

A Front Foyer

A week after Mary died, Stanley Samuelson hung two pictures in the front foyer of their home at #2 Happy Circle Drive. They were hung to the sides of a small side table, the picture of Mary on the left, the aerial photograph of the Happy Acres Subdivision on the right. Stan thought the photograph of Mary was taken at about the time they had moved into their new house more than forty-five years ago. It was enlarged shortly thereafter and had hung in their bedroom for almost forty years.

The aerial photograph showed Happy Acres when it was first plowed and staked; it was taken before the first foundation was dug. You could see Happy Circle Drive in its primitive state where the plow and levelers had crossed the furrows of the old field. There was a bowl and small lamp on the table; a plain straight-backed chair was on the right side against the wall.

A month after Mary was buried, Stan went into the foyer and moved the chair out from the wall. He turned it around and sat down without looking up. Then he gazed first at Mary and then at the aerial view of the old farm field.

So," he thought, "old pastures become housing tracks. What happens to old men? Mary, I miss you so much."

Stan closed his eyes and without realizing it, he began to hum the song he and Mary had shared for so many years. He scratched his chin. "No one ever accused us of being highbrows or cultured snobs. Maybe we were not. We just had our Bach and only the kids knew."

He smiled. He continued to rock gently back and forth. He looked up at Mary and sighed. Little by little, he recalled the words. It was as if they were coming from behind Mary's picture. He sang them over and over again. "*Mein Freund ist mein, ... und ich bin sein.*" Mary would start and then he would harmonize, one voice overlapping the other, hand in hand. "My friend is mine, and I am his." Eventually when the music ... well, they just would repeat themselves when the singing got more involved.

Stan looked down at his hands. Mary was no longer with him, his hands were free and he let them move as if they were conducting one of the choruses. He realized that he was at the start of the Cantata, Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme, *Sleepers Awake*. Oh, he wished he could wake up and find Mary with him again. He could hear all the voices. Everything was clear. It was only a matter of time. He started to tell Mary, "See, I can remember. It's Cantata #140. We always sang it together."

He closed his eyes and he was a young man, at his first job in New York City. His apartment was around the corner from the Manhattan Bach Society. Stan smiled. Chance. On a whim, he had entered their office and bought a season ticket for series of cantatas performed in churches around Manhattan. The final gala was held at the Cloisters in upper Manhattan. He had never heard a cantata before but he did know about Bach. He had heard the Brandenburg Concertos in his high school music class.

Stan laughed at himself. He thought of the subscription as, “a personal gift from the cultural center of America to a Midwest bumpkin. A gift that I would share with Mary. I never would have guessed it.”

He returned to their duet and sang, “*May I soon awake and find Mary with me.*” The words almost fit; Stan did not care. “After all, it is Cantata #140, *Sleepers Awake.*”

Once again, he hummed along with the first chorus. He talked to the pictures. “I’ll wake up, Mary. Soon I will wake up and you will be by my side again. You’ll see.”

Stan continued to sing, slightly off key, but now in a loud voice. “*Er kommt, der Braut’gam kommt,*” thinking all the time, “Yes, it would be nice to go visit Mary. What was it she had said to get us here to Happy Acres forty-five years ago?”

“Come, Stan. It is a nice Sunday. I’ll bring Kevin over to my mother. I just have this feeling that this place will be right for us. You’ll see.”

Stan recalled how they had driven out to what was still farmland and how proud he was to find Robinson Road at the edge of the city. Robinson Road was only two narrow lanes back then. They found a small caravan with wooden steps leading up to a small porch. Flags were flapping in the crisp fall breezes. There was music coming out of the open door that made you think you were at a parade or a state fair.

Stan started to get up in order to have a closer look at the photograph of the field. He took a step forward and was able to make out the flags. He closed his eyes and was able to hear the loud blaring music that was quickly turned down as soon as he and Mary crossed the threshold. A man, not ten years older than he was at that time, came out from behind a desk, an unlit cigar in his left hand. He made them welcome with a friendly laugh and a joke about his unit cigar.

“It’s one of these Italian ones, ones where the smell is really worse than its look. I light this, I no longer have a potential buyer, or maybe even one that’s still alive to sign on the dotted line.”

Stan’s nose sniffled. “See Mary, I can still smell that unlit cigar. My memory is holding out after all.”

Mr. G., Stan could not remember his name, invited them to look at the model of his subdivision. He told them all about the Brooklyn Dodgers. “I named these streets after my favorite players. Those bums finally won and then they up and relocated. I won’t even say where!”

“I put up those Campanella Courts and the city liked me so much they gave me permits for the Happy Acres Subdivision. More upscale but not snooty, mind you. You can see Pee Wee Pond, almost like a bull’s eye right there in the center. Lovely plots.

“You have kids? We’ll have blue gills stocked and you can teach them to fish. Heck, if you’ve any girls, they make the best fisherwomen. I’ve plenty of good sites left. We got several model plans and even these can be easily customized. If you wish, I can walk you through the division.”

Mary told him she came prepared and had put their boots in the trunk of the car, just in case. “The advert wasn’t all that clear,” she had said. “We’ll walk around ourselves if that’s all right. Your model here is pretty clear.”

Stan was thinking, “Ah, what a day that was. The sun was just right through the broken clouds. We walked halfway in and down to the pond. The pond was surrounded by cattails; there was even a family of ducks floating by the far edge.

“Mary’s cheeks were beaming pink from the sun and happiness. She told me how much she liked how the plot marked #2 rolled gently down to the pond.”

“Well, kids, what do you think? Do you have any questions? I can see the country air agrees with you both. It’s even better for kids. We won’t allow any fences and the children will be free to run with their friends. If I know them, they’ll be going from Mom to Mom getting more milk and cookies at each back porch. If you’re curious, let me give you more information and run up some numbers. Never any obligation. Did you find one plot that really tugged at your boots?”

Stan got up and moved closer to the aerial view. He peered more closely at #2. “Yup, Mary told him she was taken by #2 and Mr. G., hmm, Mr. Gara... something, busied himself for a couple of minutes pulling together a package of papers. He then explained that these were just some tentative numbers and that he included the names of two different mortgage agents at two different banks, “But you can check with others. No harm.” He added, “The Better Business Bureau likes me, so please give them a call too if you wish.”

Stan scratched his chin. “Yeh, I think Mary had an uncle in construction and he had said Mr. G. was tops.”

He walked right up to the picture and put his three middle fingers on the plot marked in faint blue ink, #2. He chuckled, “That blue is mostly faded, just like me.”

He moved two feet to his left and placed those same fingers on Mary’s lips. They stayed there for a minute before he brought them to his own lips.

Stan returned the chair to the wall alongside the table. He turned around and shuffled back down the hall towards the kitchen. He started singing the last part of their duet, both parts.

Ich will mit dir -- du sollst mit mir –

In Himmels Rosen weiden,

Da Freude die Fulle, da Wonne wird sein.

(I will be with you, and you shall be with me.

We’ll wander in Heaven’s rosy pastures,

Full of joy, in contentment.)