



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #248 — OCT. 16, 2012

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My Political Muse...

(posted by MarthaH, Oct. 16, 2012)



My political muse has been going, and my irritation growing. That is not designed to be poetry, just fact. We have the country divided along philosophical lines but we also have the, I am VERY SORRY to say, racial ones as well. Fact is fact, hatred is hatred, fear is fear, unknowns are possible to make knowns through education, my favorite observation. But why do some not bother to make the effort? Sound bites are easier, lies believable. The liars, in many cases, laugh all the way to the bank.

Some of us have taken the responsibility to educate ourselves on other things besides our immediate needs in life. Others matter, other ways are refreshing, I believe, for our souls, and getting out "there" to see the greater world is necessary. Yet we have a (too large!) portion of our society that thinks its is the only way. And they are the hard-core who want to inflict theirs on all while those at the other end of the spectrum are willing to share the culture and let all decide for themselves and co-exist in those rights. Then we have the FEW in the middle, the "swing voters" who list as the wind blows. Witness the surge for Romney after the first debate. Can 90 minutes of non-debate debate really make up their "minds?" I think they want the easy/mindless way out! A sound bite of a commercial, if you will...and I am off to shop. Facts are facts, emotion is emotion, easy is easy. Now I know? PLEASE. No one TV show makes up a campaign, people.

In the olden days when folks read true journalism and had to make more effort than a remote to "learn" about a campaign, they had to use their brains to sort through. No live pictures, no right/wrong tie, no "looks" or all that! What would Lincoln and Douglass say about training for a debate? IF it were a REAL debate instead of a show! Today when one man who has the answers as to what is really going on in the seriously flawed world has to stand before a camera and discuss/parse...he is the in defense of things we can't know as outsiders. The out who wants in doesn't know what he is getting IF he wins and we definitely don't know what he would do in those cases. But 90 minutes tells the few who will decide what we get? All we really have on the out group, at the moment, is their history. A lot of the problems with that began with hanging chads and the US Supreme Court in the 2000 election, unfortunately. Or am I tainted by life experiences and study?

I have to admit my personal answer to the frustrations is to avoid it all. Too much is at stake, and the vision we need to follow has been stymied for four years by those who voted to "get Obama" at any cost.... At the cost of the future, and I can't stand to watch the theatrics. It smells so much of Rove who is silent enough to be dangerous while others flap their lips and fan the racism.

There, I feel better in having ranted for you!



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20121015-01 09:04 Pam Re: My Political Muse... (reply to MarthaH, above)

I totally agree with you, Martha. You describe our despicable current situation very well. I am not watching the debates and I avoid the TV ads as much as possible. The whole do-and-pony show makes me sick.

The other day I saw Christia (forget her last name for the moment) on Stephen Colbert, talking about her new book *Plutocrats: The Rise of the Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else*. This morning I heard her interviewed on NPR, and she was able to go into more detail. It was pretty chilling. She talked to lots of the super-wealthy, not the ones who inherited their riches but those who had "done it themselves." She assumed initially that because they knew how hard it was to get where they were they'd have sympathy and/or empathy for those who were still trying. Not so. What they had was mostly contempt. She quoted one man who said, "The lowest paid American worker is the most overpaid worker in the world."

There is less equality and less social mobility, much less, than we had in the 'fifties, when the middle class thrived, and the super rich were few. Now there are lots of multi-millionaires and billionaires, and they're all over the globe. Marx's prediction of the withering away of the nation-state and the rise of global, rather than national, alliances is, ironically, coming true. Only it's not the workers of the world who are uniting; it's the super rich. Another discovery was just how out of touch these people are. One man was asked to give some financial advice to a friend's kid and his wife. The advisor said, "They only had \$10 million saved. How are they possibly going to live on that?" The super rich, according to this book, will go to great lengths to save a couple of percentage points on their taxes, and as we all know money and power rise, like some poison cream, to the top. If this trend continues, the great American experiment will fall apart, just as Plato predicted in "The Republic." The 99% or 47% (take your choice) will revolt, and who knows what will follow the chaos?

20121015-06 18:39 Art Re: My Political Muse... (reply to Pam & MarthaH, above)

I think the issue will be "Can average people bring down the rich and powerful without a violent revolution?" This election may well serve as a benchmark for that question. Actually, we have done it previously. The nation was headed that way in the late 1800's when Roosevelt and others, with "Trust Busting" and other actions, managed to level things out, but not before a lot of violent riots and strikes. The French and Russian revolutions serve as examples of the extreme. The rich simply don't get it. I am not sure I can even get into their minds, but they clearly march to the beat of a different drum. They really do think they are superior and deserve to rule. Romney and most of his friends really don't care a hoot about the average citizen and only play the game because, in this current society, they have to. Of that I am sure.

