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An Original

—By Doug Larson

One day in recent years, shortly before June, I was in my vegetable garden putting wire cages around my tomato plants. I looked toward the house next door and noticed that a cattle truck was being backed up to the garage. My first thought was, "My word! The wealthiest woman in Grimes is using a cattle truck to move in to a \$70,000 house! Such an abysmal lack of taste."

Miss Addie was a mystery to everyone in Grimes; and from what I had heard, she had been a mystery all her life. For the past several years, she had lived in a drab upstairs apartment in a downtown store building that she owned.

When I heard that she had bought the house next door, I didn't know how to react. I had been so conditioned by what the townspeople had said about her that I didn't know how I would like such a looney woman as a closeby neighbor.

Not everyone felt the same way I did about Addie, however. Some of my fellow townspeople worked their way into her acquaintance to get monetary handouts. She was always surrounded by opportunists who were willing to do her bidding, whether that meant cooking for her, driving her red Cadillac places for her, or handling her correspondence. In exchange, she paid their medical bills, set them up in business, or helped them out financially in other ways.

"She was tall, angular, and a bit stoop-shouldered."

I had heard many stories, so I was expecting her move next door to be handled by her pseudo-admirers; but I wasn't expecting it to be done in a cattle truck.

As I craned my neck toward my neighbor's house, I saw at least twenty people—boys, girls, men, women—alighting from cars parked on the street and going to the truck to begin to unload the furniture and household goods.

Overseeing the whole operation was a strange-looking woman who had ridden to the house with the truck driver. She might be 60 or 80. She was tall, angular, and a bit stoop-shouldered. As I walked nearer the chain-link fence that separated our property, I could see that she was wearing a purple dress whose hem struck three or four inches below the knee. She had fuzzy-looking orange mules on her feet, and her pink slip was showing at least an inch. I was to learn that the too-long slip was one of Addie's trademarks. For one so old and of such withered and spotted skin, the blackish-red hair showing underneath a rakishly tied multi-colored kerchief seemed a discrepancy. I mentally set her age at 80.

I wanted to meet this woman I had heard so much about, but yet I was hesitant. Was it because I didn't want to interrupt her work, or was I afraid. I had met many interesting types in literature and life, but subconsciously I wondered whether I was ready for the Addie Harp experience.

Actually I knew very little about her that I could put any stock in. I decided to barge right in and introduce myself. I could hear her saying, "Now, Honey, be careful with that violin. Momma and Poppa gave that to Genie on her tenth birthday; and when Genie died, I got it." I was to learn that **Honey** was one of her favorite vocatives.

About the time her cautioning words were out, she turned and saw me but didn't lose her train of thought. "Oh, hello, there. You know, Genie was my little sister. Bertie was first, I was second, and Genie was the baby. Everybody just loved Genie to pieces. She was the charmer from the first. When she was about nine years old, a Chatauqua program came to town and there was a violinist in the group. As you know, Poppa was always as active as could be in all the city's doings. So he brought the violinist home to stay in our spare bedroom. Since he was an old man away from his own grandchildren, he took an immediate liking to us girls—and especially Genie. He taught her some

of the basic fingering on the violin, and she caught on very fast. By the time he left our house a week later, Genie was hooked—as the kids say today—on the violin. So what brings you here?”

I was about to answer, but she interrupted and began to talk again—“Well, by going all the way to Yukon, Momma finally found a teacher for Genie, and boy she passed all of us in our music accomplishments. I had been taking piano lessons for years, and I wasn’t setting any records. But poor little Genie! Everyone said she had the talent to be a concert pianist, and she probably would have made it too if she hadn’t got married, started a family, and then died at a young age.”

Finding an opening, I plunged in. “I’m your next-door neighbor. This probably isn’t the best day for calling, but I have wanted to meet you for a long time. So I took the chance to come over.”

“My, what a nice neighbor I already have. You must be that sweet Mr. Norwood I’ve been hearing about. Ever since I bought this house from the Overbys, people have been telling me about you and your little family. So you teach English up at the college. My I think English is a good field for a man. Sometimes the kids just won’t listen to a woman; that’s especially true of the boys, you know. Ha! Listen to me—a former English teacher—saying ‘you know’.” I detest that expression. I suppose you know I taught English close to three hundred years over at Locono High

“As I left Addie’s yard, I thought, ‘So what?’ ”

School. Yessir, and the last ten years I was there, I was head of the department. But if I had it to do over again, I’d stay in the classroom. I liked the teaching better than the administrative work.”

