

## NONAGENARIAN MUSINGS

Who the hell is that guy I see standing there, framed in the hall mirror? Sunken cheeks, fleshy neck, little wisps of hair, body titled forward at the waist, a cane nearby –

I know goddamn well who it is. It's me, Kenny Green! – appalled at the sight of what's left of myself at ninety years and counting. . . .

Do you know the word for someone over ninety? It's "nonagenarian," and the dictionary says you split it up like this: "Non -a - ge - nar - ian." Frankly, I prefer "three score and thirty."

Let's face it, even in the old days, I wasn't handsome – jaw too prominent, nose a little crooked – but I must have given off some good vibes, because women didn't shy away. Now, when I ogle a pretty lady on the street – and that I do, the old libido of mine not being totally dormant – the look I get back telegraphs pity, not interest. I used to arouse their sexual drive – now I appeal to their caregiver instinct.

They say you live by the sword, you die by the sword. Something about me in my 30's attracted Jenny – and then, 25 years later, something about that asshole Bert must also have attracted her. . . . I still can't believe it – after two decades of marriage and a pair of kids, she takes off with Bertie boy. . . . Not that I was always pure in matters of the flesh, but I'll say this for myself – I always kept my flings in perspective. I loved Jenny, and then I hated her – and after she flew the coop, we mostly ignored each other. . . . Although I did feel some pangs a few years ago, when I heard she'd passed away.

Damn, I hate to say this, but it would be good to have Jenny – or at least some woman – to help me through the effing crisis I'm facing right now. There's no lady in my life – I never remarried and haven't had a serious relationship for the last fifteen years. I'm just living here alone in Philly – small apartment, walls closing in on me, stuff all over the floor, joints aching, nursing a cold, reading a book on the Great Depression, and eating Reuben sandwiches from the local deli . . . .



My two sisters died years ago. As for my children, well, that's a real bummer. Both my girls, Abby and Carla, were away in college when Jenny and I split. They took it hard – and even though their mother ran off with Bert, the girls somehow blamed me for the break-up. That was the spin Jenny put on the split, and they both swallowed it whole.

Carla ended up just disengaging herself – not only from me but from the entire civilized world. . . Wait a minute, I don't mean Carla, I mean Abby. What's wrong with me?. . . Abby moved up to a small town in Vermont, never married or had a live-in – there's some question about her sexuality – and knits woolen scarves to eke out a meager living. We haven't talked in the past 20 years. I send Abby a holiday card each December, but I've never had a response.

As for Carla, well, we've stayed in touch, but it hasn't been too fulfilling. She lives across the country in San Diego, runs some kind of charitable foundation, and is married to a big shot real estate guy who has no interest in Kenny Green, the small shot retired high school history teacher. They don't like to come to Philadelphia. Neither do their kids, who I've seen just a few times, when I made trips out west. Whatever they've shown toward me has been strictly dutiful, not loving.

My last phone call with Carla was earlier this week – let's see, it was on. . . uh, I think Tuesday. . . that's right, today's Wednesday, so it was yesterday. I called her at noon my time, nine in the morning at her end.

“Hi, Carla – I hope I'm not calling too early.”

“Hello, dad – no, as a matter of fact, I was just going out the door to a foundation meeting I'm chairing in an hour. What's up? How are you doing?”

“Not too well, I'm afraid.”

Carla gave one of those sighs that signify I've-heard-all-this-before. “Sorry to hear that. You've got to junk that Reuben sandwich diet – get some healthy vegetables into your system.”

I snorted at our standing joke. “Unfortunately, it’s a little more serious than brussel sprouts.”

“You do sound a little stuffed up with a cold. . . . Listen, dad, I want to hear all about what’s wrong, but this is just a bad time – I’ve got to get to that meeting. Can we speak later in the day?”

