YOUNG AND OLD

Twenty-five years ago, in 1993, I was a junior Sociology major at Notre Dame University in Indiana. As part of my studies, I was required to briefly visit and write up an experience report on a juvenile women’s detention center, a juvenile men’s detention center, and an adult men’s prison. Later that same semester, I was sent to a senior retirement and assisted-living center to interview seven residents at random about their lives, past and present.

Both of the detention facilities -- as well as the prison -- were very depressing. The Indiana Girls School (Indianapolis, IN) was designed like a summer camp, with various small dormitories, a mess hall, a sports area, and a large brick administration center. But the interiors were run down, and the whole compound was surrounded by tall chain-link fences and security gates – all topped by wicked razor wire. All of the windows had steel bars. I was reminded of the P.O.W. movies Stalag 17 and The Great Escape! I and my fellow classmates were ushered into a large room with scattered cheap folding chairs and several worn-out tables. We each sat alone with four girls, ages 14-17. We were warned that the residents might try to lustfully touch our hands above or even our legs below the table, seeing as we were healthy 20-year-old males in our prime. If that occurred, we were to immediately alert the female guards, who would quickly intervene. The girls’ life stories were very sad – robbery, drug abuse, prostitution, etc. Most had been molested as children, either by family members or strangers. All had dropped out of school. Their physical appearances were shabby, their health habits poor. They badly wanted to get out of the facility! Plus their eyes sized me up, like a starving person fantasizing about a hot, full platter of food.

The Indiana Boys School (Plainfield, IN) was a similar kind of internment camp. The boys were tough, world-weary, sarcastic, and angry – even though none were yet eighteen years old. Some had scars from multiple fights and/or tattoos showing former gang affiliations. Most of the boys were either black or Hispanic, whereas most of the girls I had earlier interviewed in Indianapolis were Caucasian. They had no fathers around during their upbringing, and each seemed lost and unable to fit into normal society. Similar to the girls I had interviewed, all the boys had all dropped out of school. They had no job skills or interests other than crime and getting in trouble. Some expressed interest in joining the military, however, once they were of age and were released. Of course, whether they would be accepted or not would be another matter.

But the scariest venue we visited was the Indiana State Prison (Michigan City, IN). We were greeted by and briefed by the warden, Casey Wooster. We then asked and he answered our questions, before we were walked around the cell tiers by the armed guards. It was like feeding time at the zoo! The inmates were the dregs of humanity, animalistic and fatalistic. More than a few were lifers. I and my fellows were jeered at, with taunts like: “Hey college boy! I like your mouth.” Or “Lover, come on in and I’ll show you a good time.” We stayed walking out of arm’s reach from the cell bars, as the guards were at the ready with their night sticks, telling the inmates to shut up and behave. I tell you, everyone needs to see the inside of a real prison, as a deterrent to ever thinking about doing any crime, and then getting caught and sentenced to years inside a hell hole like the Indiana State Prison.

A few months later, I visited my senior center. I had never been inside one before. It was called Golden Oaks Community Living (South Bend, IN). I took my portable tape recorder and headed over there, a short distance from the Notre Dame campus.

The facility was bright and cheerily appointed, with an attractive central lobby featured comfy couches and arm chairs, a television, a grand piano, and a gas fireplace which was left on all day, regardless of the season. Plastic flowers were arranged in vases. Nearby was the dining room with tables for four, where three meals a day were served. Tea, coffee, and juice was also available 24/7, along with cookies and crackers. Residents could come and eat as they wished – alone or with others -- during the established hours. There was also a small library with assorted books, magazines, and newspapers. One room had two washers and two dryers, for those who still enjoyed doing their own laundry and who preferred not to pay an extra monthly fee for it. Another small room was set up as a kind of salon for a regular hair stylist/manicurist, who gave haircuts for both men and women, and did nails for the ladies, both for an extra fee. The standard cost for living at Golden Oaks was $1200/month. If you needed housing and care in the Assisted Living wing, however, the cost rose to $1850/month. This other wing was for very elderly and/or infirmed seniors who needed help dressing-feeding-bathing-moving themselves, or for those who had dementia. Either way, living here full-time was not cheap! Curiously, the whole building was locked tight at 10 p.m. every night until 7 a.m. the following morning. This, we were informed, was to protect any seniors from ‘wandering off’ unseen. Lastly, a specialized facility van took those needing transportation to weekly religious services or to those interested in (carefully chaperoned) periodic trips to the local shopping mall.