“May I call you **Addie**, or do you prefer **Miss Harp**?” I asked, jumping in again.

“Everybody in town except the Negroes who work for me from time to time calls me **Addie**, so you may call me that, too.”

“Well, we don’t stand on formality either, so you may call me **Doug**, and I want you to drop in when you get settled so my family can meet you.”

“Well, that goes for you too, Doug, and I hope to see you again soon.”

As I left Addie’s yard, I thought, “So what? Maybe she is a little eccentric, but we need some local color in this neighborhood.” I enumerated all the ordinary people in that section of Grimes, including the Norwoods.

Addie moved in next door toward the first of

June. Then Summer School started, and I had lost awareness of time until one evening in late June I received a telephone call. “Doug, this is Helene Goltry. Have you met your new neighbor yet?”

“Well, Helene, I haven’t talked with you since Mark and Cathy’s wedding.” Mark was one of my undergraduate classmates; he and his mother had befriended me when I first arrived in Grimes to attend college. “Yes, I met Addie the day she moved in, but I haven’t been a very good neighbor. I have been very busy this summer with my teaching and other activities.”

“Well, I understand that if anyone does, Hon, because I know how busy Mark stays. Of course over at SIU he’s mostly in research and doesn’t teach much. But the reason I called is to tell you that today is Addie’s 75th birthday. I’ve been talking with Betty Hanks today about a celebration. As you probably know, Addie and Betty have been good friends through the years. And each time Betty is back from New York City—you know she’s an off-Broadway drama coach—she always tries to get together with Addie. So I have made a birthday cake, and Betty has mixed up some punch. Will you help us surprise Addie? Will you and your family be our escorts?”

“Sure thing. That sounds like fun. The children will enjoy an outing, and Laura probably will too. Are you ready now? I’ll come after you.”

Being assured that Helene and Betty were waiting for me right then, I told Laura and the children about our plans for the evening. I suggested that they go over to Addie’s house for a casual drop-in visit and that they do their best to prepare her for the surprise without telling her the whole thing. I also asked them to try to keep her away from her front windows since her first hint of company should be the ringing of the doorbell.

With all the arrangements settled, I headed across town to pick up the revelers. True to Helene’s word, the two of them were waiting on Helene’s front porch. Both of them seemed as excited as two young girls headed for their first date.

When I looked at Betty, I could understand why she and Addie would be drawn to each other. I discerned immediately that Betty believed that all the world’s a stage. As I drove up, she was practicing “Happy birthday to you” somewhere far above middle C in the treble clef while at the same time pirouetting and flinging kisses at the wind. I considered her actions rather odd behavior for a woman in her late sixties or early seventies; but then I looked closer at her “costume.” As a little girl going to a birthday party might have been decked out, she was wearing silver ballerina slippers and a red-and-white-checkered pinafore

held out by numerous petticoats. Her brownish-gray hair was in ringlets; her make-up was smeared. Beside her, the dumpy, garish Helene Goltry, who tried in vain to stay young, seemed normal.

Seeing my strange companions, I began to wonder if the birthday party would ever come off. It was obvious that each one wanted to be the star of the show and that neither was willing to bow into the wings. Betty was arguing that she had known Addie longer and that she should be the one to lead in singing "Happy Birthday." Helene insisted that she had known Addie more recently than Betty had. Finally, they agreed to let me do it since they might start the song too high for me.

As I parked my little VW at the curb in front of Addie's house, Betty and Helene were still quibbling over some minor detail concerning the party. Treating them like the little girls they were, I said, "Now, Girls, this may very well be the only birthday party Addie has ever had during her adult years since the people of Grimes have treated her like a second-class citizen. So let's not let pettiness ruin it for her." They took my remonstrance fairly

well, but I could see the beginning of a childish pout curling around Betty's lip. I wanted desperately to say, "Betty, can it! You're a grown woman. Why must you try to be a character like Addie? She's an original. She can't be duplicated." But what good would it do to tell a woman of her age something like that?

