

# Old Man

By Mark Edgemon

We opened Martinez & Son Grocery Store on February 4, 1870 on a cold and snowy day, which never happens out here in the desert. We were the only place for food or supplies in a fifty-mile radius of our home in Mescalero, New Mexico. It was just the two of us, my dad and me. Mother died when I was born. My dad was a workaholic. The store was the only thing in life he focused on. He would hardly ever look at me. I would often reach out to him during the early years of my life, until I realized that it made him mad. He didn't want to reach out to me. I wondered if he had any real affection for me at all or was I just an obligation to him.

Other than school, I spent the rest of my time working at the store. I worked hard like a man during my formative childhood years and only received pocket change for my pay. Dad wanted to keep the overhead low, so paying me so very little was one way of cutting his costs.

He seemed to have tunnel vision as it pertained to life, for he would never do anything else, other than eat, sleep and work. He was a determined man to be sure. You could see it in his face. It was as if he was pressing forward with his body, leaning into each and every task from sun up to sun down, never turning aside even once for a moment of enjoyment.

He despised frivolity and anything that he considered a waste of time. He applied that philosophy to me as well. When my friends from school came around the shop, he frowned, as they would keep me company while I worked. When he started to clear his throat, it was time for them to go. The longer they would stay, the louder he would clear his throat. Once, when one of my friends wouldn't take the hint, he came over with a broom and literally swept him out the door. Eventually, no one came around, except to buy groceries.

It made me sad to be so lonely. Other than barking orders to me, he would never say a kind word to me or look me in the eye when he spoke to me. He just expected me to work like a slave, day in and day out, for little to no money and wouldn't even pass the time of day with me.

I loved him, I think; I mean a boy is supposed to love his dad, isn't he?

This behavior continued year after year from the time we opened the store when I was twelve, until I was eighteen, when I graduated school. A few times, I would try to talk to him about things that were important to me. He treated me like I was some kind of a traitor for even daring to focus on anything other than the business at hand. So I kept most of the things I loved deep in my heart and would not share them with anyone. It was hard though and lonely too most of the time.

The only time we would be away from the store was when we would go to get supplies. We would drive a large wagon to Albuquerque to pick up a load of goods and head right back to the store.

One time, while we were loading the wagon, I saw what I thought was the first unselfish act of kindness from my dad, when a bunch of kids started pleading with him to buy them some candy. After being pestered for about half an hour, he told them as soon as he was finished, he would share with them some of the rock candy he was buying for the store.

While we finished loading our freight, the kids were busy loading up a large sack of every type of candy they could find. When they were ready to pay for it, they looked around and he was gone. They left the unpurchased bag of candy on the counter and went outside the store to see us driving off with our goods. They ran after us for about a hundred yards before he stopped the wagon, so they could catch up. They asked why he left without buying the candy he promised to buy them. He smiled and retorted, "I promised I would share with you kids the candy I was buying. Since you filled your sack with candy I don't eat, then pay for it yourselves."

With that, he turned back around and drove off, laughing to himself.

When we got back to the store, we unloaded the goods and opened the store once again. We did a pretty good business, being the only store in the area. He knew all of the ranchers and families by name. He never would extend credit, no matter what, so no one ever asked.

As we got closer to my graduation, I tried once again to talk with him about my dreams for the future. He seemed impatient; like I was interrupting him and would I get on with it, so we could get back to work. I told him I wanted to attend a university or college and I needed to earn some money of my own in order to pay for it. I wasn't asking anything from him, except his blessing and maybe a little encouragement. Instead, he just looked at me, like I was some kind of traitor and told me to do whatever I had to do. With that, he turned around and went back to work.

I looked down and finally realized that this was the way it was. He didn't care about me or my happiness, just his grocery store. I quit working that day and got a job at one of the ranches in the area for twenty-five dollars a month, which was top pay in those days. After 6 months I was off to school. I decided to go to college somewhere on the east coast. I packed my bags and planned to research my options when I got out there.

