

CHAPTER ONE

There he was, the old man this day, with only one eye and smothered in bulky layers of woolen blankets that pressed his bent frame deep between the wheels of his chair and seemed to smell of wet mule. The old man was always stuck in that chair of his, brooding in silence periodically punctuated by a wheeze or shiver as all the tubes and wires that protruded from his nose and limbs and other places I'm not so clear on went about gurgling and dripping and clacking and monitoring what little activity there was left to monitor inside him. When he wasn't in that chair he could always be found in the bed with white railings. The railings prevented him from rolling over and falling off should he ever muster enough strength to do so. He didn't do much of anything, the old man. He didn't watch TV. Even Dozer likes to watch TV and he's just a dog.

Dozer was a present to me from Dad when I turned four, when he still lived with Mom and me. In dog-years I think Dozer is

now old enough to be a great-great-grandpa just like the old man. But the old man wasn't so great. He didn't fetch. He didn't play. He was just old that way.

It used to be that being old, old like the old man was old, meant that no matter how impetuous or cantankerous or bumbling or befuddled you actually were, you had at least managed to get old and were to be respected for doing so. You'd made it this far, by God, and were entitled to unrelenting gobs of love and selfless understanding from even the most recent and unfamiliar additions to the family brood. For all those decades of hardship and tribulations and sacrifices you'd been subject, you were to be regarded with courtesy and patience, even if there at the Thanksgiving Day table you should one day find yourself simultaneously prodding cranberries on your plate and breaking wind in your seat.

It's true.

"Gramps!" came the admonishing, if any at all. "Get a hold of yourself."

Nowadays Gramps would be committed for senility to a convalescent home with a room the size of a walk-in closet. There he could whittle away the hours with a triple E shoe box, sifting through artifacts of a lifetime kept cozily within.

"Go on, Boiler. Go inside." Mom nudged me into the room containing the old man and myriad machines which pumped slothful existence into him. I didn't want to go and made a raucous at informing her so, after which, I conceded and obeyed. I did a