

Thanksgiving is always a good time to go home. Christmas is the best time, of course, with all the Christmas lights, friends and family visiting with all their presents and the village drenched in snow. But there is something about Autumn, the kaleidoscope of colours captivating the landscape, the smell of the crisp orange leaves and the way the leaves gradually fall off a tree like they are wandering to the ground that make it special. If presents were exchanged it would be the best time of the year.

I'll never forget the Thanksgiving in my last year of university. It happened awhile ago, long before I knew what I wanted to do in life, long before I became a father and long before I met my one true love. What made that Thanksgiving so memorable was the auction at Andy Cummings' farm.

Andy Cummings had died in August of that year at the age of seventy-seven and he had outlived his wife by quite a few years. They had no children and Andy's only relative was his older sister Martha who lived in the village. Martha was too old and too comfortable in her village home to own a farm so she decided to auction off the entire farm.

The farm was as close to the village limits as it could possibly be without actually being part of the village. It was seventy-five acres of land, which isn't a lot for a farm. Andy had farmed a few animals over the years and had rented the fields to the surrounding farmers. The driveway, with its long paved narrow strip, was long enough not to be associated with the village but, in all reality, the village limit started at the base of his driveway. I had been up there a few times as a paperboy and can remember how clean it seemed to be for a farm and the narrowness of the driveway. Andy had always kept the farm in mint shape and when he stop farming in the traditional sense, he paved the driveway. The driveway was too narrow for any modern tractor to fit on.

The house is on a hill overlooking the village. From the front porch you could see across the road to the old mill and the meandering river going through the hay fields. It truly was a beautiful view. As a paperboy, I would always stand on the porch and take an extra moment to inhale the view.

The auction started Saturday morning at 9:30 and that's precisely when my parents and I arrived. Like any auction, the bidders have to register for a number. My parents, planning on doing some bidding, wanted a number. Mom had her eye on some old milk cans. We left the village limits and walked the six metres to Andy's driveway and went up the hill.

The line to register was close to forty yards long. Cars were parked on both sides of the driveway. There were at least five hundred people at the farm. The next day, through village gossip, we were told that there were roughly seven hundred people at the auction in the morning and one thousand people for the day. This is quite amazing considering the village has only six hundred inhabitants!

"Let's look around. The line will get shorter." My dad reasoned.

Mom went over to the tables of dishes, knick-knacks and jewellery. Dad went over to the automobiles, which consisted of Andy's Fifth Avenue car and 4x4 red pickup truck (a must-have for any farm). I wandered around the farm.

Out back in the hay field was the farm equipment that had not been used in over twenty years. In fact, a few antique dealers were in attendance. There were two old hay wagons filled with odds and ends from the barn. Behind the house, in the open yard behind the two-car garage, was the furniture. At the north end of the yard, under the shade of a maple tree was my mom and the tables of dishes. There were about seventy stackable wooden chairs beside the table of dishes for people spaced in an orderly fashion for bidders to sit in with a podium at the head of the chairs. Wandering around the farm, I could see tons of people I hadn't seen since graduating from high school. Most of the village's six hundred people were at the auction. My mom left the dishes and grabbed my arm.

"You can tell who isn't from Braemar, Ham."

"How's that?"

"Braemar people are walking with their heads up. They're making eye contact with people. You see" see pointed to a man passing us who had his eyes fastened on his feet as he walked "that man isn't from around here."

Sure enough he wasn't. Neither of us had seen him before.

"Look, he's looking at his boots. Must be from Bennington or something." My mom concluded.

"Have you seen the farm equipment yet?" I asked her.

"No, I haven't."

"Come, I'll show you. It's in the back."

We walked to the old wagons. Off in the far end of the backfield was now being used as a parking lot. The sides of the roads surrounding the farm were congested with

bumper-to-bumper parking. On the wagons were pails of bolts, jars of screws, a couple of lanterns and other rusted things. Of all the stuff on the wagon, my mom picked out a small case. She always had a good eye for finding the hidden gems.

"This must have been Andy's safety glasses."

She opened the case. Sure enough she was right.

"Look at these things." she said as she held them up.

"It's just some glasses with two strips of metal on the sides." She closed her eyes.

"I can see Andy wearing them."

My mom had been close to Andy Cummings. He was a regular customer at the bank over the years. She, along with her fellow tellers, had visited him in the hospital before he died. I could tell my mom was feeling uncomfortable.

"Look at this, Ham!" She pointed to a homemade sign on the second wagon. It read "Andrew Cummings, Prized Jerseys." It was the sign that appeared at the entrance of his farm until that day.

"That's something I would love to have."

We walked into the barn. All the animals had been sold soon after Andy had died. The barn had been cleaned and only the straw remained up in the hay mound. It too would be sold by the end of the day. We walked to the circular steps that led to the hay mound. Mom stopped.

