

A PRAYER FOR EARL

Personal Essay

By

Elaine Greensmith Jordan

On a cold November morning Earl Smith knocks at my back door. I can't imagine why he's come. Framed by our northern Arizona landscape, Earl looks like a bundled-up prospector—wrinkled face, stooped body, clutter hanging from his belt. He fits the rustic scene better than I do in my robe and slippers. I marvel at the view of winter behind him because the rocky desert is covered with patches of snow. Snow is not my natural habitat.

Southern California has been my home until a year ago—when I'd accepted a call to minister in a small church in Arizona—and this is my first white winter. The altered world outside seems God's way of saying you can't count on anything. That trickster God may have led me here, but I fumble and fret my way through this first ministry feeling I lack the right stuff to serve the people of the little church—as if I've come without sturdy shoes.

“Morning, pastor,” Earl says, shaking snow from his well-worn snow boots. He notices my bathrobe and adds, “Hope I'm—not too early.” We live in a land of retirees who hold to imprinted farm schedules. They rise at dawn.

“Not at all. Just having my coffee.”

This rumped prospector adores me, his lady minister, and he's a married man—though I've never met his wife. Earl's affection is an embarrassment to me. He waylays me in the church entry before the Sunday service, holds my hand too long and begs for a hug. Much of the time he has to manage an oxygen tank with tube attached to his nose, but he's not slow in trailing me down the church aisle. The only tactic I can think of is to run. I skitter away, a black clerical mouse, hiding in my office while my geriatric admirer searches for me.

Earl doesn't attend to unspoken church rules, and he embarrasses us in worship services. He likes to speak in the moments set aside for prayers of gratitude or expressions of concern. He wants to tell God about his birthday or his new car. You aren't supposed to chat with God in church as if you were speaking to your Dad. You're supposed to thank God for blessings, like a birth or recovery.

Some Sundays Earl will leave his seat in the middle of the service and trudge to the men's room trailing his oxygen tube. We can hear the flush of the toilet and anticipate his return no matter what's happening in church. Sometimes it's silent prayer. The interruptions undermine my efforts to provide a sublime worship service. God must have sent Earl to help me to get over the need to prove myself, but I keep trying.

"The church's—shut up—tighter'n a drum," Earl reports that chilly morning at my house. He's arrived with no oxygen tank and his speaking takes effort. "Got a little electric organ—to drop off."

Earl haunts rummage sales and swap-meets for objects to refurbish, then tinkers with his finds until they're ready for resale. If he thinks the riches have any religious significance he gives them to me. I feel exploited as I deal with each new offering. The level of this detritus rises like Noah's flood, and I struggle to control it, recycling Earl's junk as fast as the items come in—the set of video tapes on sign language, the gigantic Bible made for use by gigantic people, the *Guidepost* magazines from the nineteen-sixties.

It makes me nervous to have Earl in my entryway this winter morning undressing me with his rheumy eyes. It's like having an old lover appear, one you didn't want to see again. I hug myself and turn up the collar of my winter bathrobe, bestowing my patronizing ministerial smile. "Earl! Good morning. Okay. You can leave the organ in the trunk of my car."

Our feet crunch the gravel of the drive as we make our way to the garage, a blue-robed woman in heavy slippers followed by one of the Seven Dwarfs. I open the screeching door, and Earl hauls a chord-organ into the car's trunk and then wipes his hands on his pants. What will I do with an instrument that we don't need in our small church sanctuary?

"Can I make a—phone call, Pastor?" Earl asks. For a second I think he wants to get inside the house and have his way with me. "I wanna call Dick—see if he's at—the Donut Hole yet." Embarrassed by my silly thought I lead the gnomish gentleman up the stairs to our living area.

"M'sister's got—a thing about you, Pastor," he says. "Heard from her yesterday. She don't believe in—such a thing as a female pastor." He laughs. "Said I shouldn't go to your church. I told her—to mind her own business."

I smile, and my admirer makes the call to his friend and leaves, speeding down our icy driveway faster than seems safe.

*

Two weeks later, while I huddle in my office next to a portable heater trying to organize the Christmas schedule, the telephone rings and I pick it up to hear a choking noise.

“Pastor, I’m dropping out of church.” I know by the end of the sentence it’s Earl. “Take me off the rolls. I ain’t comin’ back.”

“Earl, what’s the matter?”

“I’m quittin’ church,” he says, coughing. “Take me off the rolls.”

“Is something wrong? Are you okay?” I imagine his sister has told him he’s destined for hell if he stays at a church with a lady preacher, especially since he makes his affection for me so obvious.

But it isn’t about me. “I ain’t comin back there. Today at the Donut Hole . . . can’t talk about it.”

“You mean something happened at the Donut Hole to make you want to drop church?” I ask, wishing I had a maple-sugar donut.

“Yeah.” He blows his nose. “Dick told everyone about my going to the toilet during church, made a joke of it. The guys laughed . . . said I was avoiding the collection.”

“Oh. So, you don’t want to come to church any more. . . I’m sorry.”

“Can’t do it.”

Hesitating a moment, I ask God’s help for Earl and me. If you asked me to explain my position on prayer, I’d have to say I don’t believe in a listening person in heaven, but I pray when stymied or afraid. I get energy and insights from prayer. This time, I get an impulse to stay passive, let Earl pour out his pain. He tells me he’s never had such a terrible morning, never been mocked that way before. He cries.

“Earl, do you want me to speak to Dick this afternoon, tell him how you feel?”

“Course not!” he says. “Dick’s okay. Most the time he don’t hurt me.” He blows his nose again.