After a short meeting with the director, Cathy Lancaster, I was allowed to wander around and choose my seven subjects to interview. I noticed that once I left the formal front area of the facility and entered the hallways of the living quarters, the smell of adult diapers tweaked my nostrils. It was not unlike the odor of many babies with their talcum powder. Humans going ‘full circle,’ I ruefully mused. Next, I noticed dozens of residents either dozing in arm chairs, talking with their fellow residents in pairs, or simply staring off into space alone. I wondered what those sad souls were thinking about.

I ultimately chose the following people – four men and three women who appeared most willing and lively. Here are their names and their ages: Mike (70); Imogene (77); Beulah (86); Roy (73); R.J. (84); Fanny (81); and Hank (71). What follows are the transcriptions made from my tape recordings. I asked several questions in advance to each subject, then let them talk without any interruption from me, kind of like the format used by famed interviewer-author Studs Terkel (“Hard Times,” “Working,” et.al.)

Mike: “I was born in 1923 in Chicago. I remember the attack on Pearl Harbor. I joined the Navy in 1942. I was 19. Got shipped out right away to the Pacific. Fought the Japs at the Battle of Midway. I was a 0.50 caliber anti-aircraft gunner on the USS Minneapolis. The good old CA 35. She was a heavy cruiser, New Orleans-class. She had just fought in the Battle of Coral Sea before I got aboard. You know, Midway was a big turning point in the war. We kept hammering away at the little yellow bastards all the way until Truman dropped the Big Bombs in ’45. We had to blast them to rubble because they would have never surrendered. Crazy, tough fighters, those Nips. Anyway, I made to through the war with only a nasty shrapnel wound to my right leg. But a lot of my buddies were killed over there. War is a son of a bitch, young man. It’s brutal, it’s terrifying, it’s chaotic. We had to do it, though. We saved the world, you know? Knocked off both Japs and the Krauts. I’m proud to have been a part of it. When I finally got home, I got a job in the steel mills in Gary. Married a nice Italian girl, Gina, and had three kids. Worked for 33 years at the mill. We had a great union, with good benefits and a nice pension. But you know what? The company sold out to a Japanese firm – can you believe it, the same guys we fought tooth and nail in the war! -- so one day we were all ushered out and forced into early retirement. I was only 55. My buddies and I were shocked. The mill hired cheap, non-union workers, but couldn’t make it, so it closed for good a few years later. By this time, Gary had gone in the toilet, crime moved in in a big way, and white families fled as more blacks moved in, so Gina and I went back to Chicago. Found a nice bungalow on the East Side near the Indiana border. That was in 1978. We were happy there for ten years. We enjoyed the corner taverns, playing bingo at the neighborhood churches, and the Friday night fish-frys at the nearby mom & pop restaurants. Chicago was always politically corrupt, but the Democratic Machine always got the job done. I still remember the shock when Mayor Daley died in 1976, just before Christmas. It was as if God Himself died. Now his son, Ritchie, is mayor. They made sure that the potholes were fixed and any snow was plowed fast, and they kept crime in check. Remember the Democratic Convention in ’68? Old man Daley sure taught those long-haired hippie protesters the right end of the police baton, didn’t he? Well, Gina died in 1988 from a botched gall bladder surgery. The kids had all grown and left by then, so it was just me in the house. I was O.K. for a couple of years, until I hurt my back after falling on the ice one winter when I was shoveling out our driveway. It was never right again. Eventually, I had to have a wheelchair. My kids saw that I couldn’t get around alone anymore, so they talked me into moving here to Golden Oaks. Been here for about three years now. It’s alright – I mean the chow is good and all, and most of the staff is capable – but time sure drags here because there is nothing to do but sit, watch TV, eat, nap, maybe read the newspaper, then go to bed. There are a few other vets in here, and we like to gather and talk now and then, but it’s still lonely and depressing. Don’t hear much from my kids, I’m embarrassed to say. I guess they are too busy to think about their old man. I suppose I’d rather be back in my old house again, but those days ain’t coming back. So that’s about all I’ve got to say, young man.”

