

*Tom Backer*

## **The Elephant Trap**

**G**RANDPA RAN A TRUCK FARM ON THE FRINGE OF INDIANAPOLIS but when he got older, about eighty and his wife had died and children gone, he came to live with us. Fairly short, maybe five eight, his farmer's deep tan of his prominent cheek bones and jaw, blue veins crawling bumpily across the dark splotches on the back of his hands, he always wore grey work pants and a long-sleeved grey work shirt. He got up early, went on a long walk around town, had coffee and toast and then, weather permitting, sat outside in his metal rocking chair under the maple tree to read the paper. After a nap in the chair he began to rake. When the leaves left he raked the pebbles in the bare spots back and forth.

In 1946 I was seven and brother Joe was six. Grandpa loved our four year old younger brother Pat, calling him his "little Petzelie." They would walk to the corner store where Grandpa would buy him a popsicle or root beer barrel and then they would sit on the front porch swing and little Petzelie would look so smug as he held up his prize or stuck out his tongue when we passed by. That, and Grandpa not paying any attention to us, caused our bitter resentment.

We decided to get even.

Inspired no doubt by a Tarzan comic book, Joe and I constructed an elephant trap on the narrow path at the side of the house by the back porch. We dug out the soil of a rectangle about 18 inches wide, 2 feet long and 2 inches deep, mixed some of the soil with water to make mud and then dusted it to look like the rest of the pathway.

We needed to get Grandpa to follow us down the narrow path, step on the trap and make a slide into second base.

I found an ornate metal doorknob on the workbench in the basement and Joe and I marched to the front lawn where Grandpa raked pebbles and his little Petzelie worked alongside him with the play rake Grandpa had given him. I threw the doorknob at Grandpa and yelled, "You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man!"

We ran down the side of the house and Grandpa came after us in a fast shuffle. We jumped over the trap and didn't look back to see if he slipped and fell. We just kept running as fast as we could for two blocks and lay on the grass, panting and thinking maybe it was not such a good idea.

We got our friend Tuffy and went to one of our favorite spots, a sand pile by the bell tower used to warn the volunteer firemen that they had to come put out the fire. We made roads and tunnels in the wet sand for the small cars and trucks we always left there and then we got the idea of climbing up the metal steps of the fire tower and jumping off the metal bar at the first level of the tower, about five feet off the ground. We removed the cars and trucks and jumped onto the sand pile, yelling "Geronimo" and laughing at the destruction we caused to the roads and tunnels. We then decided to jump off the second level, about ten feet above the sand pile. Tuffy said that he would jump off the second level and land head first if we each promised to give him a quarter so we did and he did.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Laughing as he jumped up and used his hands to brush the sand out of his hair, he extended one of his hands for the quarters.

We went home shortly before supper time and went in the side door, hoping we could get around the corner of the kitchen and up the back stairs before anyone saw us, but mom did.

“Boys, how could you do such a thing?”

So he fell.

“He’s mean to us.”

“Your father will deal with you when he gets back from his call. (He was the doctor for our small town and the neighboring farms.) Go sit on the back porch steps. No supper and straight to bed. No visitors.”

Half an hour later dad came out the back door and grabbed each of us by the hair and whacked our heads together, close to where Grandpa must have landed. Dad didn’t say anything, just went back in the house. We went in with our heads lowered and up to bed where we read comic books. We had skipped supper a few times but you never get so hungry as when you are not allowed to eat. Mom, the kindest person in the world, brought each of us one of dad’s special black aspirins but did not bring us a snack or one of those little bottles of 7-Up we got when we were sick and she didn’t even tuck us in or tell us a story. It was that serious.

We had somehow failed to take into consideration that Grandpa was dad’s dad.

A week later Grandpa fell down the back stairs. As I looked at the purple splotches on his face and hands I felt sure that I had somehow caused it. He died a month later and they placed his coffin in a corner of our living room. Joe and I were playing tag, running and laughing through the room when our oldest brother Pete, having graduated from medical school and helping dad in the office, yelled at us. “Have you no respect for the dead!”

Sometimes you get whacked on the head but it doesn’t sink in.