

Resurrection Bingo

FOR ALMOST A DECADE, I had made a weekly trek from Chicago to Chillicothe, always taking the same highway, flying past the same rural landscapes in a blur of inattention, cell phone implanted in ear, Blackberry buzzing beside me. It wasn't until spring of the tenth year, when the Illinois River bolted the caution of its banks and submerged a startled interstate that I was spit out of the major artery into a narrow capillary of patched and meandering asphalt.

After exiting the highway in a procession of irritated drivers flagged off by state troopers, I drove the two-lane road that clung to the riparian ridge, floating along with the power line waves that rose and fell between wooden poles like a gentle sea. Ahead, on a hillock with a commanding view of the river valley, rose a small brownstone church no different from the many others that I passed on the trip, its pointed hat rising above a copse of trees and protecting army of gravestone soldiers. When I crested the rise just before it, I came upon a chaos of vehicles parked haphazardly along both shoulders. Cars were stopped in the road to jockey for parking places. People walked from all directions along and in the road toward the church, bundled against the cold, their breaths escaping in visible puffs, oblivious to the clotted traffic.

I tried to control my impatience as I attempted to make my way down the road, ensnared like a car in the highlands of Scotland entirely surrounded by sheep. Ahead, on a weathered marquee sign in the yard in front of the church, in red letters over a white background, were the words "Resurrection Bingo." Beneath, in smaller letters read "This year, March 4."

As I threaded my way through the crowd, I noticed that it was not comprised solely of little old ladies looking to be on their way to a church social. There were adults of all ages, mostly alone, occasionally in pairs, looking solemn and determined. They did not look at all like what I envisioned as a typical church bingo crowd.

Curious, I lowered the window and asked a middle-aged man walking at the same speed I was driving, "What's up with this bingo?"

He glanced over at me and responded, without breaking stride, "Resurrection Bingo."

When it was obvious he was not going to elaborate, I asked, "Does it always draw such a crowd?"

"Yes." And he turned off the road toward the entrance.

It was then that I began to notice the license plates on the cars parked along the road. Plenty of Illinois plates to be sure, but many out-of-state plates too. Seemed like more than half. By the time I passed the church and cleared the congestion, I knew I'd have to see what was going on.

I pulled off onto the shoulder, soft and damp with the recent rains, hoping I'd be able to get back onto the road. Checking my side-view mirror for traffic, I opened the door, struggled out against the tilt of the car, and transformed myself from the role of aggrieved motorist into part of the problem.

Following the crowd, I entered a side door of the church and descended a scalloped flight of well-worn stairs. The basement was a single, large room filled with tables and chairs. And people. More people than I had anticipated. More, I'm certain, than the fire marshal would have allowed. But, other than the sounds of movement, of chairs being drawn back or up, of coughs or of creaks, it had the quiet of a church service. The faint smell of disinfectant was discernable within the common odor of bodies and damp coats. The faded ceiling tiles, stained brown in places from leaks past and present, seemed to press down on the crowd. "Bad idea," I thought, and turned back toward the door. But my attention was drawn to a queue before a table at the side of the room where a sign declared "Bingo Cards, \$10 each. Limit one per person."

When in Rome, I mentally shrugged, and joined the line. When I reached the front, I handed a woman a ten-dollar bill and received a bingo card. I turned to find a seat.

The people on either side of me did not speak or acknowledge me as I sat. Most of them had a photograph on the table in front of them. I took surreptitious peeks at them. Some were wallet-sized, bent, and frayed as though they had been carried for years. Others were larger, standing in ornate frames before their owners, all of whom seemed to be fingering or speaking to them. A low undertone of murmuring could be heard, and many lips moved silently.

In the center of the table was a bowl of buttons. Everyone had taken some, presumably to mark their cards. I reached in and withdrew a handful, which I placed on the table in front of me. I noticed immediately that my pile seemed bigger than that of everyone else. Seemed as though everyone else had only about five buttons. No, everyone had exactly five buttons. I immediately felt self-conscious, like some kind of button-hoarder. But there seemed to be plenty left in the bowl, so I let it pass.

The room became deathly still when a man walked up to the front table. He was a tall, gaunt man, dressed in black, with a white clerical collar. His face was etched with wear, but I couldn't tell if from age or experience. Without a word, he turned the crank on a barrel containing Bingo tiles. All eyes were on him as he opened the barrel door and withdrew a tile.

He looked up at the audience and said in a quiet voice, "Welcome to this year's Resurrection Bingo." Then he held up the tile and read from it, "G-48".

A quiet, communal holding of breath further stilled the room, as every head dropped to peer at the card on the table in front of it. Here and there a movement as a button was placed on a card. The heads nearby would turn sharply, then quickly back. Now all faces were back toward the speaker.

He had written on a blackboard board behind him. "G-48." He turned the crank again, withdrew another tile, and read it aloud. The scene was repeated as all heads bowed, several buttons were placed, necks craned, then attention returned to the front. The second letter-number combination was written on the board. The crank was turned a third time, a third tile read and recorded, a third episode of frantic concentration.

After the fourth tile was read, the silence was complete. The caller looked over the room. With the "free" space in the middle of the card, the fourth tile was the earliest winning opportunity. I myself had yet to place a single button. Nobody spoke up.

The crank was turned a fifth time, the tile read, the crowd scanned their cards and those of their neighbors. No one spoke up. The caller nodded, then turned the crank. The room had filled with quiet noise. As the remaining tiles were pulled and read, scant attention or concern was paid by those around me, although I was able to place two buttons. When, eight tiles later, someone called out "Bingo", it sounded more like relief than glee.

