

Uncle Jake's World

By William Quincy Belle

Frank sat in an armchair in the far corner of the room and listened to Uncle Jake pee. Oddly enough, he hadn't thought about what Uncle Jake was doing. It was only after a few moments that it dawned on him his uncle had gone into the bathroom and left the door wide open. He was looking at Jake's back as Jake stood in front of the toilet. Normally people shut the door as urinating is considered something private; you don't take care of business in public. Was this different? Was it because Frank was family? Did Jake feel comfortable enough in front of Frank, another man, as if this was like taking a pee in the men's room with other guys around?

He looked around at what was essentially a bachelor apartment. It was a large room divided into areas, the bed off to one side and a couple of armchairs at one end arranged as a sitting area. There was a bathroom but the apartment was no more than a single room. But was the apartment the right word to use? In the context of this old folk's home, it would be difficult to say apartment as in his mind that denoted something separate and independent. Here, each resident took their meals in common dining areas, had their laundry done by an on-site service, and had all the minor details of everyday life taken care of for them by the complex.

The toilet flushed. Frank looked through the bathroom door and saw Uncle Jake hobble over to the sink to wash his hands. At 97 years of age, Jake was a surprise to still be alive never mind moving. Yes, he was slow. Yes, he couldn't walk far without assistance but he was still alive. When the doctors had diagnosed him with cancer, supposedly he had 6 months to live, one year tops. But here he was seven years later and still going like the Energizer Bunny. Even though the diagnosis of cancer was correct, it turned out that the cancer was developing at a snail's pace. Everybody was astonished, even the doctors, to see Jake still doing not too badly considering. Then again, what kind of a life was it?

Jake and Barb had been married for nearly 65 years when she succumbed to a heart

attack five years ago. The two of them had lived together in the old folks home for almost decade. Since then Jake had soldiered on alone. He had acquaintances he saw at mealtimes or the group he met for afternoon tea, but they weren't the same as his wife. Besides, over the past few years Jake had a new health issue to deal with, his eyes. A cataract in his left eye had left him pretty much incapable of seeing anything and in his right eye, he suffered from macular degeneration. While his peripheral vision was intact, he no longer could see anything in front of him. Frank wondered how Jake was getting along. What was Jake's life like if he couldn't see anything?

Frank glanced at the side table sitting next to the other armchair. The small device on the table was a talking book machine from the CNIB, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. They offered recordings of all sorts of books and their machine, nothing more than a CD player, was designed with large buttons and labels in Braille to assist the sightless. Jake still had a television but he couldn't watch it. Apparently Jake would listen to the news show 60 minutes because it consisted of a lot of talking but as a rule, Jake didn't watch TV, only listened to the radio. Jake used to have a computer but finally had to give it up. He could no longer see well enough to read email or surf the Net. It was a big decision but between his one eye with the cataract and his other eye with macular degeneration, there wasn't much else to do. Jake was pretty much blind.

Frank imagined living his life without sight. Having always been able to see, it would be a horrible loss. It would greatly reduce his quality for life that's for sure. He remembered a few years back visiting his optometrist when the doctor noticed something odd with the macula of one eye. It ended up the discoloration wasn't bad, but the doctor started him on an eye supplement called lutein. Supposedly this substance would help in reducing the possibility of macular degeneration and what a scary idea that was. He had asked the doctor what the condition was and the doctor finished his explanation of the macula in the eye by asking him to hold both fists up in front of his eyes. He went on to explain how the failure of the macula meant the middle part of one's field of vision goes black and all you could see is the periphery.

The doctor had Frank turn and look around the room with his fists up. That was a frightening prospect. He imagined it would also be frustrating. He could see it would be one thing to be blind, that is, seeing total blackness but to always be able to see the periphery and never being able to look directly at anything? That's frustration spelled d-a-m-n.

Jake shuffled out of the washroom and began to make his way back to his easy chair. He held onto the door frame and tentatively took a step. He reached out to the edge of a bureau and stepped again. Frank jumped up and came over to take Jake's arm.

"Here, Uncle Jake." Frank took one of his arms.

"I'm an old man," said Jake.

Frank gave a half-hearted smile. "You're doing fine, Uncle Jake." He realised his uncle had forgotten his fly. He also noticed that the front of his pants was stained. Since Jake couldn't see that well, he would from time to time spill food in his lap. Picking anything up from a plate of food required two hands, one for the fork and one to touch the food to ensure he had it on his utensil. Nevertheless, a shake of the hand meant something invariably fell off the fork. Sometimes Jake would spend the entire day his pants stained with that morning's breakfast.

The two of them slowly moved back to the easy chair. Jake turned around and bent over. He put both hands on the armrests and carefully lowered himself to the seat. Once in place, he wiggled to slide back in place.

"Thanks," said Jake.

"No problem." Frank sat down and looked at his uncle. "Ah, Uncle Jake?"

"Yes?"

"You left your fly open."

Jake reached down and began to fiddle with his zipper. "Thanks." He struggled a few times but pulled it up, not all the way up but good enough.

"I'm tired," Jake said.

"I'm sorry. Did you want to take a nap? I should leave." Frank noticed that Jake was looking at him but even though he knew that Jake's eyesight was bad, it still seemed as if Jake

was looking at him.

“No, I mean I’m tired of life.”

Frank looked at his uncle knowing where this was going.

