

THE FUNERAL

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Erichie Groundwater died a couple of weeks ago. His passing wasn't mourned very much. By anybody. Not that anyone was particularly pleased he'd gone either, except perhaps Donald Traill the local undertaker. Most people who had any opinion at all were resolutely indifferent. Truth to tell Erchie Groundwater was not a very popular person when he was alive, and he was no more popular now he was dead. He had had a reputation for being the meanest person on the island, meaner even than Elma Grieve the treasurer of the island's council, but while people gossiped about it when he wasn't around most were of the opinion that if there were to be any retribution it would only happen in the life to come.

Groundwater had been a big florid man who liked his food. He was especially partial to mutton stew and sea food, which is not surprising since mutton is the staple diet of the island and Groundwater had been one of the local farmers who, like most others, also fished a little. He was also partial to the odd dram or two, provided somebody else paid for it. Whenever he entered the island's only hotel, the Pierowall, where all the serious drinking took place, people would suddenly develop a serious interest in their own fingernails, looking down and away from Groundwater and hoping that he wouldn't choose them as his drinking companion of the evening. The last time he chose me I made some hasty excuses about having to muck out the boiler at home and left, much to my own disappointment because I'm quite partial to the odd dram myself.

I didn't know Erchie very well, only by reputation. I heard that he had a sense of humour, but I never witnessed it myself. Mind you I never hung around the bar long enough when he was in it to find out. It's possible that he did have a sense of humour, most people do, somewhere, even if it is well hidden. In Groundwater's case I don't know. But then, he did christen his wee boat the St. George, a name not calculated to go down well on an Orcadian island. I'm told that he found it a source of great amusement, to himself. Donald Traill thought it amusing too. For an undertaker Donald is not a bad sort. Not at all like

everyone's image of an undertaker, all bible black frock coats and dour demeanour. Tall and lean, he has a permanent twinkle in his eyes that is easily mistaken for some hidden, and highly inappropriate, delight in mortality. And he really does have a very pronounced sense of humour although at times it can take a rather macabre direction.

Whatever the truth about Groundwater, his actual death caused barely a ripple on the island. Not so his funeral.

It's a curious thing about funerals on a small island, they become community events. Everyone is expected to attend, whether they knew the deceased or not. They were a social glue that held the community together, a kind of, ... What can I call them? Well, I suppose they were a kind of doleful celebration of community spirit, everyone coming together to remind themselves of their own mortality. On the other hand it meant that nobody was buried without witnesses. Then there was always the wake, a generally sober affair at which a great deal of alcohol was drunk all in the name of sobriety.

The day of the funeral was a cold one. Even in my well padded outdoor gear I still felt the bite of the wind. The sky was that peculiar slate grey that seems reserved for where the North Sea meets the Atlantic, cold unforgiving seas both. You wouldn't want to go swimming in either, even at the height of summer.

Away off to the left I could hear the Atlantic breakers, and the fulmars and kittiwakes squabbling in their vertical cities, the constant background music to where I lived. There was a definite wetness to the air, not rain, exactly, more like the kind of wetness you get in a sauna, but without the heat. It's the kind of air that is familiar to anyone who has ever stayed in the North Isles of Orkney for any length of time above half an hour. Mind you, it's not altogether unpleasant, even with the cold, because it always has that bracing quality that snaps you awake, just before the earache and headaches set in. In the distance, however, the clouds were ominously dark, threatening an end to the pleasant weather.

Personally I am not at all religious. Like most people my age and with my background I was brought up as a 'good' Free Presbyterian, but frankly I got bored with the whole heaven and hell stuff years ago. I'm not sure if I'm an atheist, exactly, because I gave up on all that too. Mostly I don't care one way or the other really, which I suppose means that I am probably on some infernal list of the damned. I'll worry about it when the time comes. If God really does exist I already have my arguments worked out for when I meet him, sorry, Him, just in case. I hope He has a sense of humour. My near neighbours on the island consider me and my wife as godless pagans, but as long as we observe the niceties they don't trouble us

too much. One of the niceties is attending funerals. Another is not using a car on a Sunday, which is why Angela and I ended up trudging along the stone path to Lady Kirk church a mile up the road, being blown sideways by the prevailing winds.

