The Truth About Old Age

In 1947, when I was 18 years old, I wrote my first story. At the time I never thought anything would come of it, it was just something to do. I ran away from home, you see, so I never really had any pressing matters like a job, or education. The world was my ‘oyster’, as they like to say. It is now the year 2015. I am 86 years old. I have 42 works published in my name, Agatha Rose, and the world is no longer my oyster.

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I can hear them talking behind me, my daughter, Maude, and the nurse. The nurse is pushing my wheelchair, while Maude walks alongside. Approaching the entrance, I look up. The name: ‘Aged Oaks Retirement and Nursing Home’. Ha, at least, they’re honest. Only the old and dying live here. We make it to a pair of doors. Maude walks around and opens them. Immediately we are hit with the smell. The “almost” dead (but not quite) smell that old people so often have. Inside is a long hallway leading down to a reception desk. Each wall is lined with a white bar, just above waist level. The building is old person-proofed. A smiling lady at the desk greets us: “Hello! Welcome to Aged Oaks Nursing Home,” she chimes cheerfully. I already don’t like her. Before she can say anything more, I get up and walk to the end of the hallway, leaving Maude to deal with my arrival.

In the center of this room is a makeshift jungle, with two hallways snaking around either side of it. To the left is the dining hall, some event rooms and to the right is a pair of elevators. I turn and walk down the left hallway. There are people eating in groups, in pairs and by themselves. A little community. “Your room is ready, Ms.” The nurse is behind me with my wheelchair. He wheels me down the right hallway towards the elevators. We go up to the fourth floor, turn right, then left, then down a hallway, stopping at the fifth door on the left. “Here we are,” Maude says. To the left of the door my name is printed on a plaque. I am already moved in.

Maude stays for an hour to help me settle in, and then quickly leaves. It’s only temporary of course - I will be out of here in a week when Maude realizes I don’t need a nursing home. There isn’t much to do but survey the small apartment. There is a small kitchen for the visitors I am expected to receive, and a cramped living room for sitting - just sitting - as there is no room for anything but a few chairs. Even more depressing is the bathroom, mechanisms of all sorts to help me bathe, and even some to help me relieve my bowels. The bedroom consists of just a bed, a vanity, and a dresser. It’s not even worth mentioning, as they will only be my bed, my dresser, and my vanity for a week. There’s no other possible outcome. Just the one where I go home to my small Brooklyn apartment in Prospect Heights.

I sit down in one of the three chairs. There is still nothing to do here. This darn hole can’t hold all of my belongings, so I am left with little entertainment. There are some books, but they are books I have already read, so I instead sit here until I fall asleep.

I’m awoken by a nurse knocking on my open door, checking to make sure all of the residents are in bed.

“It’ll be easier in the morning,” he says, looking at me sadly, like he knows how I feel in this moment. He helps me to my bedroom, tucking me into bed. “I’ll come by in the morning to check on you.”

He is in the hallway when I call out.

“What’s your name?”

“Nicholas.”

“Thank you, Nicholas.” With that, I close my eyes.

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Light streams in through the blinds behind my head, reflecting off my vanity mirror into my eyes. My joints feel achy. My vision blurry. Glasses, I have glasses. Turning over, I reach for them on my bedside table. Beside them is a picture of Maude when she was nine years old. She must’ve put it there before she left. I love that picture. She is my greatest pride. I had never accomplished something so great, not even my career. Enough nostalgia, it’s Wednesday today. Bingo day. Better get up, don’t wanna miss out. I walk over to my dresser. On top are some more pictures, but I don’t want to look at them now. Just six more days.

It takes me half an hour, but I manage to get myself dressed, without any help. And I don’t mean half an hour to decide on an outfit, but half an hour to put pants, a shirt, a sweater, and socks on. Sitting down at my vanity I look into the mirror. My hair has greyed, but still holds its shape. I pull it back into a bun, letting some of it fall free. Wrinkles litter my face, pulling at my eyes and lips, but it’s okay, I’ve accepted the loss of my youth. Without looking, I open the drawer beside me, reaching for a necklace. My hand hit something glass. It is a bottle of brandy – a beautiful bottle of Rémy Martin 1738 Accord Royal. My favourite. Maude must have left it for me as a present. It was my first drink as a teenager—my mother had an old bottle hidden in storage that her grandfather had given her—I had just finished writing my second story. The story of the wandering man, crossing the US border into Montana, broken and beaten down by the sun. It was published in a local newspaper in the short story section. It was my very first publication. I had never felt like a writer until that moment. Ever since, I drank one glass of that lucky brandy before sending my stories out to be published, and it never let me down. It ran out six years ago… I haven’t written anything since.

Nicholas knocks on the door: “Hello, Ms Rose,” he says cheerfully. “Would you like to go down to bingo today?”

“Yes, but first I’d like to tour the grounds.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?” He asks as if I have a choice. When you aren’t in your room, you have to have a nurse with you at all times.

There isn’t much to see. We stay in the west wings of the building so as not to disturb those in the nursing home. There’s a dining room, two multipurpose rooms, four event rooms, a game/entertainment room, and four levels of private rooms. They all look the same. The outdoors are much nicer. The greenhouse is my favourite. It reminds me of the one back home, just down the street from my apartment.

I decide to go to lunch instead of bingo. Just looking at the food makes me feel ill. I leave it untouched and go back up to my room. The lunchroom nurse follows me up to my room with the lunch and tells me I have to eat. This pisses me off, so I refuse to leave my room for the rest of the day. My control over my own life is slowly falling out of my grasp. It’s okay, only five more days.

