



Compass Rose

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FOR SALE, IN MINT CONDITION by Chris Sumner

Last week had been the china. That was the first to go. The pale blue tea set from some French boutique whose name she could not quite recall. It had incurred no damage on its journey through the family. All twelve cups were perfect; no chips or worn paint where a person's fingers would tip a warm drink to their mouth. The plates that went beneath them had no wear lines indicating cups were ever placed there before. These things, though, were a happy accident. The cups had been used, the plates as well. It was luck alone that had brought them through the generations unscathed.

At first, that fact made Ms. Nedelby reluctant to arrange them out on her table at all. She assumed that the plates, the cups, the kettle itself would be passed down to her children in the same cardboard box marked plainly "fragile" on the side. She thought they'd remain wrapped in the same wads of newspaper that had at one point been as white as Nedelby's aging face, but was now slowly turning the color of the cardboard around it. When she looked up to that area of wall space she had long since told herself would be for family portraits and candid vacation shots, she saw only her print of a Monet painting. A painting rich in purples and greens, depicting plant life atop a quaint river; a painting that held no people or sign of them other than a bridge that receded off into the forest. Whether people were waiting on the other side of this bridge, Ms. Nedelby couldn't guess.

The lights flickered in her dining room that night though, which broke her focus on the teakettle and the cups and Monet. The room illuminated and went dark and Ms. Nedelby's eyes moved from the painting to the glossy finish of the plaques that hung the length of the wall beside it. When the lights came back on the light seemed to catch them first. "Metro Bank Loan Officer of the Year," 1970 to 1996. Twenty-seven plaques, all dark mahogany with black lettering etched into marble. Her eyes traced the line of plaques from beginning to end, from 70 to 96. The lights flickered on and off once more and she was focused on the small piece of newspaper between 96 and Monet. In large black letters, "Metro Bank merges, new management takes over."

The lights' brightness increased slightly before settling into their normal glow. Nedelby turned and looked at the lamps. The flickering lights had reminded her of unpaid bills, even though the electrical bill she had managed to get on time this month. She looked at the phone. It was a recreation of the older-style rotaries, but with touch-tone buttons laid out in the circle in place of the dial. It lay on its own desk atop a doily beneath the Monet. \$42.75. That was what it cost for people to be able to get a hold of you. She pulled out a chair and sat at the table with the envelope in her hands. Her name was printed visibly through the other side of a sheer plastic screen. She organized the tea set. She thought up a fair price. She needed her phone. Someone might call.

The hospital was unkind and Ms. Nedelby remembered more than anything the stagnant smell of the sheets. She could barely notice the scars on her chest and she felt that the beat of her heart was stronger than it was even as a teenage girl. That didn't prevent the suffocating air of the hospital from creeping over to the medical bills Nedelby held in her

hands. The social security checks she received once a month made a dent, but the benefits of Metro Bank health insurance had long since expired.

This week, the bill that Ms. Nedelby received from the hospital was not even covered fully by the social security check from the beginning of the month. She tried hard to remember when the doctor said she could resume activities like work. She knew she'd need something, down at the department store perhaps. When she went in for her checkup, she asked the doctor about it. He told her that they hadn't previously discussed it and that he didn't expect her to be able to work again for another six months, maybe even a year. Nedelby realized she'd have to spend more weeks selling at the flea market to get by.

This week, it was the set of porcelain dolls that she had collected on her vacations around the world. Nedelby wished in retrospect that she had saved her high salary earnings towards retirement and not spent it on travel. As it stood now, most of the money was long gone, documented only by trinkets like the dolls. She found most of them in Asia or Western Europe on her travels but did remember marveling at some South African and South American finds.

The most prized of which sat in the middle of the table. A Brazilian doll, which really was not Brazilian at all. Nedelby recalled how she found it in a shop on a busy street in a city by a name she knew vaguely now as only Portuguese sounding. The shop was run by an older man with wavy hair that grayed only in the front where it lifted from his forehead. His shirt desperately clung inside the waist of his khakis, but the rotund shape of his belly had forced some untucked explosions around portions of his body he could not see. The first three opened buttons on the shirt had also caught Nedelby's attention, where thick hair curled through over his burnt skin and his upper chest muscles seemed to sag like her own

breasts. This only lasted a moment though, once the sun forced a glow off the white porcelain face of the doll on the table.

On the table before her now, Nedelby could clearly see that this doll was not the whitest in her collection. That day however, it seemed as though it were the whitest doll in the world. This is what Nedelby recalled; what made it so fascinating. The shape, the color, the craftsmanship seemed to look to her like every other doll she'd collected on vacation from Europe. So many of the village women walked by stunned and jealous of the beauty of this doll, no one would so much as pick it up to admire it. It was minutes before Nedelby realized that these Brazilians were taken back by the color of the doll. This she deciphered as an expert of body language learned through years of unfortunate circumstances and not of personal choice.

