

Ash Wednesday

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1.Clergy–Fiction. 2. Dustin (Penn : Imaginary place)– Fiction.

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In loving memory of
Samuel Moffitt Eppley
(1935-2004)

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Part One

Summer into Fall

Gerald Schwartz

Ten down, two to go.

Pastor Gerald Schwartz stifled a yawn and leaned back in an armchair covered with cat fur. Without moving his eyes, he snuck what he hoped was a surreptitious glance at his watch. He was feeling gassy from the four chocolate gobs he had consumed in the past half hour. He hoped he could refrain from emitting any embarrassing odors for another few minutes. Not that his current host would notice. Why, he mused, a chocolate-inspired expulsion might be sweetly refreshing compared to the stench of the unchanged litter box presently wafting about Mrs. Hawthorne's apartment.

"If you ask me—and nobody ever does—this entire country has gone to hell in a handbasket. It's not like it was when I was a child," said Mrs. Hawthorne. She had talked nearly nonstop for forty-five minutes. As her pastor, Gerald was privy to every detail of Mrs. Hawthorne's unremarkable life, from her battle against bunions to the length of her latest stool, and not the kind you sit on, either.

Gerald had dozed off for a good part of Mrs. Hawthorne's most recent monologue. For more nights than he could recount he had awoken from a deep sleep at three in the morning. He spent the hours until sunrise flailing against the mattress, unable to drive the demons from his head. Perpetually tired, he did some of his best sleeping while visiting his elderly parishioners.

"You know, Reverend, I don't believe I've told you about the time my brother saved me from drowning in the creek when I was just four years old."

Gerald knew better than to inform his host that she had already told him about her brother's heroics. He had heard the story so many times he could recite it by heart. During a previous visit he made the mistake of interrupting Mrs. Hawthorne to note that, enthralling though it was, the incident at Meyer's Creek sounded vaguely familiar. Perhaps she had mentioned it to him during one of his eighty-four other visits to her home.

She glared at him. "Pastor, are you implying my memory is starting to falter?"

So today, during the fraction of an instant when he customarily nodded his head and raised his eyebrows, feigning interest in the story that was to follow, Gerald interjected with the one segue guaranteed to bring Mrs. Hawthorne's chatter to an abrupt halt, "Shall we celebrate holy communion now?"

He said this while lifting a small black box from his lap. He placed it reverently on the coffee table next to a stack of large print *Guideposts* and *Hot True Romance* magazines.

"That sounds like a fascinating story," said Gerald, doing his best to sound sincere. "Perhaps you can save it for our next visit. Time is running short and I still have to bring communion to several other people."

Actually, just one more after this. No harm in telling Mrs. Hawthorne a little fib to move things along. He could hardly inform her that his true motive for making a hasty exit was to catch the end of the *Pirates* game. Not to mention the nausea he was feeling from the cat box odor and his need to take care of his gas problem.

"Who else do you need to see?" asked Mrs. Hawthorne. She watched her pastor fill a miniature silver chalice with the wine he carried in his communion kit.

"Miss Kirch and Mrs. Arnason, among others," he said, trying not to reveal his irritation.

"Gert Arnason? You just came from her house. She called me after you left."

There were no secrets in Dustin, Pennsylvania. Plenty of misinformation, but certainly no secrets. Gerald leaned toward his host and waved in front of her a round white wafer with an embedded cross. "Shall we stop our quibbling and proceed with our Lord's holy meal?"

"For goodness' sake, it's four already. Time for my story," said Mrs. Hawthorne, as she reached for her remote control.

"I'm quite certain your show can wait. The Lord comes first," said Gerald.

"Oh no, Reverend, I can't miss a single minute. Today we find out who the father of Melinda's baby is."

Gerald knew from experience that Mrs. Hawthorne would become belligerent if he tried to press the matter further. He would have to out-shout the actors on Mrs. Hawthorne's favorite daytime drama.

“FINALLY, PANTY LINERS THAT PROVIDE FULL DAY PROTECTION,” blared a voice on the television. Mrs. Hawthorne was deaf in one ear and raised the volume so loud that Gerald felt his eardrums vibrate. He managed to finish the prayers during the commercial break. He was not as fortunate while reciting the sacred words of institution. Gerald glanced at the television, shocked to see a shirtless man and a mostly undressed woman engaged in a passionate kiss.

