

## Glamorous

I turned my head and he was there, in the rocking chair next to me, on my front porch.

“Willard, are you going to do that after you’re dead?”

“What?”

“You know ‘what.’ Just show up out of nowhere.”

“You were sleeping,” he said, as if I’d insulted him.

“I very definitely was not sleeping, Willard.”

“You sleep all the time out here.”

“Correction: I review story ideas out here all the time. And write opening lines.”

“Uh huh,” he said, “If I were really gone from it all, I’d certainly think of better places to be than this neighborhood.”

“Now, what could be nicer than our neighborhood, Willard?”

“How about a beauty contest?”

“In your dreams, Willard. They’d never let you in. You have a permanent salacious leer painted across your countenance.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, whatever it means,” he said. “And it may interest you to know I enrolled Gladys in The Most Beautiful Lady Octogenarian Contest.”

Now this was intriguing news. More interesting than his usual complaining about his wife frittering away their retirement nest egg at the local Dollar Store.

I decided I should probe gently but deftly. Willard would surely be aware his spouse required a hefty investment, that she would need sprucing up before she glided out on that runway of broken dreams. A few more teeth, at least. Some more hair on top

would help, more than just a shave and a haircut down at Pete’s. And a beauty contest is probably the wrong event to be obvious about always presenting only one side of her face as she does around the neighborhood, often walking backward to do so. Gladys is still sensitive to the missing ear lobe O’Reilly’s dog tore off, although the red scar down the neck could be disguised with makeup. The earlobe itself would need professional plastic surgery. Willard’s attempts with chewing gum never really worked.

I did not want to be obvious with my concerns.

“I suppose,” I said, “getting ready for a beauty contest can entail some cost.”

“How do you figure?” Willard replied.

“Well, you know ... uh ... Gladys may want to get her hair done. And a new dress to wear, instead of that “I Love My Laxative” sweat shirt.”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” said the old guy.

“What about a new body brace to straighten her up, Willard?”

“Oh, I think we can get along by bending her old brace back into shape on the fence post.”

“What about travel, Willard.? Where’s the big event, Las Vegas?”

Willard looked sheepish.

“No, in my hometown.”

“That is still a bit of a distance, Willard.”

“Ain’t goin’,” he said

“Who’s not going, Willard. You are not going?”

“No need for either of us to go. It’s all done with pictures.”

“Huh!” was all I could think to say for a moment. Then I thought ... of course! What better way to conduct a beauty contest of aging daffodils. Through the mail! Why bother with lost old ladies who can’t remember why they got on the airplane or their cranky husbands who can’t find any event but the pole dancing in the bar? And this was no doubt why I hadn’t heard Willard complain about the cost of teeth and

hair and all the expensive beauty aids that make up supporting a glamorous woman like his 87 year old wife. He had no doubt discovered the least expensive solution to making Gladys glamorous ... Trick Photography! The simplest trick being to get Betty Lou down at the coffee shop to pose as Willard's wife for the photo session.

"Still," I said to Willard without waiting for him to speak, "incidental expenses can mount up."

"Sure," he said, "Any investment requires an initial outlay."

Willard's vocabulary doesn't ordinarily include these terms, so I was immediately suspicious about what he'd been reading.

"Oh, I get it," I said as I rocked back in the porch chair. "They come by and take pictures for a fee."

"Ain't no new picture taking needed," said Willard. "They have all they need from the yearbooks."

I let that remark hang in the air for a while.

"Willard," I said after a moment, "tell me what you've gotten yourself into now."

He shifted around in his chair and then said, rather quietly, "Well, you know me and the boys back home get arguing and bragging on the Internet forum we started, 'The Big Ones.'"

"Uh-huh," I offered.

"Albert is the town librarian now ... only 'cause he works for free ... and he suggested a ... well, a little wager."

"Wager, Willard?"

"Like a wager. More like a beauty contest, of course."

"Of course, Willard."

"Anyway, we all decided to kick in \$500 each for a \$10,000 pot."

"And ..." I said, expectantly.

"Bill Boron, the town mayor, was supposed to look up each of our wives in the 1940's yearbooks after we paid in our \$500. He'd choose the prettiest."

"What could possibly go wrong with that?" I said with the heaviest sarcasm I could muster.

"He went through all the yearbooks from the 40s and chose Betty Coutant. No one could argue with him. She was dead to rights the prettiest girl of the decade."

"But ..." I said, with even heavier sarcasm.

"Yeah, 'But' ..." said Willard, with a forlorn face.

"Let me guess, Willard. Betty wasn't married to any of The Big Ones."

"She wasn't married at all," he said. "She became a nun."

"So who got the money, Willard?"

"She did," said Willard. "She still runs an orphanage in Toledo, and she's pretty persuasive."

"You must feel blessed your money went to a good cause."

"I guess ..."

"But now you'll have to tell Gladys she won't be hob-knobbing with the Miss Universe girls."

"That's the only good part to this story," he said. "I never told Gladys nothing about it."

"That was smart," I said.

"Mostly nothing," he said. But now she's wondering why I straightened out her back brace on the fence post. She thinks I'm taking her out to the movies."

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