It wasn’t the first time I’d been dismayed by her lack of concern, but now I had something that needed to be said. “Please stay on the line for another minute, Carla. I’ve been short of breath and a little woozy lately, so I went in yesterday for a check-up. The doctor examined me and said I need to have triple bypass heart surgery. My condition is so bad, he said, that I should have it immediately – he would have scheduled it for today, except I have a cold, and he wanted my temperature to go down before opening me up. But I have to stay very quiet for the next few days – limit my activity, avoid the risk of any stress or excitement – and then I’ll be going in for the operation next Tuesday morning.”

For a few seconds there was silence from the other end of the line. Then Carla said, “Well, that certainly is more serious than brussel sprouts. But I know lots of people who have had the operation, and it seems to have worked out well for all of them.”

“Were any of those people over ninety?”

Another pause. “No, not that I recall, but – ”

“The doctor was very clear that the risk of an adverse result increases substantially with age. He still thinks I need to have it done right away to avoid the strong possibility of a heart attack – but he wanted me to know it definitely carried some real risk. . . .”

This time there was no pause. “That’s what doctors feel they have to say, dad – I wouldn’t be that concerned with all his caveats. Let’s see, next Tuesday – oh, you know I wish I could be with you when they operate, but next Wednesday is the big fund-raising gala my foundation is sponsoring, and I’m the mistress of ceremonies. I’ll try to get to New York later in the week, when you’re regaining your strength . . . . Now I really have to run – let’s plan to speak tonight. . . .”

Can you believe it? Her old man is going under the knife, may not survive the ordeal, and she'll be sipping Prosecco. . . . I'm like King Lear, but without even a Cordelia. . . Just an old fart, with creaking joints, a bum ticker, an inability to locate my possessions when I want them, and blowing my nose every five minutes.

And I knew in advance what Carla was going to tell me when we talked again that night – that for one reason or another, none of her kids could be there with me next Tuesday. And if I couldn't persuade Abby to come down from Vermont – which Carla knew damn well wasn't in the cards – maybe I could get one of my nieces or nephews who live on the East Coast to pay a visit. . . . Forget it – none of them gives a shit about their uncle, and Carla knows it.

Oh, hell, I've got to stop feeling sorry for myself. At least I've got my buddy, Harry. He's a mere child at 85, in pretty good health, widowed, and available. We go to movies and listen to jazz, we play backgammon for dollar stakes, and we eat Philly cheese steak and fried eggs at the Deluxe Diner once a week.

We used to do more ambitious stuff – like weekend trips on the bus to Atlantic City to shoot craps at a \$5 table we like – but that sort of thing has pretty much dried up in recent years, as my health and mobility declined. And our last junket – to the Philadelphia Art Museum, where we made like Rocky on the steps – was almost a disaster. Harry had to leave early, so I stayed alone to check out a new exhibit – but then it took me almost three hours to find my way home. Talk about being disoriented. . . .

Not that Harry ever stops suggesting good stuff – in fact, I had a call from him just yesterday morning.

“Hey, Kenny, how's your ass? What say we pop over to Atlantic City for the weekend and reclaim some of those funds we've left there in past years?”

I winced. “You know damn well, Harry, that there's nothing I'd rather do. But I've got a real problem just now – in fact, I was going to call today to tell you about it. . . .”

I filled Harry in on my upcoming surgery. Good friend that he is, he came over for lunch, bringing a Reuben sandwich he knows I crave. The doctor told me to stick to salad and vegetables pending the operation, but how could I resist.

“The condemned man eats a hearty final meal,” I said, biting into the Reuben with vigor.

Harry waggled his index finger at me. “I don’t want to hear any of that crap, Kenny. Sure, you’ve got an ordeal ahead of you, but you’ll get through it – gotta keep a positive attitude. . . .”

He was right, of course – and I’ve always been a guy who viewed the glass as half full – but I’m having trouble with this one. Lots of negativity creeping in – starting with that full-and-frank-disclosure doctor and his increased-risk-with-age analysis. . . . What would my favorite Greek philosopher, Epictetus, say about that? I know what he’d say – just focus on what you can control, like your *attitude* toward the surgery, and don’t worry about what you can’t control, like the surgery itself. . . .

