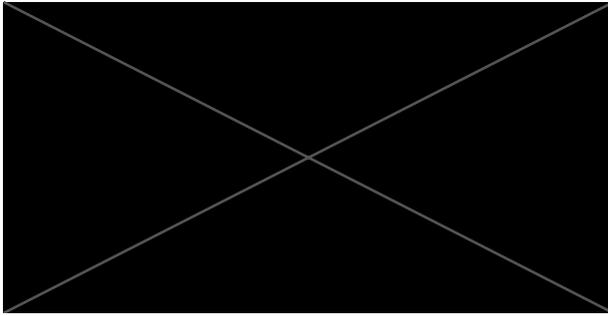


Brittney Johnson

Adult

“Grandma’s Cane”

2,206 words



## Grandma's Cane

Ethel wasn't one for sitting about. All her long life had been a dance of wonder: loping between trees in her countryside backyard, swimming down frigid mountain streams in a race with her younger siblings, crashing bikes, scooters, wheelbarrows, even ATVs, and digging through sand for creatures unknown... The joy of living was created from movement and all the wild, fresh gasps of air rushing through her throat in laughter, screams, or sometimes cries for help. Dad called her an adrenaline junkie throughout her teen years, while Papa called her trouble, and each of her younger siblings called her captain as they marched to the tune of her example.

Dad and Papa were long gone now, and one of Ethel's younger siblings, too, had retired to the dust that only flounders when the wind blows just right. And by now, Ethel's body was more ravaged, the toll of a full life crackling between the spaces of her joints, time causing her spine to soften like butter. All the rowdy days of girlhood—the dirt and froth of it—alongside the invincibility of teen years, wide-eyed curiosity of young adulthood, and joyful exploration of 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's—all were memory now. Though she found it a chore to even get to her feet, she couldn't concede to the cage of a walker: its soulless, clinical metal frame and dragging, clicking sounds. But she knew something must be done if she were to continue her independence; an admission must be made.

"I don't wish to be young again," she said to herself, taking her time to get out of bed. She'd fallen into the same routine for almost a year, because now even just the natural ebb and flow of daily existence was enough to retire her to bed early. "I just wish I could be adventurous again, in this body. We've still got it in us, don't we, old girl?"

With a little laugh, she shuffled through her small house, dishes clattering as her shaky hands struggled to set them nicely on the counter top. The only thing on the docket today was

a doctor's visit, a yearly checkup. But she hadn't left the house in over a week, and knew the expense of the energy for that one excursion would take its toll. She went through the motions of her morning routine, eating a soggy breakfast and dressing in dim clothes. When she went to the closet and tugged a coat from the hanger, a large stick fell out with it, clattering on the floor.

As she stared down at it, she remembered collecting the branch in her fifties, just after both parents had passed. Gave their house one last visit—an overnight stay. A storm caused everything to shiver and shake, like the sky was mourning with her. Lightning had burnished the sky in silver scratches, a scraggly steel wool against the cast-iron night. Claps of thunder had accompanied the crackling of trees as lightning struck the tall figures without concern or apology.

When day broke, she had tromped through the squelching, tree-pocked field like a ghost at familiar haunting grounds, the scrambling exuberance of youth pulled out from under her heart. Here, in the misty morning, she found the aftermath of splinters and wood chips. A particular stick caught her eye: it was still fighting to stay attached to its mother tree, but embossed with a burnt, quaking line cutting through its half-stripped bark. The shadow of lightning come and gone. Something about the stricken branch had enticed her, so she'd pulled and yanked and tore through its remaining fibers, then took off running, not daring to look back at the tree, nor the yard, nor the countryside home of her youth.

Since then, the branch had shuffled between closets and under beds, from apartment to house to RV and back. She couldn't bring herself to be rid of it, despite how it shed crumbling bark onto every floor, and stood too long and at too irregular of a shape to be stored neatly in a nook or crammed in a cupboard, always getting in the way. Eventually, she'd shoved it to the back of her coat closet and evidently forgotten its existence, despite the years she'd trailed

it along with her. But now, looking at its cracked face, she decided it would finally have its time to be revived.

Doctor's visit all but forgotten, Ethel carefully lowered into a seat and whittled away the remainder of the decaying bark. She revealed the warm reddish innards beneath, and used her skill with the blade to emphasize that dark and jagged scar of lightning's unforgiving reach. If she needed help getting around now, what better tool than a cane forged from the same wildness she'd grown up in, vibrant movement etched on its face for all to see?

"You've got a reserve of all the speed and spunk I've used up, haven't you?" she said to the branch as she rubbed wax over its knife-smoothed length. Her voice tremored with age, but she smiled. "I trust you'll keep all the fight left in my heart right here in my hand, instead."

The first step that Ethel took with the lightning cane, the world around her changed. In a flash of light, she awoke to her own beating heart now pulsing a realm of vitality through her. The buzzing cane in her hand seemed to shimmer with exultant energy, and inside herself she felt that energy too, coursing.

"Well, you little bug," she said to the buzzing stick, "you planning to fly me away?"

With that request, Ethel threw herself into a test lunge that gave way to a gallop. She loped through her house, appalled. Her flaccid legs were imbued with strength and nimbleness! Windows rattled with her startled laugh, then she lifted to her toes, making a face to herself before taking off running down the hall.

"What's this?" she proclaimed. "My battery's recharged! Someone wound up my key, I'm ready to go! Lookey, I'm practically a dash of lightning myself!"

She threw open her front door and launched off of the stoop. The air was as crisp as it'd always felt on her face, but fresher now, and she pushed through it until her own speed created a breeze to tickle her hair back. "My, my!"

