

The Morning Breaks Even

By Jason D. Johnson

The morning breaks even. Always. I've watched it here for four years now. On most days, the hardwoods to the east glow in the belts of light pouring down out of the heavens. Occasionally, they fall into shadow underneath a gray sky seeping with rain. Either way, the morning breaks even and it lets me know that no matter which way the hammer falls, peace can be found.

There is always a stir here in the wee hours of day-break. People wake to the early morning sounds of Bill Drake spilling out of the radio, to the laughs and exultations of Al Roker on the television, and to the pangs of arthritis in well-worn knees and hands. Over one hundred-sixty folks call this place their home. Some have risen here so long, it seems like any other house they owned was in another lifetime. But they rise, like clock-work, slip into some clothes and begin the daily routine. Down the hall of the clubhouse, just past the library, comes the smell of bacon, eggs, and biscuits. In the kitchen, the faithful hands of Pam, Reggie, and Janet are hard at work preparing the day's daily bread. Rain or shine. Snow or hail. This place comes alive in the morning.

The Summit Hills' day is in full swing by eight-thirty, about the time I arrive to once again try and solve some of the world's problems. I started making this trek when I was twenty-six. Quiet by nature, gentle but hard-shelled and driven by service, I would roll through the mountainside, tumble down the Saluda Grade, and hit Spartanburg on 26 before banking left. It was a stretch for me, both the drive and the job, having spent 1999 through 2001 educating college kids. But the stretch



wasn't that difficult as education of young adults and providing a quality of life to senior adults have more similarities than one would think. I would lie awake at night in my cabin in the foothills of North Carolina thinking over the ends and outs of the position and the ends and outs of life. I had long given up the bed for the couch, and I would lie awake on that Goodwill-issued loveseat with the window to the back porch left open, so

that I could hear the creek at the foot of the mountain trickling past. In the black of night, I would lie there surrounded by calm while my mind raced in circles at two-hundred miles per hour.

The truth of the matter is, not much has changed these days. Just the other day, to get away for a few minutes so that I could sort through some ideas dancing in my head, I took the long walk out across our fifty acres. I headed toward the hardwoods out to some home lots that were still left to build on and I knelt down on the asphalt. In between whispers of thought and words of prayer, I, a grown professional now of twenty-nine years, steadied my soul in search of peace for a few moments while my mind raced at two-hundred miles per hour. Behind me lay a multi-million dollar facility and forty-nine single family homes. Inside the walls of these homes and this center rested the lives of some one hundred and sixty retirees, all ultimately relying on my care and knowledge. Over fourteen thousand four hundred and fifty years of combined knowledge and yet, they look to me. Twenty-nine years old. What do I know?

More than I did three years ago.

I am sitting at one of the greatest fountains of knowledge that has ever existed. In between the walls of Summit Hills, there is a collection of stories and minds that would make Fitzgerald blush, Twain grow serious, and possibly convince Faulkner to use a period for once. And every morning, I am able to drop on a shirt and khakis and walk into this story. I find myself much like Forrest Gump because I never know what I'm going to get. I've handled situations as varied as a resident having a heart attack to stocking fish in a half-acre pond to a resident complaining that "the beer was too cold" at Happy Hour. I've seen grown children weep and arthritic hands clap with joy. I've watched employees grow and bloom and old friends crumble and fail. I have become slower to anger and quicker to the truth. I have bought into the fact that favorites are favorites for a reason and that the weakest link truly weakens everything. I am twenty-nine years old, but I have the world living just down the hall from my office. Any question I have, an answer is just a few steps away. Knowledge is behind every door.

We make a mistake by forgetting the elderly in our society. The little old lady next door no longer comes calling. The grandfather kicking chickens out at the barn is sitting some place else now. At Summit Hills, the

elderly can't be forgotten. The great, hidden joy of my job is that I get to see the gracefulness and the beautiful simplicity of old age in each and every moment of my working day. I have no idea if I will ever get there myself, but if I do...I know how I want to age. I have living examples swirling around me everyday and I get to inhabit their lives, learning, coping, laughing, and finding myself in the stories and victories of others.

The morning broke even again today. The smell of bacon and the sounds of new home construction fill the air, as two more houses go up down on the pond. The bream swim up to the top of the water, nipping at the tiny bugs floating along the surface. The wind picks up and sits back down. And just a few yards away, a couple starts out their front door. Hand in hand they begin their walk into the sunlight and down the street, marching along that old familiar path that they know so well. He whispers a word and she smiles. The heavens form a canvas over the spectacle, as I watch fifty-plus years of marriage ramble by me.

Life breaks even. Always.

Jason D. Johnson is the Executive Director of Summit Hills Retirement Community in Spartanburg, President of the Upstate Senior Network and a featured writer and music critic for Gigatracks, an online source for independent music and artists.

Copyright 2005 Lonesome Traveler