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Now it’s nine o’ clock Thursday morning – just five days to go – and I’m lying here in bed, thinking of all the bad things that can happen. . . . Sorry about that, Epictetus.

In my earlier years, the minute my eyes opened in the morning, I’d pop out of bed, rarin’ to go, anxious to face the day. But in more recent times, I’ve relished staying in bed for an hour or so after waking – reading the paper or doing a crossword puzzle, wiggling my toes in the folds of the comfortable sheets.

Of late, though, the bed has become my worst nightmare at times. There’s something about lying flat that increases the pressure I feel in my nasal passages – especially with this cold I have now – and gives me a feeling of claustrophobia. The worst time is when I wake up in the middle of the night to take a leak, then have trouble getting back to sleep, with lots of intrusive thoughts coming to mind.

Last night was one of the worst. It started off with a dream. Out of nowhere, Abby called me on the phone. I asked her how come she was calling now after all these years. She said it was because she sensed something was wrong. When I told her about next week's bypass, she gasped and then said she was coming to Philly tomorrow and would stay with me through the surgery. Hah! – fat chance, and the fantasy didn't last beyond my first piss break.

But what followed was no fun. Lying there in the middle of the night, fully awake, I got to thinking that maybe I should kiss off the surgery and let whatever happen, just happen. After all, whether to go under the knife is a voluntary decision on my part. And then I thought, what's so great about living on after surgery at this age, with a painful recovery and all these physical ailments, mental lapses, scanty funds, and no family to sustain me?

And from that my mind went to, hey, why wait for the final chapter? In my medicine cabinet, I've got some pills in a bottle that should rightly bear a skull and crossbones. If hemlock was good enough for Socrates. . . .

As I say, it was a bad night.

Anyway, enough reclining in bed – it's time to get up and move around. I use my cane, at least at first when I'm a little unbalanced on my feet. Later in the day, I can usually manage around the apartment without it.

My two rooms are such a mess – clothes strewn over furniture, newspapers on the floor, dust on the windowsills and tabletops. And just forget about the kitchen – dirty plates piled in the sink, smelly food in the fridge, garbage bag overflowing – ugh. The housekeeper used to come in three times a week and keep things at bay – but then I caught her stealing from my wallet . . . . Well, I didn't actually see her do it, but where else could those twenties have gone? She, of course, denied all, but I fired her on the spot. Now some incompetent comes in once a month to tidy up.

I retrieve the morning newspaper from outside my front door and scan it while drinking that first cup of black coffee. As usual,

the news is all bad – killings, maimings and other tragedies, which doesn't help my mood.

I'll tell you what else isn't helpful – I'm really getting into a cash bind. I thought I'd planned pretty well how to manage through my retired years on a frugal but livable basis – but I never thought I'd live this long. I also didn't figure on that market craziness in 2008 that laid me low. Right now, it's even tough to scrape together the money for each month's rent.

No bank is going to lend me anything. I'm not in line for any bequests. I've got no assets of value to sell off or luxury disbursements to cut out. And assuming I survive this operation, my expenses are bound to go up for nurses and such.

I can see only one alternative to stay out of the poorhouse, but it's not something I want to do. The subject came up a month ago in a call with Carla, when I mentioned that things were getting a little tight financially.

“Dad,” she said, “not to worry. If you ever need anything, Arthur is loaded, and he'll lend you enough to tide you over.”

Arthur – Carla's husband – is not one of my favorite people. A goddamn know-it-all, who looks down on me as worthless for not being affluent. And wouldn't he like to see his view confirmed by having to bail me out. . . which I'd find so painful. . . .

Sure, it would be good to have enough funds to live on, so I didn't even have to consider tapping Arthur for a loan. But I don't regret for a minute having stuck with a lifetime of teaching history in high school. I got lots of satisfaction that made up for the measly salary.

Well, I don't have to decide this immediately. I've still got that two thousand bucks in C-notes – in an envelope locked in my top desk drawer – which should take care of any extra expenses that arise in the next few weeks. I'll never forget that day five years ago – the luckiest hours I ever spent at the crap table – and for once I quit while ahead, stashed it away, and haven't touched it since.

