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Settling

Bill Elgersma

The phone sits on a desk around the corner from the kitchen, in a wall-papered room with a paint-chipped door complete with cracked bottom panel—evidence of a kick of frustration from someone tired of waiting to use it. The cherry desk, a relic from some corporate office of the past picked up cheap at an auction, has a top large enough to land a navy jet and a swing-up shelf for the typewriter on the one side. An office lamp, the horizontal type that scatters light across the top, sits in the center illuminating the note pad and writing area. But even though his fingers unconsciously twist the switch, and he hears it click, Ken doesn't need the light to see the numbers he wants to dial. He has done that so often his fingers could find their way in the dark.

His dad has been gone for about 6 years, drained of life bit by bit from a farm that eroded away his dreams, his ambition, his will to succeed, so that finally all that was left was a shell of a man with gaunt, vein-lined cheeks, sunken eye sockets on a meatless face supported by a body so strongly resembling hail-damaged corn stalks, the neighbors often wondered how he stayed alive. And then he wasn't. Harley Livingston had stopped by to ask about using the Allis for hauling silage and found him slumped in the corner of the machine shed, dead long enough to call a coroner instead of an ambulance. Heart just gave out—worked to death.

His mom wasn't surprised to find herself on her own. It isn't uncommon in this part of the country, and with nowhere to go, she just knocks around the house. But she hasn't changed much of anything—just exists. Seems like that happens more often in Sand Lake than anyone around here wants to admit. Everyone waits, and if they wait long enough, they settle. Settling means not really getting what they want, just accepting what they get. That goes for everything from jobs to spouses to life.

His mom settled for his dad when prospects dwindled, then dried up with the farm crisis. He

settled for her because she fit the bill, checked all the boxes. Could cook, clean, was okay on the farm, and didn't need much attention. She had been willing to accommodate his needs enough times to bear 4 children and then announced she was done with all that messy stuff, and they settled down to raising a family. There was no tension in the house, just the mundane chore of living as a rural family might—day in and day out as faded and worn as the wind-blown jeans and overalls that hung on the line to dry.

Even the farm seemed to understand settling. Tired, bitter winds battered this farmstead from the day it was built, offended by the audacity of someone attempting to eke out a living on a piece of land no one in their right mind would farm. But they had. Ken and his brothers, along with their dad, wrestled a meager living of beef and pigs, chickens for eggs, and a few milk cows. Not enough for any of them to make a go of it beside his dad, but the farm kept them in food with a little extra and, at the same time, saddled them down. Tomcatting, as their father put it, was out. Chores happened too early in the morning, and wrestling crops from the land consumed them from spring to fall. Maybe that's why they all moved on. Drained from the endless hours with no future on the farm, they found what they could to support themselves beyond the heartlessness of land that demanded everything with very little reciprocity. The jobs may not have been glamorous, but at least they paid enough to cover the bills consistently—and that was good enough.

And the final settle—six feet under. In Sand Lake, the dead had a greater population than the living. Several times the town had gone to Ronald Nielson, whose land abutted the cemetery, to buy another quarter section to accommodate that growing population until, finally, he sold them the entire south section. But the living, the youth that is, seeing what was in store for them, left as soon as the graduation speaker said, "Thank you." The assumption was anywhere had more promise,

all-the-while failing to realize that wherever they went, they would take themselves with them. Now Ken has returned, hoping for better but worried that this just might be the pattern of his future.

He sits there staring at the phone, not reaching to insert his finger in any of the holes of the dial although the surface is shiny and slightly worn on a series of numbers. For no logical reason he absurdly hopes that it will ring, and Lisa's voice will be on the line. He had called at one point in history, early and often, when he wanted the stability of her voice—the security that poured through the line. Now, eleven years later, sitting in the same creaking, wooden office chair that he stripped but never finished, here he is, in the same place, wondering how the conversation—if there even is a conversation—will go.

Likely, if he dials her number, the phone will ring three or four times, and he can see Lisa running from the easy-chair in the family room to answer it before the caller hangs up. And he wonders if she has caller ID. If she does, will she pick up? Eleven years is a long time—long enough to blow a marriage and ruin a career. Long enough to do reruns of the past and believe it was better than the choice. That's probably why his marriage tanked.

He was blind-sided when Marcie said she wasn't going to compete with a ghost. She and Lisa had known each other—the town wasn't that big—but he didn't think he was living in the world of “what if” until he came home to find out there wasn't a home to come home to. Marcie told him to go back to Sand Lake and figure it out. She was done.

Although he didn't want to lose her, he hadn't protested. She told him she couldn't live with ambivalence as she placed the last of his boxes by the door. “All in or nothing,” she had called from the porch as she closed the door while he loaded his belongings in the truck. Pulling out of the driveway, he looked in the rearview mirror to realize that dash screens had replaced what he was looking through. He wasn't driving toward something; he was in reverse moving forward.

