

# **“Noble Encounters”**

## **For February, 2000**

**by The Delvings**

George and Kara’s old avocado-colored washer had been acting up for a month. George thought it was something in the timer mechanism; Kara said it was because it was avocado-colored.

They put in a call to the local repair service. “Oh, it’s a Typhoon? Well, there’s only one person to call for that brand. Menno, out of Topeka.” George got Menno’s number, put in a call (Menno’s wife manned the phones), and within a few hours, Menno himself made an appearance.

The parking spot in front of their garage was completely filled by the 30-foot step van, with “Menno’s Appliance Service” painted in huge letters across the side. George walked up to the passenger door, with Droopy tagging along and serenaded by Lightning’s incessant barking. A smiling, bearded man slung back the door and greeted George with a handshake, while George marvelled at the insides of the big truck.

The interior of the truck was an organizer’s dream. Every square inch of wall space was filled with belts, fan blades, pipe sections, drive belts, and tools, tools, tools. White pegboard stretched across the walls and ceiling, with elastic bands holding everything in place. Carefully crafted wooden drawers, each latched against the bounce and jounce of rural travel, held smaller pieces. And specially-sized display shelves held brochures, service manuals and miscellaneous repair books.

“Wow, this is great!” George exclaimed. Menno laughed and invited him up. George checked out the built-in speakers, the stereo receiver embedded above the driver’s seat, even the shoplights carefully slung along the ceiling for extra light.

“So what do you do, George?” Menno asked, as he got a few tools and some parts together .

“Oh, a little computer work, some writing. My wife and I do a local column every month or so.”

“Really? I do a little writing myself. Self-help and do-it-yourself advice. That sort of thing.”

Menno gave a little laugh, turned around and searched through one of the display shelves. In time, he drew out a small newspaper. Unfolding it to the middle section, he displayed it with pride to George. “It’s the first half of a story on fixing your kitchen. Go on, keep it. I’ve a got a few extra.”

They chatted all during the hour-something that it took Menno to fix the old washer. George invited Menno back sometime in the spring, when the winter snow had departed and the hand-laid dry river bed in the side yard was visible. Laying on his back, working on the drive belt, Menno shared his own rock-moving experiences, trying to build up a retaining wall on his and his wife’s lakefront.

“Well, call me up if you need some help moving any big stones,” George offered.

They settled up the bill, while one of George’s neighbors came by to ask Menno for his input on their gas stove.

About an hour later, Lightning’s barking announced that Menno had returned. George answered the door, and Menno handed him a second newspaper. “It’s the continuation of the first half.” He gave that Menno laugh again as he walked away. “Didn’t want to leave you hanging.”

# “Noble Encounters”

For March, 2000

by The Delvings

On the table before them were a matched pair of deep bowls, hand-painted in bright tones of blue and yellow on a porcelain white background. The colors of the food within the bowls were even more stunning: green bits of spinach peeking out from beneath the earthen browns of roasted portobellos. An amber ocean of linguini flowed underneath, surmounted by creamy waves of reddish sesame-and-garlic sauce. A half-moon of french bread floated like a storm-tossed boat, without oars and in imminent danger of being drowned.

“This is heavenly!” George exclaimed around his mouthful of food.

“Yes, it is rather good,” Kara replied, more delicately. “Do you think it needs anything more? More sauce?”

“No, th’ sauce is fine,” he said, spearing another large mouthful. “About two hundred times more mushrooms.” He looked across the table at her and commented earnestly, “You can never have enough ‘shrooms.”

Just as the wondrous tastes filled their mouths, their ears were serenaded by the music of the gods.

A concert was underway, the setting a local coffee house, the performers a group of local artists. Acoustic guitars complemented the delicate voices just as the spinach and mushrooms complemented the pasta. They played Etta James, Richard Thompson and Patty Larkin, and played them strikingly well. But even the greatest world’s symphonies would have paled in comparison to the food.