For the eleventh time this day, he said, “In the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus took bread—”

“OH GOD, TIFFANY, YOU LOOK SO HOT. I’M GOING TO MAKE TONIGHT SPECIAL FOR YOU.”

“...gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying—”

“WHEN I’M WITH YOU MY INSIDES START TO QUIVER.”

“This is my body given for you—”

“OH GOD, YOU’RE SO SEXY I COULD EAT YOU UP. HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING OUT?”

“...my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

“TAKE ME NOW! I CAN’T RESIST ANY LONGER.”

Gerald peeked at Mrs. Hawthorne. She was watching the television. She closed her eyes and dropped her chin when she saw the pastor looking at her.

“Mrs. Hawthorne, I would appreciate your lowering the volume. I’m losing my concentration.”

“And Tiffany’s losing her virginity. Kids these days don’t have any morals.”

“Tiffany?”

“On my story. These kids jump in bed first chance they get. It wasn’t like that when I was young. Charlie and me were both virgins till the day we got married. You know, I don’t think you’ve ever heard about my wedding night. Up at the Timberland Lodge. It was the first time Charlie and me had ever been naked together and let me tell you—”

“Next time, Mrs. Hawthorne.”

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Gerald leaned back in the crumb-covered driver’s seat of his Buick. He had turned the air conditioner to maximum circulation in an attempt to

dissipate the byproduct of Mrs. Hawthorne's baked goods. The Pirates were losing by two runs in the eighth. Eleven down, one to go.

He was not sure why, but communion calls to the homebound on the first and third Mondays of every month were among Gerald's least distressing pastoral duties. Mrs. Hawthorne was a self-centered compulsive talker. Lois "9 Lives" Warner worried incessantly about a variety of imagined ailments. And Mrs. Weidenbach blathered about the myriad talents of Gerald's beloved predecessor, Pastor Franklin. Yet Gerald was able to tolerate, occasionally enjoy, the parishioners who were unable to attend Sunday services at Abiding Truth Lutheran Church.

Ed Jacobson, the only man on his shut-in list, liked to talk baseball and ask the pastor questions about his medications. He mistakenly believed that Gerald's theological degree included the study of pharmaceuticals. Gerald felt sorry for Mr. Jacobson, who had lost thirty pounds in the eighteen months since his wife's death. Gerald had once peeked into Ed's refrigerator to see what he had been eating. Its sole contents were two cases of Rolling Rock and a jar of pickles.

Gerald and Ed occasionally bonded over their unexpected newfound status as bachelors. Gerald tried to steer clear of this topic, however. Ed was easily moved to tears when remembering his dearly beloved Annie. And Gerald still felt his jaw grow tense whenever he recalled how after 33 years of marriage Margaret inexplicably decided to divorce him.

The others on the homebound list were confined to their homes by a variety of maladies. Chronic arthritis. Parkinson's disease. Congestive heart failure. This did not include Lillian Sutherland, who said she "couldn't possibly have a visit from the pastor today" because she was "getting her hair done in Spooner's Grove." Last month, she had an appointment with her psychic palmreader on Gerald's visiting day.

Though she lived across the street from the church, Lillian had been on the official list of homebound members since spraining her ankle three years before. During her short period of convalescence, Lillian realized it was more convenient to have the pastor bring communion to her home than to make the 300-foot trek across the street for Sunday worship. Miraculously, despite her homebound status, Lillian was able to attend any church functions involving food or gambling.

For Gerald, the most comforting aspect of monthly visits to the home-bound was the immutable predictability of it all. He knew his parishioners by the unchanging spaces they inhabited. He knew there would always be exactly seventy-six angel statues on the mantle above Gert Arnason's fireplace, no matter how many times he counted them. Prudence Weidenbach's screen door would open only if he first pulled the handle up before pushing it down. Gerald found it inexplicably soothing that the faucet in Lois Warner's bathroom emitted an annoying squeal every time he turned on the water to rinse his miniature silver communion chalice.

Gerald also knew that Lillian Sutherland would soon be complaining because her pastor never came to see her. On Wednesday, Harriet Redgrave would stop by the church to chastise him for neglecting at least one of his pastoral responsibilities. And Monday morning, on her way to the library, Dorothy Moyers would peek in the parsonage window before dropping an anonymous letter into his mailbox. Gerald knew that if this year were like the past six, he would preside at seven times more funerals than baptisms. And to his chagrin, Irmalee Hackett, his organist, would play *In the Garden* at every one of them.

