

# Departed

Adrian Koesters

When I was newly married I went to more funerals than I ever had in my life. Most of them were in Earling, Iowa, a Catholic farming town notorious for the exorcisms that had occurred there in the 1920s, and for the string of German monsignors who ruled its Church and congregation for decades and who carved into the culture an even stronger tendency to introversion than the people had been born with, along with a propensity for vicious teasing.

My husband had a slew of aunts and uncles on his father's side who were starting to depart this life with some regularity in those first years of our marriage. We entered St. Joseph's Church for each new funeral from the front doors into the back vestibule, where an astonishingly old person not much known to me would lay in an open casket, tinted in rose and yellow light from the stained glass wall panels, looking better than he or she had in months or years, jaundiced flesh spackled to a nice pink, personhood quieted inside a set of clothes likely bought for the burial at one of the clothiers in Harlan.

The dead relative would be surrounded by hundreds of the living so similar-looking to the deceased and each other I could not keep track of who they were or how they were connected to us. The young men of my husband's generation, good-looking and many still unshaved of their bicentennial beards, stood close by each other in three-piece suits of varying greys, hairlines receding at various speeds, together as if they could have made up whatever the word for multiple births would be had some poor woman had all thirteen of them at once. One of the cousins, known for strong feeling, broke into a wailing over his father's casket as we stood in that line, his face shattering as you sometimes hear of a face doing

in grief, the rest of his upper body immobile as an Irish dancer's. Few others wept openly with him at that moment, but by the end of the Mass, many cried freely. I think the only time I ever saw any member of that family weep was at funerals, although my husband's father would often get slain in the Spirit during Mass and the tears would sometimes stream down his cheeks then.

At Uncle Art's funeral, though, even the pall bearers struggled not to crack up during the recessional as "How Great Thou Art" spilled from the pipe-organ above us. Art had been a hard drunk, had even bootlegged Templeton Rye whiskey out of a truck during Prohibition. At the end of his life he lived on a small place with the one spinster sister of my father-in-law's siblings, Netty, a woman whose outsized nose and ears were un-softened by the wisdoms of married life that had lent a kind of harsh loveliness to the faces of her older sisters, though they were said to have been a mean pair, and she seemed to me to carry a celibate meanness of her own perhaps in response to the malice she had met along the way of her life.

Betty, the youngest in that family and the sweetest-natured of all of them, had loved Netty deeply and missed her terribly when she died. She revealed to me at Netty's funeral that her shyness and depression had come from having been taken out of the family every so often, for months at a time, and sent to Detroit to care for their mother's parents, and that this was why Netty had never married.

"Can you believe anyone would do that? Can you believe anyone would do that to their own child?" she asked me, smiling because she always smiled.

I shook Betty's hand again in the funeral line of her husband Jim, a warm-natured man who had had a pleasing and quiet carnal energy you found in some of the men of that town and in others you just didn't. He, like many of the men there, was quick with a

good joke and perfect timing to go with it, and his quiet teasing often made Betty's face light up in a way that I always wondered if anyone else noticed, and if they did, whether seeing it made them happy.

Many of us hadn't known before the funeral that Jim had been christened Leander, but that when he had been a young man some child had not been able to pronounce his name, and rather than put the child to shame, he had let himself be called "Jim" ever after. He had been a plumber, married to Aunt Betty nearly sixty years. The last time we visited them both at home, several times I caught him looking at her with that amused interest and affection, and it seemed to me again that she knew he was watching her without once having to look up. She was stooped with one of the worst cases of spinal osteoporosis I have ever seen, and had the large ears and the nose of all of her family, man, woman, and boy, but there was just that little parcel of appreciation, the beauty of "my wife," that came over her when Jim looked at her and that he had put there, that awareness of a man who holds the big secret to himself and that no one but she could understand, that felt almost immodest to have noticed. I felt a pang when I saw it, too, but then felt it was the kind of happiness no one ought to be stupid enough to be jealous over. No one ought to ever begrudge another that kind of feeling.

As I held her hand in the receiving line in the back vestibule, she appeared to forget me for a minute. I waited, finally said something quiet that I hoped sounded comforting about Jim. She raised her head then, the pink and deeply creased skin of her cheeks soft, the cloudy eyes wet but laughing.

"Yes," she said, her face suffused at once with the light his presence had brought to it so often, smiling but not because she always smiled. "Yes, we sure enjoyed him."