Chapter 14

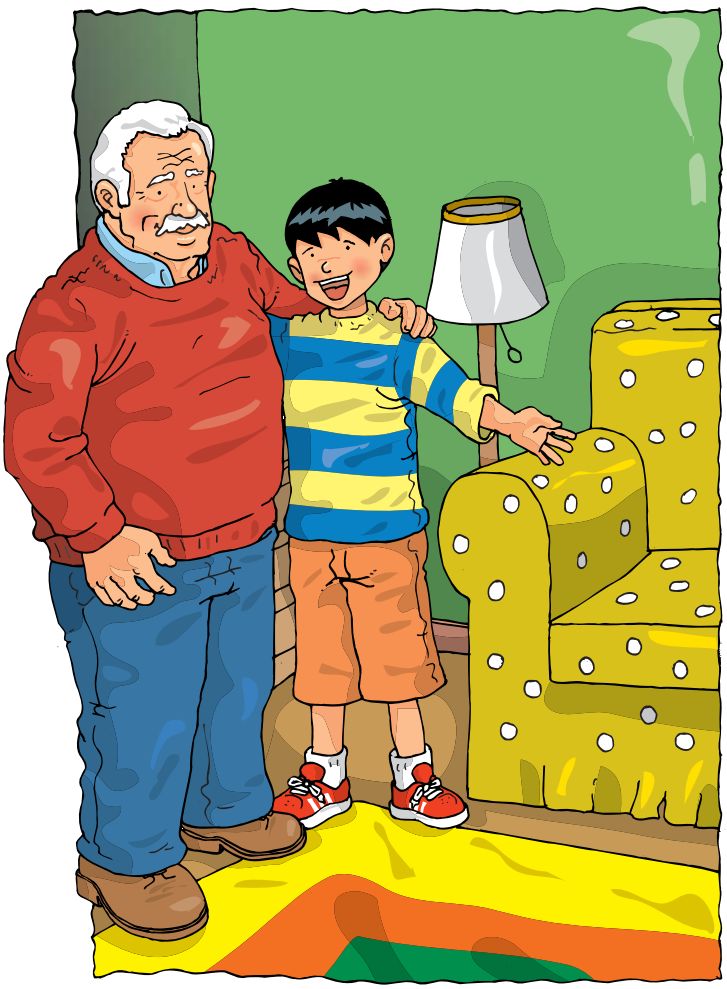
The 'Generation Gap'

"So," said Mum. "We'll pick up your great-great-uncle from the station on Monday."

Giselle nodded.

But Charlie wanted to know what was going on.

"A relative you've never met is coming to stay with us for a few weeks. He lives in the country. He is your dad's grandfather's brother-in-law. His wife, your great-great-aunt, is ill and he needs someone to look after him for a couple of weeks."



"Wow, he must be ancient!"

"Well, he's in his nineties," said Mum.

"Can he walk?"

"With help. He's pretty sharp, though. I'd like all of you children to treat him as considerately as you can."

"Where's he going to sleep?" asked Charlie.

"On the sofa-bed in the living room."

"What time does he go to bed? I like watching TV in the evening."

"He probably goes to bed early. We may have to turn the TV off while he's here."

Charlie was gloomy. What a drag, he thought. In his nineties! Probably toothless, deaf, all that. And monopolising the living room all evening!

Mum looked sharply at Charlie. "It's only for two weeks," she said in a warning voice.

Charlie did not really like old people. Sometimes they smell, he thought, and they always want to hug and kiss you. They shout because they can't hear how loudly they are talking. And they cup their hands behind their ears and say, "What? What?" to everything you say. One or two drove him nuts at the shop—they were always in the way in the aisle, and they never seemed to know when there was someone behind them trying to get through. A lot of them have outlived their usefulness, he thought, and with getting sick all the time and having to be helped, you wonder if they wouldn't be better off just keeling over.

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Charlie forgot all about their visitor until he came home from Mr Travis's on Monday to find Louis and Giselle cleaning the living room, and Mum and Dad frantically getting ready to go to the railway station.

"What's so important about this guy?" Charlie asked Giselle.

"Well, he is very old, and if no-one's there to meet him he might get lost."

"Oh, this is going to be real fun," groaned Charlie.

Louis rolled his eyes, as if to agree with Charlie, but Giselle caught herself. "It's only for two weeks," she said. "We need to respect the older generation."

"Why?" asked Louis.

"I don't know," said Giselle.

"Well, they're supposed to be wiser," Charlie said. "But if that's true, why have they left us this crummy world to grow up in—full of poverty and crime and war and pollution?" His voice rose.