20121015-08 10:48 SandyI Re: My Political Muse... (reply to Art, above)

Ken Follett's *The Fall of Giants* about WW I is about this very theme and follows the rich in England, Russia, Germany and somewhat in France. The most chilling part to me was when the Germans held the top of a hill and the French and English were at the bottom trying to take the hill. The battle went on for months (years) and the "leaders" kept sending those troops into certain death as if they weren't even human beings that were going to die. Some of the things the wealthy say about the miners in Wales and the troops are unbelievable.

Follett's books are tomes but *The Fall* was a rather quick reading considering it's almost 1,000 pages. His book about WW II was just released in hardback. I'll wait for Nook or paperback. Too hard to read a book that big in bed.

I was taught to respect my elders. It's just getting harder to find them.

The American dream looking threadbare...This is only one story among many more tragic stories. Things just ain't what they used to be... But to what other end could nearly constant growth and the god of selfish materialism take us?

"Life of a Salesman: Selling Success When the American Dream Is Downsized" by Eli Saslow, *The Washington Post*

Oct. 7, 2012, (http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/life-of-a-salesman-selling-success-when-the-american-dream-is-downsized/2012/10/07/e2b34aac-1033-11e2-acc1-e927767f41cd_print.html)

He had always managed to find optimism in even the worst circumstances, and here was another chance: a heat advisory, 98 degrees and rising at 11 a.m., the hottest day of the year yet.

"Thank you," said Frank Firetti, 54, as he walked out of his Manassas office into a blast of humidity in early June. "Thank you," he said again. "What a perfect day to sell a pool."

He opened the trunk of his 2004 Toyota compact and changed into his selling outfit of slacks, a yellow polo and a silver wristwatch. He rubbed lotion on his face and sifted through six pairs of shoes before grabbing his dockside loafers. His goal was to arrive at a customer's house looking "out of the catalogue," he said — no traces of mud on his feet, no worry lines carved into his forehead, no indication whatsoever that sales at Blue Haven Pools had been plummeting for five years running and that a staff of 24 full-timers had dwindled to six.

His job was to stand with customers in their back yards, suntanned and smiling, and look beyond the problems of the past several years to see the opportunities in every suburban cul-de-sac. How about a pool and a sauna next to the patio? Or a custom waterfall near the property line?

"The possibilities here are as big as you can dream them," he liked to tell customers, gesturing at their yards.

In a country built on optimism, Frank Firetti was the most optimistic character of all: the American salesman — if not the architect of the American dream then at least its most time-honored promoter. He believed that you could envision something and then own it, that what you had now was never as good as what you would have next. Since the country was founded, it had climbed ever upward on the spirit of people like him, on their vision, on their willpower, on their capitalism. But now, when he traveled from house to house to sell his monuments to American success, he sensed that spirit waning.

Most people believed the country was headed in the wrong direction. Fewer trusted banks, employers or government. Two presidential campaigns were bombarding his swing state of Virginia with messages about a beleaguered middle class and an endangered American dream.

He had been taught that success in the United States was as simple as choosing it, and that one man's hard work and ambition mattered more than elections in Washington or whims on Wall Street. His grandfather had taken a boat from Italy to Ellis Island and become a brick mason who helped build a state capitol. His father had started five businesses, each bigger than the last, until the profits paid for 10 acres in Virginia and a stable for a racehorse. He had nieces who graduated from college, a brother who lived in a mansion and a Filipina wife who was in the process of becoming a U.S. citizen.

The promise of America was embedded in the Firetti family story.

But lately Frank had begun to see fissures in that story, signs of the anxiety and doubt that had reconfigured so much of the country. The economic morass of the past five years had downsized his business, diminished his retirement savings and devalued his house. Now the effects were threatening to become psychological, nibbling closer and closer at the corners of his self-worth and his optimism.

As the summer of 2012 began, he and his family had much more at stake than swimming-pool sales or even the survival of their business. In question now was the conviction at the heart of an American family — that the future was theirs to control.

His brother had begun saying the world felt like a “tinderbox, ready to explode.” His father, the co-owner of their Blue Haven Pools franchise, was speaking of this election in the most critical terms, telling Frank that “the country as we know it is as good as gone without a change.” His 19-year-old son had begun building up his savings account, living in Frank’s basement and studying economics at the nearby community college, in part because he hoped there would still be a business for him to inherit.

