

The Assembly

A Short Story by John W. Allie

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As specified in her will, the task of dividing up the estate fell to Lee Herald, the next-door neighbor. Why she had chosen him, Lee did not know. There was no clear reason: he had not known Mrs. McTravers very well, and she had a niece and a second-cousin who surely knew her better. Still, she was dead, and the documents were very clear.

Lee sighed heavily and walked up the concrete steps. The inside of the house was dark and he fumbled for a light switch. He'd never even been into the house before.

The light came on to reveal a dull living room with a thick shag carpet. At one end of the room was a pale gold armchair. At the opposite end of the room, where a television would normally be situated, was a wooden rack laden with knickknacks. He crept tentatively toward it.

It was a small assortment of objects, ten or eleven in all. Lee lifted the rack from the wall and a thin envelope clattered to the floor. Gently he set down the rack and picked up the envelope. It was addressed to "Mr. Herald" in arthritic handwriting. A note was enclosed: "Mr. Herald, please take these objects into your care. Don't give them to Jim or Martha. Also the box under the bed. Regards, Linda McTravers."

Lee went to see what was in the box under the bed. He crouched down and pulled out a large black shoebox. He pulled off the lid and revealed a penciled drawing of the knickknacks. Flipping through the contents, he found dozens more drawings exactly like them, along with lists, poems, descriptions, and photographs, all devoted to the shelf. Lee chuckled. Some forms of senility could be rather amusing.

He carried the box and the knickknacks back to the house and stashed them in the basement. He called the niece and the second-

cousin to tell them the house was practically empty and ask if they wanted anything specific. The niece wanted the china and the green dress if Lee could find it, and the second-cousin said that he didn't actually know Mrs. McTravers very well and that Lee should use his best judgment.

The next morning Lee was trying not to burn the toast when he suddenly thought of the knickknacks. He tried to remember the different objects, but he couldn't seem to quantify them. He went down to the basement and snapped on the light. There they were. Smurf, Santa candle, ball bearing, 3-D glasses, spice bottle, wooden spool, nine-volt battery, croquet ball, porcelain dog, wind-up monkey. It was fascinating. He carefully picked up the assortment and carried it up to the breakfast table.

He stared at them while he waited for his breakfast. What a bizarre collection it was, and yet the objects seemed to fit so well together. He picked up his saltshaker and wedged it into the rack. Suddenly there was nothing but an assortment of peculiar objects. They weren't interesting at all. He pulled out the saltshaker, and there they were again: Smurf, Santa candle, ball bearing, 3-D glasses, spice bottle, wooden spool, nine-volt battery, croquet ball, porcelain dog, wind-up monkey. He removed the monkey. Again they were reduced to an assortment of dull objects. He put back the monkey. He stared, fascinated. The smell of toast smoke filled the air.

He thought of them the entire time he was at work. He couldn't seem to remember any of the objects specifically, but he was eager to get home and see them again. What a strange assortment of objects they were! How beautiful they were together! He smiled to himself. They constantly seemed to dance at the edges of his mind.

He got home and went straight to the kitchen. There they were! He chuckled. And Mrs. McTravers had actually thought he might give them to someone else! He'd never part from them, ever. Staring fixedly at the small rack, hand shaking, he lifted a pen and began to draw.

