

The Greatest Generation
by David Johnson

Joanne Whitman was in a foul mood when she arrived at the Easthaven Assisted Living Center. She had just come from dropping off her fifteen year old daughter at school, which, of course, made her late nearly every day. She had also gotten several truancy violation notices from the school, and the result was a rather testy conversation on the way. She went to a cabinet behind the front desk in the reception area and retrieved a newly laundered long white overcoat which almost made her look more like a doctor than a nurse, all she would have needed was the stethoscope. But, she liked to feel official. She stood in front of a full length mirror behind the front desk and ran her fingers through hair that was dark, but not quite as dark as it used to be. She was, of course, acutely aware of this, and hunted gray hair like a mercenary sent to seek and destroy. She had not yet discovered one, but lived daily with the horror of knowing that it was coming. Out of habit, she got very close to the mirror and checked one more time, even though her most recent campaign was only the night before.

Becky came in from a long hallway to the left of the desk which led to the residents' rooms, and after noticing her preening, smiled broadly. "Honey, you look fine. Stop being silly."

Becky was always so sweet. She was not necessarily what one would call beautiful, as a not-so-skinny red head with rosy cheeks and lots of freckles. For some reason, Joanne always thought that if Santa ever had a daughter, it would be Becky. Maybe it was because she was too young to be called "jolly", but it went way beyond cheerful. Joanne wondered, as she often did, why men didn't pay more attention to Becky. The patients loved her, as everyone that knew her did. She was just so great.

Becky took her by the arm and gently, but firmly, pulled her away from the mirror. "It's your turn to give Mr. Henderson his sponge-bath. He asked for the sexy brunette."

"He didn't really say that, I hope?"

"Scout's honor" Becky said, while flashing the sign. She often did that when she was pulling someone's leg.

"I should make you do it, just for messin' with me."

Becky just grinned in reply. Then she leaned in and whispered, "No, but seriously, he really does need it, he stinks." She waved her hand in front of her as she held her nose.

"Okay, but do you need help with Mr. Myers first?"

"Nope. Already got him." Becky pointed to Mr. Myers sitting in a wheelchair in front of the television. It was embarrassing that she usually had to get help lifting the patients out of bed, and into the bathrooms, while Becky rarely needed help. But, Becky was a big girl, and really strong.

Joanne looked over at Mr. Myers, and for the first time noticed what he was watching. It was FOX News, which was typical. There had almost been a knife fight a few months earlier between he and Mrs. Rogers over whether they were going to watch FOX News or CNN. He had finally prevailed by putting the remote control down his pants. She attempted to counter by simply walking up to the television and changing the channel manually. But, after he had fished it out of his underwear, he just used the remote to change it back. After several rounds of this, she had the bright idea of

unplugging the TV, but when she tried it Mr. Myers growled at her so much that she actually jumped. She finally gave up. It was a rare defeat. Mrs. Rogers generally ran things around the center, and few dared to challenge her. Joanne tried to like her, but it was hard. She was just so bossy. Sometimes Becky could kill her with kindness, but it depended on the day.

“What is going on in the world today Mr. Myers?” Joanne asked from the desk.

No answer. He was usually a fairly quiet man, but it had been especially bad during the last few months as his health deteriorated. It just seemed to kill his pride. He was not visited by family very often either, and she felt like that did not help matters.

On the TV, Joanne saw a large building with a gaping hole and smoke pouring out of it. Becoming genuinely interested in the news where before she had merely been attempting conversation, Joanne moved from the counter at the front desk to standing by Mr. Myers side.

What happened Mr. Myers?

Still no reply. Now she was beginning to feel silly. Kind of like when you ask someone what they are reading and they just point to the cover and look at you like you are stupid. “Alright then, I guess I am done trying,” she thought.

Mrs. Jenkins, who was over playing bridge at the long cafeteria table, along with several others, said to her, “They think a plane crashed into the World Trade Center.”

“Oh no. That’s terrible. How could such a thing have happened?”

Mrs. Jenkins shrugged. “That’s why I always told my Charlie, God bless his soul, that we should drive instead of fly. I never trusted those flying death traps.” She shook her head. Then she added, “If God would have meant for man to fly he would have made us with wings.”

Mr. Myers turned in his chair and looked at her condescendingly, “If that’s true, why weren’t you born with wheels instead of legs?”

Mrs. Jenkins was taken back, both by the question itself, and the venom with which it was delivered. She stumbled over her tongue in attempting to give some sort of reply, but finally just said, “Well, that’s a silly question.”

Mr. Myers turned back towards the television and once again seemed to tune everything else out, although Joanne now suspected that he was listening after all.

Becky came over, and after briefly glancing at the television to be polite, tapped Joanne on the shoulder. “I hate to be a stickler, but sponge bath?” She held up the sponge and wiggled it with a couple flicks of the wrist.

Joanne smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, forgot.” She grabbed the sponge and headed towards the utility room to retrieve the bucket and fill it with water. She completed Mr. Henderson bath without incident, then changed a few bed pans, and stripped the sheets off of three of the beds. Once she had taken the soiled sheets to the laundry and remade the beds with clean ones, she returned to the recreation area to find the bridge game suspended and everyone now focused solely on the television. Even the normally bubbly Becky, who usually couldn’t stay still for more than five minutes, was transfixed by it. She had taken a seat around the cafeteria table and leaned forward, hanging on every word.

