

“The Forever Con” by BRAD FERGUSON
Previously unpublished

THE OLD LADY sat quietly in one of the two comfortable chairs in front of the desk of Howard Poffenberger, M.D., Ph.D. Her son sat in the other. Dr. Poffenberger’s office was well appointed. The furniture was oak where it wasn’t covered with leather, and the mahogany-paneled walls were thickly covered with framed academic degrees and carefully unposed photographs of celebrities and other important people.

“As I stated in my initial letter to you, Dr. Poffenberger,” Kevin Biederbecke said, “my mother is no longer happy at the leisure facility where she now resides. To put it as plainly as I can, the place simply hasn’t lived up to her expectations. Promises have been broken and guarantees violated — ”

“To say the least,” the old woman muttered.

“ — and she would like to leave there as soon as possible. We’re investigating a number of facilities in this area.”

“Well,” Dr. Poffenberger smiled. “We would certainly be most glad to have Mrs. Biederbecke — ”

“*Ms. Biederbecke*,” the old lady correctly him.

“Of course, *Ms. Biederbecke*,” the doctor said, “and, as I was saying, we at Glory Road Estates would love to have you living with us. I certainly feel that your mother would be most happy here at Glory Road, *Mr. Biederbecke*.”

“You can talk to me directly, *Doc*,” *Ms. Biederbecke* said. “I’m not senile.”

“Of course you aren’t,” the doctor said quickly. “Do you have any questions, *ma’am*?”

“Let’s just see the joint,” *Ms. Biederbecke* said briskly. “I haven’t got all day.” She put out her arm. “Kevin, help me up, please, that’s a dear.”

After inspecting several of the dormitory

rooms, the three walked down a series of brightly lighted hallways to the public area. The old lady’s bright eyes took in everything they passed on the way, especially the many colorful posters and leaflets taped to the light blue walls of the corridor. Once in a while, she frowned as she saw something she didn’t care for, and she frowned more and more often as they approached the common room. “I don’t see any organization here at all,” she muttered. “Chaotic, just chaotic.”

“*Mr. Biederbecke*,” Dr. Poffenberger said in low tones, “your letter didn’t make clear exactly why your mother wishes to leave Mount Willow.”

Kevin shrugged. “She’s bored up there, pure and simple,” he replied. “She might have put up with the numerous contract violations on the home’s part if she felt more involved, but most days she just sits around without a chance to *do* anything. She’s always been a very active person, Doctor. She doesn’t want to lose her edge. I don’t want her to, either.”

Dr. Poffenberger nodded. “Well, your mother wouldn’t be bored around *here*, let me tell you — ”

“What are you two mumbling about?” *Ms. Biederbecke* called crossly. “*C’mon*, already. Get a move on. I want to see the common room.”

There were about thirty or forty old people gathered in the common room. Several couples were slow-dancing to classic rock ‘n roll tunes that had remained popular since their first release fifty years before and more. Others were seated around tables playing games. Kevin Biederbecke easily recognized Monopoly and Challenge, but there were other groups playing games that involved only oddly-shaped dice and many pieces of paper.

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“Roleplaying,” Dr. Poffenberger said to Kevin’s unasked question. “Mostly dungeon-and-dwarves stuff. Sometimes a single adventure takes years to complete.”

“They have the time now,” Kevin said, nodding.

Over in the corner, a group of six laughing women were singing a nonsense song while making appropriate gestures:

*“If you’re happy and you know it,
point your ears!”*

*“If you’re happy and you know it,
point your ears!”*

*“If you’re happy and you know it,
Then here’s the way to show it —*

*“If you’re happy and you know it,
point your ears!”*

“Point your ears!”

“Trekkies?” Kevin asked.

“That’s right,” Dr. Poffenberger said. “Unfortunately, they have to amuse themselves more and more often, because it’s getting hard to find good guests for them. Actually, we’re rather hoping — ”

“What’s that supposed to be?” Ms. Biederbecke snapped, point at an antique phone booth standing in the corner of the room.

“Oh,” Dr. Poffenberger said. “That’s the Tardis. The *Doctor Who* fans are rebuilding it again. I suppose they’ve knocked off for lunch.”

“They’ve got it all wrong,” Ms. Biederbecke sniffed. “For one thing, the door opens the other way out. Amateurs!”

“What are your favorite activities back in Mount Willow, Ms. Biederbecke?” asked Dr. Poffenberger.

The old lady shrugged, still examining the Tardis. “I don’t much care for the *Who* stuff, but I dabble in it from time to time. I do some *Star*

Trek once in a while, when I can stand it — mostly Third Generation, though. I used to edit a *Quantum Leap* slashzine, too, until my eyes started getting a little funny.”

“Have you ever thought about perhaps trying a facility in another genre?” Dr. Poffenberger asked. “Say, one of the romance homes?”

“Are you kidding?” Ms. Biederbecke said, shocked. “Gafiate? *Me?* Why, I’ve been involved in fanac for *fifty-seven* years, young man — !”