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Nicholas comes by again the next day. I ignore him. So he leaves me alone until I have to eat, every four hours coming by to make sure that I’ve eaten. I spend every day like this until the day he stops coming.

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Saturday morning, I wake up bored of my protest. I go down to the front desk looking for Nicholas. They tell me today is his day off, and that he won’t be back until noon tomorrow. So I go back to my room. Only three days left.

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In the middle of the night, I wake up, my stomach is hurting. I didn’t eat anything the day before. The clock says it’s 3:00 a.m. I have two more days to go. Sluggishly, I drag myself down the hall to the kitchen. Maude had done some shopping for me when we first came, so there are some crackers and cheese. I’m on my way back to my room when my foot slips on the kitchen tiles. My legs go out from under me, my back hits the ground, the crackers crackling around me as they hit the floor. My breath is knocked out of me, and I lie wheezing, trying to get it back. I should call for help, but I don’t want it. If I can’t get up myself, then I’ll just have to lie here until I can.

The time takes forever to go by, leaving me to my thoughts. Just like in 1972. I had been travelling with a few fellow writers, looking for inspiration. We were stopped in New Mexico, out of money. I had a friend who was willing to let us stay with him until we got back on our feet. He was out of town on business trips most of the time, so we had the house to ourselves. Like now, there wasn’t much to do, but sit on our arses and think. We had finally slowed down, we had finally stopped moving. Pausing our search for inspiration forced us to think for a moment. We would laze around all day, writing about whatever first popped into our minds. It turned out to be the greatest inspiration we ever got. Two weeks later, we traveled home and never spoke to each other after that.

The nurses find me eventually, having noticed that I’m not answering the door. Nicholas is upset, asking why I hadn’t called for help. I ignore his question and instead tell him the story of my summer of 1972. The nurses put me on bedrest to make sure whatever I hurt has a chance to heal.

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Sunday and Monday fly by, and it’s finally Tuesday. Maude called yesterday to confirm she’d be coming today. I can barely contain my excitement. I tidy up my rooms, and put on a nice outfit. I want to show Maude that I’m capable. I want her to see that I’m fine to live on my own. The fall doesn’t help, but it only happened because of the stupid tiles. She’ll understand that. I wait in the greenhouse. I bring a notepad and pen with me. I’ve decided that I don’t need to write to publish anymore, or for anyone else’s pleasure. I can just write for myself now.

*… She left me here. She took my life away, and imprisoned me to the life of a patient. She took away my freedom and left me to suffer alone. As much as I am hurt by her, I can’t bear to do this alone. I beg for her return, but she is already gone, the door closing behind her. The time begins to tick away, taking me with it. My time is over. Now all that’s left is to wait for the final blow. I sit down, and close my eyes.* My pen trails off the page, ending the story. I often write about my fears, but I have nothing to fear now. Maude is here.

I go to greet her at the front desk, and walk her up to my room. Inside I make some earl gray tea. It’s her favourite. She doesn’t seem very pleased though. Actually, she seems nervous. But I dismiss it, it’s probably just work. Nicholas comes up to join us for a bit, chatting with Maude, the two exchanging stories about me. Eventually he leaves us alone to catch up with one another. Maude starts off with some small talk, but my patience is thin, so I get straight to the point.

“When am I coming home?” I ask, practically jumping out of my chair.

Maude looks confused for a moment. Not for long though, her look turns sad quickly. “Oh mom, you didn’t think—”

It hit me suddenly. She never had any intention to let me come home after the week. It was just a reassuring comment to get me to consider accepting this life, to tide me over long enough to eventually like it here.

“You never had any intention of letting me come home, did you?” I’m crying now. “You were never going to let me leave!”

“I’m—I’m sorry mom. I really am. I just—you can’t live alone anymore. You’re not capable of taking care of yourself anymore. I mean, this past week just proves it—”

“Don’t you dare say that. This past week proves nothing. This past week just proves how horribly unfit I am for this place,” I’m starting to lose it. “Please don’t leave me here. You can’t do this to me!”

“I shouldn’t have come—” She starts to get up.

“No—no, let’s just talk about it a bit more.” I put my hands out to stop her.

“I should’ve waited longer. This was a bad idea.” She gets up, placing her tea on the table, not hearing me.

“No,” I block her, “it’s my life. You can’t do this.”

“I love you, mom, I’m sorry,” she kisses me on the cheek and turns to go to the door.

“Please,” I beg her, catching her hand.

“Mom, don’t. You’re sick, and you need help that I can’t give you myself. Just please.”

She is grabbing her stuff now, backing away, out the door. I beg her. My eyes plead. Please don’t leave me here. Please don’t leave me. I still want to live. I still want to be known. No one will remember me. I don’t want to disappear. I still have the inspiration, clear as the days in New Mexico. I still have more to give to the world. But she just sheds a tear, looks down ashamed and walks away, trying to ignore my calls, the door slowly sweeping shut behind her. It is my time. Just like in my story. It is my time to sit and wait for the final blow. To let the time tick by. I was foolish to think I could escape time, to believe my writing was enough, to believe I was any different from her, from my character. But no, we all have the same ending, to die and be forgotten. Now it’s my turn. *My time is over. Now all that’s left is to wait for the final blow. I sit down and close my eyes.*

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