Somewhere in there, Lisa Atkinson had eased herself in between the crops and the chores—a little like osmosis. Maybe living two concessions over, maybe the fact that their fathers helped each other out, maybe because they went to school and

church together, whatever, they had been tight. Lisa compensated for Kenny's gaps. She prattled where he was quiet; she protested when he agreed, and she knew how to get him to talk when he was too shy to speak.

This friendship had started early in grade school—at age 7 or 8. Awkward at interacting with others, he had run into trouble at school with Susan Young and Darlene Prins. They were the leaders in the class, mean girls from town who modeled what they saw and heard at home, and they controlled as ruthlessly as their mothers had done before them and continued to do in the community. Staying in a small town where hierarchies are clearly defined often through gossip and malice, they reign, but only if they stay. A move, even 40 miles away, and they are dethroned by anonymity, and the kingdom disintegrates. So, like their mothers, Susan and Darlene would be permanent fixtures in one-horse towns like Sand Lake, already in training.

The school shared the church's parking lot, and one Friday, behind the church, in the only blind spot too far for a lazy monitor to patrol, was the ring where fights were settled, kisses given, and schemes concocted. They had decided to make Kenny their target for his shyness and silence. A note in his desk told Kenny to come to the stairs, the name for the location, and so he did, wondering as he walked what plan was being hatched and what his role might be.

Arriving, he found Susan and Darlene in the center of the circle, and as they called him in and started to chant, he realized what this was. He had seen it happen to others before and simply walked away. But this time there would be no leaving—he was the one under fire, and as usual, he had nothing to say. They started with his lack of speech, then his awkwardness around people, and had just started into the way he looked when Lisa had jumped into the ring, punched Susan right in the mouth, and slapped Darlene across the cheek. They both reached for their faces, and at that point Lisa grabbed bunches of hair and threw them to the ground. Although she was not nearly as tall as either, the farm chores in her background, her fury, and her shouting had them trembling and the circle backing up quickly to avoid her wrath.

She spent the rest of the day in the principal's office, taking the brunt of punishment, while

the other two spent the better part in the nurse's room—Susan because her nose continued to drip blood and Darlene because her face hurt, both having learned early how to play the game and let others take the blame.

All Lisa had said to Mr. Pot, the principal, was they were mean, and they had no business bullying other kids. The term bullying hit a nerve, and even though he pressed for details, that was her explanation; she would not say more. The other two turned the situation around and made Lisa the problem. Kenny was on the edge of the mess, not saying a thing.

Saturday, he rode his bike to her farm, avoiding their mutt Sparky, who announced his presence and nipped at his boots as he pedaled up the laneway. Mr. Atkinson yelled "Hi" from the machine shed, and Lisa slammed the door behind her as she left the house. The two of them had spent quite a bit of time together, so Kenny's presence wasn't a surprise, nor was the idea of the two of them disappearing for most of the day doing whatever kids do. She swung open the gate that fenced her and the lawn away from the cows, goats, or whatever roaming deemed tasty and slammed it closed behind her.

"Hi" he said quietly, sitting on his bike, one toe digging in the gravel, one on the pedal, expecting her to launch into him for hanging her out to dry in the principal's office. But that wasn't Lisa.

"Kenny," she smiled brightly with a little skip, "dump your bike and let's go to the fort."

The fort was a water tower, abandoned after the deep well had been drilled and electricity provided the water. If they had lived in town, someone would have made the windmill that had powered the pump some sort of art form. Now it creaked back and forth as it rode the air, the blades stilled, and the tailbone furled permanently into the wind after a particularly aggressive storm. Once water was no longer a scarce commodity, her older brothers had taken planks off the wood pile and nailed up a box with a roof on top of the platform where the tank had long since been sold to the scrap dealers who traveled around picking up junk. Lisa had laid claim to the fort when they left, and Kenny was invited over.

They spent time together up there, hours and hours, sometimes talking but mostly just Lisa. Often he said nothing, just let her talk for the two

of them, and she did. It was comfortable. The incessant background chatter meant he didn't need to speak, and that made life less awkward. What she had to say was interesting, and he was safe, not wondering if she was going to manipulate him or make snide comments to nip at him. Occasionally though, when they went into the house, Lisa's mom stopped him as he attempted to slip by quietly. She would look at him and say, "Hello Kenny. How are you?"

Early on he was mortified. "Good" was all he muttered, but she wouldn't let him off that easily.

"Kenny, if you want to come into my house, you must look me in the eye and say, 'Hello Mrs. Atkinson,' and then you can go play."

