Senile Ward

Beth Benson*
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Abstract

What do you want from me, old man? You take my hand, flat between the two of yours. Go ahead...
WHAT do you want from me, old man? You take my hand, flat between the two of yours. Go ahead. Press it hard if it helps. And so you do. Your hands are withered and so knotted — and cold, stiff with cold. I wonder what makes hands that cold. But I smile up at you from where I kneel by your chair and you slowly lean toward me, as if to confide something very important. Your eyes are wet beneath thick lids, and your mouth is heavy and putty-like, with crusty dried lines; and it smiles back, baring tartared teeth, and breathes of stale tobacco.

“My wife,” you say, “my wife. She’s coming to get me next month. Gonna take me home for good. Won’t that be something? You know what? You’re purty — jus’ like her. Mos’ beautiful li’l woman in the world. An’ she’s comin’ to get me tomorrow, take me home. I got a daughter — you know that? And she looks just like her — an’ I’m gonna go home and they’ll all be waiting there for me. And Virginia too. . . .”

Your voice trails off, as if you were entering a long cave and getting farther and farther from me all the time. Your eyes grow stupid; your hands, your knotted hands slide off
and hang limp and Raggedy-Andy-like at the end of your long, brittle expanses of arm.

"The ash grove, the-e ash grove, how . . ." The piano gives the old hymn a metallic flavor in its honky-tonk plink-planking, while the foot pedal sighs on alternate measures. A struggling chorus of young voices in the group huddled about the piano begins verse four.

"The ash grove, th-e ash grove/ alone is my home." One last note lingers. The pedal clings the full four beats and, wheezing with reluctance, exhausts itself and gives up. The pink-faced attendant in white applauds almost enthusiastically. His clapping bounces off the flat, yellowed walls of the room, hollow and small as a faint echo in a cavern that returns to surround its maker and bombard his ear-drums with waves of rebuking sound. And reverberate it does, white against a black, empty ground; and unnatural and intense silence governs, dominating somehow even the constancy of shufflings and hushed mutterings.

All around the room in the beds and chairs and walking are the Old Men, the caged and riddle-rid men of the poem, waiting, waiting . . .

And what do you wait for, old men? Where are these homes you tell me about and the beautiful women who are coming, always coming?

And you, my old man, you look at me, your eyes Nordic blue and clear. What do they see? You slump and then suddenly stiffen and search about as if you heard someone calling you. Now you smile at me once more, child-like, and your eyes are too bright and you cock your head coquettishly to one side. You seem about to speak again.

But the group is leaving, still singing, and I must hurry to go with them. "Good-bye, sir. Nice meeting you."

I do not look back as I leave.