



Who is *That*?

When Community Means Knowing What You're Doing...Before You Do

By Maggie Barnes

Life in a small town is different on many levels. The pace is slower and, I think, more practical. You may have fewer acquaintances, but relationships tend to be deeper. There's a simple reason for that. Get a town small enough and there isn't much else to watch except each other.

I was once in a quaint burg whose town clerk had a sign on the wall that said, "We don't need directionals on our cars here. Everyone knows where you are going."

For a recent holiday, Bob and I received a lovely set of cordial glasses, beautifully etched and delicate. When we were unloading gifts from the car that night, we demonstrated perfect miscommunication

when it came to handling that box.

"Got it?"

"Got it."

CRASH!

"Oh, that? No, I didn't have that."

Only one of the glasses cracked, but I was heartsick. The next business day I hurried to the store the box had come from and crossed my fingers for a bit of luck. Staring into the display cabinet of a dozen varieties of glasses, I had a sudden mental block about which were the ones we had been given. When the clerk offered to assist me, I lamented that we broke a glass that had been a gift and I couldn't remember the pattern. Without a word, she opened the

case, plucked the exact crystal I needed, and held it out to me. "This one, Mrs. Barnes," she smiled.

That's what happens when a store can remember who bought what for whom.

All of this was brought to mind on a chilly spring evening when we were attending to sad duty; calling hours for an elderly friend who had passed. He had lived his entire life in a hamlet of less than a thousand people and it looked like most of them had turned out to say farewell. The line went out the door of the funeral home and a good distance down the sidewalk.

While we waited, everyone chatted. We talked about the weather, how the winter

had been, gas prices, and what crops were going in the ground as soon as Mother Nature settled on which season it was going to be.

The conversation suddenly hushed as someone who had been inside made his way past the line and back out to the parking lot. A middle-aged man, sporting a dark beard and mustache, nodded politely to those in line and stepped out into the twilight.

Then it started. In the next ninety-four seconds, the crowd pooled its collective memory.

"Who was that?"

"Anyone recognize him?"

"Is he a Martin? He looked like one of the Martin kids."

"With a beard? Tsk! Sarah wouldn't have allowed it!"

"Is he the guy who bought the hardware store?"

"No, that guy is taller. And he'd wear flannel, even to a funeral."

"I think I saw him at the Post Office on Saturday."

"You didn't even go to the Post Office on Saturday. I went. And I didn't see him!"

"He's getting on a motorcycle!"

"Well then, see? Clearly, he isn't a Martin."

"I have no idea. This is so strange."

My neck hurt from swiveling in so many directions, trying to keep up with the flow of historical knowledge. The group then settled into quiet, puzzling, as Dr. Seuss would say, "until their puzzlers were sore."

I took a deep breath and in my best educational tone said, "You know, it is possible that Don, somewhere in the course of his long, productive life, met someone who isn't from here."

I was met with a silence out of which a mason could have constructed a fine wall. A thought had not been received with such skepticism since Christopher Columbus had stood in the court of Queen Isabella and said, "Izzy, I am telling you. It's round as the King's fat head!"

There is a fine line between small-town familiarity and a level of personal knowledge that begs for a restraining order. As the days of spring warmed the ground and the breeze sighed in relief from the cold, I got a call from our dry cleaner.

"Maggie, we have a dress of yours down here. Been here awhile," the voice on the phone said.

I was bewildered, almost certain I wasn't missing anything from my closet, but I swung in on my next drive through town. I was handed a polka-dotted summer frock that I knew on sight was indeed mine. Then I noticed that there was no name on the plastic bag. No receipt or order form—nothing.

"Matt," I said, accepting my change, "how did you know this dress was mine?"

With nary a trace of apology to his tone, he replied, "Oh, I remember seeing you in it last summer."

In a larger community, a comment like that would have registered a nine on the creepy scale. In our little intersection of the world, it was perfectly understandable. I remembered the day I wore that dress last summer, too. There wasn't much else going on.

Maggie Barnes is a recipient of both the IRMA and the Keystone Press Award for her columns in Mountain Home. She lives in Waverly, New York.