Gerald steered his Buick up Maple Street, avoiding the potholes while staying within the posted speed limit of 20 miles per hour. After signaling well in advance, he made a right turn onto the sprawling campus of the Valley View senior living center. Gerald drove around the lot twice. When he parked, the odometer on his car read exactly 178,000. He hoped his final visit of the day would be a short one.



Miss Kristina Kirch had resided for the past three years in an assisted living facility perched at the top of a hill overlooking the town of Dustin. Valley View Manor bordered on a park, which had once been the site of Abiding Truth's annual Easter sunrise service. This tradition was discontinued in Gerald's third year after someone noted that cloud cover had prevented anyone from seeing the sunrise for the past eight Easters.

In recent years, the park had become a popular spot for teenage partiers and clandestine lovers. Broken beer bottles and used condoms posed hazards

to the few children who dared to venture onto the dilapidated playground. Like most of Dustin, Summit Park had seen better days.

The view from the top of the hill was alternately spectacular and dismal, depending upon which direction a person looked. Directly to the west, a lush tree-covered valley spread like a blanket for miles before the land rose again, culminating in the rounded tree-topped peak of Mount Siebert. A lazy river snaked through the valley, bordered on both sides by the sprawling village of Pottersfield. On clear days, the view from here was one of the most awe-inspiring in all of Pennsylvania's Allegheny mountain range.

Yet a mere turn of the head revealed a completely different sight. A few miles to the southeast sat the unsightly remains of a coal mine. Though the mine had been abandoned for ten years, most of the houses surrounding it were permanently covered with an ashen-colored film. Next to the empty mine sat Ray's Salvage, sprawled out as an ugly reminder that death could be lurking around the next corner. This massive collection of mangled rusty automobiles, most of which had met their demise on the narrow winding roads leading into town, included a few that had carried some of Gerald's parishioners. Ashes to ashes, Dustin to dust. So went a not-so-funny local joke.

When Gerald first moved to Dustin and was still inclined to exercise, he would climb to the top of the hill as part of his daily prayer walk. He would look out across the valley toward Pottersfield and muse that this must have been how Moses, the great leader of the Israelites, felt when he gazed at the Promised Land from the top of Mount Pisgah.

In recent years, however, Gerald always drove to the park, and then only when he had to. Gerald rarely stopped to enjoy the scenery. The awe-inspiring vista served only to remind him that while Moses might have been moved by the view from Mount Pisgah, he never did make it into the Promised Land.



The door to room 128 was slightly ajar. Confident that his flatulence problem had been resolved, Gerald knocked three times. Waiting a full 30 seconds and hearing no response, he peeked inside the room. A shriveled, silver-haired woman in a wheelchair stared curiously at her visitor.

“It’s your pastor, Miss Kirch. I’m here for our 4:30 rendezvous.” Gerald lifted the black communion kit with one hand. He pointed to his white ministerial collar with the other.

“Oh yes, Pastor. Please have a seat.” Her lips barely moved when she spoke.

Miss Kirch suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, or so Gerald surmised from her behavior over the past two years. She had worked as a housekeeper at the parsonage during Pastor Franklin’s tenure before moving to a farmhouse near Somerset, where she cared for her ailing mother before returning to Dustin. Gerald heard that Miss Kirch had once been very beautiful and that she had inherited a large sum of money from her mother. As with most gossip that originated with Dorothy Moyers, he was inclined to doubt the veracity of the latter rumor.

Certainly the rumors Dorothy had spread about him were mostly untrue. He did not have too much to drink at the Wilmore/Sidman wedding reception. Admittedly, he had slurred a few words during the opening prayer, but that was due mostly to exhaustion.

And despite the unrelenting whisperings at the bimonthly women’s guild meetings, Margaret most certainly did not leave him because she had fallen in love with another woman. She had moved to Harrisburg to live with her former college roommate Althea.

After thirty-three years of marriage, Gerald could attest to the fact that Margaret was heterosexual. Or more likely asexual. But she certainly was not gay, for God’s sake. Still, last week, through the heating vent that led from the church basement to his office, Gerald had heard Edna Weinwright’s booming voice declare, “Harrisburg is teeming with homos and colored people.”

Between her thumb and index finger, Miss Kirch was caressing a small Celtic cross pendant, attached to a finely braided silver chain she wore around her neck. When she was not staring blankly out the window, she was usually fidgeting with something, a symptom of her progressing Alzheimer’s. “So how are Gracie and the children?” she asked.