*There’s an all-night party outside my door  
Sliver of light lying on the floor  
Well I take it in my hand so I can see  
Don’t worry ‘bout me...*

George sipped chianti from a carnival-glass water tumbler, Kara drank water from a taller cut-glass goblet. The intimacy of the moment compelled Kara to stretch her hand across the table. George opened his and Kara’s slipped within.

Music and fragrances filled the room. It was difficult to decide what to concentrate on next, the aromas or the sounds.

They leaned against the chair backs and digested the wonderful meal, while the guitarists strummed and the singers wove their mystical dreams.

*Ooo wee, ride me high,  
Tomorrow’s the day  
My bride’s gonna come.  
Oh no, we’re gonna fly  
Down to the easy chair...*

“Room for dessert?” Kara said to the air, a dreamy smile on her lips.

“Mmmmm,” was George’s equally dreamy reply, and then as an afterthought, though it was completely unnecessary, “Great meal.”

“Don’t let me forget what I did,” Kara said, as she headed off to the kitchen with an armful of dirty dishes.

“Sure, honey,” George said, as he rose from the table and crossed to the ancient stereo. He slowly turned the knob, and the volume from the radio program softened, faded and was gone.

# “Noble Encounters” For May, 2000

by The Delvings

George and Kara rarely picked up hitchhikers, but the three elderly, bedraggled men looked so forlorn, they felt compelled to stop an offer them a ride.

The first man who got in appeared Middle Eastern, with dark skin and long unwashed hair, and wore a tattered white cloak down past his knees, which were muddy and bruised. The second man also appeared Middle Eastern, or maybe Arabic, and was also dressed in a flowing garment of simple white cloth. The third man had even darker skin, but had the face of a Hindu, and wore an unadorned blue robe belted with a sash at the waist.

“Thanks for the ride, friends,” said the first man. “I wish we could repay you for your kindness, but we are poor travellers with no money between us.”

“That’s okay,” said George, as he pulled back onto the busy road. “What are you guys doing out here on foot?”

The second man answered, “This is as far as We could run, when We finally lost them.”

“Lost them? You mean, someone was chasing you?” Kara asked, concerned.

“Just the whole population of that little town back there,” the third man answered. “Seems like We irritated just about everyone We spoke to.”

“What were you doing, selling vacuum cleaners?” George asked in a joking manner.

The first man said simply, “We were preaching the Word.” After a short pause, he added, “Of God.”

Kara studied them closer, aware of a certain air of power about the three men. “And you are...?”

“Whenever We tell people Our names, they scoff at Us and call Us liars,” said the second man. “Just know this: We came back, the three of Us, because the messages We brought the first time have been devalued by the currency of your modern world: violence, material possessions and personal desires.”

“What do you mean?” asked George, trying to picture all three men in his rear view mirror.

“Our names are not as important as what We represent,” said the second man. “Know this: I once was a man of war, a fierce soldier, who thought religion was spread by the edge of a sword, with no concern for the unbelievers. I was wrong.” The second man did have the physique of a warrior, Kara noted, strong arms and wide shoulders. He continued, “I left for My followers a book of teaching that I thought would lead them through the tough times they would face. But I never dreamed that after a thousand years, they’d preach Holy Wars against so many non-believers.” He shrugged his shoulders in dismay. “I should have used that line of Yours: those who live by the sword...,” he said to the first man.

“Didn’t help My followers any. Crusades and terrible wars throughout the ages have been fought in My name, often with both sides vehemently assured I was with them.”

The third man gazed out the window. “I once was a rich and powerful nobleman, but I gave it all up when I realized how possessions and money can insulate one from the truth all around them. I tried to teach others to concentrate on their inner selves, and not concern themselves with clothing or fancy houses or rich foods. And now, the most powerful land these days has more food than the richest kings I have known, while their noblewomen try to starve themselves to look like twelve-year-old girls. And the rest of the world wants only to catch up with them!” He shook his head slowly. “Such a mixed-up place.”

“We thought We’d begin small,” said the first man. “Come to the heartland, talk to the farmers, the small shopkeepers, the salt of the earth.”