Lisa would attempt to intervene. "Mom!" But Sheila would stop her protest with an outstretched hand to block her words and continue to look at Kenny. Beet-red, he would raise his eyes about apron-level and mumble, "Hello Mrs. Atkinson," and then disappear down the hall with Lisa.

Over time, he became part of the family, more or less—an extra plate at the table, someone to help feed calves when they were busy. He drove tractor when necessary, and they made space in the station wagon when they went to the lake. Typically, Lisa would speak for him, and he didn't mind. Once, when she asked why, he said, "you say it better and you don't mind people looking at you," and that settled it.

Tight as they were, this did not become a boyfriend/girlfriend thing. And when a person doesn't say a whole lot, he doesn't attract many friends, so Kenny didn't hang out much in high school. But the few guys that did know him would occasionally ask about Lisa. He would shrug his shoulders and say, "she's my friend," and that was it.

But the social rules of high-school conduct relative to boys is a rulebook written in invisible ink that few can read and even fewer understand. One day Darren Philips crossed the line and made a crack about her body, where upon Kenny closed his fist and belted him in the nose. Only one hit, but the blood went everywhere, and Darren returned to school with two black eyes that took several weeks to clear up.

When Lisa asked him what happened, Kenny replied, "He said something he shouldn't have, and he knows better for next time." No one else would tell her for fear that they too would be

sporting the raccoon look.

Marcie Fleming showed up almost by accident. She was a fringe player in a group of fringe players. Though Lisa was his friend, Marcie dedicated her energies into getting his attention as a boyfriend, and Kenny never even saw it coming. Marcie was just easy to be around. She knew how to tease her way into boys' lives, giggling and laughing with more antics and chatter than Lisa, letting her hand linger on their shoulders or their backs, so she was even less work. Lisa warned him, but all he did was blush and say, "Get out. What would she want with me?"

While Lisa didn't want him as a boyfriend—he was more brother than anything and that was just eeuw—she didn't like girls sniffing around Kenny like he might be the flavor of the day. After one particularly awkward afternoon at the lake where Marcie had her hands on him so often Lisa thought he was going to turn into lint, she went to his house, sat him down, and gave him the talk. She finished with, "Kenny, she's mean and she's a bimbo! You are better than that," as she headed for the door. He sat there in silence, and she left. And now, as he thought about it, that was the beginning of the end.

A few years out of high school, he and Marcie married. It was a linear relationship, although he didn't realize that either until later. Marcie needed a man, someone to work and pay the bills, someone to take to parties or dances or wherever she needed to be seen, and Kenny was as reliable as a Caprice Classic. By the time he actually realized it, he was getting married; the dress had been bought; the cake ordered; the church reserved; and the deposit sent to the caterer. They were going to play house, and he was the man on the top of the cake. No going back or changing direction now, although that would have been the last thing he would have done anyway.

Once more Lisa tried, maybe a month before the wedding. He had run into her coming out of the feed mill, dusty from picking up chop for the cows. Always upbeat, big smile on her face, she hugged him quickly, knowing how awkward this kind of contact was for him, and asked him how he was.

"Good." The response lacked a little, but she knew him.

"How are the wedding plans?" She looked him

in the face with eyebrows raised while he examined the ground.

"Alright, I guess. Don't really know. I haven't had much to do with them," he shrugged.

"Kenny," Lisa grabbed him by the arm, "look at me."

When he raised his face, she shook his arm and said, "This is your wedding. You are supposed to be part of it. You getting cold feet?"

"I dunno," he mumbled. "Not sure this is the right thing to do, but she has done all this work. Can't really get out of it. Wouldn't seem right. That's not how we do things."

"If you don't think it is right, then don't do it. Kenny, listen to me. Tell her you can't go through with it. You hear me?" She shook him again and, her voice rising, continued, "Kenny, I have never told you wrong, and I'm telling you now: I don't think this works for you." With that she went through the door, the brass bell clanging behind her. He watched her pickup pull away from the loading dock, ease into the traffic, slow for the yield sign at the end of the street, and then disappear.

That night, when he had gone over to Marcie's for yet another litany of wedding plans, he mentioned that he had seen Lisa, then asked Marcie if she was sure about all of this. "All of what?" Instantly, there was an edge on Marcie's voice.

"All of this wedding stuff—you know, getting married and everything." He sort of muttered out his response. Words didn't come easily, and he was risking his thoughts out loud.

In small towns, maybe even in big cities, for some people—typically the mothers—weddings are a type of status marker. Both they and their daughters are stars for the day—leading ladies on carousels for all to admire. For those mothers who must have their daughters married early to demonstrate just how much power they wield in the town, cancelling a wedding is not an option. By the time Kenny realized he had just said something that was off-limits, the temperature in the room had dropped significantly. When he looked at Marcie, the fury in her face matched the volume of her voice. The rest of the evening was a blur, but somehow Lisa took a hit, and he was verbally flogged back into submission.

