

Full Circle

“Say hi to your new meal mates, Mary,” the aide walked her to the assisted-living dining-area table.

After eight years in the senior section of North Battle Creek Golden Fleece Manor—noted ‘Haven before Heaven’ to countless cereal-executive widows, and others—Mary Beth Nielsen (88) moved to assisted for reasons of insurance and arthritis.

“Joy, Betty, Jean, this is Mary Beth.”

“Please, just Mary.”

Normally, that would have begun some banter, but the gazes of Joy and Betty stayed fixed into space as if nothing were said. Jean, however, piped up, “I sure hope you’re a good listener, Babs, because I’m a dynamite talker.”

Was there a grin or some other sign she was kidding? Jean’s expression stayed tautly serious. Egads! The aide informed Mary that Joy and Betty were hard of hearing.

Welcome to assisted living.

Mary recalled a phrase from her childhood on the farm: “Isn’t this a fine howtodo?” Her mom often used the phrase—on occasions ranging from one of the kids dropping a plate on the kitchen floor to a tornado funnel making a beeline for the barn.

Not fully sharing her mother's casual fatalism, Mary did have a high threshold for worry about life's slings and arrows. Now with the ironies of advancing years, her sense of humor made the small misfortunes even less so. For instance, she thought it funny her nieces never called... just as she was forgetting their names. ☺

So Mary laughed to herself about these two women at the table, Joy and Betty, who couldn't listen and the one woman, Jean, who wouldn't.

She mused, "What no one warns you of at 70!"

Mary Beth's first dining event in assisted living was, if not swell, then, at least a few rungs above awful. Jean, as advertised, turned out to be a *bona fide* Chatty Cathy. In fact, Mary considered finding one of the old CC dolls and having some techie-youngster reprogram it... stand it up on the table, pull the cord repeatedly:

"Jean, you don't say."

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"I know what you mean, Jean."

"Please pass the salt and pepper, Jean."

Not so bad, though, sometimes Jean was even entertaining. Her late husband was a Kentucky horse-breeder; she'd loved everything about that life.

More than anything she “liked to watch...” the act of horses *copulating*. That’s right: the ol’ horsey hokey pokey. Jean’s eyes would grow wide recounting the cataclysmic carnality of it all.

Mary, in her mind, pulled the Chatty Cathy cord:

“Oh really, Jean? You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not kidding. Why would I kid about something like that?”

Mary was trying to change the subject. (Like most WASP¹ Americans, Mary was reticent about sex, even between consenting livestock.) Eventually, Jean would leave the equine love stories and tear into *men*.

“You know men aren’t even close.” Jean’d say.

Mary thought, “Geez, I certainly hope they aren’t.”

Jean the Queen, more a ball-buster than a man-hater. No mystery she’d outlived Hubby Harold. To Jean, Tarzan the Ape Man was weak and effeminate. And Harold (Hal)—Mary read between the lines—was more the gregarious George of the Jungle type. His family had the lineage and the money, but Jean had developed the domination of weak, well-heeled men into an art form. She ground him into fine Arizona road dust. He died young.

¹ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

Joy and Betty were perfect table mates for Jean: she could pontificate at will. And they liked Jean because they could actually *hear* her. Mary Beth brought in a new dynamic, though, a caring presence that made Jean want to discuss things like politics and religion. Hoo boy! Jean made Ann Coulter seem like Mary Poppins: “Hey, you’d better be voting for Sarah Palin (and Sen. Fuzznuts).”

Just let it go.

Mary’s habit is to eat quickly then move off with the stroller, visit with her community of friends. The arthritis is cruel and unyielding, but thanks to iron discipline for nearly 50 years—rigorously keeping to her walking and calisthenics—she can still make the social rounds on foot.

Mary realizes that if she has to sit every meal at the Joy/Betty/Jean (JBJ) table she’ll go batty. So after more days than she cares to admit, Mary asks the attendant, “Donna, how do I get out of this?”

“Well, we like to assign new arrivals to the JBJ table as kind of a buffer zone. Jean is easily frustrated by Joy’s and Betty’s hardness of hearing. If we don’t put a good listener in there, at least someone without a hearing aid, Jean gives the whole wing a screechin’ hard time.”

“I see.”

“There’s sort of a formula...” Donna’s voice trails off.

“Take one for the team, eh?”

“Mary, you’re a nurse, you’re wonderful with people. We know it’s tough duty, give us a few weeks, then we’ll rotate you out. Just say the word.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

That night Mary, after her rounds, returns to the small room and, as usual, watches *Jeopardy* then checks out the *Cheers* rerun. Still no avoiding the voice in her head:

Monkey Brain: “You’re getting old, girl.”

Mary: “I *am* old, you twit. So what? Go away.”

“You sit here in this room, just think about the loneliness. Who calls, who visits?”

“My nephew Wayne drives my sister Steph over every few weeks. We go out.”

“Sure. Pub and grub at Arcadia, followed by a drive in the sticks. Big whoop. How sad is that?”

