

Rhoda Elizabeth Playfair

ONE FOR THE MONEY

The thing to remember, Alice Webster told herself on the last Thursday morning of the month following her eighty-first birthday, was not to think about it. You weren't permitted to talk about it of course, nor were the others in the room to indicate in any way that this day was different from any other day. The staff was very firm about that. Rules were Rules.

She felt reasonably calm due to the tranquilizers she'd had at breakfast (there'd been some the night before too, Alice knew), the purpose of which was to keep her sedated and help her through until ten, at which time, said the Rules, she was to take the Walk. (Though scarcely anybody walked of course. They went on stretchers or in wheel chairs or on beds. The choice was left to the individual and Alice had said she'd walk.)

It was very difficult for her to walk because of her arthritis. Without her walker she couldn't take a step but in spite of the pain she'd forced herself to shuffle up and down the hall twice daily in an effort to keep from becoming bed-ridden. She would certainly walk today.

She looked toward Mrs. Smith's bed. Ordinarily Mrs. Smith, who was very frail and on the deaf side, would have exchanged some routine bits of conversation with her and the day would have gone on. This morning Mrs. Smith was sitting with her back to Alice, staring out the window.

Mrs. Evans, the room's third occupant, was senile. The clock on her bedside table said eight-thirty. Alice's own clock had fallen and broken its face six months ago and it hadn't seemed worthwhile to get it fixed. Mrs. Evans' clock wasn't always accurate though, so as a rule Alice asked Mrs. Smith when she wanted the time. Mrs. Smith wore a little gold watch that had been a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gift from her husband pinned to the front of her dress, and when Mrs. Webster asked her the time she grumbled. Alice didn't mind. She knew Mrs. Smith liked to be asked. It gave her a

reason for handling the little watch, for touching it, and smiling secretly at the memories behind its face. But this morning it wouldn't have seemed proper to ask.

The nurse who had helped Alice start dressing had laid her turquoise dress on the bed. It was Alice's best one, sent at Christmas as a gift from her daughter Martha. Martha sent dresses regularly at Christmas and on birthdays, though of course she hadn't sent one on the eighty-first because what would have been the sense?

The last hour and a half were going to be rough, Alice knew, tranquilizers or no tranquilizers. It she could just get a grip on herself! If she could just get through without a scene and go the way they liked you to go—the recommended way—which was simply, and without any fuss. It was good for morale when a patient went that way and the homes, Alice knew, worked hard at their morale ratings.

It was just so impossible to believe! On the one hand she'd known about it forever, but on the other her knowledge had been distant and kind of "some day" oriented. Not concerned with tomorrow! Not Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. . . . Not today!

But there was no getting around the system, Alice knew. It had been inaugurated years and years ago—back in the 70s actually, and it was practical. It had begun with considerable talk about over-population and under-facilities and steps having to be taken. Not much was done in the beginning other than to make abortions legal on demand which a great many people figured was the logical thing to do when you considered how many women had no interest in the life they cradled beyond a determination to destroy it.

Mrs. Webster's own daughter Martha had had two—one before she was married and one after. Alice had been terribly upset the first time and begged Martha to have the baby and put it out for adoption. She and Sam, Martha's father, had willingly offered to pay her expenses at one of the fashionable Hotels For Women where girls who, for various reasons, were "going through with it" could live out their sentence comfortably. But Martha had refused to go on the grounds that it was immoral to subject her body to a birth process she was not in sympathy with. Martha was fifteen at the time, an age which had recently been declared legal for decision making in most areas, so there was really nothing Alice and Sam could do.

The second time they had offered to take the baby themselves but Martha was adamant. She had one living child, a boy named Fred, and no desire for this second one. The idea of bringing it to maturity for the sake

of its grandparents was inconceivable. Sam and Alice were inconsiderate to ask.

