

Last Tag

Ron Molen

THE BOY LIKED TO VISIT HIS POLISH GRANDPARENTS in their small, brick bungalow just around the corner from the parish church. The neighborhood was clean, orderly. Almost everyone was Polish or Irish, and everyone was Catholic. The boy and his mother waited on the long front porch, while his father rang the bell. The smell of coffee and baked bread exploded from the doorway when his grandmother appeared. "Dzien dobry," she said. She was short, plump, wore her hair in a bun, and despite her false teeth had a disarming smile. She hugged his mother and father, and as soon as she kissed the boy, she tapped his hand. "Twoja kolej," she said.

He quickly tapped her back. "You're it," he said, then lunged to get away. She got him back, then broke loose and raced through the living room with him right behind. He forgot all about his grandfather, his parents, but they were used to it. He was six, and she was seventy-two. He could outrun her, but she was shrewd.

They circled the dining room table and its ring of heavy oak chairs. He looked at her across the tabletop. Already she was out of breath; moisture sparkled on the fuzz above her lip. She was light on her feet; he never knew which way she would turn.

He took off to the right. She pulled out a chair that stopped him, then chuckled wickedly. He reversed, but by then she was through the kitchen door. He raced after her, and she stepped behind the chrome table. They stood looking at each other. He lunged. She drew him in and buried him in her softness. They laughed uncontrollably. Her

RON MOLEN is a retired architect living in Salt Lake City. He is a board member of Writers at Work, has won several state literary competitions for fiction, and is the author of House Plus Environment, a book on residential architecture.

hands were large, warm. Her long dress, covered with a white apron, smelled like clean sheets. He stayed in her arms until they stopped laughing.

At the moment of letting go, there was a sudden alertness. They were competitors again. She jumped up. He charged. She dodged. He dove. They went around and around. He was finally left *it* when she took his hand and returned with him to the living room, postponing the game until later.

His grandmother sat down and talked to his mother in Polish, while his father and grandfather conversed in English. His father, a Mormon from Utah, had to do most of the talking. The boy was satisfied to play with his grandfather's collection of bent-stemmed pipes carved from deer antlers.

The living room was colorful, filled with pillows and afghans made by his grandmother and crowded with odd bits of furniture his mother said were purchased because the price was right. Surviving the Depression in Chicago took ingenuity. On one wall, a parish calendar showed a haloed Jesus with haunting eyes, looking off, upward. A large, secondhand radio, its dials forming eyes, nose, and mouth, looked like a giant's head coming through the floor. His grandmother insisted it would teach her to speak English, but it didn't succeed. Except for a few words, the boy spoke no Polish. Playing tag was what they did together. She never gave up, and neither did he. She could be baking, scrubbing, sewing, then suddenly the game was on. Nothing was too important to stop.

Even when the boy's grandmother came to his house, the game was continued with equal vigor. His grandmother would even sneak into his room, after he'd gone to bed, to tag him. This bothered his mother. He'd never go to sleep as long as he knew his grandmother was there. Often he'd hide in the closet or crawl under the bed, where his mother would find him asleep the following morning. His mother worried about his grandmother. "Your high blood pressure," she'd say in Polish.

His grandmother would never answer.

The boy was frightened of his grandfather. He was a proud, trim man with white, wavy hair and a handlebar mustache slightly yellowed from his pipe. Sometimes he wore knickers and a loden jacket, and the boy thought he looked quite dashing.

"I think we should be going," his mother said.

His father looked up, surprised. "Already?"

"It's past someone's bedtime." She nodded toward the boy.

His grandmother, sensing what was said, threw her hands up and ran into the kitchen to prepare hot chocolate. The boy smiled. It always

happened this way. But his mother irritated him. Everything had to follow a schedule. She was slightly taller than his grandmother, a thin, wiry dynamo who leaned forward as she raced through the day, cleaning, cooking, keeping him scrubbed and fed better than he ever wanted to be. All her spare time was spent on PTA, church work, bridge club, with nothing left for him.

The boy took as much time as possible with his hot chocolate and coffee cake, while his father tried out some new Polish words. It was a game his father played that included his grandmother. He was fun-loving, charming. Gross errors in pronunciation made his grandparents laugh, and the boy was sure he made them on purpose. Anything to get them to accept a Mormon who had taken their daughter away from the Catholic Church. When the boy finally finished, his father stood and shook hands with his grandfather. "Guess we better go," he said. Smoke curling up from his grandfather's pipe made his father blink.

"I'm not tired," the boy said.

His mother frowned.

"See you at the wedding Saturday morning," his grandfather said.

"We'll be there," his mother said. She kissed his grandfather, and the boy knew he was expected to do the same. His grandfather always smelled like tobacco and whiskey.

His grandmother tagged him as they left, but the boy lunged and got her just before his mother dragged him off.

"People are all alike," his father said on the way home in the car. They lived in a large house in the suburbs, in a neighborhood with large, sweeping lawns and bronze street lamps. "I wonder whether your father will ever accept me."

"It's not just the Church," said his mother. "He doesn't want me to stop being Polish."

"What does that mean?"

"I think you know that as well as I," she said. "And what about your family accepting me?"

"When do you see them?" his father said. "Utah is a long way away. But what about your son?" He looked in the rearview mirror at the boy. "A half-Polish Mormon." He chuckled. "Not exactly a winning combination."

His mother didn't find his father's remark humorous. She hardly understood her new religion. The fact that Mormons didn't smoke or drink was enough for her: abstinence was respectable, that was the important thing.