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Pay It Backward

The Magical Drive-Through from Cranky to Considerate

By Maggie Barnes

“Welcome to Dunkin’ Donuts. What can I get you?” I shoved the Jeep into park, my excessive use of force a proper indicator of my lousy mood. I was hot. I was tired. I was frustrated with the state of humankind in general. Six months into a new job and I was still struggling to understand the processes essential to my position. Earlier that day, I had a hefty portion of my backside handed to me by an unhappy client.

I pride myself on my professional abilities and every error and misjudgment was carried home and brooded upon. My boss, a most supportive and congenial chap, tried to settle my knotted nerves. “You’ll get it,” he smiled. “You’re still learning.” He had more patience than I did for a ramp-up I found inexcusably long.

There was more eating at me than the job, though. As spring had come to a close, my family suffered the loss of a brother and, though the death had been expected, grief continued to hang over my heart like a morning fog that wouldn’t lift. My tolerance for the small infractions of social behavior that make up modern life

had bottomed out. Every slow driver, disinterested store clerk, and ill-tempered mechanical device unleashed a reaction from me that was out of proportion. I would have slugged Gandhi if he tried to get through the express lane with eleven items.

I was grouchy.

I contemplated telling the chipper voice on the speaker that she could get me a new mindset and a return to a generous nature, but I doubted they had that among the blueberry bagels and Boston crèmes. I ordered a strawberry smoothie and dutifully pulled ahead when advised.

There were two cars in front of me, one at the window having some sort of conversation with the cashier.

“Oh, come on,” I grumbled, “no chatting today. Just give me my damn smoothie.”

The first car pulled away and the one in front of me took its place. Again, there was much gesturing and back-and-forth between the car and the person inside the window. “If they are doing a

customer survey or something, I will pull her through that window and stuff her in the glove box,” I sneered.

Like I said—grouchy.

After what seemed like time enough to negotiate the purchase of the entire franchise, the car before me moved on. I rolled into place, debit card in hand and a face of granite. Ain’t making nice with nobody today.

Then I looked at the young lady gazing at me from the other side of the split windows. She couldn’t have been twenty years old, a vibrant swath of pink hair in her ponytail. But the dye job had nothing on the brightness of her eyes. They were shining. In fact...was she about to cry? Oh, what the hell...

“Okay,” she gasped out, struggling to contain her emotions. “I don’t know what to say...the people in front of you,” she gestured to the mini van negotiating a left-hand turn out of the lot, “they paid for your order.”

That stopped me dead in my miserable, self-absorbed tracks. But she had more. “And the people in front of them paid for them and the people in front of them paid for them and...it’s been going on for half an hour! I just don’t even know...” She stopped talking, back of her hand to her mouth and the battle against the tears being lost.

The whole idea of this kind of random generosity tried to settle into my blackened brain, but failed. It certainly didn’t jive with my current worldview. It was like watching a black and white movie, but one person keeps showing up in full color. I was in a full-blown, grade A, diva snit! This doesn’t make sense, not today. I looked again at my benefactors, driving off in a nondescript, dirty, soccer mom van with a dented bumper. I had to close my eyes when the afternoon sun cleared a cloud and flooded my windshield with light. The concept of the sweet act tried to crawl into my brain again, and failed again. “People do not do things like this. Not in this day and age,” I mused. And yet, there she was, all nineteen years of her, breathing around her tears and beaming at me with pure joy. When the reality of the moment planted a flag in my head, successfully this time, it wasn’t because the reality had turned right side up. It was because my head had.

My debit card was still in my fingers, and a glance in the rearview mirror told me all I needed to know for the next few moments of my life. “Then I’m paying for them,” I jerked my head behind me.

“Oh!” She took a step back from the window and put her hand to the top of her head. “There’s three people in that car!”

“Good,” I snapped with something that could have sounded like irritation. “I hope they’re hungry.” She processed my card and looked at the receipt.

“Honestly, I’ve never seen anything like this. I don’t know what’s gotten into everyone today,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, you just paid \$13.63 for one smoothie!”

I took the offered cup and receipt and pondered the number at the bottom of the tally. Thirteen dollars and sixty-three cents? To buy back my soul? What a bargain.



Maggie Barnes is a two-time recipient of the Keystone Press Award for her columns in Mountain Home. She lives in Waverly, New York.