“I’m tired. I’m in pain. My prospects are not good that this is ever going to get better but merely continue to get worse. I’m tired. I want to go.”

Frank watched Jake half turn toward a side table and put out one hand. He felt the table top and touched various objects until he identified the box of Kleenex. He pulled out a tissue and blew his nose. After wiping his nose several times, he blew his nose a second time then leaned over the side of the chair. He moved his hand around searching for the wastepaper basket. Certain his hand was over the basket, he let go of the tissue.

Frank watched the tissue fall on the floor. He reached out and used his thumb and index to pick up the tissue by one unused corner and drop it in the basket.

“I’m going to be 98 this year. I would advise you to go at 85. Don’t stick around any longer than that. I don’t think it’s worth it.”

Frank looked around the room. This is what happens. You get old; you go into a retirement complex and your life shrinks to the four walls of the old folks’ home. Seriously, what did Uncle Jake have to look forward to? Come to think about it, what would Frank have to look forward to?

Frank’s company had organised an information session on pensions and an expert from an insurance company walked everybody through the various options in preparing for one’s golden years. Most people were concerned about not having enough money to live, never mind having enough to travel. At the end of the session, there was a question and answer period. At one point, the expert asked everybody what their plans were for retirement. Frank put up his hand and said, “I am hoping to have an early and fatal heart attack.” His colleagues laughed but the expert looked at him like he might be nuts. Not everybody gets black humour.

Frank sighed. Maybe Jake was right. He didn’t relish the idea of seeing his life shrink to a room in a retirement complex. But other than that heart attack, he didn’t have much say in how

his life was going to turn out.

“A good night’s sleep and you’ll look at things differently,” Frank said. He sensed the lie in his own words.

“Nobody wants to talk about it.”

Frank looked at his uncle. “About what?”

“I said I’m tired and you dismiss it as if I’m in need of sleep. I’m tired of life. I’m tired of my life.”

Frank studied his uncle’s half-seeing eyes. He understood what his uncle was talking about, the quality of life versus the quantity of life. Jake was incontinent and had to wear diapers. Jake occasionally had mild seizures and soiled himself. At what point does anybody consider that life sucks and sucks royally and what the hell is the point of going on? But you weren’t allowed to end it yourself. Well, you weren’t supposed to but he wondered how many do. How many make that conscious decision to end their life early instead of spending the last years of their life in a diminished capacity or suffering from chronic pain?

“I don’t know what to say,” Frank said.

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’s just that sometimes...”

Frank leaned a little closer. His uncle spoke softly and Frank had to strain to hear him.

“Sometimes I feel really tired. And it’s depressing.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it from that perspective.”

Jake unseeing eyes looked at Frank. “Your turn will come. If you’re lucky, it will be over and done with quickly. No need in dragging things out.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Jake.”

“No need. It’s not your fault. It’s the way things work out. It’s the luck of the draw. I suppose I should be pleased I’ve outlived everybody, all my family and friends, but it’s hard. It’s lonely and, well, as you can see my health is anything but good. It gets me down once in a while. Maybe more often than not.”

Frank remained silent. What else could he say? How could you argue with your uncle

when you actually agreed with him? As some comedian said, if you hang in there long enough, eventually you'll die. Jake was hanging in long enough to beat the record.

Jake looked toward the door. "What time is it?"

"One thirty."

"Okay. If you don't mind, I think I'll lie down."

"Sure, no problem." Frank stood up. "Can I help you?"

"No. I'm going to make a phone call then go to bed." Jake held out his hand. "Listen, thanks for coming. Don't listen to the ramblings of an old man."

Frank shook his uncle's hand then leaned over to give him a hug. "It was good to see you. And thanks again for lunch."

Jake chuckled. "The complex took care of it all. I'm allowed a visitor to share a meal. I don't even have to pay."

"Well, thanks anyway." Frank walked to the door. "Do you want me to shut the door?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

Frank pulled on the door which released it from a magnetic clamp. He turned back to have one last look at his uncle. He fumbled with the phone trying to punch in a number.

Frank walked down the hall, crossed an open area and exited the building by the main entrance. He stood on the sidewalk blinking in the sunlight. He got out his clip-on sunglasses and got them fixed to his prescription glasses. He blinked again. That was better.

As he walked toward his car, he noticed the sounds of the outside: the rustle of the trees, chirping birds, the sound of traffic out in the road. Life was out here and life was alive. It seemed as if Uncle Jake's world was frozen in time, cut off from the regular world. It felt sort of artificial. It felt a little dead.

He was happy to get on his way, back to his own life. He felt sorry for Uncle Jake but he also wondered how he was going to handle it, getting old, having to go to a home, having to give up his regular life and his freedom. Sooner or later, it was going to happen. It was inevitable.

Writing Raw

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But not today.

The End

William Quincy Belle bio: William Quincy Belle is just a guy. Nobody famous; nobody rich; just some guy who likes to periodically add his two cents worth with the hope, accounting for inflation, that \$0.02 is not over-evaluating his contribution. He claims that at the heart of the writing process is some sort of (psychotic) urge to put it down on paper and likes to recite the following which so far he hasn't been able to attribute to anyone: "A writer is an egomaniac with low self-esteem." You will find Mr. Belle's unbridled stream of consciousness here (<http://wqebelle.blogspot.ca>) or @here (<https://twitter.com/wqebelle>).