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What Little Remains

Bill Elgersma

I don't like weddings—never have, and before someone gets all scrappy, let me represent a father's perspective. I know words like scrooge, grouch, crotchety, and geezer come to mind, but I have reasons. All that hubbub, the flower and the pictures and the dress and the reception hall and the church and the music—that's a lot of hubbub. I have four sisters, and so perhaps what added to the definite disdain was the fact that in our house a wedding meant the entire farm got a coat of paint as well—150 feet of three-rail fence that extended from the road to the barn, made of reclaimed silo boards that sucked up paint like a high school sucks up pizza at an all-you-can-eat buffet. If I had thrown the paint in the general direction of that fence, it would have been absorbed before it hit the ground. Wooden barn and window frames would not hold paint—even the old oil-based paint. Weddings were the death knell of a summer. Clean and wash and paint and hoe—we even washed the cows' tails. I suppose that if we could have diapered the flies, that would have happened as well. Instead, the barn was white-washed, and we kept scrubbing and polishing. Relatives were coming, and we were the farmers in the family.

A few summers ago our oldest daughter got married, and I held my ground. There would be no painting; there would be no planting of shrubs and putting in a new kitchen. There would be no upgrades to the house, and there would be no new furniture. Family was coming, and they could see us as we are, warts and all.

And it was okay. The air conditioning cooperated and so the house was cool; no breakers blew from an overabundance of people inhabiting the house, the septic system behaved—in short it was a successful wedding. My daughter was married;

she looked beautiful, the church was passible, the reception hall unique, and although the warmer for the smoked chicken quit, the food was quite good. The families got along, or at least tolerated each other, and siblings who haven't seen each other in years were congenial. To top it off, I actually like my son-in-law, a rare admission for me, so life was really good.

Shortly after the wedding, my other daughter announced she, too, was betrothed, and the wedding would happen the following summer. Round two. Perhaps her thought was to strike while the iron was hot, so to speak, as in, I was reasonably amiable so no time like the present to exploit my benevolent demeanor. Fortunately, enduring a wedding allows a person to develop psychological callouses that remain for a time, so as the Israelites would say, "My loins were girded." I could do another wedding. No painting, no new furniture, no "let's impress the relatives and the world, wow the masses, give everyone a show." We were still on the wedding interstate, and this interchange was going to be smooth as well. Yeah right.

The first part I already knew—she was marrying a Dutchman. No, Dutchman doesn't mean someone from North America with big feet who is tall with a big nose and both opinionated and stubborn. Regardless of what level of warped pride we might have in those wonderful attributes, newsflash: the Dutch don't have a corner on that market. Many who have never heard the word *Klompen*, have no idea what a *croquet* is, wouldn't dream of eating a piece of salted black licorice with the lingering flavor of bias-ply tire, and couldn't fix a tube on a bicycle if it was their last chance at life also share those attributes. What I was acquiring for a son-in-law was a real, no longer off-the-boat instead an off-the-plane, Dutchman.

Looking back, the fact that most of my family has antsy is no secret. Itchy feet, I don't care what

you call it, we have a hard time sitting still. The daughter has been on the move most of her life, and perhaps the fault is ours for moving her 18 hours and a country away three weeks before she was born. Whatever the case, she has never met a map she didn't like; so, when she came home from college one day to tell me that she was studying abroad the following semester, I wasn't surprised. My only stipulation was that she couldn't go to a country where her brother and I could not rescue her in case the government made a hard right and headed for a border. Hello Holland.

My parents came from Holland: my father in his teens and my mother quite early in life. What I knew of the old country was seasoned by their memories and the displaced individuals who arrived at our home far too often, speaking longingly of the homeland. For my parents Canada was the homeland, and although they had a sympathetic ear, they had no desire to return. College landed me in the States. Somehow I lost track of time and 30 years later am still here, and my daughter goes full circle and returns to the first homeland. In literary terms, that is called irony. I don't spend much time thinking about this because the confusion of the situation is difficult to wrap my mind around—something like geographical schizophrenia.... Regardless, I thought it was a great opportunity: *Go. See the world, immerse yourself in a culture, learn to appreciate a global view, do this now while you can, and by the way, don't call home for money.*

Perhaps in the back of my mind this encouragement was a result of ulterior motives. The recent concept of delayed adolescence concerns me. Children return home after college and do not become adults until their early thirties. Not in my house. *Have a nice trip honey and email us when you land so we know you got there.* She got there alright and fit right in—so well, in fact, that when she returned after the semester was over, a souvenir arrived two months later, and he stayed for a month.

