

Grandpa Charlie's Coming for a Visit

By Jeffrey R. Paine

Charlie fidgeted in his seat, barely able to contain his excitement.

"I wish he'd hurry up and get here," he said to the nanny, who was presently fussing with one of the babies and was the only adult available.

"He's coming as fast as he can," she replied. "He can't make the ship go any faster than it already is."

"Sure he can," Charlie said. "He's at the helm." That wasn't really the case, he knew, but he was feeling impatient.

The nanny did not reply, occupied as she was with four children under the age of two.

"Did he get our message? How will he know it's us? It's been years since he's been home!"

"Now, Charlie, you just calm down," the nanny said. "He knows we're waiting, and there'll be someone to direct him to us. You know, for someone as mature as you are, you're almost as much trouble as the babies! Just relax. The ferry isn't due to land for ten more minutes, and it will be a little longer before he can get off. But he will be in the first group off, and he will be coming to this gateway."

Charlie was offended, being so much older than the babies she compared him to, but he decided to keep quiet. There was already enough commotion, with more than fifty of grandpa's descendants and assorted other relatives waiting for the ship to disgorge its valued passenger.

And then there were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other groups waiting for their expected and valued passengers as well.

Charlie's patience was wearing thin. It was like waiting for Christmas, but for so much longer. It had been almost a year since they had received the message that Grandpa Charlie was on his way home, for the first time in years.

Charlie looked up at the monitor screens, high up in the terminal. He could not see the image of the giant ship, as it was some distance away—it was too large and cumbersome to come all the way into port. What the assembled family was waiting for was the smaller ferry to bring him to the passenger dock where they waited.

For Charlie, the time since they had received the news of the now-imminent arrival had seemed an eternity. He was certain that it was eons ago that he had hugged Grandpa Charlie goodbye.

Now, for month after month, each day had brought a growing excitement. He had spent hours looking in the family albums, looking through the memorabilia of his own, stirring up memories of Grandpa. How much had Grandpa changed? He was nine years older now. Would he look the same? Would he still be the active, boisterous man, or would his voyages have aged him? Charlie knew that he himself was older, and that Grandpa Charlie might not remember much of him after all this time.

He looked out the window, but couldn't see much. Would this waiting never end?

He checked his watch, comparing the time with that displayed on the monitor across the room. He sighed and looked over at the nearest stroller. He gently pulled it toward him, until he could see right in. Bright eyes blinked back

at him, followed by the familiar shriek of recognition, and the little toothless smile.

Little Samantha had been born just nine months before. She was the youngest of Grandpa's descendants, and Charlie was the oldest, and had been since mom and dad had died. Playing with her would help the time pass. He leaned forward and began to make cooing noises, then talked in her favorite funny voice, reaching in to play with her hands and tickle her. That brought bright peals of laughter from the tiny face.

As he played with the baby, Charlie's mind wandered. He could still remember the first time he met Grandpa Charlie. He and Grandma had stayed home, waiting, while dad and mom had gone to meet Grandpa at the port and bring him home from a long voyage. Charlie had just turned six, and had just finished Kindergarten.

Mom and dad had never known Grandpa Charlie, and it had been years since Grandma Sharon had seen him, or so they had told him in preparation for the visit.

It was late, and Charlie had fallen asleep on the living room sofa while waiting. He remembered slumbering, stirring some when he heard voices, and there was laughter. He awoke, sat up, and rubbed his eyes.

The living room was almost dark, illuminated only by shafts of light escaping from the kitchen. He could see Grandma sitting at the table, her silvered hair glinting in the light, above her familiar, wrinkled face. Dad was leaning against the counter, by the sink. They seemed to be talking to someone out of sight, on the other side of the table. He could hear a voice he didn't recognize, and most of the talk he didn't understand.

Charlie quietly climbed off the sofa, and padded his way across the room to the kitchen doorway, pausing while in the shadows, still unnoticed, to learn what more he could. Was it really Grandpa?

“You can’t imagine how much of a shock it was to learn just a few months ago that I was going to be greeted when I got back to Earth by a son named James,” the stranger’s voice said. “And when I saw him in person, I could tell that he was your child.”

Grandma just laughed, then said, “He’s got your eyes, and your sense of humor, too!”

“I wish you two would stop talking about me like I’m not here,” he heard dad say.

“I still don’t believe it, Sharon,” the stranger’s voice said. “I don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. I would have stayed. I would have done the right thing. Even if we hadn’t married, I would have made sure you were okay, that you didn’t have to raise our son all by yourself.”

“And that is exactly why I didn’t tell you,” Grandma said. “In all our time together, I could see the wanderlust in you, the call of the journey. It was all you talked about, everything you were working for all through college, ever since elementary school, you said. It might have been the right thing to do in some outmoded idea of nobility, but I didn’t think it was right to ruin your life’s dream because of contraceptive failure. Besides, I was in good health, had a great job, had a supportive family—including your siblings and your mother, who gave me some pointers about raising children on your own—and could take care of myself. And I wasn’t at all in love with you. The fact you were leaving made it much easier to accept that I was having a child.”

At that, Charlie could wait no more—he practically bolted into the kitchen, stopping beside Grandma’s chair, looking at last at the stranger across the table. He looked, he could tell at a glance, just exactly like the man in the pictures in Grandma’s photo album.

