

“The Ministry”

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When we got the call that my wife’s grandmother had passed away at ninety-two, we weren’t really surprised because once one gets into her nineties there’s only so much time left. Of course, in our twenty years of marriage, we had been told each year by my wife’s mother that we should come visit because “this is probably her last year.” Fortunately, and as usual, her mother was wrong, and her grandmother lived relatively well until a sudden internal bleed took her quickly, though we were unclear if she died on Sunday or Monday, not that it really mattered. What we needed to know for planning purposes was when the visitation and funeral were to be held, so we could rearrange life: work schedules, church, piano lessons for our daughter, taekwondo for both children.

Though we hadn’t seen her often through the years given that she lived several hours distance from us, my wife loved her grandmother, and I always thought highly of her as well. She was always positive to us and wrote lengthy messages in cards about how proud she was of us, of our children, of our lives. Her script was in cursive, a form of writing no longer taught in schools, and seemed to indicate serious tremors in her hand. I imagined it would take her hours to get a card out to one of her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nearly forty all combined. She often included Bible verses, too, an idea she had given a great deal of thought and what she imagined might be fitting given what she knew of the family member. That was her ministry. My guess is that she sent hundreds of cards a year, helping a struggling postal service. Given that her generation is dying off, and there continues to be an increase in web communication, I expect the postal service will suffer a tremendous blow in the near future.

Aside from the day and time of death, my mother-in-law had apparently told uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and ex's (yes, I said ex's because of multiple marriages in some of the family who were still considered family given shared children and grandchildren, a phenomenon still alien my own immediate family) that a cousin, who lived outside the town of Thomasville, Georgia, where the visitation and funeral would be held, would host everyone for a dinner. More important, she told them all that my wife and her sister-in-law would prepare the food. My mother-in-law conveniently forgot to tell my wife and her sister-in-law, but when they couldn't pull it off, my mother-in-law communicated back to her family that my wife and her sister-in-law "weren't willing to do it," making my wife and her sister-in-law look bad. Conversely, this fabrication made my mother-in-law appear to be the sweet angel who was attempting to help everyone in the family, a life-long perception she attempted to project. After all, she is a nurse, but if I was laid up, I wouldn't want her coming at me with any needle because it might be full of arsenic. I imagined her to be like a librarian I had once worked with who was rumored to have been ordering and reading books on poison shortly before her husband died of mysterious illnesses, though he had several issues. It wasn't long after, though, the librarian had a new boyfriend, but he died within the year. She followed that with another boyfriend turned husband, but she left the library and moved, so no one knows if he is still living.

Normally, I don't even answer the phone anymore, even if it's her family members or my own. I think after being on the phone at work so much, I've found it to be an annoyance in my life I can do without. I have a cell phone for emergencies and people get mad because I don't turn it on, nor do I have voicemail set-up on it. In several conversations with family members, my wife was reporting to me details one morning over coffee and said something matter-of-factly that struck me as odd: her cousin Jack was bringing the grandmother in a van.

“What the hell did you say?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” she responded.

“Did you just say your cousin was hauling your grandmother to Georgia in the back of a van?”

“I think that’s what someone said,” she said.

“Don’t you find that odd?”

“Well, I guess so. I really didn’t think about it.”

“I know they live in Tennessee and all, but I don’t think you can just pick up a dead person and transport them out of state. You can bet I’ll find out.”

At the visitation, I was itching to find a way to get to Jack and ask, particularly since we’d only met once through the years and I didn’t even know him. He was outside smoking and I cornered him and said, “I appreciate all you had to do.”

“Man, you wouldn’t believe it,” he laughed. “I didn’t mind hauling her in the back of the van. You know I did it for my uncle and my grandpa, too, but I didn’t expect all this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you didn’t hear? I picked up the box at the funeral home and signed papers.”

“A box?”

“Yeah, cardboard. Probably charged us for that, too.”

I was already shocked, but the next piece increased the level.

“I got to somewhere in North Georgia when Mama called and said, ‘Jack, where are you? Have you left yet?’ I told her, ‘Yeah, mama, I’m already in North Georgia,’ and she said, ‘Damn, we forgot to get her clothes on and she’s in the box naked.’ I said, ‘Lord, Mama, what you want me to do about it? I ain’t turning around and driving four hours back to Knoxville.’ She said,

‘Just go buy her a nice pink dress when you get down there. We got her a pink casket.’ Man, was I floored. I’ve got my grandma in the back of my van and she’s naked.”

I smiled. “Did she sell Mary Kay?”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “She never wore much make-up. Ain’t that crazy, though? She was in there naked. I never seen her naked and weren’t about to go and look either, but it just freaked me out. I smoked a little before getting back on the road just to keep me even.”

“Wow,” I said. “That is some story.” I wondered how odd it would have been if his marijuana- induced driving would have caused him to be pulled over by the Georgia State Patrol and had to endure a search.

“I got to the funeral home in Thomasville right after they closed, and one man was getting in his car, and I eased the van in and blocked him, got out, and told him, ‘Hey man, I got my naked grandma back here in the box, and you ain’t going nowhere till you get her out of my van.’”

“Well, at least someone was still there.” At that point, another relative came up and started talking to Jack and I moved back inside to visit more. The rest of the visitation went well, people hugging and telling stories. One of my wife’s aunts hit on me and another aunt slapped her fifth husband at the funeral because he told her to calm down. Other than that, the service was fairly uneventful and went smoothly. When we arrived back home, I checked the mail and my heart skipped a beat when underneath the weekly shopper, credit card junk mail, and business flyers lay a card addressed to my wife from her grandmother, apparently mailed the day before she died. She waited a few days to open it, and it was the same sweet grandmother, praising us, ministering to us, and offering scripture on the eve of her own departure.