Wedding number two: a trip to Europe and a wedding. What more could a person ask for? If one were to ask my wife, I imagine she might suggest something like input on the wedding, or at least the protocol so that we knew what we were walking into. Nope, or *nay*, I suppose, as they say in the Netherlands. We just had to show up. Nothing to paint, not one thing, nothing to worry about as

far as relatives were concerned. We just had to find the town, meet the family for the first time, and go through a day of Dutch wedding ceremony stuff. The fact that some of the family spoke very little English and we spoke no Dutch might have been a clue that all would not go exactly as planned, but a trip to Holland is a trip to Holland—they'll get the wedding arranged and we will enjoy the day with the anonymity and cluelessness of foreigners, visitors, tourists—whatever term fits.

Unfortunately, we think we blend in, that is my wife and I. Several years ago when visiting Holland over a spring break, we thought we were incognito until we stepped off the plane in Schiphol. After 30 seconds at the information booth, the gentleman said, "American?" with a tone of authority. Not all that inconspicuous, but we found that the color of our clothing was the problem. This time we were determined to blend in, and prior to beginning the journey north, we wandered into Amsterdam and sat down in a city centrum. The sun was strong and the air was full of Dutch—the bikes and scooters, drivers and passengers, texting, eating, holding hands, carrying on conversations while they passed by with bad magicians and weak musicians plying their trades with hat out front for some change. We sat on the steps to a fountain and watched the world go by. Maybe our powers of observation were too intense. Whatever the case, five guys in their mid 20s came up to ask, "you are American yes?" with camera in hands and smiles.

Great, I thought, fly 7 hours to deal with panhandlers with an accent. "Why?" I asked cautiously.

The leader of the group proceeded to explain that he was on his bachelor's party from Germany and was filming people congratulating him to show at the reception after the wedding, and would I mind doing just that?

Easy enough, I thought, and let down my guard. I looked into the camera and worked at giving the lens my most congenial well wishes for their wedding. Then we made small talk.

He asked where we were from, and I told him the States. He persisted and asked where in the States, and I responded with, "Some place you haven't heard of, the Midwest."

To which he replied, "Oh, my girlfriend went to school for a year in Iowa," and my radar went off.

"Where in Iowa?"

“Sioux City I think,” was his response, “but I am not sure. She went to a school called Unity”—a school 12 miles from our home.

I looked at my wife, and she glanced at me. I don't know how many miles there are between Sioux County, Iowa, and Amsterdam, but what are the odds of running into someone I would have seen in the grocery store back home or someone who knew someone? My spine was crawling, and I shook my head. The group didn't understand the silent interchange between the two of us, and we didn't say much more. They thanked us graciously and continued their bacheloring. We looked at each other, wondering just what made us stick out that badly and at the same time laughing about the Sioux County guests at a German wedding who would hear a congratulatory note from a Sioux County resident. Only in Amsterdam. That peculiarity set the stage for what would prove to be a week of out-of-the-ordinary for us.

Perhaps the first mistake was renting bikes instead of a car. But in a rare moment of awareness, I was all about immersing myself in the culture, and since I see the culture of the Netherlands as a culture of bikes, bikes it was. The first thing I learned: foreigners who rent bikes in the Netherlands should be required to get a license or wear a large flashing light that warns natives of our ineptitude. Because I don't speak much Dutch, I don't know many of the naughty words, but my vocabulary was expanded exponentially as we pedaled out of the center of Amsterdam. Those people ride bikes like we drive cars—perhaps better. They can hold hands, text, and carry a passenger on the back or front while negotiating traffic, cars, people, but not stupid bikers. Those would be us. That little dingling bell behind you means “dumbass, get over. I am trying to get to work, or home, or somewhere important, and you are not paying attention.” We learned to respond to the bell immediately but then would promptly pull right back out into the center of the *fiets path*, or stop and look around. If it could be done incorrectly, we were doing it.