But apart from Alice's misgivings over Martha's abortions in particular and the morality of the deed in general, the program was fantastically successful. Hundreds and hundreds were performed in the very first weeks once all the nonsense of making it necessary for a reliable board of physicians to acquiesce in the removal of the foetus (some doctors continued to refer to it as "destruction" but women's groups campaigned for the more euphemistic "removal") was circumvented.

One thing that could be said for the program was that it opened the way for a great many more reforms in the field of euthanasia. While they were a bit slow in coming at first, once the initial step (mercy-killing of elderly vegetable-type people with irreversible brain damage) had been taken, people began to see that a whole new era was opening up in the weeding out of undesirables.

Why, for instance, should age be the criterion of survival? Why not permit a young person who had suffered brain damage, at birth say, or in a car accident, or through a series of seizures of some sort, to go with dignity? And by the same line of reasoning, what about paralytics? The emotionally ill? The mentally retarded?

Unquestionably the population explosion and the fact that people were living much longer and putting a strain on the economy were responsible for the speed with which the idea caught on. It was during the 1980s (the actual date slipped Alice's notice as she and Sam were on a world cruise at the time) that the suggestion of setting a date, an actual time in years beyond which the chronically ill would not be permitted to survive, was brought forward. It met with considerable opposition at first but unfortunately, facts were facts. The economy was becoming top-heavy with old people who were not only non-productive but in need of care. Nursing homes and geriatric hospitals and chronic care institutions were over full and under staffed. Why not set a reasonable age limit beyond which care would no longer be extended to any patient? Ninety-five say, or ninety-six? The cessation of life would be painless with the use of modern drugs and wouldn't the whole thing be a kind of welcome relief for the elderly soon-to-be-dead anyway?

It was a hard-fought issue. To begin with, there was a considerable number among the legislators whose grandparents or even parents were approaching the proposed point-of-no-return and while populations certainly had to be limited, it was one thing, they reasoned, to put a paralytic painlessly to

sleep and quite another to do in grandmother. In the end it was the economics of the thing that was the deciding factor. A great many figures were quoted concerning gross national product, the welfare budget's percentage, and national health and hospital insurance costs, but what it finally boiled down to was the over ninety-fives had to go.

As it turned out, that wasn't a realistic figure, so that a year later it had to be revised to ninety-three, and on down to ninety the year after that.

At first this relieved the pressures on existing facilities tremendously because once the word got around, the sick and elderly endured almost any amount of suffering rather than book into an institution. But it was a temporary respite. Inevitably there came a point beyond which even the bravest could not carry on and with the passing of time public sentiment, calloused by years of greed and rationalization, accepted the situation matter-of-factly. What else was there to do?

Every year the number of the senile, the arthritic, the chronically ill from any number of crippling and disabling diseases that the research labs had found no cures for, as well as the simply fragile elderly, continued to swamp the facilities of existing institutions and those being built. There was nothing for it but to keep lowering the age limit. It stood now at eighty-one.

Which brought it to Alice's turn, among others. Two weeks ago she had turned eighty-one and this was the last Thursday in the month. The day had been set arbitrarily by a decision-making board whose members reasoned that Thursday would give the staff all day Friday to clean and disinfect the bed, dresser, and closet so that the incoming patient could be admitted on the weekend. The end of the month was fortuitous too as it meant no interruptions in the monthly bills submitted to various welfare agencies or, in rare but still existent cases, to the family or trust company of the patient involved.

Alice had been on welfare for three years although she had been a resident of the Sunny Dawn nursing home for seven. Her pension plus a few stocks and securities along with money from the sale of the house she and Sam had lived in for thirty-five years had kept her solvent for the first four. After that she had gone on welfare. She got twelve dollars a month spending money for herself plus her care at Sunny Dawn which she had considered satisfactory. Her material wants were few. What she really would have liked were some visitors.

Not that they didn't get visitors at the Sunny Dawn—carol singers at Christmas and bingo organizers through the week—but what Alice would have liked were some visitors of her own.