Frank, meanwhile, continued to believe the answer to his future was always waiting on the next sales call, inside the door of the next house. Always the next house.

“Just got to close this one,” he said now, driving his car toward the first sales call of the day, a noon appointment in Arlington County. “Close one and we’ll be doing okay.”

He loved being in the car, the one place that was his alone, where he could fortify himself against stress and negativity. There was Motrin in the center console for his headaches, hand sanitizer for germs and four empty bags of pistachios, because cracking shells occupied his hands and quieted his mind. There was classic rock on the radio, because he had changed the station when the host of his favorite conservative talk show started dissecting the economy, a word Frank couldn’t stand to say or hear, because he had come to equate it with “an excuse for failure,” he said. There was a Bible open on the back seat, because having it there occasionally helped seal the deal with a religious customer, but mostly because Frank was an ardent believer who liked to read and annotate the book when his faith needed restoration.

He pulled up to a mini-mansion and parked in the shade, leaving the air conditioning running while he reviewed the customer’s file. Four or five years ago, sales appointments had been his favorite part of the job. He was a former construction worker who knew how to build the pools he sold. There were other salesmen who rushed through their pitches and then pulled out a contract, but Frank liked to savor those first few hours in a customer’s house, when everything seemed possible and he could sit with a sketch pad and interpret someone’s vision.

His designs occasionally went over budget, but few customers seemed to mind. They could rely on equity in their homes and banks that were eager to loan.

“Selling is winning,” he liked to say.

But now the wins came much less frequently, and customers wanted to talk more about warranties and payment plans. Many of them owed more on their mortgages than their homes were worth, and most banks considered it too risky to lend tens of thousands of dollars for a swimming pool.

Frank had tried to compensate by lowering his prices and improving the quality of his work, raising Blue Haven’s rating with the Better Business Bureau from an F under previous ownership to an A-minus. He had taped a copy of a Native American poem about fearlessness to the first page of his appointment book. He had also taken to repeating an aphorism, a company goal that sounded more like a prayer when he said it now, as he stepped out of his car onto the sidewalk.

“This will be a good business if we can sell a hundred pools this year,” he said.

“A hundred pools,” he said again. Then he walked up the driveway and knocked on the door.

Frank’s wife attributed his successes to talent, and his brother jokingly credited luck, but the truth was that Frank possessed the single quality most central to American achievement. “You’ve got to have that drive,” he said, and he always had. That’s how a mediocre high school student turned himself into a restaurant manager, and how a restaurant manager became a chief building engineer, and how a building engineer became a salesman for a Virginia moving company making \$80,000 on straight commission.

He recognized opportunities and then seized them, never dwelling for too long on fears or self-doubts. He moved from one career to the next on a steady journey upward, pausing just long enough to hang a sign in the office that read, "God Bless America."

So, when his father asked if he wanted to tag along to a convention for swimming-pool salesmen in February of 2006 just to learn what the business was like, Frank answered the way he always had when a new opportunity arose.

"You bet," he said.

That's how he ended up at the Sheraton in Dallas with hundreds of other salesmen from 80 Blue Haven franchises across the country. His father, Sal Firetti, had recently joined Blue Haven as a salesman, and they spent three days spoiling themselves on the corporate expense account. It had been a record year for pool sales; there was all-you-could-eat prime rib at lunch and a specialized phone booth called a "money machine," set up in the lobby, where fans blew \$20 bills and employees got 15 seconds each to step inside and stuff their shirts. Frank met two salesmen from the Manassas office, Dennis and Ted, who wore Hawaiian shirts and told stories about making \$200,000 a year and traveling to the Bahamas on a company-paid cruise for salesmen who sold 42 pools or more.

"Greed on display," Frank called it, and he wanted in. He joined Blue Haven as a salesman within a year. He and his father bought the franchise in Manassas shortly thereafter. Sal was nearing 70, and he wanted to buy one more business as a legacy for the grandkids. Frank was nearing 50, and he wanted to transition from working for companies to helping run one. It was the next step up in what seemed to him like the classic American narrative. The Firetti men agreed to manage the business together, bonded by a philosophy.

"Go big or go home," Frank said.

Now, on a Tuesday morning in late June, Frank walked into the company that had become his own. Ted and his Hawaiian shirts were gone, retired to Florida. Dennis was selling for a competitor. His father was back in the hospital because of complications from an illness that left him chronically fatigued, so now Frank was mostly in charge of Blue Haven by himself. He didn't have a lot of money in the bank. After six years selling pools, he had yet to qualify for the company's annual cruise. "One guy selling 40 pools?" he said, shaking his head. "These days, they could fit that group into a canoe."