“And what happened?” asked Kara.

The second man said, “I told them to give up their weapons, and they called Me a bleeding-heart liberal who wanted to trample their God-given right to shoot whomever they liked.” He scowled. “I do not recall My God ever granting that right.”

The third man said, “I asked them to give up their possessions and share what they had with their fellow man. They called Me a socialist and an anarchist, and told Me I wouldn’t be saying that if I actually had anything of value.” He gazed at the large SUVs flying past them on the main road. “I do think they’d be healthier if they walked more and drove less.”

The first man said, “All I wanted was for them to believe that beyond their lives, there was a Father who loved them and wanted the best for them. That this world could be another Eden if they would just love their fellow man.” He looked down at his feet, fighting back tears. “They called Me a dreamer, a supporter of deviate sexual ways. They cast Me out of their eating establishment and pelted Me with bad vegetables.”

“I told You to wait until after the lunch-time rush,” said the second man. “They get surly when they’re forced to wait for anything.”

“So, what are your plans?” George asked.

“We thought about taking Our message to the media, but We’ve been turned down by all the major networks. They say it’s sweeps month, and their schedules are all booked up,” said the third man.

“I think We should leave them to their own ends,” said the second man. “Let them continue to destroy the planet until there’s practically nothing left. Then they’ll listen.”

“That’s kind of harsh,” said George. “Say, I used to work in advertising, and they always taught us that if you reached the consumers when they were young, you’d have them for life.”

“Hmmm,” mused the first man. “Talk to the children. Say, that’s not a bad idea. Where would you suggest?”

Kara studied the three. “Well, three men in loose robes hanging around a schoolyard would get you picked up as potential molesters in no time.” She thought for a moment, then snapped her fingers. “I know! A website! Yeah, trade links with Disney and Toys R Us, and you should have all the kids traffic you can handle.”

“And put in lots of dinosaurs and Tele Tubbies. Kids love that stuff.”

“That does sound like a good idea,” said the second man. “If the Prophet can’t link to the masses, then the masses will just have to link to the Prophet.”

George and Kara dropped the three off at the First e-Bank and e-Loan downtown, and after talking with one of the e-Lending Consultants about their new ‘youth-oriented Web startup,’ got a loan for \$20 million and a web presence within days. Their stock split twice in the first quarter, and after being featured on the Nightly Business Report, promised even higher growth.

“Gee, honey,” George said a few months later, after visiting their site, *I’m\_Down\_With\_The\_Word.com*. “I feel we may have steered them wrong.”

“What makes you say that, honey?”

“All their popular click-throughs are for the Gap and Old Navy.”

# “Noble Encounters”

For June, 2000

by The Delvings

With Lightning riding shotgun in the back window, George drove up Highway 9 on a warm spring day. He watched for the landmarks until he located the narrow drive that led off the main road and deep into a stand of trees. Dodging water-filled ruts and the larger potholes, he eventually came to his final destination.

Beside the white modular home stood a large four-car garage, with doors big enough to accommodate an average semi-trailer. Blocking the nearest garage door was a Freightliner cab with a tangle of wires strewn out of the engine compartment, with only the legs and lower sections of two men working on the engine visible. And all around, behind the house, behind the garage and strewn all about the clearing the buildings occupied, were hundreds of wrecked autos.

George parked, held the door open for Lightning, and then proceeded to the two auto repairmen. He spoke to the half-visible body of one, who pointed with a wrench at a line of newly arrived wrecks off to one side. Stepping carefully to avoid most of the mud, he followed Lightning to one particular car, a once-white Taurus that Lightning had already sniffed out.

Approaching from the passenger side, the car didn't look too bad. Some broken glass lay scattered across the roof and the hood, like leaves that might have fallen from the tree limbs overhead. But when they got around to the driver side, the real damage was evident.

Both doors had been smashed with the force of a bulldozer, ripping the metal away from the frame and turning the sheet steel into thin strips of aluminum foil. The panels front and back of the doors were crumpled too, and the whole frame seemed to have been rearranged. Glass lay strewn all throughout the passenger compartment, which seemed quite a bit smaller than before the doors had been rammed in.

