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MORTY

By Clint Hall

Every time Fred woke up, someone died. That's how it seemed in the nursing home, anyway. Put in a nursery after you're born, put in a nursing home before you die. Who was it that said 'you come into this world with someone wiping your ass, and you go out the same way'? Fred never found that comment funny, but some of the 'inmates' – as he called them – did. He had heard it here more times than he would like to count.

He knew he was waking up now, but when he first lost his vision he had never been sure. The world around him was black no matter what, so who says he's ever awake, right? At 79 years young – another overused phrase he hated – he was about ready to call it quits and not wake up at all. He sometimes wondered if he could just force himself not to wake up. Does it take a lot of effort to do that, or just the opposite? He thought of all these things every day as he woke up, but every day he . . . well, woke up. There was a good reason to open his useless eyes in the morning, though.

Brenda was his cellmate in this hellhole where no one cared, and no one came. His nose opened just for her. The first thing he smelt every morning was the raspberry shampoo she favoured and the ever-lasting cinnamon and sugar from a lifetime of baking sweets for her kids. That smell kept him alive, that smell made him smile. And it was that smell that touched his nose now.

He awoke, smiling.

"Mornin' Freddy," Brenda said through a smile. Fred loved to hear her words change as they passed through what he imagined to be a perfect smile on a perfect face.

She always came right up to his bed to deliver the medicine the ignorant nurse had plopped on his nightstand hours before. He reached out and immediately felt the paper cup in his hand. He touched her face to see her smile.

“Thanks, Brenda, you’re gorgeous,” Fred said through his own smile.

“Well, I was once. Back before the wrinkles.” Within Fred’s hands Brenda’s face tightened. She must be pulling back the skin on her face. He chuckled hoarsely.

“I still think you’re the prettiest lady here. Did Amy and Joe drop by last night?”

“Who?” Her face changed expression in his hand.

“Your granddaughter.” Brenda had Alzheimer’s. Fred was her memory, Brenda was his eyes. They fill in each other’s empty spaces. “I fell asleep early last night.” He swallowed his pills.

“I know who Amy is.” Sure didn’t sound like it to Fred. “Yes she did. She brought me daffodils and brownies. Would you like one?”

“I don’t really like flowers.”

Brenda laughed. “A brownie, you dolt.”

He laughed too and accepted the treat. Fred was getting restless and pushed the covers away, instinctively looking for the hook of his lucky cane between his nightstand and bed.

Fred’s favourite part of the day was the Game’s Room. Not necessarily the room, but the trip to it. Brenda always interlocked his arm with her’s as they walked down the long hallway to the place where all the ‘inmates’ gathered to play poker and blackjack and chess and checkers and cribbage and bridge. Being blind as a bat, Fred couldn’t do

any of those things with any enjoyment or accuracy, so he mostly just sat silent beside Brenda while she enjoyed herself. A lot of the time he would sit in front of the window, knowing what must be outside and imagining all forms of life.

His lucky cane was slung around the arm that wasn't enjoying Brenda's gentle grasp on this grand walk to the Game's Room.

"I know I tell you this every day, but I just want you to know how much I appreciate you helping me as much as you do. I used to hate going to that damned Game's Room. Now it's the best part of my day."

"Well I'm glad you tell me that every day, because if you didn't I would forget."

Fred smiled.

Brenda said, "Is there any news on your brother?" Sometimes her memory surprised him. She couldn't remember the name of her granddaughter, but she remembered that his brother was in chemotherapy.

"He died yesterday, Brenda." Rotting in a bed, he felt like saying. Like I will, he felt like saying. Such a boring and slow way to die.

"Oh my God. I'm sorry, I probably asked that before, didn't I?"

"It's all right." He patted her fragile hand. "It's all right. I never would've expected to outlive my younger brother, but death is all I know anymore."

Fred smelt the familiar smoke of Marlboro cigarettes from Ernie's room as they passed and decided to change the subject.

"How does that man keep getting cigarettes in here? Do the nurses not smell that?"

"I didn't know he smoked."

