

A Dark and Empty Corner

A STORY

BY OLGA ZILBERBOURG



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GOD WAS PRESENT that Thursday night in June when Peggy and Winston volunteered at the Family History Center. He hung about the one-room building behind the parking lot of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and listened in on their conversation from the dark corner dedicated to microfilm research.

During the school year, when his grandkids were around, Winston volunteered in the mornings, and this was his first evening at the center. During the two years since he'd retired to this town, Winston and Peggy had taken notice of each other at church and organizational meetings, but they had never been together in an intimate setting like this. That's what it felt like to the two of them, that the Heavenly Father was watching their every move and nudging them toward each other. There was a sense of urgency in the air, even though it was only eight o'clock, two more hours to go until closing time, and only one hobbyist genealogist still in the building, slowly scrolling his way through miles of microfilm in search of his forebears.

"Would you like some hot chocolate? I'm thinking of making some," Peggy said to Winston. They had been

sitting across from each other at an oval table in the middle of the room, Winston at the computer, processing information requests coming over email, and Peggy filling out loan forms and coloring in the volunteer shift schedules for the next month.

“No, thank you. I don’t really like chocolate.”

“Lucky you! You know, for me, one of the hardest things about joining the Church was having to give up all of that, tea, coffee, you know.”

“Lifelong habits are hard to break. I’ve tried the stuff, but it’s never appealed to me.”

“This reminds me of my mother, when she was dying. I brought her a cup of coffee, and she refused it, she said she never really liked the taste of it. This was a woman who’d made a pot of coffee first thing in the morning every day of her life! She always made it for my father and never drank it herself. Imagine that.”

“People without faith choose strange things to believe in.”

Peggy had lost her mother three years earlier, and Winston not only had outlived his parents but he had also, more than a decade ago, buried his wife. Now, Peggy at seventy-three and certainly Winston at eighty-one were the next in line, but both were in good health and working to keep it that way. Winston rode his bicycle for exercise, and Peggy ate at least one apple every day, cut it up into pieces and packed it in her purse, in a plastic baggie, to snack on throughout the day. They both went to church regularly, Winston a lifelong Mormon, and Peggy a convert after her ugly divorce fifteen years ago. And yet faith did not make the idea of death comforting or even approachable. Instead of picturing a meeting with the Heavenly Father, Peggy kept stubbornly coming back to the memory of her mother’s deathbed, the image of sunken eyes and immobile hands lying on top of the bedsheets. Winston always believed that families were forever, that if he was valiant in his devotion to the Church, after death he would be reunited with everyone he loved. But now that his wife was dead, Winston was living on his own and enjoying it very much; he felt like a schoolboy at the beginning of summer vacation.

“Listen to this,” Winston said. “Here somebody thinks she’s related to Boleslaw the Brave, the first king of Poland.”

“Everyone’s related to Charlemagne, but Boleslaw? What a name!”

“Maybe we could use him for our trivia contest.” Peggy pushed aside her requisition forms and reached for the office laptop. She situated the screen to touch the back of the monitor of the computer Winston was using, and pulled up Wikipedia. “Boleslaw the Brave,” she read, “born in 967 AD, one of the most powerful monarchs in eastern Europe, brought Christianity to Prussia—”

“A good guy, then?”

“I’ve always wondered what Prussia was.”

The building housing the Family History Center wasn’t much: a single room, partitioned into an open study area, a nook with a few shelves of reference books and microfilm stacks, and an adjacent dark area with several microfilm-viewing machines, where their one remaining visitor that night pored over old records. The wooden table in the middle of the room, where Peggy and Winston were sitting, was lit by two desk lamps and the glow of their computer screens. The overhead light was off—Peggy liked it that way. She complained that overhead lamps were too bright and made the space seem like an emergency room.

The information requests Winston was processing were of an entirely trivial nature. How late is the center open on Saturdays? Can I register for the class on reading gothic German script, even though the website says the class is already full? Who’s the expert on English family history, and when can I see her? Winston was going a mile a minute answering these questions.

“Old Prussians were conquered and completely vanquished by the Teutonic Knights,” Peggy read. “Isn’t Wikipedia great? It’s got answers to every question I can think of!”

“No wonder the Prussians were vanquished,” Winston said. “I mean, if their religion was paganism.”

“But the Teutonic Knights, there’s an ambitious crowd. They united with something called the Han-se-atic League, and took over the entire Baltic region. Not bad, right?”

“They didn’t have those cruises going around the Baltic back then, did they? You and I should take a trip, visit all those countries. Germany, Sweden, you know.”

Winston had traveled this route as a young man, after he’d completed his mission to Europe. In Norway he had met his future wife, a recent convert to the Church, and proposed to her on the eve of his return to the United States. These memories were so blurry, they had stopped being true memories a long time ago, becoming family legends, the stories they told their children and grandchildren during holidays. But the physical experience of travel, and particularly the discomforts of it—the cold and wet breeze on the deck of a cruise ship, the unpleasant sour smell of the water—this he remembered well, and found that he thought of it with longing.

“You would enjoy taking a cruise. A perfect day on a ship can make it seem like you’re going to live forever,” Winston said. Expressed out loud, the thought sounded heretical, and yet the romance of the idea was so strong, Winston did not want to give it up. “Maybe I’ll have that cup of hot cocoa after all.”

“Do Teutonic Knights still exist?” Peggy said. “I would like to be one. Bring Christianity to remote lands, fight the good fight.”

