

Getting Shorter (Memoir)

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By Gary Gladstone @2014

In the summer of 2011, I'm sipping my morning coffee over The New York Times when I notice a famous LIFE Magazine photograph by Alfred Eisenstaed. It shows Edith Shain, the nurse being kissed by a sailor in Times Square during a wild celebration of our victory in Japan ending World War II. Edith has died in Los Angeles at 91.

Years back when I am a young photographer at LIFE magazine, I meet Alfred Eisenstaedt, who we call "Eisie." Eisie is very short, a little over five feet, but he's the Grand Old Man of photojournalism. I'm a foot and a half taller. We're riding the elevator to the 44th floor in the LIFE building and Eisie looks at me and then, addressing all the passengers says, "I used to be as tall as he is but this is what happens from carrying the heavy cameras all these years. I'm getting shorter," Everybody chuckles.

Edith and Eisie are gone now. Recently I've noticed a blizzard of obituaries for a long list of people who have populated my world and been important to me.

I'm going to be dying soon. It's no longer something that will be happening far in the distance. There is nothing ~~serious~~ ^{seriously} wrong with me; I've just been living over three quarters of a century and things are slowing down. The future is no longer boundless so I'm spending a lot of time cruising the past.

I think back to when I am thirteen, walking alone on a shiny railroad track, balancing like a circus tightrope walker. There are no trains, just the dead quiet of August heat filled with the smell of creosote and urine rising from the track bed. I walk for twenty minutes, balancing on a single rail when I feel a tickling vibration in the bottoms of my shoes. A distant train is coming and there is a faint buzzing rising from the steel as the train gets closer. A minute later there is a quivering on the rail and then a clacking as it rises and falls against the spikes that anchor it to the ties. I turn and see, in the distance, a bright shimmering headlight. I'm not alarmed. I'm lost in a lovely solitary journey and when the train comes, I'll just step off to let it speed past before climbing back on again.

It's 71 years later and my 86th birthday will be in July when it will be hot once again.

My life is still filled with wonderful things. My son and two grandchildren fill my days with smiles, but the tracks have been tickling my feet for a few years now. I know I'll be stepping off the rail again soon and, sadly, probably not stepping back on.

In the mornings while shaving, I flash a wide smile in the mirror to try to wash away non-negotiable aging.

Sometimes I imagine how the ending will play out. Will it be a merciful fall-asleep-and-never-wake-up event? A long slow hospitalization peppered with sad-faced visitors struggling to find something to say?

Will it be on one knee, clutching my chest in a Walmart aisle looking up at the stacks of ^{Tidy Cats ✓} ~~Yesterday's News~~ Scented Cat Litter and knowing that it's now too late to use my coupon? Or, maybe I'll just decide to make it brief and step off the curb into Second Avenue in front of the M15 Bus when, as usual, it runs the red light at 23rd Street.

I tell my son, that if I end up with a headstone, I want it adorned with a carved marble hand with the index finger extended in a pointing gesture directly towards the visitors. Under the hand will be carved an instruction, "Pull my Finger." He rolls his eyes and mumbles, "Geez, Dad."

The truth is that I don't want to be under a headstone or any other place that's hosting crabgrass. I want to be cremated and my ashes stored in an urn with holes in the top placed in some loved one's ^{CAR} trunk so that when the winter gets real bad and icy and that person gets stuck going up the driveway, they can just open the trunk and sprinkle me under the tires and I'll make one last useful appearance.

When I announce this thought, all my friends groan. They don't want to think about these things. But I do. I just don't mind getting shorter .