

Three Century Woman

By Richard Peck

“I guess if you live long enough,” my mom said to Aunt Gloria, “you get your fifteen minutes of fame.”

Mom was on the car phone to Aunt Gloria. The minute Mom rolls out of the garage, she’s on her car phone. It’s state-of-the-art and better than her car.

We were heading for Whispering Oaks to see my great-grandmother Breckenridge, who’s lived there since I was a little girl. They call it an Elder Care Facility. Needless to say, I hated going.

The reason for Great-grandmother’s fame is that she was born in 1899. Now it’s January 2001. If you’re one of those people who claim the new century begins in 2001, not 2000, even you have to agree that Great-grandmother Breckenridge has lived in three centuries. This is her claim to fame.

We waited for a light to change along by Northbrook Mall, and I gazed fondly over at it. Except for the Multiplex, it was closed because of New Year’s Day. I have a severe mall habit. But I’m fourteen, and the mall is the place without homework. Aunt Gloria’s voice filled the car.

“If you take my advice,” she told Mom, “you’ll keep those Whispering Oaks people from letting the media in to interview Grandma. Interview her my foot! Honestly. She doesn’t know where she is, let alone how many centuries she’s lived in. The poor old soul. Leave her in peace. She’s already got one foot in the—“

“Gloria, your trouble is you have no sense of history.” Mom gunned across the intersection. “You got a C in history.”

“I was sick a lot that year,” Aunt Gloria said.

“Sick of history,” Mom mumbled.

“I heard that,” Aunt Gloria said.

They bickered on, but I tuned them out. Then when we turned in at Whispering Pines, a sound truck from IBC-TV was blocking the drive.

“Good grief,” Mom murmured. “TV.”

“I told you,” Aunt Gloria said, but Mom switched her off. She parked in a frozen rut.

“I’ll wait in the car,” I said. “I have homework.”

“Get out of the car,” Mom said.

If you get so old you have to be put away, Whispering Oaks isn’t that bad. It smells all right, and a Christmas tree glittered in the lobby. A real tree. On the other hand, you have to push a red button to unlock the front door. I guess it’s to keep the inmates from escaping, though Great-grandmother Breckenridge wasn’t going anywhere and hadn’t for twenty years.

When we got to her wing, the hall was full of camera crews and a woman from the suburban newspaper with a notepad.

Mom sighed. It was like that first day of school when you think you’ll be okay until the teachers learn your name. Stepping over a cable, we stopped at Great-grandma’s door, and they were on to us.

“Who are you people to Mrs. Breckenridge?” the newspaperwoman said. “I want names.”

These people were seriously pushy. And the TV guy was wearing more makeup than Mom. It dawned on me that they couldn't get into Great-grandma's room without her permission. Mom turned on them.

“Listen, you're not going to be interviewing my grandmother,” she said in a quiet bark. “I'll be glad to tell you anything you want to know about her, but you're not going in there. She's got nothing to say, and . . . she needs a lot of rest.”

“Is it Alzheimer's?” (1) the newswoman asked. “Because we're thinking Alzheimer's.”

“Think what you want,” Mom said. “But this is as far as you get. And you people with the camera and the light, you're not going in there either. You'd scare her to death, and then I'd sue the pants off you.”

They pulled back.

But a voice came wavering out of Great-grandma's room. Quite an eerie, echoing voice.

“Let them in!” the voice said.

It had to be Great-grandma Breckenridge. Her roommate had died. “Good grief,” Mom muttered, and the press surged forward.

Mom and I went in first, and our eyes popped. Great-grandma was usually flat out in the bed, dozing, with her teeth in a glass and a book in her hand. Today she was bright-eyed and propped up. She wore a fuzzy pink bed jacket. A matching bow was stuck in what remained of her hair.

“Oh, for pity's sake,” Mom said. “They've got her done up like a Barbie doll.”

Great-grandma peered from the bed at Mom. “And who are you?” she asked.

“I'm Ann,” Mom said carefully. “This is Megan,” she said, meaning me.

“That's right,” Great-grandma said. “At least you know who you are. Plenty around this place don't.”

The guy with the camera on his shoulder barged in. The other guy turned on a blinding light.

Great-grandma blinked. In the glare we noticed she wore a trace of lipstick. The TV anchor elbowed the woman reporter aside and stuck a mike in Great-grandma's face. Her claw hand came out from under the covers and tapped it.

“Is this thing on?” she inquired.

“Yes, ma'am,” the TV anchor said in his broadcasting voice. “Don't you worry about all this modern technology. We don't understand half of it ourselves.” He gave her his big, five-thirty news smile and settled on the edge of the bed. There was room for him. She was tiny.

“We're here to congratulate you for having lived in three centuries—for being a Three-Century Woman! A great achievement!”

Great-grandma waved a casual claw. “Nothing to it,” she said. “You sure this mike's on? Let's do this in one take.”

The cameraman snorted and moved in for a closer shot. Mom stood still as a statue, wondering what was going to come out of Great-grandma's mouth next.

“Mrs. Breckenridge,” the anchor said, “to what do you attribute (2) your long life?”

“I was only married once,” Great-grandma said. “And he died young.”

The anchor stared. “Ah. And anything else?”

“Yes. I don’t look back. I live in the present.”

The camera panned around the room. This was all the present she had, and it didn’t look like much.

“You live for the present,” the anchor said, looking for an angle, “even now?”

Great-grandma nodded. “Something’s always happening. Last night I fell off the bed pan.”

Mom groaned.

The cameraman pulled in for a tighter shot. The anchor seemed to search his mind. You could tell he thought he was a great interviewer, though he had no sense of humor. A tiny smile played around Great-grandma’s wrinkled lips.

