

Bob had never been in this part of Saint Paul, what they called Lowertown, at the foot of the Smith Bridge. It was a forty minute drive from River Falls; the dashboard clock on his ancient Ford read 5:54 am. His chest felt heavy this morning, which was unusual for him. He'd always been an early riser, waking promptly at five every morning to walk the dog. Once he'd completed his morning constitutional, his day felt set properly. It didn't take much for Bob to feel satisfied. He liked it when the Twins were winning, he liked grilling steaks on his prized grill, and he liked to work. Business was good, too. Had been even through the recession. Everyone still needed master electricians.

Lately, things were different. He thought of Carol, his wife of 25 years, packed and waiting nervously at their back door, a speech prepared for him. "Bob, I want you to know..." she had choked up here. "I want you to know that I love you. I just ain't happy though." She fell into the vernacular of their rural Wisconsin youth. "I been trying, and I think maybe you just can't understand what I need." She had wept onto her New Balance walking shoes, twisting a Kleenex in her fingers. "I'll be at Mother's until I can figure out what needs to be done." She paused with a hand on the doorknob, then whispered, "Okay. Bye, then."

He had dialed her cellphone several times, then clicked off before she answered. He had no words, and she hadn't called him back. He desperately wanted to say the thing that would bring her back, but nothing came. His voicemail box remained empty, as the electronic voice told him at least five times every day.

His coffee from the SA station on 94 coming into Saint Paul was still scalding. His thoughts hung limply like the fog weighing on the bridge in front of him. He was doing the electricals at a pre-Civil war place, being restored to be a saloon. He gazed at its facade now with interest; these old places made him feel content, a little spiritual, even. Lots of souls passed through old places like this, he thought. Made you feel part of something to help restore them. He grabbed his gear and trudged up to the door.

His watch read 10:13 am when he heard a soft knock on the door. Bob assumed it was the owner, but when he opened the door, a woman stood there expectantly, holding a metal tray with a percolator pot, thick mugs, and a wrapped parcel. She looked to be about seventy, with a flowered-print house dress and low-heeled black shoes. Her silver hair was waved up in pins and a pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses perched on her long nose. "Hi there, can I help you?" Bob said.

"Hello, hello! Just bringing over some lunch for you all. You moving in here?" She used the country term for a mid-morning snack. Bob immediately felt at ease.

"Uh, no ma'm! Just doing some electrical work for the owner here."

“Oh, wonderful! So glad someone is keeping up this place. So much history here. I live across the way there, over at 454 Smith.” She gestured with her head to the rambling white house across the street, with a neat limestone walk leading up to a storm door, surrounded by windows. A brick addition poked out from the back of the house.

“Yes, sure is a nice thing, m’am. I like these historic buildings. You’ll come in and have some of that with me, I hope? It’s just me here right now.”

“The woman came in, introducing herself as Helen O’Leary. As she poured the fresh coffee, she said, “Daughter is staying with me this week. Sad thing, that. She left her husband a few weeks ago.”

Bob choked slightly on his coffee. “Well that is a shame. Bad deal, I’m sorry.”

Helen O’Leary had brown eyes, rimmed in a blue ring. They were warm and alert. “In my day, once you said “I do,” you stayed put. But that isn’t always all it’s cracked up to be either, is it?”

“No ma’m, it isn’t.” He gulped his banana bread.

“She might go back to him, I don’t know. He’s a good man, my son-in-law. Rosie says they’re like strangers now, though. It gets that way after so many years, I guess. I was married for 50 years before I lost my Bill, two summers ago now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” She looked at him suddenly. “You gotta be brave, though.”

Startled, Bob set his cup down. “Brave? Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“Lots of ordinary things take bravery. Like being married.” She sipped her coffee. “That’s what I said to Rosie, anyway.” She drained her cup. “Well, I do talk! I just came to say howdy, so I’d better head home before Rosie gets back!”

One her way out, Helen turned to him as she opened the door. “Be brave, Bob. Okay!” It sounded like a benediction. She turned away and made her way across the road to the aging white house, wreathed in fog.

It was near quitting time when the owner stopped by. Bob gave him a progress report of the day. “Spoke with your neighbor across the way there. Seems like a nice lady, about seventy? She brought over some coffee and treats for us, we had a nice chat.”

“Older lady, really? I thought a single guy lived over there. Huh!” Rich peered out the window. Dusk was falling, and the fog had lifted long ago. Bob followed his gaze.

There, across the road, stood a crumbling brick shack, not big enough for a car. He recognized it as the rear addition to the white section of the house he'd seen early today. The well-kept sidewalk was gone, in its place nothing but crumbs of concrete. On the sagging door to the brick dwelling the crooked metal numbers read “454.” “Small place she has there,” Rich remarked.

Bob gathered his things and put his keys and cell phone in the pocket of his jacket. He felt brave enough to make a stop on the way home.