

How to get things done

‘SHE’S opposing it because I suggested it.’

‘I don’t think that’s likely, Kenneth.’

‘It is and it’s what’s happening.’

‘That’d be silly, she just wants the best for the town like the rest of us.’

‘You think? She’s only been back a few months and it ain’t the town she knew.’

‘She grew up here.’

‘Yeah, forty years ago, a lot’s changed. Ever wondered why she’s opposing it?’

‘Says it’s too expensive, at least your plan’s too expensive.’

‘You see, that’s bullshit, it’ll hardly cost a penny, and she knows it, folk’re already volunteering to set up the beds and baskets and take care of them.’

‘You’re imagining it, Kenneth, she’s not like that.’

‘You don’t know her like I do, I’ve known her a lot longer. That gal will not be crossed.’

‘So who’s crossing her now? You put the proposal to the committee, we heard you out, then she and Tyrone and Martha spoke against it.’

‘Tyrone and Martha were against only it after they heard her speak.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘OK, maybe they’d have opposed it anyway, but she opposed it first and that might — no, I’m sure it did sway them.’

‘You can’t know that, Kenneth, and it ain’t fair on Tyrone and Martha.’

‘Come on, Tyrone always does what Martha wants, he’s like a puppy dog.’

Frank laughed.

‘That’s true, but it doesn’t mean he’s only agin because she’s agin.’

‘Who, Martha?’

‘No, Marylou.’

‘Martha takes her lead from Marylou and Tyrone takes his lead from Martha, that’s what happened tonight.’

‘Why are you so sure she’s opposing only because you suggested it?’

‘Because . . .’

But then Kenneth stopped.

‘Another beer?’

‘Because what?’

‘Because nothing. Another beer?’

‘Yeah, why not. Reckon you’re imagining it, Kenneth, really do.’

. . .

Many years ago, Marylou and Kenneth were sweethearts. Then it all changed and soon Kenneth married Lucy. A year or two later Marylou went to live upstate. When she came last fall, she was a childless widow, but with more than enough money to buy the Eby farm, hire a manager and make it work. Kenneth was now divorced and never remarried. None of his sons wanted the business. Two are teachers and the other one, well, Kenneth don’t quite know about the other one. All three long moved away and none was close to his dad. So when he was 62, Kenneth sold the business and spends his time helping run the town. It was pretty much all he now has in his life.

He was surprised when Marylou came back, hadn’t thought of her in years. Grey now, she was, of course, but not too much extra weight and still that feisty look in her eyes. He didn’t make contact, and neither did she. Maybe if they had, they would be getting along better. Now? Now it was too late. The pattern was set and was that Marylou did not want much to do with Kenneth. And Kenneth? He wouldn’t have minded. When he heard she was back, he thought for a week or so should they get it going again, put a match back to that candle? But he reckoned because of how it ended, Marylou best be first get in touch if that was what she wanted. Kenneth was surprised when she stood for the town council after Crowther died. She ended on the same committee and the first he got to speak to her after forty years was in the first meeting. She was polite but distant. Marylou was a bright one. And made it clear she was not interested.

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‘I’m not imagining anything, Frank. I know that woman. She’s ain’t forgiven me, she never forgave me.’

‘After forty years? You that sure? Forgiven you for what. Breaking up? Happens all the time.’

‘I know that woman, Frank, I know her.’

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Kenneth proposed the town be made brighter with flower beds and baskets along on Main Street. There were visitors in the summer and flowers would make the town even more attractive. Marylou shot the idea down there and then.

‘We can’t afford it.’

‘We can, Marylou, we’ve got enough in the kitty, and I’ve already had folk offering to help. They like it.’

‘I’m not saying it’s a bad idea, I’m saying other tasks got a better call on the town’s money. Martha was saying a lick of paint here and there and pretty much everywhere will not hurt, and I agree. You remember, Martha?’

‘I did, that’s true, Marylou.’

‘So we like your idea, Ken, it’s a good one, but it’ll have to wait until the town can afford it.’

Martha agreed, and then so did Tyrone.

‘OK, but let’s think on it first.’

...

Marylou invited Martha and her Paul and Tyrone and his Anne for supper later that week. They had not been raised in the town like Marylou and knew none of the

gossip of forty years ago. After grace, she got the meal started with general conversation and did not get to the point until they'd all finished eating. By then everyone had drunk at least two, three glasses of cider. Paul and Anne removed themselves to the porch. They weren't much taken with council business.

