

Octogenarian

It's hard to drive a big car in the city these days — too much traffic and too many stop lights, but an old man needs a big car. Twice in the last six months Emerson was in automobile accidents. Nothing serious, little fender benders — both his fault — but nevertheless accidents.

“You need to sell that car and stop driving.” Blanche told him after hearing of the first accident. He didn't tell her about the second. Nor did he plan on telling her about Wendel's red-headed nurse who he nearly ran down on his way out of the medical complex's lot that morning.

“Should have run her down. I would have done it if I were driving.” Wendel's sunglasses had fallen to the floor when Emerson swerved to miss her. He reached down and picked them up.

“How can you say that.”

“She's a witch who's refusing a guy the medicine he needs. An addict! Can you believe she called your baby brother an addict? And even if I am an addict, it's their fault.”

“She's just trying to do what's best.”

“Jesus, Emerson, are you my brother or my Padre?”

“All right, the next time I get the chance I'll plow her over good.”

“Now you're talking. How about taking me over to Westville Medical?”

“It'll have to wait till tomorrow. I got Becky's birthday party to go to.”

“Becky? You've been holding out on your brother. Where'd you meet her?”

“Becky, Blanche's girl, she's turning five or maybe it's six.”

“I thought you went to a kid's birthday party yesterday.”

“I did. I went to Charley's party. Flo's grandson. I'll tell you, it's a bit weird when you see your great-grandchildren turning ten.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“No I suppose you wouldn’t.”

Emerson drove the sedan up a hill and onto the Elmwood Senior Home’s lot. Memories of steep Pittsburgh streets and Leaping Freddy Hodges flooded his mind. He helped his brother from the car. Leaping Freddy Hodges had been the east side boxing champion of the ten and eleven year old division. It took the Germans to take him out — no Pittsburgher could have done it.

“Can you get me at eight? There’s a new doctor on mornings at Firestone and I hear he’s a pushover when it comes to writing prescriptions.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then.”

Emerson was a busy man but the memories of Leaping Freddy and Joey, and Lenny, and the rest of his pals way back then were always with him. Yet he worried about his memory. Last year when Blanche took him back to the old neighborhood it was nothing like he had remembered. It was somehow smaller, less open and free. Lenny’s house stood in ruins — even the plywood sheets over the windows and doors were graying and warped. The blocks were short, and he realized it was really no more than a few hundred yards from his old house to Lenny’s. He had remembered it being quite a hike when he was a boy. The front window of his house wasn’t what he remembered it to be either. He had always talked about that window, said you only had to open it halfway to pass an elephant through it. “Grandpa, you’re silly. You can’t put an elephant through that window,” Becky said when they walked up on the porch. In fact, it was hard for Emerson to even recognize the house at first. It blended into the neighborhood so well, it was so ordinary, he pointed to three other houses before he found the right one.

Skipping Becky’s birthday party, he drove to Mt. St. Mary’s cemetery to stand in the rain by Sarah’s grave. She used to help him remember. She had been there too. But

now like the sound of her voice, the memory of her was also fading. He wondered if she was smaller than he remembered. He cried a little beside her grave.

Emerson heard his phone ringing almost before he pulled into the garage. He listened while it rang fifteen or twenty times before he could get into the house and answer it. It was Blanche on the other end. "Where were you? Wendel said you dropped him off over two hours ago." An ambulance followed by Flo's car drove onto his driveway. "Leave them for a second and they think you're dead," Emerson thought.

"I'm sorry, I forgot all about the party. Hold on a minute O.K.?" Emerson set the receiver down and opened his door. Two paramedics, each carrying big cases, and Flo walked into the foyer. Emerson smiled. "Hold on a second, I'm on the phone."

Emerson walked back to the receiver and picked it up. "Blanche, our sister's here."

"Good, we've been worried sick."

"I had some errands to run. I sure hope Becky will forgive me. Tell you what, let me talk to her." When Becky came on the line, Emerson talked to her about love and forgetful old people and forgiveness. She talked to him about dolls and clothes and ear piercing. When he got off the phone, he worried, not about Becky--she'd be fine, but about himself. He knew he was creating suspicion, that his daughters would not soon forget this stunt. He turned and faced Flo and two paramedics who were now sitting at the kitchen table. "Look Flo, I just had a few things to do. I'm fine. There's no need for the ambulance."

She looked worried. "What things? Where did you go? What did you buy?" He shrugged his shoulders. "You don't remember?" Flo stood up. "Look at you, you're soaking wet and you got mud all over your cuffs." A tear ran down her cheek. "Dad, we're worried about you."

"It's O.K. darling. I'm O.K." Emerson offered the paramedics coffee. They politely refused and carried their chests back to the ambulance. Flo had to move her car to let them out. After insisting Emerson shower and change into clean, dry clothes,

Flo left too, leaving Emerson to worry about nursing homes and about losing his stories, about forgetting the tomato juice can--no one owned a real football--that took out Joey's eye the time Lenny threw him a pass when he wasn't looking.