"Good morning," he said now, stepping into the office. "Anybody up here?"

His voice broke the silence and echoed off the walls. The office, once cramped with 24 employees, now felt like a mausoleum on a dead-end road in an industrial park. There were empty desks and scattered customer thank-you notes from the boom years. There was still his stepmother, a former teacher who had taught herself to keep the books. There was his earnest 16-year-old nephew, helping out for the summer in mesh shorts and untied sneakers. There was his son, Tyler, down in the basement warehouse bumping his head to rap music on an iPod and taking inventory of what supplies they had left.

Frank walked into his corner office and closed the door. He had been increasing his hours even as business slowed, believing he could work his way out by punching numbers into his oversize calculator and compiling photo albums to showcase the pools he built. The phone affixed to his hip rang every few minutes, although too few of the calls came from customers.

His father called on his way home from the hospital: Try lowering the prices again, he said.

His brother called: Hire some staff, he said. Take some risks. You're sitting on a gold mine. "A damn gold mine!"

Now there was a knock on his office door. "Yep," Frank said, and in walked Scott, his construction manager and most loyal employee. Scott was a talented builder who had worked for other pool companies, but he had stuck with Blue Haven through the downturn because he believed in the company's work. Even as its annual business dipped

from 400 pools to a hundred, Frank had never asked Scott to build with cheaper materials or shortchange customer warranties.

"We've got a bit of a problem," Scott said. A storm had caused damage to one of their pools still under warranty, and it would require a few hundred dollars to fix.

"Does anything ever go right?" Frank asked. He looked up from his desk and smiled.

"Not lately," Scott said.

They stood together for a moment in the quiet office. When his family bought Blue Haven, Frank had vowed to take care of his employees. He wanted to start a profit-sharing plan and celebrate good years by taking the entire staff to the Bahamas. But now Scott hadn't taken a decent vacation in two years, and he had started cleaning pools to make ends meet. He had briefly considered leaving the business to work for the government.

"You ever think about doing something else?" Scott asked.

"Sure," Frank said. "Yesterday, day before, day before that. But deep down I still believe it will get good."

"A hundred pools?" Scott said. He had heard the refrain.

"Maybe 75, even 80," Frank said. "If we can do that, we'll all be doing real good."

At first, swimming pools were just another product that he sold: \$40,000-to-\$200,000 retail price; several thousand pounds of concrete followed by 30,000 gallons of water; a two-month construction headache for 6 percent commission.

But the more he learned about pools, the more he found them representative of something larger. They were carvings etched into back yards as a mark of ascent, commemorating a customer's arrival in the upper middle class. They were a signal: You had a pool, you were an American somebody. Frank loved to visit his construction sites, exchange his few words of Spanish with the crew and then patrol the area with a digital camera. The crews sometimes found it peculiar, but Frank didn't care. He wrote into each contract that he was allowed to take pictures and chronicle his creation. A black hole in the earth became a smooth bowl of white-and-blue speckled plaster, filled with water so calm and pristine that it offered a promise. Here was a place of undisturbed relaxation, of aqua blue and sandstone, a monument to luxury that could be owned. He hung photos of his favorite pools in the office and brought others home to show his wife. He wanted one.

His sister already owned a pool, a custom model with two waterfalls and a hot tub that Frank had sold to her at a discounted cost.

His brother had purchased a few pools in his life before deciding it would be better to buy a house on the water.

His father had a pool on three acres in Purcellville, where he hosted family parties and cooked Italian meals on Sundays.

About a year after Frank started working for Blue Haven, he had decided to design a pool of his own. It would be his most ambitious creation yet — the biggest pool he had ever drawn, a concept he was sure nobody had thought of before. He drew a 1,200-square-foot pool with an island dotting the center and a lazy river wrapped around the perimeter.

"I'm going to lie on my back and float in circles all day." That was his plan.

Four years later, on a breezy evening in July, Frank came home to a townhouse in Purcellville sandwiched between two identical townhouses. It had been a promising day at work — one pool sold, another just waiting on county approval — and he cracked open a beer and grabbed a copy of his old drawing from the basement. His pool was

still only a plan, stored alongside the yellowed schematics for a house he had hoped to build in Purcellville. He already owned the land, but their townhouse had declined in value and their money was tied up in Blue Haven. "Someday," he said.

He grabbed another beer and carried it out to the deck.

