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SURE, WHY NOT?

By

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Another rainy day—so many lately! No pedestrians, no cars, everyone seems to be hiding. In this part of the country rain elicits the same behavior that snow does in other parts of the country; it certainly prevents things from happening. No one even owns an umbrella or, if someone does, it never gets used. I can't think of one person who wears galoshes. And so, Gisela Fromm's thoughts drifted as she sat at her functional but outdated thirty-year-old desk in her real estate office in Yreka, California. The entire office had a late-70's style and feel. The Mediterranean look; simulated dark mahogany wood desk and paneling, brown and orange-flecked carpet, rust-colored Moroccan tile at the entry. The computers on each desk were the only visible sign that the 21st century had arrived in this frontier region of the state.

While speculating about the habits of her fellow Yrekans, she saw a man cross the office

parking lot. He was straight and tall and hatless, no fear of rain evident in his stride. *What fun it would be to walk in the rain like him!* She imagined a version of her younger self—tall, slender and athletic, matching his step and laughing as she jumped over rain puddles. In fact, this man's positive and lithe gait brought to mind not only a wishful past self, but also the image of a client she had had a few months before—easy going, confident and absolutely charming.

The client, a youngish man, perhaps in his late thirties, was employed by a five-star lodge in the wilds of Alaska as a hunt and fishing guide. Since meals and lodging came with the job, he had saved most of his regular pay along with generous tips he received from the sportsmen staying at the lodge. His plan was to invest this money in real estate, hoping that there would be a greater return than what the banks were offering. Northern California was the location of choice for this investment. He was familiar with Siskiyou County, having spent his summers as a teenager on his grandparent's ranch haying and helping out as an additional ranch hand.

Gisela remembered that the transaction had been a simple and easy sale between a willing buyer and a willing seller. To top it off, it had been a cash deal without the onerous

involvement of a lending institution. It couldn't have been better.

The man walking in the rain, the random thoughts about her Alaskan fishing guide and her past-self, cheered and warmed her like a glass of good red wine or a nap on a quiet Sunday afternoon. The phones were silent. She allowed herself the luxury of reflection.

Company policy stated that female agents could not meet an unknown male client alone for the first time unless this meeting took place at the home office. A new client was asked to come to the office first, or if impractical, another agent was to accompany the female agent on the first meeting. To the best of Gisela's knowledge, this policy was enacted when a young female agent had been accosted in the field. No one really knew whether the assailant had ever declared himself to be a client, but as with many rules, the "better safe than sorry" thinking prevailed.

Gisela could still hear the Alaskan's clear, even-toned voice on the phone. His voice had given her confidence that the rule could be broken this time without serious consequences. Besides, who would harm a solid, robust woman with a crown of short, permed gray hair?—Certainly not a middle-aged man who most likely was looking for a young, attractive woman with long, flowing blond hair and not another middle-aged ex-wife.—A young man would also

forgo making advances once he was confronted with her unadorned, moon-like face. As for danger coming from someone older than herself, that was also highly unlikely. If nothing else, her daily swim routine and exercise sessions had so developed her endurance that she felt she could outrun, if not outmaneuver, any older male. Furthermore, she reasoned, any male predator would most likely be in weak condition—equating moral and physical decline.

He had called about a little green house advertised in the *Property Guide* for real estate in the south county region. The photo showed a charming house surrounded by huge pine trees. The trees caught his fancy. He wondered where the house was located and if he might be able to look at it about 9 a.m. the next day. She told him that the house was in Weed, a town about twenty-five miles south of Yreka. Did he know where that was? Sure, he knew. His grandparents' ranch was just a little east of there. In fact, he would be coming directly from an early morning pheasant hunt on the ranch.

She recalled feeling uneasy about that. Hunting meant guns. He would most likely have a gun or two in his pickup. Her mind conjured up the image of the young local men with pickups and guns strapped to racks on the rear window and menacing dogs in the bed of the truck. Her confidence had waned, not because of fear of some physical harm—it just wasn't the best scenario for making a sale.

A number of months had passed since the conclusion of that sale and Gisela was surprised how easily she remembered the events, his voice, his appearance, and her feelings. She had arrived at approximately 8:50 a.m. at the property in question. She couldn't tolerate tardiness and was always disappointed in those who were not motivated by the same standard. She wanted the house to be open when he arrived. Fumbling with locks or combinations, she felt, colored the client's confidence in an agent. (*There ought to be a course for realtors on how to open front doors with the least amount of stress!*) If possible she always wanted the lights turned on for a bright and cheerful welcome.