When she stopped examining the crowd and looked back at the vendor, she herself did catch a glimpse of the irony. This shopkeeper standing beneath his relative shade, attempted to minimize the darkening of his skin to even a deeper brown. The village women looking from all around at Ms. Nedelby and back at the doll, seemed even darker, which Nedelby assumed must be from various aspects of rough village life. Yet there in front of the shopkeeper the sunlight reflected the image of people who's heritage was traced at least three thousand miles away.

Somehow that shopkeeper seemed to smile at that, knowing that he could never pass this off as truly his own art and not an import. This is what Nedelby guessed. She still haggled an absurdly low price by American standards. She planned not to buy it; her collection had grown immense already. She knew that if she'd had a husband he would have confessed her insanity for the hobby long ago. Yet the doll sat under the scrutiny of many a Brazilian observer so that the glass eyes seemed to get lonelier and lonelier to Ms. Nedelby.

This is when she began bargaining a price that was fair, was fair because as rare as the doll may have been from whatever country it may have come, it was now in Brazil in a busy city street surrounded by common folks who had grown accustomed to the local art. So if not for her, the lonely piece would never have been sold. Nedelby knew that the shopkeeper knew this, and so she haggled her better price.

“It’s a beautiful day,” the woman at the next table over said.

“It is,” Nedelby agreed before her head had even fully turned to see the sunshine on the grass uncovered by the tent. She was such a fan of sunny weather, though she hardly seemed to notice when she was at the flea market.

“I’m sure my Harry’s at home washing the cars.”

“Yes, I’m sure he is, too,” Ms. Nedelby knew the woman. Elaine Cavanaugh from apartment 17 across the hall. Nedelby only found out she lived next door when she started a table selling crafts that she made at the next table over every other week. “I think I’d be doing a little gardening.”

“Oh, that sounds delightful,” Elaine replied.

Ms. Nedelby folded her hands in her lap and scowled a little. It did sound delightful. She had intended for it to be cynical, even a little sarcastic. Elaine was supposed to think of the garden outside their apartment building. How it hadn’t been weeded in the longest time. Elaine was supposed to remember last week when Nedelby discussed how she would possibly fit all of the gardening gear on her table. At the time she was mostly joking about selling her gardening equipment. At the time, she had every intention of pleading with an associate manager of the local department store for a job as a greeter. Either way Ms. Nedelby wasn’t so concerned with the details of that afternoon and whether or not Elaine

remembered them, not as much as she was with the thought at the present moment that gardening felt like a good idea.

She remembered how excited she was when her local department store began selling little knee cushions you could lay down in the garden to relieve some of the stress. It came out right when Nedelby swore that she couldn't bend down like she used to and that she might not be able to continue on gardening. She used that cushion though to keep on going. She had a habit of planting all of her favorite flowers in groups of two in early spring. Tulips, Snapdragons, Lilies, Carnations, they were all planted two neatly beside each other. And if any others started sprouting up, the flower would be quickly removed if it didn't have a mate sprouting with it. If one of the two flowers didn't make it, a replacement would quickly be found. The only flowers in the garden allowed to grow in vast numbers were the Quaker-ladies.

Ms. Nedelby had two reasons for this, the first being that she used the Quaker-ladies as a border around the entire garden. This idea she was most pleased with, for the white of their little petals reflected the sunlight forming this glow around the vibrant array of color. Her other reason was that Quaker-ladies were much harder to control. They seemed only to grow in patches. Even getting them to go in a circle each year required Nedelby to scoop a small cluster of them, root and all, and place them in line on a different side that hadn't been growing as nicely. Despite their stubbornness and numbers, Ms. Nedelby tried every June to count the buds of Quaker Ladies to ensure that there was an even amount. She never made it all the way around. Her old eyes played havoc on what she had counted already and what she hadn't yet. In the end she always left it to mother nature that no good flower in her garden would be unmatched.

Now Nedelby thought, even with the arthritis flaring up beyond what the cushion could comfort, she could not keep up gardening. If she won the lottery and never owed a cent again, she could not keep gardening. If she couldn't even work down the street in a department store saying hello to people, for fear that her condition is too weak, she certainly could not garden. And the very real scenario, Nedelby concluded, is that she hadn't won the lottery.

"I'm going to sell them all, you know," Ms. Nedelby said.

"I'm sorry?" Elaine responded.

"Remember I told you, I'm going to sell all my gardening gear?"

"Oh, you did tell me that. I'm sorry, that's too bad."

"I'm too old to keep it up, anyway."

"I don't know about that," Elaine said, "You're only as old as you feel. That's what they say, isn't it? I'm so bad with sayings. Never-mind me. Are you going to get a good price for them?"

Ms. Nedelby thought about it. She narrowly got by last month handing Jamie the overdue rent. The time flew by and she was quite surprised to learn when he appeared at the door she owed him for three months. Nedelby always thought the young man a sweetheart. He wore white t-shirts and light blue jeans every day. His hair was slicked back and to the side. Ms. Nedelby liked best about him that he always minded his manners, at least until the day he came pounding at her door. She tried to reason with him and felt that she was being as understanding as possible. He told her that if she didn't pay by the end of the month she'd have to find a different place to live. Not long after that she read an editorial in the Times about real estate tycoons picking up apartment complexes as ten-year investments, and then selling them again and making a huge profit. The man ranted and raved about how

this negatively affected the living conditions and maintenance. Nedelby wasn't as concerned with that at the time as she thought of this as an explanation for the poor boy's impatience.

