

The Forgotten Hat

By

Timothy Fish

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The moment he opened the door, a buzzer sounded, letting everyone within earshot know that someone had opened the front door. Gene turned off the alarm by punching in the required numbers. 6, 7, 8, 9 was the sequence of numbers that he punched into the number pad that was hanging beside the door. The sequence had never changed in all the time that he had been going there, but that did not matter. A member of the staff had printed the correct sequence on a piece of paper and had posted it right above the number pad. That way, the staff need not be bothered with checking the alarm when it went off.

Gene walked down the short hallway. He walked by a couple of offices and the restrooms before he came to the common area. He quickly scanned the room looking for her. She was usually easy to spot, but she was not always in the common area. He did not see her at first. There were several people in the area. He scanned the area once more, thinking that he might have to look somewhere else, but then he spotted her. She was sitting, nearly hidden by a column, in the recessed area where the television was located. Gene started to make his way through the maze of tables and people. He knew several of these people and would have to stop and talk to some of them.

“How are you, Mrs. Flowers?” Gene asked one woman as he placed his hand gently on her arm. She had a blank look on her face when he approached her, but when she looked up and saw his face, she smiled brightly.

“I’m doing really well,” she said.

“It is good to hear that,” he said. “Has your son been to see you?”

“No, he never comes.”

“I thought he must have been here,” Gene said. “Someone brought you some new house shoes. And a new housecoat! Are you sure that he didn’t come for your birthday?”

“O, he came for my birthday, but that was months ago.”

“I thought you had a birthday yesterday,” Gene said.

“No, my birthday is July 23.”

“Today is July 24,” Gene told her. She gave him a blank stare.

“He just never comes to see me.”

“Maybe he will come someday soon.”

“He doesn’t like coming here, but that’s okay. I’m going to go home soon. He can visit me there.”

“Who would take care of you if you go home?” Gene asked.

“I can take care of myself. I lived by myself for twenty years after my husband died.”

“I know you did, but you aren’t a spring chicken anymore. Your son might not like it if you are living by yourself.”

“I don’t see what business it is of his.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see what happens,” Gene said.

He left Mrs. Flowers and continued walking across the room. He had not yet

reached the other side when a little old man in a wheelchair stopped him.

"I need to go pee," man said as loudly as he could. Gene tried to ignore him, but the man repeated, "I need to go pee!"

This time, the man grabbed Gene by the arm. Gene tried to pull free, but he only succeeded in dragging the little man, wheelchair and all, along with him.

"Take me to the bathroom! I need to go pee!" the old man kept yelling.

"Someone else will have to take you," Gene said and tried once more to get free.

The old man was persistent and while he held Gene with one arm, he began to swing at the old preacher with the other. It was all Gene could do to keep the other man from injuring him.

A couple of the workers saw what was going on and came to Gene's aid. One of the women held the man's right arm as the other pried his left hand free from Gene's arm.

"Now stop that!" one of the women said, as the little old man tried to bite her.

"Let go! You're hurting me!" the old man yelled.

"Stop trying to bite me," the woman said.

The two women finally managed to get Gene's arm out of the other man's grasp.

"We're sorry about this," one of the two said. "He gets this way sometimes. Are you hurt?"

"I'll live," Gene answered.

"I need to go pee!" the little old man yelled.

"We'll take care of that," one of the women said and began pushing his wheelchair out of the common area, most likely back to his room.

"Wee!" the man said as they went.

Once he was free of the old man, Gene was able to walk, unhindered, to the recessed area. There were only three people in this area. All of them were women and they all sat in wheelchairs. One of them was asleep in her chair. She was leaning so far forward in her chair that she would have fallen out if it had not been for the straps holding her in. One woman was peacefully watching television. The third woman had her chair turned with its back to the television and she seemed to be watching a show of a different kind. She kept looking off in the distance, past the wall that stood in the way and she kept pointing at things that other people could not see.

Gene went and stood in front of the woman who was watching the television. "How are you dear?" he asked.

"I don't know who you are," the woman said and looked at him with fear in her eyes.

"I'm Gene James," he told her.

"Really?" the woman said. "That is my husband's name."

"That's right," Gene said. "That is your husband's name. Don't you think I look a little like your husband?"

"Maybe a little," she said, the fear was beginning to leave her expression.

"Well I am your husband," Gene said.

"Of course you are," the woman said after looking at him again. Her face blushed. "I can't see very well in this light."

“Then let’s see if we can find some different light,” Gene said. “Let’s go down to your room and I’ll brush your hair for you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Evelyn said.

“No, but I want to,” he said.

“Does it look very bad?”

“It has looked better.”

The two of them left the common area and made their way toward her room. Gene walked slowly beside her as Evelyn pulled her wheelchair along with her feet. It took them a while to get to her room, but Gene was in no hurry.

When they reached the room, Gene went over to the nightstand and pulled out the hairbrush. He stroked his wife’s mangled hair with it. As he did, he told her about the things that were happening in the world outside.