The wedding happened, and he didn't remember much. Lots of handshakes and hugs and back

pats. Some kisses, but most knew he was too bashful for that kind of attention, and quick contact was all that happened. He never asked about the guest list but came to find out that Lisa had not been invited when his mother had asked Marcie the Sunday before the wedding. Thinking about the blowup the night after he talked to Lisa, he thought better of mentioning it, and the look on Marcie's face, when she explained that they had to limit the list, told him he had made the right choice.

Trouble didn't happen immediately. They moved a few hours away, where Ken picked up a job at a local elevator, and they settled into routines. As in most marriages, early-on infatuation, playing house, spending time together, doing nothing together, it was all good. For Kenny it was great. Marcie was all in, as to what he considered the perfect wife, and he just went to work—isn't that what guys do? She handled the rest.

It was after the third miscarriage that the winds shifted. A few years to get settled into this marriage thing, the house, the boat, the cruise, vacation in Mexico—he was making good money and getting promotions at the mill—and she was keeping up with their friends. Kenny knew how to keep her happy, or so he thought, until their friends started having kids. At first, he didn't think much of it. So you have kids coming—congratulations.

But Marcie was keeping score, and she was matching her friends one for one on everything until the babies wouldn't grow. After the second miscarriage, she overhauled the house, tossed everything that might contribute to infertility, and had his fertility tested—much to his mortification—all-the-while crushed every time another baptism was announced at church—Kenny knowing they would be worshipping in another town that Sunday.

As someone who was always thin on words, he wasn't much for support. He talked a little more now, but it wasn't all that helpful. "Marc," he would start up, "if God wants us to have kids, they will come. Look at Sarah. Over 100, then she gets pregnant. Now that's persistence!"

At one point, early in their marriage, Marcie would have laughed with him and made an off-colored comment, but now she was all out of jokes. Baby fever does not come with a sense of humor,

and the edge on her tongue was reminiscent of any time he had been in the background when she was near Lisa. Sometimes mean girls grow out of it, but for some, that entrenched character trait just manifests itself in different ways. Ken had been an adequate spouse until the pothole in the road of their marriage became a sink hole, and then she managed to drop him and their marriage into it.

But he had to share the blame. Doing nothing is still doing something—nothing. She had been content to lead him like a horse to water. Now she wanted him to step up, do something, change something, make a baby, just something to keep her in the vortex, and he didn't know how. And somehow, she managed to drag Lisa's name into the mess—convinced that he was still lost in that world and indirectly blaming her for the lack of children while he was just trying to make her happy. She complicated what wasn't complicated and failed to recognize that his simplicity and innocence—naiveté actually—made him incapable of that level of subterfuge.

Sure, her "all or nothing" line blind-sided him, but what did she want? He went to work; he brought home a pay check; he didn't ask about anything she did. He thought he was playing by the rules—whatever they were—but obviously he was wrong.

The divorce wasn't messy. He signed over the house, split the bank account, packed up his clothes, and headed back to Sand Lake, the only place he ever understood. He didn't think it was about Lisa until he pulled in the driveway. Immediately he wondered if she was home.... And maybe that said everything.

So here he sits. His mom has gone to bed, but not before she brought him up to speed on all the local gossip, the essence of small-town living, including Lisa. Not much to tell. She wasn't married, wasn't seeing anyone, pretty much home taking care of the folks, running the farm. Said Lisa would ask about him when they ran into each other in town, maybe once, twice a year, just shooting the breeze like old friends do. Saw her a week ago and told her he was moving back. She looked busy, a little worn, tired from keeping the place up what with her parents aging and no brothers and no man. Ken didn't miss the "no man" line.

But what does a person say after 11 years? How does that conversation start? How could

she ignore the disaster he had made of his marriage—his life? In this town, what would people say about her being seen with him, divorced and all—what would that do to her reputation? What about her parents? After taking him in like one of their own, did they deserve what this might do to their name?

And, does anyone want damaged goods? He was like a toy Marcie bought and then took back to the store, not because he was broken but because she didn't want him anymore. What if Lisa was done with him as well?

He knows about cowards dying a thousand deaths—ten thousand maybe in his case—as he attempts to will himself to pick up the phone. If

she picks up the phone, what does he say? He has played the conversation in his head:

"Hi Lisa, It's been a long time. I'm back in town." Where would that go?

"Hi Lisa, this is Ken. 'Member that time at the mill? Just before I got married? Well, you were right. I blew my marriage, and I am back in town with no clue what to do." "Hi Lisa, I just moved back to town. I'm stuck in neutral. Not really sure what I am doing. Want to go out for a drink or something?"

And now, consciously, his fingers reach out and, instead of the phone, twist the switch again. And again, the switch clicks as the bulb fades—as if it knew all along.