The house was open, lights were on, but he didn't arrive at 9 a.m. or 9:15 or 9:30. She reminded herself that she should have listened to her first instinct—the appointment was most likely a waste of time. Real estate buyers were not the most dependable individuals. Other activities would come along, e.g. hunting, after an appointment had been set, that became important to the buyer. And sometimes the buyer would not even call to advise the agent of a change in schedule, assuming that the failure to appear was sufficient notice. Gisela considered “no-shows” as rude and lacking respect for her profession.

She remembered feeling a bit disheartened as she went around the little house making sure that all the lights had been turned off and doors secured. Sellers had no sympathy for

agents who left lights on and doors unlocked.

Now where the heck is that front door key? Did I lock the back door? I don't want to drive back to check. While trying to find the front door key in several possible pockets of her purse, she heard the sound of a truck in the driveway. She stepped outside, stood on the porch and waited with arms folded. He jumped out of the truck with youthful ease and in quick and exuberant steps approached the porch. "Sorry I'm late," he acknowledged with an extended hand. She shook his hand, but did not express the expected, "Oh that's okay." She simply said, "The house is still open, take a look!"

He reminded her of a current well-known soccer player whose picture she had seen advertising men's briefs in a fashion magazine. She recalled that her attention had stayed a little longer with this ad than usual. And just like the soccer star in the ad, this man exuded vigor and confidence. Both men seemed to know that their bodies would do exactly as they wished them to do—graceful and charming young men with easy and open faces. *If only I would have had their confidence at that age!*

Her disappointment vanished. Like two friends, they ambled from one brightly painted room to the next. The children must have been consulted when the colors were chosen—lilac walls and a wispy-blue cloud ceiling in the first bedroom, metallic blue with Spiderman

suspended from the ceiling in the next bedroom, dark moss-green with white trim in the master. The rest of the rooms had been spared the creative touch. The kitchen was *de rigueur* white as was the bathroom, and the living room walls were dirty gray or dirty brown—she couldn't remember.

He listened good-naturedly to her description and explanations. He didn't as much follow her through the house as walk with her, sometimes tilting his head toward her to hear more clearly what she had to say. *What was the feeling I had then—a lightness of being?*

When they went outside she mentioned the possibility of a problem with the septic system. At this point he lost interest and mentioned that his friends were probably still waiting for him at the ranch and that he wasn't too sure about the property. She told him about another house with a nice fenced yard and lots of potential. The house needed a little work, but was livable and cozy. There was also an 18 x 20 foot detached garage.

"Would you be available to view the property tomorrow?" And in her most cajoling tone, "Would 10 a.m. be better?" He didn't answer immediately, as if pondering several possibilities. "Sure, why not?"

Sure, why not? Had she ever responded so indifferently to a sincere offer? Of course she had—probably many times—without knowing that a friend or acquaintance had hoped for a

more heartfelt reply. There would be fewer difficulties or misunderstandings if the emotions between people were in harmony while conversing. They wouldn't have to agree on the content of their discussions, just on the emotion.

“Sure, why not?” Wasn't that what she had said so off-handedly to Mr. Bendinelli? Gisela recalled her first meeting with him on the slopes of Mt. Hood while instructing a high school boy's ski team on the correct up and down motion when changing direction on skis. She had been assigned the ski team as her extra-curricular teaching duty. (Her first job out of college had been a teaching position at a parochial high school for boys.) And while she knew how to ski, her technique was questionable.

It had been one of those stormy afternoons—almost white-out conditions—that were frequent in the Cascades that year. The boys had been anxious to finish the “up and down” drill and head back to the coziness of Timberline Lodge, the only warm spot on the mountain and the remains of their lunch.

Mr. Bendinelli was a member of the Mt. Hood volunteer ski patrol unit. She remembered thinking him to be old, but maybe he hadn't been so old after all. On one of his patrol runs, he had paused to watch her attempts at instructing the teenage boys. It must have

been apparent that she was struggling. Not only was she lacking in skill and knowledge, she was not in command of the situation. The boys were pushing and shoving each other, exaggerating the demonstration. Her youth might not have hindered so much had she been a little more confident.

After watching her demonstrate the art of changing edges, he approached and offered his help. Wasn't it part of his job to make sure everyone could safely maneuver down the slopes?

"Sure, why not?" had been her offhanded response.

From then on he would find them every Friday afternoon somewhere on the slopes. Nothing was ever pre-arranged. He would ski up to the group, wave to the boys, extend his gloved hand to her, shake her own gloved hand, lingering just a while and then turn to the boys and ask, "What do you want to work on this week?" After a short verbal explanation of a point, he would enthusiastically shout, "Gisela, let's you and me show them how it's really done." And then again at the end of a session, with the same good cheer, "Gisela, that team of yours is really looking good. Great job!"