At first she had had a few elderly friends who like herself were becoming arthritic and finding it difficult to get around, but they had dropped off, one by one. Martha still flew out once a year when she took her vacation but what Alice wanted was a *friend*. Someone to come in regularly and bring her knitting or a bit of crochet work and just sit beside the bed and talk. She wouldn't even have to talk much, if she'd just listen and let Alice talk. There was nothing profound that Alice wanted to say but there was an ache inside her, a kind of deep yearning to talk about the years and things that had happened in them. The early years when she'd been a girl in Ontario and helped tend the fires for sugaring-off parties when it was maple sugar time. The years when Sam was with her and Martha had been young, with all their ups and downs in technicolor. The real years, beyond this twilight existence. She did talk with Mrs. Smith of course but it was the same with her. They each had stories of their own. That was what saddened Alice most. The lovely stories, reminiscences and laughter, locked away and crying to be shared.

Even today. Especially even today! The turquoise dress reminded her of Sam who had always loved her in turquoise and—she swallowed hard—it would be nice to talk to somebody of Sam. Though she was glad, for the first time in the thirteen years he had been gone, that he wasn't with her to see it. It would have been unbearable to have to say goodbye to Sam. Nobody ever said goodbye, of course, because it was against the Rules to talk of it at all (the notices were sent out afterwards) but everybody knew, and she had always shared with Sam. She would have said something for sure to Sam, and there would have been no way to endure it.

She felt terribly sorry for Mrs. Smith. Her turn was next month and her husband was alive. He was a few months younger and could still get around on crutches and manage by himself. He might last for a while. He came in every day and brought her flowers in season and sometimes, on seeing them, she'd cry. Their time was getting short and it was hard. Alice was fiercely grateful that she had been spared all that with Sam and there was a choking longing inside her to say something to Mrs. Smith. Some little thing so she would understand that Alice understood and not feel so alone. But all that was against the Rules. Besides, Alice knew very well she'd crack up if she tried.

She finished dressing. The turquoise dress had buttons up the front. Her dresses were all made that way so she could get them on. Her arms wouldn't lift above her head so there was no other way. She smoothed her hair and put the comb in back her grandson Fred had given her for Christmas.

There wasn't much else really. She glanced at Mrs. Evans' clock and carefully noted—half an hour to go.

She could either lie back on the bed or sit up in her chair. She could only sit for short periods of time because of the pain in her back but might this not be a good time to do it?

It was a strange thing, how she kept living out the details. All her life she had done this, on the theory that if she imagined something often enough she would be in control of the situation once it arrived. Sometimes it helped, sometimes it didn't. She hoped desperately that it was going to this time.

Mrs. Smith was still sitting with her back to Alice, staring out of the window. She seldom sat that way. As a matter of fact, Alice couldn't remember a time when she had sat that particular way, with her back completely turned. As a rule she faced Alice, wearing her gold watch like a badge, or sat at an angle so that she could include the view from the window with the view inside the room. She wished hopelessly that Mrs. Smith would turn around. Mrs. Evans was sitting quietly in her corner unravelling the tassel on the afghan across her knees and occasionally calling, "Nurse! Nurse!" in her high-pitched mindless voice but Mrs. Smith never wavered from her position. It was dreadful to have Mrs. Smith take it this way. In all her imaginings Alice had never thought of Mrs. Smith being upset. She had imagined everything else—what she would wear and how she would insist on walking down the hall herself, and what she would say to Miss Marten when she came for her—she just hadn't imagined how Mrs. Smith would feel. It threw her emotionally off balance to have this new factor introduced at the nth hour as it were. If Mrs. Smith was feeling badly and showing it, however was Alice going to manage? The whole thing, all her plans, depended on a tight control. A word, a touch, a *look* and even with the tranquilizers Alice knew she'd break like Humpty Dumpty.