With Lightning sniffing gingerly at the derelict car as if testing the age of roadkill, George used a crowbar to pop open the trunk. Inside he found a large blue zippered bag, originally intended for first aid material. He began filling it with the rest of the contents of the trunk: maps, tape cassettes, a compact umbrella, some hymnals and songbooks. He moved to the back of the car and added a single shoe and an undelivered birthday present.

He pried open the passenger door and leaned into the front seat area. Thankfully, the seats had no blood stains, but from the damage, the lack of blood was surprising. Glass was everywhere, and the side impact had reduced the driver's area to a fraction of what it used to be. A half-eaten sandwich lay beside the center console, dropped when the impact jarred it out of the driver's hand.

"Took quite a hit," said a voice from behind. George leaned out and spotted one of the two repairmen sauntering over. "What'd she do, run a stop sign?"

"Nope. She was just sitting at a stop light."

"That's a shame." The repairman bent down to survey the rendered driver side. "What hit her, a ceeee-ment truck?"

"Nope." George inhaled deeply as he let out the frightening phrase. "Modular home on wheels. Plowed into her at the stoplight, then dragged her car fifty feet."

"Oh, man I should'a guessed!" the repairman said. "Those things're more dangerous than a teenager with a new license. Cause more accidents, too." He inspected the wreckage one last time, then said slowly, "She all right?"

"Yep," George said with a sigh, bending down to pet Lightning. "She's fine."

"Glad to hear it." The repairman headed back to the cab, then turned around and yelled emphatically, "Tell her to sue the pants off 'em!"

The only time George smiled that whole day was when WJHS played Dave Edmunds' "Crawling From The Wreckage." *Seems appropriate*, he thought.

# “Noble Encounters”

For August, 2000

by The Delvings

George sat at the very edge of the dock, his feet braced against the pontoon boat, his hands white-knuckled, holding it close enough for the six women to clamber aboard. Christine and Cheryl carried blankets, food and picnic supplies, while Mally struggled to hand young Dennis across to her cousin Lillian. Mally looked down at George struggling to keep the pontoon stationary in the heavy afternoon waves. “Too bad you’re not babysitting.”

George laughed and glanced towards the seawall, where four dogs wagged their collective tails, all eager to go with the gals, but wary of the waves. Lightning and Droopy had had enough bad experiences with seawall-side baths to make them dislike the water intensely, but the two ‘Head’ sisters, Knucklehead and Blockhead, were still young enough to treat the bouncing, sloshing waves as something mysterious. The elder dogs’ caution only added to their own wariness, and they stayed a healthy distance away.

“No, I’ll have my hands full with these four, believe me.”

Kara was last, carrying one of the coolers (the one with the orange rum slushies). “Have a good time, honey.”

“Have a good trip, ladies. Don’t pick up any hitchhikers!” George called, as he pushed the boat away and tossed the rope after. The ladies waved as the engine sputtered to life, then carved a slow wide arc across the Richard Basin on their way to the quieter Mason Basin. The four dogs whimpered as the pontoon boat grew smaller, but when George pulled the rain cover off the gas grill, they quickly forgot all about Kara’s disappearance and concentrated on the food George was preparing.

Half an hour later, the four dogs were feasting on grilled chicken breasts with portions of hamburger on the side, while George ate his veggie burgers undisturbed. He’d offered some to the dogs, but they had treated the faux meat with even more caution than they had the water.

They devoured their respective meals hurriedly, with the intensity that animals have who know that at any moment, another bigger animal might come along and take it away. They scarfed their meals down and when they realized the only thing left to eat was George’s veggie burgers, they settled down around the patio, staring out at the water.

