was sorry neither of them had met our gentle grandfather in this lifetime, since he died before they were born. I let my brother know that our grandfather, who loved him, would be there when he was ready to pass.

My father and I were with my brother a few nights later when he died. My father held me as I sobbed and then I held him. It was the only time I saw my father cry. That night when I finally drifted off to a dream-filled sleep, I saw my gangling, six-foot-four brother resting in the loving arms of my little grandfather and then riding away together in that shiny red truck.

I often walk by the vestiges of the old sawmill in my new neighborhood. A renewed energy is taking place as the dilapidated site is transformed into a hive of social activities and a grand marketplace with fresh produce, restaurants and art galleries. The giant bulbous funnel that released tons of sawdust remains as a beacon of rejuvenation and my own life renewed. I remind myself to recognize the precious presence and guidance of my brother, my grandfather and my grandmother. I ask for their support so I can pass along a few valuable insights to my daughter, sister, grandkids and my friends.

*The stories often ended with "Den dat Brer Rabbit begged Brer Fox, 'Drown me des ez deep ez you please, Brer Fox,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'but do fer de Lord's sake, don't fling me in dat brier-patch,' sezee. 'Co'se Brer Fox wanten hurt Brer Rabbit bad, he slung 'im right in de middle er de brierpatch. Terectly, Brer Rabbit he holler out, 'Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox – bred en bawn in a brier-patch!' as he laff en run down de road."



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