Joanne wanted to ask what had happened, but instinctively felt that disturbing the new aura of silence that pervaded the room would be somehow inappropriate. It wasn’t long before she knew. Along with nearly everyone else in the modern world, she would

see the replay of the plane hitting the second Tower at least a dozen times over the next 24 hours, and several times in the next hour alone.

It only got worse. Joanne felt almost physically ill when the Towers began to fall and so many people had to literally run for their lives. Gasps filled the room, the only expression worthy to break the silence.

Mrs. Jenkins' left hand flew to her mouth, and nearly touched her lips, as she mumbled something that was not loud enough for Joanne to hear. She then closed her eyes, and ducked her head for a moment, but then she opened them and began watching once again, afraid to miss something, and also afraid not to miss it.

Finally, one of the former bridge players, Mr. Miller, took off his large black-rimmed reading glasses, placed them on the table and rubbed his eyes. Then he leaned back and hooked his thumbs into his suspenders, as he had a habit of, and said, "There's gonna be a war now."

"But, we don't even know for sure who did it," said a woman to his left, named Mrs. Elliot.

"Don't matter. We're goin' to war with *somebody*."

No one argued with him.

Joanne thought of her daughter Kelly. What else might happen today? It felt like the world was on fire, and it just kept getting worse with every passing minute. What if the last words she ever said to Kelly were in an argument? She walked over to the front desk and pulled out the phone. She dialed her own cell phone number. Well, it was supposed to be her phone, at any rate. Kelly had "borrowed" it so often that it was essentially her phone now. No answer. She tried again. She was probably with Todd again. Joanne didn't care for him much, mostly because he was a 17 year old senior, and Kelly was a 15 year old sophomore. Or, "almost 16," as she said. Finally, Kelly picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi Kel, it's mom."

"Um, mom, I'm in class right now. I'm gunna get in trouble. I have to go."

"Are you really in class?"

"Yeah. My teacher's looking at me. Bye."

"Tell your teacher it's your mom. Ask if you can talk for a minute."

There was a brief pause. "She said yeah. Hang on, I'll go out in the hall."

The conversation was brief. Joanne was relieved just to talk to her and know that she was okay. She asked if Kelly had heard anything about whether the school was considering closing, and whether she needed to be picked up. Kelly hadn't heard anything about any of that. Then they talked about what each of them had seen, and compared notes. That was about it. After Joanne hung up, she called her younger daughter's junior high school, and her son's elementary. She wasn't able to talk to them, though she might have if she had insisted, but both receptionists were very nice, and somehow it reassured her even to talk to them. It was probably silly to call, but it still helped, silly or not. Joanne went back into the recreation area and began watching TV once again with the others. There was really nothing else one could do.

After a few hours, Becky realized what time it was, and went into the cafeteria to help the support staff prepare and serve lunch. No one was very hungry, though. Becky tried to get them to turn the TV off for just a few minutes, but was unsuccessful. She

relented for another hour to hour and a half, and then insisted that they all take a break from the TV for at least an hour. She seemed to expect Mr. Myers giving her trouble over it, but he did not. It did not matter much to turn the TV off, though, everyone was still only thinking and talking about one thing.

Finally, Joanne noticed that Mr. Myers seemed quite agitated. He was not yet in tears, but still seemed very upset. It was certainly understandable, given the circumstances, but she wondered if perhaps he was embarrassed by it. She decided to give him a way out, and offer him some privacy if he wanted it.

She tapped his shoulder and said loudly enough for everyone to hear, "You look tired to me Mr. Myers. Are you sure you don't want to go back to your room for a little while? We can sure bring you back out if there are any new developments."

He looked up, at first quite surprised, but then he understood, and nodded. "Yeah, maybe a nap would do me some good."

She began to wheel him back into his room, and got Becky to help her in case they needed to lift him into bed. To her surprise, however, he got out of the wheelchair himself, though gingerly, and they only needed to stabilize him and make sure that he didn't fall as he got into bed.

He rolled over onto his side, so that he was turned away from them, and away from the door. As they began to quietly leave the room, he rolled towards them slightly and over his shoulder asked, "Joanne, could you stay for a few minutes?"

She nodded, and said, "of course," then obediently came forward a few steps, while Becky softly closed the door. A few awkward moments passed, where the only sound was his labored breathing. Then, he finally just said it: "Joanne, do you think there is going to be another draft?"

Ah, so that was what was bothering him. "He must have sons or grandsons, and he is worried about them just like I fretted over Kelly," She thought.

She didn't know what to say that might comfort him, but finally replied, "I don't think so Mr. Myers. I think our current military will be able to handle things."

As though she had not even said anything, he quietly said, "I don't wanna go, but if they draft me . . ."

It was a good thing that his back was to her, because she started to grin, and had to work hard to keep from laughing outright. That was her initial reaction, at any rate. But, realization slowly seeped into her mind of what he was actually saying, and the earnestness with which he said it, and well, she didn't know what to think. What could you say to that? She felt like just hugging the poor man, but she didn't.

"I think you have already done your part, Mr. Myers, and everybody knows that. I wouldn't worry if I were you."

He turned and looked up at her with relief in his eyes. "Really?"

She nodded.

"Thank you Joanne. Thanks for staying to talk with me."

She smiled, and reached down to lightly squeeze his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Myers. For everything." Then, she turned and quickly left the room, closing the door behind her.