

Yard Sale

By Kathleen McGill

After the funeral, she set up the tables. I watched her when she dragged their long plywood lengths out her front door and into the yard. The four tables were dusty and their legs did not open easily. I remembered the last time they had been set up, seven years ago when the Ridges decided to throw a block party. The whole thing had gone horribly wrong; hence the tables' rusted legs and cobwebbed undersides.

I should have helped her set up yesterday but I didn't know how to approach her. I went to the funeral, presented my condolences and sent a fruit basket, but beyond that, I just didn't know. Maybe today I'd buy one of those small frozen pizzas and drop it off around dinner.

Mrs. Ridge, I think her first name is Emily, was now a widow. Her husband of some incredibly long period of time had just passed away, leaving her the sole occupant of 1041 Briar Lane. I lived across the street.

From my second floor bathroom, peaking through the gauzy curtain, I could see her front yard. She was a strange woman, but not outrageously so. She bought chickens once, a rooster and two hens and let them roam her half-acre. The rooster was hit by a car and the two hens just took off. I think a hawk got them.

A few cars had stopped to see what she was selling. Mrs. Ridge hovered around the porch, only coming forward to answer questions or to take money. Mostly, though, people just got out of their cars, perused around and climbed back in their respective vehicles.

I walked out of the bathroom and into my bedroom, to begin looking for something to wear that was suitably mute. I didn't want to appear insensitive or overly dramatic. A gray turtleneck and some black slacks would do. Yes, I looked reasonably sympathetic. I headed down the stairs and paused to pick up my keys, considered this and then put them back down, pulling the door shut behind me.

Mrs. Ridge had laid out her husband's clothes systematically. Shirts, both work and leisure, were on the front left table. Jeans, slacks and few pairs on shorts were on the front right, with shoes, hats and ties on the table directly behind that one. The fourth table had knick-knacks and hobby accessories. I gave her a nod and brief wave and started to look in earnest.

The shirts were mostly white and pinstripe button-downs. They looked stiff to the touch. I ran my fingers under the collar and held it with my pointer and thumb. The collar points were intact and sharply dignified. I released the shirt and kept looking. A renegade pink one was neatly folded all by itself on the corner of the table. The plastic bit that secured the price tag was still attached, so I figured the tag was tucked down into the shirt out of sight. He had never worn

it. I passed T-shirts that he had worn in the yard and to little league games in the fall. She was asking for two dollars a button-down and one dollar a T-shirt.

I felt uneasy at the whole prospect; it just seemed wrong somehow. Mrs. Ridge didn't need the money and she could've just donated all his clothes to some charity if she didn't want them around. That, or her sons could have come and taken some of their father's things. I looked up to find that she was watching me. I smiled meekly and moved on.

I didn't intend to buy anything, but kept looking. I couldn't help but be curious; the man's whole wardrobe had been laid out. It was like invading the closets of the people you were asked to housesit for as a teenager. Even if this viewing was sanctioned, I couldn't get over the low-frequency guilt that accompanied it.

The pants were mostly gray and black, drab and well cut. The right back pocket on all the jeans had the ghost imprint of his wallet. This mark was matched by the circular wear of the dip tin he kept in his left pocket. The two pairs of shorts were obviously out of place and had probably only been worn when he took his grandkids to Disney World a couple of summers ago.

I skipped the hats, shoes and ties table entirely. The last table held only a few personal items, of which the first to catch my attention was a picture of Jesus in a gold frame. It was one of those air-brushy, hazy portraits, with large watery blue eyes. The word "Jesus" was written in script at an angle near the bottom of the picture, as if He Himself had autographed it.

I had never seen more than the front hallway of their house, but I tried to picture where this portrait had hung. The kitchen, I decided. I had the distinct image of Mrs. Ridge looking up over her roast beef, over her husband's head, and meeting Jesus eye to eye. I could see why she would take it down; it was going for a buck fifty. For a moment I wanted to buy it, but just as quickly was repulsed by the idea.

A couple of baseballs, a set of golf clubs and an aquarium were all that was left. The aquarium seemed a bit opportunistic. I was about to turn around and head home when I saw that a blazer had fallen off one of the tables. I bent down to pick it up and didn't know where to put it back, as none of the tables had coats. Mrs. Ridge saw me hesitate and came down off the porch.

"That's a beautiful blazer, isn't it?" she said as she took it from me.

"Yes," I nodded, "it is."

It was- it was tweed and had leather pads on the elbows.

"I was thinking that three dollars would be about right."

She looked up at me expectantly and then handed it back. Aghh, I inwardly groaned as I draped the blazer over one arm and dug three dollars out of my pocket.

“Thank you, dear,” she said absently, and smiled.

It hung heavily on my arm, reeking of oldness, as I turned to walk back to my house. Slipping it on, I found that the shoulders were too big, as were the sleeves. The coat hung loosely around my body.

As I crossed the street, I reached into the pockets of the blazer. An old tissue, a rubber band. It had an inside breast pocket as well. My fingers slipped against something smooth and folded and I knew immediately that it was a bill. Carefully, I pulled it out. Ten dollars.

I kept walking. When I reached my front door, I stopped and stared at the knocker, holding the bill in my fist. Then I turned around and walked back to Mrs. Ridge’s yard sale, picked up the Jesus picture and paid for it with the ten-dollar bill. With Jesus under my arm, and my chest encased in the dead man’s coat, I hustled away, feeling guilty but vaguely elated.

Disgust filled me as I entered my house. I shrugged off the coat and hung it up in the hall closet. Jesus’ eyes were slightly out of focus, his gaze aimed up and over my shoulder. Again the image of dinner at the Ridge house flashed in my mind and I felt something in the way of superior as I hung up the portrait on the inside of my closet door. I shut the door with an angry snap and pocketed the change I had been holding.

I knew I wasn’t going to help her put those tables back.