

AGING IN THE LAND OF THE YOUNG

by Sharon Curtin

What burden are years if you have lived no more than thirty? The author has searched for answers from friends and strangers twice and three times her age, and writes of what it is like to learn the feeling of no longer growing, in a culture that worships youth.

1.

Old men, old women, almost 20 million of them. They constitute 10 percent of the total population, and the percentage is steadily growing. Some of them, like conspirators, walk all bent over, as if hiding some precious secret, filled with self-protection. The body seems to gather itself around those vital parts, folding shoulders, arms, pelvis like a fading rose. Watch and you see how fragile old people come to think they are.

Aging paints every action gray, lies heavy on every movement, imprisons every thought. It governs each decision with a ruthless and single-minded perversity. To age is to learn the feeling of no longer growing, of struggling to do old tasks, to remember familiar actions. The cells of the brain are destroyed with thousands of unfelt tiny strokes, little pockets of clotted blood wiping out memories and abilities without warning. The body seems slowly to give up, randomly stopping, sometimes starting again as if to torture and tease with the memory of lost strength. Hands become clumsy, frail transparencies, held together with knotted blue veins.

Sometimes it seems as if the distance between your feet and the floor were constantly changing, as if you were walking on shifting and not quite solid ground. One foot down, slowly, carefully, force the other foot forward. Sometimes you are a shuffler, not daring to lift your feet from the uncertain earth but forced to slide hesitantly forward in little whispering movements. Sometimes you are able to "step out," but this effort—in fact the pure exhilaration of easy movement—soon exhausts you.

The world becomes narrower as friends and family die or move away. To climb stairs, to ride in a car, to walk to the corner, to talk on the telephone; each action seems to take away from the energy needed to stay alive. Everything is limited by the strength you hoard greedily. Your needs decrease, you require less food, less sleep, and finally less human contact; yet this little bit becomes more and more difficult. You fear that one day you will be reduced to the simple acts of breathing and taking nourishment. This is the ultimate stage you dread, the period of helplessness and hopelessness, when independence will be over.

There is nothing to prepare you for the experience of growing old. Living is a process, an irreversible progression toward old age and eventual death. You see men of eighty still vital and straight as oaks; you see men of fifty reduced to gray shadows in the human landscape. The cellular clock differs for each one of us, and is profoundly affected by our own life experiences, our heredity, and perhaps most important, by the concepts of aging encountered in society and in oneself.

The aged live with enforced leisure, on fixed incomes, subject to many chronic illnesses, and most of their money goes to keep a roof over their heads. They also live in a culture that worships youth.

A kind of cultural attitude makes me bigoted against old people; it makes me think young is best; it makes me treat old people like outcasts.

Hate that gray? Wash it away!

Wrinkle cream.

Monkey glands.

Face-lifting.

Look like a bride again.

Don't trust anyone over thirty.

I fear growing old.

Feel Young Again!

I am afraid to grow old—we're all afraid. In fact, the fear of growing old is so great that every aged person is an insult and a threat to the society. They remind us of our own death, that our body won't always remain smooth and responsive, but will someday betray us by aging, wrinkling, faltering, failing. The ideal way to age would be to grow slowly invisible, gradually disappearing, without causing worry or discomfort to the young. In some ways that does happen. Sitting in a small park across from a nursing home one day, I noticed that the young mothers and their children gathered on one side, and the old people from the home on the other. Whenever a youngster would run over to the "wrong" side, chasing a ball or just trying to cover all the available space, the old people would lean forward and smile. But before any communication could be established, the mother would come over, murmuring embarrassed apologies, and take her child back to the "young" side.

Now, it seemed to me that the children didn't feel any particular fear and the old people didn't seem to be threatened by the children. The division of space was drawn by the mothers. And the mothers never looked at the old people who lined the other side of the park like so many pigeons perched on the benches. These well-dressed young matrons had a way of sliding their eyes over, around, through the old people; they never looked at them directly. The old people may as well have been invisible; they had no reality for the youngsters, who were not permitted to speak to them, and they offended the aesthetic eye of the mothers.

My early experiences were somewhat different; since I grew up in a small town, my childhood had more of a nineteenth-century flavor. I knew a lot of old people, and considered some of them friends. There was no culturally defined way for me to "relate" to old people, except the rules of courtesy which applied to all adults. My grandparents were an integral and important part of the family and of the community. I sometimes have a dreadful fear that mine will be the last generation to know old people as friends, to have a sense of what growing old means, to respect and understand man's mortality and his courage in the face of death. Mine may be

the last generation to have a sense of living history, of stories passed from generation to generation, of identity established by family history.

2.

In a hill town in eastern Kentucky, I met an old woman called Granny Sukie. She was more than a hundred years old, according to her family, and now spent most of her time wrapped in a quilt sitting by the fireplace in the winter and on the porch in the summer. Granny Sukie was cared for by "Aunt" Mary, no blood relation but considered kin by marriage. Aunt Mary was pushing seventy when I first met her, and she told me she had been caring for "the old lady" for thirty years. Their relationship had begun quite naturally: Granny Sukie needed someone to care for her, and Aunt Mary needed somewhere to live.

Granny Sukie was blind now, had been for many years. But she knew her way around in the way only a woman who has cleaned and scrubbed every inch of space can know a house; and she knew every tree and shrub in the small yard the same way. She had planted them, had nurtured them, had watched them grow. Even though she could not see anymore, things in the area of her home remained so familiar that her step never faltered.

She told me one day, "The last years of a woman's life should be spent in trying to settle what's inside. Early on a woman is so filled with things outside—her looks and her husband, her children and her home—that she never has a chance to be just private. I've had more private time, now, than I need; but I value these years all the same. I miss readin' and I wonder sometimes if the hills have changed any. I've buried two husbands and three children . . . right up till now, my life's been good. But I wonder if Aunt Mary is gonna last long enough? Seems to me her arm feels thinner, and she isn't moving so quick. If Mary goes, I haven't much kin left . . . and if she gets sick, well, can I take care of her?"

