

Veteran's Day

Alice stopped at the recreation room of the Assisted Living wing to see one of the residents she'd visited once or twice a week for several months. He was always cranky at first, and complained about the living conditions, the food, how he hated living in the "Old Folks Home". But once the visit got going, and Alice cajoled him into a better frame of mind, he forgot his troubles and could be entertaining, even funny.

He sat alone at a card table, working on a huge puzzle, barely started. He squinted at a piece, turned it around and around, then put it down. He picked up another piece.

"Good morning, Mr. Vicker," Alice said, though it was past noon. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"Yes, I've had it. If you can call it lunch. If you can call it a meal. Completely unrecognizable. I do not know what it was. Terrible." He shook his head.

"Oh, now, it can't have been that bad. It looked fine to me. How is it going today?" Alice asked.

"Same-o, same-o," he said, as he did every time she asked him.

"Remember, you're coming home with me today. We'll sit in the living room and have tea, then we'll have a nice meal. My son, John, will bring you back later."

"Oh, yes. That's right," he said. Alice was pretty sure he'd remembered. Maybe he wanted her to think he had so many appointments he couldn't possibly keep them all straight.

They walked back to the elevator, where Alice pressed the button for the third floor. He used a walker, and Alice walked slowly by his side. When they reached his apartment, which is what it was, a big living room, bedroom, bath and efficiency kitchen but which he called his "room", Alice settled him in his chair while she got his coat and hat out of the closet. She sat down for a moment. He needed to rest a little between exertions.

Alice asked if he needed to use the restroom, and he said he did, so she helped him up. When he returned, she helped him back into the chair. They would stay here awhile, then she'd get him into his coat and hat and out to the car.

Mr. Vicker was ninety years old. His did pretty well for that advanced age, except he was a bit frail and did not walk well so needed the walker. But he had no other afflictions; he could see and hear and had a sense of humor, when he wasn't complaining.

It took over thirty minutes to collect Mr. Vicker, get him ready to go, get him out to the car, into her house, and settled in the living room. Once he was in the chair, George's old chair, she covered his knees with an afghan and turned on the gas fireplace. Then she went to the kitchen to make tea.

They would have tea, they would talk for awhile, and then she would serve him a simple meal. John would stop after work and pick him up and take him back home. It would be dark by then and Alice didn't drive after dark. John was so good about helping. Geo too, but mostly John, who lived very close to the "Old Folks Home".

Today Alice had cookies to offer with the tea. "Mr. Vicker, have a cookie or two."

“Alice, when are you going to stop calling me Mr? My name is Clint and you should call me that. After all, we are friends, are we not?”

“Yes, Clint, we are friends,” she said.

As they drank the tea, Clint said, “Now this is good tea. Nice and strong like it should be. Not that weak dish watery stuff they have at the Old Folks Home.”

“Yes, I like my tea strong. I can’t think why people bother to drink tea, if it doesn’t taste like tea.”

“I agree, Alice.”

“Today is Veteran’s Day,” she said.

“Well, that’s right, I guess it is. I did hear something on TV about it, this morning. That President, talking about Veteran’s Day as if he cared about Veterans. I don’t think that is an honest man. I don’t like him. I voted for that Obama. Everyone at the Old Folks Home voted for Obama. Because you know, he likes old people. He said so.”

“Yes, I believe Mr. Obama does like old people,” Alice said. She was pretty sure President Bush liked old people too, but decided to let it go. “I was thinking that maybe today, on Veteran’s Day, you might like to share your story with me, when you were in the war. But if you’d rather not talk about it we can certainly talk about something else. I just thought perhaps you’d enjoy that, today of all days.”

“Why sure, if you’d like to hear about it.” He stared past Alice, toward the dining room.

“Just start anywhere, when you first went in,” she suggested.

“Well, I got drafted. I was single and I was working at the oil fields then, down by Bradford, Pennsylvania, if you know where that is. Right on the border there, Pennsylvania and New York. I was working on a drilling rig, as a tool dresser.”

“How did they let you know you were drafted in those days? Did they write you a letter?” Alice asked.

“Yes, they just sent letters. Everyone expected them, in those days, with the war and all. They told me I had to report to New Cumberland, that’s in Pennsylvania. We got on a bus and went there. I think I was there for three or four days. There they assigned your clothing, all the stuff you’d need for training. We were to take basic training in Oregon, Camp Adair for six weeks.”

“What was basic training like? What did you have to do there?” Alice asked.

“Oh, the usual. We hiked, got in shape, learned how to shoot guns, how to clean them, how to march. Just the basics. Guess that’s why they call it ‘basic training’”.

Alice laughed.

“Then we got shipped to the Mohabi Desert to train for African warfare, dessert training, it was called. That took about a month or so, but by the time we were finished with that, the war in Africa had ended. They were fighting in Sicily though so they sent us to Camp Carson, Colorado for mountain training. We were going to be fighting in the mountains, there in Italy. But by the time we got done with that, the fighting in the mountains had ended! Not very good planning on their part, eh?”

“No, it wouldn’t seem so.”

“Anyway, then they shipped us to France. Some port, I can’t even remember the name. By this time, the war was mostly house to house, town to town, and from that time on that’s what we did.”

“Oh my, that does sound dangerous,” Alice said.

“Well, yes, it was.” He was clearly enjoying himself now. “We spent a lot of time in ditches in open fields with bullets flying overhead. And there was Bed Check Charlie to deal with.”

“Bed Check Charlie?”

