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Arriving

Bill Elgersma

I have arrived. After 21 years of small town living in middle America, I have become something. I am known, a feat of no small undertaking where people are identified by the last inhabitant of the house they now own—as in “you live in the Old Skyler Place,” no matter that Skyler was in the ground before my foot ever touched the gravel; in fact, Skyler may be completely decomposed, but “yes, I live in the Old Skyler Place.”

This is a town of understoods. Two streets east of Main, the elderly locals drive with an abandon that elicits prayers from parents hourly. Main Street bustles, what with the factories on the north end of town and Super Walmart on the south, so they retreat to the side streets. Second Avenue, cleverly assigned as the second street in from Main, has few stop signs and even less traffic. The geriatric underground has taken this to be their strip—they cruise from one end to the other with no regard for road signs or cross traffic.

For the inhabitants of the neighborhoods closest to four-way stops, the drivers are identified by sound. Lyle’s transmission is going out, so the Fairmont has to wind up before it bangs into third; Lloyd’s power-steering pump whines, and Harold’s muffler evaporated. Not unlike the whistle that howls in the center of town to announce 12 noon, 6 pm, and 9 pm, these cars pass like clockwork, destined for the card game at the mall, a round of pool at the rink, or supper at Hardees. They have a mission. In time the routine is so entrenched that when Harold fixed his muffler, we wondered whether he had taken ill or been committed to the Home. However, the screeching of brakes

and blaring horn from an unsuspecting driver who nearly t-boned him drew us to the window as Harold sailed on through, not even turning his head. Few challenge the kings of this road, and so the thoroughfare is theirs.

Another understood is turning. In this town we know who turns where—a turn signal is merely an outgrowth from a steering column used to support cruise controls. Wide-sweeping curves in ’70s Caprice Classics negotiate corners like aircraft carriers, slowly inching around until the vessel finds easy water and sails down the center line. Those on sidewalks freeze. Pedestrians do not have right of way. As a matter of fact, pedestrians don’t exist; at best, they are moving targets—the latest Wii game that includes real targets with real cars, not some virtual nonsense.

In all of this, the parental rule of thumb has to do with hats. Early in life, children have learned about hats. When hats are visible over dash boards, squirrels chip, dogs bark (not unlike the Nature channel, where beavers slap their tails in warning), children are ordered to stay on sidewalks, and bikes turn into driveways—self preservation is critical. A seed-corn cap is synonymous with a flashing light, a backup beeper, or a wide-load sign. All demand the observer’s caution.

Beyond the idiosyncrasies that identify drivers are many other understoods. One of the most mystifying is locals-versus-new. *New* is a relative term with little definitive property. After 21 years of living here, I am still new, and they know it. A revelation of my last name evokes instant associations with individuals two towns over, sporting the same name. When I inject that my parents were immigrants from the Netherlands,

follow-the-bouncing-ball stops—I am discarded. They have no way of playing that game of bingo, so I do not exist. I may as well be a Smith or Jones. Regardless of the fact that one of my children was born in this town and the others were educated here right through college, I am not a local, and should I die here, I will still be new. However, should I do something famous or infamous, I may be claimed—at least I will be a topic of conversation for a time.

The hierarchy sorts itself out in several ways on the men's side. One of the most reliable networks here is the fire department. This brotherhood keeps us safe summer and winter, pulls bodies from mangled wrecks, crawls through burning attics to chase down smoldering lumber, and retrieves body parts when the farm equipment loses our respect. It also provides a hog roast for the county in June, candy for the Fourth of July parade, and the insider information on who is hired and who is fired consistently throughout the year. To be in with the fire department means to have arrived—you are family. But to be in it is a feat few attain early. While sons and in-laws gain easy acceptance, 30 years for a new comer may be necessary to prove worth.

A second network is the elderly, a group impossible to crack. This is the group that play cards in the mall at 3:00, remain as permanent fixtures in the back five rows of the church, and recite lineage not only on relatives two and three times removed but also on pets to the same degree. They know. And they share. But only with each other. A new widow in the group is cause for a haircut and a clean flannel shirt. Men may go so far as to pull a new pair of Dickies out of the dresser and put on the red suspenders. But the bubble around this group rivals the Metro Dome. Infiltrating their circle short of marrying a son or daughter will not occur.