“Probably that no-good grandson that visits him. I’ve never liked that kid. I’ve never liked Ernie, either.”

“Oh, Freddy, you shush. You don’t like anyone.”

“I like you just fine.” He smiled. All he smelt was raspberry and cinnamon again as they continued on.

The hallway opened around him as he heard the echoes of men and women talking and the clang of dishes in the kitchen at the back of the room. The Game’s Room was also a dining room. If Fred had the choice, he wouldn’t eat there. He couldn’t see what those minimum-wagers were doing to his food.

He decided today he would sit by the window again and reflect. Think about his brother. Think about fizzling away without the blaze that was the glory of his life. Think about death.

Every time Fred woke up, someone died. That’s how it—

Something was different. Something wasn’t right, wasn’t as it should be. He shot to alertness and reached for his cane. It was where it was supposed to be. He reached to the nightstand and found the paper cup and rattled it to hear the pills tumbling around. Did he wake up early?

“Brenda?” He said, getting out of bed.

He grabbed along the wall, stubbed his toe on Brenda’s nightstand and cursed. He touched Brenda’s bed.

“Brenda?”

An unfamiliar voice spoke from the centre of the bed. “Good morning to you, roomy.” The voice was raspy and unfamiliar and unpleasant. “Expecting someone?”

“Who are you? Where’s Brenda?” Fred abruptly turned and stumbled and tripped through the room toward the door. There was no cinnamon, no raspberry. “NURSE!” he yelled when he felt the doorway. “NURSE!”

He clutched at the wall, staggering, adrenalin flowing, but he was a weak old man, he couldn’t afford the strength to run; he was afraid to run. He was blind and confused.

“NURSE!” he kept calling, but the ignorance of the staff was as consistent as death in this place.

He grabbed onto the doorway of Ernie’s room and smelt the Marlboro. He stumbled past. Where was his damn cane? He must have left it in the room.

“NURSE!”

Someone finally answered. “Whoa, calm down, Fredrick. What’s wrong?”

Fredrick. He hated that. This was Anne. She smelt of body odour and cigarettes. He told her a thousand times his name was Fred. “Where’s Brenda? WHERE’S BRENDA!” He grabbed her smock.

She shook him off. “She died in her sleep last night. We moved a nice young man in with you this morning. You’ll like—”

He grabbed his face and sobbed. “NO! He’s not young! None of us are. We’re old! We’re all going to die!” He paused to cry for a moment. “This is a goddamn morgue, is what it is. Goddamn cemetery.” He lost the last bit of his strength and collapsed on the ground.

Fred started to wake up for the second time today and wondered who hadn't. He wished he hadn't. He wished he were gone so he didn't have to lose anyone else. He hated the fact that he was still alive – still outliving everyone.

“You all right, Fred-o?” that same voice from Brenda's bed asked. “Had quite the spill, I heard. Nurses were complaining about it when they lifted you into bed. The name's Morty.”

“I don't care what you're name is. Let me die in peace.”

“I hate to break it to you, Fred-o, but you aren't dying.” Fred could hear him smiling.

Fred turned in bed to face away from him. “Wish I was.”

“Hey, look, Fred-o, we're probably going to be together for a while, and I know someone could use a friend.”

“Not interested.”

“Come on,” Morty said, making Brenda's bed creak as he got out of it. “Tell me about Brenda. Was she your wife?”

Fred's eyes suddenly watered for some reason. Maybe he had wanted her to be. Maybe he had finally decided to move on only to have to move on again. “No.” His voice cracked when he said it.

“But she was as important as your wife.” He sat down on the edge of his bed.

Fred turned back around to face him. He always faced people when he talked to them. Maybe it was a remnant of his years of sight, or maybe he did it merely to oblige the person he was talking to.

“Yes. She was. In the past three days I’ve lost the last people that I’ve ever cared about.”

“And you don’t care for many people, do you?”

“I don’t care for you.” He turned back around.

“Oh, come on, Fred-o, we were doing good there.” Morty paused. “Did you love Brenda more than your wife?”

Fred should have been offended by the question, should have been irate and enraged. “Yes.”