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Let Me Outa This Joint Our Columnist Brings Her Funny Bone to Rehab

By Maggie Barnes

“Kiddo, we are out of options.” It’s bad enough to hear those words from your plumber or the Electoral College, but hearing them from an orthopedic surgeon is a major bummer.

The dour man in the white coat turned the screen so I would have full view of my crumbling right hip. We had tried everything: physical therapy, injections, heat treatments, and medication. But I hated the thought of giving up some of my original equipment. I believe you should go back to God at the end of your life with the same stuff He sent you out with. How else was I going to get my security deposit back?

“I’m too young for hip replacement,” I protested, but he shook his head. “You are right in the middle of the age spectrum. I’ve had thirty-year-olds do this.”

At last, I once again have something in common with a thirty-year old.

A blur of preoperative preparation later and it was the day of my surgery. Bob and I had attended “Joint Camp,” an anxious gathering of my fellow sufferers,

and had most of our questions answered. Our home went through its own prep, with the area rugs coming up, walkers and canes installed, and the herd of cats lectured against “getting in Mommy’s way.”

With moments to go before my journey to the operating room, a charming nurse pushed “a little something to help you relax” into my IV port. Suddenly, the world looked like a Disney dream, complete with animation and musical score. The soap dispenser on the wall smiled at me, my Styrofoam slippers winked, and Jimmy Durante stuck his head in the door and gave a thumbs-up. I have the foggiest memory of propping up on my elbows and questioning, “When did they stripe this room? It looks awesome!”

Bob turned to the nurse and said, “She’s ready to go.”

“Rehab” is a deceptively nice word for a painful process that hurts the body and frustrates the mind, but I was determined to regain my mobility as soon as possible. The primary purpose for the facility I was in was long-term care, so me and my fifty-

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something age were in the minority. That didn't stop the young activities director (and I mean *young*—I have black dress shoes that are older) from trying to engage me in the daily fun.

“Hi, Mrs. Barnes! Wow, you look wonderful today!” (I looked like death on a cracker, but the kid had a quota to meet.) “We are playing bingo today. Won't you join us?”

I declined, but suggested if someone kicked off a round of Texas Hold 'em, give a shout. “Deuces and Queens are wild, opening bid is two pairs of support stockings.” She was not amused.

The only event I did roust myself out of my room for was a visit from the local animal shelter. I was having moderate-to-severe withdrawal from my kitties, so a few minutes with a sweet Labrador was just what the veterinarian ordered.

Of course, I made several trips to the “exercise room,” where a cheerful cast of therapists attempted to move my new hip via techniques I am quite sure the Geneva Convention had banned.

When your mobility is severely compromised, eating can become the highlight of the day. The food was good enough, but some of the menu selections brought forth an “Ummm...” more than a “Yummm...” One day, my half-sheet of dietary delights included the following: franks and beans with Brussels sprouts, chipped beef over toast with pickled beets, and stuffed cabbage casserole. Good Lord. I'm trapped in a middle school in 1954!

When the dietician came to pick up my menu, she said, “You haven't selected anything.”

I said, “Forgive me, there is nothing on that summer camp menu I want to eat.”

“You have to eat to recover from your surgery.”

“No worries. I have activated the emergency response system.

At this very moment, Seal Team Six is rappelling down the side of a pizzeria in an undisclosed location. In about twelve minutes, a flash bang is going to immobilize the nursing staff while the team breaches this window and hands me a large with pepperoni and extra cheese.” Health care workers can be so humorless. I bet they eat the food.

The pizza did appear as predicted, though in the hands of my dear friend Eleanor, who looked at my menu choices and shook her head. “And they wonder why old people are cranky,” she said. The next night my husband secured his nomination as best spouse ever by showing up with my favorite entrée from a Valley restaurant. Between a steady flow of contraband and the occasional lucky find on the menu, my cupboard was never bare.

I recovered fully and now enjoy setting off the theft alarms on my way into various stores while yelling, “Haven't had time to steal anything! It's just my hip!” Seriously. I now carry a card in my wallet to validate that that part of my anatomy came, not from the mind of God, but from a factory in Warsaw, Indiana. Wonder if the vending machine there doles out chipped beef?

So, if joint replacement is in your future, fear not, I am here to help you plan. Bring comfy clothes, have faith in your surgeon, do your exercises, and pack a lunch.

And a breakfast.

And a dinner...

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