Beyond the problems of a party of six who were bicycally challenged, possessing the attention span of a gnat did not endear natives to us either. Pulling up in the middle of the street for a cute picture caused pileups not unlike corners on the *Tour de France*, but oblivion is a beautiful thing. We were in the Netherlands on holidays because

our daughter was getting married, and something was our oyster.

One of the particularly aggravating problems continued to be our luggage. My wife and I had backpacks—we were seasoned travelers, and her dress and my suit were neatly rolled up and stashed in the bottom of the packs—shoes and all. However, one of our traveling party brought along a roller bag, not a bad thing in almost every circumstance but certainly a problem when four days of biking are involved. Anyone who has seen a load shift on a tractor trailer on the interstate can appreciate a rollerbag shifting off the rack on the back of a bike. I imagine we would have been more annoyed if it had not been for the pain endured when introducing one's unseasoned *derriere* to a bicycle seat for an extended period of time. Any legitimate excuse to get off the bike was a good one, so without anyone admitting it, we waited in anticipation for the bag to slide.

Another struggle was directions. We were informed that one of our party had a map so we did not need to bring one along. Upon meeting up with the group, we discovered that the map was more than a quarter century old. For a country like the Netherlands, that can be a problem. While I do not completely understand it, these people decide to make land when they run out by simply pushing some dirt together, pulling the plug, and draining the pond. *Voila*, a new province. So, the map was a little outdated, and few bike paths were listed. After biking for four hours through Amsterdam and seeing signs continually saying Amsterdam 4 km, I strongly suspect we were in a holding pattern and quite simply circled the city in an effort to find an escape route. Total seat time, 5 hours—and probably 6 kilometers away from the city center. Not all that productive, but day one was down. We found a motel and crashed for the night—an appropriate verb, as proved when my sister-in law, while negotiating a curve, dumped her bike into a bush in front of our lodging. Graceful we were not.

The next three days were similar, although once we had left the gravitational pull of Amsterdam, the biking was much easier. Discovering that the white triangles painted on intersections and red and white signs were solely for cyclists helped immensely, and we became increasingly aware of how ignorant and out of place we were. We worked to

acclimate, but even the term itself implies that one is not in his element and significant adjustment is necessary. When we were out in the country, biking on dikes, pedaling past cattle and horses and sheep with only the occasional ding behind us that suggested we were still obviously clueless, we could relax. The small towns boasting houses from the 1400s and forward, quaint canals through the middle of villages with dories tied to piers, and everywhere bikes wrestling for space with cars on narrow streets that ran like arteries through the community caused us to pull up and absorb our surroundings. In some ways this was *Tour de Holland for Dummies*. The scenes were literal, living, breathing calendars, mirroring the images of my youth that hung on our kitchen wall back home as each month unfolded in front of us.

On Wednesday, the day before the wedding—yes, in the Netherlands weddings apparently occur on Wednesdays and Thursdays—we spent the day wandering the town of Groningen, some two hours north of Amsterdam, by train. At least I think it is north. Too many loops around Amsterdam left me geographically disoriented, so I simply followed the bike in front of me or the red and white signs. Groningen is the largest town nearest the village where the wedding was to occur, so we were within striking distance—just a 90-minute bike ride. We had a bed and breakfast booked in the village for that night, but the father of the bride needed a day to deprogram. It had less to do with getting a daughter married than absorbing the culture of the town. Rather than do the typical tourist things, my wife and I wandered, poking our heads into construction sites where old buildings were being renovated and sampling foods that only locals might eat. As well, we chatted with those around us, asking questions and admiring architecture.

All this led to an interesting conversation with a group of Groningen University students who were prepping their sailboat for a six-week excursion. As we chatted, it became clear that they lacked the skills to manage the technical aspects of soldering and wiring a loom of cables that controlled both the engine and the navigational system. Three hours later, after an enlightening conversation, we left with their boat correctly and safely wired. However, the time needed to finish the job had cut into our arrival time at the bed and breakfast, and now we were pedaling in the

dark to a village that we did not know. The lights on Dutch bikes are good, but lack of geographical knowledge makes the going difficult. A few wrong turns and a few bag slips later, we arrived to settle in for the night. At this point I began to realize the error of no rental car. While I had no problem with biking, much of our party wanted a vehicle, and now we had no way of finding one, short of biking back into town. I went to sleep.

