

“Noble Encounters” for October, 1998

by The Delvings

George and Kara are part of a new wave of immigrants, but they didn't arrive by boat from the Old World, nor are they headed for new lives in the Big City. Instead, they're heading away from the Big City, trading the tall buildings and scarce parking for tall cornfields and long gravel drives, the kind of land you find all around Noble County.

George worked in advertising (but don't hold that against him), while Kara supervised a large hospital department. Their average days usually included two hours of commuting on crowded, rage-filled expressways (an odd name for roads where no one moves for ten minutes at a stretch), followed by two or three hours of near-pointless meetings, a couple of hours fighting 'forest fire' emergencies, which left only four hours of actual work-time into which they needed to compress twelve hours worth of output. They decided last year they wanted to make a change, so they printed up maps and invitations to visit for all their friends and relatives, translated their jobs into ones they could do from home, and then split.

Their new life out here is so different, the feel like they've moved to an entirely new country. Back in the City, nobody ever waved – or at least, not with all five fingers at once. Out here, everybody waves. Of course, most of the traffic by George and Kara's new place is boat traffic, and it's a lot easier to wave when you're driving a pontoon boat doing a no-wake, leisurely five miles an hour.

The concept of 'customer friendly' back in the City is to locate the ATM and the Lotto machine right next to the front door, so that customers don't actually have to talk with anyone while they get their money and their tickets. Out here, George and Kara are amazed at how open everyone is. In all the shops they've been to, they're treated like guests in someone's home, not at all like customers. They've found stores where it's common courtesy for employees to help carry parcels and such out to the car. In the City, there were some stores where you couldn't even get your cart to the car – iron security posts surrounding the entrance forced you to leave your bags of groceries waiting precariously while you went and retrieved your car.

They were completely surprised, then, when they entered their local carpet store one day to find an entire chocolate cake perched on the counter (“Chocolate zucchini cake,” they were informed by the proprietress). And it was good, too. Kara congratulated the woman on her baking. George congratulated her in his own way, by having two pieces.

They've spent most of their summer fixing up the old house they're staying in, a three-story summer house built back when an 'out building' did not mean the place where you stored your boat. They've learned a lot of new crafts in three short months: George specializes in laying carpet now, and Kara concentrates on the painting. Their neighbors all agree, in weekly streetside conversations, that the young couple must be completely crazy. As evidence, they point to the new mailbox, painted a blazing metallic blue, covered with multi-colored swimming fish on both sides and a special greeting on the little front door for the local mail carrier. But the couple has so much more time these days, and such a cheerful attitude, that they want to share their joy with everyone they come in contact with, mail carriers included.

Neither of them feel the need to lock their doors anymore, and most of the neighbors prop open their doors during the summer to catch any breeze they can. The neighborhood pets take full advantage of such freedom, wandering out of one door and into another, inspecting the possibilities for food and greeting the various animals inside, before venturing outside and into the next house. Lost and slightly inebriated party guests occasionally make the same trek, at which time George carefully guides them out, politely directs them to the proper house and closes the door, for all of about ten minutes.

Though the selection of fresh fruit and vegetables at the corner food stand always has some of the freshest produce they've ever seen, all their neighbors have small plots or gardens of one sort or another. Some even have major sections where they grow everything from squash and beets, to four kinds of tomatoes and two varieties of corn.

Out here, a traffic jam is when there's an Amish buggy both in your lane and the oncoming lane as well. A busy day at the License Plate bureau is when there's two, not thirty-two, people in line ahead of you. And the difference in the way national holidays are celebrated, is even more noticeable.

George and Kara had inured themselves to the hassles of getting downtown each Fourth of July to watch the City's big fireworks display. They had steeled themselves for the hour-long mass transit ride, standing all the way, and the eight-block walk to the huge City park, crammed with people. The park was designed to hold around 10,000 people, but each year, more than 800,000 felt compelled to squeeze into that little area. It was a struggle to get any spot of grass not already chosen hours before, and they counted themselves lucky if no drunken brawl broke out, like the one a few years back when two guys got to arguing over the words to the “1812 Overture” (George had patiently explained to both of them that it was an overture and therefore had no words, but they wouldn't listen). Paying \$4 for a warm cup of soda and \$6 for a cold sandwich was normal, all the while dodging random firecrackers and stray cherry bombs. They thought that was the way the Fourth would always be for them.

When they spent their first Fourth out here, they were simply awe struck. The basin in front of their house filled with boats, over two hundred, all lined up quietly, politely waiting for the display set off from over by the dam. The fireworks were swell, very bit as good as any they'd seen Back there. And when the show was over, the boaters all lined up and drove slowly, majestically back to the Narrows, a stately procession with their red and green navigation lites all in a row, a river of incandescence, as wonderful a scene as the fireworks had been.

They knew they loved the area as soon as they had moved here, back in June. But they hadn't made that final commitment until recently. It was then that they performed that special ritual that marked one forever as a local, an accepted and permanent resident. That singular event was the switching of the license plates on their car. The rusted old ones (complete with rusted-on bolts) hadn't been removed in the previous ten years. They were wrenched off much effort and alternating shots from the WD-40 and the Liquid Wrench cans.