The kirk is a simple stone built structure of the kind that are found all over the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. It is small and rectangular, with arched windows along either side of its length. The arches are its only concession to ecclesiastical architecture. Otherwise it is quite plain. Inside is also very plain. It has long, unforgiving dark brown benches that serve as pews. There is no altar, but there is a high pulpit at the end of the aisle from which the ministers harangue the flock.

We used to have our own minister on the island, but not any more. The last one was Hugh Traill, brother of Donald, and like him he was wiry and lean. There were a lot of jokes on the island about the Traill brothers' family business, the one dispatching our souls the other our bodies. But that was before Hugh got ill and had to retire. He's still around somewhere, but we don't see very much of him. A pity, really, because despite our differences as to theological matters I quite liked him. For a Free Presbyterian minister he had rather a sweet nature and a perpetual twinkle in his eyes. That must be a family trait, the twinkle. I used to wonder what they knew that the rest of us didn't. Oh, he used to deliver the hellfire and brimstone sermons, right enough, but somehow they lacked conviction. I remember him once delivering a sermon on the evils of dancing, especially close dancing with members of the opposite sex. Poor chap. He did his best, but the sermon was really less alarming than some of the children's programmes they show on the BBC. I think he preferred the pastoral side of his job, afternoon tea and cake at the manse.

These days all the ministers are visitors. They come from one of the other islands when it is time to top up the islanders' quota of grace, about once a month or when there is an occasion, like a funeral. Today we were to be entertained by a new man, one Alastair Hugh Macleod, native of Stornaway and scion of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. He was a man of reputation was Mr. Macleod. Unlike poor old Hugh Traill he was reputed to be a genuine hellfire preacher. I looked forward to the show.

Angela and I settled onto one of the benches and relaxed into the relative warmth of the place. It wasn't heated exactly, but out of the wind and amongst so many bodies it soon became warmish. The place had a fuggy damp smell to it as the steam rose from all the wet tweed in the place. There was a low murmuring in the hall, and away over at the foot of the pulpit rested Groundwater's mortal remains in a plain wooden box placed precariously on

trestles.

Mr. Macleod entered and ascended the pulpit, like an entertainer taking the stage. With his white hair and black vestments he looked like a hoodie crow in spring plumage. At his signal we all raised our bibles and began to drone out psalm 23, I think. I wasn't really paying attention. I lifted my bible high and hid behind it so that no-one could see that I wasn't actually joining in. I was here strictly as an observer. Angela gave me a quick dig in the ribs, but I ignored it. She would say something when we got home.

In front of us there were three old people; two women with a man seated between them. I'd noticed them earlier because the man kept making a series of very odd movements. First his left shoulder rose very slightly, then relaxed. Then his right shoulder repeated the movement. Fascinated I couldn't resist having a peek to see what was going on. Carefully, so as not to draw attention to myself, I inched forward on my bench until I could look over the man's shoulder. "You crafty old bugger," I thought when I saw what was happening. In his lap he had a bag of pan drops. As I watched he surreptitiously slipped a sweetie first to the woman on his left then the one on his right. When the sign came from the pulpit for another psalm up went the bibles and in went the sweeties. So I clearly wasn't the only one not joining in with the communal sing song.

Having satisfied my curiosity I settled back on my bench into the warm fug and retired for a short nap while the rest of the service was conducted. But it didn't last very long. The tone of the service seemed wrong. Mr. Macleod had begun the oration on the dead Erchie Groundwater.

I had expected the usual peroration, some guff about Groundwater having lived a virtuous life, blah, blah, will be sadly missed by family and friends, blah, blah, sad loss to the community, and so on. But Mr. Macleod's tone seemed quite at odds with the usual sentimentality. I dragged myself back to the room, mentally speaking, and focused my attention on Mr. Macleod. He was in full flood, and I could see immediately that he deserved his fearsome reputation:

"Yon man whose mortal remains lie before us was a sinner to his very bowels. Aye, prudence is a Godly virtue, right enough, but parsimony and meanness show a want of Christian charity that is grievously distasteful to the Lord. Hear me ye sinners, for the Lord abominates the miser."

I have to say that this was turning out to be the most entertaining funeral I had ever attended. I stifled a giggle and Angela dug me in the ribs again. But I could see that Mr.