Imogene: “I was born in 1916 in Kokomo, but my father moved us to the town of Knox when he decided to try his luck being a farmer. Knox is the seat of Starke County, and the old 3-story stone courthouse is still there, from 1897. Pa got a good eight-acre piece of land right outside of town. I was one of eight children. Everybody had their own particular chores and work to do when us kids were not in school. We were never bored. We grew corn, and we had a rectangular side building with thirty laying hens. Ma had a garden too, beside the house, where she grew tomatoes, raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, and green beans. We had a pump for our water in the yard – no indoor plumbing – and an outhouse further away. Our neighbors down the gravel road had a dozen milk cows, so we would trade our produce and eggs for milk and butter. We never made our own cheese, however. Then there was a bakery in town – the owner’s name was Vicky -- that had the best bread and sweet rolls! I can still smell that shop. We would stop there after church every Sunday. I still remember the taste of our home-grown tomatoes, straight from Ma’s garden. And that sweet corn, slathered with butter and seasoned with salt! One of my chores was ‘candling’ the eggs in the hen house– holding each one up, one at a time, in front of a lit candle to make sure there was no baby chick embryo inside. Afterwards, Ma gently cleaned each egg, before putting them in their cardboard cartons. Our Beagle dog, Pal, kept harmful critters away from the chicken coop at night, and our two cats, Sleepy and Silly, were both good mousers and always earned their keep. It was a good time to be alive, I can tell you. We never locked our doors. Crime was unknown, other than a rare drunken bar fight in Knox, mostly between out-of-town strangers. Neighbor always helped neighbor in those days. Folks around had all emigrated from different places in Europe, but everyone was proud to be an American and they loved this country dearly. We listened to the radio for evening entertainment. Although I remember nothing about World War One, I do remember hearing about Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic, and Franklin Roosevelt’s voice encouraging people during the Great Depression. I got married in 1938. I was 22. Bert and I had four daughters. Pearl Harbor and World War Two? Oh my, yes. We had to get ration books for sugar, meat, gasoline, lard, and cooking oil. You traded a stamp for a specific item each month. Tin cans, steel, and rubber were recycled for the war effort. We had a Victory Garden, of course, like everyone else. Ma made her own fruit preserves and jams from our own berry bushes. My younger brother Frank enlisted but was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. It was just before Christmas in 1944. Oh how we cried! Did you know that 19,000 of our boys died in that battle? Yet just five months later, the war in Europe was over. I still miss Frank to this day. (She softly began to cry here, and quickly apologized for it.) Anyway, Bert died from a ruptured appendix around the same time I got Parkinson’s Disease. When I couldn’t manage the house alone anymore, we had to sell it and the girls moved me into Golden Oaks because it was not too far away. Been here for just over a year. My daughters live away in all parts of the country now. I might get a visit or two a year around the holidays, or a phone call on Mother’s Day or on my birthday. I’ve made a few new friends here, so I can’t complain. This place is not too bad. I’ve had a pretty good life compared to others, so that’s about all I’ve got to say for now.”