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That delivery guy from the deli is late with my food – can't trust anyone to perform well nowadays. Maybe it's because I ordered a beet and cucumber salad. "Hey, Mr. Green," said the guy who took the order, "What's with the salad? – what happened to the Reuben sandwich?" I didn't feel like explaining that I was trying to follow the doctor's orders, so I told him to throw in the sandwich too. I'll eat the salad now and put the Reuben in the freezer for a better day. . . .

Meanwhile, this goddamn computer I'm wrestling with is completely worthless – YOU PIECE OF CRAP! Whattya mean, I'm not connected to the internet? I was connected an hour ago . . . WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON HERE?!

I need to call that smart kid who helps me out when I've got a computer problem. But where did I put the piece of paper with his phone number on it? And what's the kid's name? . . .

Oh, there's the bell – must be my order. . . . "Hey, bozo, where in goddamn hell have you been?! I ordered this hours ago – you sneaking a smoke with your girlfriend? Just for that, no tip this time – and next time, when you leave the shop, you come right here first. . . ."

Wow, am I getting crotchety – not only at things, like the damn computer, but at people, like that bewildered-looking delivery guy. I've got to do something about this – I'm sure it's not good for my health. I used to be a pretty mellow guy – it's this damn heart diagnosis that has me on edge. . . . Wow, am I getting crotchety . . . .

Hey, didn't I just say that – "Wow, am I getting crotchety" – less than a minute ago? I've been noticing that lately, sometimes repeating myself. Not good. When I hear this kind of thing from another old fogey, I can't help but think that maybe dementia is creeping in.

Is that what's happening to me? Is that why it took me so long to get home from the art museum? Is that why I can't remember people's names – like the computer guy – or find things – like his phone number? And, bottom line, would I want to keep living if my mind was going wacko?

I remember something a guy once told me. If you're worried whether you're experiencing the onset of dementia, take this test. Open a copy of the *New Yorker*, flip the pages, and check out the first cartoon you see. Then look at all the other cartoons in that issue. When you're finished, see if you can recall what the first cartoon was about and also remember the punch line. If you can, you're okay. If not, well, you may be a candidate . . . But although I subscribe to the *New Yorker*, I've never taken the test – I guess I'm too worried how it might come out. And I'm sure not gonna do anything now to add to my woes. . . .

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I just took a little nap, which would have helped my state of mind except for a snippet of a dream I had just before waking up. There I was, in a small hospital room, woozy after surgery, no one at my bedside – but with three other beds stuffed into the same room, each with a heavy-breathing, snorting, wheezing, coughing geezer like me . . . .

But now I'm doing one of my favorite things – watching some clips from pro football games on the tube. What a sport – beats the others by miles.

Uh-oh, here comes that damn commercial again – the same stupid one that they repeat every quarter during an actual game. Can't they get something new? And a lot of these ads come on when the *refs* halt the game – not the teams. What kind of football is that? Wouldn't have happened back in the good old days of Sid Luckman and Sammy Baugh. . . . Hey, there I go again, getting all worked up. . . .

The phone's ringing, and I bet I know who it is – one of my granddaughters.

“Hi, grand-dad, it's Megan. How you doing?”

“So-so – I'm not feeling great, and. . . .”

“Yeah, mom told us you gotta have an operation, but she said you'll be just fine when it's over.”

“I’m glad she thinks so –”

“Anyway, get well soon, gotta run. . . .”

And then the other grandchild called ten minutes later for a similar brief dialogue. Nice of them to call – albeit forced to do so by Carla – but not too satisfying.

I take out the old photo album that Jenny put together back when we were a couple. . . . Here’s a shot I remember well – she was really a beauty. I wonder what Jenny would look like if she were around today? Oh, and take a gander at Carla and Abby, each sitting on one of my knees. They really looked up to their old man back then. . . . How did things get to where they are today. . . ?