George ate slowly, savoring the deeper flavor the grill had imparted to the normally bland burgers. The late July sun burned an orange swath down through the low clouds, setting the western lake afire in reflected reds and golds. *Not too many left*, he thought to himself. *Soon, we’ll find another home and this will be a memory.*

They’d been looking for a home off the lake for the better part of a year, and had found two homes that were great, only to be beaten out at the last minute by other buyers who’d been a little faster on the draw. But whenever they realized they’d be spending another month in the family’s summer retreat, they realized they really weren’t in any hurry to leave.

The sun took an hour to set, though it seemed like a week. Blockhead decided that she needed to be the first to greet Kara, so she took up her station at the very edge of the dock, and proceeded to bark like a lunatic at every passing pontoon boat. And just for good measure, she barked at every other passing boat, and a few ducks and geese, too.

By ten o’clock, the moon had crawled up over the edge of the southeastern shoreline. The dogs (except for Blockhead) were snoring on the cool concrete, while George got the firepit ready. When the high-pitched laughter reached his ears from the approaching craft, he lit the dry leaves, and soon a warming fire greeted the returning women.

The waves had settled down, so the other three dogs joined George and Blockhead in greeting the women as they stepped off the boat. “Got a nice fire going up top, perfect for marshmallows,” George said, as he helped them disembark.

Kara was last off, as George helped her tie off the boat. They looked up at the fire at the edge of the patio, casting dancing, flickering shadows out across the soft waves. Without a word, but with an arm around each other’s waist and a pair of dogs at their heels, they walked the dock and climbed the steps up to the patio.

# “Noble Encounters”

## For September, 2000

by The Delvings

“Bye, honey. I’m off to take my pictures,” Kara called, heading out the porch.

“See you when you get back,” George replied, holding onto their two dogs, Lightning and Droopy.

Kara piled her gear into the back of the car, and drove a half-circle around the lake, winding up barely a mile away in a gravel parking lot near the center of town. It wasn’t a large town, but that’s what George and Kara liked about it. You knew most everyone, and there was almost no chance of urban sprawl hitting their little community. As she levelled her tripod, she recalled how big a deal it was when the old bait shop had been remodeled into a real estate office.

She attached the camera shoe as she looked around the city - the hardware-grocery store, where the aluminum screen is right down the aisle from the aluminum foil; the tanning-video store; the gas station that sells bait, down the street from the gas station that sells fireworks, and the gas station that sells, well, just gas. The post office across from the combination police station-town hall.

Kara smiled at the private naming system she and George used. This place, the local village, they called ‘Mayberry.’ The big town eight miles east was ‘Mount Pilot,’ and the semi-large city half an hour south was ‘Raleigh.’ But when they first assigned the nicknames, they did it with little knowledge of their new neighbors and the charm of the place.

The smile slowly softened as she appraised the town. She realized, suddenly, that many of the things she had thought were somewhat comical just a few short years ago, now were really endearing. The main street that wasn’t busy enough for a stoplight, or even a crosswalk.

The bingo hall that used to be a foreign legion post, the pizza parlor that used to be a Chinese restaurant, and before that an Irish bar, and before that a hot dog diner, and before that a pizza parlor. The half-dozen homes along the main drag that always had baby clothes and bikes for sale in the yards on weekends.

As she adjusted the exposure and fiddled with the filter, Jerry Denby walked by, pulled by his new hunting dog Inferno, a partially domesticated hunting dog that seemed ready to bound off in search of adventure at any moment. Jerry kept her a safe distance away while he talked. “Whatcha doing?”

“Getting set to take a picture,” Kara replied not looking up.

“Of that thing?” Jerry said, pointing with his leash-wrapped hand.

Kara smiled as she regarded her subject. Sitting almost forgotten in the gravel lot by the public access ramp, right near the main road through town, was a derelict old rolling advertising sign, with creased, slightly rusted aluminum sides and a matching pair of flat tires. One of its four braces was bent (having been rolled over by a bass boat trailer, no doubt), and it listed heavily towards the north. On one side it read, “Pork Sandwiches, Firehouse, \$3, 8/12,” black letters and red numbers on faded yellow plastic. It said the same thing on the other side, except for the missing ‘h’ in ‘Sandwiches.’ Kara studied the leaning, weathered sign through her view finder and wondered if the asking price would buy you a meal or the firehouse.

