

GreatPapi's Fable: Bongo Saves Hollywood

The cold, icy winds went back into their winter storage box. It was now spring, and Mr. Padre was sitting on his porch in a wooden rocker. His son had made the chair for him on his birthday. He was waiting for his baby girl to come out all dolled up in her GreatPapi date dress to escort him to the movies. His wait was interrupted by screams from his daughter and retorts of "am not" from his baby girl. He thought about getting up from that wooden rocker, but his son had given it to him to avoid scenes like the one playing out in his kitchen. So, he sat and waited for his date to emerge and tell him how unfair her mama was. Like a frozen hurricane, the front door spit out his granddaughter, and she stood there in tears.

"GreatPapi, I can't go to Hollywood today."

Tears fell down the eleven-year-old's face.

He reached into his left breast pocket and pulled out a red handkerchief and dabbed her sweet freckled nose and puffy eyelids. She calmed down with his soft touch and snorted several times. The snot that was falling out of her nostrils.

"Did you sass your mama?"

"No - I mean - sorta, but she's wrong. I can't go today."

He sat there quietly folding his red handkerchief and looked out at the yellow fields. The dead stalks of last year's crops were bending waiting to be put out of their misery. Eventually, they would be replaced by the tiny seedlings of this year's crop. Baby girl didn't know what to do. He wasn't saying or doing anything, so she decided to let her mama have it and avenge herself.

"You see, the movie we were going to see."

Her GreatPapi just nodded.

"Like ok, it has *him* in it".

"Him? What do you have against him?"

"My friend, Molly, told me that her older sister, Francis, had read that he is a bad man, so you see. I want to go to the theater with you but can't."

"I see. You feel that he is a bad man," GreatPapi said as he rocked back and forth in his birthday chair.

"Of course, he is."

Her tears had stopped, and her blotchy face began to lose the redness of anger.

"Well, I don't know about that stuff. How about you pull up that folding chair and sit next to me? If we aren't going to Hollywood, I guess you'll just have to live with a farmer's story."

She went over to the corner of the porch. In that corner of the white framed house, she found a folded red camping chair. She took it in her hands and put in front of her body. With both hands, arms raised, and bent elbows she slowly went back next to her grandfather.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked her.

He moved her straight, apple red hair from her face, and she looked up at him with her golden-brown eyes and nodded.

"Well, good. Now, let's see. You know the Kerneses down the street; don't you?"

She nodded and sat back in her chair.

"Well, did you know that their boy spent thirteen years in prison for killin' a fella."

"Really?"

"Yep, he was one of those *bad men*."

Her grandfather nodded as he said it. He took out his blue baseball cap and put it on his combed over hair. If they weren't going out, there was no reason he couldn't wear his ball cap. Besides, it hid his three stray hairs that he had to wet down and comb into place, to hide his bald spot. He looked straight ahead.

"You wanna know about it?" he asked.

"Please."

Just then, her mother came out and flashed an angry look at her father.

"I hardly think this is appropriate story for her to hear."

"I'm not a child; I'm a teen."

She had just turned eleven last week. Her and her mother went to her GreatPapi's house, so he could take her out on her birthday date.

"That you are, girl, and Megan, I think she should hear it, so you go back in and bake something. Or grab another chair and listen."

Megan did neither. She went to the porch railing in defiance of her father and leaned up against it. She folded her arms across her chest, annoyed that he was about to go into one of his stories that are mostly made up.

"Yep, Bongo is his name. You've met him several times. He's the boy that helped you about six years ago when that contraption over there broke down."

He was looking at her tricycle that she decided she was going to use to run away from home. She got on her three-wheeler and pedaled down the street like she was a commuter on her way to work. It was a good idea until the road went uphill, and no matter how hard she pedaled, she went backwards instead of up the hill. She rolled into a ditch and lost the back-left wheel. Bongo came over the hill and stopped his truck at the bottom. He got out and picked her up out of the ditch, and then, he returned her to her grandfather.

"He killed a man? But, he was so nice."

"They usually are dear," her mother said.

"Yep, several years back he killed a radio fellow. He'd come on every day and tell us good folks about the football teams, baseball teams, all sorts of teams. He died right outside his station. Guess I had been hearin' his broadcast for about twenty years or so. His death made the front news of the paper and so did Bongo. See, Bongo was out one night at a party. The police believe he'd come by when that radio boy was leaving work. The police believe that Bongo killed him for his money. Guess Bongo didn't want the party to end, so he and his buddy beat him till he died and then stole his money."

GreatPapi was rocking away acting like he didn't notice Megan's disapproval. He wanted to tell the story. She wanted him to take her daughter away, so she could have an afternoon nap. The longer he took to get to his point, the longer she would have to wait.

"Wow, I can't believe it. Was it after he rescued me?"

"Nope, it was before. He sat in prison for about thirteen years, all the while tellin anyone who'd listen he didn't do it. Which was funny because his friend testified against him."