Beulah: “I was born in 1907 down in Brown County, so I’m really one of the old-timers, young fella! (She laughs.) Been here at Golden Oaks since 1987. Never married, so maybe that’s why I’ve lived so long. (Laughs again.) Now mind you, I had my share of courtin’ and canoodlin’, but when it came right down to it, all of the men I met were more interested in drinking and gambling and being lazy rather than being responsible workers or attentive to me, so I dropped them one after another as fast as they came down the pike. Finally, I plum gave up. I decided to become a nurse instead of a typical housewife. I went to the St. Elizabeth School of Nursing in Lafayette, then got a job at City Hospital in Indianapolis. Worked there for 42 good years. The stories I could tell you! Lives saved and lives lost. But you really want me to tell you what it is like to get old, right? Well, I’m going to tell you. Old age comes on you real slowly. That’s God’s gift. You start getting a pain here and a pain there every now and then. Gradually, it becomes an everyday expectation. Soon, it’s two or three various pains a day as the body continues its slow decline and is trying hard to repair itself. Your immune system weakens, so that any cold or flu or pneumonia you catch takes longer to recover. Same with a cut or a bruise or a broken bone. It takes more time to correct itself than when you were spry. Your skin gets dry and thinner so that it cuts and bruises easier. You get wrinkles. Your toenails thicken and are prone to turn yellow with nail fungus. Men lose muscle mass, go gray, then white, or their hair thins until they eventually go bald. Guys often get a pot belly too. Their prostate gland swells up, triggering the need for frequent urination, especially at night. Both sexes can put on the pounds, and both can lose bladder and bowel control, causing the need for adult diapers. The ladies suffer from loss of bone mass from lack of calcium, so some get rounded, caved-in shoulders or even a humped back as they shrink. Their breasts sag something awful too. Your hearing and vision slowly starts to go. Your taste buds lose their vigor, and your gums and teeth start to cause problems. Your digestion gets finicky and sluggish. Your joints, especially the knees and hips, start to ache as cartilage wears out. Many get arthritis in their fingers and hands. The arches in your feet flatten. You will need to take regular afternoon naps. Your sleep cycle goes seriously out of whack. Am I depressing you yet? (Laughs.) But don’t worry -- you are only twenty, young man. Exercise, don’t smoke, go light on the booze, and watch your diet and you’ll be fine until your late 70’s. Then you usually wind up getting some surgeries in your 80’s, like I did, but hopefully not any cancer or diabetes or senility or worse. When you get older, the doctors will often put you on many different kinds of medications, some with annoying side effects. But you know what? Then the doctors simply prescribe more drugs to deal with those side effects. It’s crazy! Anyway, what else can I tell you…oh yes…your short- term memory will definitely fade. You’ll forget a minute later what you were trying to remember! (Laughs again.) It’s almost comical sometimes. Everybody here laughs about, you know, their dreaded ‘Senior Moments.’ Yet, incredibly, your long-term memory stays with you, even tiny details. So does your libido. You have the same feelings and desires that you had when you were younger. Surprised? You know, I read the other day how some senior homes down in Florida have to keep their frisky inmates from climbing into bed with each other on the sly at night! (Chuckles.) Maybe something is in that Florida water! (I recall Beulah playfully tapped my knee.) So it’s not all gloom and doom, young fella. The Bible says there is a time and a season for everything. And nothing lives forever. So you simply make the best of things while you can. No sense moanin’ and groanin.’ Remember that classic Jimmy Stewart movie – “It’s a Wonderful Life” -- where the old man is on his front porch on a summer’s evening and he spies a young couple who are continually talking rather than kissing? So he says in disgust and wistfulness, ‘Aw...youth is wasted on the wrong people!’ It’s both funny and melancholic. I’ve also learned that 99% of the things you worry about throughout your life never happen. So my advice to you is don’t worry -- just grab life by the horns and give it a good shake, before your clock runs out.”

