

## Abundance

These days Lem wheeled the picnic table from the shed to the edge of the driveway around nine or so. He set out the items that, for him, no longer served a purpose. A dented percolator coffee pot. The air popper—a Christmas gift from the kids at least twenty years before. Lem preferred the kind of salty popcorn that came in a compact flat package meant for the microwave. His wife Francie had liked her popcorn air-popped, though, no salt, and Lem felt a pang setting the popper on the table next to a faded box of Lincoln Logs. Francie'd been dead now more than a year, and Lem was cleaning house, selling what he could at the side of the road.

“If you don't claim your junk,” Lem had told his kids, “don't ask me later what's happened to it.”

Wayne, who lived in a house on the west side of the farm, and Brig, married to one of the Bell boys and living in the old farmhouse down the road, sorted through their belongings in the attic and the cellar. Brig took some of Francie's things, too, pieces of costume jewelry and handkerchiefs that smelled of lavender.

Francie would have hung on to the kids' things forever, and to the air popper and the rusty garden tools and the enormous earthenware soup tureen.

It all had to go.

Lem walked across the street to plant the large sign, handmade with black painted letters, next to the mailbox: SALE TODAY HOUSEHOLD ITEMS ANTIQUES NO CLOTHING. He hadn't included a date like he'd seen on some signs, or even *Thurs-Fri-Sat*; he would sit at the edge of the driveway whenever he chose to, as many days as necessary.

He waited and watched the traffic in and out of Bell Meadows across the road. Bell Avenue, once a narrow strip of gravel that cut

*Sara Biren*

through the fields to the barn behind the farmhouse, was now the entrance to a development of townhouses, marked by a stone arch bearing its name.

He waited for neighbors to stop by for a quick hello—the Hansons from next door or Buddy Aleshire from over the other side of the Bell farm. Lots of young families lived in the new townhouses, people he didn't know but who returned his wave. He waited for cars to slow or maybe even stop, for strangers to pick through his belongings on the picnic table, to buy a picture frame or set of worn steak knives or jigsaw puzzles, brand-new in their boxes, of the Golden Gate Bridge or Nantucket in autumn.

The puzzles were Francie's. Francie was the one with enough patience to fit the tiny, jumbled pieces together to make the whole beautiful picture, not Lem. But Francie had struggled with diabetes most of her adult life, and when she'd begun to lose her vision those last two years, the pictures had fogged and faded. At the end of her life, even Lem had only been a silvery shape to her, no clear edges, blurring into the walls and the light of the room.

Lem had hoped someone would buy these puzzles the first day he'd set up. He'd marked them at only fifty cents apiece, in shaky permanent ink on a jagged scrap of masking tape. *What a steal*, he'd written above the price. After five days, they remained.

Mary Alice Bell, Brig's mother-in-law who now lived with her husband Vernon in the housing development named for them, stopped by with a dozen eggs and two pints of canned tomatoes in a SuperValu grocery bag. Mary Alice and Vern had been friends of Lem's and Francie's since kindergarten.

"Brig sends these," she said. She shaded her eyes with a leathery, spotted hand. "She might stop by later."

"All right."

"Bit hot out here, isn't it, Lem?"

"Might be, closer on to afternoon," Lem said.

Mary Alice stood at the end of the picnic table. "Sad to see it go," she said.

## Abundance

Lem wasn't sure which of the items on the table she meant. He got up out of the lawn chair and picked up the jigsaw puzzles. He handed them to his neighbor.

"Take these," he said. "They're brand new. Francie never got a chance to open them."

"Oh, Lem," Mary Alice said. Her words were thick with phlegm. She'd been a good friend to Francie, and a good neighbor.

"Go on and take them. It's been over a year, Mary Alice. I needed to do a bit of housecleaning. If you won't use them, give them to one of your kids."