His son, Tyler, was already there, just back from his daily workout at the gym, and Frank sat across from him. His wife, Suzette, was inside packing for a trip to visit her family in the Philippines, and his 7-year-old daughter was dancing to music videos in the living room. It was just the two of them outside, father and son, drinking beer in a light breeze as the sun dipped toward the horizon. "Is there a better night than this?" Frank said, feeling wistful.

He began to talk about the things he wanted, his hallmarks of success in America: a Harley, a new camper, a family trip to Italy and that pool with the lazy river.

Tyler responded in turn by listing his own goals, which so many people in his father's generation had considered guarantees. "Stocks. Bonds. A house. A car," he said. He had been working double shifts as a waiter to boost his savings. He wanted to pay down his community college loans before transferring to a four-year college to finish his degree.

"Those are all good things," Frank said. "Smart. Real practical."

"You can't be too safe or too smart about money with the economy now," Tyler said. "I want to save up and make the smart investments."

"You'll make them," Frank said, nodding.

"I want to have that absolute stability," Tyler said.

"You'll have it."

They stayed out on the deck until the sun disappeared behind the townhouses. Frank went to bed just before midnight and awoke at 4. He always had been a sound sleeper, but lately he had been putting himself to bed with Tylenol PM and stirring awake to questions in the middle of the night. When had stability become the goal in America? What kind of dream was that? And in the economy of 2012, was it even attainable?

He had begun a habit of leaving his bedroom in the middle of the night without waking his wife. He would grab a blanket and walk out to a chair on the deck. It had become his favorite place to sleep. There was peace in the silence and perspective in the stars. There was comfort in the familiar churning sound of a swimming pool. It was a public one, located just across the street.

A few days later, Frank's father, Sal, came into work for the first time in weeks, taking the stairs up to the office two at a time, chest hair rising over his yellow Hawaiian shirt.

"Let's sell some pools," he said, clapping his hands.

He had gone to the hospital again the day before, and he had been too fatigued to leave home the day before that. But now here he was at 73, barking orders into his cellphone, hair slicked, feeling suddenly better.

"How we doing, Frank?" Sal said. "You good?"

It was a family habit not to allow for the possibility of any other answer.

"You bet," Frank said. "Real good."

Nothing reinforced his sense of possibility so much as seeing his father on a good day, shouting in Italian and marching around the office with the self-assurance of a man who had spent most of his life as a boss. Sal had started an alarm company, owned a hardware and appliance store and traveled regularly to Asia for an import business. His family loved to tell one story about his days as a salesman for Motorola, when he talked his way into an appointment with Redskins coach George Allen and then walked out 20 minutes later with a signed contract and a complimentary pair of season tickets. To his family, he had always been the best salesman of all.

Now his gravelly baritone filled the office as he called subcontractors and offered advice to Frank. They wrote down names of customers on a dry-erase board, and Frank booked sales appointments in his day planner. He had four customers on the verge of buying pools and 15 more who had expressed interest on the company's voice mail. Maybe his brother was right: Maybe they really could do millions. Maybe he could still hit a hundred. Now was the time to invest, to swing big, to hire a few more salespeople and call back some of those hesitant buyers for one more try. He picked up the phone and started dialing.

"Happy wife, happy life," he told one customer.

"Aren't you tired of baking in this heat?" he asked another.

Sal ordered pizza for lunch, and Frank joined him in the conference room. Sal loaded hot pepper flakes onto a slice and starting telling a story about a trip to Italy a decade earlier. He had been wandering around Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples, looking into their family ancestry when his guide led him to an apartment with a marble staircase worn from centuries of use. At the top of those stairs was a small apartment, and in that apartment was a friendly old woman who turned out to be a distant relative, and on her wall was a black-and-white picture of Sal's grandfather.

"Marble stairs worn in the middle," Sal said, shaking his head.

"And still standing," Frank said.

"Makes you feel like a part of something," Sal said.

"Something that lasts," Frank said.

They ate in silence for a minute, thinking about the decades of drive and ambition that had delivered their family to this office in Manassas. From Italy to the United States in 1911; from Firetto to Firetti during the chaos of processing at Ellis Island; from handcrafted marble steps to American brick masonry; from an apartment on a volcanic island to 10 acres in the rolling horse country of Virginia. The Firetti family narrative was the story of steady advance, of one generation after the next overcoming distance and circumstance to accomplish something greater.

Now it was left to Frank to outdo the past again, and something about that thought made the office feel small and quiet. He stood up from the table and rubbed his forehead. "Back to work," he said.