George performed the ceremony in the narrow driveway, accompanied by the the sound of acorns occasionally dropping onto the asphalt around him. They landed with the force of ball bearings tossed from a tall building, and George's street-trained hearing kept warning him to duck from the nearby gunfire.

After the tenth acorn fell and he'd finally begun to grow accustomed to their crashing, he turned to Kara, lying in the shade in an old woven hammock. Their two dogs, Lightning and Droopy, slept on the leaf-strewn carpet beneath her. The trees danced in the autumn breeze, serenading them with their end-of-summer song.

She smiled at him, he smiled back and said softly, “Y'know, I think I'm gonna like it here.”

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George awoke early that crisp fall morning, but Kara had risen even earlier. She hadn't woken him, and though he could hear her down in the kitchen, he didn't seek her out. Instead, he showered in the cold bathroom alone, running over in his mind the work still to be done on the old house.

Theirs was a three-season house, built at the end of the previous century. With all the tasks they had accomplished throughout the summer, the house was “almost ready” for the fourth season (a situation Kara had likened to being “almost pregnant”). The screens were all put away and the storm windows stuck in their place. The plants had all been brought in, so many that the inside of the house resembled a florist's that couldn't sell anything, or an arboretum run amok. They had spent most of yesterday afternoon pulling up the boat dock, a difficult ballet of balancing in the old aluminum canoe, unbolting the supports and slowly unscrewing the long aluminum poles that sank deep into the cold Lake's gravelly bottom.

But the draft on his feet reminded him of another major task. The wind was coming up and he had to get the last of the leaves raked and burned. Although it seemed like he and Kara had been raking leaves since mid-July, there was still a thick carpet of yellow and brown outside. Coming from the City, George had more of a passion for raking leaves than his neighbor George the Principal to the south of them or Councilman George on the north side. They'd wait until Saturday morning and then, armed with their trusty leaf blowers, they'd attack the debris with high-powered abandon.

George preferred the old standbys: a sturdy bamboo rake, a twenty-year-old wheelbarrow and when Kara helped, a bedsheet to pick up the larger piles with.

George used the daylight hours to do the last of the caulking around a few drafty windows, added another layer of Insulboard on the half-buried wellhouse and then, as the sun began its descent across the Lake, turned his attention to the yard full of leaves.

Trying to burn off his pent-up emotions with the exertion, George raked furiously. His mind touched upon the fate of the discarded leaves, cast away by the huge maples and oaks. They had been necessary all year long, providing compact green factories for the massive trees as they converted water, sunlight and minerals into chlorophyll. But now, at the close of the season, the trees simply tossed them aside, no longer of any use. Some of the trees, though, would not let go of their leaves. The pin oaks and some of the maples held on to their ineffective brown cloaks, like a woman on the town who pulls her tiny wrap tighter around her shoulders.

As Kara came out, dressed for raking in a heavy wool coat, with Lightning bounding through the leaves at her heels and Droopy bringing up the rear more leisurely, George thought how similar trees and humans were: the unique attributes each one bore, their complex, barely understood cycles, their desire to hold on to what others might consider useless.

George headed across the street with yet another wheelbarrow load for the curb, and in the darkening gloom he spotted one of his neighbors, Bill. He and his wife Ielene ran the antique store “The Weekender.” George liked Bill, not just because of the wonderful collection of Depression glass and the amazing oil lamps he specialized in finding, but also because he was one of the few male neighbors the couple knew who was not named George. An unnaturally high proportion of George and Kara's neighbors were also named George. It was almost surreal at times.

Outside in the swirling leaves and rolling acorns, Bill waved and called out, “What're ya carrying in the 'barrow, George?”

“Mostly acorns,” George replied, dumping the load of leaves next to the already lengthy pile.

“Too bad we can't just get rid of our troubles that way. Just rake 'em up, wheel 'em to the curb and dump 'em. Let the City hire a contractor to haul 'em away, and that'd be that.”

Bill wandered over to the leaf pile. Kara joined them and started the low pile smoldering with a single match, a trick the two men marveled at in the steady breeze. The three stood around the crackling fire and talked about antiques, old wheelbarrows, Lightning's reticence near fire, Ielene's passion for Carnival glass. The fire warmed their fronts while the wind cooled their backs. After an hour, Kara took the dogs inside and left the two men talking in the empty street, while the last glow of the sun slowly disappeared and the wind grew colder. Bill took his leave then and headed back to his own warm home and Ielene.

George stood for a long time after Bill departed, leaning against his rake and occasionally tending the fire. Bill's words had struck a note deep within him. He tried to reconcile the concept of collecting rare hand-made treasures with the equally human insistence of removing so-called “useless” things, like old leaves.

Eventually, he got the last of the leaves to burn down to a flimsy pile of ashes, tugged and pulled skyward by the insistent wind. He looked around in pride at the dark but clean lawn, an orderly notch between the ankle-deep yards on both sides. He headed inside, feeling good about himself.