'How long has Ken been in the chair?'

'A good few years now. Why, Marylou?'

'Is he up to it?'

Martha looked at Tyrone. Tyrone shrugged.

'I don't see why not. But how do you judge?'

'I knew him years ago and he doesn't seem to have changed a lot.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, OK, he was still pretty much a kid then, but he never did much thinking, said the first thing that came into his head. I'm surprised he made his business a success.'

'I've never thought that, Marylou, seems steady to me.'

'Yes, seems steady, but . . .'

'But?'

'We don't change much, and Ken . . .'

She left it there.

Tyrone spoke.

'I heard you two were a couple.'

'Not for long.'

'Long enough, McAllister at the bank says you two was engaged.'

'Tyrone!'

'What Martha? Just saying, jeez, it was forty years ago.'

'Just watch your mouth, Tyrone!.'

'Don't worry, Martha, Ken would be the one upset if he heard Tyrone. I ended it when I realised what a . . .'

She left it there.

No one spoke, and the silence just sat among them. That's how Marylou wanted it.

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Kenneth's proposal was put to the vote and was rejected and did not go to full council. Marylou, Martha and Tyrone were against, but so was Frank. After the meeting he did not go for a beer with Kenneth as they did. Kenneth rang the next day.

'What gives, Frank?'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean what gives? You voted against. You never warned me. I thought you were in favour?'

'I was Frank, I was, but then . . .'

'Then?'

'Marylou called round and explained why she was agin.'

'What else could she tell you, except she reckons the town can't afford it?'

'It wasn't just that, Ken.'

'And we knew it was going down anyway because of three to two against with Martha and Tyrone voting with Marylou, so you didn't have to vote against, no need.'

'No, I don't suppose I did.'

'So?'

'Oh, I don't know, Kenneth, it was just what Marylou was saying.'

'What was she saying?'

'Nothing special, just this and that, you know.'

'This and that, this and that, you watch that woman, Frank, you watch her and watch your back. I know her.'

'She doesn't seem so bad, Ken.'

'No, she doesn't seem so bad, she never did, they never seem so bad, but watch that woman, Frank and watch your back.'

'I've got to go, Kenneth.' Frank hung up.

...

No one can know what happens in a marriage. There is no umpire, there's rarely right and wrong. And if there is, who do you believe? If a man beats a woman, or even if a woman beats a man, no one's going to know. If man or a woman is bad in bed and all that ends sooner than growing older would insist, no one's going to know. When Lucy left Kenneth people wondered why, but no one knew. Kenneth did not remarry, though he was well-off and some town widows had their private thoughts and a possible scheme. Folk knew his sons and did wonder why they did not come back to visit their dad. But no one knew why and, in truth, no one cared. Kenneth was respected rather than liked, but no one knew why, either, it just was like that. The older folk, those as old as Kenneth and Marylou and who had been born and raised in the town, preferred Marylou and thought she was a decent sort, but they respected Kenneth, too. And anyway, they had their lives and their own problems.

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Frank upset Kenneth in a way Kenneth did not understand. After the next committee meeting, they did go for a beer again, but it wasn't the same. Kenneth wanted to ask Frank why he had voted against after Marylou had called and what Marylou had said. He thought of how to ask the questions, but could never think of a good way that didn't make him look wrong. So he never found out. At full council meetings he was aware, or thought he was aware, of everyone gathering around Marylou and not gathering round him. They never had gathered round him, really, but now it felt more certain.

When elections were coming, someone mentioned, he could not think why, that he was probably thinking of stepping down.

'Stepping down? Why?'

'Oh, I thought that was what you were considering.'

'Never thought of it. Who told you?'

'No one told me, it was just, you know, the general impression.'

'So everyone thinks I mean to step down?'

‘Well, some people do. But obviously not.’

That was not the first query of its kind. It puzzled him, though soon he had an inkling why that had become the gossip. On his way out of the chamber one night, he overheard:

‘Well, she’s not been here long, OK, but that doesn’t mean she wouldn’t do the job well. Why would it?’

‘No, that Marylou has got something.’

Yes, that Marylou certainly had something, and Kenneth thought he knew better than most what she had. He took stock. He recalled the months and weeks and days leading up to the moment the engagement was broken off. It was still quite fresh in his mind. And after a day or two of taking stock, he announced he would be standing down after all.