“I’d miss you if you didn’t come to church.”

“We’ll see about that,” he says, almost cheerfully.

Earl is back in church on Sunday. The jokester God has brought this Arizona universe into balance.

*

I finally meet Earl's wife, Betty, when he asks me to drop by their home to meet her. I can't discern if she's dear to him or not. Now he wants me to visit. I'd heard that Betty was an alcoholic, and I'm uneasy about meeting her. I pray I can respond with compassion to any crisis or need waiting for me in their home.

The couple live in a mobile-home park not far from the church, a clutch of homes estranged from the country club where most church members live. I drive the winding desert street wondering what Earl's place will be like. The day doesn't have a sunny brilliance that Arizona so often enjoys, even in winter. A cloud-cover makes the scene gray as if God were looking away from us.

Set back from the paved street on narrow lots, the homes are a mismatched jumble. Some of the owners have made pleasant gardens out front, using boulders, winter pansies, crushed rock patterns. Their pine trees—some with dangling strands of unlit Christmas lights—appear a deep green in the refracted light. A few units are in need of paint. In one of those lives the young girl who's promised to bring her new baby to our church on Christmas Eve where she'll portray Mary in a blue robe while we sing "Silent Night."

Earl's corner lot has no plants or graded rock, but it has remnants—rusty tools and an iron wheel barrow—from one of the abandoned gold mines of the area. This makes the place seem a western outpost. Would Betty be a drunken Calamity Jane, wielding a rifle?

Earl watches me get out of the car. I can see him standing behind a screen door wearing a cowboy hat, his oxygen, and a wide grin. "You got here okay," he says in amazement, as if I've come from Colorado.

"Yes, I recognized your yard and all your . . . collections." He looks pleased and escorts me inside. The darkened room smells of tobacco and dust, suitable to the grandfatherly fellow who lives here.

Off in a side room Betty sits at a table next to a window wearing a green sweater and smoking. She turns to me and grimaces, exposing large white teeth in a weathered tan face. Holding an empty jelly glass, she could be a thirsty gray-haired Native American woman. Her eyes speak messages. *I'm managing*, she seems to say. *I'm not dead yet*.

Earl stands in the doorway, nods to me, and leaves. I sit tentatively in a chair across from his wife. What we talk about is lost to me. I remember that occasionally Betty glances into the gray skies, feeling abandoned by the sun, as I do. How different she looks from the other women I've met here in the complacent community near a golf course. She wears no apron. She offers no food. She has no ready chatter about bridge games or quilting. Betty endures.

I don't know what this native looking woman needs from me except that it isn't religious counseling. We're posing in the window for Earl, it seems, who needs to have us here. My presence may make Betty uncomfortable, but she doesn't look bothered. I'm the uneasy one. I feel stranded, as if I've been dropped off the boat at the wrong port.

I have to wonder on my way home how this world-weary woman happened to be married to Earl. Betty and Earl don't seem connected in ways I'm used to. I know Earl's neighbors love him—that he's a help to them—but he doesn't seem to relate to Betty. He didn't speak to her, or introduce me, nor did she want any such nicety from him. How could that be? How do they work things out? I'm missing a lot here. Theirs seems like a marriage that has not failed so much as never happened. The universe of this couple feels as unfamiliar as the startling snowfall that turns a desert landscape into Christmas. All I can guess is that Betty and Earl live apart in their manufactured home, and Earl sells his junk to buy her liquor. That's not a scenario I can accept.

*

Prospector Earl must have longed to drive off to a better place than his Arizona outpost because two years later he does just that. In the early spring Earl decided to leave our area in a new red sports car. His toy convertible gleamed on our sunny driveway one day in early May when he stopped at our house to say goodbye, asking for a hug before he roared off. Soon after he arrived in Indiana he wrote me a despairing letter about regretting his decision to leave. Maybe he had to live with his bossy sister.

I wish I'd known how to deal with Earl's infatuation; keeping my distance, like a bustling clergy-on-the-run, wasn't fair. Perhaps fascinated men like Earl were loved unconditionally by their mothers, and they find in women clergy a warm maternal figure. Or maybe they never had a mother's love and long for someone who seems to have a serene spirit to fill the space. That romanticized portrait doesn't describe me, of course. I wear my robes over a soul preoccupied with the scrutiny of a God who jokes with me, confuses me, judges me.

I'd treated Earl like a pest, and he was a funny, helpful, trusting person. He had an admirable way of making his way in our rocky landscape, and I remember him now with fondness, even gratitude, for his adoration. I wish he'd stayed. In fact, Earl bears a resemblance to the God who's as much a pest as my adoring prospector. Both of them needled me, gave me unwanted gifts, and caused me to examine my self-centered soul.

I can see myself holding Earl's letter and wondering why I never inquired about Betty after Earl left. It was as if I'd imagined her. Shouldn't a servant of God have done more? I have to assume Betty died, though I've not been told of her death. Her existence was never mentioned by anyone in the church, before or after she evaporated. She didn't fit anyone's lexicon—not because she drank but because she wasn't part of a golfing land where people have potlucks and tend their gardens.

Betty's figure framed in that window seemed to personify my alienation in Arizona snow country. Just as she was disengaged from the country club, so far as I could see, I too had few connections there. I was lonely. I'd taken on a commitment I didn't really understand, feeling unsure and wondering if I was adequate or authentic. I needed a sustaining faith that could help me manage the unknown, and it eluded me. I clutched at prayer as Betty did her crude tumbler, hoping for blessings from a God who'd stop playing tricks and disappearing in a red sportscar.