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CLOSE AS A DREAM STILL DREAMING

Joseph Crowley

THE LADIES of the old ladies' home sat on the porches during the noon hour right after lunch. The superior told them they could stay there all afternoon if they wished but that they should be very quiet and not disturb the others. They always promised yes they promised that they would sure they yes they said.

They were old women.

On Sundays most people took the car out and went for a nice long ride, looking at the homes of the rich, getting a vicarious thrill out of imagining themselves in the same home, forgetting the upkeep, the taxes to be paid. On Sunday most people did. They went for rides. The old ladies' home was on the edge of town. It was a big red brick building, completely and comfortably furnished and modernized. It was, some said, the finest building in the county. Others argued why old women should have such a wonderful castle to die in, with young people rotting in hovels. They called it something against the moral law. They said it shouldn't be, that old women should be turned loose and left to stray. They called that efficiency. Some said it didn't matter, that old women would die and rot no matter what happened.

But the simple two-bit people that went riding on Sundays never thought of such things. They thought of the nice ride they were having and the view they could have and the fresh air blowing in their eyes, hard and sandy.

Then, on Sunday, the people would turn their little cars off Howard Avenue and on to Bancroft Highway, leading to the country. Just before they hit the junction where four good streets came together, one going to Cleveland, another to Detroit, another to Chicago, and another to Columbus, they would see a beautiful brick building standing on the

corner, lonely and majestic. Kids would ask their fathers, "Hey, Pop, what's that there? That big building?"

Pop, grinning, saying, "That's the old ladies' home, Bill."

"Old ladies' home? What's the old ladies' home? What's that for?"

"For the old women, Bill," would the wife say brightly. "Don't ask so many questions."

"Aw-w," would say Bill.

But they always slowed down when they passed it, craning their necks to look and admire. Some of them couldn't understand why old helpless good-for-nothing women could get such a building as that. They just couldn't understand.

Ten hours, starting at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning and continuing till almost nine-thirty at night, a steady string of cars would pass the old ladies' home, crane necks, gawk, say ahhh, and admire and pass on. They couldn't understand.

They just couldn't.

The old ladies sat on the porch, resting. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon. There were a few visitors in the place. Not many, because some of the ladies had been complaining lately. Oh, nothing serious, but all the same they didn't feel so good and they didn't want any unnecessary excitement. It might be too bad. They had their own cemetery behind the building, a few square acres, shady in the summer and beautiful in the winter. It was a beautiful home for the ladies. It was only a hundred yards to the cemetery, safe delivery guaranteed.

Now the ladies sat, their birdy winks quick and flashing, happy and secure. All they had left, some of them, were themselves. Whole families gone and now poor. But they felt well. They couldn't kick. Some of the luckiest were the ones that kicked. Take that terrible Mrs. Haggart. She was always complaining. What if her son was killed in Spain? So what? A lot of their sons had been killed in the big war, but they didn't whine over it. They took it and then forgot it, but that Mrs. Haggart, ah, she was a bad one, yes, she was.

They sat quietly on the shady porch, some awkwardly talking and some gently sleeping. The superior was talking to a young married couple. No, their mother wasn't there. She was dead. Why had they come? "Just to look around," they said.

The superior was surprised.

"To look around?" she said.

"Yes," said the boy. "Florence here wants to make sure that if anything happens to me she'll have some place to stay."

The superior now was quite surprised.

"But your wife is young," she said, "and lovely."

The boy shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"Well," he said, "maybe we're just kidding. Maybe we were just curious . . . but say—you do have quite a place here. It's really all right."

"Yes," the superior smiled. "The ladies do have a very nice place—all the comforts of home." She laughed, but they did not laugh.

There was a silence; then the girl spoke up. "Tell me," she said, "is it really true that most of these women never got married? that they're old maids?"

"No," said the superior. "The ladies married and had families. Some of them were quite happy and then their families died."

"That's too bad."

"Yes," said the superior, brooding. She rose as they began to leave. "Please come back again," she said. "Glad to have you. The smile of youth, you know. Haha."

"We'll come back again," the boy promised. "Goodbye."

When they were gone the superior sat down and thought of something. It was strange, but as she thought she thought that something ugly and vicious had just come into her life. She didn't know what it was, but it was something both ugly and unnatural, something not right and like a disease. It was something clammy. She felt bad thinking of it.

Suddenly over her head and over the heads of all of them the low angry roar of a plane flying low could be heard. It startled all the ladies and even the superior. She got up and went out to the porch to calm the frightened women.

"It's all right, ladies," she said. "Just a plane."

The plane went away and returned, always flying low. Then they saw it and a lady gave a scream. She was very scared. She could not stand the sound or the sight of a plane. She was obsessed. Something was wrong with her.

At last, after circling low over the spot, over the very house it seemed

to them, the plane disappeared. They were quiet again. Then they began to talk, the birdy winks gone now.