Her face was so full of wrinkles and folds that sometimes I thought it would look the same upside down as right side up. Being blind had made her face appear eyeless, as if a sculptor's thumb had been drawn from temple to temple, leaving only a continuous deep crevice. She was tiny, so tiny I wondered if she would just shrink away. Compared to her body, her hands seemed oversized. They were still the hands of a homemaker; large, with red knuckles, the skin tightly drawn from washing clothes by hand with lye soap. Sometimes her hands would reach out as if looking for a job to do, a baby to bounce or a coat to mend. Those hands weren't used to being still. But now she spent her time dozing in her chair, wrapped in her quilt (she could tell stories about each of the

age, āj n fr. L. aetas, fr. aevum, lifetime 1. The part of an existence extending from the beginning to any given time. (Webster)

pieces in the quilt. It was very old, so old that even Aunt Mary didn't know whether or not the stories were true), and living in a "private place" in her mind.

Granny Sukie and Aunt Mary lived on a stipend from the state welfare office called "Old Age Assistance." At the time, for the two of them, they received about \$180 a month. The house was owned "outright," but they paid for taxes and insurance. The utility bill was negligible, since they cooked but one big meal a day on the old wood stove, and they went to bed with the sun and rose with the dawn, thus using very little electricity. They managed, with the small vegetable garden and a few pretty sad looking chickens, to eat fairly well. Neighbors frequently brought over fresh bread, or a pie, as was the custom in that part of the country. In fact, someone came by the house nearly every day, just to check on the old women and see that they were all right. They still had some family. They were as rich in resources as they were in years.

Some bright young man at the bank noticed one day that the signatures on the welfare checks were identical and he called the welfare office. That office, failing to find anything out from the old ladies, had asked that a member of the family look into the matter.

Aunt Mary was, quite properly, furious that someone would suspect that she was trying to cheat Granny Sukie. She straddled a worn spot in the linoleum, looking for all the world like an ancient sea turtle, her head darting from side to side and her eyes shining, and her low-built, almost legless body never moving an inch. Damn right, she signed both the checks. Did those fools in that office think the old lady could read and write, her with no sight for thirty-more years? She always knew those ladies-aide women or social women or whatever you called them wouldn't give something for nothing. What did they want? The house? Granny's jewelry? Were they going to send her, send Aunt Mary, to jail so's they could come and drag Granny away and take it all? You never got something for nothing, she knew it, always knew it, shouldn't have started accepting the money in the first place. Well, she'd pay back every last cent. She'd never done nothing dishonest . . .

Aunt Mary against the society of social officialdom was something to see. She had done nothing wrong and that was that. "They" had offered *them* the money; a busy woman with a leather case like a man's came out one day, years ago, and filled out some papers. The money came to the letter box every month, and once in a while some snoopy lady would come and ask questions, refusing tea or any refreshment like she was too good . . . Social officials were simply routed. First of all, Aunt Mary had no idea of their existence. She wouldn't talk to them. And sec-

ond, to stop the checks now would mean someone had been making an error every month for years. So the old sea turtle beat the great black birds. In the little house in the gentle hills, things go on much as they have for years. Agelessly aging.

3.

I decided to spend some time in the hotel because of the sign painted on the building: Pensioners Welcome. The sign meant just this: the owners would accept pensioners as lodgers, not provide any special service or anything. They would tolerate old men and women. The hotel itself was located in an unlovely section of a singularly unlovely city, full of small hotels, greasy spoons, liquor stores that advertise specials on muscatel and Tokay wines, and over all was a feeling of decay.

If the owner had had any sense and any insurance coverage, he would have been out looking for a good arsonist. The building seemed structurally sound—at least, it didn't lean—but the minute you walked inside the door, you could smell it, feel it: the place couldn't be saved. There are some buildings where too much has happened, where the walls can't support any more life. They are full, finished.

My own mood as I walked down the street was like that of the hotel. I felt finished, depressed, abandoned. I had begun research on the problems of old people, had spent three weeks working in a nursing home and a month as a visiting nurse, and was very full of other people's misery. My marriage had not long before been declared a disaster, and I was just beginning to come out of numbness into the real despair. I had been able to sit for hours, for days, without moving, just staring straight ahead. Now I was trying hard to "pull myself together" and "straighten UP." I felt like the old people I was trying to understand: sick and lonely and wondering if it was worth the trouble to take another breath.

The carpet in the lobby had once had an elaborate pattern, maybe even colorful, like that found in old movie theaters. Time and dirt had erased everything but shadows. Here and there a certain brightness in the pattern suggested the past presence of some piece of furniture, but now there was only the clerk's desk in one corner and some uncomfortable chairs. A few old men sat around, successfully blending in with the walls and furniture.

I walked in carrying my own burden of loneliness. It seemed like an appropriate place for me, at the time, even if I wasn't a pensioner. I needed a totally new and undemanding environment. I wanted to be someplace where nothing reminded me of normal happy things; someplace where a deep, ragged sigh would not sound unusual. The lobby was still, so quiet it seemed to be waiting for an earthquake or a

thunderstorm. It was an empty quietness, somehow, not the quiet of content or the stillness that follows good conversation, but just the absence of sound.

The desk clerk was a hostile cretin. He did not talk but interrogated. Was I from welfare? From the state? The city? What agency did I represent? Whom was I investigating? Anything I wanted to know, I could ask him. No sense bothering the old fools. Was I a cop? Maybe some kind of fed? Well, what did I want?

"A room. With bath, if you have it."

The clerk was not accustomed to listening, unless it was through a keyhole. Direct human communication seemed impossible. His face was webbed; in fact, the wrinkles were so dense that it seemed all expression was caught in a net.

"We don't handle day trade, lady. This here is a resident hotel. But maybe we can make a deal . . ."

Behind me I could feel ears straining to hear every word. I began to realize that the desk clerk knew of only two kinds of young women who could come to that hotel: social workers and hookers. Either way, he was out to make a buck, as long as he was protected. I knew I was blushing, and embarrassment made me angry. He had rooms available; I had seen the sign in the window. He was also the kind of person you couldn't let get by with anything. He was a small-time, small-brained creep; but he would be capable of sneaking up to my room with a passkey, or peeking through the keyhole, or making a grab as I walked by.