However, the next group—the local pickup-truck owners—is the one that has granted me status. They have acknowledged me, and I feel somewhat smug. Until recently they did not know my name, but “that guy” is a level of distinction. I was not aware of the bequeathed title until I was stopped while walking through the local lumber yard. I had heard someone say “that guy” but was going about my business when this older gentleman stepped up beside me and asked, “are you that guy

that does doors?” No name, no idea who I am, just “that guy,” and so, yes I am and yes I do. I have learned that, locally, part of the equation for status is expertise in a skill at a bargain price. Uncovering that gem pushes even the geriatrics up the status ladder as they advocate for the group. Doing something for free has the answering machine blinking “full” in the message box at the end of the day.

However, much of the history of “that guy” is attached to my truck. A 1982 Dodge Ram Prospector 150, three-toned with faded maroon primer showing through, and rust, this truck stands out. The cavern in the driver's door came compliments of a parking lot at a local college where someone swiped it with a bumper, leaving a concave dent nothing less than the size of a pothole that spills the coffee in your lap when you drive over it. Had it been Agriculture Day on campus, I would have assumed a rampaging bull had attacked the side, but no—just a large dent and no confession. The dent stays. As well, the front fender on the same side bears severe dragging evidence—the result of a child in love and completely unaware of the proximity of truck to house. The house endured a few cracked blocks, the truck bears a few scrapes and lacerations, and the romance did not last. But the truck is distinctive. In a county where pickups reign, mine is not even a peasant—it is a serf.

I had no idea about the engine of this truck when I first became its proprietor, but I knew that its oil consumption was alarming, perhaps the reason that I received it free. This is not a truck where the driver checks the oil; he simply pours it in. Not clairvoyance—this is simply common sense. Occasionally when fired up, it disappears in a cloud of smoke only to come lurching out once the carburetor has smoothed out and the choke activates or deactivates, whatever it feels moved to do that day. *Miser* is etched into the back window—Chrysler's attempt to appeal to the consumer and let other traffic know who was being energy conscious. In 2009, I wonder whether the word refers to the truck or me. After a few forays beyond the town limits, I knew an engine was in order, but “free” creates a cruel psychological condition. If the truck is free, spending anything on it begins to make it

expensive. Dutch blood runs thick, and so I go to the salvage yard to find a motor.

The salvage yard, wrecking yard in former times, is a world where time stands still, but not in a bad sense. A walk through the yard reveals Corvairs, old Bugs, 1940 Ford pickup parts, one '28 Model A, a little of everything, but the owners are part of the club. They know who has skill and who does not, and they often view individuals from the area with philosophical amusement. The commoner is a source of entertainment, and I have become an anticipated act through time and repair. They are not surprised when I ask about an engine, simply take the pay loader to the back, lift a 1977 Volare out of the weeds, and remove the engine. Three days later when I go to pay, they say "Free." Free truck with free engine. Could life get better?

But the group granting me status does not want my truck. Probably they disdain it. It will not shine should I deem to wash it; the lifters stick, and it is ugly—twenty-five years old. Nothing is gained by arriving in this vintage automobile.

On the other hand, it is free advertising. Last summer while I coordinated a service project in town, the truck sat proudly in front of the job. It hauls shingles, concrete, ladders, tarps, whatever, without my having to worry about scratching what little paint is left. But for this group, the truck only served as a retro GPS as to who might be on the job. Several weeks after the job was completed, I had stopped on the side of the road to tie down a ladder when a shiny pickup pulled up beside me. The power window buzzed down, and someone I did not recognize asked, "You the guy that did that roof in the middle of town? Seen the truck." There was no admiration in the voice, no praise for a sturdy vehicle, no acknowledgement of my being a part of a select group of pickup owners who through that ownership had rite of passage. This had to do with landmarks, coordinates on a map. And so I came to be embraced—well, embraced maybe too strong a word—enfolded? Not really. More like acknowledged by the group as "that guy." Likely, when adding information for clarity, since none knew my name, the conversation included, "you know, that guy with the beat-up Dodge," but not to my face.

But because this truck is a landmark, old guys

that I have never spoken with, never even seen before, come up to me to make small talk. As it goes, in local terms, I live on an acreage, which means that I own a home that comes with land of an acre or more. This particular acreage is known as the old Schiebout place. I don't know the Schiebouts, never met them, am not sure when they lived there, and if any are still alive, but as nearly as I can figure, they were the proprietors sometime shortly after the turn of the last century. The litany usually starts like this: "You live in the old Schiebout place." It's a statement, not a question. Initially ignorant to the lineage, I denied the accusation. "Nope, Ricketts lived there." But I was wrong. I failed to recognize that Ricketts were outsiders, so they did not register with the town. Had I said something like "you know Mary Ricketts; she was a Vis?" I might have gained respect, but I missed the moment.

The old boys were persistent. "No, no, that is the old Schiebout place," and they would launch into its history with details that only locals would know. "I used to get milk there. Had to walk with a pail, cold in the winter," and they would shiver in memory.

