



## **EXPIRATION DATE**

**By**

**Debbie Kuhn**

**Craig was in a lousy mood by the time he pulled into his driveway on Howell Avenue. It had been Senior Citizen's Day at Winn-Dixie and the store had been overrun with blue-haired old ladies and elderly men in hats. He'd had to help several of them use their discount and debit cards at checkout – and argue with them over their expired coupons.**

**Then – on his way home – he'd ended up behind an old lady in a Buick who only had two speeds: creeping and crawling.**

**Craig sighed as he entered his house through the back door. He immediately zeroed in on the fridge and helped himself to one of his mother's light beers. She was working another double shift at the GE plant – thanks to the burden upstairs. She'd already told him he would have to settle for one of the local community colleges this fall, on a part-time schedule.**

More wonderful news – not that he'd decided on a career.

Craig heard his grandfather's nurse, Sandrine, moving around in the laundry room to his left. She was a soft-spoken, middle-aged black lady who had supposedly immigrated to Ohio from Martinique.

Craig chugged down the rest of his beer and then headed upstairs to change clothes.

His grandfather let out a grunt as he passed by his room. Craig paused in the doorway and stared at the invalid huddled on the hospital bed. The room reeked of urine.

Pathetic.

“What's the matter, old man? Need your diaper changed?”

His grandfather just stared at him with vacant, watery eyes.

“You know what I think, Gramps? All you old people should have expiration dates. That way the rest of us aren't hassled.” Craig grinned, imagining how it would be. “Yeah, sixty-five years for some of you – seventy-five for others. Nobody would make it past eighty without perfect health – and a young mind.”

Saliva dribbled from the corner of his grandfather's mouth.

“Pathetic.”

Craig turned around and was startled by Sandrine. The nurse was standing in the hall, as silent as death, holding a neatly folded stack of the old man's flannel pajamas.

“You should respect your grandfather, Mr. Craig,” she stated quietly, staring down at him from her superior height. “He is a wonderful person.”

Craig smirked. “How can you tell?”

He stepped aside and let Sandrine enter the room. She deposited the stack of clothes on the dresser, and then promptly closed the door in his face.

Witch. He couldn't believe she didn't resent all the disgusting duties she had to perform.

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It was 11:45 P.M. Craig sat on the back porch steps and smoked his last cigarette, enjoying the warm, breezy June night. He wasn't in the mood for sleep.

Gray clouds raced across the white, full moon at what seemed like an impossible speed. Watching them gave Craig a weird, exhilarating feeling – like all he had to do to hitch a ride was lift up his arms to the sky.

If only.

Maybe his nagging conscience was the reason he couldn't sleep – thanks to Sandrine.

But why feel guilty? He hadn't spent much time with his grandfather. If his mother hadn't kept the old man's sports trophies and war medals, Craig wouldn't know a thing about him.

Hell, he couldn't even remember his own father. The creep had run off when he was three.

Craig had no intentions of ever marrying – not that he had a girlfriend.

He finished his cigarette, and thoughts of raiding the fridge again were interrupted when he heard a tapping noise above him.

He looked up and saw Sandrine in the window of his grandfather's room. She gestured for him to come to her.

Terrific. What now?

Craig sprinted into the house and up the stairs.

The old man was shaking violently. Sandrine was trying to give him an injection.

"I need you to hold his legs down," she said calmly. "He's having a seizure."

No shit.

Craig put pressure on his grandfather's shins, and was surprised at how much effort it took for him to hold them still.

"Put your hands on his knees, Mr. Craig."

Craig shifted his weight, and Sandrine was able to inject the medicine into his grandfather's stomach.

The old man calmed down almost immediately. Sandrine held his wrist, checking his pulse.

As Craig started to move away from the bed, the nurse grabbed hold of his bare arm with her free hand.

"Thank you for helping me, Mr. Craig," she said, looking him straight in the eye.

**A strange tingling sensation moved up and down his arm. He pulled away.**

**“Has this happened to him before?”**

**She shook her head.**

**“What if he has another seizure when no one else is here to help?”**

**Sandrine gave him a queer little smile. “I always do what needs to be done, Mr. Craig – one way or the other.”**

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**God, he couldn't wake up. Why did he feel so tired?**

**Craig's tongue felt too big for his mouth. His body ached all over – and his stomach was sore.**

**He concentrated on opening his eyes. Sunlight filled the room, but everything looked blurry.**

**A foul odor hung in the air.**

**“How are you feeling, Sir?” Sandrine was by his bed.**

**No, it was his grandfather's hospital bed.**

**And he was standing next to Sandrine – that was his body, his clothes.**

**Craig let out a long, low moan. This couldn't be happening.**

**“What's the matter, old man? Need your diaper changed?”**

**Craig's eyes welled up with tears.**

**The other Craig leaned over him. “I never liked the name Larry anyway.”**

**Sandrine laughed – a beautiful, terrible sound.**

**Bitch. This wasn't fair. He didn't deserve this. Nobody deserved this.**

**“Pathetic,” said the young man. “I agree with everything you said, you know – every little word.”**

**“Expiration date,” the old Craig whispered. “My expiration date.”**

**His grandfather smiled. “That can be arranged.”**

**THE END**