When Blanche called the next week, "Me and Flo and Gloria want to stop by this morning. Are you free? It's kind of important," Emerson went to his bedroom and began packing his personal things--his diaries and notes, his war medals, the last family portrait with Sarah--the articles he didn't want the girls to handle. He hid his typewriter in the garage. "Maybe the next fellow'll get some use out of her," he said to himself. He tossed a blanket over the black case and shut the overhead door.

Flo carried a dog from the car to the porch. "Yeah dad, Blanche came up with the idea, and we all agreed that it was great. So we bought her for you."

"We figured that what you don't use you lose. You know we thought maybe if you had something to do, you'd be happier." Gloria smiled.

"She'll make you twenty years younger. Since mother died your house is so empty. You need someone to bring a little life back into the place. Besides, we figured you've always liked to care for people, first to us, then to granny and then to mother and now you've got this dog to care for. Isn't this a wonderful idea?" Blanche brushed dog hair from her dark blouse.

Flo lifted the dog's things out of the trunk. "Besides that, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren will have a ball playing with her when they visit. So, anyway, her name's Sally. Blanche fell in love with her eyes. Just look how happy they are. And doesn't she have a nice color?"

"Well she's certainly beautiful, isn't she?" Gradually, Emerson realized she was meant for him and not as a pet for one of his daughters. "Yes, she's beautiful."

"Oh, she's simply adorable, Dad, you're going to love her," Blanche said. "And look we already got you some extra food and a nice leather collar for her."

“She’ll keep you young. Her name’s Sally, and she’s fit as a fiddle.” Blanche handed a folder containing her health history to Emerson.

“Well, Sally, it looks as though you and me are going to be together for a while.” He reached down and scratched her belly. “Aren’t I lucky to have such wonderful girls who’d go through all this for their old man.” He hugged each of his daughters. “She sure is beautiful.”

After the girls left, he pushed Sally outside, locked the door and pulled his typewriter from its cache in the garage. He wanted the typewriter in view to remind him of his unwritten stories. He thought about Cap, the mutt that roamed the streets with Leaping Freddy — Freddy got his nickname jumping back and forth over Cap who would just lay on the sidewalk like nothing was happening. Leaping Freddy claimed it built up his foot speed. No one could doubt it. Emerson knew he should write that nickname part down, he knew he’d forget to mention it later, but Martha needed a ride to her bridge club, and he wanted to unpack his bag.

The frame holding the portrait was apart at a corner. In his haste to pack, he must have jarred it somehow. Emerson figured he had time to glue it back before he had to get Martha. Hearing a knock on his door but expecting no one, he ignored it, poured a cup of coffee, and carried the broken frame down to his work bench. He thought of his dad’s old paint stained workbench every time he looked at his own store-bought bench — all his children had pitched in and bought it for him for Christmas one year. He appreciated it, but it never seemed to measure up to his father’s rough and sturdy bench. Emerson had watched his father work on the old bench many times. It seemed to him that his father spent most of the time adding gadgets and shelves to it. He could not picture his father working on any actual projects on the bench. The bench itself, it seemed, was his project, his creation, his monument. Emerson wanted it when his father passed, but the thing was so massive they couldn’t get it out of the basement — his father must have built it down there, but

Emerson couldn't remember. In his mind, it had always existed. I should write about that bench, he thought.

His coffee cup fell to the floor as the rap on the basement window startled him. "Damn." He looked at the window and saw Pete Calloway staring at him. He reached up and opened the latch. "You scared the hell out of me." Emerson's socks began soaking up the puddle of spilled coffee he was standing in.

"I didn't mean to scare you Mr. Forester, but I think I found your dog."

"What?"

"I was out in my yard warming up my son, you know baseball, and along comes this here mutt and grabs the ball right from Tucker's hand. Nearly bit the boy I might add. Anyway, the dog's collar says she belongs to you. When did you get her?"

Emerson raised his eyebrows. He could still feel his heart pounding. "A dog, I don't have a dog, Pete."

"Well, this here dog has a collar that has your address on it."

Emerson looked back at Pete but did not respond.

"Look Mr. Forester, I got a kid over there who wants to play catch with his dad. I don't know why her collar would have your address on it if she doesn't live here."

"Oh, a dog. Yes, I guess she does belong to me. My daughters bought me that dog just this morning. She must have gotten loose. I completely forgot all about her." Emerson stepped out of the puddle of coffee and reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "I'll be right out. How much do I owe you for the ball?"

"Listen, don't worry about it Mr. Forester, just try to keep your dog tied, all right?"

"That's mighty neighborly of you, Pete, but I insist on paying my debts."

Emerson walked into the backyard and handed the stranger two dollars. "Will that cover it?"

"I suppose."

“Again, Pete, I’m sorry for any trouble I’ve caused you.”

Pete nodded and walked away.

Emerson swept Sally into the garage and went back to the basement to clean up the coffee spill. The murky puddle looked like a miniature of the drainage ditch where Joey found a condom when they were twelve.