It took Gerald a few seconds to realize that Miss Kirch had mistaken him for Joseph Franklin, who had served as pastor of Abiding Truth for thirty-eight years. He died six days after his retirement in 1997, a month before Gerald’s arrival in Dustin. Though Gerald had never met the man, he was well

acquainted with his ghost. Seven years after his death, parishioners still spoke about Franklin with fondness usually reserved for Jesus, Elvis, or one of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

“Oh no, Miss Kirch,” Gerald said, trying to conceal his irritation, “I’m Pastor Schwartz. I don’t have any children.”

Miss Kirch stared at him, her forehead wrinkled, her chapped lips pressed together.

“Or a wife,” added Gerald, as though he had just remembered how alone he was.

“Oh, yes, you’re the new guy,” she said, sounding momentarily coherent. “From one of those big cities down the mountain. Johnstown, is it? Altoona?”

“Baltimore.”

“Johnstown. Baltimore. They’re all the same to me.”

Gerald winced. Comparing his beloved Baltimore with a decaying mountain burg whose claim to fame was being devastated by a flood in the 1800s was like equating Languedoc-Roussillon Corbiere with Boone’s Farm. Then again, on those rare occasions when Gerald’s parishioners sampled “wine” it was bound to be Boone’s Farm. And those who dared to set foot in a “big city” rarely ventured beyond Johnstown or Altoona.

“How are you?” Gerald asked. He knew how she would answer.

“Oh fine,” she said, “same as always.” Unlike Mrs. Hawthorne, who operated on verbal autopilot, Gerald could rarely encourage Miss Kirch to speak about herself.

As he glanced around at her sparsely decorated living area, Gerald sensed that something was different about her room. The cross-stitched wall hanging of the 23rd Psalm graced its usual spot above the television. A calendar from the Aschenbrenner Funeral Home was tacked to a bulletin board next to a copy of the week’s meal selections.

Large X’s were drawn through the first eight days of August, giving the impression that someone was counting down to an important event. Gerald knew there were no impending milestones for Miss Kirch. The calendar merely served as a reminder that she had made it through another day. If she could survive another eight hours a brand new X would await her in the morning.

A mother-of-pearl statue of praying hands sat on the bedside table. Behind the statue Gerald noticed a framed photograph. He rose and stepped across the room. "I don't believe I've seen this before," he said, as he lifted the photograph from the table.

It was a black and white portrait of a young woman who appeared to be in her early 20s. She was standing by herself on a beach with a large body of water in the background. The woman wore a one-piece bathing suit, modest by modern standards, yet tight-fitting enough to reveal her slim figure. She had dark, flowing hair, which rested on her well-toned shoulders. A shy smile revealed a hint of perfectly white teeth. Bright eyes the same hue as the water behind her sparkled, undimmed by age. The woman's head was tilted slightly to the right, revealing a finely braided chain around her neck with a small Celtic cross pendant attached to it. Gerald recognized it as the necklace Miss Kirch was wearing now.

He stared at the young woman's eyes, unable to look away for a few seconds. "It's you," he said finally.

Except for her necklace, the woman sitting before him bore little resemblance to the one in the photograph. Only a few of her teeth were remaining. Gerald guessed that she probably had not smiled for several years. Miss Kirch's hair was thinning and gray with bald patches, her shoulders slumped, her eyes clouded over. All signs of beauty had long since melted away.

Gerald studied the photograph. "You certainly were attractive," he mused.

Miss Kirch stared at him blankly and Gerald felt blood rush to his cheeks. Embarrassed by his uncharacteristic effusiveness, he stammered, "Y-you s-still are, of course."

"Thank you," she said, with the graciousness of a woman who had received the compliment before.

Gerald took a moment to regain his composure. "It's a remarkable portrait. When was it taken?"

"Long time ago."

She was staring at her shoes again. This was how it usually went—a few minutes of coherence followed by a return to her usual state of confusion.

"It's time for communion," he said, returning the photograph to the bed stand.

Gerald sank into the driver's seat of his Buick and offered a quick prayer of thanks to Whoever Might Be Listening. Twelve down. Another month of homebound visits completed.

That night, after Gerald had finished his customary liter of wine and chased it with four shots of bourbon, a few handfuls of low-fat crackers, and a leftover piece of German chocolate cake from Sunday's fellowship hour, he took one last gulp of bourbon, lay down on the king-sized bed he and Margaret had shared for thirty-three years and fell asleep with his clothes on, waiting for the demons to come.