

Not Yet

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OLD AND ON THEIR OWN. By Robert Coles, with photographs by Alex Harris and Thomas Roma. DoubleTake/Norton. 184 pp. \$27.50.

There are societies that regard long life as a blessing, that do not allow entire generations to be libeled as greedy geezers, that do not incessantly scheme to speed them off. Not ours. A Colorado governor told the old and sick they had a duty to die; he served on the board of directors of the Concord Coalition to

help lead a crusade against Social Security and Medicare, and President Clinton welcomes their counsel. Before he acts on it, however, he would do well to visit some of the beautiful people in this beautiful book.

Listen to Nellie, who at 95 greets the dawn: "Fancy meeting you again—one more time." Nearly blind, she tracks time by shadows. "I talk to the light," she says, "and I hear the darkness." Or George, 99, a self-taught "jack-of-all-trades" who loves rotund words like "quotidian" and mocks his own "loquacity" and "exuberance of verbosity." The prospect of becoming a "centenarian" next year and the pleasure of weekly readings by young volunteers help justify his continuing "my so-called life." At which Robert Coles comments, "Ready to fall, but not yet, strangely enough, not yet."

That is true of all eleven people who talk to Coles, a psychiatrist, in *Old and On Their Own*, and is evidently true of the forty-one who speak in striking photographs by Alex Harris and Thomas Roma. They have worked long and hard and live in pain, but fight to stay out of nursing homes, with only occasional help from offspring or visiting nurse or homemaker. And each is different. Laura and Anne cling to the memory of romantic movies that got them through the terrible thirties and World War II. Laura, depressed, talks to her walker, which she calls Clara. Anne became alcoholic when her husband died, saved herself by immersion in ballroom dancing, learns she has Parkinson's disease and wonders "if there will be any dancing where I'm headed."

A self-styled "crank," unnamed, rejects "mood-elevating" medication, telling his

doctors he is not depressed, just realistic. "I have to smile that they want (they expect) me to smile. Maybe *they* should try some of those 'happiness' pills they want to give me."

On the other hand, May Belle, who is 93, of slave and sharecropper stock, smiles a lot. She explains that it is not, as people tell her, because she has received "the gift of life.... Gifts don't hurt, and drag you down, and make every step seem like you've been walking forever; and gifts don't bring you a sick stomach when you eat.... I'm smiling for the Lord.... I'm not going to be feeling sorry for myself."

A retired engineer reproaches himself for complaining about his physical ordeal, considering the fate of young buddies in the war in Italy—"a dirty, dirty job," but one he still glories in. For a carpenter's wife, "it's an awful thing to say, but the war saved us, all of us, this country." She recalls Depression days: "My husband came home a beaten man, and a robbed man, sometimes: he'd worked with all his energy, and he got no pay for it—and now he had to face us. No wonder we fought like cats and dogs!" Now prosperous, the husband recalls having thought of killing himself for a \$100 life insurance policy he could not keep up. But he would not seek relief. After sixty-five years of married life, they still quarrel, some.

Not quarrelsome at all as they go about their kitchen chores, Callie and Charles remind Coles of a ballet. They joke about their pain. Charles says he can't remember half the things his hands have done, but the best was to tie the knot with her. Born ninety years ago in Alabama, they migrated north. He, too, often went unpaid for work done, but he refused relief. "My pride... told me no, don't take a single cent from Uncle Sam." In those days, if you came upon a

quarter, you'd think it was God sending a message. "Now, we're talking about cashing a Social Security check." Callie said they were on easy street now.

During an earlier campaign against Social Security, David Gergen told about the

first person to draw a Social Security check, at age 65. She'd paid very little in payroll tax, and she lived to be 100. Gergen thought that was a great joke on the taxpayers. If he reads this book, he may come around to thinking it a cause for pride. ■

John L. Hess wrote "Confessions of a Greedy Geezer," in the April 2 and May 21, 1990, issues.