“There you are, my sweetness,” Grandma said to Charlie, as her arm snaked around him. “At last you’re awake. This is your grandfather; he’s finally here. And as I’ve told you, his name is Charlie, too. You were named after him.”

The stranger stood and walked around the table. Charlie just watched the man, and turned toward him as he knelt in front of Charlie, making their faces about eye level. The man held out his hand.

“Hello, munchkin,” he said in a soft and serious tone. “I’m glad to meet you, Charles.”

Looking the man in the eyes, Charlie took the huge adult hand in his and solemnly shook it.

“Do you really steer a big ship?” Charlie asked, for such questions are of paramount importance to six-year-olds.

The man frowned for a moment.

“No, I’m sorry. That isn’t true, Charlie,” he said. “Not by myself at least. Flying a starship takes a large team, hundreds of people. I help steer it.”

Charlie was disappointed, and it must have shown in his face. But suddenly the face before him cracked into a tremendous smile, and Charlie saw a twinkle in the man’s eye as he winked at Grandma.

“No, the word ‘big’ doesn’t even begin to describe it,” the man exclaimed, throwing his arms wide and his head back, his voice booming. “I

help steer the largest, most humongous, enormous, oversized, so-far-past-big-it's-not-even-funny, colossal monster of a ship you could possibly imagine."

Charlie shrieked and laughed at the sudden, surprising histrionics, even if he didn't know all the words.

"Charlie, I live in a floating city," Grandpa said, his face beaming at the young boy, his hands now resting on his hips. "Bigger and more people than here in the city you live in. And I've come all this way to see you!"

With that, Charlie could stand it no more. He threw himself at the man, throwing his arms around his massive neck in a hug that was returned just as suddenly and warmly.

"Welcome home, Grandpa," Charlie said. "Welcome home."

Charlie realized that the reverie had lasted only a moment, and that there were tears streaming from his eyes. He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes, looking around to see if anyone had noticed. No one had, except little Samantha, who was waiting for more entertainment. Charlie proceeded to play peek-a-boo, using the handkerchief to hide behind. Within moments, the baby was breathless with laughter again.

There was much to remember of Grandpa, Charlie thought. The first meeting. The eighteen months of loving friendship. Grandpa had stayed with the family, with Grandma, who was nearing seventy at the time, and his parents, who were in their forties, and his three brothers and his sister, all of whom were older. There had been traveling, and fishing, and camping out under the mountain stars. Riding on the broad, strong shoulders of his grandfather, up a

mountain trail. Reading stories. Watching movies. Sneaking late-night snacks, and talking about all the things that are important to a young boy. And finally, halfway through the second grade, the tearful goodbye.

Charlie had blocked out most of the memories surrounding that farewell. Even to this day, he only had a hazy recollection of the events of the time. He remembered asking Grandpa if he would ever see him again, and the wonderful man had answered, "If the winds and stars are willing."

And then he had been gone, his ship moving away slowly and then more quickly, until it was no longer visible.

Charlie had cried for days, but as children do, he had gotten on with his life. Periodically through the years, he would check on the starship's progress, as updates were regularly posted.

And now Grandpa was coming back for a visit! He would be so proud of all the things that his grandson had done over the years. At least, Charlie hoped so. And with the accumulation of years, Charlie hoped to learn more about and appreciate better the man he had so loved when he was little.

There was commotion now, as the ferry was docking, visible through the outside windows. The walkways connected the terminal to the ferry. Everyone was craning their necks to see the stream of crew and passengers coming through the doorway, meeting up with friends and family with jubilant outcries.

With a sudden jolt of recognition, Charlie yelled, "There he is! Grandpa Charlie! Over here!"

Somehow, through all the din in the cavernous station, the beloved face turned and a look of joyous recognition spread across it. The younger man bounded—as best he could, considering the crowd in the terminal room—right up to Charlie.

“Charlie, is it really you?” The man asked, reaching out to take both of Charlie’s frail hands. “My god, you were just a little tyke when I saw you last! This is so weird! I still keep a picture of you by my bed, and another in my wallet! And I watch the videos of us pretty often, too.”

“Yeah, I was little then,” Charlie said. “Good gods, Grandpa, you still look as young and strong as you did the day you sailed away!”

Grandpa Charlie laughed and said. “I’m a little older, nine years older. The hair’s a little thinner, and I have to work harder to keep trim and fit. But look at you! You’re all grown up!”

“Yeah,” Charlie said with a laugh. “I’m grown up and started growing back down again. You take off in your humongous starship and gallivant all around the nearer part of the galaxy, and you only age nine years, while I age nine times nine years here on Earth, before you get back to visit again.”

They stood gazing at each other, with extended family gathering around the old man and his grandfather, now 44 years year junior, but born a century and a half before.

Charlie was the youngest of Grandpa’s five grandchildren, and the last surviving. The two stood, surrounded by many of the great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren and great-great-great-grandchildren of a middle-aged starship crewman. Charlie pulled the younger man to him, in a long-awaited hug.

“Relativistic travel is something, isn’t it,” the younger Charlie said. The elder Charlie laughed.

“Welcome home, Grandpa,” he whispered in the younger man’s ear.

“Welcome home.”