



GEORGE GROSZ, "(ARTIST'S MOTHER-IN-LAW)" (1926)

Her eyes were wide and she lay in bed in the darkness. It was five in the morning, the night light, no more than ten watts, cast a red, sickly shadow through the room. She was upset because she had lost her treasured pill box, a Mother's Day gift. Where could she have dropped it?

"I think I'll get up and look through my handbags again." She spoke to herself, half-aloud. "No, I must not get out of bed, the day will be interminable."

She could have said 'endless', but she was a retired schoolteacher, tucked neatly away from the rigors of life in an adult community, somewhere on the flats of southern Florida.

Her husband was a poignant memory, and her daughter dutifully sent her gifts on Mother's Day, her birthday and Christmas. Well, she knew many 'widowed-mothers' who never heard from their sons; perhaps, then, daughters were better.

Once, her daughter's present was late, and rather than fight the empty rejection in her heart, she had purchased an enamelled pill box for herself — at Jordan Marsh. It was expensive, it could never hold all the pills she had to take, but she felt the need to be extravagant.

"Do you want this to be gift wrapped?" inquired the salesperson.

"Of course," she retorted defensively. "It's a Mother's Day gift."

Now, she recalled with a pang, her pill box was gone, she had lost her Mother's Day gift.



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How could she be so careless? Well, she'd look for it again today.

Today? Well, what could she do today? Orange juice, granola, hot instant Sanka. Wash the dishes, vacuum, rinse some underwear, and catch the Florida sun. A short walk, hope for mail (from whom?), and then, the Clubhouse.

She hated the shuffleboard but played it and feigned excitement for the benefit of her cronies. They were well-meaning, lonely old ladies, but how she hungered for a challenging political discussion, no polemics, no re-hash of the commentators, just an honest give-and-take. Not here, not in Twilight Village. She had to be careful for this was her home — her last home; these were her only friends. Ostracism or ridicule meant a slow death. One must play the game cheerfully: be pleasant, helpful, not too bright, not too good at anything.

Perhaps the Village bus would schedule an outing to Palm Beach. The display windows on Worth were done in such impeccable taste — like Fifth Avenue, Madison Avenue, long ago... Madison Avenue? Was it this life? This same life? And was it only 5:15?

Am I living too long? She had a favorite fantasy — that she could give up her life to someone younger, someone important so that she could go on living. She reasoned that she would have a noble purpose to her life.

Her thoughts grew wilder. What if she could give her life in exchange for someone else long gone? But the great question was: who should receive this great gift? The two Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Lincoln, Gershwin, Marilyn Monroe? Who?

I must be more practical. How can I save the living?... Now!... An Indian boy (from the Dakotas or Delhi), an American girl with t.b. —

She squirmed in bed and turned over. "I don't like my thoughts," she murmured.

She must work on her knitting, although the cost of yarn was increasing. She wished she could afford the New York Times on Sundays, but everything is going up — cottage cheese, toilet paper, milk, meat... Meat? She thought of the steak barbeques — long ago — her husband in the chef's apron with the Alka Seltzer ad, and her daughter with the chef's hat... all their friends cramped in the backyard, and the laughter with the beer —

"I'm living too long!"



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TWILIGHT VILLAGE

BY DOROTHY HOROWITZ

She desperately tried to think of another device to counter-attack the morbidity of a southern morning. Her mind became blank, then she began worrying about her pill box again.

"If I could locate all the pupils I taught in thirty years! How many history lessons do they remember? Do they remember me?"

"Are they teachers themselves, lawyers, derelicts; are they dead? I don't like these thoughts, and I'm not going to take a glass of wine — not at 5:30 in the morning. It will have to wait until dinner, just before dinner as I watch the sun set... Oh, my dear God, how will I ever get to sunset?"

"I must play bridge today. I shall not try to win too often so that there will be no unpleasantness. And there's a new class in Body Language. What can they teach us to say with our bodies? When we're old, we're in one club, the signs are there, there is instant communication. What do we need from each other? I guess companionship, possibly some respect, that's about all."

"My library books are due — I must read fast... I feel the cataracts are growing. What do I do then? Television! I'll watch the good programs and write critical reviews just to keep my mind from becoming rusty. But I am rusty! The rust cannot be hidden! I'm not going to lie here another moment." She got up slowly and limped to the bathroom. She was old. Yet, she reasoned, she had a place to live, she was never too cold, and she could sip a glass of wine at dinner.

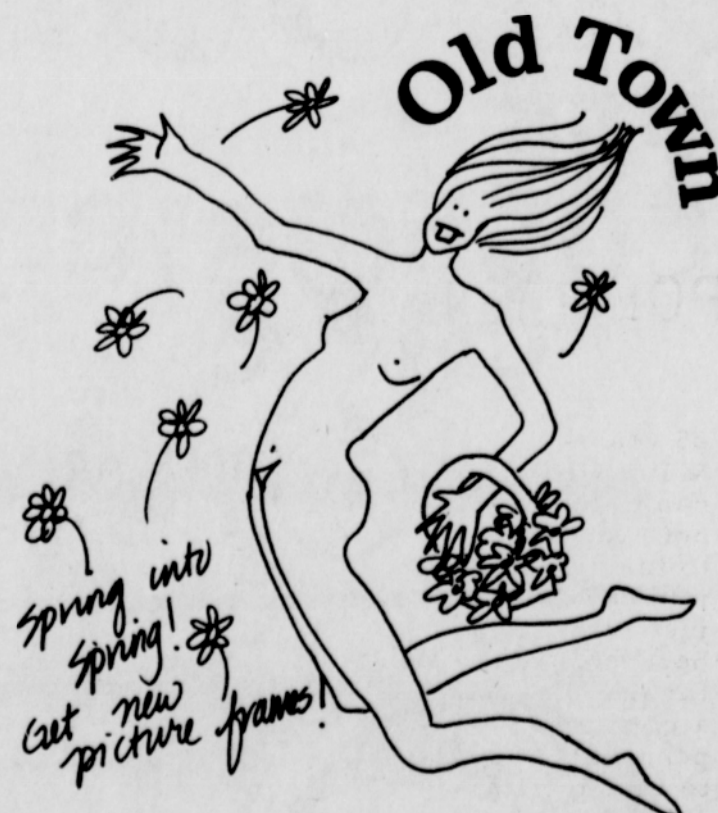
"I must train my mind to recall only pleasant memories," she murmured.

She raised the blind and surveyed the lone coconut palm, almost shuddering in a gust of breeze. As she walked into the kitchen there was the pill box! Right at the sink where she had taken the nitro the night before.

"I've found you! Oh, thank goodness! It's going to be a special day! I feel it!" She spoke loudly, almost as if she wanted God to hear her and make some notes. She smiled as she clasped the pill box tightly. It was a good omen.

Perhaps her daughter would send her a photograph of her grandson even though it was not Christmas.

Dorothy Horowitz is a retired teacher who has contributed to the NCTE before ("A Baseball Fan Fights Cancer", Oct/Nov 1988; a play, "The Survivor", Sept 1988). Her sons David and Michael are teachers and writers and are frequent contributors to the NCTE (Michael is co-publisher of Times Eagle Books), and her husband Nathan has sent poems; his most recent, "Four Chaplains", appeared in the Jan/Feb 1990 NCTE.



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