Directions to a lost place: a parable for modern times

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“I’m lost,” he sighed to himself. Then, just ahead he noticed the little postal truck idling under a timeless elm. A woman in a blue toboggan—all bundled up against the cold—hustled back to her truck. She’d just made a delivery. Pulling alongside, he rolled down the passenger’s window. “Ma’am,” he said, getting her attention. “Can you tell me how to get to *Gratitude Street*?” She brightened. “Sure. You got a pen?”

When he was ready, she spoke, pointing ahead. “So, at the end of this street, go left. That’s *Family*. You’ll know *Family* because every house is wildly different. You’d swear *each one* had a different Builder. But actually, the same Builder designed every house. It looks like a mess: there’s a treehouse, an igloo, a tent, and a Victorian. Every house and every person on *Family* look so different they seem out of place. But here’s the amazing surprise: despite all the differences, every house has some small elements exactly—and I mean exactly—the same as *all the others*.

“Here’s how they discovered it,” she said, warming up. “A long time ago, some angry owners—the homeowners association—drew up rules to make the houses look more alike. Some wanted the igloo removed. Move the teepee, said others. A group felt the treehouse was a terrible eyesore. Then, one day the igloo’s heater just died. The Inuit went door to door: *Do you have a part that looks like this?* she asked. Before you know it, everyone on the street was in an uproar! *Everyone’s house had exactly the same heater!* Exactly! House, teepee, igloo, tent: Whatever your house, it had that exact same heater. As they investigated their homes, they noticed other things were also exact copies. They realized that even with their differences, many things were the same. Nowadays, tourist vans go up and down *Family*, telling how two houses can be very different but in some ways are still just like each other. The *Igloo’s Heater* is their favorite story. “It’s a remarkable place,” she said, wistfully.

She refocused. “Sorry, I do get off track. Back to your directions. Go 10 blocks on *Family* and then turn left onto *Can’t Do It Alone*. Pay attention here or you’ll get stuck. Whatever the time of day, people are doing things for others. Somebody’s always on a ladder washing a neighbor’s windows, or baking a shut-in a loaf of bread or chopping them firewood. Everyone is *always* helping somebody. Funniest thing, too. Once you’re on *Can’t Do It Alone*, you may end up staying!

“Take *Can’t Do It Alone* 1 mile. You turn right onto *Unexpected* just after the railroad tracks. Now, *Unexpected* seems kind

of scary. Some houses are terribly beat up. You’ll see folks just hanging out, lurking. Shady characters, you’d think. Lock your doors and windows, be respectful, and have courage. But, the thing about *Unexpected* is that just when you think the folks around there are *all one thing*, they aren’t!

“One time, a fella’s car broke down on *Unexpected* in the worst place possible. He saw a man walking toward him. The man wore a big, long coat, the hood pulled up over his head. The traveler’s heart started racing. The figure kept coming, determined. The stranded fella was filled with dread. Then, an insistent knock on his window. Then another, unrelenting. Finally, summoning all his courage, he barely cracked his window, hoping this crazy person couldn’t get in.” The postal lady paused dramatically. “The hood came off the top of a head—just a little—revealing a grizzled Old Man. He spoke in a gruff but reassuring voice, ‘Stay out here any longer and you’re going to catch your death of cold. Come on in, let’s get you warmed up and on your way.’” Now, remember that. When you cross the tracks, *Unexpected* is just beyond. *Unexpected* can be scary: unfamiliar and unknown things usually are. But, trust me, the folks and experiences on *Unexpected* are often just what you need, just when you need it.”

“After *Unexpected*, go about 13 blocks. *Life* is on your right. Turn there. Now, sometimes you think this *Life* ain’t going to ever end. So far, this trip’s had lots of surprises: so many twists and turns you feel utterly lost. Now, though, it seems every house is *exactly the same*. Same trees. Same hedges. Same roofs. You think, ‘Get me out of here! I don’t want this. It’s the same thing all the time.’ *Will I ever get where I’m going?* you wonder. I’m bored. You gotta *look harder* when you think like that. Trust me, I know. There *are* lots of little differences all along the way, small reminders to look and listen. Seriously. Keep your eyes open. Look real hard. Don’t focus on the sameness. Anticipate surprise. Train your eyes to spot details you usually ignore. Believe me, that’s the only way to get through *Life*. Don’t give up, either. As soon as you think, *That’s it. I’m done. I can’t take it anymore*, you

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come up to a big Hill. It's really tough to get up that Hill. Just keep going. Eventually, at the very top, there's a Park.

"When you get to *the Park*, *take a break*. Look around. It's the highest point in this here part of the world. It's so high, it's hard to catch your breath. But, let your senses steep in the *beauty of your surroundings*. The air is clear and crisp. The only sounds are birds, leaves rustling, and tree branches soothing one another. *Soak it in!* Trust me, every day after that, you're going to try to remember just how it felt. So, take your time. Make a picture in your mind.

"Oh," she paused. "When you make it up the Hill, it's tradition to leave a little reminder you were there. Maybe it's a

special rock in a hidden place. Or, a paper tucked into a tree's hollow. Or, an initial in the dirt or sand. If you have time, do something like that, okay? From there on, you coast gently downhill until you intersect with the most beautiful spot there ever was. If you've followed my directions, you can't miss it. Right there is *Gratitude*."

With that, she bid farewell. "More holiday deliveries," she said.

What happened to the Lost Man who asked for directions? No one's quite certain. Once you've started following these directions, it's for sure you'll end up at *Gratitude*. But, it's unknown how many stops you'll make along the way.