Anger was a dangerous emotion, because I was so hurt and confused over the direction my life was taking that I could not control rage. I would have cheerfully murdered that man, and something in my face must have frightened him. I repeated my request, quietly, not daring to look into his face because of my own anger, and he quickly closed a deal. A room, shared bath, two weeks in advance, \$40. He overcharged me.

As I closed the door of the room behind me, I almost regretted my persistence. I didn't mind being considered a dirty young lady so much as I minded living like one. I knew country poor, but not city poverty. The room was about 8 by 10 feet, just large enough for a bed, a bureau (the top covered by the scars of lonely drinking bouts, hundreds of circles left by wet glasses, and the edge marked by forgotten cigarettes) and a straight-backed chair. The room wasn't noticeably clean, but someone had been very generous with a scented spray. No obvious signs of insect occupation. It was a tiny, smelly, ugly room.

I was also worried about my motives for being there. I wasn't particularly interested in social reform, and I wasn't a reporter. I liked old people, and was interested in the problems of aging, but I didn't intend to make it my life's work. I had thought about

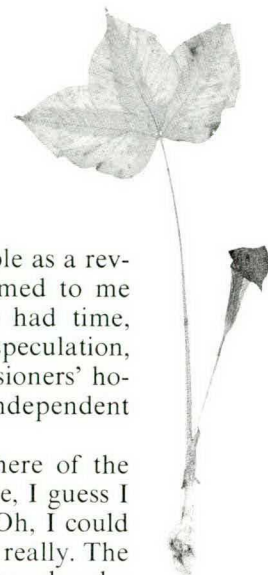
writing a book, about organizing old people as a revolutionary political force, because it seemed to me they were natural revolutionaries. They had time, and nothing to lose. But most of this was speculation, idle thought. Why was I here in this pensioners' hotel, populated by forty or so old, poor, independent people?

Why was I there? Partly, the atmosphere of the place suited me. Like the old people there, I guess I felt more abandoned than independent. Oh, I could manage. But it wasn't as if I had a choice, really. The place was right for me and for the old people who lived there. It was a kind of junkyard for rejected human beings.

When I had come upstairs the lobby had been buzzing. The conflict and hatred between myself and the clerk had been quite obvious. I hoped this would make the old men feel they could trust me, but I had no idea how to approach them. I felt stiff, awkward; I didn't know the rules observed by people who lived this way. I didn't want to hurt or embarrass anyone, and I couldn't afford to be hurt or embarrassed myself. I couldn't offer to pay someone to let me follow them around. (Excuse me, sir. I am doing research on dirty old men. Could I step into your shoes for a week? For a price? No? Why not? Because, even here at the bottom, you have a right to privacy and a right to choose your own company. Right, sir.) I felt they might be more friendly outside, maybe in one of the local diners.

I met Harry and Al over a salt shaker on the corner. They were both in their seventies, old enough and tough enough so that they remain difficult to describe. They looked alike, stringy in body and sour of face, with eyes that were never still. After a while I noticed that Harry did most of the talking, because Al seemed to have a slight drool, perhaps the result of a stroke. They had both been drifters since the Depression. Though ancient, they retained the moves of much younger men; like good athletes, they had learned to care for their bodies, to conserve their energies, to keep moving. I was impressed with their strength from the very beginning. They had nothing, hadn't ever been much, loved no one, and regretted nothing. They accepted things in a way that was difficult for me to understand.

Harry and Al didn't exactly seek my company, but they agreed to spend some time with me after I convinced them that I sincerely believed they had something to teach me, that I wasn't trying to cheat them, and that I wasn't any "do-gooder" either. They were pretty contemptuous of the human race in general, not having generous natures themselves, but were especially suspicious of "gub'ment do-gooders." I think



The latter part of life; an advanced period of life; also, seniority; state of being old. ("Nor wrong mine age with this indignity." Shakespeare)

their final analysis of me was that I was a fairly harmless crank.

That first afternoon we spent in a nearby park. They had one bench they always sat on, close to the street so they wouldn't lose the comforting smell of the city. Both men hated the country; they distrusted anything that looked too close to the earth. I would lie on the grass and they were both convinced I would die of worms or some other dread disease. They never saw any contradiction between this and the fact that they continually itched and scratched from various bug bites.

We agreed to meet in the morning outside their room in the hotel. I glanced in when Harry opened the door; the room was so small that they had to turn sideways and scuttle to move between the beds; they had no bureau, and clothing was simply tossed in piles around the room. Everything seemed both dusty and water-stained, like a very old and slightly leaky tomb. They wore the same clothing every day. It never seemed to get any dirtier or cleaner; maybe they each had several outfits in the same stage of filth and disrepair.

A day with Harry and Al always started with coffee and a doughnut at a diner twelve blocks away, to which one walked. Twelve blocks, in the morning, before coffee. All three of us would silently move down the cement wrapped in our own misery. I felt sorry for myself. Harry tried to move in a way to minimize the pain in a bad knee. Al would blink, blink, mutter, and wipe his mouth every fifth step. The reason we went twelve blocks was that in that diner one could buy day-old pastries: 15 cents fresh, 7 cents day old; coffee 10 cents, refill for a nickel. That was breakfast. No talking. Everyone in the diner was in the same state of early-morning sorrow, that moment of gathering strength to face a day over which one has no control. You have to be ready for anything, surprised by nothing.

Neither man was on any kind of public assistance. Al insisted he had tried to get aid and had been turned down. Harry didn't say much, but my guess is that he had some reason for failing to apply; maybe a family abandoned somewhere or jail time not yet served. Their days were spent scurrying around the city, like chiggers under the skin of civilization. They lived by panhandling and petty thievery (mostly shoplifting), occasionally taking a job "on the docks" or washing cars or with a moving company that hired day labor for a buck an hour, a quarter kicked back. In my honor they free-lanced a few days. They showed me how to work a street: at the stoplights, each would rush a car, preferring two women or an older couple in it, wipe the windshield, and ask for money. Refusal meant they had a right to hurl unspeakable obscenities in the "customer's" face. Working the street usually meant more money than

just straight panhandling, but sometimes you would be hassled by the cops. And you didn't do it when high school kids were on their way home. (Both men were terrified of teen-age males. It was an almost mystical terror, like primitive devil fear. They would rather be hassled by cops than by teen-age boys.)

