

Protagonist Corner

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“Pastor, we’ve got a family here looking for a Lutheran minister,” the caller began. I groaned inwardly as I recognized the funeral director’s voice, thinking of the sermon preparation, meetings, and pastoral calls already on my calendar.

But I said yes, because I had promised myself I would.

I’d spent a long stretch of years out of church. So I knew something about the mixture of anger and alienation and just plain drift that sent people out of church, and the way that even the most inveterate “unchurched” person might be ambushed by longing for the rituals and cadences of worship.

My father’s funeral had brought me home to my childhood church. I’d been swept up by the strong language and truth-telling of the liturgy and brought to tears by familiar hymns. The former organist, long since retired, had driven for hours so he and his wife could join the little group that had gathered to grieve with us. After the service, we went downstairs where the urns of coffee and trays of cookies and sandwiches brought back, in a rush, memories of Sunday morning festivity. Later, I found myself wondering forlornly where I would go if I had to bury my husband or my child, or where they would go to bury me.

So several years later, when I had returned to church and then a few years after that, I surprised everyone (not least myself) by becoming a minister, and I made a promise to myself. When an unchurched family came looking for a minister to bury their dead, I would say yes.

The day before the funeral, I went to meet the family at the funeral home. The body lay in folds of pleated satin, flanked by dim pink torch lights. He was dressed in a dark blue pin-striped suit, sharply creased, with a precisely knotted tie over a starched white shirt.

Ten people sat in a small cluster of chairs arranged next to the coffin. I worked my way around the circle, shaking hands as I took measure of the family. Albert had lived 85 years, the last one in failing health. His older sister, tiny and frail, sat with upright posture, both feet planted on the floor. The last survivor of six siblings, she nodded vaguely when I introduced myself. Albert had no children, and his female companion had died years ago. The circle next to his body included some of his many nieces and nephews and their partners and some of their children, Albert’s great nieces and nephews.

These preliminaries accomplished, we all settled into our chairs. His sister was on one side of me, and on the other, his great-nephew Tom, one hand running distractedly over his stubbled chin.

I looked around expectantly.

Silence.

“So!” I said brightly. “Tell me about Albert.”

Tom declared, “He was a grouchy old bastard.”

Protests erupted around the circle, as people shot dismayed glances in my direction and glared at Tom, who stood his ground. “C’mon, you all know he was.”

Then the stories came tumbling out, glimpses of a life for a funeral requiem. Meticulous to a fault, Albert had spent hours in the bathroom each morning, carrying out elaborate rituals of grooming—a source of intense grievance, years later, among those who had contended for their own time in the one bathroom of that row house. His exacting sartorial standards applied with equal force to domestic order, and when he established his own household, those standards were fiercely enforced upon all comers. He could hardly bear to have visitors in his home, so vexed was he by their relentless depredations—wet glasses set on his tables, crumbs dropped on his living room rug, sofa cushions askew. Children were a special trial, requiring his constant correction. “He was always yelling at us,” one nephew recalled wearily. On their own part, the younger generation retaliated by tormenting him—an easy target, of course, agitated as he was by disorder.

Grouchy old bastard. A stark summation of a life, I couldn’t help but feel, looking over at his stern profile, this last word from his family, pronounced on his furious and perpetually frustrated drive for order. Well, his miseries were over now. Sweat would not stain his pristine white shirt, and no errant drip of gravy would threaten his tie. As for his house, whatever became of it, he wouldn’t be there to suffer it.

The next day I stood next to Albert’s body again, looking over the little group of mourners, those people who had annoyed him so much. His sister, leaning on two canes as she tottered to her chair; his brother-in-law, in a shiny black suit, likely in long service for such occasions; his candid nephew, his face scraped pink today; along the back row, grand-nieces and nephews slouching in their seats as they thumbed their cell phones. I stepped to the lectern, surprised by welling tears, and then steadied by the strong and somber words of the funeral liturgy. In my homily, I included some of their memories of Albert, that exasperating and so easily exasperated man.

After the brief service, they filed up to the coffin to look one more time into his face. His sister kissed him on the forehead. Tom stood at the coffin for a long moment and then turned away, honking into his handkerchief. Two great-great nieces came up clinging to their mother’s hands and stood on tiptoes to peer curiously into the coffin. Then the room emptied out, and the pall bearers were dispatched to wait across the hall.

As I stood next to the coffin, the funeral director turned the crank to lower Albert’s head. He tucked in the satin lining, lowered the lid and latched it, and secured the flowers on top with a bungee cord. He and an assistant flung open the parlor doors and then rolled the coffin into the hall.

On the way to the cemetery, I lapsed into a morose silence. Grouchy old bastard—well, he had earned that epithet, on the evidence. Still, behind it I thought I could hear the faint echo of another name, the hint of an unmade diagnosis of a condition that, once named, might have been treated; that once treated, might have provided Albert some relief from the constant irritations of a messy world. *What if?* Too late to ask that question, on the way to a grave. I sat up straighter and opened my service book to the graveside liturgy.

The hearse crunched over the gravel roads of the cemetery and pulled up next to a little row of chairs and a hump of Astroturf covering the open grave. The mourners assembled again. I said the words of committal over Albert’s body and poured sand on his coffin, thinking a moment too late how he would have hated that. A light breeze sent the sand swirling in the air and skidding down the lid, requiem for a grouchy old bastard.