

Death of a Norwegian bachelor

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I RECENTLY GOT an answer to an important Baby Boomer question. That is, will those of us who do not replicate our Davy Crockett childhoods, by producing children of our own, die alone?

The answer I got was Ken Stensland, and it will do.

Ken was what humorist Garrison Keillor would call a Norwegian bachelor farmer. Only he left the farm, to work for the insurance company in my hometown, in South Dakota.

Ken was big: He made even a Barcalounger look small. He had a dimple, and strawberry-blond hair that never seemed to gray. His colorful suspenders gave him a kind of trademark look.

When he began to do very well in insurance, he built a big house on the edge of town. It had a hacienda-style splendor people were not used to, so they liked to tour it and marvel. The bathroom had a phone, and gold fixtures. There was a fountain in back. The bookcases were filled with brand new sets from Time-Life. Ken had a ball with that house.

Then something went badly at the company, and Ken was fired. He sold his house and moved into a townhouse apartment, retiring early. People took sides on whether the firing was just. But even sympathizers tended to avoid Ken; they were embarrassed for him.

My parents were among a small group that maintained a friendship, and regularly included Ken at dinner. My father and Ken developed a routine for loading the dishwasher that I would watch in awe when I was home. It was so smooth. Dad would explain that the layout of Ken's kitchen was similar (my parents' townhouse was only a few doors down from his). But Ken was the only person, I felt sure, whom Dad would ever allow to help him in the kitchen, including me.

Ken extended invitations of his own. He was a good cook, and spread out ridiculous quantities of food when company came. Gradually, his circle expanded again. I never heard him talk about what hap-

pened at the insurance company. But to me the point was the problem of how to live afterward. Why didn't Ken leave? His family were elsewhere in the state; he could have gone to them. He could have gone anywhere. In time, though, it became clear that he was staying for his friendships.

My family cherished Ken's appraisal of the movie *Midnight Cowboy* (particularly since few people in town knew what to make of it). "Based on a false premise," he'd said briskly. "Those two should never have been friends in the first place." But Ken himself had so many friendships, most of them alive for the most unlikely of reasons, or for no reason at all that I could see.

He showed up at graduation parties and weddings with gifts; gave people rides to airports in distant cities, or picked up hard-to-get items for them there; loaned me the same suitcase whenever I had too much Christmas overflow; brought a dish to pass if someone was sick.

In the 1980s, when my mother's multiple sclerosis began to slow her down, and my parents wondered every second whether they could keep their weekly newspaper going, Ken began showing up at the shop every Tuesday to help stuff papers for mailing. He asked for nothing; he took the work absolutely seriously. Others came too, but Ken was the most faithful.

Not long ago he began making trips to out-of-town doctors. A few times, he collapsed at home. Dad or another friend would call the ambulance; Ken would be in the hospital for a day or two. It went on until one day he came home with a six-month time frame courtesy of the Mayo Clinic, and the diagnosis "liver something."

He sorted through his best things — the carved figures bought on his pilgrimage to Norway; the family immigrants' trunk he'd had decorated with Norwegian rosemaling; the

sterling — he had the same damask rose pattern as my mother. The relatives came and hauled it away.

Ken got a room in the nursing home, so he could get the help he was expected to need, but he seemed to improve. He came and went, as though the home were a hotel. He would meet friends for coffee, then return to instruct the staff on improving the decor. People in town said Ken had nine lives.

In August, though, he became disoriented; he could not always recognize his friends. An interested buyer asked Dad if he could see Ken's townhouse, and got a blunt refusal.

One day, Ken became conscious long enough to tell the Lutheran pastor he was ready to die. The pastor told him about all the friends who had come to sit with him, and he seemed to understand. Some people told my mother they went but didn't stay; it was too crowded.

One person who stayed was Harvey Schaefer, the basketball coach when I was in high school. Harvey is an avid outdoorsman, and at some point began dividing his catch with Ken, bringing pheasant in the fall and walleye in the summer. While Ken was sick, Harvey and his wife, Deanna, sometimes came to cook dinner for him. But a lot of the time it was just Harvey, cooking, cleaning up and turning off the light over the sink. In the end, during the part of death that looks like such work, it was Harvey who sat with Ken.

There were lots of people at the funeral, Mom wrote, "unusually so, considering he was a retired bachelor. He would have been pleased at the attention." Someone must have slipped up on the food, though: there was no Jell-O, which would have been mandatory had Ken planned it.

He did not quite make it to 65, but Ken was never one to overstay his welcome. After dinner, he would sit and talk for a little. Then without much ado, he would say, "Well; I think I'll come away."

It's an exit line I'm saving.

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