

Mutterings

by James Black

They're skimping on paper towels these days. You know that don't you? Making them thinner and thinner, but they charge you the same, or more. I'd use a plain ole towel to clean up this mess, but I have a hard enough time lugging just my clothes to the washer and dryer. I do my laundry down in the Center, where all the old folks go to put puzzles together and not talk to each other. Never thought I'd be so ashamed of people my own age.

This isn't a rest home, mind you, but a retirement "village," they call it. Looks like one of those old drive-up motels, only more spread out. It's what I can afford on my fixed income. At least I've got my own place still, and my own front door. If I had to fight stairs just to get outside, I might have to stay inside a lot more, and, well, that just wouldn't do.

My daughter Sharon helps me out when she can. She works three full days a week, so on Tuesday and Thursday she can come over if I need her to. And she's been running over here quite a bit lately. I keep falling down for some reason. The other day I was standing outside my front door telling Sharon about how I saw the site manager dumping trash out in the field. That man thinks he can put his crap anywhere he wants, thinks he owns this place, but he don't. I pointed to show her where he dumped it. Then I tipped right over. Had my cane in my hand, but down I went. Felt it coming, even, but couldn't stop it.

Sharon got all panicky. "Mother, are you all right?" She squawks that at me all the time. But, see, I went with the fall, let myself go once I felt it happening, 'cause if I hadn't I sure as anything would've broken my hip. So I laid there for a minute to make sure I didn't feel anything out of place. "Oo-ee, that was a good time," I told her, but she's losing her sense of humor lately. If she knew how often I fall when she's not around I'd probably have some nurse pestering me all the time.

Mrs. Van Steenis got herself a nurse. She's my left-side neighbor. That old woman's got to be senile or something. The other day she asked my daughter if I had a "thing about water." Sharon told her I didn't, but then came right in and asked me, "Mother, you got a thing about water?" See, the other night I was on my way to the bathroom and I guess the bulb in my night light burned out because I ran smack into the doorjamb. Tore my arm open where I bumped it, just like it was tissue paper. I was cleaning off my arm when I noticed I got blood on my pajamas; I had to take off my top and wash it out in the sink. The water couldn't've been on more than five, maybe ten minutes. So, my thing about water is that I don't hesitate to use it to clean up my messes. I'm sure I should just thank Mrs. Van Steenis for her concern. Why, as often as I catch her peeking in through my window blinds, she's bound to catch an eyeful of fun any day now.

I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't watch me land on my face a few minutes ago. I was bringing my plate back into the kitchen when the next thing I know I'm flying through the air. Guess the rug reached up and grabbed me by the foot. I bumped my head, that's all, and the bleeding's about stopped. Then maybe I can get the rest of the lunch I didn't eat off the floor before Sharon gets here. She'll have a healthy fit when she sees a bandage on my forehead. "Oh, Mother, you've got to be more careful," is what she'll say, just repeat it and repeat it, like that's going to make my rugs lay flat.

Damn, she's already here. Oh, wait, that's the phone. I've got so many bells ringing in my head right now I can't tell which is which. But it is Sharon, and she's not even on her way yet.

"I'm going to be late, Mom," she says. "Josh needs a few of the books he left here for one his graduate classes. I need to find them and get them sent today."

"How is my grandson? You know, honey, I just had a dream about him. I dreamed he visited me."

"He'd like to come visit if he weren't so busy."

"Yeah, he just showed up and said, 'Hey Grandma, let's go for a drive.' And you know me, I told him, 'Josh, I can't, I haven't done my hair today.'"

But he took my hand and led me out the door. I didn't even realize I was all dressed up in a white pants suit, which seemed weird since I don't own one. Of course, it was a dream. He took me to his car, held the door for me, and off we went out of my neighborhood into the countryside. I pointed out trees and Josh named them, just like I taught him when he was a boy. Then we came to a town along the highway. I knew I'd been there before.

Josh turned off onto a side road and kept making all sorts of turns like he was driving in a maze, but he seemed to know where he was going the whole time. He turned up the driveway of a white house and as we got closer I could see violets in the window boxes. Violets are my favorite, but for some reason I can't get them to grow in my apartment.

I got out of the car and was knocking on the door when I realized I was at the house where I grew up. My mother used to rock me to sleep on that very same porch when I was a baby. When I turned to tell Josh, he and the car had vanished.

The front door opened, and my gosh, if that wasn't Margaret standing right there, my youngest sister who passed away sixteen years ago, before any of the rest of my brothers or sisters did.

"How you been, Maggie?" I didn't know what else to say to a sister who's supposed to be dead and gone. She looked at me funny and I wondered if she was having trouble seeing me through the screen door. "It's me, Jane, your sister," I explained.

"That's not funny, lady. All my brothers and sisters are dead. You'll have to go."

"Oh, Maggie," I said and opened the door, pushing right past her into the house. In the living room, pictures of my mother and father set right where they always did, on the mantle. I walked into the kitchen and sat at our old table. I looked underneath and saw my initials still carved into one of the legs.

I felt right at home, but the lady of the house, who was the spitting image of my sister, I'd swear to it, repeated that she didn't know me, would I please leave.

"I'm sorry," was all I could say, and I walked out into the back yard to see the garden. It was overgrown and smelled like things were festering. Then I leaned over to pick up an overripe tomato that had plopped onto the ground, and I could feel I was about to tip over.

I want to tell Sharon about my dream, but of course she's stopped me before I can tell her anything more about it. She tells me she doesn't have time right now.

"Why don't you tell me about it when I get there?"

"Well, all right. That's fine. So you'll be here late this afternoon?"

"Actually, if I make it there today, it'll be more like this evening."

If? She's been coming every Tuesday and Thursday lately.

"Mom, are you still there?"

Of course I am. Where does she think I'd go?

"Are you okay? Do you need me to come over right now? Please answer me."

"I know you're busy."

"Mother, I'm sorry. If you need me to come over, I can."

"Tell Josh hello for me."

"Mother, I --"

"Bye dear."

Sometimes she can stretch out a simple good-bye until it drives you nuts. I mean, I know she's busy and, well, so am I.

