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MIKE FINALLY SMILED

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I met Mike about a decade ago.

He had been a hard-working, blue collar man who had been employed — in one job or another — since his youth. He had served in the Army in Korea, operated a coin-operated laundry, a pizza parlor and a deli — each with some success, but all at the cost of his health and his self-esteem.

His whole life was lived doing what others told him he should or should not do.

In the U.S. Army, his service in Korea was unremarkable (according to Mike) and resulted in less-than-rapid promotions. He said his sergeant constantly berated him because he would not make independent decisions and had a reputation of waiting to be told to do even the most mundane of tasks.

He left the Army after his 3-year hitch and decided to make a life for himself in New York.

That's where he met and dated an over-bearing woman who insisted on making every decision. She chose when they dated, where they went and when the date was over.

They got married because, after dating for a couple of years, her Catholic priest told her they should get married. She believed the priest.

She set up the wedding.

She married Mike. (Decades later, Mike would confess, “I got married because I didn't know what else to do.”)

His new wife decided when and where they would begin a new business, where they would live and what they would do. Mike might grumble, but Mike went along.

For example, she decided they needed to live on Long Island on a property they could barely afford because it would make them respectable and acceptable to society. They bought two horses because the neighbors had

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horses. They never rode the horses that much; they just kept them to keep up appearances.

Mike's wife would brag about owning horses.

Mike cleaned the stables and fed the horses.

Although they never had children of their own, his wife decided to adopt her sister's son.

She made all the decisions on how to raise the boy.

She would berate Mike in front of his son and, frequently, tell the boy not to pay attention to what Mike told him. So, Mike avoided telling the boy anything.

That did not stop Lucy from yelling at Mike when their son got into trouble or got bad grades or didn't do his jobs. Yet, if Mike tried to discipline the boy, his wife would overrule his orders. So Mike never reprimanded the boy at all.

Mike just tolerated his wife and his son.

He held onto his dream of retiring to Florida where all would be right with the world.

Mike was a hard worker. Every day, he worked from before sunrise until after sunset and then went home to clean the stables.

Although he resented his life and his wife, he remained silent and resentful.

Through it all, he hung onto his one dream. Mike was determined that when he retired he would — finally — be able to sit on the Florida beach, drink wine and smoke cigarettes.

Mike had smoked as long as he could remember. Cigarettes gave him comfort. Smoking provided him frequent breaks in the Army and was a way to escape from reality his whole, miserable life.

When the working hours got too long and the demands too many and the abuse too overwhelming, Mike would escape into the wisps of smoke coming from the cigarettes he smoked one-after-another.

Finally, his wife decided they needed to retire.

She decided to move to Riverview, and they moved into a house next to ours.

They moved into a small house with an overly large yard. The yard was necessarily large because his wife insisted that they buy a large boat like all rich people in Florida owned.

The boat, on its trailer, was so large that it loomed taller than the roof of the single-story home they owned. As a matter of fact, because they purchased their home in a deed-restricted home, they had to move the boat to a storage facility because the deed restrictions clearly stated that nothing could be stored in the back or side yards that could be seen from the road.

The large yard demanded that they buy a riding mower. Mike wanted one from Home Depot but his wife insisted that they buy a John Deere because “that’s what real home owners had in Florida.”

From the time they bought the John Deere, they had problems with it. Whatever went wrong, his wife blamed Mike. There is some evidence that Mike did contribute to the maintenance problems with the John Deere since he took a perverse amount of enjoyment in the explosive responses of his wife whenever anything went wrong.

And things went increasingly wrong.

But Mike still had his dream. One day, day-after-day, he would be sitting on the beach, drinking wine and smoking his beloved cigarettes.

That’s when fate stepped in and soiled his life.

For some time, Mike had trouble with his leg. At times, it felt numb and at other times, he couldn’t feel it at all. So his wife took him to the hospital.

Mike had clogged arteries caused by decades of smoking.

To save his life, he had his right leg cut off just below the knee.

But, Mike lost a lot more than that leg during the surgery.

Since he was receiving Social Security, it paid for a prosthetic leg and a wheel chair.

He never liked the leg so he refused to wear it. Whenever he needed to get out of his wheelchair, he’s just hop. Needless to say, he didn’t hop far.

Still, his wife insisted he go to the store when she went — probably to give her someone to talk at while she drove. So, she’d complain about how long it took him to get into the car, how heavy the wheel chair was and how insignificant he was a human being.

After awhile, she found a neighborhood lady to go to the store with her and left Mike at home where he wanted to be anyway.

Hour-after-hour, day-after-day, week-after-week, he would watch black-and-white movies on the Turner Classic Movies network, dancing, in his mind, like Fred Astaire; fighting the bad guys like Errol Flynn; and bedazzling the ladies like Cary Grant.

Since he couldn't smoke any more, he'd eat chocolate or some other candy.

As time went by, he moved very little and spoke even less.

He lived in a world even his wife could not penetrate.

Yet, he couldn't find a smile because there was no contentment, only escape.

One day, Mike had a stroke. He fell by the bed and just laid there even as his wife yelled at him to get up.

His wife called 9-1-1.

Then she called us, but my wife, Peggy, was out.

Naturally I rushed over to offer aid and assistance.

The medics from the local fire department came within about 3 minutes of the 9-1-1 call.

The attending medic announced it was a stroke and began an animated conversation over a walkie-talkie with someone.

Moments later, an ambulance arrived. The attendants came through the opened door at break-neck speed with a wheeled stretcher.

I tried to comfort his wife, but she seemed more worried that the wheeled stretcher would leave marks on the tile floor than about getting Mike to the hospital.

The medics rushed Mike out on a stretcher, informing his wife that Mike would be taken to South Bay unless she had a preference. She insisted on taking him to Brandon Regional Hospital because she knew someone who worked in Administration at that hospital.

They asked if she wanted to ride in the ambulance; but she told them she had to wash and to set her hair before she could possibly leave the house.

As Mike passed me, I saw in his eyes that it was the last time he would be leaving this prison he never called home.

A few days later, Mike died in the hospital.

According to him, his life had never amounted to much.

He had never — really — accomplished anything and had never — really — touched anyone.

He never knew what to say to people, so he never said anything.

He never had confidence in his decision-making ability, so, he avoided making decisions.

His wife hated Mike for not being a man.

Mike resented her for not letting him be a man.

He resented his son for not respecting him.

But, most of all, he hated himself for never becoming the man he dreamed he would become.

And he loathed a life that never got him to the beach to drink his wine and smoke his cigarettes.

His wife wanted to host a funeral at the Catholic church because that was what one did. However, the Catholic church in Sun City Center would not permit it because — according to her — she didn't belong to that church.

So she arranged from some strange preacher at a strange funeral home near Sun City Center to hold the meeting.

Rather than asking friends if they wanted to say anything, she had the preacher do all the talking. After all, that was the way fine funerals were done.

Beginning his talk, the preacher said, "I never knew Mike, but I understand he was a man of few words. But, when he spoke, people listened."

It was all I could do to keep from laughing. The few others in attendance stifled laughter as well. Mike never said anything, and no one ever listened when he did.

The longest conversation most folks had with Mike was when they would ask "How are you doing?" and he would reply, "Fine."

At the end of the service, we walked up to his open casket.

As he lay there, for the first time, I saw the contentment Mike had been searching for all the days of his life.

Finally, he was on that never-ending beach with its ever-calming breeze, smoking foot-long cigarettes and drinking from a bottomless bottle of the finest wine.

There, in the coffin, Mike finally smiled.