

MISTER EUDY

Warren Eudy turned 107 years old on August 15, 1994. I know this because I had to chronicle this feat of longevity for the *Concord Tribune*. Back then I was fresh out of journalism school and had only been at the paper a couple months. The editor wanted a human interest story for the *Living* section, so on a muggy weekday morning I pulled into the parking lot of Crescent Ridge nursing home. I knew the assignment to be menial, but it was also one of my first stories, so I took it seriously.

“I’m with the *Tribune*,” I said to the girl at the front desk, ready to flash my credentials if need be. “Here to interview Warren Eudy.”

“Mr. Eudy, huh? You should enjoy that.” She gave a mischievous smile, then turned and pointed behind her. “Room 119. All the way at the end on the right.”

The aroma of this place had hit me when I first walked in the door and it only grew stronger as I walked down the hall – a pungent cocktail of preservatives and disinfectants. Perhaps in an attempt to counterbalance this unnatural odor, the department-store art on the wall was heavy with chickens, milkmaids, and other similarly pastoral subjects.

The door to Room 119 was ajar and inside I could hear what sounded like *Let’s Make a Deal* on the TV. I knocked, waited, then knocked louder. No answer, so I tentatively stepped inside. My first impression of Mr. Eudy’s room was that the nursing home smell was gone, replaced by the tangy scent of cheap cigars. He lay in bed smoking one, and an ashtray on his bed had the butts of several others. He sported a scraggly beard and no shirt, wisps of white hair rimmed his bald head; he looked as skinny and wizened as I’d expected of someone his age. It was a plain room, decorated only by a few family pictures on the dresser.

“Scott Sorensen,” I said, waving. “I’m with the *Tribune*.”

He nodded to me while taking a drag on his cigar.

“They told you I was coming, right?”

He didn’t answer right away and I thought for a moment that he might not be all there. Certainly understandable at his age, but not a complication I wanted to deal with on one of my first assignments. He savored the smoke that was in his mouth, then exhaled slowly. It disappeared into the hazy air that filled the room. When he finally did speak, I was relieved to hear the voice of someone with a clear mind.

“Surely did. I been waiting on you. Even kept my teeth in,” he said, opening his mouth in case I needed proof. “This ain’t no big deal, though. Y’all wrote a story about me when I turned a hunnert and four, too.”

“No kidding,” I said, then added, “I didn’t know they let you smoke in these places.”

“I been in this room near fifteen years. I do whatever I want.”

I gestured at a chair, asking if I could sit down. He nodded, then used a remote attached to his bed to turn the TV down. Not all the way, though, and he kept stealing glances at it throughout our conversation.

“So whatcha want to know, boy?”

“Whatever you want to tell me, Mr. Eudy. I’m going to turn this recorder on, if that’s ok with you.” He nodded that it was. “You’re the subject of my article – your life, your thoughts on the world, any wisdom you have to pass on. You’ve got more life experience than anyone else in Concord, so people will be interested in what you have to say.”

He snorted. “Now you know that last part ain’t true. Folks just think I’m a crazy old man, even my family. Strangers reading a paper ain’t no different. I’m always happy to talk, though. Where you reckon I should start?”

“At the beginning. Where were you born?”

“Here.”

“In Concord?”

“Roundabouts. Kannapolis.”

Once he got going, my job was as easy as holding the recorder upright. He told me about his childhood, growing up in a mill village in Kannapolis, quitting school for work when he was 15 and his family needed money, marrying a girl who lived across the street, inheriting his parents’ house when they died. He had five children and had been married to his wife Jean for over sixty years; she’d died twenty years earlier. Three of his kids were still alive. In addition to working and raising children, he had been a church deacon, spent years on the Kannapolis town council, headed up the local Civilian Conservation Corps during the Roosevelt years, and successfully ran a restaurant with his daughter once he’d retired from the mill.

“I was important,” he concluded, with the kind of inoffensive conceit to which anyone who reaches 107 years of age is entitled. “I worked 50, 60 hours a week, every week. I hardly ever took time off, didn’t complain like you hear men complaining nowadays. I did what I had to, took care of my responsibilities. That’s probably why people think I’m crazy, ‘cause ain’t nobody that acts like that anymore.”

I nodded.

“So what else you want to hear?” he said.