This was what I had been waiting for. The prize had to be something extraordinary, given the strange draw of the game.

But nothing seemed to happen. Everyone cleared their cards, and the caller erased the board and cranked the handle for the first tile of the next game. I whispered to the woman beside me "No prize?"

“You have to win on the first five calls,” she responded without taking her eyes from her card.

“Oh,” I said, mostly to myself, although I wasn’t sure it made any sense. We played on. The intensity was palpable through the first five calls, then flowed into relief as the game was played out. After about a half-hour of this, I had seen enough. Even though I still didn’t understand what was involved, I had miles to drive, and the day wasn’t getting any younger. But then I found the first number called in the next game on my card, so figured I’d see one last round through.

I hit on the second one, too. Immediately to the right of the first. “Wouldn’t it be a hoot?” I thought. When the third call appeared on my card lined up with the first two, I began to get a little excited. The people to either side of me started to glance at my card nervously. The fourth call was also in the line. Of course, someone could win on four calls if their line passed through the center. But nobody called out.

The crank turned, the tile was read. I checked my card twice, then raised my hand and tentatively called out “Bingo”

The room erupted in noise. People talking out loud, chairs scraping, buttons falling. An attendant hurried over to me and read my marked squares out loud. The caller confirmed each one against the list on the blackboard. “We have a winner,” he announced solemnly.

The room went totally, perfectly still. All eyes were on me. The caller spoke across the room, his voice a forced calm.

Francisco Zuniga.
Woman Reposing.
Bronze, 9 x 15 x 7⁷/₈ in.,
1966. Collection
of The University of
Arizona Museum of Art,
Tucson. Gift of Dr. and
Mrs. Stanley H. Schneider.

“Who do you choose, my son?” he asked. I stared back blankly.

“You must choose now,” he urged gently. “I must have a name.”

“Uh, choose who?” I stammered, feeling my face flush as all the faces in the room watched me with intense curiosity.

“Your resurrected,” he said. When I shrugged, he realized I was clueless and explained, “You can bring one person back from the dead.”

I sat frozen in place, my mouth hanging open in stupid wonder. What was he talking about? Of course this could not be true! Back from the dead? Preposterous! Absurd!

But, perhaps it did explain the once-a-year crowd from all over the country, the grim players, the solemn mood.

Then my mind flashed with the hundred horror movies I’d seen. Did they come back as rotting corpses? Did they have the injuries that killed them? If they’d died five hundred years ago, would they be five hundred years old when they came back?

But as the weight of the crowd pressed in on me, and it became clear that I would have to produce a name if just to humor them, I turned my attention to picking the name of a dead person. Maybe this was some sort of test. I got into it. Should I choose some great scientist or leader who could help humanity? A personal friend? Who did I actually know well who had died? As these thoughts reeled through my mind, the man prompted more urgently, “Son, we need your answer now!”

“Karen Sander,” I blurted out.

The hall emptied out, and I found myself walking across the muddy lawn toward my car with a frightened woman half my age. She held tightly to my arm and looked about in total confusion. In her 1950s hairstyle and clothing, she looked as out-of-place as I felt.

I walked her around to the passenger side, pressing the car door fob as we went. She slid into the seat, looking even more disoriented as she took in the interior.

“I’ll try to explain,” I said, as I closed her door. I got into the driver’s seat, latched my shoulder strap, and said to her as I started the engine, “Buckle up.” She looked at me blankly. I pulled on my shoulder strap as demonstration. Still no comprehension. Finally I leaned over, pulled the buckle across her slender waist and snapped it into place. She looked down at the belt in bewilderment. I had to smile as I pulled out onto the highway and headed north.

We rode in silence. She looked out at the flat Midwestern fields, while I struggled with the reality of her presence and how to explain it to her. She was obviously as profoundly shocked as I was.

“Where are we?” she finally asked.

“Illinois.”

She nodded, as though recognizing a place name was a start. Then, just to verify, although a photograph of this very woman had sat in a prominent place in every house I'd lived in for the past fifty years, I asked, "What's your name?"

She looked at me carefully, studying my face as I drove. "Karen," she answered hesitantly. Then more confidently, "Karen Sander."

"Do you know who I am?" I ventured. She hesitated.

"You look a bit like my father. He didn't have a brother, but . . ." she trailed off.

We drove in silence. I didn't know what to say, or even what was real. So I asked, "What year is this?"

She stared ahead, eyes unfocused, pulling up a memory. Her hands, locked together, struggled against each other. Finally, she answered, "It's 1951." Then, as the doubt solidified, "At least, the last I remember." Her face twisted up in anguish, then composed itself. "And, the last thing I remember, I was in Italy with Bill." She paused, then added, "Bill, my husband."

I gripped the wheel. I'd always been socially challenged, so I assumed that whatever I said next would be wrong. So I told her, "You had an accident in Italy. That was fifty years ago. Bill is dead." I made no mention of the fact that he had survived the accident, remarried, and cut me off like a gangrenous limb. I looked over at her as she struggled to make sense of what I'd said.

Then I added, "I'm your son."

She twisted her scarf in her hands, studiously avoiding my eyes. Several miles passed as we each attempted to cope with this new reality. I didn't think she was really seeing the passing landscape, although her pale face was turned to the side window.

But after a few moments she murmured, "It sure is flat around here."

"Yes," I agreed. Just then, we floated up onto an overpass and could see the prairie stretched before us, fading into the distant gray vagueness of the horizon.

"One thing about flat," I said, "you don't have to get very high to be able to see forever."

She nodded, mostly to herself, then drew a ragged breath.

"My son," she said.

"Yes."

"Stephen."

"Yes."