“It’s not sad, it’s fabulous: we see old digs, towns I’ve known: Allegan, Plainwell, Marshall, Paw Paw, places where I’ve lived, worked, and/or exchanged pleasantries into the wee hours.”

Eventually Monkey Brain lets go. But he (Monkey Brain’s always a guy) usually gets Mary worked up enough to point her mental stroller in an uncomfortable direction, down the Lane of Nostalgia.

Though quite a looker back in college, Mary rarely had time for pitching—or catching—woo. She hid out in her dorm room studying her sweet bippy off. Through plain hard work, she'd won a scholarship to University of Michigan Nursing School, then made the cut (only half the freshmen in '39 graduated in '43.) The Army Nurse Cadet Program paid tuition and books, then if the war was still on, she'd be called to duty.

Boys? They became scarce on campus, or anywhere else stateside, after December 7, 1941.

One guy stood out: Gentleman Jack.

He was a few years older. His left foot was a prosthetic, installed after the real foot intersected a mower blade back on the boyhood farm. He walked with a limp, a cane... and a smile.

What a smile!

Jack was the reincarnation of poet Edwin Robinson's *Richard Cory*: "clean favored and imperially slim," with a full head of light-brown hair, awareness of fashion, and a loquacious bent. He was sort of a beatnik before beatniks, preferring to hang out in quaint Ann Arbor coffee shops and bars, not usually with people of the highest social standing. He had plenty of "dates."

[Stateside, if you wore pants you didn't have to wear them much. Even the nice girls were hot to trot. Typical attitude toward smilin' Jack: "If a good-looking guy like you can't go overseas to serve the country, you can darned sure come over to my place and service *me*." (Not the Home Front party line, but true nonetheless.)]

Mary met Jack at the Post Bar, downtown, on a rare foray with a couple of her party-friendlier dormies. After some chitchat, she asked him his curriculum.

"Architecture." As he looked her over, he continued, "I like well-built things." He feigned embarrassment, not much. She feigned offense, not much. She said, "Listen, if you're going to talk this risqué way you can at least buy me a drink."

Jack was actually relieved that this one wasn't looking to score, only banter and flirt. Mary let him walk her back to the dorm and give her a kiss goodnight.

Felt *good*. She whiffed his cologne, laid her hands gently on his shoulders, traded smiles, gazed into his kind eyes, felt a little tingle in the grungels. New experience to feel wanted this way... and to want *back*.

It wasn't that Mary didn't think about 'the heat,' about love and marriage, babies even. She liked music, dancing, social deals. But underneath she feared giving herself to a

man, not physically, but losing control spiritually, of *her* life as she had always known it. Women in those days still stayed home, kept house, bore and raised kids, deferred to Hubby in all the big life-choices. If Mary yielded this soul she had created—that people had grown to like and respect—would fade away.

Social pressures were overwhelming, especially for a girl with her looks. Hormones insistent, too. So she did spend more time with Jack, running clips through her mind from the latest Jimmy Stewart/June Allyson movie.

She felt deeply for him, too, yes partly on account of his injury that he abided with dignity. Mary had also suffered a childhood accident, at the age of eight, playing hide-and-seek and falling through an opening in the top story of a neighbor's barn. She lay in traction for weeks; her father—returning shell shocked from the War to End All Wars—wished he'd had boys, resented paying to keep her going. Not a heartwarming Waltonesque story.

One night, sitting on a park bench, Mary let on to Jack the PG version of her past; she saw his eyes moisten and felt his arm gently caress the top of her thigh. He popped the question. She said yes. They would marry as soon as he graduated and found a job and as soon as she graduated and found out what the Army had in store.

Mary was hoping for duty close to her home and family—preferably, right here, at the Battle Creek Army Hospital that opened in '42 to look after wounded American soldiers—but in the spring of '43, the Nurse Corps decided she was too valuable for home duty.

She spent the next two years in England, at various hospitals, caring for the poor kids on the Meatgrinder Front. Not that there weren't some pleasures midst the rubble and trauma: Mary enjoyed some of the Brit ways, the tea, the conversationalism, the attention to etiquette, even the subtleties of humor. But she missed Jack. She wrote to him once a week, and he wrote back as often... at least in the beginning.

His letters came less and less frequently, then, after six months, ended with a "Dear Jane"—"outa sight, outa mind" overcoming the "heart growing fonder in absence." Jack just didn't seem to be the type, once pledged to a woman, to stray; dammit, he was a man of *character*. The news triggered bouts of anger and tears, but also relief.

She'd given the marriage prospect a try, and failed. No one could blame her now for letting go. She also knew this would be her final ascent up the wedding cake toward the idyllic toy-pair pledging foreverness. Her hard-won identity would not be undone by wifhood or motherhood.

Mary returned from the war, with honors, to the KZoo area. She moved in with her older sister Connie, husband Brad, and their newly-arrived twins. She took part time jobs and looked for nursing positions. The call came from Michigan's budding Department of Public Health; they had a slot in Three Rivers.

Wow, her ride with public health had been a grand 40-year freight train passing in the rustling of the leaves: Wyoming, Iowa, Oklahoma. Finally, the University of Texas Medical Center in Galveston. She taught bubbly Boomer babes... and increasingly, Boomer boys.

