

*** A creative short story about a southern funeral with 3 additional short thank you notes accompanying the story.***

It was a busy Friday at the funeral parlor in the small town of Jansen, Georgia. The director's assistant, Sam, ended a call with Mrs. Underwood's daughter after ensuring the change in details would be handled accordingly. After all, Mrs. Underwood was a fine upstanding citizen in their small town, and it only seemed right for her funeral to have the same gentility and class.

Sam headed to the back of the parlor to tell his boss, John, about the change in details. Mrs. Underwood's lapel flower was to be a gardenia now instead of the pre-arranged camellia. Upon entering the preparation room, Sam could hear John talking to someone, but it was just the two of them in the room and, naturally, a body John was preparing.

"It seems the entire town will be there Friday..." John said.

"I do believe it will be an affair like no other..." he continued.

Sam was confident that 62-year-old John hadn't suddenly started using Bluetooth headphones; he listened for another moment before finally interrupting the one-way conversation, "Excuse me, John?"

"Yes?" John replied.

"Exactly who are you talking to?" Sam queried in confusion.

John replied, "Well, Mrs. Underwood, of course!" as he motioned down to the body on the table. "You must agree she gets a bit lonely back here by herself."

Yes, talking to the dead. That was just one of Mr. John C. McCutcheon's many quirks. Perhaps one should expect the small town funeral director to be a bit of an odd duck, but in some ways, John seemed downright strange.

One example of John's peculiarity was how he chose to dress. It's true that in his nicely pressed tan suit, Mr. McCutcheon didn't look out of place at Mr. Duncan's funeral, which took place at 2 PM on a Tuesday. He'd picked Tim Duncan up after a sudden heart attack at 2 AM the Saturday prior. While the neighborhood stood milling about in their muumuus, robes, and pajama sets, there was John in a navy blazer, tie, and sharply creased slacks. At 2 AM! On a Saturday! The entire cul-de-sac was buzzing with talk about John's attire when they should have asked the question: What was married Mr. Tim Duncan doing at Martha Davenport's house at 2 AM on the weekend?

Mr. McCutcheon was a nice man; he was quite approachable and always carried small, sugar-free candies for any children attending a loved one's funeral. Parents often appreciated this small gesture as it kept the kids quiet throughout the service. Children would frequently run up to him in town and ask for candy; he always had to be prepared.

So a year ago, when the local candy shop burned down under suspicious circumstances, it wasn't necessarily odd but rather shocking when John put up his own funds to rebuild it. This time, rather than starting a whispering campaign, the town praised John. The small candy store was often the local hangout for teens in the community; parents agreed that their children would be more likely to run the streets without this store. John's good nature had saved them from their worries.

Back at the parlor, Sam had gone out for lunch. John brought a ham sandwich from home. He paired it with a scoop of potato salad and a helping of some sort of goulash casserole left over from Mr. Adam's funeral on Wednesday. Once again looking for his boss, Sam found John eating lunch in the preparation room with Mrs. Underwood. Sam thought to himself that perhaps eating a sandwich with a dead woman was less bizarre than talking to her.

The phone rang. It was Ms. Shirley Sullivan, Jansen's best hairdresser, and most prominent town busybody. Shirley's salon was the central hub for all community gossip. She also did most of the hair styling for the dear departed; unless she was overwhelmed by clients, she would naturally enlist the ladies' help at the cosmetology school. In this case, though, Mrs. Underwood had specified: Shirley had done her hair for nearly 40 years and was the only one who knew just how she liked it. If Shirley couldn't do her hair one final time, then it wouldn't be done at all. Shirley knew an unkempt Mrs. Underwood wasn't even an option, so she'd best tend to this one herself.

"I know Clara wanted her hair done last, so it didn't get mussed up. I just wanted to see what time y'all wanted me to come by," said Shirley.

Sam replied, "Well, John said it's up to you. He said he'd be finished with everything by 530 this evening. Unless you'd rather come first thing in the morning, the family should start arriving around 10 AM."

Shirley confirmed, "I'll be by around 6 tonight. I'm just itchin' to tell John about Mr. Adam's daughter. Can you believe she was so tipsy when she left the service that she accidentally took out a whole aisle at the Piggly Wiggly on Juniper? I just can't believe it...."

Sam listened to Shirley's idle chatter for nearly 5 minutes before finally interrupting her to say, "6 PM sounds perfect. Goodbye, Ms. Sullivan."

Having finished up a bit early, John sent Sam home for the day and waited for Shirley to arrive. While waiting, he allowed his thoughts to drift away to Mrs. Underwood. She wasn't just another body to provide a service for. It may not have been well known, but Clara was a dear friend to Mr. McCutcheon. Since Clara was the town Florist, they worked together on hundreds of services over the years. Clara's husband, Jim, had passed away about a year before John's wife, Sarah. John struggled at first, but Clara helped John through.

When Clara got sick, she reminded John to never lose his sense of humor. She joked with John as they planned out her funeral.

Clara laughed as she said, "John, soon you may need to find a new job."

John, feeling blue about planning such a day for his friend, quietly asked, "Why's that, Clara?"

"Because funeral directing is a DYING profession," Clara chortled. John was shocked as Clara was typically a very stern, no-nonsense kind of woman. Kind and amusing, sure, but certainly not one to tell such jokes.