“I’m sorry — ”

“A *romance resort?*” she snapped. “Get my thrills by being chased around the corridors by old coots wearing armor they make themselves out of tinfoil? Well, I never! Kevin, take me home. Right now.”

“Please, Ms. Biederbecke — !” Dr. Poffenberger began.

“I thought these people were *serious*, Kevin.” She sniffed. “You misled me, son. I really didn’t want to come down here at all, you know.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Kevin said sheepishly. “Let’s go back.”

“Ms. Biederbecke, I do most sincerely apologize,” the doctor said. “I meant no offense. I was simply asking as a matter of curiosity — inappropriately, I now see. Please forgive me.”

“Well — all right,” the old lady said. “Might as well tell you that I *did* do a few days at a mystery facility right near Mount Willow last month, just to see what it was like. Place was called Sherlock Homes.” She frowned. “Too cute for my taste. Besides, they were always solving the same old cases over and over again. If I was ever tempted to change horses, that cured me.”

“We do try to keep things lively here at Glory Road Estates,” Dr. Poffenberger said. “I’d

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really like to talk more with you and your son about that, privately and in depth. Is there more you'd like to see, or shall we return to my office?"

Ms. Biederbecke took a last look around the common room. "I think I've seen enough," she said. "Let's go to your office."

Dr. Poffenberger had ordered coffee for himself and Kevin Biederbecke, but Ms. Biederbecke had insisted on — and gotten — supercaffeinated cola. They settled down after Ms. Biederbecke refused the doctor's offer of a cigarette. "Never used 'em even after they took all the cancer out," she said. "Well, Doc, what's your pitch?"

Dr. Poffenberger smiled as sincerely as he could manage. "Nothing you haven't heard elsewhere, Ms. Biederbecke," he said. "You know what we can offer you here — involvement, companionship, security and unmatched medical care for as long as you like."

"I can get that deal in other places."

"Not like here," Dr. Poffenberger said. "Glory Road Estates was one of the very first of the specialized retirement homes, after all. We have more experience than most others — and our reputation speaks for itself. I presume you've checked our background with the Social Security Enforcement Division ... ?"

"Among other agencies, yes," Kevin Biederbecke said. "I can't fault your track record, Doctor — but that's not the only factor in my mother's decision, of course."

"Of course," Dr. Poffenberger said, "and I'd like to discuss that further."

"Go right ahead, Doc," Ms. Biederbecke said, carefully flavoring her tone with a trace of boredom.

"I'll be as brief as I can," the doctor assured

her. "Ms. Biederbecke, Mr. Biederbecke, you no doubt know that, a generation or two ago, even the best retirement homes were little better than places to park elderly people increasingly unable to care for themselves. The best of those homes were comfortable, and care was at least adequate. The worst of them — well, the horror stories persist to this day, and we need not go into them here."

"That's right," Ms. Biederbecke said, looking at her nails. "Save 'em for Halloween. Go on, Doc."

"Then came your generation, Ms. Biederbecke — the baby boomers. You were the healthiest and wealthiest generation in American history. Because many of you took care of yourselves earlier in life, your retirement years found you still active and healthy. You were not the kind of people to slink off humbly to a old-fashioned nursing home where the most exciting thing you could expect to do all month is vote on menus for the following month's meals."

Ms. Biederbecke stifled a yawn. "This is ancient history, Doc."

"So it is — but history is merely a prelude to the present, and here we are. Glory Road Estates is one of the oldest and most respected specialty leisure homes in the United States. We cater to the lifelong science fiction fan. No area of interest is too arcane for us — why, we even have a group that's building a replica Time Tunnel in the basement. Every day here is a convention day. There are no dead-dog parties, ever, because the con never ends!"

"That's what they said at Mount Willow, Doc. The mutt died, believe me."

"But, Ms. Biederbecke, we at Glory Road Estates have been willing to put everything in writing. Everything."

"Mount Willow put it all in writing, too,"

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Ms. Biederbecke fumed. “I worked my rear end off for those people, Doc. They’d ask me if I could find the guy who was the third assistant window washer in the twenty-third episode of *My Favorite Martian* for an appearance, and I would, because there’s no job too tough for *me*. They’d have me ask some writers to make personal appearances at Mount Willow, too, and I’d get them to show up, but then the administration people would forget to pick them up at the rapitrans station or accidentally bill them for expenses or some dumb thing. I mean, do you know how hard it is to find writers to be guests these days? In the first place, all the good ones kicked the bucket *years* ago.”

“I can imagine, Ms. Biederbecke — ”

“I’m the best programming chair there ever

was,” the old lady continued. “I *still* am. Getting old hasn’t slowed me up at all.”

“But, ma’am — ”

The old woman scowled, folded her arms, and sat silently.

“Don’t you *want* to come live with us, Ms. Biederbecke?”

She continued staring straight ahead, saying nothing.

“Mr. Biederbecke — ?” Dr. Poffenberger said tentatively.

“This is Mom’s business,” Kevin said, shaking his head. “I never interfere.”

Dr. Poffenberger sighed. “All right, all right,” he said heavily. “We’ll tear up the proposed contract, Ms. Biederbecke. Now, just how much more money *do* you want?”•