A good life, she made friends easily—except for the low-lifes next door on 'the Island' who watered their lawn using her spigot... and *hose!*—lived frugally. Simple pleasures: she watched the Houston Astros on TV—in the days of Nolan Ryan—but she remained a Michigan girl at heart. She kept a gleam in her eye for the Tigers and, in college football, the Wolverines.

In the late 80s, she retired and moved with her mom to Battle Creek to live with sister Connie, now widowed, on the lake. Also special years: The "Golden Girls" watched and listened to all the Michigan teams, every day tuned in *Jeopardy* and their sitcoms, on Thursdays, *Cheers!* Mary read widely, especially on the American Indian, wrote

letters, gardened, sewed quilts for Charitable Union; she and Connie took Binder Park Zoo travel packages around the world and daily walks in the adjacent nature preserve.

The homestead served as a gathering place for their small extended family. Not only Connie's children, also youngest sister Stephanie's. Mainly in the warm seasons, Mary's young grand-nieces and -nephews played on the long grassy slope down to the lake and in the swimming area. Between Connie and Steph were seven offspring, three male and four female, an eclectic mix, some conventional and well-established, others driven by angels or demons. The adult conversations varied from ordinary, to stimulating, to "you've got to be kidding!"

How enchanting for Mary, childless, to experience on that familial ground, for a decade or so, the warm center of life... icing on the cake.

Then the inevitable fade. Her mom shed the mortal coil at 92 in '94. Down to just the two of them, Connie and Mary, with Connie's single daughter Anne down from Muskegon most weekends and Steph's divorced, childless son Wayne dropping by occasionally from the Detroit area on his two-wheeler. Both solitary souls, Anne a pessimist destined for the Nihilism Hall of Fame, Wayne who never met a pile of manure he didn't envision a pony in.

Connie caught the cancer and died in '99; Mary, resented, incredibly, by the girls, got the bum's rush.

Sigh.

Mary shook herself out of the reverie.

The Fleece had been a life saver, certainly a sanity saver, a comfortable apartment on a moment's notice. So long ago, 10 years, the pain of departure fading like a footprint on a wave-polished beach. Stephanie called every week, Wayne made a point of driving his mom over in the van once a month for a visit to the brew pub, then a drive in the country. Mary looked forward to getting out, loved watching the trees and farmland rise in the windshield and recede to the side, then behind them.

No time like the present. Getting older, the more impermanent things became, and she was one of them! Mary had seen this Smithsonian DVD about the formation of the earth—how it all got going not millions but billions of years ago. The whole of human history was but a universal heartbeat, our lives rising and receding in the blink of a cosmic eye. Not even. She actually gained a measure of inner peace from such ruminations; they led her to think of the cats who'd been so much in and of her life: Something eternal in these special creatures, a shared presence, the face of God purring inspiration.

At dinner tonight, the nurse tells Mary that someone will finally be joining the four of them at her table. Moreover, if Mary wants to move on, she can stay for transitioning a few days, then go to another table and that will be the end of it.

Morning comes. Mary completes her social hallway strolls with the walker, then heads to the table to sit with Jean and the two pleasant hearing-aid models. Coffee has been poured. Down the aisle ambles an old man, taller than most, though stooped by the years... managing with a cane. Donna, the attendant, goes over and introduces herself and escorts him to the JBJ table.

“Girls,” Donna says, “Say hello to Jack.”

They all greet him warmly, well, Jean does. Joy and Betty smile politely, wondering how the local sociology will change. Does Mary detect them whispering to each other?! Mary says hi. Jack responds with a slight wave and nod of the head, then sits down.

He’s cheerful enough, but there’s bitterness beneath the banter as he lets out his recent plight: “I really didn’t want to leave my granddaughter’s place, but she remarried... to this Ohio State redneck. When I expressed doubts Woody Hayes could walk on water, the two of ‘em packed my bags that night. Long story short, here I am.” He smiles.

Mary catches her breath: “Omigosh, it’s him!” No one smiles like Jack, even after 60-going-on-70 years. He doesn’t recognize her, continuing with the smalltalk...

“... and geez, those Buckeye fans s’bad as Wolverines, only with IQs lower than guacamole. Take sports way too seriously. All I said, when he told me Woody had godlike powers, was, ‘That’s what makes horse races.’”

Jean’s ears perk up.

Mary can see Jack still has the same breezy, accommodating quality he had in college. No he-man he. She imagines mince meat will soon be appearing on the menu; Jean’ll start in on this gift-wrapped Harold-clone as soon as she finishes her salad.

Wow, even though the pain of his leaving has long gone, Mary still wonders what happened back in ‘44. She thinks, “Jack, you got some ‘splainin’ to do.” On the other hand, Jean is such a pain, it will be great to hasten the day of keeping other company. But how’s Jack going to handle it? Part of Mary has a fascination to be here and watch the lioness munching on the feeble Christian....

“Isn’t *this* a fine howtodo?”