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Title: "Ralph"

Ralph

By Tom Zirtzlaff

When I was young, I loved to visit my grandma on her old farm. Her old farmhouse was built around 1900. The most interesting thing about that house was its basement. It was dark, musty, damp, and it had a slippery dirt floor. It would have been great for exploring as a kid, but Grandma said it was off limits. Only she could go down there. It was too dangerous.

One day, when I was feeling adventurous, I took my flashlight and went down into that basement to explore despite what my grandma said. I found an old wooden baseball bat. It had a cracked handle. Not useful. I found an old baby carriage that had pretty much rotted away. Again, not useful. Then I heard a shuffling noise in a dark back corner. I thought, maybe a rat was down here, or maybe a snake. Whatever it was, it had to be dangerous, but I had to see what it was. I carefully went closer and shone my flashlight into the corner. There in the corner was the biggest spider I have ever seen, and in its mouth it had a mouse.

I froze. I couldn't move. It was staring at me with its eight beady eyes. The biggest spider I had ever seen was eating a mouse and looking at me like I was the main course. It had to be bigger than a cat. And I just couldn't run away. It finished its snack and rose up on its eight legs, then started to move slowly towards me. I still couldn't move, and I thought, "Oh boy, I'm in trouble now." It slowly crept forward. I broke out in a cold sweat. I couldn't swallow. I couldn't scream. It was right by my feet. Then it started to tap its right front foot. What was it waiting for?

My fear had slightly subsided, but I thought it was time to leave before it attacked me. I slowly started to turn back toward the stairs. It went with me, always right in front of me. When I stopped, it would start tapping that foot again. Finally, I was facing the stairs, and was about to make a run for it when the strangest thing happened.

It stopped tapping its foot and rolled over onto its back with its eight legs pointing into the air. WHAT THE HECK!!! It just lay there like a cat waiting for its belly to be rubbed. I thought, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained". I slowly reached down and tickled its tummy. When I did, its eight legs started dancing in the air. I did it again and got the same reaction. As I moved slowly toward the stairs, the spider always got in front of me, plopped down, and rolled over for another tickle.

I finally made it to the stairs. I had to tell someone about what I had just seen and done. No one would believe me. When I got to the top of the stairs and opened the door, there was my grandma looking at me like I had just robbed a bank. Oh, yeah. I just remembered, "Don't go into the cellar. It's too dangerous." Her voice was angry as she said, "I said don't go in the cellar. It's too dangerous."

Then she smiled that sly little smile that all grandmas use when they pull a trick on you and said, "Did you meet Ralph?"

Indeed I did. Turns out that Ralph was her pet. She had been taking care of him for a while. She found him crawling up her leg one day in the cellar. He didn't try to bite or run away. He looked very lonely, so she started feeding him regularly. He wasn't always so big, but under her care, he just kept growing.

For the next few summers, Ralph and I would spend time together in that cellar. I tried to teach him some games we could play, but communication between us was difficult at best. We finally settled on "hide and seek" and "mouse trap" as the only two that made sense. Of course, Ralph was better at both of those.

When I tried to hide, he would run in front of me, roll over for a belly rub, and never let me actually hide. When he hid, I could never find him because it was too dark in the cellar. He could see better in the dark than me; an advantage to Ralph. As far as "mouse trap" went, there was no contest. He could definitely catch mice better than anyone.

I tried to get him outside once, but he refused to be moved. I guess he liked living in the shadows. He liked the darkness of the cellar but, being alone was no fun. I could understand that. No one ever likes to be alone all of the time.

My time with Ralph did teach me one thing. No matter how different two people are, there is no reason they cannot get along. If you try, you can always find some common ground that you can agree on. The relationship between Ralph and me is proof of that.

Eventually, one winter, Ralph passed away. The next summer, Gamma showed me where she had buried him in her garden. All his life, he had lived in the dark. Now he rested in the sun, in her flower bed. There was a little plaque in the flowers. It simply read "RALPH."