

Golden Years

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In a dimly lit theater, crew members milled about the stage, getting ready for the curtain. I stood in the mezzanine in my crisp, white, way too large, Playhouse Square shirt and my black, work pants, watching them scatter. The crew members wore shirts and hoodies with a silhouette of Peter Pan on them. "Finding Neverland" was the show, based on the true story of Peter Pan's birth. It explored who "Peter" really was before James Barrie, the original writer of Peter Pan, immortalized him in his stage play and novel. Barrie met Peter and his four brothers playing in Kensington Park with their mother, Sylvia Davies. Barrie would later fall in love with Sylvia, and when she died of cancer, adopt her boys. Peter was seven years old when "Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up" hit the stage, and it followed him and his brothers throughout their lives. *They* were the boys who would never grow up, and Peter, the eponymous, spritely protagonist in a make-believe reality, suffered from alcoholism and disease in his adulthood. In April of 1960, when he was 63, he threw himself in front of a train in London's Sloane Square station. Newspapers filled London homes with headlines that proclaimed the death of Peter Pan.

An old woman in a red, usher's jacket shuffled into the mezz, obviously tired from the long walk up. She wore a painted gold name tag: Joan. The house lights added a glimmer to her dull gray hair as she sat on the carpet, shakily picking at the rubber folds on the stairs up farther and farther into the back of the theater. Joan kept repeating, "These are a hazard, someone could trip!" The other Redcoats turned away. "These are a hazard, someone could trip..." They brushed her off, senile. "She lives in her own little world", voices said. Joan sat for a few minutes, with a look on her face as if she wanted to get up, but couldn't just yet.

Joan-- Gift from God, God is gracious. People with this name are supposed to have "a deep inner need for quiet, and a desire to understand and analyze the world they live in, and to learn the deeper truths."

Joan was very small, an almost birdlike woman who, if caught in a wind, would float into the air and bob up and down forever. Her eyes seemed huge in her slender face. When she grinned, it was wide and vast. When she spoke, it was hoarse yet tender and could easily sing a crying infant to sleep. The other ushers paid absolutely no attention to the aunt, mother, sister, and wife leaning against the wall for support before them. I averted my eyes to avoid glaring at them, these women who couldn't have been younger than fifty, spitting on Joan as if she was an invalid, old news, a spider to squish. As if they didn't have the same grays on their head hidden under hair dye. They were repulsed by her and whispered how she was not qualified to stand where they stood. When she smiled at them or tried to make conversation, they ignored her like a stone that doesn't skip.

I was fifteen, a sophomore in high school, a student usher getting volunteer hours and getting to see the shows for free. After having no luck with the witches with dye-covered grays, Joan approached me and asked me how my week had been.

I have never been particularly good at communicating with old people. I always felt scared to look them in the eyes. Every conversation was trivial, filled with filler words, and thin smiles. My grandfather used to have puffy pink eyelids that oozed every now and then. His smile was missing a few yellow, yet straight teeth and his hands shook like a baby bird lost in snow. When he laughed, his whole body shook with tremors, a startling contrast to the sound of pure happiness that rattled the house. To me, old people always looked like they were in pain, and if you think about the process of aging, their body is decomposing; muscles and bones and brain matter are slowly going gray, turning soft and weak. And through all this, their soul keeps on, keeps fearing the inevitable, keeps them awake at night with aches, sharp pains, hunched backs, or broken hips. However, Joan's body had not forsaken her yet, and with each small, calculated step, she bubbled within. She shone like a bright, frantic lighthouse willing sailors back to shore.

How was my week? "Good, good!" I was in the middle of midterms, and slightly worried. I didn't like math that much. "Well, what subjects do you like?" Writing, reading, Spanish. Her sweet gray eyes got wide, and the wrinkles on her face collected in her cheeks showing a wide, sudden smile. "Do you like to write poems?" Yes. I love to, actually. She smiled so wide her cheeks folded into her face and she showed all her teeth. "Oh, I'm glad your school lets you be creative. I've heard a lot of uh..." she took a thin pause, "heard a lot of um, good, good things about your school." She grew up in Florida and every Friday in her primary school, they'd have a writing lab and you could write whatever creative piece you wanted and she loved it. She spoke slowly, carefully, and had some difficulty finding the right words. She smiled and laughed and had wild gray eyes, but oftentimes her lips and tongue and teeth just couldn't seem to snatch a word from the language she wrote and studied for years and years.

"So what else do you like to do?" Joan of Arc asked me. Her enormous smile had faded, but the lines on her face left the notion that she had smiled very wide very often in her life. I told her I loved acting and singing. Her eyes glistened. She was the oldest of nine, she said, and that whenever she bounced the babies, she sang to them. After a while though, she got bored with normal words so she sang anything that fit because, after all, the baby couldn't understand. We laughed and the lyrics of Finding Neverland swirled in my mind: *Play, play! Remember like it was yesterday. I was young and having fun, playing all my cares away.* "Had I been in any plays recently?" Yes! I had recently played Hermia in a *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She jumped at the name. She asked me if I found the language odd or unnatural. I was confused. I explained that while I was intimidated of it at first, it was only because I was a newbie. Once I figured out what everything meant, it felt extremely natural.

She asked if I was familiar with the monologue beginning with "to be or not to be." At that time, I wasn't. I didn't even know what play it was from. She began to smirk, and you could tell that just behind her eyes, she was reliving her golden years with brilliance and resplendent energy. "I will say it okay? And you can guess what you think I mean." Dull gray turned to sparkling silver, ashes turned to dust, and the divine words of Shakespeare washed over her eyes, cleaning the fog.

Of course, I now know that Hamlet is coping, deciding how to face the inevitability of his own death. Is life worth continuing despite the arrows in his back? *Who would bear the whips and scorns of time?* How will he be the master of his fate, the captain of his soul? How can he prove to himself, to what is left of his family, to Ophelia, that he is *Invictus*, unconquerable, undefeated? He ponders for 33 lines. And Joan?

Joan recited the whole monologue exactly verbatim. Joan, a 90-year-old woman who hobbled and picked at the Palace Theater floor, oldest of nine, a gift from God, performed for me. She gazed toward the house lights with wide eyes hiding behind knobby glasses and recited the whole damn thing. Her performance bounced off the walls and rippled like a dewdrop in a pond sending out larger and larger waves. I clapped, and the other ushers glared at me but oh God, did I clap. I remember hoping that I never forget this moment, so I wrote it down, but there is an aching puddle in the bottom of my stomach that reminds me- Joan may not remember who I am at all.