Roy: “I was born in 1920. Been here around two years so far, after I suffered a stroke. I especially hated to give up driving. Losing your independence, you know? And I miss being able to go outdoors whenever I want. We are so close to the Indiana Dunes and Lake Michigan and some great forest preserves, but they never take us anywhere. So I’m stuck. I wish I was still working too. It gives you a reason to look forward to each new day, to contribute to life beyond yourself. It’s funny how when you are younger and working how you fantasize about retirement and having nothing to do but relax. But when that day finally comes, it’s pleasant for maybe six months or so, but after that you are bored out of your mind. Nothing to do, you just putter around trying to fill your day any way you can. We seniors still have so much to offer, even if our bodies are old, but nobody wants to hear about it or do anything about it. Some cultures admire and revere their elders for their advice and experience and wisdom, but in modern America, not so much. We don’t contemplate aging or death very much as a society, even though it affects everyone eventually. Nowadays, we seniors get what I call the ‘warehouse treatment’, where we are shut away, more or less out of sight, in these retirement ‘communities.’ So I really appreciate that you have come to see me for a little while and listen to my story. Highlight of my day! (Laughs, gleefully slaps his hands together.) Well, let’s see…I was a sixth grade teacher in Terre Haute for 32 years. I was married, and we had two sons. My wife, Connie, died in 1990 from uterine cancer. After I retired, we had bought an RV and drove all around the country, even into Canada. Our favorite spots were the National Parks and the ocean coasts. So I’m glad we had that time together alone before she got sick. Now, you need to know that I’m not a very political person. I’m a quietly registered Independent, and I vote for the individual -- whether the candidate is Democrat, Republican, or Third Party. But I was surprised how seriously to the Left most of my teacher colleagues and administrators were! I was also surprised that our teacher’s unions – whether local, state or national – never endorsed anyone who was not a Democrat. At staff meetings when I was first hired, I politely questioned some of our more liberal district policies, proposing that we be more inclusive and tolerant of community members who might lean either conservative or independent. Of the twenty-two staff members, only two other male teachers and three other female teachers were open to my viewpoint. From that day on, however, the six of us were seen as ‘obstructionists’ and were made virtual pariahs! Led by our Principal, our ideas were quickly discounted, despite majority parental support from our classroom families. We sympathetic teachers privately dubbed our cadre the ‘Sensible Six’. Soon, subtle pressures were put upon us. We were socially ostracized by the others. The Principal made our daily life tense and uncomfortable. We were given the most ‘problem-prone’ students every year, whereas his cronies were given ‘dream’ students. The Principal always sided against us in any school dispute. When President Carter was succeeded by President Reagan in 1981 and I swapped out their portraits under my classroom American Flag, you’d think I put up Hitler’s picture! The Principal blew his stack when I refused to take Reagan’s picture down. I explained that it was not a partisan stand, but rather a patriotic example for the students for whomever was elected as leader of our nation. But I was even more hated by him after that. One year, he said that due to overcrowding in our classrooms and portables, I would need to have my class for the entire year on the open stage area of our school gym! I told him I would file a formal complaint with the District Superintendent. The Principal immediately backed down the next day, and a regular classroom was quickly found for me, through a blatantly suspicious ‘rearrangement.’ The Principal would also drop in during class lessons for unannounced ‘evaluations.’ While technically these were legal, only the Sensible Six were ever targeted. At recess time, I would often be slyly asked by the strolling Principal, ‘Thinking of transferring? I hear there is an opening at (such and such) school.’ Or he would acidly ask with a fake smile, ‘So…how many years until retirement for you?’ Thank God my other five teacher friends all supported me and each other. The Principal’s sycophants always backed him up at meetings, rubber-stamping any new, absurd ‘progressive’ proposal or program – ones which regularly failed after costing the district piles of money over just a year or two. Finally, one dramatic day, the Principal was abruptly escorted out of his office in the middle of the day by two police officers. He had been seen by witnesses molesting the genitals of a first-grade boy student in a school bathroom, lying that he was merely helping the child pull his pants up. The Principal’s cronies were stunned, then silent as they abandoned their support of him. Anyway, he was terminated after the scandal went public and he was convicted, though he was spared a prison sentence presumably through some backroom deal. He moved out of state with his devastated family. Soon, we got a new female Principal who was much more moderate and accepting of different points of view. The huge burden was finally lifted off my back! (Laughs.) When I think back on my teaching career, I have no regrets about my choosing the profession, for it offered wonderful, positive moments of teaching and learning. I was praised by the vast majority of my students and their parents over my 32 years, and I actually won several Indiana teaching awards. But the extra stress of dealing with those unsupportive colleagues and that terrible Principal probably affected my health in a negative way. Maybe even hastened my stroke, who knows? I still have bad dreams about it now and then. Anyway, I spend my time here at Golden Oaks reading history and biographies or listening to classic music. I’ve taken up charcoal sketching and watercolors too. Plus I watch the Andy Griffith Show and Leave It to Beaver on TV every morning. It’s my daily escape to an idealized past! By the way, one of my sons is a veterinarian in Wisconsin, and the other is a policeman in Ohio. Neither one had the ‘calling’ for a career in education.”