The day of the wedding was as uneventful as guests at a wedding might expect. Not required to do anything except show up, we managed that well. In the Netherlands the wedding is apparently a day-long event, and around noon we went to the in-laws' house to meet the family for the first time. I don't know if the environment was uncomfortable for our hosts—those in the family who could speak English were the interpreters while the rest of us smiled and nodded in both English and Dutch. Truthfully, I think we got the better end of the deal. No planning, no painting, no renovations, no reception hall, while they managed the day and entertained us. From there they decided to shuttle us—no bikes, which was something of a shock for me until I discovered where the church and the reception were located. I hadn't really thought about that—so much for culture and acclimating.

Apparently, the *initial* wedding reception occurs before the wedding, so from the house we are shuttled to the reception hall, where people come and go. They speak perfect Dutch, and we speak imperfect English, and so we smile and nod and shake hands. Sometimes, when they attempt English and we attempt Dutch, all of us increase the volume of voice as if louder will make foreign words understandable. In the end we smile once more, receiving pitying glances from well-wishers who probably think that this son-in-law still has the opportunity to head for the sea instead of marrying into a family of dolts who only speak one language and have little to no clue about Dutch culture. I don't share the fact with them that this is the "Old Country" for my parents and siblings; I don't need the resulting castigation.

From the reception, the wedding is held in a church down the road—the date above the door says 1470 AD with a bunch of names under it. I ask someone who speaks English what the names mean and find that these were the local dignitaries who built the church. I wait in front of the church

for my daughter and wander through an ancient cemetery that borders the entryway. It lends itself to all sorts of bad lines, but I hold my tongue, and soon a car drives up, and she steps out in all her splendor. One of the English speaking in-laws attempts to politely herd our family into the church by asking the rest of our party if they would like to go in. I discover her attempted politeness and tell her she needs to order them in. That is how we respond well, and she is good at it, so all is in order. My daughter takes my arm and we walk in. The aisle is narrow and the benches are tight, but not so much that we have to sideshuffle. Dutch people were not once the size that they are today, and the church is evidence of this. Either that or the Calvinist bent that influenced the reformational movement intended to have them uncomfortable as they listened to the Word. The pulpit was suspended at the front with a choir of organ pipes behind and a circle of benches for the elders, looking a little like a pit. The minister waits with my soon-to-be son-in-law in the ring. I don't give my daughter away; she was gone long before that was going to happen. Those were the technical details.

The delightful thing about this wedding was our presence. We were spiders or flies on the wall—foreign insects. The wedding was in Dutch, as was the sermon—yes there was a sermon—with something of a translation on a sheet in English for us to follow. The vows were in English, and then his family sang a song for them in Dutch, and we looked on. We do not sing, so we did not sing, for the betterment of all in attendance. My wife had somehow ended up at the other end of the bench with our children in between, so we sat apart for the wedding, which may have added to the international mystery of family. We must have

been a curiosity.

After the wedding, the reception, the *first* one, included the kind of people I had grown up with. These would have been my aunts and uncles, broken English with handshakes and smiles all around. They apparently popped in simply to wish the newlyweds well, talk to a few people, snack on a *gbak*, and have a cup of coffee, and they were on their way. That one went into the early evening. Then the *second* reception occurred. I am still not sure how the signals work, but guests left, and I believe other guests arrived, and the party was in full swing. My wife left at 11:00, and I managed to get back to the bed and breakfast by 12:30, even though the energy in the hall was still strong because of the culture thing. We had to be up at 3:00 a.m. to bike back into town for the 5:05 train to Amsterdam to get to Schiphol for a 10:30 a.m. flight, and we were the parents of the bride. We needed some rest. However, in attempting to set our alarms, we discovered that our phones had not made the 6-hour time change, so the alarms were only a guess. Anyone who needs to get out of a country at a specific time knows what happens next. Awake every 20 minutes. At 2:30 I finally got up. We quietly left the house.

The only two lights illuminating *the fietspath* in the early early morning that Friday were our bike lights as my wife and I quietly pedaled in. The occasional duck, startled from sleep by our pedaling, rushed from the grass to the canal that flanked us but other than that, nothing. A car would have given us at least one more hour of sleep, perhaps 4 if we had driven to Amsterdam, but instead here we were, wide open bike path, not a soul in sight. And as I thought about it, this was just the way my ancestors would have....