Mary Alice held the puzzles as Lem tied them together with twine he found in the shed. She walked across the road, past the mailbox and Lem's hand painted sign, up Bell Avenue toward the townhouses. She moved at a slow, even pace. She carried the puzzles as she and Francie had once carried their schoolbooks, strapped together with older brothers' belts, decades ago.

Another image came to him then, of those two girls, Francie always a bit heavier, wider through the hips, in dark straight skirts and matching plaid jackets. It was a photograph he'd seen in one of Francie's albums. They sat on the steps of the old brick schoolhouse in town, laughing, and Francie pointed at Lem, the photographer.

Nearly half a century had passed since those four—Lem and Francie, Mary Alice and Vern—had left the brick schoolhouse, already couples before graduating in 1951, and married soon after.

But Lem was not fond of looking back. Francie had maintained the photo albums and scrapbooks, had wandered through antique shops looking for her mother's pattern of green Depression glass. On Sunday afternoons she would play scratchy records of Artie Shaw and songs from Judy Garland movies, reminisce with the neighbors and Brig around the enormous dining room table with steaming cups of coffee – *remember when, remember the time*.

Lem had been the one to look forward—to being married and setting up house, to a good growing season and a plentiful crop, to

*Sara Biren*

raising the kids, to the kids leaving home. He looked forward now to visits from his grandchildren, to Lions Club meetings and steak fries. In the last year, with less to keep him busy now that Wayne and his three boys had taken over running the farm, it had become much harder to avoid remembering. Without Francie to keep the memories for him, they bobbed to the surface, begged him to look back.

For generations, in this eastern part of Wright County, well beyond the Twin Cities and growing suburbs, not much changed. The kids and grandkids attended the same brick schoolhouse, now just for the high school grades, where Lem and Vern played football and Mary Alice and Francie belonged to the Home Ec Club and Tumbling Team. Folks stayed in the area. With few exceptions, the same families had farmed the land or run the businesses in town for a century or more, many of them on this stretch of County road.

It had all begun to change these last couple of years as more people crowded the suburbs and farms began to fail. It became easier for families to sell their land to developers. Bell Meadows was one of the first developments of townhouses, but the few miles from here to town were now dotted with signs announcing housing opportunities. Lem and Francie had not wanted to sell any of their land as the Bells had done, leaving only a small portion for Ben and Brig.

Ben and Brig had two children—Dean, a high school senior, and Amber, a year younger, the only granddaughter. Amber had been Francie's favorite. From her grandmother, Amber learned latch hook and counted cross-stitch, how to bake chocolate walnut brownies and spritz cookies, the foxtrot and all the words to *The Trolley Song* and *Swinging on a Star*.

In the winter months, after chores and homework were finished, Amber would sit with Francie and Lem in the family room, warmed by the wood stove, a bowl of pretzels and a jigsaw

## Abundance

puzzle on the card table. Most nights Lem sat in the recliner on the opposite side of the room with a tattered old mystery or the crossword from the Minneapolis newspaper. Sometimes he wandered over to the table, eyed up the puzzle for a minute or two, sliding pieces to Amber and pointing out where she should place them.

The puzzles were of places they had never been, cities around the United States, mostly, and some European locations: the New York City skyline, Key West, Stonehenge, Windsor Castle, the canals of Venice.

Studying and arranging the tiny pieces, a thousand in each puzzle, Francie and Amber talked. Amber told of troubles at school or of babysitting Buddy Aleshire's four ill-behaved children. She talked about soccer games and shopping trips to the Mall of America with her best friend Heidi. For every story, Francie had a memory of her own.

"We used to go to Bailey's Diner every day after school for a Cherry Coke and a Snickers bar. It used to be on the same block as the Jack & Jill is now. Tiny little place, no bigger than this family room."

Francie continued, her head bent over the puzzle. "So we'd hang out at Bailey's for a bit, and then the boys would head off in somebody's car and the girls would walk down to Joanie Kemp's. She was the only one of us girls that lived in town, and the only one with a record player, can you believe that?"