Sal returned to his office, sank into his chair and closed his eyes. "I'm exhausted," he said. And then, almost whispering: "Damn sickness." He stood up from his desk and walked over to see Frank.

"I'm going home," he said.

"What happened?" Frank said. "I thought you were doing good."

"*La vecchiaia e una carogna*," Sal said, repeating an Italian phrase that meant getting old involved nothing but pain.

"You know I hate it when you say that," Frank said.

"Ah, come on. I'm going to hell in a handbasket."

Frank winced. "Okay," he said. "Go get a little rest."

He watched his father ease down the steps, leaving him alone in the office. His glasses sat low on his nose and his shoulders slumped toward his desk. The phones had stopped ringing. The leads on the company voice mail sounded mostly like dead ends. There was a letter taped on the wall from Blue Haven's corporate office, sent a few months earlier. "Most offices have had to let go employees," it read. "Those sales reps still with Blue Haven represent the crème de la crème. Being in this elite group is an accomplishment in itself!"

He stood up from his desk and walked into the company's storage room, the place he went whenever his optimism began to feel misguided. There were cardboard boxes piled high on the shelves, each one filled with Blue Haven contracts from 2005, 2006 and 2007, great years for the American economy. Frank sat on a knee-high stool in the center of the room and reached for the closest box. The label read: "Last Name M, 2006," and inside were 42 swimming-pool contracts sold to a single letter in a single year.

He pulled out contracts and started to read the sale prices: "Sixty-two thousand," he said. "Eighty. Fifty-four. A hundred-and-twenty. Ninety-seven."

He reached for another box.

"Forty-two. Seventy-eight. Sixty-seven."

Quieter now.

"Fifty. Ninety-one. Can't you see? This place was mega."

He looked up and stared at the boxes stacked high on the walls, overcome by the evidence. What had come before was better than what he had now. Maybe, despite so much hard work and ambition, he couldn't do mega. Maybe, in the summer of 2012, all he could do was this:

"Fifty pools," he said, standing up from the stool. "Fifty pools and we'll be doing all right."

One night late in the summer, Frank carried a plate of leftovers and his laptop to the kitchen table so he could video-chat with Suzette, shortly after she arrived in the Philippines. She had traveled back to her home town of Dumaguete City six times in the decade since they married, but he had never gone. The flight cost \$1,700, and a worthwhile trip across the world required more vacation time than Frank had taken in years.

Suzette appeared on his screen, and Frank saw the only view of the Philippines he had come to know: a whitewashed stucco wall, a kitchen chair and his wife holding coffee in her hand. It was 8 a.m. for her. The picture blurred and the volume faded out.

"What are you doing today?" Frank asked.

"What?" Suzette said, leaning closer to her computer.

"What are you doing today?" he yelled.

"Oh, we are still getting ready for the party."

It was the one-year anniversary of Suzette's mother's death, and she and her sisters had planned an event for 300. As usual, they had paid for all of it.

"Free dinner on the Firettis?" Frank said.

"What?" Suzette said.

She pointed to her ear, indicating a problem with the volume, but Frank wondered if she was choosing not to hear. She had spent almost \$25,000 in the past three years to support relatives in the Philippines, and her frequent trips to Western Union had become a point of contention in an otherwise happy marriage.

The "Land of Money" — that was what Suzette's relatives sometimes called the United States. Her older sister had immigrated first on a temporary visa to do housework for a diplomat and then recommended Suzette for a similar job in 1988. She boarded a plane for the first time, traveled 38 hours and reunited with her sister at the airport. They stopped at Pizza Hut and drove to clean a house in the Washington suburbs. Five hours later, she had \$80 in cash — the equivalent of a good month's wage in Dumaguete City.

Suzette had been working steadily ever since, caring for an autistic child and tidying houses in order to send \$250 a month back to her family. News of her generosity had traveled quickly, and now, whenever Suzette came to the Philippines, she found dozens of people waiting outside her family's house hoping for a little help from the Land of Money. They saw the United States the same way she once had, as a place of endless opportunity, where even the cleaning ladies got rich. Now she knew better, but they didn't.

Frank looked at his wife on the computer screen and noticed her fingernails, each painted a different color. He had fallen for her at a barbecue a decade earlier, asking for her number and then calling the next day, but it had taken her a month to call back. She had confidence built during her years as a onetime beauty queen and member of an elite dance troupe. He had papers from a recent divorce and a temporary room in his father's house.

A few months into the relationship, Sal approached Suzette and asked what she thought about his son. "He has a kind heart," she told him. "He is a great father and a gentle man. It's not just the person he is now but the person he is becoming."