"Oh, come now, John, we must laugh at matters involving death. Nobody gets out alive."

John's reminiscing ended with the bell ringing as Shirley entered the front door. He led her to Mrs. Underwood, and Shirley set about working on Clara's hair. She talked with John and gossiped about the happenings after Mr. Adam's recent service. John replied accordingly but wasn't really listening. He was used to Shirley's incessant chin wagging and paid no mind to it anymore.

Shirley finished up around 7, and John bid her goodbye. He tended to the last-minute details ensuring Clara would genuinely be happy with how everything was set up. As he turned off the light in the preparation room, he spoke to Mrs. Clara Underwood one last time.

"Yes, friend, I do believe your service will be an affair to remember."

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Thank You Notes:

Dear Dan Vanderpool & Family,

I wanted to drop a line to say how much I truly appreciated your attendance at my mother, Clara Underwood's, funeral service last Saturday. Mom was a kind woman and wanted everyone to enjoy her celebration of life.

I especially appreciate you joining us after the service at the gathering at Mom's house. So many people stopped by; it was apparent just how loved she was. As cousins, we don't see each other's families nearly often enough. Sadly, it takes a funeral to bring us all together. But it was lovely to see you and your family even for such a sad occasion.

Remember when we were kids and Mom used to call us two pearls in the same oyster? I've been thinking a lot about that lately; we used to be so close as kids, and we shouldn't let distance separate us as adults. Mom wouldn't want it that way.

Oh, and speaking of pearls, yesterday our landscaper found a beautiful pearl necklace under our azaleas, and I believe it may belong to your wife. By the way, how is Sarah after taking that tumble down the porch steps? I know all too well that white wine doesn't mix well with Mom's front steps, so I hope Sarah is recovering well.

Reverend Samuels is doing well, all things considered. He was a bit upset that Sarah ran over his foot while backing the car out of the driveway, but he is recuperating, though he may lose that toenail. Everyone agreed it's good that you drove home

I know funerals are never a fun occasion, but it was nice to see you and your family. I hope we continue to stay in touch moving forward. I just really appreciate you being there for Mom. From one pearl to another, I hope we talk soon. And thanks again for joining us to celebrate Mom's life.

Respectfully,

Margaret Underwood

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Dear Martha Meyers,

Thank you for joining us last Saturday to celebrate Mom's life. It was a difficult day to get through but you taking charge of the kitchen definitely helped to make things a bit easier for me. I know it's been tough for you too, as Mom's dearest and closest friend.

Everyone had wonderful things to say about the food. I was a bit stunned by Jim's contribution of barbecue ribs, but the men definitely seemed to enjoy them more than the finger sandwiches.

Please let your daughter, Judy, know her help in the kitchen was also appreciated. So much food was left over that we sent some home with Mr. McCutcheon. Mom told us to in advance; she said he's not the best cook and doesn't have his wife to cook for him anymore. He did call to say the potato salad was terrific, right up til he found the acrylic nail in the last bite.

It was a sad day, but you could tell how many lives Mom touched. Seeing that so many people loved and cared for her as much as I did was endearing. Even some customers from Mom's flower shop stopped by to share their sympathies. Darla Andrews seemed a bit upset that the tater tot casserole she sent over wasn't sat out with the rest of the food. I didn't have the heart to tell her it was because the tater tots were still completely frozen.

Martha, I'm so sad that my Mom is gone. You've always been such a dear family friend, like an aunt to me. I do hope that we stay close. Perhaps we can have lunch together once a week or so. I think Mom would really like that.

Thanks again for all your help.

Respectfully,

Margaret Underwood

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Dear Amy Jo and the Jackson Family,

I wanted to reach out to say how grateful I am for your family's attendance at Mom's service last Saturday. I heard that Jim's been working late most nights, so I wasn't sure if y'all would be there, it being so early in the day. I know how much it meant to Mom for y'all to be able to attend.

I appreciated your mother, Marsha's, kind words about my mother. I'll admit, my daughter was a bit taken aback when she said, "Clara, bless her heart, was a whole lotta woman..." I tried to explain to Janice that it had nothing to do with Mom's size but was instead about Mom's great big personality.

By the way, how is your mother? I hope that small spill she took wasn't too much for her blood pressure. I spoke to Cousin Carol about her son pulling that chair out from underneath Marsha, and she assured me he had been punished. Rightfully so, I say, as

your mother could have been hurt. Please tell her not to feel embarrassed; luckily, nobody saw that she wasn't wearing a slip under her dress but me.

I know you enjoyed working with Mom, and you did a great job with her floral arrangements. I know there was that slight mishap with the "Contratulations Bouquet" meant for the Anderson's newborn; it is unfortunate that our town's hospital and funeral home do have the same name. I'm glad we caught that quickly though.

Mom told me several times that she was proud to hand the flower shop over to you, Amy Jo. I know you'll continue to carry on in the style and tradition Mom set in place. I'm hoping you intend to leave the name Clara's Garden, but I understand if you feel the need to change it.

Again, I appreciate your attendance; it was a wonderful service, and I'm glad you were there to celebrate Mom's life with us.

Respectfully,

Margaret Underwood