Sometimes Lem would grunt at Francie's stories, saying, "All sunshine and roses, was it? She won't tell you about the hard times, Amber. Myself, I usually had to get up three, four in the morning to work my chores in the bitter cold before going to school. And there wasn't a whole lot of money going around back then, even if Cokes were only a nickel."

"Well, that's true enough," Francie agreed, "but we got along all right."

*Sara Biren*

Francie and Amber told each other stories and the puzzles came together—giant landscapes and picture postcards, too lovely to destroy and toss the pieces back into their boxes. Their favorites—London’s Tower Bridge, the Hollywood sign, the Eiffel Tower—they shellacked and hung along the wall which followed the staircase to the second floor.

Just before Christmas of 1998, Francie began to lose her sight, first noticing the difficulty in recognizing which puzzle pieces fit together, the blurred print of the morning newspaper. Within months, she could no longer read, no longer see the winter farm scene forming piece by piece on the surface of the card table.

Amber had offered to finish the puzzle for her grandmother, hang it on the wall next to Westminster Abbey.

“No, it’s all right, sweetie,” Francie had said. “You’re busy.”

The unfinished puzzle had remained on the table. Francie, moving with slow and deliberate care, had dusted it every so often, but did not make an attempt to return the puzzle to its box. Lem had not offered.

At one o’clock, Brig brought Lem a bag lunch—ham sandwich, potato chips, and a thermos of milk. Brig looked a lot like Francie had in her early forties, dark curls just beginning to gray around the temple.

“Mary Alice said you’d set up shop again today. Did you remember to eat?”

“I’ll eat when I’m hungry,” Lem said. He removed the sandwich from the bag and took a large bite. “Thank you.”

“How’s business today?”

“Not bad. A few things go every day.”

“How long do you plan on running this operation?” Brig asked.

“However long.”

## Abundance

Brig stepped over to the table and ran her fingers across the spines of a row of books, held up with ceramic elephant bookends marked at a dollar.

“What would Mom say, knowing you’re selling her things? Her cookbooks, her tea kettle?”

Brig, their only daughter, had been close to Francie, a lot like her. Both were sentimental about *things*, photographs, ticket stubs, and figurines, both full of memories.

“What good does it do, keeping them?” Lem asked.

“For her memory, Dad. To remember her by.”

“Take anything you like, Brig, if it helps you remember her.”

Brig turned to him. “I’ve taken so much already, Dad. I’d take everything if I could. I just wish you’d leave things where they were, so we could walk into the house and everything would be the way she’d left it.”

They’d had this conversation before. Lem understood how his daughter felt, but for him, it was easier to remove everything from his sight.

Francie had not adjusted well to her dimming vision. She had moved more slowly, her right hand in front of her to catch herself before she walked into sharp cabinet edges or stubbed her toes. Mary Alice and Brig had helped with many of her household chores, but Francie was stubborn. She would make an attempt before she turned over any of her duties, and there were many tasks she did until the day she died—dishes, dusting, feeding the chickens.

Some days, Lem would come into the house and find her crying, a broken figurine or plate on the dining room table in front of her.

“I’m sorry,” she would say, “I’ve grown so clumsy.”

But more than once he’d seen her frustration turn to anger, had seen that she’d smashed the plate to the floor.

*Sara Biren*

Some days, he would find his wife sitting at the puzzle table in the family room, moving the pieces around, holding them close to her eyes, feeling the shape of it with her index finger. The sun would stream in from the west, warming her face, and when she somehow could feel Lem standing in the doorway, watching her, she would lift her face toward him, to the sun.

Their marriage had not been perfect. There had been plenty of times when the money ran out. Wayne and Brig had their wild, reckless teenage years like anybody. In the early 1980s they'd nearly lost everything. And there had been Francie's diabetes, which had worsened in the last decade, stolen her sight.

