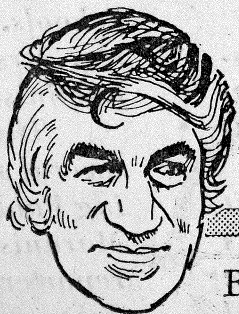


# The Splendor and Desperation of Age



BOOKS of  
the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

## Nobody Ever Died of Old Age

By Sharon R. Curtin, Atlantic-Little, Brown, 228 pages.

*"Old age is a hell of a long sentence with no time off for good behavior."*

— Grandfather Willy Curtin

The Eskimos once coped with the problem of aging by simply leaving their old people on the ice floes to be claimed by death and the great white bears.

This book will leave you with the haunting, blowing question: Is the way we abandon our old people in America really more humane than what the Eskimos did?

Sharon Curtin grew up in Wyoming surrounded by an "extended family" of long-lived Irishmen (and women) who never acted their ages, and who, as the phrase has it "swung a little."

There was Granddad Fred, a small, silent man, a cabinet maker and carpenter with a liking for strong drink who ignored all

the doctors' warnings until a truck hit him and knocked him into the old folks home at the age of 82.

There was Granddad's wife who had left him with the five children and taken off. A red haired swinger, who in her seventies had her foyer in San Diego dominated by a huge poster of ELVIS Presley.

And there was the philosophical Grandfather Willy. Three of her four grandparents "lived full, independent lives until they died suddenly" and Carrie, Grandfather Willy's wife, at the time of publication was still around at age 96, lighting candles and attending wakes.

She remembers Old Jim Crowe, back home, "regarding the aches and pains of his sixty-nine year old body as just another dividend from a punishing Scotch-Presbyterian deity."

Old Jim, she notes, is fairly typical of old people in the United States. The President's Council on Aging in 1963 drew a "profile" of a citizen over sixty-five:

- Probably not working and without adequate income.
- Without a high school education.
- Receives Social Security, but no private pension.
- Spends most of his or her income on housing.

It was Sharon Curtin's "debt to old people" that led her to spend two years from New York to California preparing this book.

By then a Registered Nurse, her marriage declared a disaster, "... I had lost a husband, two kids, a home and a dog so fast ... I felt just like the old people I was trying to understand. Sick and lonely and wondering if it was worth the trouble to take another breath."

She moves into a pensioners hotel to find old people, and of course, herself. She finds Harry and Al, drifters since the Depression, their days spent scurrying around the city, like chiggers under the skin of civilization.

"They lived by panhandling, petty thievery (mostly shoplifting) and occasionally taking a job ... for a buck an hour, a quarter kicked back."

Everything about Harry and Al — their faces, their bodies, their minds, their souls — is stunted and soiled.

"Harry and Al were professional survivors," Curtin tells us. "They reminded me of nothing more than a couple of antique cockroaches, those marvelous insects that no amount of civilization can kill ... but at what a price."

She writes of Aunt Jenny, a lady of seventy-two quiet summers, living in a spacious modern apartment in New York City within walking distance of museums, theaters and galleries. Her rooms are full of paintings, heavy antique silver, Victorian lamps, a baby grand piano.

"Things," says Aunt Jenny, "take a revenge of their own. They take up space, time, care, energy. The older I get, the more chained I feel by all this stuff. I don't need it. Maybe I never did. My ROLE required it; I didn't."

She writes of Letty the Bag Woman accepting the view that she was a welfare case, a Medicaid card, a victim to any petty criminal, existing on about the same level as cockroaches.

"These agencies," says Letty, "I figure they have to make it hard for you to get help so only really strong people or really stubborn people like me survive. All the rest die. Standing in line."

She writes of Mr. and Mrs. Vadiat out in California, both seventy-eight years old, Mrs. Vadiat bedridden and in a wheelchair for ten years, waited on hand and foot by her husband.

"I almost envied Mrs. Vadiat," the author says. "She had herself a real loving man, a man who would never give up. Never desert her. Even if she didn't know it, even if her brain was totally scrambled, he was satisfied to serve out a promise made long ago."

"He reminded me, 'In sickness and in health ...'"

She writes of nursing homes and the aides washing the elderly men and women.

"They might have been two sisters doing dishes, lift, scrub, rinse ..."

She writes of retirement villages where one gains admittance by saying, "Yes, I am old. Yes, I have nothing to do, just hours to fill ..."

There are now twenty million people in America over sixty-five and they no longer can work and pay their own way and society, for the most part, has abandoned them to the geriatric wards, the psychiatric wards, the pensioners "hotels", the lonely, lonely, living death of obsolescence.

Traditional roles for the aged have vanished. There are no quiet warm places by the fireplace to sit and watch your grandchildren play, no cracker barrels to sit upon and speak of times past. There is no security in old age.

That's why we isolate our aged. We fear them. They remind us of our mortality. They remind us that our turn is coming.

There is an old American folk tale about the Grandmother, who because of her trembling hands, occasionally dropped and broke a dish.

Her daughter angrily gave her a wooden bowl to save the family china.

The young granddaughter, observing this, asked why Granny had to eat from a wooden bowl.

"Because she is old," the mother said.

The child thought for a moment.

"Then you must save the bowl," she said, "for the time when you are old."

It is not surprising that a sensitive granddaughter has praise of old people and outrage at their loneliness. What is surprising is that such a young writer has written such a wise old book.

"Twenty million old people. They have been able to go from the era of the horse and buggy to hydrogen bombs and a man hopping around on the moon. Old, maybe, but not old fashioned. They know about things. How to do things, how things work, even who first did things. Anyone over sixty-five has a more modern mind than I do."

"If you are going to be stranded on a desert island, you better hope that at least one person in the group is plenty old, because the rest of us have learned very little about survival."