“She must have been a great person.”

Fred thought about raspberries and cinnamon. “Are her daffodils still here?”

“Yes,” Morty said. “They said it would liven up the room.”

Fred chuckled like a madman at the irony.

“Listen, I was going to go poke around the Game’s Room. I’m not that bad of a guy, you got to admit, right? So you should come with. You know, show me around.”

Fred wasn’t interested. “I’ve never seen the Game’s Room.” He wasn’t lying.

“I probably won’t like the games here, anyway. But I was wondering if we could walk around outside.”

Fred perked up. “It’s fall. Too chilly to go outside. But I like to look out the window.”

“Aha! You’re faking the blindness! I knew it. Insurance scam?”

The joke was in poor taste, but it was the kind of humour Fred enjoyed, so he grinned and got out of bed, reaching for his cane.

“Hey don’t worry about that thing.” Morty touched Fred’s hand as Fred touched the cane. His touch felt like an old friend’s. “I’ll help you. I don’t like holding hands, though. Just to let you know.”

Fred grinned again and grabbed his cane. “It’s my lucky cane. I bring it everywhere no matter who is holding my hand.”

They walked down the hallway and stood by the window together and Morty described everything he saw to the smallest detail. He talked about the blue skies above with threatening rain clouds on the horizon, the ashen colour of the sparse scattering of leafless trees, the gusting winds making the grey branches wave, the brown leaves dancing on the ground, the kids riding red and blue bicycles down the middle of the street and the occasional rusty car honking at them. It was the first time he saw outside the facility. The first time he’s seen in years.

Maybe this Morty wasn’t so bad. Hopefully he wouldn’t be the next one to die.

Fred was waking up, but something was wrong again. It didn’t feel like morning. He smelt smoke.

Thick smoke was choking him, coming in from the door and strangling him. It was burning furniture, and burning bedding. There was screaming, yelling; people were dying.

Goddamn Ernie. He must have been smoking in bed again!

He reached for his cane. “Morty! Morty, get up! This place is on fire.” He coughed hoarsely. He used to smoke, so why couldn’t his lungs take this assault? Where the hell was his cane? Why wasn’t it beside his bed?

He began to panic. Breathing hard now. Coughing more. Fight through this, damn it! Fred wanted to live. Wanted to survive. Needed to. Where was Morty?

“Morty!” Screw the cane. Fred whipped the sheets away and dropped to the floor, crawling through the room, feeling his way to Morty’s bed. He grabbed onto the hanging sheets and clawed his way up the bed, trying to feel for his friend. “Morty, damn it!”

He wasn’t there. Son of a bitch left without him.

No, that didn’t sound like Morty. Something was wrong. Fred crawled to the other side of the bed and felt around the floor. Nothing. No Morty.

Fred gave up and crawled across the room and bumped into the wall. Where the hell was the doorway? How long could he keep this up before he inhaled too much smoke and died? Where the hell was his damn cane? His lucky cane! He felt his way back to his bed and grabbed at the floor, groping all over looking for that piece of wood, that damned lucky cane. Where was it? Why wasn’t it where it always was?

His head was feeling light, the smoke made him go into a coughing fit. He couldn’t concentrate on finding his cane anymore. There was no more time, he had to leave it. Had to let it die like everything else.

He finally found the doorway. His elbows shook, his knees shook, so he let them rest. His body was really heavy. His head felt like it was full of lead. Fred was tired. He would rest. Just for a moment. Just in the hall. It would be okay. It was time.

“Fred-o,” Morty said from beside him. Was he lying on the floor, too?

“Morty,” Fred coughed. “Get out of here. You’re going to die.”

“You still haven’t figured out who I am? You’ve been listening for me for days.”

Fred tried to speak but made a pitiful cough instead.

“I’m death. Have been all along. I thought this would be the best way for you to go out. Blaze of glory, so to speak.” He paused. “You knew death was coming, Fred-o. I thought I shouldn’t disappoint. You’re a good man and you don’t deserve to die alone. So here I am. See, . . . I’m not so bad,” he said through a smile.

Fred wouldn’t wake up.