“Why y’ takin’ a picture of that old thing?” Jerry asked.

“I like the statement it makes. Old and beaten, bent but not broken. Overlooked but still doing its job. It’d make a great picture for the local photo contest.”

“The one at the library?”

“That’s the one.”

Jerry leaned in closer, or at least as close as the bucking Inferno would let him. “Make sure y’ buy a nice big frame for it. Y’ know, the judges are all frame store owners.”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” Kara answered softly.

“How’d ya do last year?”

Kara sighed, finally lifting her head away from the camera. “Two Honorable Mentions.” She sighed again and placed her eye back at the view finder. “But then, I don’t believe in fancy frames. So, where y’ heading, Jerry?” Kara asked, concentrating again on her camera.

“Oh, I’m meeting Mary down at the new ice cream parlor. They got a deck on th’ back that looks out over th’ lake.” He tossed his head at the sign and added, “But I’ll leave plenty of room for next week.” He finally gave Inferno her head, and she dragged him off down the sidewalk.

Half an hour later, Kara strolled down the sidewalk outside their lake home. Lightning’s excited yapping and Droopy’s mournful groaning howls greeted her as they bounded out the door from the kitchen, announcing her return to the whole neighborhood. “Got some good shots,” she said through the window to George, making them their lunch. “They’d sure make a statement at the photo contest.”

“Hey, didn’t you say the contest deadline was last Saturday?” George called back through the window.

Kara’s reply was soft enough that only the dogs at her feet heard her. “Sure was.”

# “Noble Encounters”

## For October, 2000

by The Delvings

With the changing of the seasons, two traditional events occurred on the Lake: the summer residents all took their boats out and headed off for their other homes (depopulating the area by some forty per cent), while the year-rounders celebrated their new-found peace and quiet. And one of the favorite ways to celebrate was ‘Doing the Maze.’

Local farmers had long been envious of the magnificent European formal gardens, and in recent years, they had discovered a palette of possibilities just waiting for them: their very own cornfields. With a discerning eye, they moved down narrow lanes in various shapes and sizes, in the hopes that, “If you mow it, they will come.”

It certainly worked as far as George and Kara were concerned. With bouncy little Lightning in tow (Droopy decided he’d rather stay behind and sleep), they headed down to Millersburg and the much heralded field down there. One of the local farmers had actually designed his maze in the shape of a huge pig, and the challenge of negotiating a four-acre pig-maze was just too powerful to resist.

“You take the high road. I’ll take the low road,” George said, laughing, to Kara.

“And I’ll be in Albion ‘afore ye,” Kara laughed in reply. They headed off in opposite directions, George headed for the snout while Kara aimed for less desirable parts. Lightning, temporarily overlooked, headed right down the middle. The corn stalks towered over them, their dry leaves rustling in the early autumn breeze like sandpaper.

After a half-dozen turns, George came upon a strange sight. Tucked into a small clearing (about where the pig’s ear would be), stood a pair of folded tables and a set of metal folding chairs. A large television set sat perched on one of the tables, while behind the other stood a pair of suit-clad yuppies, hair neatly combed, smiles carefully poised on their eager faces.

“Ah, welcome, welcome! Come in, sit down!” George complied warily, wishing Lightning were at hand to drive away these terrifying specters. What could they be? Amway salesmen? Jehovah’s Witnesses? “We’re pollsters for the Bush campaign,” the woman on the right said. George’s heart sank. Even worse!

“We’d like to test your response to some new TV ads the Guv’nuh is planning on running,” said the man on the left. Without waiting for an objection, he hit a button on the remote control, and the screen glowed to life. An image of the ‘96 Democratic Convention appeared, with the theme song “Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow” playing in the background. Al Gore leans over to shout in President Clinton’s ear, “Think you can come up with something just as snappy for my campaign in four years?” Clinton just smiles in reply. The next scene showed Al and his wife Tipper outside the ‘2000 convention, surrounded by demonstrators and pickets, while the song “You Can Go Your Own Way” echoes off the buildings all around him.

