

Death in a Retirement Home

By Jean Shriver

I try to avoid hanging out with old people. But it's impossible to do when you live at the House of St. James. Actually the full name of this creepy place is The House of St. James, An Episcopal Home for the Aged. So naturally there are old people everywhere. Sitting in the lobby, hobbling into the dining room and clogging up the halls. You can't escape them.

An apartment door banged open and out rushed Mrs. Durling, possibly my worst favorite resident.

"Girl," she said, before putting a hand on her wide chest and having a wheezing fit. She was wearing what looked like flowered blue silk sheets sewn together to make an enormous tent. "See those boxes?" She waved a pudgy arm toward two boxes outside her door. "Your mother promised me the custodian would take them to my storage space in the cellar," She caught her breath and went on, "Today." Checking her diamond studded watch, "But it's five o'clock and they are still here."

"Oh?" I looked down at my boots, stalling for time. I didn't want to tell her Mom let old Angus Frieze leave early to see his wife in the hospital. "He ...he'll get them tomorrow morning." I said, hoping this was true. Angus was kind of fuzzy minded, but Mom didn't have the heart to fire him.

I tried to dodge around Mrs. Durling's wide body, but she moved sideways penning me in. "Tomorrow won't do. I'm expecting company tonight."

I couldn't stop myself from looking amazed. Mom and I had been living here for one miserable month and in that time Mrs. D had never had even one visitor. She barely spoke to other residents and every night sat alone at a table for four in the dining room.

Now she plucked at three strands of pearls peeking out from under her double chin. "And if those boxes aren't gone when she...er when my visitors get here, I will report your mother to the Board. This isn't the first time she's broken her word. As a manager she's deplorably inefficient."

Kindhearted isn't the same as inefficient, but I didn't say so. Poor Mom was terrified of losing this job. The House of St. James was the only place that had called her back during that terrible week in August when she stormed out of our house and filed for divorce. As you can guess living in an old folks' home is almost the worst thing that could happen to a high school junior. But for the ultimate in awful try living in a homeless shelter.

"Don't worry," I called edging past her and sprinting down the hall, "I'll take care of it."

Ten minutes later I had piled the two heavy boxes onto a dolly and was heading for the third floor elevator. The House of St. James was built as a millionaire's mansion in 1913. Just last year, it had been converted into a retirement home that held forty ancient residents. Though the oldies paid what Mom called a "small fortune" to live here, the penny pinching Board hadn't replaced the ancient elevator, which was probably put in when they built the house. I pushed back the criss cross metal gate and pulled the dolly into the tiny space. Opposite me on the paneled wall was a cloudy mirror in a fancy gold frame. The face in the mirror was white, the

eyes were wide and staring. Okay, I'll admit it. This place spooked me. Too far out in the country for one thing. Owls hooting at night and creaky floors. I'm your basic suburban teen. For sixteen years I'd shared a one story house with Mom, Dad and my sister Fern. We had white walls, a pool and neighbors. No attic and no cellar. Now, thanks to my randy dad, a doctor, who had to go and have affairs with not one, but two of his office nurses, I was about to get up close and personal with a lot of spiders. How I wished I was sitting on the couch in our apartment eating popcorn, watching TV and pretending I'd done all my homework. Instead I was on my way to the cellar to cover my mother's you-know-what.

When Mom discovered Dad was a cheater times two, she raced out of our home taking two suitcases and me. Like a sucker, she told Dad she'd only take support checks for me. Not a penny for herself. I heard her on the phone, "I know you think I'm just a ditsy housewife, Peter, but I can manage."

Actually ditsy housewife is a pretty good description of my mother. Like I'd have to admit people might say I was a ditsy teen. Dad and Fern are the brains in our family. Maybe it wasn't smart of me to ditch Dad and stick with Mom, but like I said, I'm not known for my high IQ.

The elevator stopped at the second floor. Our new desk clerk, Ernesto pulled back the gate and stepped in.

"Hey Jessy. How's it going?" His smile revealed a dimple in one smooth cheek. "What you got there?"

"Just taking some residents' boxes to the cellar." My face felt hot and I hoped I wasn't blushing. Ernesto wasn't really my type, but somehow around him, I always found myself acting flustered. Maybe because he kept giving me these long looks.

"Want some help?" His brown eyes checked me out. Then they checked me out again.

"I'm fine. Seriously." I asked, "Do I have a smudge on my face or something?"

"Sorry. Just thinking I've seen you somewhere. Do you go to Fontana High?"

"No, Ladera Heights."

He shook his head. "...not at school then." He wrinkled his forehead, then snapped his fingers. "I know. I bet you were on the Ladera team in the Knowledge Bowl last year."

"Me?" My laugh was sharp. "You got to be kidding?" I was lucky if I got a C in a class. Not that I cared.

Ernesto kept on staring. "But I'm sure I remember the name Coulter.."

That would be my sister Fern. She competed for Ladera last year, She's in college now."

Before I could ask Ernesto if he was a brainiac like Fern, the elevator stopped at the ground floor.

“Going up?” Hector Prideaux peered through the metal grate giving us his usual cheery smile. Sure, he had white hair, but otherwise he was totally different from the other old guys. His tanned face was smooth and he didn’t use a cane or a walker. Today he wore white shorts and a polo shirt and he carried a tennis racquet.

“No, sorry.” I smiled back. “I’m taking some things to the basement for Mrs. Durling.” I pointed to the boxes. Mr. Prideaux’ eyebrows went up like he sympathized.

Beyond him, I saw Mom standing in the lobby talking to a paunchy guy in a tan uniform. She looked worried. What now?

I pressed B and the elevator doors groaned shut. I turned toward Ernesto, who was biting his lip and frowning. “You don’t have to help me, you know. I may be short, but I’m stronger than I look.”

He didn’t answer, didn’t even seem to hear me.

The basement smelled damp. The stingy little ceiling light bulbs were almost useless. In the darkness, shadowy objects inside residents’ wire cages could have been lions and tigers or Frankenstein.

“What number?” Ernesto was pushing the dolly really fast, tapping his fingers on the handle like there was only a second left before he turned into Dracula.

Panting I said, “Thirty-nine. At the end.”

We passed rows of cages. A canoe paddle hung in one, a hat rack stood in another. Somebody had saved a big old fashioned baby carriage. Weird and kind of sad.

Finally, Ernesto stopped. “Here’s thirty-nine. You got the key?”

“Omigod, she didn’t give me one. Is it locked?”

“Yep. Big old padlock.” He started backing away.

“I...oh double damn, I’ll have to go back and get it.”

“Can’t wait,” Ernesto said, “...gotta go, Jessy. Sorry.” Almost running, he turned a corner and disappeared. All the lights went out.

“Ernesto!” My frantic screech got no answer.

Behind me, the elevator started clanking and groaning. Cautiously I took a few steps toward the sound. Then stopped, thinking I heard something or someone rustle in the darkness. “Who’s there?” I said, and it came out really shaky.

No answer. Just a soft padding sound that could be footsteps. My girlfriends used to tease me because I always turned the TV sound off if things got scary. Without spooky music and howling wind sounds I could watch the bad guy creep up on the girl without freaking out. But

right now I was hearing soft footsteps coming closer and closer and I had no Mute button. Stiff with fear, I reached for my phone and realized it was still upstairs in my backpack.

“Ernesto!” I yelled. No answer. “Please,” I said, “this isn’t funny...plea....”

A rush of air, then something heavy hit me on the head.