I tried panhandling. I was terrible at it. Harry said I asked as if I expected to be refused, and didn't deserve any help. He was a master. He could make himself look older, yet still proud. He would shuffle up, plant himself in front of the "mark" as if by accident, and say, "I's old, cold, hungry. Can't work, bad knee. Could you give me a little change to get to the Veterans Hospital?" It always worked. I think Harry usually chose to ask older affluent men, men who were facing their own retirement and old age. They would give him money just to get him out of the way. Al would hit on women. With his drool and slightly lopsided appearance, he frightened money out of them.

Actually, I think they preferred to work rather than panhandle. But some days, physical labor was impossible for them. So they would beg. Or steal. One of the reasons Harry and Al finally accepted me was that I was a better shoplifter than they were. They were obviously out to steal. I could go into one of the big supermarkets, pass for a shabby student or maybe a sloppy housewife, and come out with enough food for lunch every day. I also tried to get them some new clothes—shirts, sweaters, underwear—but they promptly sold everything I gave them.

We lived in a pretty tight little world, the three of us. I began to find myself neglecting to bathe at night, and leaving my hair in braids instead of washing it. Since we did the same thing everyday, I wore the same clothes. Just like Harry and Al.

People would really stare at the three of us. At first I was self-conscious, but I learned to stop *feeling* their eyes. I didn't need anything from them, and they didn't need anything from me. Just like Harry and Al.

We shared a boundless contempt for the hotel clerk. Harry called him the "Gutless Wonder," because he would steal from anyone, even the dying. Harry told me about the man who had been in my room, lived there a long time, slowly dying.

"There lay old Eddie, dying inch by inch, and swearing he didn't want to go to the city hospital. He knew they'd do some dreadful experiments or something, and he wanted to die in peace. So we would bring him food and medicine. But the Gutless Wonder couldn't wait to figure what was in it for him. You know how he charges 10 percent of value to

cash checks? Well, pretty soon, he was taking 50 percent of Eddie's check, plus room rent, plus something for not calling the hospital. And when Eddie died, old Gutless stole his clothes. Would have taken his teeth, too, but they stopped him. Man oughtn't be buried without his teeth, even if he is buried by the city."

Gutless did steal everything he could. Besides charging me four times the normal rent for my room, he had another small business on the side. Some of the winos in the area would give the hotel as their home address to the welfare office, and their checks would come there. But they preferred to stay on the street or in the cheaper flophouses which were unacceptable to the welfare department. Gutless would report that they lived in the comparative opulence of the "Pensioners Welcome" hotel, accept the mail, split the checks with the winos, and everyone was happy. The drunks could afford to drink, welfare could feel it was performing a social service by keeping drunks off the streets, and Gutless had more money. What he did with it was beyond me; he lived in two rooms off the lobby, dressed like the other old men, and was too unimaginative to have any expensive vices.

Since I was able to steal lunch, Harry and Al spent hours in the park with me, just taking it easy, talking about their lives, other people in the hotel, the world in general. They didn't believe in God or Man or the Devil, yet were capable of mouthing the most awful sanctimonious and patriotic clichés. I began to think they never had an original thought or noble moment. Everything about them—their faces, their bodies, their minds, their souls—was stunted and soiled. They lacked the ability even to *experience* their lives as real. Harry and Al were professional survivors. They saw only what was directly in front of them, they asked no questions, felt no anger, demanded no love; they just made do, just kept body and soul together. They reminded me of a couple of antique cockroaches, those marvelous insects that no amount of civilization can kill. Cockroaches survive everything; and so had Harry and Al. But at what a price. They had paid by giving up almost all human softness or warmth. I would sit on the park bench and wonder if that was the only way to survive, if you have to stop feeling, stop loving, stop caring, in order to live. It was frightening, but the longer I stayed around the hotel, the more convinced I became that nobody cared.

At the same time, I was aware that Harry and Al liked me. When I was more depressed than usual, they would try to cheer me up. They would tell horrible corny jokes, and even talk to me in the morning. Their efforts were awkward, but they tried to be my friend. And friendship was their one decent instinct. They had total loyalty and friendship for one an-

other. It wasn't love that kept them together, but something stronger. Need. They had met on the road about twenty years previously, and discovered that as a team they were able to survive with less trouble. Two men could cover more ground panhandling; two heads knew twice as many diners where you got bread and butter with soup, not just crackers; two men could work both sides of the street. And if there were two of them, they were less vulnerable to attack when tired or weak or asleep.

Their friendship for each other was really the only thing these two had; life had knocked everything else out. I began to be afraid I would disrupt their lives in some awful way, that I was disturbing some precarious equilibrium, some carefully nurtured blindness and insensitivity which enabled them to survive. The other old men in the hotel began to tease them, asking which one I preferred.

One night in the local Mom's Café I tried to talk about all this with the boys. Those "Mom's Café" signs mean that for 99 cents you get a complete meal—soup or salad, meat loaf, potatoes, gravy, dessert, coffee. The soup is watered-down canned soup, just like Mom's in the Depression. And the meat loaf is mostly bread crumbs. But the good places serve things hot and give you extra coffee free. So Mom's was a treat.

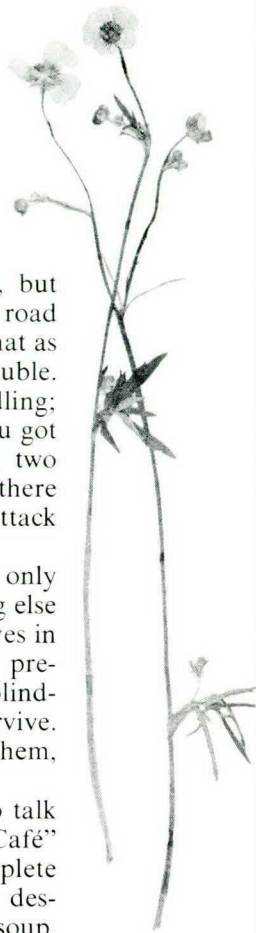
The problem was my inability to accept the responsibility of their friendship. I couldn't guarantee loyalty or support. I was just passing through.