Cane in her hand, Ethel rushed through the neighborhood, up and down blocks and alleyways, exploring the nooks and crannies of grimy shadow, finding joy in the creepy crawlies and crouching down quietly to lure in small cat friends. Then, breathless with options, she looked toward the mountains, practically hearing the streams and shimmer of leaves.

Ethel tromped toward the mountainside, verve filling her every step, and before she knew it, her feet did not touch the ground any longer. Her legs pumped with voraciousness as she became airborne, walking on the wind! Her lightning cane pointed the way as she zoomed over craggy outcroppings and tousled the crowns of trees that had long been out of her reach. She took in the sweet scent of spruce and juniper, then slowed as she spotted the glisten of a foamy brook tumbling through.

Ethel floated down between copses and landed at the bank. She dipped her feet in the frigid mountain water. After this test, she jumped right in, lightning cane in hand, her clothes soaking to her skin as the rushing river took her bubbling with it! She splashed and laughed and made little fountains with her mouth. Then, when too cold, she stepped out, and just like a flash of lightning, her stick pulled her to the sky again! The breeze dried her hair and clothes quickly while she was steered toward another adventure.

In a moment, she recognized the path she'd hiked long ago, and the mouth of one familiar cave opened before her like a door unlocked and beckoning. She howled with excitement as she landed, keeping her speed on these newly electrified legs, and launched into the darkness.

The rocky echoes of dripping water and her own dancing footfalls created a symphony. She tapped her stick against the wall, where a spark would light up her path, and she traversed through the cavern without a care. There were formations she had forgotten about, some like melting caramel dripping down a sundae, others like sugar boiling up to become hard candy. The rocks took on a dance of their own in her brief sparks of firelight, each snapshot more grand than the next. Stalactites as tall as her, and slippery mounds of water-smoothed stone hills. The light at the end came into view, and she took one last peek at the slow trickles of water... swept in a breath of cool, musty sediment... then launched into the open air once more!

The trees all waved to her as she passed, and Ethel found she could ride side-saddle on her lightning cane, exclaiming, "I'm a proper witch now, aren't I?"

They zoomed through the forest as she peered for her next source of excitement, buzzing with anticipation. The sunlight caught her gaze, and so instead she faced the sky, letting the breeze push her hair from its standard plait. The warmth of the afternoon sunshine made her skin come alive in rich sensations of newness, regrowth, spring.

"Ah, this is just like my childhood," she thought aloud. "Riding from one thrill to the next, breathing it all in." Suddenly, she felt grateful to be so old, to have gotten the experience of so much, to have contained eons of movement in her past that still her muscles remembered. Then, she laughed, "All there is to do now is crash! Sure my body remembers all that, too."

In looking down at her trusty steed, she spotted just beneath her a rocky lake with coarsely sanded beaches. The crest of the mountain, she'd made it! She beamed and alighted down onto the sea-glass pebbles, all orange, white, black, brown, tan, and sporadic green.

The water shone with reflections of rocky juts scraping the clouds on one side, and the scant shrubby trees that could grow this high up, pocking the coastline with roughly hewn shade.

The air was clear, thin, crisp, and the sand *shhhed* beneath each step she took, using her cane to keep her balance. As she struck it against the water's edge, a blast of shimmering light puffed out from it in small orbs of soft yellows, whites, purples, multiplying in the mirror of the water's surface.

Amazed, Ethel's mouth gaped and she watched these glowing bubbles gently leave their birthplace, then dance on the breeze over the water, twinkling as they bumped together, a sort of laughter. Some singed out as they touched the lake, some soared so high they became lost in the blue arc of sky, and others wound between trees, making the mountainside glow and shimmer. She tapped her cane once more, creating a new blitz of these puffs of light, like children of clouds and stars, shining as they flowed outward. She grinned and reached for one. It passed around her fingers like steam, rolling off and leaving a staticky sort of moisture behind.

She giggled, released another bout of them, and stepped out toward the lake. Her cane *shhhed* against the water in the same way it had on the rocky shore, and in another pace or two she found she was walking over the surface like it was dew, a too-full waterbed. Her steps were rocky, and that added a joy as she stumbled about, trying to catch each glowing orb, feel its caress in her palm. She danced over the lake, amongst homemade stars, until she was winded from exertion and joy.

Her lightning cane, sensing the energy all used up in her, started to tug her back into the breeze. She forced it toward the water's surface once more, to release another flock of dandelion-fluff starlight, then jumped off the water's surface into the air, spiraling as she sailed higher with her cane leading the way.

"Oh, ho ho!" she howled. "That's it! That's enough for a lifetime!" Through sighs and laughter, legs kicking with jovial energy, she said, "That was the one more adventure I'd needed under my belt. I'm satisfied. Thank you much, dear lightning bug, I'm satisfied!"

They soared slowly down on the wind, watching as the sun matched their pace in its own journey behind the mountains. The air was chilled and scented soft, like a pillow flipped to the fresh side. Ethel's hair floated wild and her body was filled with the pleasing soreness of a full day—a long-forgotten feeling, and one that made her smile. Golden orange light reflected in her watery eyes, and eventually they reached the grass of her front yard, a soft bed of chilled stillness all drenched in dull shadow. Ethel patted the green of it, and allowed her cane to rest alongside her. The sky arcing above reflected the soft hues of the puffs of light she'd chased, and Ethel released a gentle sigh, looking up. The blushing sun stretched its last golden trickles to each corner and soft curve, and, seeming content, decided to go down.