

The Very, Very Old Man

by Verlene Schermer

Once upon a time, a very, very long time ago, before you were born, before I was born, before anyone here today was born, there lived a very, very old man, older than anyone here today. And he loved more than anything else in the world, to go for a walk. And so every day he would go for a walk. He could no longer take large steps like younger folks, so he took tiny little steps, and he could no longer hold his head up high like younger folks, so he bent over at the shoulders, and held onto a staff that he had whittled from a willow branch. He didn't go very far on his daily walks, and it took quite a long time, but he loved his walks so much, that he never missed a day!

One day, while he had been out walking for a very, very long time, he suddenly found that he could no longer take his tiny little steps. He looked down at his feet. "Move feet," he said, but his feet just stood there. He tapped at his feet with his willow branch, but it didn't do any good. The old man stared at his feet for many minutes. The minutes became hours, and the hours became days. The old man hoped that someone would come down the road and notice him standing there, and know what to do with him.

But the days became weeks and the weeks became months. After several months, the old man's whiskers had grown long and stringy and hung clear down to his hips. The months became years and the years became centuries, and when many centuries had passed, the old man's whiskers had grown all the way down his body to his toes! And in all this time, no one came down the road to notice him standing there.

But then one day, a young man came down the road, walking in large steps and moving very quickly -- so quickly, he almost didn't notice the old man standing there in the road. He stopped just long enough to say, "Silly old man, go home! There is no use for you here!" And the young man hurried on his way.

The next day, a young woman came down the road with her head held high -- so high that she almost didn't see the old man. But she glanced down her nose at him and said, "Silly old man, go home! There is no use for you here!" And she marched importantly down the road.

The next day, two very young children, a boy and a girl, about your age, came skipping down the road. They stopped to giggle and point at the old man. They skipped and danced around him and asked each other, "What is it? What is it used for? Maybe Grandmama will know!" And they hurried back up the road to fetch her.

When they returned with Grandmama, the old woman looked with tenderness and wisdom at the old bent over man. She sat down on a rock next to him, leaned his back against her shoulder, and began to stroke his long stringy whiskers, and the most surprising thing happened! The old man began to sing and tell the most wonderful stories the children had ever heard! The children sat down right in the middle of the road and listened for hours.

And the very, very old man, who could no longer take large steps -- or even tiny little steps, who could no longer walk with his head held up high -- or even up at all, found out that there was still some use for him after all.