Macleod had everyone's astonished attention, including mine.

“I didn't meet yon Mr. Groundwater,” he continued, “but his kind is well known to me. Sinful in his greed and selfishness. I tell ye all, he will burn in hell, and ye that are wont to be like him take heed of his fate. The magnitude of his sins is very great, and his soul is befouled for all eternity. Aye, hear me. The wages of sin is death. DEATH! And for his sins Mr. Groundwater will burn in the fiery furnace tormented by Satan and his demons for ever, for EVER!”

Poor old Erchie, I thought. I also thought it very curious that while condemning the unfortunate Groundwater to the eternal fires, Mr. Macleod referred to him politely as Mr. Perhaps he considered good manners essential even in such a dark business.

“Hear me and mark my words all ye sinners. He is doomed, DOOMED, to the eternal fires of hell ...” and so it went on.

Say what you like about the really good hellfire preachers, they've got stamina, if nothing else, and an impressive ability for extemporisation. Seriously, I was very impressed. I think the anti-oration must have lasted an hour, if not more. It certainly gave the three old people in front of me plenty of time to finish off their pan drops. I felt a curious sense of anti-climax when it was all over.

At the signal from the pulpit we all started to the door. My knees creaked as I got up, and I could feel the damp patches on the legs of my trousers clinging horribly to my legs. It was time for the internment.

During the service the rain had really set in, and the wind had picked up. We all hunched into ourselves as we traipsed in the wake of the six pall bearers now wobbling their way up the little stony track past the iron railings and into the graveyard. At the graveside they set down the coffin, with evident relief, while the minister intoned the words of internment. And off he went again:

“Mortal sinner though ye be, destined for the fiery furnace of hell and the close embrace of Satan himself...”

Like I said, I'm not at all religious, but I'm quite sure that these words didn't come out of the service book, or any service book, of any church, anywhere.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes ...”

And that was it. Poor old Groundwater was dispatched to the infernal regions.

The pall bearers lifted the coffin on its traces and hauled it over the newly dug grave. Slowly they lowered it into the hole and ... it stuck. Halfway down into the hole. Whoever had

dug the grave hadn't made it wide enough. Donald Traill hid his face behind his top hat and cleared his throat nervously. He muttered something rude about "wee Jamie" and began to flap around aimlessly. There wasn't much else he could do. Even his sense of humour couldn't help him here. I guess he was trying to convince somebody, himself most likely, that by moving about he was actually doing something useful to resolve the crisis. But, of course, Erchie Groundwater's last residence stayed exactly where it was, stuck accusingly in its hole.

Despite the harsh wet cold now attempting to strip the flesh off my face I very nearly laughed out loud. Angela gave me a sharp look. But I wasn't the only one. The three old people I mentioned earlier, with the pan drops, were clearly having trouble keeping a straight face. And even Donald Traill in the midst of his embarrassment had a curious twist to his mouth and a pained look on his face as if he were struggling with an inner demon.

Just then there was an almighty clap of thunder and a lightening bolt flashed across the sky. The heavens opened, and the grass around us leapt into life as heavy streams of water splashed around us and turned the ground into a passing resemblance to a small river. And the coffin began, ever so slowly, to slip sideways down into the hole, coming to rest diagonally in the bottom with its lid just beneath. We all looked down astonished as the torrents of rain poured off our heads like so many little waterfalls. Even Mr. Macleod had his mouth open in apparent astonishment. Perhaps he had never had such a direct reply to one of his sermons.

We could scarcely see each other in the lowering darkness and falling rain, but we could all see what had happened to Groundwater's coffin. Just under the noise of the wind and rain I could hear a few strangled giggles and a lot of throats clearing.

I guess old Groundwater did have a sense of humour after all. Or maybe he was just answering Mr. Macleod's accusations. Whatever had really happened, I can honestly say that this is the only time I have ever seen somebody genuinely turning in their grave.

"Ah, Erchie," I thought to myself, "if I'd known you were this amusing I'd never have bolted from your company, and I'd have bought you as many drinks as you wanted. Cheers, Erchie, thanks for the best entertainment I've had for years. I'll no doubt be seeing you again one day."