



Selby's Soirée

a short story by Albert Fried-Cassorla

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In the lower part of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, there was an aqua blue-colored house, which was almost identical to those near it. The road leading up to this house was freshly paved with its twice-yearly layer, as this was an affluent section of the county.

The door to this particular home looked to be freshly installed with varnished wooden relief work, and was sealed from the world by a heavy-duty door knob assembly and a deadbolt lock. Immediately inside was a spacious room, with antiques and fresh-cut flowers plus a modern sound system. That space led to a large glass wall, a sliding glass door, and an attractive patio beyond.

A trim older man was sitting in a cushy outdoor chair, singing the song "Good Night, Irene," a favorite tune of his. He was belting out a very loud solo while gazing with admiration at the gorgeous vegetation in front of him.

This was Eugene Selby, a widower of just one year, and he had set aside this time for self-reflection. He had planned to have no electronics available, nor notebooks, books, periodicals, nor food. He allowed himself a tall, cool glass of water which sat to his right on an end table.

Selby, as his friends had called him all of his life, was not accustomed to being A Solitary Man. That status did not particularly fit him well, he thought. *On the other hand*, he also reflected, *I'd better get used to it.*

So he took in the colorful arrangement of bushes and flowering perennials and annuals before him. They were a living testament to the artistic gardening skills of his wife, Arlene. She had lovingly planted each growing thing in front of him, and it comprised a 270° panoramic nature extravaganza. The plants that Arlene had selected and located were: hydrangeas with copper and blue blossoms, bold orange and yellow hibiscus, tall and fierce-looking canna, tea and grandiflora roses, coleus, two-toned tulips, hyacinths, and much more.

Selby looked at the floral riches around him and was both sad and glad that it preserved Arlene's creations. They were a living reminder of her grace, and at the same time, a negative reflection of his own lack of similar creativity. Despite his mixed feelings, he was more pleased than otherwise to look out upon the dancing monarch butterflies and hibiscus heads waving in the gentle breeze.

If you looked at Selby from above, you would see a gray-haired, pattern-bald man who was in his 70s and looked it. He was slightly slouched and his facial pose was more than a bit contemplative. He was thinking:

I've had my first act, my life up till leaving graduate school.

I had my second act, toiling for decades in the vineyards of advertising.

I had my third act, raising two beautiful children with Arlene, children who are now successful and on their own. Most of these times I enjoyed with my dear wife, whom I will never be able to replace.

Then I had my fourth act, volunteering with senior executives and helping grade-school children with their homework. Plus a full life of socializing, family events and progressive politics.

I had my fifth act, nursing Arlene through her final illness, the hardest thing I have ever done.

And I don't have my sixth act, whatever I will do before my seventh and final act, my own death. So, how do you want to spend your remaining time, old Selby? What do you want to do?

Face it, fellow, you are no climber of Mount Kilimanjaro. You are no painter of giant abstracts or Monet water lilies. You're no great Reformer of Men, no Great Ameliorator of the conditions of the bottom fifth of humanity.

You'll never compose a concerto like any of Mozart's.

So what are you? And what should you do?

As Selby thought about it, a catbird landed on the branch of a short Japanese maple in the corner of his yard. It began singing its heart out.

He said aloud: "So what you think, bird? You got a lot of thoughts in that tiny head of yours. Send some my way."

So he sat and thought some more. And he listened. And he felt the sun beginning to get a bit too warm, but no mind. No need for sunscreen. This steady, uninterrupted thinking was a novelty, not one he terribly enjoyed. About an hour and a half into this contemplation he realized this:

I need company. Not just any company, but the company of people nearby.

Now, in many parts of the world, maybe yours, getting to know your neighbors well is a common thing. It's like breathing, like strolling. But in some parts of suburbia, including sections of lower Montgomery County, talking to one's neighbors was just not an easy thing to do.

He reflected on his solitude and decided:

So I'll make it a small plan, and implement it.

First, he walked into his living room, slid the large glass door behind him stepped over to the full-length looking glass. He combed his fairly messy gray hair, straightened his shorts, tucked his rumpled shirt into his pants and gave himself a nice practice smile.

He looked down at his hairy lower thigh and calves, white socks, and tan loafers. "Good enough, man. You're 77, so don't act like you have to care."

Selby left by the front door and walked across the street in the direction of the home of his neighbor, a Vietnamese woman named Hong. He strode confidently across the street and knocked on her door.

She answered with her three-year-old girl in her arms and gave him a warm smile, saying: Selby! Nice to see you. Do you want to come in?"

He demurred and asked if she would like to visit him for a small snack in about an hour. She agreed. He thanked her, and then proceeded to the home of his neighbor a few doors down and to the right of his own home. He knocked on the door of Charles, whom he knew was home almost all the time. A few weeks earlier, he'd had a casual conversation and Charles had complained, "I don't know if I can handle this retirement thing. Too much free time. Don't know what to do with myself."