Michelle didn't interrupt him, but she was hooked. She stood up and grasped her faded blue skirt to her legs with her right hand, and then with her left, she turned her chair toward her GreatPapi. She sat down facing straight toward him. He let her get settled and then continued.

"Yep, everyone knew he was guilty. The janitor told on him, too, which meant two people saw him kill that fellow. Bongo sat in jail for five years trying to be heard. Well, it turned out that that science stuff, DNA, belonged to someone else. No one knows who, but it wasn't Bongo."

"See, I told you he was a good guy. I don't know because I was like - five, but he's awful nice. Last year, at the fair he literally gave me a ticket to ride the bumper cars," Michelle said with a triumphant smile on her face.

"You think so, huh? Guess your mama hasn't done a good job of tellin/ you to stay away from a man and puppies," he said as he scolded his daughter with a look.

Michelle looked weirdly at her father, and she just threw up her arms. Who knows what Mr. Padre meant?

"Yep, science proved Bongo was innocent, but he wasn't let go."

"What, why not?"

"Well, because of the two eyewitnesses."

"Eyewitnesses?" she said slowly and with difficulty, "What's that mean?"

"Well, that means they were there when it happened, and they saw who killed that fellar. Oh, you weren't even born yet when this happened, but it was all over the papers. For two years, we read nothing else but statements of how he hurt that sports guy. Bongo listened to his lawyers and stayed quiet, and in the trial, when he finally told what happened that night, everyone knew he was lyin. Except he wasn't lyin'; was he? But, after your peers say you did something, you have to prove you didn't, and the courts said that lab stuff wasn't enough to get him outta jail. So, he sat there for a couple more years. Finally, his family decided to do what the prosecutor had done. They stopped being silent and began talking to every paper and television station they could find. They told 'em about the DNA. They told 'em about that janitor fellar, who shares a last name with our governor. Mind you, I don't think they kin, but they have the same name. That janitor was in prison for being a ho-mo-sexual-"

At that point, Megan interrupted.

"Now, Dad, we are trying to raise Michelle to love everyone."

"Love everyone? Well, that's what he did, but it wasn't gender the put him in jail. It was the age of them boys that he loved that bothered the law. Yep, he was a pervert."

A quiet conversation began between father and daughter. His face expressed an *are you happy* expression. Mr. Padre had just told his granddaughter about a pedophile. Megan was pulling at her bangs which wasn't unusual for her. Ever since she was Michelle's age, she'd pull at strips of her hair. When she was really angry, she'd have a bald spot. The doctors told Mr. Padre to put her on anxiety meds, but he decided that they didn't know what they were talking about and took matters into his own hands. Whenever she started pullin', he'd strap two oven mittens to her hands and bound them with electrical tape. Problem solved.

"Yep, Bongo's family told everyone they talked to about the pervy janitor, and that he got out of jail for his testimony in Bongo's trial. After the DNA stuff and the time limit on his crime expired, the perv confessed to the same reporters that his wife had sent him newspapers in prison. He decided he didn't like being in jail at the time, so he told the popo he was there that night at the radio station, and that he saw Bongo there. Well, like I said, he finally admitted he lied after all."

"That's when Bongo got out?" Michelle asked.

"Nope, my little carrot top. He was still stuck in prison."

"But, why if DNA says he didn't do it and the eye – eye – eye seer says he didn't see him? Then, they had to let him go."

She rushed through her bungling pronunciation of eyewitness and got to her point. By this point in her GreatPapi's story, she had moved from the back of the chair and was sitting on the metal pole that was covered by the edge of the red cloth. Her back was straight, and she was holding on to her grandfather's knee.

"Well, see, everyone believed he did do it, and they still had his bestie in jail admitting they had committed the crime. So, the family began telling secrets about that boy. Apparently he's one of those tweakers from Cameron –"

This time it was Michelle that interrupted him.

"GreatPapi, what's a tweaker?"

Megan jumped in; she didn't want her father explaining meth-heads to her eleven-year-old. So, she leaned forward off the railing and stepped toward her daughter. She knelt down, so she could be at eye level just like the mommy blogs told her to do. She took her chin just before she said, "Sweetie, you know those trailers we pass on the way to the river? The ones you can smell from the road?"

Michelle nodded her head.

"Well, a tweaker is someone who visits those places."

She looked at her father who was lounging back in his rocking chair. His eyes closed, but she knew he had just closed them. He had been watching her talk to Michelle and, most likely, disapproving of her technique.

"Remember me telling you those are bad places, and to stay away? Well, that's because bad people go there."

She stood back up and went back to her place on the porch.

"Yep. Like your mama says, only fried eggs come out of that place."

"I think she is a bit young to get that reference, but go on and please wrap this up quickly," Megan begged.

