

The Burial

It took me three hours that night to dig a shallow trench in the vicarage garden for Beatrice Conway's body. Luckily (I won't say 'Thanks be to God' in the circumstances) the temperature was mild for February and the soil ready to receive Beatrice. More ready than I'd been when she'd rung that morning.

As I dug, I told myself: Reverend Marjorie Jones, this isn't the way you thought your big decision would be made. But there's no turning back now.

Causality, they call it in stories. This happens, which makes that happen, which causes the other. It's about inevitability. And it rubs the edge off the guilt.

Take that day's events. If it hadn't been mild, I wouldn't have stuck feet into wellies and gone mushroom-picking early in the wood. If I'd remembered to take *Fungi for Dummies* with me, I'd have chosen my mushrooms more carefully. If Beatrice Conway hadn't rung at ten and pleaded for a chat about her marital problems ('At our Silver *Wedding* party? And she's a *cleaner* for the *council!*'), she wouldn't have been there at lunchtime when I said, 'Stay, Beatrice. I'll cook us both an omelette.'

A little goodwill couldn't hurt, especially as Beatrice would be my last ever pastoral effort. My suitcase – Jesus stickers peeled off with white spirit - was packed. I intended to be on a plane to somewhere, anywhere, by dusk.

And if the phone hadn't rung when it did, I would have eaten a toadstool omelette, too. 'You go ahead, Beatrice,' I'd called from the hall as I picked up the phone, and I think I can safely say she took me at my word.

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I suppose I could have contacted the police. But I'd spent thirty years urging people to believe stories they didn't want to believe and, frankly, I was weary.

Plus, I'd planned a new life in the sun, not in a cell with someone farting and snoring like a freight train in the bunk above.

So, three hours. I couldn't have dug for much longer without collapsing. I thought the Nifty Fifties session in the church hall had helped, but there's fit enough for a brisk walk and there's fit enough for concealing a plump corpse.

As it was, it had taken all my energy to drag the prostrate Beatrice from where she'd fallen on the dining room rug. I'd hauled her through the living room and onto the kitchen lino. I heard the church clock strike one. I'll miss that sound, I thought.

Surely you can't bury her in broad daylight, though, said a voice in my head I think was Ian Rankin's. So I left her on the kitchen floor until dusk, covering her face with a Tenby teatowel. I sat with her, drinking tea and eating Bourbons: a wake of sorts. When darkness fell, I went out to dig.

How to get her down the garden without noise, though? I couldn't risk being scuppered by Wilfred from next door leaning over the fence in his pyjamas to ask why I was dragging a parishioner's corpse past the pyracantha.

Then I remembered the giant roll of bubble wrap. I'd ordered it from Amazon to wrap all my glasses and crockery when I moved to this vicarage but had clicked on 50 metres, not 5. That was the last time I shopped online while preparing a sermon on Leviticus.

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'I've made you a shroud,' I said to Beatrice, and rolled her up. 'Not quite Turin, but it's all I have.' And it did make for a more peaceful drag down the garden except for the bubbles - pop, pop, pop – each one echoing in the night air. Like a mini gun salute, I thought, and she'd never have got that from a Browns and Co funeral.

It was nearly three when I finally manoeuvred Beatrice in tweed skirt, paisley jumper and bubble wrap to the edge of her grave. I was so exhausted by then that I lay down alongside her and nudged her into the hole with the length of my body. 'Sorry Beatrice,' I whispered, as she landed in the hole, her grave clothes popping like a frenzied bowl of Rice Krispies. 'You'll understand if I don't sing a hymn or do the dust speech.'

I struggled up to standing and looked down. She'd landed not on her back but on her side with one leg slightly bent and one arm on top of the other. She'd never been the most cooperative parishioner and even now, just to be perverse, was trying to get herself buried in the recovery position.

I shovelled the earth back in over her body, puffing and panting by now, then realised with dismay that the mound screamed 'Grave!' like inch-thick make-up screams 'Acne!' I hadn't accounted for the fact that, where some of the earth had been, there was now a four inch layer of bubble wrap around someone who'd only attended one Nifty Fifties session before going back to *Flog It*.

I lay down again and rolled backwards and forwards over Beatrice's grave to flatten out the earth. 'Think of it as an ancient Mayan burial ceremony or something,' I hissed down to her. It's funny – once you've decided not to be a vicar any more, the pagan instinct takes over more quickly than you'd imagine.

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I dragged the old bench seat to where the grave was and placed it over where Beatrice now lay, resting in peace, with her marital problems sorted for good. The bench looked at home in its new position. What a shame it had taken the secret burial of a parishioner to get me rearranging the garden more pleasingly.

On the aeroplane to Barbados, unscrewing a mini-bottle of Pinot Grigio, I said, 'Beatrice, if you can hear me, I owe you a thank you.'

She'd said that morning, pulling a pack of Handy Andies from her pocket to dab at a tear, 'I'm so glad you were free to see me, Vicar. I'm hoping that what happens today will force a decision, once and for all.'

1020 words