“Yeah, yeah? Whaddya think?” the male pollster asked him. George didn’t say a word, but a shudder ran through his body.

At the opposite end of the cornfield maze, Kara had been corralled by equally pushy Democratic pollsters, and forced to watch the latest Al Gore commercial: four minutes of George Bush pressing the flesh with well-heeled millionaires and defense contractors, while the rebellious 60’s tune “Goddam the Pusher Man” roared from the speakers

“Oh, man,” Kara thought to herself, “how much worse can this campaign get?”

In the very center of the maze, Lightning rounded a corner to face Pat Buchanan, in the flesh, with an 8 mm projector and a drop-down movie screen some distance away. At his feet were a pile of old home movies. Lightning looked him up and down, snorted once, turned around and ran back the way he came.

The three of them met up at the entrance of the maze. Without a word, they piled into the car and drove home.

As they neared the driveway, George managed to say, “Gettin’ pretty close to Halloween. Scary time, Halloween.” Kara could only manage a silent nod in reply.

It took an hour before Lightning stopped shaking.

# “Noble Encounters” For November, 2000

by The Delvings

Sitting in Mary LaMarr’s Land and Lakes real estate office in Wolcottville on a crisp, beautiful Friday the 13th evening, George and Kara were in the process of making the most important decision of their married lives. But actually, the decision had already been made, weeks before.

The first time they had seen the home of their dreams was back in the early spring, with snow still encrusting the cornfields nearby. They had only driven by it, thinking that the expansive yards, the large house and the extra-large garage would put it way out of their budget. So they spent most of the year inspecting water pressures, roof integrity and basement dryness in homes other than their preferred choice.

But through all the dozens of houses they saw, their thoughts would occasionally drift back to that simple white house on the quiet country lane. They had made offers for three other homes, ones that met some, though not all, of their needs, and in all of them, something odd happened: each time, on the very day they were making an offer, some other home buyers would appear from out of nowhere and submit their offer just ahead of George and Kara’s. Three times George and Kara thought they were buying a home, and three times, their offer came in just a few hours too late. “Guess God doesn’t want us to buy a home,” was George’s appraisal.

Mary LaMarr’s answer was, “God just doesn’t want you to buy those houses.”

Finally, after all their searching, as the summer slipped away to fall, they decided to take an inside look at the charming country house. And it seemed like a good omen that the first time they walked inside the house, just happened to be on their anniversary. From the well-cared-for kitchen, to the spotless attic, to the practical wood-burning stove, they fell in love with the house. It even had one surprisingly unique feature: a glass enclosed atrium, where the previous owners had enclosed the entire south side of the house from rooftop to basement with glass, and lined the inside wall with black-painted cinder blocks. It was a feature that not too many home buyers would expect, which was possibly why the house had lingered on the market so long.

But the price was still higher than they thought they could afford, so George and Kara continued looking for another three weeks, seeing a dozen homes on one marathon Saturday. But their thoughts kept coming back to the simple white house. Finally, on that wonderful Thirteenth, they walked through the house a second time, meeting the seller, Ellen, and her sales agent, Bob Kelley from Four Seasons in Kendallville.

Ellen was charming as she shared details of how she and her ex had worked for years, closing off this wall, removing the old windows there, replacing the roof and the appliances. And Bob singlehandedly changed George and Kara’s impression of real estate sales agents, as his helpfulness and openness made the couple think this time, they would have a chance at getting the home they were meant to have.

Later that night, the couple poured over legal papers and forms, as Mary indicated where to sign, for the fourth time. “Feels like deja vu all over again,” Kara chimed in.

“Yogi Berra?” George asked.

“Boo Boo bear, I think,” Kara replied.

After all the t’s were crossed and the i’s dotted, the tired couple clambered into their Subaru, where Droopy and Lightning greeted them like long-lost companions. As they drove back to the lake house where they had lived for the last two years, George commented, “It’s a wonder more people don’t talk about the two most painful events in a human’s life.”

