

Mrs Baxter's Quiet Day

Mrs Baxter was a well meaning gentle soul who had aged and slowed. She inhabited a landscape of detours that no longer took her directly from A to B but filled the time nicely. It gave her pleasure to do everything thoroughly, and why not, she was in no hurry. At the present time she was staying with her daughter who worked in the City. Mrs Baxter spent her hours alone happily rewashing her daughter's cutlery, hunting for dust behind the books, and completing those little extra tasks she felt the super efficient cleaner had probably overlooked.

One tea time the phone rang; Mrs Baxter sat down with paper and pencil to take a message. The caller was the secretary from the church on the hill. There was apparently a crisis in the linen rota. The secretary had noticed there was only one fresh 'purificator' in the linen cupboard and a funeral service was booked for noon the following day.

Disasters of this nature were right up Mrs Baxter's street, 'Leave it with me!' she said and pleasurable anticipation warmed through to the tips of her neat busy fingers. It meant calling her daughter out of a meeting to find out where last week's soiled purificators were but once tracked down she attacked the small squares of embroidered linen enthusiastically. They may be stained with 'the blood of Christ which was shed for you' at St Michael's, but they were red wine stains to Mrs Baxter and didn't stand a chance as she set about them with Vanish, Bleach and Biological washing powder. It was a wet evening and she couldn't hang them out but spread them to dry on a towel on the kitchen table.

The thick linen was still wet when she came downstairs in the morning. 'It's the embroidery,' she told her daughter who wasn't listening, 'I'll have to iron them dry.' Mrs Baxter ironed and ironed them again, drank a cup of tea and ironed them a third time. They looked fine when they were hot but as the linen cooled damp seeped out of the thickly embroidered crosses in the middle. Time ticked on and by eleven fifteen she had to admit that, though they were not up to her exacting standard, they would have to do or miss the 12 o'clock funeral. She put on her hat and coat and carried them, unfolded over her arm like a silver service waiter, hoping that the sunshine might just dry them out on her way up the hill.

She wasn't familiar with St Michael's but her daughter had given her instructions, she entered by a side door, slipped quietly up the side aisle, behind the choir and into the vestry. There she found the heavy oak cupboard where the priest's robes were kept and below the two labelled linen drawers. She slid the purificators, now neatly folded in three (she knew she mustn't crease the cross,) into the empty space. They may not have been 100% dry but their radiant whiteness pleased her profoundly.

Mrs Baxter looked around enjoying her unusual side view of the high altar, 'Like an actor backstage' she thought. Her mission was accomplished but somehow she was reluctant to leave. Her daughter had said, hadn't she, that if the church had run low on linen the side table beside the altar might not have a cloth on it? Tentatively, Mrs Baxter stepped out behind the communion rail to look. There was a cloth on the table, but it was grey and limp, a travesty. That couldn't be right; she wouldn't want a grubby cloth at her funeral. She stepped out further and looked down the length of the church and saw it was completely empty. 'I've just got time' she thought, and took one of her driest and prettiest lace cloths and set about replacing the old one. She did it all meticulously as she did everything, and was so absorbed in making a good job of it that she didn't hear the doors at the far end of the church open.

A small funeral party came in. They had been talking outside but one by one they fell silent. Mrs Baxter cannot have known that she was exactly the same height and weight as the deceased. She couldn't have known that the play of light from the high windows above the nave blurred her outline as she bustled in and out of the shadows. Most of all Mrs Baxter cannot have known that the woman they had come to bury was a soul mate, a fellow housekeeper par excellence. To the stunned family it seemed wholly plausible that Rowena, their wife, mother, sister, next door neighbour, who had been a paragon of domestic organisation herself, would pop in to make sure everything was tidy and ship shape before her own funeral. They watched the familiar deft movements with an unexpected surge of affection. 'Why, Bless her,' Rowena's husband thought with more warmth than he had felt for years.

Mrs Baxter heard the second time the big church doors opened and the vicar led in undertaker's pall bearers and the coffin. She slipped quietly back into the vestry. The service began as she let herself out by the side door.

More glasses than usual were raised to the deceased at the wake later. None of the mourners shared what they had seen, but they spoke in hushed voices and were of one mind that Rowena's funeral had been remarkable. They seemed reluctant to split up and sought each other's company to pass the church and walk back home down the hill.

For supper Mrs Baxter served her famous broccoli soup.

'Did you have a good day?' Her daughter asked.

'It was very quiet,' Mrs Baxter answered comfortably, 'Do you think this needs a little more parmesan?'

(979 words)