“Emerson, where have you been? I was supposed to be there a half an hour ago. I’ll never get a good table now. I’ll probably have to play with Margaret. Whoever gets there late gets stuck with the old bag. She can’t even tell the difference between a king and a queen.”

“I’m sorry Martha. I had some unexpected problems.”

“Well, problems or no problems, I’m late and it’s your fault. Harry would have never done this to me. God rest his soul. Your brother was a saint.” Martha began to cry.

“It’s all right Martha. We’ll get there with plenty of time.”

“I hate being late, Emerson. No one understands. Only Harry knew, and now he’s gone. This is like a nightmare. Just look at what I’ve been reduced to, depending on my brother-in-law to drive me around late to everything. It’s a nightmare.”

Sitting in the car while Martha played bridge, Emerson remembered his sergeant whacking Lenny on the head and yelling about how the Germans were going to blow his butt off if he didn’t stay down. After basics, Lenny signed on with some photography unit and began shooting pictures rather than guns. Emerson remembered after the war sitting with Lenny drinking at the VFW and listening to him bad mouth the sergeant. That’s important, Emerson thought, but Martha opened the door before he could figure out why.

As he pulled into his garage, Sally ran back and forth in front of the car. Occasionally her front paws would come off the ground as she tumbled backwards from the impact of the bumper. After getting himself out of the car, Emerson slid Sally onto the driveway and closed the garage door--careful this time to remove her collar.

He was eager to fix the frame and start working. He warmed up a cup of coffee. Memories of Sarah standing by the stove smoking a cigarette floated through his mind. He started smoking with her when they were thirteen. Leaping Freddy stole some hand rolled cigarettes from his old man and Emerson and Sally each got one. They smoked those first cigarettes behind the drugstore. Emerson could see the drugstore in his mind. It was where they bought penny candy and goofed around, and it was in the secret smoking spot, behind the drugstore, where Sarah first kissed him. She was good at kissing. He had to learn. That drugstore should be in the story, Emerson thought. The phone rang.

“Dad, it’s Blanche. I was calling to check and see how you and Sally are getting along.”

"Sally?"

"The dog, Dad. you didn't change her name on us now did you?"

“Oh, Sally! Yes, well she sure is a beautiful dog, Blanche. It was a very thoughtful gift from you girls.”

“That’s great, I’m glad you like her. Listen If you’re free tonight I thought I’d bring Fred and Becky over to see the dog.”

“You know you’re always welcome.”

“O.K., we’ll see you in a little bit.”

Emerson hung up the phone and unplugged it from the wall. He walked out to the garage. Sally was sitting in front of the overhead door waiting for him. He buckled her collar on and let her into the house.

That night Sally slept in a cardboard box that Becky cut into a dog bed. She lined it with an old worn cushion she found on the seat of Emerson's desk chair.

"Well, if that's not the bed of a queen, I don't know what is. I may just sleep there myself." Emerson made like he was going to lay down in the box.

"Oh Grandpa, you're silly."

In the morning, Wendel was waiting by the Elmwood door when Emerson's car rounded the corner. When Wendel got in the car, Sally jumped out.

"When'd you get a mutt?"

"She's just a stray I picked up on Market Street. She'll be safer in this neighborhood." They drove off. Sally ran circles in the big yard and was still running three hours later when Emerson returned Wendel to Elmwood and let her back into the car.

At home, he left Sally in the passenger seat and went to his desk. While driving his brother to the doctor, Emerson thought about how Wendel used to be. He remembered finding out about Wendel getting hit. First it was a rumor passed on to him and then the letter came. Emerson never suspected at the time that a wounded leg would change a guy like it changed his brother. Wendel had been a lady's man — always handsome and smooth. Emerson remembered his and Sarah's wedding and how Wendel had danced everyone off the floor. Before being shot, Wendel met Bob Hope and managed to collect ten different autographed pictures of himself posing with USO girls. Emerson never met a veteran who had more. Of course with Lenny being in a photography unit Wendel had an advantage, but there was no doubting that Wendel had charm. He was the guy everyone wanted around. Always jovial and always suave. Emerson remembered once trying to smooth talk Sarah and how Sarah only laughed at him and told him to stop trying to be like Wendel. But Wendel never really recovered from the injury. He walked with a cane at twenty-six, and would need that cane for the rest of his life — a new life full of pain and complaints.

Emerson titled his first chapter “Wendel.” He typed. My brother was dashing and I, although older, followed him like a baby chick follows its mother, hoping some of his smooth magnanimity would rub off on me. I knew it wouldn’t, but I figured at least I’d be included in the fun if I stayed around him.

His chair was uncomfortable to sit on without the cushion, and Sally’s barking disturbed him. When his coffee grew cold, Emerson walked out to the garage and freed Sally from the car. She licked his face when he reached down to get his seat-cushion from her box and followed it and Emerson to the desk where she promptly perched herself on top of the cushion when Emerson returned it to the seat of the chair. When he came back from the kitchen with more coffee, Sally was fast asleep in his chair. Emerson let her sleep, and instead of writing more, hung the repaired family portrait back on the wall—over his bed and under the crucifix.