In exactly—she consulted Mrs. Evans' clock once more—twenty-four minutes Miss Marten who was the matron and very efficient, would come in the door and suggest she come on down for a cup of tea. Tea, it was widely speculated, was the medium in which the lethal drug was concealed, but Alice didn't think so. A friend of hers whose daughter was married to a fellow who worked at a crematorium had told her once that the tea contained a preliminary knock-out drug that enabled the patient to be removed to a central base where the final whatever-it-was was administered. This made good sense to Alice. It simply wouldn't be practical for every hospital and home to main-

tain its own Slumber Room, as they were called. Still, nothing was known for certain.

She felt incredibly lonely. Her eyes slid around the spotless room where she had lived for seven years like a cutting from a plant stuck in water, whose every cell was programmed towards rooting in earth. She eyed the bed without a wrinkle. The curtains, hung in antiseptic pleats. The yellow daisies sterile on the bedside table top, their plastic faces mocking her that they the unreal would survive after the removal (it had a euphemistic ring) of Alice Webster had been completed.

Maybe the thing to do, thought Alice desperately, was *go*. The time was almost run out anyway. Miss Marten would be prompt. She was efficient and quite young—but all the girls were young. Only the young could work in geriatric centres now. The middle-aged had proven too emotional. There had to be a pattern with set Rules, and absolutely no emotion. The girls did very well and, with a few exceptions, so did the patients. To keep it tidy, was the current phrase. There was a kind of pride in it. A last grand gesture, so to speak.

She stood up trembling, and carefully balanced on her walker. She'd just start out. She'd never been much good at gestures anyway, and seeing Mrs. Smith so ramrod straight and staring at the same dwarf dahlias out beyond the window sill was just too much. She moved the walker forward. One step at a time.

"Oh—Mrs. Webster!"

It was Mrs. Smith. She hesitated. Absolutely no! She couldn't pause or say a word or even risk another glance if she were going to make it in one piece. But Mrs. Smith was standing up and pushing back her chair. And Mrs. Smith, incredibly, was crying.

"Don't!" Alice begged. "You know the Rules! We're not supposed to—"

"Rules!" Mrs. Smith said fiercely. "You know what they can do with Rules!"

It was a shock to Alice. Everyone knew the Rules were for their own protection because some of the patients had been known to break down during the last few days and once, right here in the Sunny Dawn, someone had succeeded in hanging herself—but these were extreme cases. No one deliberately provoked the situation or—

"I want you to have this," said Mrs. Smith. Her fingers trembled

crazily as she undid the small gold watch she had worn for thirty years and coming close to Alice, pinned it on the turquoise dress.

"You're giving it to *me*?"

"Yes, please."

"You shouldn't—" Alice said and then—she couldn't fight it any more—she leaned across her walker and kissed Mrs. Smith's tired cheek and they stood there crying together.

"It's beautiful," whispered Alice before her voice gave way entirely. And it was. Without being able to say so, Alice knew it was probably the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to her, and it didn't matter at all that she had never been able to say to Mrs. Smith the things she had wanted to say because now they had all been said.

"I'm going to walk with you!" Mrs. Smith wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater.

"Oh, would you?" said Alice longingly.

They could hear Miss Marten's footsteps in the hall and Miss Marten's fake-cheerful voice announcing, "Come now, girls, we mustn't have any of this, must we?" as she put her hand out to steady Mrs. Webster.

"Why mustn't we?" said Alice unexpectedly.

"Why?" said Miss Marten sharply. "Rules!"

"You know what you can do with Rules," said Alice rudely.

Miss Marten stared. The ladies didn't seem to notice.

"I'm ready," Alice said and blew her nose.

"I'm walking with you!" Mrs. Smith declared.

"You can't do that!" Miss Marten cried. "It's not allowed!"

"Poor thing," sighed Alice turning toward the corridor. She looked at Mrs. Smith, a brief, communicating look and put her right hand up to touch the watch. "How is she ever going to manage? How are any of them? Tell me!"