“But you’ve lived through amazing times, Mrs. Breckenridge. And you never think back about them?”

Great-grandma stroked her chin and considered. “You mean you want to hear something interesting? Like how I lived through the San Francisco earthquake—the big one of oh-six?”

Beside me, Mom stirred. We were crowded over by the dead lady’s bed. “You survived the 1906 San Francisco earthquake?” the anchor said.

Great-grandma gazed at the ceiling, lost in thought.

“I’d have been about seven years old. My folks and I were staying at that big hotel. You know the one. I slept in a cot at the foot of their bed. In the middle of the night, that room gave a shake, and the chifffonier walked right across the floor. You know what a chifffonier is?”

“A chest of drawers?” the anchor said.

“Close enough,” Great-grandma said. “And the pictures flapped on the walls. We had to walk down twelve flights because the elevators didn’t work. When we got outside, the streets were ankle-deep in broken glass. You never saw such a mess in your life.”

Mom nudged me and hissed: “She’s never been to San Francisco. She’s never been west of Denver. I’ve heard her say so.”

“Incredible!” the anchor said.

“Truth’s stranger than fiction,” Great-grandma said, smoothing her sheet.

“And you never think back about it?”

Great-grandma shrugged her little fuzzy pink shoulders. “I’ve been through too much. I don’t have time to remember it all. I was on the Hindenburg when it blew up, you know.”

Mom moaned, and the cameraman was practically standing on his head for a close-up.

“The Hindenburg!”

“That big gas thing the Germans built to fly over the Atlantic Ocean. It was called a zeppelin (3). Biggest thing you ever saw—five city blocks long. It was in May of 1937, before your time. You wouldn’t remember. My husband and I were coming back from Europe. No, wait a minute.”

Great-grandma cocked her head and pondered for the camera.

“My husband was dead by then. It was some other man. Anyway, the two of us were coming back on the Hindenburg. It was smooth as silk. You didn’t know you were moving. When we flew in over New York, they stopped the ball game at Yankee Stadium to see us passing overhead.”

Great-grandma paused, caught up in the memories.

“And then the Hindenburg exploded,” the anchor said, prompting her.

She nodded. “We had no complaints about the trip till then. The luggage was all stacked, and we were coming in at Lakehurst, New Jersey. I was wearing my beige coat—beige or off-white, I forget. Then whoosh! The gondola (4) heated up like an oven, and people peeled out of the windows. We hit the ground and bounced. When we hit again, the door fell off, and I walked out and kept going. When they caught up to me in the parking lot, they wanted to put me in the hospital. I looked down and thought I was wearing a lace dress. The fire had about burned up my coat. And I lost a shoe.”

“Fantastic!” the anchor breathed. “What detail!” Behind him the woman reporter was scribbling away on her pad.

“Never,” Mom muttered. “Never in her life.”

“Ma’am, you are living history!” the anchor said. “In your sensational span of years you’ve survived two great disasters!”

“Three.” Great-grandma patted the bow on her head. “I told you I’d been married.”

“And before we leave this venerable lady,” the anchor said, flashing a smile for the camera, “we’ll ask Mrs. Breckenridge if she has any predictions for this new twenty-first century ahead of us here in the Dawn of the Millennium.”

“Three or four predictions,” Great-grandma said, and paused again, stretching out her airtime. “Number one, taxes will be higher. Number two, it’s going to be harder to find a place to park. And number three, a whole lot of people are going to live as long as I have, so get ready for us.”

“And with those wise words,” the anchor said, easing off the bed, “we leave Mrs. B—“

“And one more prediction,” she said. “TV’s on the way out. Your network ratings are already in the basement. It’s all web-sites now. Son, I predict you’ll be looking for work.”

And that was it. The light went dead. The anchor, looking shaken, followed his crew out the door. When TV’s done with you, they’re done with you. “Is that a wrap?” Great-grandma asked.

But now the woman from the suburban paper was moving in on her. “Just a few more questions, Mrs. Breckenridge.”

“Where you from?” Great-grandma blinked pink-eyed at her.

“The Glenview Weekly Shopper.”

“You bring a still photographer with you?” Great-grandma asked.

“Well, no.”

“And you never learned shorthand (5) either, did you?”

“Well, no.”

“Honey, I only deal with professionals. There’s the door.”

So then it was just Mom and Great-grandma and I in the room. Mom planted a hand on her hip. “Grandma. Number one, you’ve never been to San Francisco. And number two, you never saw one of those zeppelin things.”

Great-grandma shrugged. “No, but I can read.” She nodded to the pile of books on her nightstand with her spectacles folded on top. “You can pick up all that stuff in books.”

“And number three,” Mom said, “Your husband didn’t die young. I can remember Grandpa Breckenridge.”

“It was that TV dude in the five-hundred-dollar suit who set me off,” Great-grandma said. “He dyes his hair, did you notice? He made me mad, and it put my nose out of joint. He didn’t notice I’m still here. He thought I was nothing but my memories. So I gave him some.”

Now Mom and I stood beside her bed.

“I’ll tell you something else,” Great-grandma said. “And it’s no lie.”

We waited, holding our breath to hear. Great-grandma Breckenridge was pointing her little old bent finger right at me. “You, Megan,” she said. “Once upon a time, I was your age. How scary is that?”

Then she hunched up her little pink shoulders and winked at me. She grinned and I grinned. She was just this little withered-up leaf of a lady in the bed. But I felt like giving her a kiss on her little wrinkled cheek, so I did.

“I’ll come and see you more often,” I told her.

“Call first,” she said. “I might be busy.” Then she dozed.