Before I left, I went by the store to say goodbye to my dad, hoping he would wish me well. When I walked into the store, he was busy waiting on customers. He saw me as I walked in, but he didn't pay me any mind. I waited for about an hour, until all of the customers had been waited on and walked up to him extending my hand as my way of saying bye. He ignored me. I stood there in disbelief for about a minute and then walked out of the store.

I headed out east and worked different jobs, kept company with several different women over the next fifteen years and accumulated my own personal property as I was trying to build my own life. I don't know, I just didn't have the drive to do something great. I don't know what it was; I guess my heart wasn't in it.

I thought about going back home many times, but I didn't see the attraction of going back and living in the desert, a place I had often dreamed of leaving when I was growing up.

One day, I received a letter from a friend of mine back in Mescalero, who told me my father had died three months earlier. At the time, I didn't have any feelings about the news, just surprised. I gathered my things and started my way back home. It was then that I had the time to think about the loss I felt and the grief of never having the chance to make peace with my father. Only then did I realized I did love him, despite the fact that he never really cared for me the way I did for him.

When I got back to the store, it had been snowing, which was the only time I had ever seen that happen since we opened the store twenty-one years earlier.

I walked around inside the store, which was now an abandoned looking shack and tried to come to grips with my own emotions. I had spent six years of my life in that building and now it was in disarray. I walked passed a faded mirror on the wall and slightly glanced at it. I was shocked when I looked in the mirror and for a moment saw my father's face in my own reflection. It was like standing there looking at his spirit. I had not realized how much I had grown to look like him.

Suddenly, I heard someone say, "Hello there, is anybody here?" This startled me, because for a moment, it seemed that I was hearing my father's voice from the grave.

When I walked out into the store area, I saw an older man standing there looking around. As I walked up, he asked me, "Are you the owner of this place?" I hadn't thought about it, but I guess I was. I told him yes and then he said he wanted to buy the property. This puzzled me. Why would anyone want this broken down building in the middle of the desert? I asked him why he wanted to buy the property and he said he wanted to open a store of his own.

I got his name and address and told him I may get back with him soon.

I appeared before the town council to see if I could get the title to the property being the next of kin. I hoped there wouldn't be any legal problems, seeing my father did not have a will. Come to find out, the town's attorney was also my father's attorney and my father did have a will, leaving everything to me, including the property. To my great surprise, my father's estate, which included the store, worth now about two hundred and fifty dollars and cash in the amount of over one hundred thousand dollars was willed to me along with his personal effects and a letter.

Still in shock, I opened the letter and read it in stunned disbelief. My hands were shaking and my insides were frozen as I read things I never knew about my father's heart and his thoughts about me.

The letter started out by saying that my father was lost after the death of my mother. The store was the only way he could divert his focus from the pain he felt without her. He said he kept

every penny of the money he profited from the store, in order to take care of my future. He didn't say he loved me in so many words, but it was there in the letter.

After I had finished reading the letter, still frozen inside, the attorney handed me the deed to the property, and a bank draft for the money, which was waiting for me in Albuquerque.

It took me awhile to come to grips with the knowledge that my father really loved me and providing for me was the only way he had of showing it.

Six months later, Martinez & Son Grocery Store re-opened on February 4, 1891 on a hot desert morning. I had met a very nice woman at the supply company in Albuquerque, who had a son in a previous marriage, now about twelve years of age, who looked up to me as a father figure. She and her son helped me open the store to a brisk business. A few weeks later, we were married with many of my old school friends in attendance.

We were happy. I was so glad that she was in my life and I prayed every day for her well-being. I couldn't imagine how I could get along if something was to happen to her. For the first time, I understood how much pain my father must of felt, living without my mother, who he loved so much.

One day, while I was stocking the shelves with my stepson, the painters arrived to paint the exterior of the store. When they were finished, they asked what name should they paint on the storefront. I looked over at the young boy of twelve standing beside me and said, "Martinez & Son Grocery Store."

The End

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