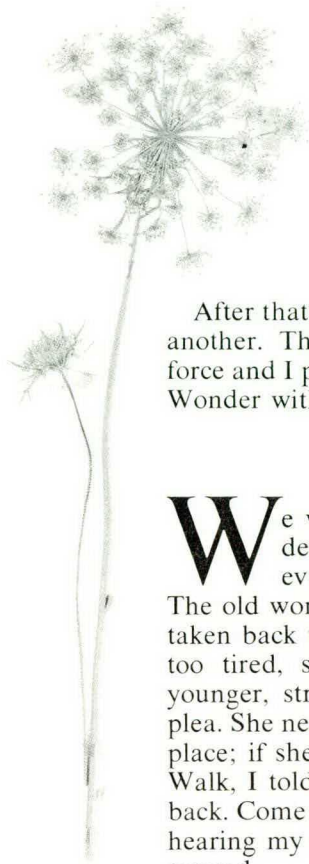
Harry and Al stared dumbly into their coffee as I tried to explain my problem. They sensed my fear, maybe even before I did. The more I tried to talk, the sorrier I sounded. Before long I was ready to cry, ready to say I would take them home and take care of them forever and they wouldn't have to live like this anymore. I don't think I really meant it—I wasn't ready to give that much yet—I just felt so damn guilty about being young enough to leave that hotel and that neighborhood and live another way.

When Harry began to talk, his voice was so low I could barely hear. He and Al knew I was worried about them, knew I thought they should be different, better than they were. But they had learned to live one way and that was that. They liked it. Couldn't ask for more, couldn't settle for less. It was their way. But not mine. Besides, they didn't need me, didn't need my sentimentality. They had one another.

Their greatest fear was being so disabled or so sick they wouldn't be able to get on their feet again. Little things they could handle between them: the days Harry's knee wouldn't work, Al would do the running. But they didn't want to end up as "vegetables."

So like Huck and Tom they had cut their thumbs and sworn that if one became so ill that complete recovery was a remote possibility, the other would smother him with a pillow.





After that we didn't have much more to say to one another. That night the bedbugs attacked in full force and I packed my carpetbag and left old Gutless Wonder with two days' rent paid in advance.

4.

We walked slowly through the pretend garden, just a narrow walk surrounded by tiny evergreen bushes and casually placed rock. The old woman clutched my arm and begged to be taken back to her room. She was too weak to walk, too tired, she didn't want to be outside. I was younger, stronger, pulling her along, ignoring her plea. She needed to exercise, needed to be out of that place; if she just stayed in bed she would soon die. Walk, I told her, walk. You must get your strength back. Come on, I said, tugging not so gently now and hearing my voice impatient, you simply must move around.

She had been my friend. We had met months before at a lecture when, bored and feeling guilty, both of us had tried to leave the hall without being noticed and collided in the doorway. I had smiled because she looked so startled, like a child caught with forbidden sweets. "It's like leaving church in the middle of a sermon," I said. "You feel you've offended God." We laughed and left the building together.

There was seventy years' difference in our ages. We shared a mild cynicism, met frequently for lunch, and tore apart the reputation and motives of public figures. She considered herself a conservative, I was a radical. Nothing ever changes, she would say, you must save the things that are good and familiar, otherwise people become confused and destroy everything. Nobody has ever tried to change *enough*, I would retort; everything must change if the world is to be a fit place to live.

And so we would talk. She was ninety-six years old. Her passion was bridge. She liked order, quiet, things properly arranged. For thirty years she had taught mathematics to uninterested high school students; she had never found a pupil, she said one day, who could understand the beauty of numbers, of problems neatly solved, how beautiful the arrangement of a difficult problem on a page. That was the only time I ever heard her express an unfulfilled hope. She had been one of the first women to graduate from Stanford University and still wore her hair cut in a boyish bob, a style once considered a threat to home and family and country. Deep-set, lively blue eyes peered at the world with stubborn distrust. I think she had been beautiful, the bones of her face cleaned of superfluous flesh, her aquiline nose stretching out and the nostrils flaring with each breath. She was rather like mathematics; a cipher, a code, a human being pared down to the essential

parts. Nothing sloppy or sentimental about Miss Larson. She was ninety-six years old, a maiden lady without family and with few friends.

After she was forced to retire from teaching she moved into a private residence club and lived there for thirty years. Her life was orderly—I was the first new variable, she said, in twenty years. She desired nothing, lacked nothing, did what she pleased in the order she pleased. She thought my life utter chaos, my politics anarchy, my appearance slovenly, my habits unhealthy. I thought her rigid, frozen, unemotional, detached; I once told her I thought I injected a bit of healthy dirt into her life. I was very fond of her and had no idea why she tolerated me.

She became ill during a bridge tournament. That morning, Miss Larson had wakened early, excited and looking forward to a long day of playing her favorite game with first-rate opponents. She was conscious of mild nausea and a sharp pain in her side. But she was old and accustomed to functioning with occasional discomfort. Just excitement, she told herself as she carefully dressed. The pain in her side was enough to make her move carefully and slowly. I am ninety-six years old, she thought, and I still get a catch in my side when I am excited. I remember my first day of teaching, it was the same thing. I couldn't eat, felt so weak, and those high school boys all looked so huge and menacing. Well, I soon showed them who ruled the classroom. And today, well, today I feel I am going to play fine bridge.

She did play fine bridge that day, and when the final cards were played, she asked that someone call her doctor. She felt too faint to stand and the pain had become a grasping, digging presence, making breathing difficult. An ambulance was called, and she went directly from six hours of tournament bridge to the hospital operating room. Miss Larson had gallstones.

The operation was a complete success, no physical difficulties were experienced, she simply entered what she later referred to as her "psychedelic stage." Three days after surgery, the night nurses were surprised to hear a loud, argumentative voice coming from her room. When they entered, they found her standing by her bed shaking her fist at a corner of the room and demanding that her pupils pay attention to the algebra lesson. She was confused when confronted by the nurses and began to cry. Throughout that night and early morning, the staff found it necessary to keep someone in the room.