His father wasn't that religious either. He went to church every Sunday but read Zane Grey instead of the scriptures and often slipped

off to a Cubs game Sunday afternoon. Sometimes he took the boy along. His mother never took the boy anywhere except shopping.

The boy complained when he had to dress up for his cousin's wedding. It was in the parish church, and on the way his mother gave instructions. "Keep your eye on me during the mass," she said. "When I stand, you stand. And when I kneel, you do the same. I still remember what you're supposed to do."

When they arrived, the boy followed his parents into the church foyer. The moment they entered the chapel, a large woman just ahead dropped to her knees. The boy's father struggled to pull her back to her feet. The woman spun around and glared at him. "Excuse me," he said. "I thought you fainted." The woman grunted, then stepped off to the side, knelt down again, and genuflected. The boy snickered, and so did his father.

"What did you do that for?" his mother said.

His father held up both hands. "Sorry."

The boy's cousin looked angelic in her long, white dress as she walked down the aisle. But as soon as the mass began, there was no time to gaze about. The boy and his father were busy trying to keep up with the correct response. The priest spoke in Latin, and the boy thought it sounded like Polish. There was no hint of what to do next. The boy and his father were inevitably left standing when everyone else was kneeling, or sitting when they were standing. Whenever it happened, they chuckled. "I'm ashamed of you," his mother said afterward. "What will people think?"

The wedding reception was more fun than the boy had anticipated. It was held in the church basement. A long table was filled with exotic Polish food and bottles of wine and beer. A small band played polkas while everyone danced, even the boy with his grandmother. The celebration continued all day, and there were many toasts followed by long bouts of laughter. By early evening, two older nuns dressed all in white were giggling, the priest was having difficulty forming words, and his grandfather was still dancing with anyone he could talk into it. His grandmother wasn't even up for a game of tag. An older cousin gave the boy a taste of beer, and even though it was bitter, the boy thought the whole affair was perfect.

The next morning on the way to church, the boy's father pointed out a church surrounded by cars with people going in. "The Dutch Reformed go to church longer than Mormons," his father said. "They go all day."

"What's so good about that?" said the boy.

His father didn't answer.

The boy decided then he preferred the parish church, not because he understood what was going on, but because services were over in a hurry. And he liked to stand and kneel, and there was so much to look at: the statues, the paintings, the arched ceiling, the priest's colorful robes. He thought his own church was ordinary, boring. In Sunday School they sang about mountains and streams and "little purple pansies" while they sat in a dark basement room with cracked plaster walls that leaked water when it rained. Worse, they had to go twice each Sunday: two hours in the morning and more than an hour at night. When they got home, the boy was exhausted. He would have traded with his cousins any day.

Wednesday night of the following week, the boy's grandparents came to visit. The boy and his grandmother had a good game of tag, but the boy agreed to go to bed early, knowing the game really wasn't over. He arranged his bed with extra blankets and pillows to make it look like he was still in it, then crawled up on the dresser top and waited. This was a new move. He snickered, thinking how clever he was.

Before long the door opened a crack. His grandmother slipped in and quickly closed the door, then waited for her eyes to adjust. She always did it that way. She was now only inches away, and he could hear her breathing and smell her apron. She tiptoed forward then lunged at the bed. It was an aggressive act. He leaped from the dresser onto the bed. She jumped. "Oh!" she yelled, and her hands flew up. She grabbed him, and they fell to the bed. When his mother appeared, they were laughing in each other's arms. His grandmother pointed to the dresser and tried to explain, but she was out of breath.

"You're making too much noise," said his mother. She couldn't help laughing either. "You've got to get to sleep." She turned to his grandmother and spoke in Polish. "And your high blood pressure." His grandmother scowled.

They separated, and when his grandmother stood she tapped him on the arm. "Twoja kolej," she whispered. He lunged, missed, and was stopped by his mother. His grandmother looked on with the smile of the victor. The counterattack would have to wait for another day.

"Would you read to me?" the boy said after his grandmother left.

"It's much too late," his mother said.

She always had an excuse. Sometimes he thought he loved his grandmother more than his mother.

A week later his grandmother had a stroke. His mother stayed with her in the hospital until she died.

Many people attended the funeral in the parish church, even though the day was rainy. The shiny, black casket stood surrounded by flow-

ers before the altar. The boy could hear his mother and aunts crying, but he wasn't going to do that. He refused to think of her being inside the casket. She had simply gone away. That was all he could accept.

Above the altar was a huge crucifix, larger than a man. He looked up into the sad eyes of the whitened face. Open wounds from spikes driven through the hands and feet trickled blood. He tried not to look but couldn't help it. He wondered why the crucifix was there and what it meant. He liked the other statues with racks of red and blue candles at their bases and the stained glass windows were a delight. But he was glad to get out of the church and into the rain.

At the graveside, his grandfather looked lost and suddenly much older. His father bent down to the boy and whispered, "You'll have to be extra nice to your mother. She's going to be upset for a while."

The boy looked at his father. What about me, he thought. Then he noticed how distraught his mother looked.

That evening before dinner, he wanted to tell her how he felt, but he couldn't think of the right words. Finally he just said, "Would you read to me?" He knew there wasn't time—she had to fix dinner—but he had to say something.

At first she acted like she didn't understand. Then she drew him in and held him. "Maybe after dinner," she said. But when the time came that evening, she was busy ironing.

He went to bed and was half asleep when he heard the door open and close. He thought of his grandmother, her hands, the smell of her apron. In the half-wakefulness, a new hope surged through him. He felt a soft tap on the hand, then heard the words, "Twoja kolej."

A small, thin figure slipped quietly out the door.