The next day was a spectacularly windy Tuesday. With the help of a few sixty-mile-an-hour gusts, all the leaves in Noble County flew past Howe and settled somewhere to the north, Sturgis probably. George the Principal and Councilman George had yards as devoid of leaves as George and Kara's. But the memory of their conversation with Bill, the warmth of the fire against the wind, and the feeling of a special moment shared, left George with a satisfaction that more than outweighed the energy expended.

“Noble Encounters” for December, 1998

by The Delvings

It was a week before Christmas, and George and Kara were still searching for that traditional holiday feeling.

It was an unusual season, to say the least. Temperatures in the 50s throughout the month, 60s during Thanksgiving, had made it seem more like late fall than winter. And this being their first winter in the country, away from family and friends, without the preparations of office parties and the constant bell-ringing of sidewalk Santas, made them feel even more out of touch.

They tried to find that holiday feeling whenever they ventured outside, but it was mildly disconcerting to still hear leafblowers, instead of the more expected snowblowers. Their neighbor to the south, Principal George, laughed when he told them he'd been walking the family dog in shorts just the week before. Their other neighbor George laughed when he explained how he'd put up their Christmas lights without gloves. He was pretty thankful for that, too. Easier on his hands, easier on his lights.

They tried to find the season at home, and that helped a little, but even there, things were strange. To celebrate their first Christmas in the country (and to stretch their gift-giving dollars), Kara had suggested giving hand-made gifts. So they sat by the warm glow of the space heater, rolling sculpting clay into fist-sized balls, to make snowmen with funny expressions, accompanied by tiny birds and plastic rabbits. But popping snowmen into an oven (to harden the clay) wasn't quite what George had expected. And Kara was used to spending many nights practicing with their City choir for the “Messiah” concert, and like an old race horse, she longed for the familiar routine.

They canned too, for the first time in George or Kara's life. Who would have thought that Kara, who was so good at running an office, creating spreadsheets and working with the public, would be as comfortable with Ball jars and a pressure cooker? Kara experimented with apple butter and spiced fruit, both of which turned out surprisingly good. But it seemed more like their mothers' or grandmothers' activities, and they were still left groping for that familiar holiday feeling.

They got a little closer when they stopped by the local library, surprisingly enough. George was looking for a special reference book, and when he checked it out, they handed him a free roll of wrapping paper. Free wrapping paper at the library! They laughed at the absurdity of it, but they were happy just the same.

Their two dogs, Droopy and Lightning, were probably closer to finding the the joy of the season than they were. The temperatures were still warm enough that neither dog had been forced to wear those ugly loud dog-sweaters, which must have always upset their natural instinct for camouflage. And both of them had been recipients of the dog-cookies Kara had baked as additional gifts for friends and family. Maybe the dogs couldn't use a calendar, but they certainly sensed the change in the mood.

One crisp winter night, George and Kara found themselves standing in front of a house on County Line Road, west of Wolcottville. Many of the houses in the area had lights, but they were conservative, smallish displays, compared with the all-out extravagance they had come to expect in the City. But here, surrounded by bare cornfields and softly whispering pine trees, was a display that rivaled the wildest the City had to offer. Dozens of dioramas blazed with electric color, lights were strung throughout the trees, and ‘moving’ effects were part of many of the larger displays. Over there, a carriage rattled across the lawn, complete with galloping horses' hooves and rolling carriage wheels. Over there, a waving Santa had just landed in a bright green helicopter, with red spinning rotors front and back. And next to the house, a train laden with gifts chugged along a stationary track, its wheels revolving with ceaseless energy.

George and Kara held hands beneath the star-filled sky, beside the empty country road. The nip in the air painted their breath a frosty white, and it was certainly cold enough for winter, but they found they were especially warm inside. Lightning and Droopy seemed less impressed by the displays, and more eager to investigate the lone dog's barking that echoed way off across the empty cornfields. When they realized their humans weren't going to let them run off and investigate, they sat down and calmly waited for George and Kara to get their fill of staring at the lights.

But it took a long time for them to be satisfied. It was getting late, when the owner of the house came outside, checking on all the strings, making sure none of the bulbs were burned out. He stopped by George and Kara, who stood calmly basking in the electric glow.

They talked for a while. The owner explained how the whole family got involved. They began to string lights and put up displays well before Halloween. They used to just have the standard lights in the trees and along the house, but a few years ago, they began adding the displays, and they've been adding more every year since. Theirs was now the most elaborate display in the county, and hundreds of motorists every night would slow and gape at their brilliant arrangement.

George asked how much their electric bill was. The owner replied, “Close to three hundred dollars a month.” Kara commented on how much that seemed.

“Never seems too much to us, when we see how happy it makes people. And isn't that what Christmas is all about?”

George and Kara smiled back at the owner, and for the first time that holiday season, they felt right at home. In time, the owner finished his nightly inspection and went back inside. George and Kara, Droopy and Lightning were left to themselves, looking across the small reflecting lake at the wondrous lights, each happy inside for the generosity of common people.