

## ***The Old Man Was Weird***

*by Jerry Waxman*

The old man was weird. I'm sorry, I don't mean any disrespect. He was just weird. He was always, I don't know . . . joyful. He didn't have any reason to be, from what I saw. But there he was, always grinning and happy like it was the best day in his life. Weird.

He showed up at all the events; weddings, bar mitzvahs, even my cousin's birthday party. He was like family, except nobody could say how he was related. Nobody remembered. He was like this forgotten fixture that you notice but you don't pay much attention to. He was always there. Always grinning.

He always brought a present when somebody was honored, like the bar mitzvah boy or the bride and groom.

You may be thinking, "So what? Everybody brings gifts."

Not the *same* gift every single time!

I'm not kidding. He gave me the same thing when I graduated from college as he had given me when I was 8 years old and just had my tonsils removed.

"That's the old man!" my father once told me, "You may not know this . But he gave me the same thing when I came back from the war.

'You came back. That's good! Here, I have a little something for ya. It's got answers, it'll take your headaches away. Take care of your nightmares, too.'

"Then he gives me a book with no title on the cover. "

"Did you ever read it?" I asked my father.

"No, I never found the time. It's still around here, somewhere. Probably in storage."

The old man was at my wedding. I didn't even remember inviting him. But there he was, grinning and enjoying the music. He came over to us and this time he spoke to my new wife. But I could tell he was speaking to me too.

"Here, I have a little something for ya. It's got answers. You've got nothing to worry about, believe me. Everything's gonna be fine. You'll be rich if that's what you want. Here, take this and have a wonderful family."

That was a while back. I have no idea where my wife put that present. But I'm sure it's still around. We never throw away books. It's a rule in our house.

One time, I saw the old man when he wasn't grinning. In fact he had tears in his eyes.

My wife had found him. He was walking around like he was in shock and didn't know where he was. My wife brought him to our house and made him some tea. I sat down with him at the kitchen table.

"So, how are things?" I asked.

Silence. He just stared into blank space. It looked like he was staring at the newspaper on the table. So I inched it closer to him. But he didn't respond. He saw the paper, but he wasn't reading it.

"So, what do you think of the weather?" What else do you talk about with the old man?

He slowly raised his gaze. His saddened eyes gave me the answer loud and clear. "Are you kidding?"

He took a sip of tea. Then he sighed and rested his hand on the newspaper.

The top story was about the United States getting ready for war in the Persian Gulf. There was a side story about a terrorist event in Israel and some people were killed. And the rest of the front page had its usual stories about bickering and alleged scandals, and whatnot.

The old man finished his tea and went home. He never said what was bothering him so much. But obviously the newspaper didn't help. Weird.

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The day my son got married I wasn't in a good mood at all. I didn't care much for the bride, but that wasn't my business. I didn't understand a thing about his career goals - sweeping floors at a bar, but that wasn't my business either. Come to think of it, nothing was my business. Not even the wedding, itself, and I was paying for half of it.

Secretly or not so secretly, I always wanted that boy to be an architect, like me. I even got him some tools when he was a kid. But you know kids. Toys with batteries and space sounds, that's all they want.

Why was I thinking of that at my son's wedding? Somehow, as he was standing under the canopy, I had this vision - this feeling. He was going the wrong way and I wanted to stop it. All those tools and supplies I had gotten for him over the years, just sitting around collecting dust. He could be looking toward a great life if he had just tried them out. Ah, what the heck.

Then the old man comes in. Yeah, he's still around. And still weird. He comes in, grinning as usual. He joyfully moves his arms and head with the music like he's the only one there. Then, while we're all sitting, eating the most expensive fried chicken and french fries (Don't ask.) I've ever seen, the old man walks up to our table.

"Congratulations, congratulations!" he says to me and my wife. Then he turns to my son and his new bride. "Here, I have a little something for ya. It's got answers."

The old man pauses. "It's got answers," he begins again as he pulls his book up onto the table.

"Thanks, thanks a lot," my son says, while his wife is giving him a look that says, "What are we gonna do with a book?"

For the first time, the old man did not finish his speech. He looked at me, his smile starting to undo itself. I could see sadness in his eyes. He turned away and gazed at the crowd.

How many books had he given as presents throughout the years? All those people, all those events, all those ways they could need the magic in his book. And all those books lying in storage, never read, never glanced at. The grin came off our old friend as some realizations crept into his being. He walked out of the wedding.

The old man is still around. I haven't seen him since the wedding, but he is still around.

I wish I knew the end of this story. I wish I could say that after all the people saw the old man stop smiling, that something awakened in them. That when they went home, they found the books that they had received as presents. That they dusted them off and began to read them.

I wish I could say that people began to see changes in their lives, and everyone found peace with themselves, and all those other things the old man used to promise.

But I don't know how this story ends. Maybe you do. Weird.

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Feel free to give this book to friends and family.

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