The next morning, the doctor ordered private-duty nurses twenty-four hours a day for Miss Larson, and she became the first patient I had cared for in four years. She found this very amusing, during her lucid moments, because we had often argued about my reasons for disliking nursing.

"I see things," she announced to me that first

*The period equal to the average span of human life:
generation ("Actions of the last age are like almanacs
of the last year." John Denham)*

morning. "I think someone gave me some drug. At night, when the hospital is sound asleep, I wake and the room is filled with colors, with dimly remembered faces, with funny music. Sometimes I will find myself talking quite lucidly to someone who just isn't there, someone who died a long time ago. I feel one moment like I am five years old, and my father is holding me on his lap; or I am on a train and have cinders in my eyes. Last night I taught my first class all over again—and, oh, I didn't want to do it then or now. I argued with my father about going to graduate school. 'I must,' I told him. 'I can be a really great mathematician.' But as I was talking to him, his face became a rainbow and slid off down the wall and he disappeared. The nurses came in . . . if they've given me some drug, for experiments, they should tell me. It isn't fair, I shouldn't have to relive all that again. If every night for the rest of my life is going to be this way; if all my dreams are going to be distortions of the past, with time and color and everything all running together, I would just as soon die now. I can't do it all again, I can't be that strong all over again, not now. Not after all these years."

During the day she was fine, if tired and dozing most of the time. But when darkness came she entered a shadowy world, a world seen only by her. In hospitals they call it "sundowning" and it is a common thing with old people when they are removed from a familiar environment and placed in the hospital. The darkness, the lack of familiar things around them, the strange sounds from the corridors cause a sort of sensory confusion which brings on hallucinations. Usually the simple act of turning on a night-light will chase away the shadows, and the old people will sleep. But in Miss Larson's case, a light was not enough. For ten days her nights were filled with horrors, and her days spent in exhausted, fitful dozing. She seemed well on her way to becoming a senile old lady.

But gradually the lucid moments became more frequent, and she began to beg to be taken home. The hospital was a malignant presence to her, a place filled with ghosts and sudden, unexplained noises in the night. She was coherent but unreasonable in her demands. She could not walk, could barely stand without help. She continued to be suspicious of all nurses, but she had always been suspicious. She was extremely demanding, even more so after she discovered the private-duty nurses received \$40 a shift. She expected to receive her money's worth. The night nurse quit after Miss Larson caught her dozing in a chair and threw a pitcher of water in that general direction.

The next morning her doctor announced that, owing to her slow recovery and the general overcrowding in the hospital, she must consider moving to a convalescent hospital. Since she lived alone, she

must be physically able to care for herself before discharge. Meals and maid service were available in the residence club, but no personal care. Now Miss Larson became really upset. She had friends who had simply disappeared in such places; she believed people went there when there was no chance for recovery. "Death houses for the old," I heard her mutter. "I'll go to the street first." But it wasn't as if she really had a choice. The hospital needed her bed for acutely ill patients, and other facilities were available for long-term care.

The doctor informed the nursing staff and the hospital social worker that Miss Larson was to be transferred to an "extended-care facility." He recommended several places in the vicinity, and the social worker came to talk to her.

"Social Worker." A strange title and an even stranger woman. Her job at this particular hospital consisted in finding places to send people who were no longer in need of intensive nursing care, who could not be helped by all the technology gathered in a modern hospital, who were, in short, no longer medically interesting or likely to improve drastically. The job was more like that of a travel agent, and Miss Larson was convinced that this woman was selling only one-way tickets.

"You're very lucky, Emily, my, you don't look ninety-six years old, we've found a perfectly lovely place just down the block from here, a new place run by perfectly lovely competent people recommended by your doctor. Everything will be taken care of before you leave here; I just need a few answers to some simple questions and you can be moved immediately, and doctor says you are to have nurse with you for a few days until you get used to the change. . . . Now, Emily, if you will just tell me your social security number . . . Is she listening to me?"

"I think she turned off her hearing aid when you called her by her first name. She regards that as impertinent; she doesn't want to go to this place, and I don't blame her for being uncooperative," I answered. "If you need any information, it should be on her admission forms here. I think Miss Larson understands that she is being moved on orders from her doctor, and there isn't much we can do. But she doesn't feel any need to be polite."

"Doctor says . . ." The woman was only doing her job. I didn't want to be rude, but she showed no understanding of the crushing blow Miss Larson had received. For years, she had managed to avoid a nursing home, and now, through the benevolence of Medicare, she was eligible for, and forced to accept, institutionalization. There was no way the social worker could sugarcoat the pill, no family she could smile at and be helpful to, no gratitude from the withdrawn old lady in the bed.



First impressions of Montcliffé Convalescent Hospital were favorable. It was small, just thirty-six patients, and fairly new. The design and decoration of the building was modern California motel; long and low, with large expanses of glass covered by serviceable beige drapes. Every floor was carpeted, and walls were newly painted beige. Large and fantastically colored sprays of plastic flowers dominated every flat surface and each room had sliding glass doors opening onto a narrow walk surrounding the building. The place was unimaginative, impersonal, tasteless, but not really objectionable. It was simply ugly.

Miss Larson and I were directed to a four-bed room; no, they didn't have space available in a two-bed room; yes, they knew it was requested and as soon as space was available . . . please just fill out these forms.

The woman in charge of the Montcliffé Convalescent Hospital was a registered nurse. She was required by law, a fixture like fire doors or ramps; new to her job, frightened of old people, she had a tendency to avoid looking you in the eye. She bustled, chirped, patted, pulled, and quickly disappeared. All of the actual patient care was done by the "aides" or "attendants." They are not trained to do their jobs, and they learn by watching other attendants. Their skill and interest depend a good deal on whom they work with the first days. Some are good, some terrible. All are underpaid. It's a job for the unskilled, for women with children to support and no hope in their future; for women whose legs are already swollen and tired from thankless day labor in a million other jobs like this one; they must work, and it's a job.