“You’ve given me a lot,” I said. “I can write pages and pages on what you’ve just said. But you still haven’t answered the question everyone’s going to have: What’s your secret? How did you live so long, possibly longer than anyone in the history of this town?”

He exhaled a cloud of smoke and scratched his head. “Well, I told that to the last girl that interviewed me a few years ago. Hard work. Easy as that. If everyone worked like me, they’d all live this long.”

I nodded reverently, in my head already crafting a conclusion for the article. By this point he’d spent half an hour narrating the story of his life and this seemed like a good place to wrap up. I turned the recorder off and was about to offer my hand and thank him when he cut me off.

“I lied to her, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I told that girl that it was hard work cause I knew that would sound good in the paper. That ain’t the reason, though. I didn’t trust her with the real reason.”

He took another pull on his cigar and smiled at me, thoroughly enjoying the suspense he had created. I reached to turn my recorder back on.

“No, no,” he shook his head, waving his hands at me. “You can’t record this.”

“Well then, I’m confused. Why are you telling me?”

“Don’t rightly know. Guess I just feel like telling someone. Don’t want to keep it to myself anymore. Maybe it’ll help you one day when you’re a crazy old man like me.”

“But if it’s off-the-record, I can’t print it.” My tone betrayed more annoyance than was professional, but Mr. Eudy didn’t seem to mind.

He grinned at me, his veiny hand gripping the bedrail in his excitement. “You think I’m putting you in a pickle, don’t you? Messing with you?”

“Yeah, a little bit. I’m trying to make a name for myself at work, and I need my pieces to be good. I’d really like your permission to print this.”

He shook his head grimly. “Not possible.”

I sighed, unsure how to respond. Journalism school had taught me nothing about dealing with inscrutable old men. But my annoyance was matched by an intense curiosity to hear what he had to say.

“We got a deal?” he said. “Give me your word you’ll keep this to yourself?”

With some effort, he sat up in the bed and stuck out his hand. I shook it, giving him a smile that was equal parts amusement and frustration.

“Alright,” I said, holding out my hands in a gesture of reception. “Enlighten me. What’s the secret that’s kept you alive for 107 years?”

“Open the bottom drawer of that dresser over there.”

I did this and was presented with an abundance of flannel shirts and khaki pants.

“Reach in the back right corner and find a red sweater,” he said. “It’s wrapped around something. Take it out.”

I picked up the sweater, almost dropping it because of its unexpected weight. I looked at him before continuing and he nodded. Carefully – and a bit nervously – I unwrapped it, pulling back the last layer to reveal a revolver. I jumped when the gun appeared and almost dropped it.

I looked at Mr. Eudy and he gestured me over to him, holding out his hand. I took a couple steps, but hesitated to hand it to him. He didn’t seem like the type to shoot me, but the appearance of the gun had made me uneasy. He laughed.

“It ain’t loaded. Check for yourself.”

Careful to keep my finger away from the trigger, I turned it over in my hands, embarrassed to admit that I didn’t know how to verify that it was empty. I’d never held a real gun before.

“Just push. Right there where your thumb is. Don’t have to push it too hard.”

I pushed and the cylinder popped out, revealing six empty chambers. Feeling more confident about my ability to handle it, I clicked it back into place and gave it to him.

“There it is. That’s my secret. See why I didn’t want you to share it with anybody?”

He looked at me with an air of expectation, waiting for the obvious question, which I quickly supplied.

“I still don’t get it. How is a gun the key to a long life?”

He straightened up a bit before speaking and cleared his throat. He seemed to be preparing for a long-rehearsed speech, something he’d thought a thousand times but had never said. “You’re a young kid, but I’m sure you’ve begun to notice that things ain’t free. In life, I mean. Everything has a cost. You follow?”

I nodded, more to keep him going than because I understood.

“You wanna get strong, it don’t just happen. You gotta lift weights. You want food, shelter, clothing, you go out and work. A marriage works because you make sacrifices. Nothing’s free. Trying to get things for free, things you don’t work for, is what causes problems.”

He paused here, pale blue eyes locked onto mine, wanting to make sure I understood him. I nodded again, though I was no less confused.

“Part of what I told that first reporter was true. Hard is work is what kept me going for years. That’s how I got to be damn near 90 years old and still as fit and sharp as I was at 50. I was working full-time at the restaurant, still on the trustee committee at church. But my wife died and I took it hard. Sold the restaurant when I shouldn’t have. Then the kids talked me into moving here. And the problem with this place – ”

He paused, grasping for a word to properly convey his disapproval of Crescent Heights Nursing Home.