“Yes, it was a plane that went overhead and dropped bombs on us most every night. We weren’t allowed to smoke because they might see the light from the cigarettes. Then they’d know there was somebody down there and they’d drop a bomb.”

“So every night you went to sleep, not knowing if you’d have a bomb drop on you?” Alice asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said.

“But, how did you handle that? Weren’t you scared?”

“Well, sure, but you just got used to it. Funny what a person can get used to.”

“I guess so, but when I think about it, it strikes me as very brave. We don’t realize, we being non-military, what it was really like,” Alice said.

“Wasn’t your husband in the war?” Clint asked.

“No. He wasn’t old enough. We graduated from high school in 1945 and the war was ending then,” Alice said. “So, he never went in the army or anything. We got married and then Geo was born, in 1946. He worked at the mill.”

“I see. Well then, he was a bit younger than me,” Clint said.

“Yes, we were the same age. We went to school together, I’m eighty one, this year,” Alice said. “And George would have been eighty one too. But anyway, go on. Tell me the rest of the story.”

“Well, the Battle of the Bulge, that ended the real fighting, about 1944, I guess. It’s hard to remember. Anyway, our division was guarding the south portion of the combat zone there, so that when any Germans came across that line, it was our job to get rid of them. But by the time we got there and got everything set up, the Germans surrendered. The German people in the town, they were as glad as we were to have the fighting ended. I remember, a German lady made me a birthday cake. It was good too.”

“That was nice,” Alice said. “I guess they were as anxious as we were to have that awful war behind them.”

“Oh, yes, they were that. They just had that war foisted on them and didn’t understand a lot of why they were even at war. And back then, you didn’t know so much, what went on. Nowadays, you have reporters and such, right in the middle of it all. But back then, I don’t think they did. At least I never saw any. You just didn’t know what was happening then. All you knew was word of mouth.”

“When did you get out then?”

“Oh, I think it was November, 1945, maybe December. Can’t really remember the exact date,” he said. “I got some shrapnel in my foot. Got some points for that, got to come home a little early.”

“Points?”

“Yes, you got points for things. It bought me a couple of weeks or something, early out. By that time, it didn’t matter too much because the real danger was over. I was in the 104th infantry division, the Timberwolves. Under General Terry Allen, known as Terrible Terry. They shipped us to France first, to go home. The camps there were all named for cigarettes. There was Camp Lucky Strike, Camp Chesterfield. I think I ended up at Camp Lucky Strike. There you just waited your turn to go home. Then once on the ship, it took two weeks to get to the U.S.”

“Were you really anxious to get home?”

“Oh, yes, sure I was. I wanted to get home to Martha. She was waiting for me there. But those two weeks, on the ship there, those were good days. You felt good, like you’d done your duty, but you’d survived and now you were going home. So while we were all anxious to get home, it was a nice time.”

“I can imagine it was. It must have felt wonderful, to know that you weren’t in danger any longer.” Alice thought about what it must have been like to have been in the war. What those men had gone through. And the women they’d left behind, how they must have worried. How could they ever have a peaceful moment, thinking at any time, they could learn of the death of a husband, a son, or a brother?

“We got dumped off at San Louis Abisbo. Everyone was on their own then, to get home whichever way they could. I hopped on a train and came home.”

Alice poured more tea. “When you came home, did you have nightmares? About all the violence and the war?”

“Nightmares?”

“Yes. You know how you hear about people coming back home and having posttraumatic stress disorder? They have nightmares, wake up at night reliving it. Especially the Vietnam War veterans. They seem to be most affected by it,” Alice said.

“Well, no, I don’t guess I ever thought about it much,” Clint said.

“You never thought about it?”

“No, not much. It was just something you did. You went in the Army, you did the best you could. Then you came home. Not much sense reliving it all.”

Alice pondered this. Was it just the difference in mindset that the older veterans seemed to be able to put it all behind them? How was it that they could live through such horror, and just go on about their lives, that it was just something they “did”. If George had had to go to war, would he have put it behind him, like Clint had, or would he have been forever altered by it? It was something she would end up thinking about later, she knew.

“Alice,” Clint said. He cleared his throat. “You could marry me.”

“What?” Alice was abruptly brought out of her contemplation of older veterans as compared to younger veterans.

“You and I should get married. We are good friends, are we not?”

“Well, yes, we are friends, Clint, but I couldn’t possibly get remarried,” Alice said.

“Why not?”

“Well, because, I am the kind of woman who could only be married once,” she said. “I could never remarry. It would seem like being unfaithful to George. He was my husband. He is the only husband I’ll ever have.”

“It sounds like you aren’t going to change your mind very easily. But, you know, I am well off enough. I’d leave it all to you. It would serve those kids of mine right, for sticking me in the Old Folks Home.”

“Clint, they did what they thought was best. You know you’d have trouble caring for yourself now. Getting meals and all. How would you manage? You have a lovely home there, and people who care about you, and who can help if you need it. It’s not the Old Folks Home. It’s a place where people live who need a little help, that’s all.”

“Well, maybe. But those kids didn’t give me a choice. They just decided it was where I was going and they never even gave me any say in it.”

“Well, maybe they could have handled it better. But you can’t hold it against them because they only did what they thought was best for you,” Alice said.

“Maybe I can talk you into marrying me,” Clint said.

“No, that won’t happen, Clint. I couldn’t. It’s just, well, it wouldn’t be right, to my way of thinking. I’m sorry. But I’ll always be your friend. I’ll always come visit you and we can talk.”

“Well, then. I guess I’ll have to be content with that,” he said.

“Yes, I guess you will.”