Three of the beds in the room were occupied, two by silent unmoving figures, looking as if a child had placed pillows under the sheets to fool his parents, and the bed nearest Miss Larson's (I already thought of it as "her" spot as she sat in the wheelchair, head down, hearing aid off, hands moving restlessly in her lap) was completely filled by an extremely obese—grayly fat, no pink skin, just mounds of bulging, unfeeling flesh—woman, who moved her lips constantly, pulling them in and out like a baby waiting to be fed.

It was nearly four o'clock, time for me to be leaving. I wanted out of that place very badly. It was all so clean, so neat, but underneath it felt just like the "Old Folk's Home" I had known. The smell, the ambience were alike, but the surface was different. We have certainly improved care of the aged in all those highly visible ways like clean linen, modern buildings, professional staff, even fire regulations. The package has been sanitized, wrapped in plastic, and labeled fit for public funding. But it feels the same as it did before modernization set in.

I didn't want to leave Miss Larson. However, I

smiled a very professional nursy smile, efficiently tucked her into bed without letting myself feel compassion, and thought that the doctor *must* know best; after all, he is the doctor. I refused to meet Miss Larson's miserable, half-uttered pleas that I not leave her alone. I went home, and by morning had convinced myself that the place wasn't so bad, that I was simply against institutions without really giving any particular place a chance to be different, and resolved that I would do my best to make Miss Larson's stay comfortable, easy, and as short as possible.

That first morning began with a lecture by the charge nurse. I must help Miss Larson adjust to being in Montcliffé . . . As the charge nurse talked, I could see the aides pushing patients in wheelchairs out of their rooms and into the hall. Under thin cotton bath blankets, the old people were naked. Some were confused, pulling the cloth off their wrinkled flesh, mouths and hands constantly working, sometimes uttering small wordless cries. Others sat miserably hunched in their chairs and held the thin blankets tightly around bent shoulders. Someone had pulled Miss Larson out of bed, and she was sitting in the line, looking around wildly, her neck rigid with indignation. "No, no, I have a nurse. No, no . . ." I could hear her protest. "No, no, I can bathe myself, just let me alone, I can do it." Some of the other patients were looking at her, without interest and without pity. We all have to do it, they seemed to be saying. Don't fight it. No distinctions. What makes you think you're so different? Men, women, confused, coherent, all the same. To the showers!

Two aides, one on each side, would pick up the old carcass, place it in a molded plastic shower chair, deftly remove the blanket, push the person under the shower and rather haphazardly soap her down. A few minutes for rinsing, a quick rubdown with an already damp towel, back under the blanket and ready for the next. The aides were quick, efficient, not at all brutal; they kept up a running conversation between themselves about food prices, the new shoes they had bought, California divorce laws. They might have been two sisters doing dishes. Lift, scrub, rinse, dry, put away. Lift, scrub, rinse, dry, put away. And did you hear the one about . . .

I gave Miss Larson a bath in her room that morning, over the strenuous objections of the charge nurse, who felt I was encouraging separation and dependence. I felt guilty, and my hands were unnecessarily rough as I turned and bathed Miss Larson. It was as if I blamed her for placing me in a position where I had to be miserable, observe misery. How could she do it to me?

The resentment I felt so strongly that first morning

Act one's age or be one's age: to behave in a reasonable manner.

seems endemic in places where the aged live. The custodians, whether medically trained or administrative, always seem to have some anger, some residual hatred or fear of their charges. Sometimes I felt it was fear of one's own aging process, or just anger at having to do a very difficult job. Sometimes I saw it as a sort of natural turning away from another's misery, the way one will ignore the open trousers of an old man on the subway. But even if it was a sense of delicacy, of not wanting to intrude on the last years these old people had on earth, it soon progressed to another level. Because the attendants had physically to care for, handle the aging bodies of these old people, they began to treat them as if they were infants, unhearing, uncaring, unable to speak or communicate in any way. The patients were uniformly called honey or dearie or sweetie—or sometimes naughty girl if they soiled their beds—just as one tends to call children by pet names. The attendants expected gratitude or at least silent acquiescence from the old people and their families. The bodies were kept clean, fed, powdered, combed, and clothed, but they were like infants, without modesty or sex or privacy.

At times the patients were even treated as inanimate objects rather than as human beings, adult or infant. This attitude was most frequent in older staff members, and it is understandably defensive. "Ahhh, she's *just* an old lady," they would say. "She's *just* an old lady." And that seemed to justify all manner of things, including the way blind patients were fed or not fed, according to whim; or how soon an old man was cleaned and his linen changed after he soiled his bed. And Montcliff Convalescent Hospital is a *good* hospital.

Besides the nursing-care program (baths twice a week, enemas when required, tranquilizers and sleeping pills as directed, part of each day spent out of bed, and so forth), Montcliff also boasted a part-time recreation therapist. She hadn't been trained for her job, but she had the right disposition and character for it. Nothing depressed her, and she seemed oblivious to the depression around her. Surrounded by "her girls," who were all nodding and fidgeting in wheelchairs and who had not uttered a sound, she would chirp, "Oh, this is such fun, isn't it, girls? We must do this [watch television, play bingo, clap hands, whatever] more often!"

The programs took place in what Miss Larson and I began calling "the parking lot." This was a large room, beige brightened by a touch of orange, designated the recreation room by Miss Smiles. Most of the day it was filled with old people, who had either been pushed in in wheelchairs and left to doze in long lines against the wall, or had tottered in, pulled

by the hand of an impatient aide, and were seated in low, plastic chairs, expressly designed for the discomfort of old bones. Miss Larson refused to patronize the "parking lot"; she said the sight of that many old bodies lined up waiting for the undertaker depressed her. No conversation between patients ever took place in the parking lot. The only people who spoke were those whose job it was to entertain. When no program was scheduled, a large color television set was turned on. The patients were not to touch the set, and it was frequently out of focus.