“ – it’s too *still*.”

He grimaced when he said this last word, obviously wanting a more derogatory adjective but unable to supply one.

“From the day I got here, all I do is sit, all day long. I’m just waiting to die, all the while being waited on hand and foot. Everything I get is free. I don’t work for *nothing*.”

“But you’re not getting a free ride,” I said. “You pay rent on this room.”

“My son does. I ran out of money years ago. And even if my son’s money ran out, the state would pay for me, like it does most folks in here. I’m at the point in life where I can’t work, can’t do nothing to earn things.”

He nodded to the gun in his lap and grinned.

“Can’t earn things the regular way, that is.”

“I still don’t get it,” I said, willing to play his game in order to hear whatever explanation was coming.

“On my 95th birthday, I wanted to kill myself,” he said. “I’d been here for eight years, and I couldn’t take anymore. All those years of not working, of taking and taking and not giving anything in return. I had this gun. I snuck it in when I came years earlier, never thinking I’d use it. I just liked to hold it sometimes. But that night, after everyone went to bed, I loaded it.”

He opened his bedside table, rustled some papers around, and pulled out a bullet, stubby and dull-gold.

“I only got one. Guess that’s all I’ll need, huh? But once I got it loaded, I had a hard time pulling the trigger. I’m a church-going man. Thinking about suicide’s one thing, but going through with it’s near impossible. I sat there half the night with this thing in my hand, staring at it. I’d been playing with the cylinder, spinning it round and round, and it suddenly occurred to me I didn’t know where the bullet was. It didn’t seem quite the same as committing suicide, and then I didn’t have a problem putting it to my head and pulling the trigger. And I did.”

“Russian Roulette.”

“Yep, I’ve heard it called that. Whatever it is, it cleared my head. The next day I woke up feeling like I deserved to be alive, like I’d done something to earn it. And that’s my payment, that’s how I balance out all the sitting and doing nothing. Every year since, I’ve paid that way.”

“But that’s twelve years!”

“Yep.”

“Including this year?”

“Birthday’s today. Did it this morning before breakfast.”

“What are the odds?” I said, trying to do the math in my head. “What are the odds that you’ve survived that many spins?”

He laughed. “Don’t ask me, boy. I never was no good with math.”

“Do you want it to go off?”

“I reckon about as much as I don’t want it to.”

Neither of us said anything for a moment and he relaxed his posture, resuming the reclined position he was in when I first entered the room. He asked me to bring him a new pack of cigars from his dresser, and I did, then lit one for him. He puffed on it in a leisurely fashion. His eyes drifted back towards the TV. In my head I ran through a number of follow up questions, but then realized I was thinking like a reporter, which I’d stopped being when I turned the tape recorder off. I wasn’t quite sure what to call my new role. Receptacle of arcane wisdom? Amateur shrink? Whatever it was, Mr. Eudy seemed content that he’d said his piece and for the next few minutes we watched *Let’s Make a Deal* together in silence. At the commercial break I stood to leave.

I offered my hand. “It was nice to meet you.”

“You too, Scott,” he said, shaking it. “Look forward to seeing your story.”

The piece ran on Sunday, buried in the back of the *Living* section, chopped from 1,000 words to 500. In summary, Mr. Eudy had spent his life as a family man and servant of the community, and he attributed his longevity to a Protestant work ethic. The story wasn’t nearly as good as it could have been, but my editor seemed pleased.

One year later I was typing in my office when my co-worker Ron stuck his head in.

“You did a story on that Warren Eudy guy last year, right?” he said. “The one who was about 200 years old?”

“Yeah.”

All day I'd been acutely aware that it was August 15, so what came next didn't surprise me.

“He killed himself. They found him in his bedroom at the nursing home, shot in the head.”

“You're kidding,” I raised my eyebrows so that I'd look shocked. “He seemed in pretty good spirits when I spoke with him.”

“Yeah, just thought you'd want to know. I'm doing a little write-up on his life. Is there anything I can say about him, other than family members and occupation? Anything you picked up when you two spoke?”

I paused, trying to think of something appropriate, then shook my head. Ron had turned to leave when it came to me.

“Hey,” I called, catching him before he walked away. “Say that Mr. Eudy earned everything he ever got. He'd like that.”