"Well, it isn't all Grandpa's fault," said Giselle. "So we must be nice to him."

"Grandpa?" exclaimed Charlie with disbelief.

"That's what we're going to call him. It's easiest."

'Grandpa' duly arrived. Wow, thought Charlie—talk about old! He could hardly make it up the steps! His hair was white, his face was dark and lined like the country earth where he came from. But his eyes were bright and alert.

"You must be Charlie," he said, planting a wet, whiskery kiss on Charlie's cheek. "I've heard so much about you!"

Charlie helped to get the old gentleman into the house thinking that a crowbar might have come in handy. Grandpa settled on the couch at last. Charlie wondered if he would ever leave it!

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In the beginning, things turned out just as Charlie had imagined. Grandpa was a lot of trouble—he had to be helped to do all sorts of things. Mum was constantly whispering, "Do that for Grandpa," or "No, you can't do that because of Grandpa." He did have a good sense of humour, though. And, maybe because he was so old, he wasn't afraid to say things everyone else would not. He was so honest and outspoken, you couldn't help but laugh.

Charlie found that Grandpa slept a lot, so that they did not have to miss TV in the evenings because Grandpa would just go to sleep on the couch. And he was so deaf they didn't even have to keep the volume down. When Mum offered him Dad's and her bed, he said he liked sleeping in the midst of the family. "I like life around me," he said.

One day Charlie came straight home from school because it was one of his days off from Mr Travis's. Giselle, Emily and Louis had gone to the park, and Charlie wanted to have a snack and to relax.

Grandpa followed him into to the kitchen, leaning on all the furniture and lowering himself carefully into a chair. He looked at Charlie with his bright eyes and asked how school was. Charlie said it was fine, but actually he was having some problems. Girl problems.

He had a big crush on a girl called Sara. He had fallen for her beauty, her laughter, and also her smile. The problem was, every other boy in the year felt exactly the same.

Charlie got out a snack and sat down at the kitchen table.

"You're troubled," Grandpa said.

Wow, those bright old eyes missed nothing. "No," Charlie replied. "Just tired."

"Oh," he said. "Nothing more?"

He seemed to know just what Charlie was thinking! His eyes were twinkling, and his toothless mouth was twisted into a knowing smile. Charlie felt he could trust him—and suddenly wanted to tell him everything.

Grandpa listened attentively. "That's a problem," he said, when Charlie had finished. "All the boys are after her, you say?"

"Yes. There's no chance for me."

"Well, I think she might notice the one who's not noticing her."

"What do you mean?"

"Try standing back a bit and not always hanging around her like a vulture. I bet she'll notice you then." Grandpa winked. "Just be a little aloof," he said.

Charlie could not make sense of that. He had to gain Sara's attention over the others. Grandpa had missed the point.

"Grandpa," he said. "I think girls may be a little different nowadays than they were when you were young."

"Oh?" said Grandpa. "God changed the design, has he?"

"No," Charlie laughed. "But they probably think differently now."

"That's an interesting thought," Grandpa responded. "I don't think human nature changes, though. I'll tell you something, Charlie. Your great-great-aunt was the prettiest girl in the village, and I won her. How? By being different from the others. I went and made something of myself while the others all hung around her. When the time came for her to choose, I was the one she wanted." He paused. "Why don't you try it?"

Charlie had his doubts, but then what difference did it make? If he stood aloof from Sara it certainly wouldn't hurt their relationship—they didn't have one.

Amazingly enough, after a few days of just going about his business, Sara noticed him—to his surprise, she even went up and spoke to him at his locker! In fact, she went up and spoke regularly between classes.

"Your great-great-aunt was the prettiest girl in the village, and I won her. How? By being different from the others."

"Grandpa! Grandpa!" Charlie cried, bursting into the house. "You were right! It worked!" Charlie looked all around. Where was he?

Grandpa was in the living room with the whole family, packing up his things. The two weeks were up. Great-Great-Aunt was getting better, and she would be able to take him home soon. Charlie felt happy for Grandpa but sad for himself. If Grandpa knew this much about girls, what else could he teach him about life?

Grandpa gave Charlie a big hug and said that he hoped they would see each other again. Charlie asked him if he would mind if he wrote to him and asked his advice on things sometimes. He said he'd be very pleased.

Charlie felt miserable when he had gone. He remembered the times they had sat together and talked and he really missed him.

Grandpa had a special ability to make Charlie feel important. The others had felt it too. Where did he get that ability from?

"From a good long life," said Dad.

From then on, Charlie found his attitude towards the old people in the shop and on the streets changed. He no longer saw them as has-beens who had nothing to