The random conversations continued for about six months. I would be wandering into the bakery to pick up the most palatable coffee in town, and someone would stop me with a "say." Locally, *say* is a term employed to introduce a topic. As in "Say, I heard the factory is adding a third shift," or "Say, did you see the big limb that is down in the park?" However, the conversation had nothing to do with enlightening me on a recent discovery in town. It had to do with the acreage. With a hand on my arm, a gesture of familiarity that makes me highly uncomfortable, they would start: "Say, I see you are putting new windows in."

"Yeah, I am swapping them out; the old one had weights you know," I would try to be polite. "The wind howls right through them in the winter, and the heating bills climb."

"Watched them put them windows in. They was something when they showed up. The wife wanted them, but they were too much money. We had to go with the cheap ones." They would shake their heads as if to remember how far and how short the pay cheque went. Windows are women's treasures for these guys and too much money for

something to clean. Only recently has efficiency become an issue.

Later, when I was replacing the siding, I would hear it again. "Say, putting on cement board. That the colour, or you painting it?" They were not shy, nor did they feel a sense of intrusiveness. Whatever juicy morsels were gleaned would be shared at cards or pool. I didn't tell them it was not cement board, and, a coward, I deferred to my wife on colour. It falls under the same category as windows.

By nature, I am not a trusting person, and withholding information is a defense mechanism. I am not opposed to speaking to strangers necessarily, but more than two decades of residency in this town has prepared me for some of what is expected. One of those expectations is a *not*. Do *not* expect locals to talk to you if you are *not*. Well they *are*, and I am *not*. So what gives? Living on a half-mile black top with a T intersection, both terms indigenous to the area, we noticed that traffic was light in our neighbourhood. Short of the tractors pulling anhydrous ammonia tanks in the spring and elevator-destined gravity wagons and semis in the fall, there is little cause for sojourners to pass by. However, over time, a trail of pickups began to cruise our strip. Although I had noticed this parade when I changed the windows and installed the siding, I thought it was because I had painted the house Hampton or Atlantic or whatever name some individual in a Midwest paint factory decided the blue should be. In truth, the colour was startling, but as much as I may not have liked it, I dislike painting more, so it stays. I assumed the parade in front of the property was connected to the insult to the skyline. In a town of earth tones, colour trends change slowly. Generations pass before drastic moves are made. Something akin to a hippie painting a mural on the side of a barn, we had murdered the old Schiebout place. I can only imagine the ripple that caused at cards, and it probably threw off their pool skills as well.

They asked about the colour. "What was the name of that again?"

"Say (hand on arm), I see you painted the house blue. Stands pretty tall; never noticed how high that house was till you painted it blue."

Clearly the colour was a problem as is any adjustment, like losing their favored pew on a

Sunday morning or having to find a parking space farther away from the cafe. Change is rarely easy, and the pigment in this paint was change. But with time comes familiarity, and the comments stopped. I was again relegated to invisible because nothing of interest appeared to be occurring.

For a time I was too busy to frequent their hangouts. With my teaching load, the garage was a night-and-weekend project. Another understood is "inactivity diminishes curiosity," so nothing more than a customary nod, a universal local symbol for "I don't know you but you might be all right," was given in passing. However, that all stopped the day I cut the windows and doors into the sheathing. The underground circulated the news with the alacrity of a ten-year-old and a Zippo lighter. We were back on the strip. Curiosity is one thing, but the traffic didn't slow much even when the structure remained wrapped in Tyvek for most of the year. Finally, one day late this spring, almost a year after the foundation was poured, I was hurrying through the bakery to pick up a coffee on my way to do some "that guy" job. As I passed the table of card players, I was shocked into stopping about four steps late.

"Say, Bill?" I walk on, no recognition of the voice, lots of Bills in this town.

"Say, Bill?" A different voice, sort of stretched with that aged quality of hard farming, straining to be heard over the growl of machinery and damaged by combine dust. I slow my step.

"Bill!" A different voice again, insistent, not unlike the tone that directs hogs up chutes onto trailers or moves cattle from pen to pen when heat checking. I stop and turn.

The table is full, eight or nine old guys, some stuffed in overalls, crisp and fresh, unfaded by the sun (they have never seen work), others in flannel shirts, but all sporting hard, sun-scraped faces with deep crevasses that time and climate have etched. Hands with fingers holding cards—pudgy to gnarled, some short, some missing—cement the bond between the group. All eyes are on me, and as I look around, I know no names. These are shiny-pickup owners I have never done work for. I don't go to church with them, and although I have seen them in the lumber yard, we have no history. The needle goes off my Richter scale.