So I picked up the cake, the jar of punch, and the party ice and started toward the house. My Southern belles followed safely behind, free of any load. The sounds that came from the living room and the sight I viewed through the open drapes heightened the excitement of the evening. Addie was sitting at the piano playing "The Church in the Wildwood," and my little family was gathered around the piano singing at her direction. Her face was radiant; it was obvious that she was thoroughly enjoying her time with Laura, Steven, and the twins, Larry and Jennifer.

Betty rushed ahead of me and rang the doorbell three or four times. I had lost control. When Addie opened the main door, Betty started grabbing at the storm door trying to get it open. Addie seemed dismayed. When we finally got inside, Betty threw



Design By Mike Sigurdson

Illustration By Matt Heckman

herself upon the stunned, unsuspecting Addie and began singing in a shrill, almost macabre voice some childlike words of "Happy Birthday":

Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday to you!

You act like a monkey,

And you smell like one, too!

Betty had evidently decided that she would be in charge. She undoubtedly missed her work in New York; she set about planning the party. She looked at Laura, whom she had never met, and said, "Now, Sug, you go into the kitchen and get the refreshments ready. Norwood, you carry them in there for her."

"Why don't we have some group singing? I'll play the piano."

By the time I arrived back to the living room, Betty had the children, Addie, and Helene playing charades. I stifled a devilish impulse to ask, "Bettykins, will you-ums let me play too?" I didn't have to ask; I was immediately drafted.

If it hadn't been for Helene, Addie's suggestion—"Why don't we have some group singing? I'll play the piano."—would have been brilliant.

But Helene countered, "No, I'll play." And that turned out to be a failure. Helene had once been told by a visiting singer at her church that there was nothing more commonplace than a pianist who played just what was written on a sheet of music. He had shown her how to add flourishes. So now Helene's playing was almost all flourishes—with little incidence of a discernible melody. Singing something even so simple as "Beautiful Dreamer" was difficult with Helene's accompaniment. But the important thing was that Addie was having fun; and, after all, who should be having fun?

Laura broke up the Hellenic flourishes with the announcement that she was ready to serve. By the time the ladies had dawdled over cake and punch and each ancient woman had told one girlhood story, the clock showed midnight. Although the next day was Saturday, I excused the Norwoods by saying that Steven and the twins needed to be put to bed.

With no little effort, I was able to conduct Helene and Betty home, grateful that the evening was over and that I would probably never have to endure another one like it since I now knew better than to let myself be vulnerable to that kind of thing again.

I was barely awake the next morning, and everyone else in my family was asleep, when the doorbell rang. When I opened the door, there stood Addie in her "uniform"—purple dress, pink slip showing, orange mules, and multi-colored kerchief. She was holding behind her a bouquet of field flowers. Although she was trying to look cheerful, I could tell that she had been crying.

In a cajoling tone intended to cheer her, I queried, "Well, Miss Addie Harp, to what can I attribute this pleasant Saturday visit?"

"Mr. Norwood—Doug—I felt that I should thank you for last night. Momma always said that a lady never made an unannounced visit without taking along a gift. I thought of pretty flowers, but I didn't have any; so I went across the street to the vacant lot and picked the best ones I could find. I hope you like them."

"Well, they look fine to me, Ma'am, but the best part is that you brought them."

Evidently not accustomed to male flattery, Addie muffled a sob and said, "I'm not myself today. I shouldn't have come over here at all."

"Of course you should have, Addie. What's the problem?"

"Oh, it's nothing new. It's this town and some of the people in it."

"What happened?"

"Well, Mr. Norwood—"

"Doug—"

"All right—Doug—last night was one of the happiest nights of my entire life—to think that someone was doing something nice for me and not expecting anything back from me."

"You've known?"

"Of course! I've known all these years. And then this morning, one of those people called to act snooty about my birthday party. How she knew, I don't know. It was probably that stupid Betty Hanks who told her."

I was glad that Addie's assessment of Betty jibed with mine. "Yes, who is the woman?"

"I won't—can't—tell, Doug, but she has a high position in this town; and she came from dirt! Her old daddy used to beg or steal or do anything to feed his family. She knows that I know that, so she's always taking it out on me. She did even when we were girls. She had a way of somehow turning her poverty into my richness and my richness into her poverty."

"Addie, I've heard the whole schmeer on you, but I think you're a great lady. And I've known you only a month."

Addie Harp, unaccustomed to any outsider's sincere kindness, sat in my house and wept. *

(DOUG LARSON is a *nom de plume* for a regular WESTVIEW contributor.)