A decade later, he was still becoming. Frank sometimes wondered what Suzette's family thought when they wandered into view during these Skype conversations, stopping to wave and look into his living room. Did they wonder why he didn't visit them? Why Suzette couldn't give away more?

Did they consider him a disappointment in the Land of Money?

It was a possibility too hard to discuss, especially now, on a computer connection across the world.

"I love you," Suzette said.

"I love you, too," Frank said.

The screen went dark, and he walked into the kitchen. He rifled through the fridge, finding only a leftover bratwurst. He opened the freezer and frowned. "Nothing good," he said. Suzette would be away for two more weeks. His father was back in the hospital. It was just him, alone with the responsibilities of his townhouse and his business.

He took out his appointment book and checked his schedule for the next day. "Pretty light," he said. He stared at the page and then began flipping ahead to the next week and the next month, looking for a sign of possibility before summer's end.

And then, out of nowhere, one came.

A couple stumbled onto Blue Haven's Web site, liked what they saw and invited Frank to their house. He dressed in his slacks and yellow polo and silver watch and drove to Oakton, where he parked in the shade and idled in the car. He read over the first lines of the Native American poem in his appointment book. He checked his hair in the rearview mirror and smiled at his reflection. "Selling is winning," he said.

A man greeted Frank in the driveway, wearing a white-collared shirt and cuff links, and led him into the living room.

"Beautiful house," Frank said, taking a seat across from the man and his wife. He pointed out the window to the back yard, shaded by 100-year-old trees. "And a beautiful place for a pool," he said.

"We've been thinking about a pool since 2007," the husband said. "We're tired of waiting for a perfect comeback that might never happen. We want to enjoy our money."

"We want that negative edge, that waterfall," the wife said.

"A one-of-a-kind pool," the husband said.

Frank reached into his pocket and grabbed a pencil. "An infinity edge, huh?" he said, beginning to sketch.

"With mood lighting," the wife said.

"Somewhere in the range of a hundred-and-twenty grand," the husband said.

Frank started to draw faster, sharpening the borders of the pool, grinning, nodding, bouncing his knee. "Okay," he said. "Okay! A one-of-a-kind pool."

They watched him sketch, and Frank let his imagination run. "An infinity edge," he said again, mostly for himself. Here were people with a dream that they trusted him to shape. Here was money and ambition. Here was a house in one of the richest neighborhoods in the country — a place built on American success. He shaded in the interior of the pool and handed the sketch to the wife.

"Beautiful," she said. And then, a few minutes later: "I like you, Frank."

"I trust you, Frank," the husband said. "We'll be in touch soon."

"I can't wait to hear," Frank said, beaming, sensing in his gut what would soon become contractual — the couple would buy a pool for \$155,000, one of his biggest sales of the summer.

He walked out of the house to his car and turned up the classic rock on his radio. "Momentum," he said, drumming against the steering wheel. One big sale would surely lead to others. He called his father to share the news. "Could be a good August," he said. Selling was winning. The future was still his to control. He drove back to the office, pushing the speed limit, ready for the opportunities ahead.

And then he waited. And waited. The phones stayed quiet. His son and his nephew went back to school. His stepmother cut back on her hours. A subcontractor left early to spend the winter in Texas. August remained as slow as July, and as slow as June and May before that.

Frank sat alone in the office on Industrial Road at the end of the month and looked out the window. Out there, unemployment was near 8 percent, the presidential election was still a tossup and America remained unsettled. Another of his competitors was about to go under, and Frank wondered who might be next. The economy had turned business into a game of survival and sales into an exercise in humility. It had to get better. He was sure of it. But what if it didn't? If a salesman lost his optimism, what did that mean for everyone else?

He rubbed his hand over his eyes and picked up his calculator. Their landlord had agreed to halve the rent so long as they took care of the property, and now an afternoon shadow crept across overgrown grass, and weeds broke through the parking lot. Summer was ending, and soon it would be their slow season — a time to reckon with results.

They wouldn't be selling 100 pools.

Not 75.

Not 50.

"Just have to hold our breath and make it to spring," Frank said, still looking out the window, sounding resigned.

He heard a car pull into the parking lot and watched a man and a dog make their way to the front door. It was Blue Haven's former sales manager — a man who had trained Frank to sell pools and then left to start his own swimming-pool company when the business slowed. He climbed to the top of the stairs, and Frank greeted him at the landing and shook his hand.

"Quiet up here," the former sales manager said. "How's business?"