"This is where he hurt himself." She grabbed the top bar of the pen fence and rung her hands on it. "He was standing here at the corner of this pen by the steps putting feed into the pens when the cow pushed him into the barn wall. I guess the cow was hungry. You know, that cow's push combined with the barn wall broke his hip and left leg. Just a fluke of nature, I guess. He crawled out of the pen, out of the barn through this gate," she had let go of the pen fence and moved to the barn doorway "all the way to the barnyard fence outside, to wait for some help. When he was lying against that fence," she pointed to the fence "the cows came up to him and started to lick his face. They were pets more than anything really. Some of the cows laid down beside him until Martha found him. It's like they were laying down beside their friend, or family."

She paused.

"He had surgery the next day and died of complications within a month."

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She paused again.

"I guess his body couldn't take the shock."

My mom and I went up the steps into the hay mound. From the hay mound door, high up in the barn we could see the entire farm. The auctioneers had set-up a Johnny-on-the-spot beside the barnyard where my mom had hypothesized Andy's last location on the farm.

"Look at all the cars... and people. Your dad isn't going to be impressed. The registration line is bigger. It's all the way to the barnyard now. What's that like fifty yards?"

I agreed with her.

"You know Ham, I doubt Andy had this many people even up to his farm."

We stared out into the crowd.

"I'm starting to feel woozy up here. Let's find your father."

We found dad still hanging out at the automobiles. Mom explained to him that the only way she was going to feel better was to drink a coffee. They were selling coffee and donuts near the house so dad gave us five dollars. We approached the short line and to our surprise the line was not short in length nor to a refreshment stand on the lawn or in the garage. It was a long line into Andy's home. The refreshment stand was Andy's kitchen.

"Well for Pete's sake!" My mom was not a fan of line-ups.

We stood in line and started talking to Penny Darby and her mom. Penny was a year ahead of me at school but her sister, Mary, was my age. They were standing in line behind us. I hadn't seen her since high school. Our moms started talking "mom talk".

"How are you doing, Ham?"

"Good, and yourself?"

"Fine."

"What is your family looking for, Ham?"

"Well, nothing now. The line to register is too long for them.

"It is long, isn't it."

"Yeah, well, Dad's over watching the auctioning of the cars,"

"So's my dad."

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"Mom would like some of Andy's milk cans. She also saw these safety glasses which were Andy's, over there on the wagons, but with the line and all, you know. Hey, you should check them out, the glasses are worth looking at."

"Behind the barn?"

"Yeah, in the right wagon, actually."

"I think I will check them out."

We both stood silently for a moment until Penny spoke.

"You looked exactly the same." She spoke the truth.

"You don't, the hair" I pointed to it.

"It's a lot shorter - but it still looks good."

"Thanks. I wasn't sure if I should cut it but my fiancée thought it would be a good idea."

"You have a fiancée? I thought it was Mary who had a fiancée."

"Nope it's me. See my ring?" She put her hand in my face.

I examined her ring without really examining it.

"Very nice." I had no idea what I was talking about. "Who's the lucky fellow?"

"Rex Walling. You might know him. He's from Youngsville."

Youngsville was, and still is, the nemesis of Braemar. The village is the roughly the same size as Braemar and is only fifteen minutes up the road - making it the closest community. The rivalry between the two villages had lasted generations. Somehow though, through the generations, Braemar always seemed to lose. And those Youngsville boys never let you forget it either.

"Oh Penny, you're marrying a Youngsville boy? They're scum, you know? So tragic, a nice girl like yourself."

"Ham, they aren't scum. And besides that's a horrible thing to say about Rex." She hit me on the shoulder.

"Oh, I'm just joking. I'm sure he's a nice person. Where is he? I would like to meet him."

I began to look around for him. I don't know why because I had no idea of Rex's appearance.

"He's working today. The construction business booms in the fall, you know. Everyone trying to finish building before the first snowfall."

"That's too bad. I would have liked to meet him."

The line slowly shrunk as we moved into Andy's home. The coffee pots were in sight. Apparently the auctioning company had made a stop at Tim Hortons because the donuts and the coffee were from Tims.

I looked at Penny more closely.

"Did he ask you to dye your hair too?"

She seemed stunned.

"You noticed. Rex hasn't noticed yet."

"'cause he's scum."

She smiled because this time she knew I was joking.

"Can I help you?" The refreshment lady asked my mom.

Mom had a coffee and I had a donut.

"I'll see you around Penny, and congratulations on your engagement."

"Thanks."

As Penny and her mom went outside with their coffees, Mom and I walked throughout Andy's home. It had been completely emptied onto the lawn. The inside of the house, like the farm, was in mint condition. In the beginning, Mom didn't want to go upstairs. She felt uncomfortable in Andy's home. After some encouragement from myself, we went upstairs. In the master bedroom, we looked out Andy's side bedroom window onto Andy's lawn of possessions. The crowd was even bigger than before.