One night a month before Francie died, Lem found her on the stairs, her eyes closed, fingertips moving across a puzzle on the wall. The staircase was dark. It was after two a.m.

He didn't want to frighten her, so he flipped a light switch before he spoke. She turned her face toward the light at the landing.

"Francie, come back to bed."

He did not need to ask what she was doing. She had done it a number of times in the daytime hours, taking several minutes to walk up or down the stairs, touching the pictures on the wall. Sometimes he heard her whisper, *Here's the Abbey, so this one would be the dunes on Cape Cod. Cape Cod, Westminster Abbey, Tower Bridge.*

"I can feel the edges of the pieces," she said, not moving her worn fingers from the puzzle on the wall. "I don't want to forget."

"Francie," Lem said again, "please come back to bed."

Sometimes, after Francie died, Lem could not sleep. He would sit in the kitchen and drink orange juice and try not to think about his wife. One of these sleepless nights he went into the family room and stood over Francie's card table. The unfinished puzzle, just beginning to take shape, had collected a thin layer of dust.

## Abundance

This puzzle had been an unusual choice. It was not a distant shore or historical scene or tourist attraction. It was a farm, similar to their own, with a large white house, red barns, fence. The ground and trees were dusted with snow. An old John Deere stood in front of one of the barns, a wagon attached.

Lem closed his eyes to see how well he could remember the picture, the layout of the farm, but it quickly faded from his mind. He felt the hurt of missing his wife tear at the inside of his throat, at the back of his eyes. He swept an arm across the card table, knocking the puzzle and all the loose pieces to the floor.

That night, Lem decided to move off the farm. He told only Mary Alice and Vern, and purchased one of the townhouses just down the street from where the Bells lived at the end of the cul-de-sac. He had not yet told his children, although they must have suspected as he sorted through their belongings and emptied the house.

A woman in a boxy station wagon pulled into the driveway. He recognized the car and the woman, who lived in Bell Meadows. Usually she had three small children with her.

“Hello, Mr. Wesley,” she said.

Lem did not know the woman’s name. He nodded.

“I’ve been meaning to stop by,” she said, “for the sale, I mean. It’s been a busy summer, running my kids to swim lessons and tee-ball and tap.”

Lem nodded again, made noises of agreement.

The women picked up a cross-stitch kit of an old-fashioned Santa, read the information on the packaging, and set it back in its place. She flipped through the pages of a *Betty Crocker’s Cooky Book* from the early sixties.

“Oh,” she said, “only a quarter? My grandmother had this book.” She tucked it under one arm.

*Sara Biren*

She moved on and came to the air popper. She set the cookbook down to have both hands free and examined the cord, the butter tray, the fit of the yellow plastic chute.

Francie's air popper. Saturday nights, Francie loved to pop up a big batch—no salt, the tiniest bit of melted butter—and watch old movies. She loved Judy Garland movies the best and gushed over Cary Grant every time the classic movies channel played *The Philadelphia Story*. Francie loved the old days, the old movies, the old music. And Lem had loved her for it, her fondness of remembering, her cheerful hold on the past.

There was no one to hold onto that for him now.

“Wait,” he said. He sprung up from the lawn chair, startling the woman. “You can't buy that. My wife...my wife loved popcorn.”

The woman smiled and set the popper back onto the table. “I know,” she said.

Lem was confused. This woman couldn't have known Francie. No one had moved into the townhouses until after Francie was gone.

“I mean,” she said, “I understand.”

Lem sunk back into the chair. The woman opened her pocketbook and found a quarter.

“Here's for the cookbook,” she said. “I think I'll bring my kids back. They might like some of these old toys. Will your sale be on tomorrow?”

Lem eyed the remaining items on the worn picnic table. Surely Wayne wouldn't mind storing what was left after today. He was tired.

“No,” he said, “'fraid not. On till about six tonight and that's it.”

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