I don’t know whether it’s the photo album or that recent dream I had about Abby, but now, without giving it any real thought, I decide to do something I haven’t tried before. I fish around in my desk drawer and find the piece of paper with Abby’s phone number. Maybe if she hears me tell her I’m about to go under the knife, and that I’m scared, she’ll relent and come-to-poppa . . . .

I lift the phone and punch in her number. It rings three times, gets picked up, and I hear her voice saying “Hello.” I brace myself and then start out with, “Hi, Abby, it’s your dad. I just wanted to tell you –” But before I get any further, there’s a click on the line as she hangs up her receiver.

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It’s now five o’clock Thursday afternoon, a beautiful early October day, and Harry and I are sitting on our favorite bench in the local park. Whenever we do this, I think of Paul Simon’s song, *Old Friends* – the two geezers, sitting on a park bench like “bookends.” And that plaintive line – “How terribly strange to be 70.” Seventy, hell, I’m twenty-plus years past that now. . . .

But anyway, there’s nothing sad about benching it with Harry, who’s a tonic to my sagging spirits.

“Kenny,” he says, “it’s too bad Carla can’t make it in for the operation. But don’t worry, I’ll be there. And if you’re really hot for a woman’s touch, how about that gal you used to take art classes with at the senior citizens center?”

“Come on, Harry, I’d be afraid she’d want to get into the hospital bed next to me – not for sex, thank you, but because she’s older and frailer than me.”

“Yeah, I see your point. But if you’d come with me to Atlantic City for the weekend, I bet we could pick up a nice chick for you – and I’m not talking hookers, either. Hey, remember the good-looking babe we saw that time, sitting at the bar near the crap table?”

As a matter of fact, I do remember that good-looking babe. It was on the trip when I won the two thousand bucks, right after I’d cashed in. Harry and I went over to the bar for a celebratory drink, and there she was, perched on a barstool. We had a little friendly back-and-forth, although nothing came of it – I was too busy hugging my stack of Ben Franklins. What a wasted opportunity. . . Hey, I guess I do still have some carnal stirrings when a seductive woman is involved. . . .

Sure, it would be fun to go back to Atlantic City with Harry, but fuhgetabout it – I can barely walk, I need to be near my medicine cabinet, and the doctor told me to stay buttoned up before the operation. Hell, even if I were able to go there, I’ve got no cash to play with. Yeah, I know there’s \$2,000 dollars in the desk drawer, but that has to cover all my upcoming expenses – I’d never risk blowing it at the crap table.

“Harry, you’re crazy, but you’re better for my health than any doctor.”

Harry picked right up on that subject. “Doctors! – what a bunch. Hey, Kenny, remember the one about the doctor who says to his patient, ‘I’ve got bad news for you and worse news.’ The guy turns pale and says, ‘What’s the bad news?’ The doctor says, ‘The test results came in and it’s what we feared – a virulent strain – nobody lives more than 24 hours.’ The guy says, ‘Oh, my God – but what’s worse news

than that?’ The doctor says, ‘I wasn’t able to reach you yesterday with the bad news.’ Boing! – rim shot. ”

I’ve heard that joke ten times, but I guffaw loudly and respond, “Yeah, and how about the day that these sounds were heard coming out of the examining room:

Woman’s voice: Kiss me, doctor.

Doctor’s voice: You know I can’t do that . . .

Woman: Yes, you can, and you must. Please, please, kiss me.

Doctor: It’s against the ethics of my noble profession, the Hippocratic Oath and all that.

Woman, now passionately: Kiss me, doctor.

Doctor: Kiss you? Truth be told, I shouldn’t be screwing you. . . .”

“Ringading-ding!” says Harry, who’s heard the joke before – “I really like that one.”

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It’s Thursday evening, and I’m home in my armchair, listening to my favorite jazzman, Paul Desmond, blowing those dry-as-a-martini sounds on his alto sax. Paul died a number of years ago, but for me he lives on, every time I put one of his CD’s into my stereo.