"A disgrace!" said one woman.

"The very idea!" another said. "It was terrible! Sounded like it was going to come right in our backyard. Humph!"

The superior felt firm about it.

"Those young fools," she said. "They'll do anything for a thrill. I'll look into this, ladies. No planes are allowed to fly as low as that."

"It's terrible!" they all said. "Those young snots nowadays. I tell you. . . ."

The ladies were quite upset about it. The superior knew just where and whom to phone. She got busy right away and soon was talking to the head of a flying school located ten miles from the old ladies' home and at which three dozen young men were supposed to be in serious training for defense and preparedness. She told the gentleman just how she felt about it, and when she hung up she felt better and satisfied that she had told off a mere man once again.

Out at the flying field the head, Mr. Meyers, turned to his secretary and laughed.

"The old ladies' home," he explained. "Guess Harry must have given them quite a start. Good old Harry!"

"Scared them, eh?" said his pretty secretary, smiling. "About time something woke them up . . . but they've got a place out there, I tell you. It's like a castle."

Mr. Meyers nodded.

"Yes," he said seriously. "Spent nearly four hundred thousand dollars building a place like that and we're lucky to get enough to build a hangar out of wood."

Harry set the plane down gently and then went into the office.

"Hello, boss," he said. "Hiya, honey."

"Hello, Harry," they greeted him warmly. "You certainly scared those old dames in the home. One of them called up now and gave me a hell of a bawling out. Said you were nearly ready to bomb them!"

Harry laughed like hell. "Is that right?" he said.

"Yes," said Mr. Meyers. "Whoever it was, she was plenty sore. Lord! She must have thought you were going to dive right down on them, the noise you made."

"I was pretty low," Harry admitted.

Mr. Meyers waved a fat hand. "Forget about it," he said. "It don't mean anything."

But that night a strange new visitor came to the old ladies' home. He was tall and handsome and was grey-haired. He looked like a king or a general. The pretty nurses and the old ladies in wheelchairs gave him more than a second look when he stepped through the hall and up to the desk.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I'd like to talk to the lady who runs this place, the boss."

The nurse blushed at the way he grinned at her. "Just a minute," she said and leaned over and buzzed a buzzer, waited, and when a voice barked into the transmitter, she turned and said, "All right. You go down the hall there and turn right where it says Miss Bernhardt. That's the office."

Miss Bernhardt looked up and saw a dream of a man coming in to meet her. She sat open-mouthed and even when he spoke and said hello she did not say anything. He sat down and waited for her to speak. She did, finally. "What do you want?"

He grinned disarmingly. "I'm the chap that caused such a rumpus out here," he said. "I flew that plane you complained about."

"You?"

"Yes, and I came in especially to say how sorry I am for doing it and it won't happen again."

"I see," said Miss Bernhardt. "I see."

"Is it all right now?" he asked. "I mean—you'll accept my apology?"

She thought it all out. "Well," she said, "it's not quite so simple. Some of the ladies—"

"Yes?"

"Some of the ladies," she went on, "were really quite shocked and you know, Mr.— Mr.—"

"James," he said. "Harry Joseph James. Go on."

"Well, Mr. James," she went on, "some of the ladies were quite shocked, and you know that an old person can't stand things a younger one can. That's why I was so bitter over it. It's never happened before. This place was built especially in a secluded neighborhood so that there would be the least possibility of a strong noise or disturbance. Otherwise, I might have forgotten it."

He stood up suddenly. "Where are the ladies now?" he asked. "May I see them? I'd like to apologize to them personally."

"Of course," she said and went out with him into the hall.

Harry Joseph James met each and every one of the ladies in the old ladies' home and he shook hands with all of them and talked to them for several moments and apologized and was very friendly with them. He had perfect manners. With delicacy he approached them as though they were still young and beautiful. He flattered them. He made them feel wonderfully good, like a knight courting them in some old fairy tale. And when it was all over and he had seen all the old ladies and had said good-bye and goodnight to them, it was very late and already most of the ladies were sleeping. On their faces was a soft gentle smile, not a birdy smile of age and death, but a simple, beautiful smile. On all their faces, on all the old ladies who slept in the home.

And Miss Bernhardt, going around and opening all the doors, peering in, when she saw that, she felt the blindest, strongest urge in her life to cry. She didn't know why. She was merely another woman. Already she was forty-five. She had never been courted in her life, but something both bad and good had entered her life that day, and she didn't know what it was, or why it had come. All she knew was that when it had gone her life was barren without it, lost because of it. She didn't know why.

Then she came back into her own office and shut and locked the door. She went over and sprawled face downward on the desk and for no reason at all she began to cry, loudly and freely, crying the good cry, getting something out of her system. When it was over, she smoothed her hair, wiped her eyes dry, and then went to bed.

Like the others, there was a strange soft smile on Miss Bernhardt's face which had never been there before.