Miss Larson entered Montcliff the last week in October. The air was cool and fresh and in the sun it was quite warm, so we spent a good part of our day outside. I was becoming increasingly impatient with her; her condition was deteriorating in spite of my efforts. No matter what I did she simply refused to get better. I blamed her for imposing her weakness on me; but whenever she became too demanding, I would just walk away and have a cigarette in the dining room. Shortly after her admission, I arrived one morning at 7 A.M. to find the night nurse indignant and angry. Miss Larson had climbed over the side rails during the night, and had been found in the bathroom. "She didn't ring or call out," said the nurse, "her room is right opposite the desk, and I would have heard her. Why, she might have been hurt, and she is so confused. I want the doctor to order more sedation. We can't have her carrying on and disturbing all the other patients. Finally, we had to put her in restraints and I repeated her sleeping pill. But she kept yelling all the same."

I walked in the room and Miss Larson was indeed in restraints; the look on her face was so angry, it seemed to me someone had tied her up in order to prevent murder. "Get me out of these!" she ordered. "How dare they try and stop me from getting out of bed. I always have to relieve myself at night; and they never answer my bell. Usually they come and hide the cord so I can't even find it. So I crawl over the edge; I've been doing it ever since I came to this place. Now, you get me out of these, and tell that doctor I want to see him!"

Miss Larson was not confused; but in a place where all the patients are so sedated that they scarcely move a muscle during the night, she was counted a nuisance. I didn't want them to increase her sedation; barbiturates frequently make old people confused and disoriented. Even if she was a pain in the neck, I liked her better awake and making some sense. The problem was she had no rights. She was old, sick, feeble. Therefore she must shut up, lie still, take what little was offered, and be grateful. And if she did that, she would be a "good girl." There she was, ninety-six years old and didn't even know she was dependent on society. She thought her thirty years of teaching, her careful hoarding of the

Age, vb.: to grow older: become old: show the effects of or undergo change with the passage of time
(*"His mind did not age."* R.W. Firth)

little she inherited from her family, and the benevolence of the Social Security Act, with amendments, would guarantee humane treatment in her old age. "You get what you pay for," she told me, "and I want a nurse here, at least during the day, until I'm strong enough to manage on my own. I don't want to depend on those"—with a scornful jerk of her head—"people for anything. I'll pay for your services, but I'm asking as a friend. Don't leave me alone with them. They just want to keep everyone in the parking lot until it's over."

I didn't want to leave her alone, and certainly understood her fears. The place was driving me crazy. I would catch myself sitting and staring at the wall with a vacant smile, my hands folded in my lap, just like one of the old people in the parking lot. I found myself ignoring the calls for the help that came from rooms other than Miss Larson's because the aides had become so hostile to my "interference." The charge nurse gave me daily lectures on my letting Miss Larson become too dependent, how bad it was for her to get everything she wanted, how demanding she was to the other nurses, poor things.

She was my friend and I wanted her well, healthy, back at the bridge table. But I couldn't stay with her forever. I became impatient, even angry, sometimes rough. I could feel a great distance between us—I was young, she was old—that had never existed on the outside. The hostility of them, the others, those people who worked in the hospital, was beginning to permeate the relationship we had. I began really to dislike Miss Larson. And we had been friends.

Miss Larson understood the stakes long before I did. It was a battle for her soul, a fight for her mind, with her weakened physical condition the trump card. Either she could give up, and wheel into the parking lot, or she could keep fighting and have everybody hate her, receive extra sedation to keep her mouth shut, be placed on mind-fogging tranquilizers to stop her demands.

In late October Miss Larson and I reached an uneasy agreement; I would stay a few more days, then come back only for a few hours in the morning to help her bathe and dress. I explained to her that I was interested in seeing other places where old people lived and had accepted a temporary job as a visiting nurse in order to do some quiet investigation. She glanced at me sharply, snorted unbelievably, and turned off her hearing aid. I left the room.

It was Halloween. As I hurried down the hall to the dining room, I could hear Miss Smiles tittering away, pretending joy, fulfilling Montcliffe's promise for a balanced and interesting program of activities geared to the interest and rehabilitation of the old people in their care. The afternoon's activity was to be a party. "I ought to make the old lady go," I thought. "A Halloween party would really set her

off!" The cook had prepared cupcakes decorated with tiny candy pumpkins, and apple cider in juice glasses. Miss Smiles, in her untidy blue smock, had been racing around all morning, trailing black and orange streamers. Every patient, with the exception of an old man who said he was dying that day, was wheeled or pushed into the parking lot to attend the party.

Halloween. Hallowed Eve, the day before All Saints Day, the day that unfulfilled souls walk the earth and demand satisfaction. The door to the parking lot was filled with flickering light; they must have candles, I thought. I stopped outside the door and glanced in.

Smiles had outdone herself. Thirty-four old men and women sat lined up in the semidarkness, unmoving and quiet. One would give a phlegmy cough, another would clear her throat; hands picked at blankets or grasped the arms of the chairs tightly to prevent the tremors. The room was decorated as for a first-grader's dreams of Halloween; all orange and black and skeletons dangling from the ceiling. Plastic pumpkins held flickering candles. No games were being played, no one spoke or moved, except Miss Smiles, who was fluttering about, "Oh, what fun, what fun! Are you excited, darling? Isn't this just lovely? We really must have parties more often!"

I watched her move about, stopping before each one of the old people and moving her hands about their faces as if to evoke a spell, a running stream of words following her around the room. I had thought her an incredibly stupid woman, unimaginative and insensitive, but from the doorway, on this day, in her dark dress, she looked somehow sinister and evil. Suddenly she stopped her fluttery movements and stepped back, brushing her hands together briskly as if she had completed a hard and dusty task. "There!" she said. "Finished. Isn't it wonderful?" And she turned toward me, and flicked on the light.

Then I could see what she had been doing. The faces of the old people were covered with masks, with crudely drawn skulls, garish pumpkins, little elves, evil witches. The old gray heads halved by elastic turned toward the door slowly as if all the masks were attached to one string and Miss Smiles had pulled them in my direction. There they were, drooling, twitching; some able to think coherently, some senile; women, men; private and charity cases; all distinctions gone, they joined the living dead. Witches, goblins, ghosts, skeletons, twisted bodies topped by a child's nightmare of faces.

I backed out of the room, fleeing from some vision of my own future, locked in a world like this, forced to attend meaningless functions, eat tasteless food, live friendless, penniless, sour, and old. Was that the future? "No," I thought. "No, I don't want to get old." □

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