R.J. (Robert James): “I was born in 1909 in Kentucky. My family moved to Evansville when I was four. I got a lucky job in Chicago when I turned 20, just before the Great Depression hit. It was at the Zenith Radio Company. I stayed with them for 47 years. (I wasn’t called up during World War Two because all Zenith employees were considered crucial to the manufacturing of necessary Government electronics.) Zenith had introduced the first portable radio in 1924, and the first mass-produced AC (plug-in, non-battery) radio in 1926 – with push button tuning introduced the following year. Zenith was next involved in the budding market of car radios in the 1930’s, which was a new luxury feature. We had our faithful Model 460. It was a best seller at $59.95, which was a lot a money in those days! I started at Zenith as a warehouse worker, you know, loading and unloading, cleaning up. Then I moved to the assembly line at Plant #2. 1500 North Kostner Avenue was the address, I remember. After a few years, I was made a foreman there. Then they moved me upstairs to the ‘suit and tie’ world, first in sales, then in lower and finally middle management. Eventually we had five plants, all in the Chicago area, employing almost 7000 people. From radios, Zenith expanded into making televisions, beginning commercially in 1948. Did you know that we invented the first wireless TV remote control and also FM stereo? Our inventors and technicians were all top drawer. Our brand slogan was: ‘The quality goes in before the name goes on.” It was a thrilling time to be involved with Zenith, I can tell you. Like I say, I was lucky, having only a high school education myself and getting into the company in its early days. I had a fine career. As for being here at Golden Oaks, I had been a heavy smoker until my heart double-bypass six years ago, after my wife and our only daughter drowned in a boating accident the year before. (I recall him tearing up and sniffling here for a moment. Then he continued.) You bet I miss them. It’s awful being all alone. So here I am with the other ‘dinosaurs.’ Plus, almost all of my friends are either dead or infirmed like me. When I check the daily newspaper downstairs, I always go first to the obituaries, to see who croaked. It’s sad to see your favorite sports stars, TV personalities, and movie stars die off too. Thank God some are still alive with me. You asked me before we began taping our talk what I thought about religion and about life after death. Well, it’s funny – getting old brings some closer to their faith, while others move away from it. As for myself, I still believe in the Good Book. I love listening to Billy Graham preach. He has the true Spirit, make no mistake. I think I have lived a good, honest life, so I hope I’ll go to heaven and be with my wife and daughter. I’m not a perfect person, and I’ve make mistakes. But I tried my best, so I hope God has mercy on my soul when the time comes. As for where our country is headed, all I can say is that I’m a solid Republican. Protesting, whining, marching, and complaining is no substitute for good, old-fashioned hard work! Life has never been without problems. It’s not always fair. But you have to take the bad with the good. I believe that things improve over time by themselves. Each generation does better than the last. And, young man, be thankful every day that you were born in the United States of America, instead of being one of those unfortunates in India, or China, or Africa. I’ve seen some of those places on business trips, and you wouldn’t believe the poverty, hunger, and squalor. So those so-called ‘activists’ who would tear down our hard-earned morals and values and love of country should be rejected. And higher taxes for more give-away programs to the lazy should be rejected too. Remember Jimmy Carter? He said our country was in a ‘malaise.’ Now what kind of President would say something like that? During tough economic downturns, you need a cheerleader, not a doomsayer. Remember how the Iranians immediately released the Teheran U.S. Embassy hostages after their 444 days of captivity the very moment after Reagan was sworn-in? They knew he meant business. He led from strength! How I still love that man – his clear, steady voice, his strong bearing, his steadfast, unwavering confidence in America. ‘Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall,’ he demanded in Berlin. Remember that? And soon afterward, it did come down, as did the whole Soviet Union, and Communism along with it. All just a few years ago. Amazing…Now we have Clinton, even though Bush did a capable job and I voted for him to be re-elected. Didn’t care for Ross Perot – no political experience, which you really need -- but he is a smart businessman in his own right. There is something fishy about the whole Clinton family though, I think. His slippery wife with the Rose Law Firm back in corrupt Arkansas. The infidelity accusations by Jennifer Flowers against Bill. Did you see Bill and Hillary squirm during their recent interview on ’60 Minutes?’ Something bad is going on there, don’t you think? Plus, I simply can’t respect or trust a man nicknamed ‘Slick Willy.’ (Laughs.) Oh well, we’ll have to wait and see how his term turns out. Hope I’m still around! (Laughs again.) Thanks for listening to my ramblings, young man. Time for my nap now. Come back and visit me anytime.”