Selby had replied somewhat ignorantly, in his own retrospective opinion, when he had said: "Don't worry. You'll figure it out. It just takes time."

Selby reproached himself... What do I know about other people's retirements? I might've made him feel as though he did not need guidance and shouldn't ask for any, and was a failure at the retirement racket.

He gave Charles the same invitation he'd given to Hong; Charles also said he would show up in about an hour. That left him precious little time to run over to the market and get some snacks. He made the shopping trip lickety-split, returned to his house, set up a card table and added the kind of tablecloth that Arlene would have used: a heavy duty cloth with floral decorations. Next, he brought comfortable chairs up from the basement, and prepared snacks and beverages in his kitchen.

Once everything was arranged, he had ten minutes or so to sit and think. The invitations would have been a simple task for anybody else, but not for him. He sat with hands folded, oblivious to the hot sun, waiting.

Hong was the first to arrive, with little Han walking tentatively beside her and holding his mom's hand. "This is so nice of you, Selby," she said. "I had nothing to do. I'm tired of all the books I've read to him, and I'm too exhausted to go to the library and get more." Selby led the pair in and around to the back patio.

"This is such a sweet thing to do," she said. "I was just feeling so sorry for myself." Han brushed back some long strands of black hair that were getting in his eyes and lifted his head up to look curiously at Selby, who made a few silly faces.

"I like the job at the nursing home, but it's just so time-consuming."

Selby and Hong had chatted a couple of times before, and he knew that she worked at a nursing home on Cheltenham Avenue.

"So how is work going for you, Hong?"

But before she could answer, he heard the front door chimes. He left Hong and Han to themselves while he let Charles in.

"Is this where Selby's soiree happens?" he asked, gently jostling a toothpick nestled in the corner of his mouth.

"You're at the right place, Charles. Even the right time! Come on in!" Once out on the patio, he introduced Charles to Hong and Han. Not only had they never met before; they had never even seen each other in passing.

This not-knowing thing was also common in this particular suburb -- if you did not walk a dog, jog, or push a child in a stroller, you could miss your neighbors entirely.

Once the three guests were assembled and properly introduced, Selby calmly said: "Well, thank you all for coming! I just had the idea that since we live

so close to each other, we should get together now and then....And I have a few treats for you. I hope you enjoy them."

Han ran around the patio and then made good use of a little old tricycle that Selby had brought up from his basement for the tyke's use. The little boy sang as he ran his tires into and out of a puddle left by Selby's flower watering.

Charles and Hong became more comfortable with each other. Selby served them a weird assortment of what he believed to be treats. These included: dates, dried figs, chocolate cupcakes, lychee nuts, watermelon slices, grapes and an assortment of chips and dips. The beverages he brought to the table included a wild mix of liquid refreshments – just about everything he had in his fridge and cupboard.

Hong and Charles now got along famously, and Selby was content to sit back and listen to their conversation. It turned out that Hong was in desperate need of affordable daycare help for Han. Charles pondered this, and his mental deliberations were visible on his face in the form of forehead creases and squinting.

Then he politely offered his own time and that of his wife, Eliza, to take care of the lad for a few hours a day. Eliza was handicapped, he said, but she moved about fairly well in her wheelchair on the ground floor of their home. Hong said she thought this might work out, and they decided to explore particulars later.

"Hey, I got an idea for you," said Charles said to the group. "Why don't you all come over to my basement for a little welding demonstration. I'd like to make a gift for little Han here."

So the four of them soon left for Charles and Eliza's home, and proceeded down to the basement. Everyone had to wear welder's masks. Charles asked Hong if she thought the little fellow would enjoy having a sculpture showing his own name.

Hong thought that was a great idea home, even if Han could not read.

Using six-inch-long narrow metal plates, Charles welded them together to form the letters H, A and N.

Once the weld had cooled off safely, Charles gave the stand-alone letters to Hong. She took time to admire each one separately and made appreciative comments. Then she gave them to her son, who clearly enjoyed feeling their coolness, weight, smell and texture.

In due time, this second part of the soirée was over. Everyone parted with fond good-byes, and Selby went home to this patio. He cleaned up the various messes, and then he sat exactly where he had a few hours earlier.

He wondered: *This was fun, but what was the point of it? Am I more connected than before? Am I happier? What would Arlene say if she were here?*

He thought about this for a moment or two, and then concluded that she would approve. *"You got to get out, Gene. I'm not here for you anymore. Do it, and do it again!!"*

The next day, he received an invitation by telephone from Hong inviting him to Han's fourth birthday party. He was delighted to receive it and planned to attend. And one day after that, during an exercise walk, he chanced upon Charles on the sidewalk, and Charles invited him to come over. He'd teach him the fundamentals of welding. Once again, Selby accepted.

And he felt pretty good about himself and his little act of social bravery.

Dang, for an old dog, yer gettin' pretty frisky, fella!

THE END

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