"Good, thanks," Frank said. He stood firm at the top of the stairs, holding the sales manager near the entrance to block his view of the rest of the office. Behind him, the dry-erase board of current projects was mostly empty. The only noise was the faint voice of Sean Hannity on the radio, dissecting the latest lackluster jobs report and what it meant for the presidential election.

The sales manager looked past Frank to the empty desks and the old thank-you notes on the wall.

"In the last seven weeks, I've done a million in business," the sales manager said, patting his dog on the head while he spoke. "It's not where it was, probably won't be in my lifetime. But it's something."

"Yep. It's coming around," Frank said. He took another step forward, moving the sales manager a few feet closer to the door.

"You're looking more and more like your dad every day," the sales manager said.

Frank smiled. "Good to see you."

The sales manager nodded and walked down the steps. When he reached the bottom, he stopped and turned around.

"Hey, Frank."

"Yeah."

"I'm looking to expand, you know. So, if things are hard, and if you ever get tired of being committed to this, just give me a call. We can figure out a deal."

Frank looked back at him for a long minute, mulling over the irony. The past five years had turned everything upside down, and now there was a salesman standing at his front door, feeding him lines, sensing an opportunity and offering a deal.

"You're treating me like a customer," Frank said.

He stepped closer to the stairs before he said what came next. Because even during this time of doubt and disappointment, there remained one conviction to which he was still clinging — a belief at the core of his optimism that he needed to make clear.

"I'm the salesman," he said.

20121015-03 10:24 MarthaH Fw: A Clean Joke!

Two brooms were hanging in the closet, and, after a while, they got to know each other so well they decided to get married.

One broom was, of course, the bride broom, the other the groom broom.

The bride broom looked very beautiful in her white dress. The groom broom was handsome and suave in his tuxedo. The wedding was lovely.

After the wedding, at the wedding dinner, the bride broom leaned over and said to the groom broom, "I think I am going to have a little whisk broom!"

'Impossible!' said the groom broom.

(Are you ready for this? Brace yourself; this is going to hurt!)

"We haven't even swept together!"

(Sounds to me like she's been sweeping around!)

20121015-04	15:06	Ben	Today's Healthy Lunch at Apple
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No surprises, except how much I enjoyed eating it. Everything very fresh; to my half romaine, half spring mix, we added egg, chick peas, cheddar, carrots, cucumbers, and (of course) beets; no chicken or goat cheese today. All the seeds and nuts, so add a shake or two of walnuts, pecans, sunflower and sesame seeds, dried cranberries, black pepper... and less than a quarter of a dipper of fine house-made vinaigrette.

I managed to abstain from dessert, although I studied them carefully.

So here was lunch today; I went the gourmet route and added a bottle of Topo Chico:



Small Salad Day

20121015-05 18:04 SteveB Fw: Daily Kos Action: Help Make This Stephen Colbert Video Go Viral!

from Daily Kos:

Last Thursday, Stephen Colbert asked a brilliant question which lays waste to Mitt Romney's entire tax plan.

Click below to watch a video of Colbert asking the question, then share it widely over Facebook, Twitter or other social networks. It's not just good for a laugh—it exposes why Mitt Romney's economic policy is such a fraud.

Keep fighting, —Rachel Colyer, Associate Campaign Director, Daily Kos

Video: "Stephen Colbert Destroys Romney's Tax Plan with One Simple Question" by BruinKid, Daily Kos

Oct. 15, 2012, (<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/10/15/1144665/-Stephen-Colbert-destroys-Romney-s-tax-plan-with-one-simple-question?detail=email>)

Last Thursday, Stephen Colbert had a brilliant segment of Formidable Opponent, where he debated himself about Mitt Romney's positions. And in it, there was one key question he asked which laid waste to Romney's entire tax proposal.

20121015-07 19:57 Marci Fw: Doors

[Source of original email unknown. —SteveB]

Ever walk into a room with some purpose in mind, only to completely forget what that purpose was?

Turns out, doors themselves are to blame for these strange memory lapses.

Psychologists at the University of Notre Dame have discovered that passing through a doorway triggers what's known as an event boundary in the mind, separating one set of thoughts and memories from the next.

Your brain files away the thoughts you had in the previous room and prepares a blank slate for the new locale."

It's not aging, it's the damn door!

[I wonder if this also happens with, like, cats, dogs, mice, and horses? —SteveB]



<http://www.lovethesepics.com/2012/07/69-exquisite-infinity-pools-that-will-blow-your-mind/>



—Friends of the Middle,
Steven W. Baker (SteveB), Editor/Moderator

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