

THE CROSSWORD PUZZLE

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Once an octogenarian hesitated over the last entry in a crossword puzzle.

Not that there was any doubt about what to write. The clue wasn't a particularly clever or taxing one by comparison with those for the blanks already filled. In fact, the satisfaction one might have felt at completing the puzzle faded in a feeling the end of it wasn't worthy of the rest, was almost a denial of the knowledge needed to reach this point.

The octogenarian looked up from the puzzle and around at the tables neatly arranged in the dining hall of the retirement home. Four to a group, the other residents sat waiting for their lunch as plates heaped with steaming meat and potatoes were carried out from the kitchen.

What possessed the management to serve up such heavy fare in the middle of the day? Did they really suppose an aging stomach could do much more than churn this load around during a long afternoon nap? Or was that the intention in sending them all tottering back to their rooms like bloated cattle: bed them down for a while so they'd cause no problems until sing-along time with the activities director at three?

Who among them would have believed that all the pledges made to oneself in a lifetime and all one's efforts to fulfill them would come to this? Family, country, profession, any sense of what life promised or should promise, how could all of these have led to bingo in the mornings and loudspeaker reminders about blood pressure in the afternoon?

The octogenarian looked down again at the crossword puzzle. The block letters filling the boxes had a solidness that rivaled the darkened squares that bordered them. Each had been set down with assurance, all the references to history, the arts, science, popular culture, sports, and so forth standing there as boldly as if the events or education they recalled happened yesterday rather than over so many, many years.

There was satisfaction in that, in the confirmation one had lived through times deserving of remembrance and had experienced or learned much of what was to be experienced and learned in their passing. Yet there also seemed a warning in these lines of neatly arranged letters. Their steady march across and down the page and backward through the past seemed in its way much like the cruel reduction to little old men and little old women that had trapped these retirees, in disregard for all they might have achieved or borne during their lives, here at these tables in the feeble bodies and minds of strangers.

Who among them wouldn't long to escape their current state and go back decades to declare, "This is who I am and always shall be"? But the only escape now led in the other direction. Residents vanished from the dining room every week, and yet the management never said why, as if the acknowledgement of death was the one thing the old must be spared. What nonsense. If the people sitting in this room weren't on a first name basis with the Grim Reaper already, who was? What they didn't deserve was the silent, squeamish pretense, after they'd gone, that they'd never been here at all: that life left nothing of significance to report about them, even their passing.

The octogenarian considered the last few empty boxes of the crossword, tapped the pen against lips that formed the missing letters, then looked around once more at the other diners in the room and laid the pen down, slowly but firmly.