“You might be seeing more of me,” Gene told her.

“O, how come?” she asked.

“We finally found a man to fill the position of associate pastor. He seems like a good guy. He just graduated from seminary. He is rock solid on doctrine. I told the deacons that he would make a good replacement for me when I step down.”

“You aren’t thinking about quitting very soon are you?” she asked.

“The two of us are getting pretty old,” Gene said. “It may be time for me to step aside and let a younger man take over.”

“You’re getting old, not me.”

“Ok, I’m getting old, but I think Wayne is a good choice. He is going to work with the youth too. We can pay him fulltime that way.”

“Does he have a family?”

“A wife and two kids.”

“That is good.”

Gene continued to stroke his wife’s hair, even after it was free of tangles. He finally stopped, planted a kiss on her cheek and then went to put the hairbrush away.

“What do you say about going outside to get some fresh air?” he asked his wife.

“That would be good. Is it cold outside?”

“No, it is a warm July morning. It is comfortable now, but it will be hot this afternoon.”

Gene left his hat lying on the bed. He knew that they would be in the shade and he would not need his hat to protect the top of his head from the rays of the sun. He, once again, walked beside his wife as they went toward the exit that would give them access to the small courtyard.

The courtyard was not empty, but the only other people there were an old man in a wheelchair and his daughter. The old man had fallen asleep and his daughter was sitting beside him reading a book. Gene sat on one of the park benches that sat next to the small fountain. His wife sat near him.

“Read to me,” his wife requested.

Gene pulled out the small Bible that he carried in his pocket, turned to the place where he had left off reading the day before and began to read aloud. Page after page he read for several minutes and then he stopped, marked the place and put his Bible away.

“How is everyone at church?” Evelyn asked.

"They are fine," Gene said. "If you are feeling up to it, I'll try to take you on Sunday."

"That would be nice," she said.

"Then you can meet our new associate pastor and his family."

"What are their names?"

"His name is Wayne Hiller and his wife's name is Tiffany."

"What about the children? You did said they have children, didn't you?"

"Yes, they have children, but I can't remember their names. I think is it Jason and—no, that isn't right—it is Justin and Rachel."

"You'll be in here before you know it," she said.

"I probably ought to be in here anyway, so one of these men in here doesn't run off with my wife."

"I've put up with you this long; I'm not looking for anyone else."

"The kids will be here in couple of weeks," Gene said.

"Whose kids?"

"Our kids," Gene said.

"That will be nice," she said. "I'll probably forget between now and then. My memory is so bad sometimes."

"I know," Gene said, "but I'll remind you."

"It is getting warm out here," Evelyn said.

"Are you ready to go back inside?"

"Yes," she said.

"I can't stay much longer," Gene said. "I need to get over to church and at least pretend to be a pastor."

"That is what your associate is for," she said.

"That is part of the reason that I need to get over there. I told him that I would meet with him this morning."

"Don't let me keep you."

"I'll walk you back inside."

Gene opened the door and the two of them went back inside. He walked with his wife as they made their way down the corridor. All around them were other people who were wheeling themselves around the building with their feet. Many of them seemed to understand very little about their situation. Many of them seldom had visits from their families. They were not like Evelyn, who had a visitor at least once a day.

Gene and Evelyn walked all the way back to her room. Before he left, Gene made a list of some things that he needed to bring for his wife. A new pair of shoes was at the top of the list. The ones she wore were starting to show the evidence of her using them to pull her wheelchair bound body through the building.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Gene said, then he bent down and kissed his wife.

"I'll be looking forward to it," she said. "Have a good day."

He left her room and walked down the hall. No one stopped him this time. He walked past the nurse's station.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Mr. James," the woman at the desk said.

"I'll be here," he said.

Gene punched in the code for the door and opened it on the way out to his car. He stepped out into the sunlight and it beat down on his head.

“I forgot my hat,” he said aloud, but only the birds could hear him. He turned around and went back inside. He punched in the code again before he walked back the way he came.

“I forgot my hat,” he told the girl at the desk, when she gave him a questioning look. She only smiled.

He could still here the old man yelling, “I need to pee!” but it was quieter since he was strapped to his bed. Gene walked all the way back to his wife’s room. He could see his hat on the bed when he got to the door, but his wife was still in the room.

“Hello, dear,” he said. “I forgot my hat.”

“I don’t know who you are,” Evelyn said and looked at him with fear in her eyes.

“I’m Gene James,” he told her.

“Really?” Evelyn said. “That is my husband’s name.”



About the Story: This short story takes place in the same setting as the book *Searching for Mom* and the books that follow it. The main character in this story makes an appearance in the second book in the series.

About the Author: Timothy Fish is the author of both fiction and non-fiction books. Titles include *Church Website Design: A Step by Step Approach* and *Searching For Mom*. More information about the author and the books that he has available can be found on his website, <http://www.timothyfish.net>.