"Yeah?" I am suspicious, wondering what job I am going to do for free for whom. My understood is "he who knows my name and uses it has an agenda." I have nothing that this group wants or needs. I have neither status nor power. I am not wealthy, and I doubt my collection of tools rivals theirs. Exploitation warnings are ringing at the five-alarm level.

"How's that Dodge? You got an eight or a six in it?" They are talking about *my truck*? When this group asks about a 1982 Dodge that needs to pass a stone before exiting the driveway and has a range of about 20 miles without my considering loading the tool box and taping a AAA roadside service card to the windshield, a chill of sorts enters my body a little like the tingle that bites your fingers and toes when your older brother talks you into climbing the silo and then tells you to look down. This seemingly small talk is going somewhere—I know it. People who deliberately don't know your name and don't intend to do not stop you to talk about trucks that should be relegated to the crusher.

We chat briefly, or they do, about trucks they have owned over the years, particularly Dodges, as if we share some common brotherhood, but I am not a fool. I have no overalls, and my flannel shirt is L.L. Bean or E.E. Cummings or something with the wrong kind of check in it for this group. My truck is dirty, and my hands, although cracked and scarred, still each possess four fingers and one thumb. Yes, I grew up on a farm, but we milked cows and raised crops to feed them. We were the family farm who owned acres, not sections. The magnitude of their land is lost on my background, and besides, they don't know anything about me, I think, so they must need something else.

"Say, putting up a garage." The statement was casually uttered, but as the group leans forward, the pretense of scrutinizing cards is gone.

"Yeah; thought I was going to park in the barn but too far from the house." I am trying to make polite conversation without being the snake they are trying to charm or goulash to be served up at poo that afternoon.

The ice broken, the group jumps in, a year's worth of questions, discussions, decisions pouring from their lips. The picture window in the front has thrown them off, and one wonders whether I am

making an apartment in there. A few crack jokes about wives who would be moving them out if they had a place like that. Another wants to know why it isn't connected to the house, and I philosophically explain that a 1920s house on a farm would not have had the garage attached. I tell them I wanted to keep it somewhat true to its heritage. As well, I talk about the elevation changes between the house and the garage and what kinds of excavating changes I would have had to make. They don't get it, but they nod just the same. Another wants to know if it will be blue. In response, one of the leaders tells him that blue is not so bad. Hated it when the paint went on, but it kind of grew on him. But three bays seem to be a problem: "everyone has *three* bays you know," and I only put in two with a picture window. The interaction takes place with me being an invisible listener.

"What you going to do with all that space?" This has been the sticking point all year. What is that guy going to do with a picture window in a garage? Why not a third bay?

"A shop," I say. "I am using the other part of the garage as a shop for my woodworking tools and my mechanic's stuff."

The light goes on, and they look at each other and nod. I have found the magic word. In a soft economy with weak trading on Wall Street, my stock skyrocketed with that term. No shuffling cars out, no shunting the snow blower and the lawn tractor and the leaf blower and the grill and the two bikes and the tools that followed them from the farm, all fighting for space with the freezer, garbage can, recycling bin, and the dormant plants from fall to spring. A shop, a little slice of heaven on earth, creates visions of puttering, putting a wire wheel on a bench grinder to buzz the rust off of tools long forgotten in the rain. Shovels can be cleaned with a tool like that while the stone on the other side hones the lawnmower blade and the hoes and shovels to a butcher's edge. The compressor, too useful to go on the farm auction, has also tagged along to inflate bike tires for the annual ride and blow dust and bugs out of the car's radiator, or so they tell their wives.

A garage is a man's domain, an *alpha maleish* attitude for them, and moving to town has seen that territory change. The high gloss seal on the speckled

garage floor paint put down last year makes the tires squeal as the wheels turn. Having to vacuum and mop the surface when the ice melt drips and dries or the truck tracks in mud has left them unsure. Their garages became part of the house, and the same rules apply. A shop, where the power washer can flush down the lawn tractor—they lean forward again: “you put a drain in it?” And they dream their own shop. “Got 220?” Almost too much to wish, and when I nod, they breathe a collective sigh.

I need to get going, and as I begin to turn, one of them says, “Bill, I gotta tell you, that’s some kind of a nice garage.” Some nod in affirmation; others are still lost in the bliss of their dreams. I smile in acknowledgement but, unwilling to hold the trump card, interrupt their fantasies with a reality: “You know boys, if I had a third bay, I’d have to buy a new truck to park in it. For me, it’s one or the other.” And they laugh as I walk away. Order has been restored.