"Thanks for the donut." I said to my mom as the morning sunlight was slowly creeping into the room.

She didn't acknowledge my statement. She just stared out the window.

"Mom." I grabbed her arm. She turned to me.

"Thanks for the donut."

"Oh, your welcome." She turned and looked out the window again.

"Look at all the people, Ham. Most have never been here before. It's like a circus down there. You know, I can't believe they turned Andy's kitchen into a canteen."

She turned back to me.

"The worst part is I can't complain. I had never been here before either. If I complain, I'd be a hypocrite. That's what makes me woozy. We're just like them."

I didn't know what to say. She turned to the door.

"Let's find your father."

We walked down the stairs through the canteen and out of Andy's home. Logic concurred that Dad was still at the automobiles so that's where we headed. We passed through the furniture section to get there. People, not from Braemar, were sitting on the couches like it was an outdoor party. It would not have surprised me if they cracked open some beers on Andy's couches. I understood what my mom was talking about up in Andy's room and it made me feel woozy as well.

These people were vultures. They probably went to all sorts of auctions (swarming) waiting for the dead (prey) and swooping in. Some people are seriously demented. I can't imagine any person with a conscious, hanging out at auctions. They might as well have given their business cards to the widows at the funerals.

We found dad, surprise, surprise at the cars.

"Did you hear?"

We should cover our heads no.

"The neighbours complained about this becoming an operational farm with the manure odour and all. This is going to become a subdivision."

My mom's appearance changed drastically. Anybody, even the vultures, could tell she was sad. I quickly changed the subject.

"How much did the cars go for, dad?"

"Fourteen thousand for the truck and eleven thousand, eight hundred for the car. The MP bought the truck. I wish I made as much as a MP."

A woman's voice came over the loud speaker.

"The farm will now be sold at the south end of the barn."

We walked over to the barn with about four hundred other people. We stood in the south-west corner. I stared into the crowd. There were all types of people surrounding the auctioneer. The retired farmers (now living in new houses in the village with Crown Victorias) stood together in the back to my right. Kids were up on their fathers' shoulders

to see the event. I'd never seen so many Pioneer hats and plaid shirts at one time in my life. The auctioneer began talking but I couldn't see him. He had drowned in the sea of plaid.

"Well folks, we're ready to start. There are seventy-five acres here. You know the neighbours were telling me how they miss the animals. This is a great hobby farm folks."

My dad shook his head. The village gossip had fooled him again.

"Let's start the bidding at 150 000. Do I hear 150, 150, do I hear it?"

"Here!" yelled a voice from behind the auctioneer in the north end of the mob.

"150" the auctioneer turned and pointed to the man.

"Do I hear 175? 175? 175?"

"175!" I couldn't determine where the bid had come from in the crowd.

"200, 200 folks, do I hear 200? 200, do I hear it? 200 folks, do I hear 200?"

"Here!"

"At the back, 200" he turned and pointed to the man who made the first bid.

"225, 225, do I hear 225? Come on folks 225, do I hear 225? Good, good. Do I hear 250? 250?, 250? Come on folks, good hobby farm here. I imagine the possibilities."

He stopped talking. I guess he had to catch his breath. I asked my parents who was bidding but they couldn't see either. The auctioneer caught his breath and the bidding continued. At 285 000 the auctioneer gave a lecture how "285 was too low and the farm wouldn't sell for 285." Eventually it settled for \$300 000 and the crowd fanned out. The farmers stuck around to buy the straw while everyone else went over to the furniture. The excitement of the day was over. We hung out in front of the barnyard to the left of the Port-o-Potty where my mom had imagined Andy laid waiting for help to escape the crowd. Penny came running over.

"Did you hear who bought the farm?"

She seemed excited. I shook my head no.

"A guy named Chuck Black. And do you know who Chuck Black works for?"

Again I shook my head no.

"Walling Construction."

"As in Rex Walling?"

She nodded yes and giggled at the same time.

"Chuck told me it's a wedding present from Rex's family!"

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She grabbed my hands and jumped three or four times.

"I'm staying in Braemar! I own a house in Braemar! I OWN A HOUSE!"

She stopped jumping and let go of my hands.

"And you thought Rex was scum. Shame on you Ham."

I smiled.

She ran away laughing and yelling, "I can't believe I own a house!"

My family started to walk home. Mom was happy knowing the farm was in good hands. This seemed to matter a lot to her. In all, the auction raised \$400 000 which Martha donated to build Andy Cummings Braemar Museum. The "Andy" as it became known was the old school house built just before the Depression. In fact, Andy and Martha were students at the school. Renovating the school was a tough task but Walling Construction did an excellent job. The Andy is a museum dedicated to the history of the village. My mom said Andy would have loved the idea.

