

reflections:

The Most Important

The reporters gathered around the old man, ready to ask questions. This old man was important for two reasons: he was an old man and and they were quietly but quickly dying off; and he was one of the dwindling survivors of the Boer War. War was prominent in the news, and it would be nice to get this old soldier's ideas. Surely he would have much to say about the many interesting things he had seen over a long lifetime. The changes which had taken place; the things he could tell about war (he had known it in its days of glory). At the bottom of each reporter's sheet of questions, although at the top of their mind, was the subject of the draft dodgers -- 'the yellow mass swarming over the border' as one news editor had put it. They could imagine some good headlines: "Boer War Veteran Denounces Draft Dodgers"; "Cowards All' Says Old Warrior" and, if they were especially lucky "Old Soldier Suffers Attack Discussing Draft Dodgers". Yes, the reporters were hopeful.

The old man, Mr. Evens, looked about at the reporters with a small smile. It was hard to tell if the smile was one of shyness, senility, or humour. The reporters decided to emphasize the fact that he was such an old man, and on this basis they would ask him what were the most striking or important things he had seen in his long life. In this manner it would not be hard to steer around to war, and Viet Nam, and the coward, bastard draft dodgers -- although, of course, they would not use those exact words.

"You've lived quite a long time, haven't you?" asked one reporter.

The old man smiled.

"And you've seen quite a lot, haven't you?" asked another reporter.

The old head gave a short nod, which was taken as a signal to continue.

"And in this time there have been some great events which remain vivid in your memory."

"Events?"

"The greatest thing?" He was talking to himself more than to those present, thinking aloud more than talking to himself. "The greatest thing that ever happened to me?" He gave a smile -- a sad/happy smile more eloquent than the choicest words. There was complete silence except for the whirr of the tape recorder.

"I was...was twenty-four I guess. Heh, one year doesn't mean much these days. I was working for the railway here, right here in Fredericton, yes, at the station. Hadn't been there long, but I was waiting for something a little better to come along. Oh, the pay wasn't bad, but I wanted better. Yea, wanted a little better. Heh, Well sir, one day the train came in and a woman got off. Only one off so she stood out, but mister, that woman would stand out in a crowd. Pretty girl, with the thickest, blackest, most beautiful hair you've ever seen. Black as night. Went all the way down her back and was tied with a purple ribbon. I'll never forget that, the deep black hair and the dark purple ribbon. Lord, never forget that. That first time. And -- heh heh -- and she came up to me (I was kind of standing and gawking) she came over and asked me where some place was that was way across the river. I said, ha ha, I said to her, 'Why that's way across the river.' She said 'Oh, dear,' and she looked so sad and worried, and I said 'Don't fret about it because I can take you there'. And she, oh Lord, she smiled a beautiful smile and said 'Would you?' Asked me if I would. Would I? Ha ha, ha ha. 'Sure I would, sure...just try to stop me', I said. Sure I would. And I did, and let me tell you I wasn't in any hurry either. It was a beautiful day, and we went to where she wanted to go. I asked her what her name was and she said 'Ellen'. Ellen. I said 'Ellen, that's a pretty name', and she smiled at me and said 'thank you'. Ellen. I said 'Ellen, that sure is a

pretty name' ... a real pretty name ... a pretty name ... a pretty ... Ellen ... oh my Ellen... my Ellen

"And when we got there I said, heh heh, I said 'If I can help you any more, just let me know.' And she said, with that beautiful smile she said, 'I would like someone to show me around the town.' And I said 'Any time, sure, any time, how about to-morrow?' And she said 'Oh no, not to-morrow, what about the next day?' And I said 'Sure, sure, that would be all right.' And I did. And, and ... after a while you know, she became my wife. My loving wife. And that was ... it was ... oh my God, I'll never forget her getting off that train. I'll never....."

The old man smiled, that strange smile on his face. The reporters looked at him, looked at each other, and numbed their thanks. The tape recorder was switched off.

"Yes Mr. Evens", prompted the only reporter present who had a tape recorder. "The greatest event which you have seen in the world. You know, the most important occurrences which have happened in your lifetime."

"Ah", sighed the old man. "My lifetime -- heh, that's quite a while."

"Yes yes, we know." said an impatient third reporter. "But if you would tell us the most...."

"What my colleague means", said the reporter with the tape recorder, "In his somewhat blunt manner is, which one occurrence, which most profound event stands out in your memory over all these years. Our readers would be interested to hear the views of a man of your age."

The old man looked puzzled. "One thing? Well, there have been a lot of things that...."



The impatient reporter became even more impatient. "But what was the most important event?"

"Well", the old man answered slowly. He closed his eyes and thought very deeply, he wanted to give an accurate answer. He sat this way for a long time, the reporters growing more and more impatient, and as he groped for the correct answer, they decided to help him.

"Take your time", said the reporter with the tape recorder, "And think of the many things you have seen. I suppose", he added, "That the Boer War of which you are one of the few survivors, must have had quite an effect on you."

"Eh", said the old man.

"Yes", eagerly continued another reporter. "You've seen a lot of wars -- World War One and Two, and Korea, and today there is Viet Nam."

"Not only that", added another reporter who felt they may be going too fast. "But you have seen a lot more; the Bomb, all this pollution, the death of many great men, the eras of Hitler and Stalin, the slaughter of the Jews."

"Eh?" Old Mr. Evens opened his eyes and looked around. It was apparent that he had heard very little of what was being said. His eyes were looking far away, and he was lost to his thoughts.

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