"Don't know fried eggs, huh? Well, how about those with Malt O Meal brains? They's the ones that come out of those places, and boy, did Bongo's BFF have mush for brains. His chicken was burnt in the head. It turns out he saw the news report about the beating of that man a couple of days after him and Bongo had gone out to a party. Well, he started believing he was there when it happened. So, he started tellin people they were there, and one night he was at a party trying to prove he was tough and told the whole room his story. One of the girls who was there called the cops, and they came and talked to Bongo's bestie. They didn't talk to him right away though; they let him sit in an interview room for 19 hours when he was beginning to miss those trailers. He was a sweatin' and shakin' something fierce before they came in to talk to him. Those popo told him all about what happened to the radio man, even took him to the scene of the crime. They even reenacted the beating for Bongo's buddy. By the time they were done and ready to hear his story, his jigsawed puzzle mind put together the wrong picture. To this day, he believes they killed that man."

GreatPapi stopped the story and looked at his baby girl. She was glued to his knees and so were her nails. He gently removed them and then sat back in his chair before he continued.

"Yep. Bongo's family talked to so many people that they were able to get a new crook to represent their boy."

"Daddy," Megan interrupted, but this time she didn't stand or stare.

She slid on to the railing and put her feet up.

"Michelle might want to be a lawyer one day, and I would be very proud if does."

"A lawyer, you say? Oh, baby girl, don't be a lawyer. There's nothin' worse."

He looked at Michelle as he pronounced his judgment on all lawyers. Megan threw a spit wad at her father and shook her head.

"Well, I guess as long as you like it, your mama will be happy."

Michelle looked at the two of them – first her mother and then her GreatPapi. She swore they had quiet conversations without talking or looking at each other. Michelle was envious of that; she never had one of those conversations with either of them nor her own father. It was several minutes of hearing nothing but the finches squawk before she urged him to go on with his story.

"They finally let him go?"

"Yes, dear, and that's the end," Megan said quickly standing up.

"Young lady, I taught you to respect your elders and your father," he shouted at her as he stared her down.

Then, he turned to Michelle.

"Now, Michelle, tell me: is it not respectful to end someone's story just because your eyes look like they haven't slept for a week? Now, is it?"

Michelle didn't know what to do: she wanted her mama to go inside and nap because she always made a big dinner when she was in a good mood, but she also wanted her GreatPapi to finish the story. She decided the story was more important than her mother's needs. She shook her head no, and Megan sat back down on the porch railing.

"You see, now, I forgot where I was."

"You just discounted the two witnesses and the police," Megan mocked in an agitated tone.

"That's right. Yep. Them police put the crime in that tweakers' mind, but that big fancy St. Louis lawyer came down here and got Bongo's case heard by the Supreme Court. They declared his conviction invalid and told the DA they'd have to retry the case. Well, after all that talkin and no one credible to testify, Bongo was found not guilty by this jury. Even built his parents a new barn with all that money he got from the state. Do you see now?"

"See what, GreatPapi?"

Michelle was happy the story ended with Bongo being let go, but she had no idea what it had to do with the movies.

"Ok, let me try again-."

"No, no more. Michelle, dear, what he is trying to tell you is that believing someone is guilty just because the papers tell you he is caused Bongo to lose thirteen years of his life, even though he didn't do nothin wrong. Isn't that right, Daddy?"

"Sorta."

"Like Fake News. Oh, I know all about that," Michelle declared.

"Huh, I guess it's like that, except the papers believed what they printed. I guess most of them do. Can't imagine too many actively don't, but who knows? Nope, what I am trying to tell you is to be careful about judging anyone when you have only heard one side of the story."

"Thank you," Megan said.

She stood up and tried to take Michelle's hand, but she wasn't budging. She dropped her arms by her side and looked down at her daughter.

"Do you see now? That just because your friend was told by her friend's older sister, that she read that that actor was bad, doesn't mean he is. He could be another Bongo."

"I guess, but it still seems wrong."

Megan rolled her eyes at her daughter's stubborn devotion to her friend's gossip.

"It's kinda like that last movie I saw. That boy, Harry, man, he was going to save the world."

GreatPapi said.

"He saved Hogwarts."

"He fought because the V guy was trying to kill him, and he got some of his friends killed."

She sat there stoically mouthing something quietly to herself. Her mother assumed it was the movie, and she was trying to see what her grandfather was telling her. After a couple of seconds, her apple red hair flew around her head, and she snapped her neck strait.

"Oh, yeah, that is what happened, but what does that have to do with the movie?"

"Ya see, no matter how righteous you think you are, you can still fail," her mother said

"Huh?"

"What your grandfather-

"GreatPapi," Michelle cut her mother off to correct her grandfather's title.

Megan was not amused. She forced herself to say that ridiculous title, but only because the quicker she wrapped the story, the quicker she'd hit the couch.

"What your *GreatPapi*," she said with air quotes, "is trying to say is the path to hell is paved with good intentions."

"The hell I am. I ain't one of them Twain Missouri river raftin philosophers. Who talks such nonsense? What I am trying to tell the child is go get your damn coat because I ain't seen a movie since Harry Potter," he bellowed.

Michelle jumped up out of her chair and ran into the house. She came out with her turquoise coat, and Megan kissed her father's forehead and went inside for her Tylenol and nap. The two of them, baby girl and GreatPapi, were off to Hollywood.