How about me, Kenny Green – will I “live on” if this operation comes a cropper? What do I have to leave to anyone? No money, no works of art, no particular wisdom – and anyhow, who would I be leaving it to? No one I know – except maybe Harry – even gives a shit.

I guess I could leave Harry the punch lines to all the jokes I've told over the past 50 years – but hell, he knows them better than I do.

I could leave Abby a letter, telling her how much I love her and have missed her companionship over all these years. . . . But why would I do that? To make her feel guilty about ignoring me? That's not a very noble motive. And besides, it wouldn't be true – I don't love her, and after the initial shock of her withdrawal, I never really missed her. . . until today . . . .

I wonder if any of them will bother to come in for my funeral – or will they all have excuses about other more pressing duties? It could just be Harry and three pallbearers from the mortuary. . . .

Enough, enough of that creepy stuff! As FDR said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Live in the present moment, I hear people say. And right now – at least for the next four days – I'm still firing on all cylinders. . . .

Well, on most of them. A little haggard-looking maybe, and leaning on a cane, and with a handkerchief plastered to my nose – but not too bad for ninety-plus. And, to look on the bright side, if this operation works, I could be primed to hit the century mark – at which point, assuming Willard Scott is still around, I'll get honorable mention on the tube.

To punctuate my mood change, I hobble over to the magazine rack and pull out a recent *New Yorker*. Goddamit, I'm gonna take that cockamamie dementia test. I turn to the first cartoon. It's a scene of people in a protest march, holding up signs like "Protect the climate," "Save our kids," and such. In the middle of the marching crowd is an obvious extraterrestrial, space suit and all, toting a sign that says, "A clean earth is an earth worth invading." Well, it's not what I'd call overwhelming, but worth a chuckle.

And now I go through all the other cartoons – mostly duos, like two guys at a bar, a husband and wife watching television, the boss interviewing a job applicant – on and on until I reach the last page.

Okay, now, Kenny boy, what was it I was supposed to do? Oh yeah, try to recall the first cartoon . . .

Whammo! That wacky-looking alien with the idiotic invasion sign bursts into my brain. . . . I passed the test!

Oops, there's the phone ringing. It's nine at night – six out in California – and I bet this is Carla calling with some more empty words.

And then, just like that, everything snaps into place – as in the old cliché about the fog suddenly lifting. My mind is clear, and I know exactly how to handle things. I answer the phone.

“Hi, dad. Arthur and I just got home, and I wanted to give you a quick call before we go out to dinner.”

“Thanks, Carla. Did you say that Arthur was home? If so, I'd like to speak to him for a minute.”

“Why, yes, he's right here – I'll put him on. . . .” And she does.

“Hello, Kenny, how goes it?”

“Well, Arthur, I won't bore you with a long whining answer to that question – but there is something I'd like to ask you.”

“Shoot.”

“I'm expecting to have some extra expenses in connection with this heart surgery next week, and I'm a little short on ready cash to handle the surge. I was wondering if I might borrow, say, two thousand dollars from you to meet these extra obligations.”

“No problem, Kenny. I'll have the funds transferred to your bank account tomorrow.”

“Much appreciated. . . .”

Hey, that was pretty easy. And he didn't even give me any crap about my being short of funds, or insist on a promissory note with a repayment schedule – maybe I've been misjudging the guy. . . .

After hanging up the phone, I proceed to do three significant things. First, I go over to the fridge and take the Reuben sandwich out of the freezer to thaw. Second, I unlock the top drawer of my desk, and remove the envelope with the twenty hundred-dollar bills that's been sitting there for five years. Hey, you Ben Franklins, wake up – it's time to return home! Third, I call my buddy Harry on the phone.

“Hey, Harry, I've decided that after I go under the knife, I need more than just you for company. Remember the good-looking babe – not a hooker – that we saw at the bar near the crap table in Atlantic City? I bet she's still there. Well, I want to wake up in my hospital room with her sitting by my bed. So, buddy, take a few bucks out of that cookie jar in your kitchen, and let's get the first bus over there tomorrow morning. If next week is Armageddon, I'm gonna go out in style. . . !”