

The Vanished Reef: A Grandson's Awakening

Inside of a tiny room packed with books on the shelves in a small house in a typical suburban town, the only noises that could be heard were a young boy's innocent questions that never seemed to cease. After the boy gave his grandfather an entire interview's worth of curiosity, based on little questions like why certain things were colored the way they are, the conversation shifted towards careers. "Grandpa, what's your job?" the boy asked.

Grandpa was old, but it couldn't be seen in this very moment. His wrinkles seemed to glow with affection, his white beard ruffled with amusement, and his smile grew as he spoke, "Why I had the greatest job of all." As soon as the boy's limited attention was upon on him, he continued. "I was a marine biologist."

"What's that?"

"Why I'd work with all the ocean animals: sharks, dolphins, fish, anything you could imagine that lives in the sea." The little boy grinned at the sound of sharks. "You like sharks, don't you?" A nod of agreement quickly emerged. "Well, sharks could use your help."

"What do you mean?" He was captured on Grandpa's hook.

"Some bad people are hurting our oceans. Global warming, fossil fuels, all of those are heating it. And when it gets too warm, the reefs die. And the sea creatures lose their home." His voice was gentle, despite what he was about to say. "They're hurting our sharks. They could die."

The second the final word left his mouth, Billy's mom barged into the room, yelling with concern, "That's enough now, Dad!" Grandpa turned to look at the young boy, who only looked curious, not worried. "Billy doesn't need to know about that stuff."

“He ought to.” He adjusted himself so that he was now making direct eye contact with the boy. “He can make a difference.”

“He’s just a little boy. No need for him to be concerned. Having him panic about it won’t make a difference. It’s for the adults to worry about, not him.” Her voice overprotectively lashed out, unwavering. But it was not out of spite, rather a fear of the reaction to the harsh truth: it was already too late. He was just a boy after all.

“No need for concern?” His voice grew louder and stronger. “Fine, I won’t argue now, but you ought to go to the Great Barrier Reef. When you do, you’ll see why I became a marine biologist, and then you’ll care.” By the end, he was virtually commanding them to care.

“Grandpa, what’s the Great Barrier Reef?” The crude innocence once again shone.

“Why it’s a giant home for so many different marine creatures. Sharks, rays, fish, whales, dolphins, and more all live there. It’s like their heaven. Without it, the whole ocean would be affected and so many would die.” His white teeth still glistened.

“Wow, I want to go there!” Grandpa could see the child’s wonder that had been newly instilled.

“That’s why we have to help and be fast. If we’re not careful, it won’t last forever.”

Billy didn’t remember that day or moment until a day roughly twenty years later, when his entire family surrounded him as they encircled a wooden box that was being placed into the ground. As the day went on, moments of him and Grandpa flew through

his mind—to think how quickly things changed. There would be no more conversations like that one, but there was something that he could do, a way to be with him once more.

In order to be able to move on, Billy understood where he had to go.

Two months had passed since that somber day, but Billy was finally doing what he had always wanted. After an overly long flight that was packed with eager tourists, Billy found himself in Queensland, Australia, yawning with contentment as he arrived at a modern-looking hotel that seemed to fit in perfectly with the picturesque sky. He soon delicately walked over to the front desk, asking, “Do you have pamphlets on the reef?” The woman working there had a name pin reading “Linda,” but she only stared with her mouth partially open. Billy then decided to push the matter further. “The Great Barrier Reef?” She still didn’t respond, leaving him to look around the room to see if he was unaware of something. “Like the famous ocean thing?”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not possible.” She finally spoke in a thick Australian accent that followed the brief pause. Billy’s eyebrows burrowed themselves sullenly. Upon glancing at the puzzled expression, Linda quickly elaborated. “The Great Barrier Reef is dead.”

Billy’s face only got more contorted with confusion. “Wh-what?” He began to dart his head around the area to somehow see if he was being lied to. “How’s that possible?”

“Heated water, global warming, killed it off. Can’t go there any more. It’s as if it never existed.” Her face was bland and emotionless, like she wasn’t bothered.

“But I always wanted to go. I have to go.” She could now see the worry.

“I’m sorry, but that’s impossible.” Her eyes then darted away.

“Wait, what about all the different animals there? That was their home. So many rare species.” He looked as if he was punched in the stomach.

Linda began to shake her head and gulped. “The coral’s dead. The water got too warm. Everything else is gone or about to be extinct.” An image of the absent jellyfish, sharks, fish, rays, sea turtles, and all of the other marine creatures blasted into his head. Billy then realized that his grandfather had been right. And that made the reality sink in all too much: he was too late to see them and too late to save them. In stunned silence, he walked outside of the hotel into the hot Australian winter; after all, it never really cooled off these days.