This month's rent Nedelby was prepared to fight for. She had made enough with the tea set, that if she did the same every week, she'd have plenty for her rent. The gardening set could probably be sold for more. The cushion was still like new, and the people at the flea market seemed to go for that kind of stuff. Last week, Elaine did very well selling her crafts. Ms. Nedelby didn't exactly understand how since mostly they were pieces of wood cut in shapes like hearts, with painted scenes like people hugging, with words printed on them like "Love." That week she wished she could paint. This week though, she remembered the gardening gear and thought about unpacking it when she got home.

"I'll get enough," Ms. Nedelby responded. "I'll get enough."

More people started walking by. Ms. Nedelby realized as an elderly gentleman passed by inspecting first Elaine's and then her own tabletop. Nedelby sat up in her chair some and fluffed up her hair in the back. As the man passed her by she fluttered her eyelashes ever so slightly. It was a trick that seemed to work in all of the movies that Nedelby had seen in her past, but not very well in real life. Just as she suspected, the man kept on walking down the line.

"Probably an inspector," Elaine said. This was the word she used to describe someone that walked around the entire flea market before buying anything. That way they could see what everyone was selling, and if that was a 'rarity' or if someone was selling identical items at different prices.

"Probably, but you never can tell with those guys," Nedelby replied.

"Sometimes I wish I could hear what they were thinking as they passed by," Elaine confessed.

“The inspectors?” Ms. Nedelby asked, but in the brief time it had taken her to ask Elaine had happened upon a couple customers. Ms. Nedelby was kind and unlike some of the other shopkeepers at the venue, would not try to distract a neighbor with chitchat if they had customers.

Ms. Nedelby looked up to find that someone had wandered to her own booth as well. It was a college student, one of the ones from the local art institute, perhaps. He was in his mid twenties and a scruffy kind of beard. The kind of beard Nedelby likened to not shaving as opposed to growing a beard. She preferred to think of young men like this as painters of beautiful pictures like her Monet, not like the men who hung out around the corner to all hours of the morning playing music at those dreadful clubs.

“I like this one,” he said picking up the Brazilian Princess. He had no reservations about turning her on her side, inspecting the bottom. As his eyes traced along the part in the hairline, Ms. Nedelby thought that she could get triple what she paid for that piece (because of the low price that she paid for it). She was astonished though, that a customer had shown interest. She had nurtured the idea that she would unpack the dolls, sell every one but her, and be forced to bring her home again. She thought that perhaps her idea to place her in the center of the table wasn't a bad one.

“What's special about her?” Ms. Nedelby asked, trying not to sound overly interested.

“She's like a polar bear.” The young man said.

“How do you mean?”

“She clearly is a porcelain doll just like polar bear is a polar bear at the zoo. People seem to describe both first as white, simply white.

“Yes,” Nedelby said.

“But if you watch one of those wildlife shows and you see a polar bear walking across the tundra, he doesn’t look white at all. He looks like a cream color.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Nedelby said.

“But that’s enough to make you notice all the other things you haven’t seen before. How his shape is different from other bears, how his environment is different from other bears, how his life is different from other bears. That’s how this doll’s face looks standing next to these others.”

Nedelby gently took the doll from the young man’s hands. She held the doll up to the light to examine her features.

“What’s so great about being a polar bear?” Nedelby asked. It made the young man laugh and so she started to chuckle a bit too.

“I’m a polar bear. You’re a polar bear. That’s the point. Me standing here talking to you at this table, to anyone else walking by we just like two humans, but we know that we’re different.”

“Wouldn’t they see that I’m an old lady and that you’re a young man, and that we dress much differently and-”

“Well, they probably would see those things,” the young man said interrupting, “but it wouldn’t matter to them. They wouldn’t see what makes you yourself, and me myself. That’s just what I thought of when I walked by the table and saw her face sticking out from all the others.”

“I think I get it.” Ms. Nedelby didn’t really think she understood what the young man said like he did. She did think that holding the doll in her hands, it bore a strong resemblance to herself and somehow that meant something. She seemed to have a more honest face and tired eyes.

“How much is she?” The young man asked.

“I was going to sell her for one hundred and fifty dollars, but I think I’ve just decided that’s she’s not for sale. I hope that’s not a problem. Is that a horrible thing to do? I’m sorry I just-”

“No, no,” the man said and laughed. “Don’t worry, I didn’t bring that kind of money with me. I mostly come just to see what people are selling. Besides, if I were you, I’d hold on to that, too.”

“Thank you,” she said as he continued down the line of booths away from her and Elaine. Ms. Nedelby set the doll down facing her on the table and smiled wider than she had in years. Elaine looked over and Nedelby saw her. She could guess what she was thinking, “How could you be so happy after *not* selling something?” Nedelby didn’t have time to answer Elaine’s unspoken question though. She immediately grabbed some of the packing paper, wrapped the doll, and stuck her neatly in the box beside her chair until she could go home.