In her previous life, Peggy had been a nurse anesthetist, working in hospitals for more than forty-five years before she retired. She had long been inured to the everyday gore of disease and dying. She had seen it all—especially back in the 1960s, when she and her husband lived in Texas and she was the only person in three counties to deliver anesthesia during surgery. Caring for her mother through the months of her slow decline wasn’t particularly unusual in terms of the physical experience, but Peggy found herself unprepared to deal with the emotional turmoil of it, with her inability to express her fear and loneliness to a single human being. She had been long divorced by then, and her children and their families lived far away, and in any case she had never been one to burden others with her emotional baggage. Even in church she did not feel comfortable speaking out and sharing her experience with others—she didn’t want to sound as if she was complaining.

“I’m hungry,” Winston said. He yawned and stretched his torso, straightening his posture in the chair. “It’s amazing how hungry you can get sitting all day.”

A cell phone went off in a digital version of the old-fashioned telephone ring. God was watching Peggy and Winston, but others had their priorities as well. Peggy rolled her eyes but dug the phone out from the depths of her purse and picked up on the third ring. “Yes, hello,” she said. She spoke quietly in order not to disturb their visitor in the microfilm room but loud enough for Winston to hear every word. Winston tried to give her some privacy by burying his head in the computer but was curious and listened. He was glad to hear her voice acquire a sharp edge as she spoke to the stranger. “I can’t meet you tonight, I’m working the late shift here at the center. I’m not sure what I’m doing this weekend. How about I call you back?”

She hung up and hid her phone away with a deep sigh. Winston cleared his throat. “A man wants to date me,” she said.

“And you? Do you want to date him?”

“Well, me, I just want to be friends. The whole thing is a nuisance. He wants to take me out to dinner, but I would much rather stay home and cook for myself. I am not much for going out.”

“Is he in the Church?”

“This guy? Yes, he is. You probably know him. My kids keep trying to set me up, if you can imagine. One of my daughters even tried to get me to do online dating. She set up a profile for me on LDS Singles. But I think I’m too old for that.”

Peggy didn’t feel old. In fact, sitting across from Winston and watching the blush take hold of Winston’s pale, clean-shaven cheeks, she didn’t feel her age at all. She

could've been fifteen or a hundred, it wasn't her physical age that mattered but the fact that here was a man whose spirit seemed to be completely in tune with her own. Winston had the same sensation—as if a communication was occurring between them that went beyond words, one that could never have been contained by the sounds that escaped their mouths. Human language, he thought, was not adequate for spiritual union.

“Boy, I'm hungry,” Winston said, patting himself on the stomach.

“I found a candy bar in my purse earlier today,” Peggy said. “I don't usually eat candy, and I don't have any idea where it came from, but it's packaged and sealed. Would you like to have it?”

The room grew quiet, as if God was holding his breath. They could hear the gentle whirring of the fans inside their computers. The clock above the bathroom door ticked audibly. There were no windows in the small library, but the walls were paper-thin, and they could hear a car leaving the church parking lot. Winston thought he heard the shuffle of the microfilm being rewound in the dark room and remembered that they still had a visitor in there. Peggy glanced at the laptop, where the page about the Teutonic Knights was still open.

“Would you like to close this place early tonight?” Peggy said. She felt her heart skip a beat and then come back aflutter. She was tempted to grab her left wrist and measure her pulse.

“I've answered 109 emails today. Not bad for one evening's work, huh?” Winston replied quickly. Peggy's question sounded very much like a proposition, which made him feel excited and scared at once. He asked cautiously: “What do you have in mind?”

“Whole Foods is still open, you could get a sandwich there—or a salad, they have wonderful salads. Although it's a dangerous place. The other day I went there to buy a loaf of bread, and they had fresh strawberries on sale. I ended up with a box of them—and whatever am I going to do with a whole box of strawberries?”

“So, what are you going to do? I mean, tonight? Are you hungry?” Winston asked. Neither of them was working anymore, but they kept their eyes buried safely in the screens of their computers, both too shy to meet the other's glance. This sudden shyness scared Peggy and made her physically uncomfortable. To hide her embarrassment, Peggy closed her laptop and picked up the pile of papers she'd left unfinished before.

“Oh, I don't know. I have a sandwich waiting for me at home,” she said.

It was maybe at this point, or maybe a few moments earlier, when Winston had been hesitating about which question to ask, that God quietly slipped out of the building. The room grew silent again, but this time the silence was peaceful, allowing Peggy

and Winston to restore their breathing. Winston could hear his stomach growling, and he was starting to feel light-headed. Usually he kept a very regular schedule for his meals, and it had been a long time since he'd had to work through dinner, so he hadn't thought of packing a snack. Peggy remembered a phone call she owed her daughter; she had been meaning to call her tonight, from the center, during one of her breaks. Her daughter lived in New York, three time zones away, and now it was too late.

"Do you want to tell our visitor we want to close by nine?" Winston said.

"Sure, but you do it. I'm too shy!"

"Me too! I too am very shy." Winston grinned and got up from his seat. He placed his hands on his hips and stretched his torso forward and backward, cracking his joints. "Boy, this feels good."

Peggy got up and, following his lead, stretched, lifting her arms up and then trying to touch her toes. Together they walked around the copy machine to the entrance of the microfilm-reading area, and Winston announced, loudly: "The center will be closing in fifteen minutes—please finish up—" He interrupted himself in the middle of the phrase, because he and Peggy saw at the same time that all the machines were switched off, the microfilm rolls had been put away, and the room stood empty, as if there had never been anyone there at all. **N**