"I think it's you, not me," she would reply.

The ski season ended on a positive note, thanks to Mr. Bendenelli. The boys, in fact,

had won a few medals at the end of the season inter-scholastic ski races. Her “team” had also discovered that she, the only female coach at the high school, did not receive a stipend for coaching. They threatened to lead a school-wide protest. The administration relented and gave her a “bonus” in the February pay check.

Gisela never saw Mr. Bendenelli after that winter, but now wondered why he had looked at her so intently. Had her nonchalant acceptance of his help reminded him of some past “Sure, why not?” reply he had made? Or, was he searching for an emotion she did not yet understand?

For her second showing, she arrived early, followed her routine and then waited for his arrival. This time the truck pulled up the driveway at 10:00 a.m. as scheduled. As before, she noticed how quick and light his movements were. It wasn’t that long ago she had been able to move just like that. Her heart ached just a little, not so much for the physical attributes of youth, but the possibilities that youth implied.

He smiled, shook her hand and followed another guided tour, gracefully stepping from one room to the next—such easy movements in and out of doorways. He could see some of the good points of the house, but altogether he felt it would take too much time to do the repairs. He was going to leave the area soon to return to Alaska and wanted to rent out the property before beginning the new season at the lodge.

She suggested that he follow her to the office so that she could give him a computerized visual tour of available properties in his price range. This would facilitate and shorten his search time.

During her drive back to the office, she barely noticed the green hills surrounding the equally green valley floor with black cows scattered in the fields like so many mounds of dirt. This lush pastoral view pleased her. It was so rare and always brief in the high desert climate of the Shasta Valley—a mirage of sorts that disappeared in a blink of the eye.

Instead, another feeling took hold of her. She felt as though she had had a most delightful waltz with an accomplished partner—floating from room to room, dancing to the tune of casual reflections about the property's shortcomings. The comments were made lightly, without censor or judgment, a dance in three-quarter time.

Most clients expressed their dislike in much more negative tones, almost to the point of hostility. It always made her come to the defense of the maligned property, rightly or wrongly. This time, however, the house had not been demeaned in any way. There had been no reproach implied as they waltzed out and gently closed the door. The house simply did not fit his needs.

At the office they talked at length, making casual comments about this and that property that came up on the computer search—maybe too large, perhaps too expensive, too far away. His soft manner never changed. As they talked, youth and age assimilated into a timeless form—a partnership of sorts.

She suggested more showings, but that would not be possible until the following week. He and his girlfriend were leaving for a few days. He gave her a friendly and direct look as he shook her hand. Yes, next week would be fine.

A girlfriend, of course! What was she like—young, pretty? They probably were well suited—for the moment.

The slight pressure of his hand lingered. In her twenty plus years as a realtor, she had shaken many hands, embraced many shoulders and never lingered to reflect on feelings of gratitude or friendship those short physical contacts contained. When a client liked to hug, she allowed herself to be hugged—all appropriate and professional. Yet now, she felt a surprising significance to this universal acknowledgement.

A deal was consummated shortly after his return. He decided on a well-cared for manufactured home at the edge of town with city utilities and an oversized lot. The property

would be easy to rent and not too much to worry about from a distance.

The house inspections were made and reports were issued. There was a final walk-through of the property prior to close of escrow when all findings of the property's condition were reviewed once more. He would stand close to her as she pointed out some of the misgivings she had. He acknowledged her concerns with a nod and a look of appreciation. She was looking out for him. His manner suggested that she had done a great job for him and that he had consequently found the ideal property.

She mentioned that unless he had any questions about the property, her part in the transaction was complete. She thanked him for his business, gave a generous gift certificate for the local fly-fishing shop and wished him success. They shook hands. She couldn't remember who withdrew first.

As usual she reviewed all the forms before handing her broker the transaction file. She came across one form where his initials were missing. Afraid that he might already have left for Alaska, she called him to see if he could stop by to initial the document. She explained that her broker was demanding in that way—the files had to be complete or he would hold up her commission check. He agreed to do it the next day, though not as cheerfully as she had hope.

He framed the doorway of the entry—incredibly perfect and complete. The most

complete and perfectly proportioned person she thought she had ever seen. He came into her office, said he was glad she had called because he wanted to contact the previous owner concerning the water shut-off valve for the sprinkler system. She was able to make the contact within minutes. Problem solved! He initialed the overlooked document and wondered how she could have caught such a small omission.

The same parting as before—he stood up and with his usual direct and inclusive look, extended his hand—palm-side up. She slid her hand in his without rising. A warm ephemeral connection happened for her. Had Mr. Bendenelli felt such a connection with her through those cold, thick ski gloves the last time they shook hands? She hoped he had.