“Which are...?” Kara asked.

“Childbirth and buying a home,” George answered.

Kara smiled, as she pulled the car into the driveway. “They do, but they keep it to themselves. Only the people who’ve been through this kind of experience could really appreciate it.”

# “Noble Encounters” For December, 2000

by The Delvings

A new survey suggested this month that if people were given a choice to skip any two-week period, many of us would skip the Holidays. The combined pressures of buying Christmas gifts, fighting the crowds at the malls and dealing with this year's weather, in addition to the added demands from year-end work orders, seems to put most people in the mood to jump right from December 15th to New Years, without making any stops in between.

And that was the mood George was in this year. He wasn't looking forward to celebrating this year at all, especially after this past Thanksgiving. Against Kara's wishes, he had told all their friends and families about a contest he and Kara had entered, the "Cagey Kitchen Cooking Contest," where contestants were asked to submit a holiday dish, recipe or beverage that no holiday host or hostess should be without.

In response, George and Kara created a concoction they named "Wassup Wassail," consisting of a gallon of apple cider, a teaspoon each of ground cloves, allspice, nutmeg and cinnamon, a quart of tequila, a splash of creme de menth and - "to help you forget the bills you'll receive next month," George claimed - a handful of dissolved Prozac. He and Kara taste-tested a few batches, until they began to see snowflakes falling in the living room, and snowdrifts beside the fridge.

George was sure they'd get at least an "Honorable Mention" from the judges for their sense of humor, if not and award from Eli Lilly for a new use for their drug. But when the results were announced and their holiday drink wasn't among the winners, George went into a deep funk.

"Just like when I was a kid," he muttered one evening. "You're told all year long, 'Be good and Santa will bring you just what you asked for.' But does it ever happen? No!"

"I thought you stopped believing in Santa Clause when the Warren Report was published?" Kara responded, not looking up from her copy of U.S. News and World Report. "Why don't you go outside and chop away some of the ice that's blocking the kitchen door? That should give you something worthwhile to grumble about."

So, an hour later, George was finishing clearing the sidewalk of ice and frozen snow. The trees and power lines cracked and whispered in the light breeze, their coating of ice having survived all week long. On a whim, George stuck his shovel into a deep drift and headed off for the woods down the street. He found the wide trail still undefiled by snowmobile tracks, and headed in.

The evergreen and pine tree limbs were bowed low with the accumulated weight of a week of snow and freezing rain. Here and there, a thick limb had broken under the weight, and an occasional tree had come crashing down. The frozen branches created a musical effect deep in the forest, like wind chimes on a massive scale, soft and sweet bur as numerous as the stars.

George negotiated the trail, barely discernable with its knee-deep drifts, until he found himself in a clearing dominated by a massive old tree. Without its leaves, it was hard to tell if it was an elm or some other type of tree, but the vastness of its trunk clearly showed its age was well over a hundred years. The clearing around the tree was surprisingly devoid of branches, as if this particular ice storm was but a mere trifle to this veteran of thousands of previous storms.

Propping himself in the lee of its multi-segmented trunk, George leaned back and looked around. He noticed nearly all of the younger trees nearby had lost at least a few needles, while some had dropped whole branches here and there. But the patriarch of the clearing seemed impervious to the ice's burden. It swayed and rocked gently in the wind, and the faint evening light cast glimmering reflections off its coated branches, as if it were wearing an outfit studded with diamonds.

He realized that there was a direct correlation between the age of the elder trees and the number of storms they had survived. The older the tree, the greater the number of bad storms it had seen, and the less effect this latest storm seemed to have.

When George returned an hour later, Kara was asked him what he'd been doing outside for so long. "Listening to the trees," he said as he hung up his coat and returned Lightning's enthusiastic greeting. "Listening, and learning how to survive life's little storms."

"How about a cup of 'Wassup Wassail?'" Kara asked jokingly.

"No, thanks. But a nice mug of hot chocolate would suit me just fine."