

Neat Trick

When I got off the phone this morning with Willard's wife, I knew I had the day's work cut out for me. She said I was the only friend who could get him to go to the optician. Only me and maybe a crow bar. "He listens to you," she said sweetly.

"Willard listens to no one," I replied.

"Yes," she said. "Well, aside from that...."

In his eighties, Willard still gets around very well. An hour or so later the old guy wandered down the road and came up on the porch as he does most mornings, joining me for his second cup of coffee. I wondered if he knew I'd been assigned to talk him into a pair of glasses, probably his first.

"Don't you ever do anything but sit out here on the porch?" he asked.

"I write," was my answer.

"You don't look like you're hard at it right now," he said. "Where's your pencil?"

"I have to think first," I replied.

"Yeah," he said, "I can understand that. When I used to mow the lawn, I had to figure out whether I wanted to go around the yard counter clockwise or clockwise. It depended on which way I went the week before, but I could never remember. So I always wrote down the direction every time I mowed. And stuck the note somewhere. I never remembered where."

"That's imbecilic," I said.

"Thanks," he replied, "I've always been pretty original. And when I forgot to write it down, I figured it best to go counter clockwise. I've always been a counter clockwise person."

"I can tell," I said.

"Yeah, it's helped me to find solutions that are not always apparent to the normal man."

"There's truth in there somewhere," I said.

"Course you have to always be tuned in and keep up with the literature," he said

"What literature?" I asked.

"The Farmer's Almanac," he said. "Should be a storm coming any time now."

I leaned forward in the old rattan rocking chair. "That's not what the weatherman said on television last night."

Willard sneered. "I've seen that kid. He's probably not a fan of age old wisdom."

"He's young," I said.

"I've got shoes older than him," said Willard.

I laughed. "You've got jokes older than him."

"I've found the wisdom of the ages is printed in that little Almanac," he said, "and I've read every bit of it. Did you know a red sunset tells us tomorrow will bring fair weather?"

"I think I heard that somewhere, yes," I replied

"And do you know how virgin olive oil loses its virginity?" he said.

I leaned back in my chair to signal my amazement. "My mother never told me."

"Mixing with the wrong olives," he replied.

"Your assiduousness is incredible," I said.

Willard's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"I've never told anyone about that. You been talking to my doctor?"

"Of course not, Willard," I said, "I meant your stick-to-it-ive-ness."

"That cleared up, too, right after he gave me the medicine," said Willard.

"Can you hear all right, Willard?" I said.

"Just fine," he said. "Nothin' wrong here." But he pointed to his nose.

"And could you see perfectly," I asked, "when you tripped over the kitchen stool last night?"

"You've been talkin' to my Missus," he said.

"She called me," I said. "Thinks you ought to go see Old Johnny Four Eyes." Old Johnny is an optician and he's even older than Willard. He has what's left of his business upstairs over Rosario's Far East Lounge in town. The large sign in his window reads, "John Forrize, Optician. Things Are Looking Up!"

"I don't need glasses," Willard said.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "But two weeks ago when the kids came to visit, you thought their dog was your great grand daughter. You patted Rover on the head and called him Little Mary."

"I did wonder why Little Mary kept panting and bringing me the ball," he admitted.

"You asked her mother if the kid had asthma," I said to remind him.

"Yup, I'm a caring grandfather," he said.

"I'll take you to see Johnny at eleven. He's the pro. We'll let him decide if you need glasses."

I should have been suspicious when Willard didn't argue.

Johnny's little office is quite sparse. He's behind the times, and he once told me he wonders why business has dropped off over the years. He doesn't have an expensive line-up of the latest technology. There's no machine that resembles a submarine periscope, so you can't pretend you're hunting down enemy ships during an examination. Johnny makes a living with only a desk, an eye chart on the far wall and

a pair of half frames he sets on your nose. Into these he plops a variety of little lenses from his box of over 200 that he bought while in optician school in 1944. All the while the soft spoken old guy stares into your eyes like some long lost lover. He never married. He gives most people the creeps.

Old Johnny settled the special frames on Willard's nose and said, "See the eye chart over there, youngster?"

"Of course, I can. I'm not blind," said Willard.

"I meant would you please look at it. Would you read the letters on third line down?"

"I can read the line at the very bottom," Willard said. "It's F E L Z O L C F T D."

"On the very bottom?" said Johnny.

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" said Willard.

"Those are not the letters, Willard."

"Damnation," said Willard, "I'm tellin' you I'm reading F E L Z O L F T D as clear as reading the newspaper.

"Willard," Johnny said with exasperation, "The letters are B E D L F Z J K and L."

"Oh," said Willard, "you meant the *bottom* of the bottom lines."

Johnny began to form a knowing smile, but wiped it from his face. He stared at Willard for a long moment and then spoke.

"Count up five lines, please, and read that line for me.

"B E D L F Z J K L." said Willard

"Those are the letters on the bottom line," said Johnny.

"See?" said Willard, "I told you I could read the bottom line."

Johnny let out a long sigh. He got up and walked across the room. When he got to the far wall, he reached up and took the eye chart down. Another hung behind it.

"Now," said Johnny as he walked back to us, "please read the third line down on this chart."

"I can read the very bottom line on this chart, too," said Willard.

"Go ahead," said Johnny with another sigh, "go ahead and read the letters for us."

"L E F O D P C T," said Willard.

I strained my eyes to see the chart. Johnny didn't say anything, but instead looked out the window. He picked up a piece of paper from the desk as I began to move toward the chart so I could read the bottom line.

"Read 'em again, Willard," I said.

"L E F O D P C and T," he repeated.

I heard the paper crumple, as if Johnny mashed it into a ball.

"Willard," I said, "that's fantastic. Johnny, Willard can see the bottom line!"

"I guess he can," said Johnny,

"You won't be selling me glasses today, Johnny," said Willard.

"I'd say the joke's on me," said Johnny, and he made a perfect toss of the paper ball into a nearby waste basket.

On our way home, Willard appeared so pleased with himself that I hated to burst his bubble.

But finally I said, "I think I know how you did that, Willard."

"Did what?" he asked, sounding overly innocent.

"Memorized both eye charts," I said. "It just occurred to me you've taken your wife to Johnny for years."

"Not any more, but it's true he's always had just the two charts," said Willard.

"But why don't you want glasses," I said."

Willard let out a long wheezing breath. "Because I'm wearing contact lenses," he said.

"What?" I said. "Well, you certainly fooled me. And Johnny, too."

"Oh, I think Johnny could tell. I was just funnin' him. But you ... I knew I could fool you. Remember the time I had you convinced the pizza kid's car was a UFO?"

"It was a dark night, Willard. Did you get the contacts at the mall?" I asked.

"Yup," he said. "Can't trust Johnny's work anymore. He had the Missus seeing upside down last year till we made him fix her glasses. She still talks about the week she walked around on the ceiling."

"But wait a minute, Willard. You thought the dog was your great granddaughter," I said.

He laughed. "Not really. But her mother almost had a conniption when I asked why Little Mary was peeing on the lawn."

"But your wife says you can't see three feet in front of you," I said. "You trip over stuff."

"On purpose," he said. "While she's worrying about my eyesight, she's not asking me to clean up the shed or mow the lawn. I'm a free man as long as I'm as blind as a bat."

"Neat trick," I said, envious of his ability to pull it off.

"What?" he said.

"I said 'neat trick.' Can't you hear?"

"Maybe. I haven't decided yet. It depends."

"On what?" I asked, guessing the answer.

"On what I can get away with next," he said.

copyright David Griffin, 2013

The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

dave@windsweptpress.com