Fanny (Frances): (She excused herself and went briefly to her room, and returned with a pile of photographs.) I was born in 1912. My family came from Germany. (Shared their photo.) They sailed from Bremerhaven to New York, then took the New York Central train to Chicago. Pa got his first job in a foundry in Gary, but we eventually settled in Fort Wayne. My big claim to fame was being Prom Queen at my high school. I was beautiful! (She showed me her photo at age 18.) Don’t you think? I know, it’s hard to believe now, talking to a wrinkled old prune like me. (Laughs.) I took such good care of my skin, my hair, and my fingernails. Folks said I could have been on magazine covers and in fashion magazines. Some even said I should go to Hollywood and try out for the movies! Thank God I still have my photos, and my memories, and my wits about me. In the end, all of your possessions are worthless, except for your photographs. Nature can be cruel, I think, replacing our gorgeous bodies gradually until we are just a shrunken bag of bones. But I used to swim! Play tennis! I could dance until dawn! The boys swarmed around me like bees to flowers. I was the envy of many girls, and the prize to have a date with of many boys. Now, it’s just gone. Goodbye. I tell you, young fella, don’t waste any of your youth, because in the blink of an eye it’s over. Go on adventures, fall in love, sail the seven seas, make lots of friends, sing, laugh, eat-drink-be merry! You only get one spin on the Wheel of Life. I worked as an office secretary, typing and shorthand, for 6 years right out of school, then got married to a druggist, Mort, who owned his own pharmacy. We had a baby girl, but she was stillborn, and the doctor said no more children, so we had two dogs instead for company. I chose to stay at home as a housewife. Mort died of a bad heart valve condition in 1988, so here I am now at Golden Oaks, five years now. How I miss sewing, knitting, and quilting! My fingers are all curled up and stiff with arthritis. Useless. I can barely hold a spoon or a teacup. Pain meds up the kazoo. What will become of me? I also miss doing my own cooking and baking in my own kitchen at home. Oh, I made wonderful pies and fancy cakes from scratch, and breads and soups and casseroles and everything! Never needed to look at a recipe card either. My Ma taught me from memory. Mort bragged to everyone how much he enjoyed my meals. Now, there is nothing for me to do. Nothing. It’s like torture, you know? What am I saying…I’m silly…you DON’T know. Not yet, anyway. Not for a long, long time, so don’t dwell on the inevitable, sonny. Live it up! Be happy that you have boundless energy and a handsome, healthy body. I did too, once. What’s that old cemetery gravestone saying? Oh yes…I remember memorizing it. It goes something like this:

‘Reader beware as you pass by. As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be. Therefore, prepare to follow me.’

Simple words, but all true. So let me give you some parting advice. Think about those words sometimes, young man. Then heed them.”