Two months later, on Christmas morning, my mom opened some of her favourite Christmas presents of all time. Every twenty minutes my dad would leave the room and come back with one of Andy's milk cans wrapped in Christmas paper. She got seven cans in all. The last present on that morning was a little wrapped case. It was Andy's safety glasses. Penny had made sure that the milk cans and the safety glasses were included in the price of the farm.

It has been sixty-three years since that Thanksgiving. I never would have guessed Penny would introduce me to my one true love at one of her dinner parties up at the farm. I never would have guessed that Lily and I would become Penny and Rex's best friends. I never would have guessed Lily and I would move to Braemar and raise our son, Andrew. I never would have guessed Andrew, would marry Penny and Rex's daughter Samantha. I never would have guessed I'd be writing this story under the oak tree that Rex planted when his daughter was born. Most of all, I never would have guessed I would be at this farm for another auction.

Rex would leave our foursome a long time ago due to cancer. Lily and I spent days at the farm consoling Penny. My wife Lily passed on eight years ago this May. Penny spent days consoling me. Andrew and Samantha perished in a car accident three years after they

married and before we could be grandparents and Penny, Penny died seventeen days ago. I'm the only one left in the group. Just me. All alone.

They are auctioning off the farm as I am finishing writing this memory. It feels like that auction so long ago which I just described.

There is once again a big crowd of unfamiliar faces but this time I'm one of the old men wearing plaid. Where I stood last time with my parents is a young man with his eyes filled with excitement just like the twenty-one year old me before my awakening from my mom's revelation up in Andy's bedroom. However unlike Andy's auction, the bidding starts at 1.5 million.

As I can faintly hear the auctioneer's voice, I am looking around the farm from my spot under Samantha's tree. Memories are flashing into my mind from my soul at astronomical speeds. Meeting Lily for the first time, the birthday parties, the evening get-togethers with the Wallings, Penny's horses, Andy's auction but most of all I remember the view of the hay field from the porch through the eyes of a thirteen year old paperboy.

Over behind the garage where Andrew and Samantha were married is all of Penny and Rex's furniture. Just like at Andy's auction so many years ago, people are using the couches as an outdoor party. They are even sitting in the loveseat Lily and I gave Rex and Penny for their twenty-fifth anniversary. The bidding is at 1.7 million.

I can't help thinking of Penny, Rex, Andrew, Samantha and, of course, Lily. I'm all alone now and I miss them all deeply. The farm has sold for 2.2 million. The farmers stay for the straw, some moves to the furniture bidding while most start down the driveway to leave. The excitement is over.

Calvin McKenzie, one of my last defensemen from my days of coaching peewee hockey, stops to talk to me as he is heading down the driveway. He is nothing like the little offensive-minded defenseman who always jumped up into the play to score goals and never wanted to play defensive defense as when he was a kid. Calvin has matured with a steady job and a family.

"Did you hear who bought the farm, Coach?"

I shake my head no. It's déjà vu. For a moment his voice sounds like Penny's when she told me she owned a house.

"Justin Sullivan."

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"Who is Justin Sullivan? Is he going to keep the farm?"

I don't care if Calvin answers my first question. I want to know what is going to happen to the farm.

"Oh no Coach. He going to create subdivision and break the farm into lots. I wouldn't be surprised if they tore that old house down. Anyway, you can't farm on this. It's too valuable."

My heart sinks into my stomach as Calvin says the word "subdivision" and it shatters beyond repair when he suggests the house will be torn down. I feel empty inside but I gather my composure.

"I agree Calvin, it is valuable."

Calvin helps me up and I walk down the driveway. At the base of the driveway, I turn my head back one last time to see the farm. I look at the words "Rex, Penny & Samantha Walling" painted in white block letters on the side of the red barn, then turn my attention to the yard where my son was married, then to the farm house. I look at the colour of the siding and how the colour is fading on the West End where there is no village to block out the sun. Finally I focus on the front porch and imagine the view of the hay field that I would stop to absorb when I was a kid. I nod good-bye to the farm and turn my head across the road to the subdivision where that hay field once stood. Once the buildings are torn down and Mr. Sullivan's subdivision is built, the farm, like the view of the hay field from the porch, will only exist in my memory.

A year ago, I was diagnosed with Alzheimer's which means my memory will slowly dissolve. It's only the early stages but I can feel my memory starting to go. Penny was going to help me write down my memories so that I could relive them but she died before we could start.

Slowly I will forget people's names, my childhood, my family, the farm and the view of the hay field from the porch. Sadly, the farm is the last place that hasn't changed since Lily has passed away. By the end of my life, I know I won't even remember Lily.

I'm going to miss the past.

I'm going to miss the farm.

I'm going to miss the view of the hay field from the porch.

I'm going to miss Lily.