Hank (Henry): “I was born in 1922. I and my twin brother, Harry, both joined the Muncie Fire Department right out of school. I remember it was together, on the same day -- September 15, 1941. We worked there for a few months until Pearl Harbor, then enlisted in the Army together too. The drill sergeant always got us mixed up, because we looked so much alike! (Laughs.) So he told me to grow my moustache, but ordered Harry to stay clean-shaven. That way he knew who to yell at. (Laughs again.) We shipped out and fought the Germans in France and Italy. The Army always kept us together in the same platoon. We were in southern Germany with the Rainbow Division fighting until V-E Day in May, 1945. Although we had some close calls, both Harry and I made it through the war without any serious wounds, much to our relief and the relief of our worried parents and our younger sister. Harry and I resumed our jobs at the fire department, once we safely got back to Muncie. But one day – October 4, 1948 -- I had to call in sick with the flu. Harry was inside a burning building on the second story with the other firemen that day when the floor gave way. He was one of two men killed that day. I always felt guilty that I wasn’t with him. Maybe it wouldn’t have happened, or maybe I could have saved him. (Hank took out his handkerchief at this point and wiped his eyes.) But I stayed with the department for another 23 years. I got an extra disability pension when I was later diagnosed with advanced emphysema. That’s why I have these breathing tubes in my nose, and an oxygen tank. I can hardly get around without pausing due to lack of breath. The doctors say that my lungs are badly scarred from breathing in all that smoke when I was on the job. Burning plastics, chemicals, rubber, asbestos, you name it. Did you know that most firefighters die 15 years earlier than most other occupations? Policemen die early too. Mostly, it’s the stress for them. Some have nervous breakdowns, become alcoholic, or even commit suicide. Talk about a brutal job. They should get double of what they’re paid. By the way, I never married, though I fell in love once. Her name was Rhonda, but I called her ‘Kitten.’ I still think about her. I wonder where she is, or even if she is still alive. Gorgeous girl. Anyway, I felt it would be unfair to any woman to have to worry herself sick during every shift I worked, wondering if I was coming back home alive or not. After I retired, I stayed at home with my parents until they died, then I moved in with my sister and her family until they decided that I was better off here at Golden Oaks. It’s alright, I suppose. Better to be stuck in here than being dead! (Laughs.) I do crossword puzzles to keep my mind active, and I like to watch Jeopardy! on TV every evening. I’m pretty good! I also like to pour over Reader’s Digest every month. Improve Your Word Power, you know? When I read the Bible, I go right to the Psalms. They bring me comfort and reassurance that The Man Upstairs cares about me. As for vivid historic memories, I remember when Armstrong first walked on the moon in 1969. That was a few years before you were born, young man. It was amazing! Americans felt so proud. President Kennedy kept his promise, even though he didn’t live to see it. You can probably guess that I’m a Democrat. I’m not ashamed to admit that I cried when both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated in ’68, just two months apart. I think Bobby was the best of the Kennedy boys. He loved everybody – white, black, Hispanic, Asian. He had lofty dreams for this country. Now we have Bill Clinton. He seems bright and charismatic. He’s young, with plenty of energy, and he gives inspiring speeches too. I hope he does well as our new President. Well, sonny, good luck with your Sociology project! I hope you get a good grade from your professor. It’s time for me to head off to the dining room now for lunch.”

That concluded my 1993 interviews of seven random seniors at Golden Oaks. It was a sobering experience. I learned about the ending years of life rather than those I was presently living as a young man. I also learned how life is constantly changing, and how that reality, in turn, changes us. In our final years, possessions are meaningless, and physical health and beauty abandon us. Memories of a vigorous life well-spent, as well as photographs, are the last things you have. I was reminded of my own parents, and how I noticed they were gradually getting older from when I was a kid. I especially remember my father playing his favorite LP record. It was called “Bookends,” by Simon & Garfunkel. The lyrics, from their song “Old Friends,” always unsettled me:

“…Can you imagine us years from today, sharing a park bench quietly? How terribly strange to be seventy…”

Later in the same song, the duo concluded:

“A time it was, and what a time it was, it was…a time of innocence, a time of confidences. Long ago it must be…I have a photograph. Preserve your memories. They’re all that’s left you.”

I think I am beginning to understand what the singers were saying. Yesterday, I turned 45 years old…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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