



“RITUALS”

BY TAGLIA

MR. AUSTIN SAT CALMLY on his screened-in front porch and read the Sunday funny papers while Mrs. Austin tore around inside the house clearing the breakfast table, doing dishes, bustling, bustling, bustling. Her voice drifted out to the front porch.

“Better step around, Granddad!” she called.

“Why?” Mr. Austin’s question was sincere, but his grin revealed he already knew the answer.

“We’ll be late for church!” Mrs. Austin called back, her voice accompanied by the clatter of dishes. It was about an hour before church and Mr. Austin was already dressed in his shirt and tie. Besides, from their front porch, the imposing front doors of the

beige brick, three-story Baptist church were only about forty yards up the hill on Third Street.

"Granny's always in a toot, isn't she?" Mr. Austin grinned, laughing at Granny for her constant hurry and at himself for talking to the funny papers.

If the Austins turned left instead of right at Third Street, they would have come to the Methodist Church, which was within a stone's throw of the Baptist Church. The Methodist Church was much smaller than its spiritual competitor in size and congregation. Instead of beige brick, the Methodist Church was clad in white clapboard and was only one story. Directly across from the Methodist Church was Mrs. Mahaffey's tiny white frame house. Whereas the Methodist Church crowned a small knoll above the street, Mrs. Mahaffey's little house nestled three steps down from the sidewalk that ran along the front of her tiny yard. It was as if her little house was in permanent genuflection to the larger and more important church on the little hill across the way.

Perpetually ancient, Mrs. Mahaffey was a Sunday morning regular at the Methodist Church, and seemed to be as permanent a part of the church as the pews or the steeple. She would hobble slowly across the street, say hello to church-goers chatting outside, and point out that the boys were certainly growing up to be handsome young men. She would then slowly

and carefully climb the steps of the church, clutching the handrail.

About the time Mrs. Mahaffey completed her ascent of the Methodist Church steps, a stately old Chevrolet turned slowly into the parking lot in front of the church. (It was actually the parking lot for the post office, but the Methodists figured the Baptists owned everything else in town so they ought to get something for their taxes, even if it was only free parking on Sunday.) The old Chevrolet, a very formal black, carried itself with dignity and wore its owner's initials on both doors in red Gothic letters, HJM. The old sedan would roll to a stop in a space near the front of the parking lot, much like its owner would soon ease into a pew near the front of the sanctuary.

Mr. Henry James Morgan was the only living veteran of the Spanish-American War in town. He wore heavy, wide-lapelled suits with shirts and ties he had purchased at about the same time he bought that Chevrolet. His freshly polished dress boots were black, lace-up, and ankle-high. His hair and mustache were white, trimmed and neatly combed.

Closing the car door gently, he made his way up the front steps of the church, shaking hands with the men, nodding his head to the women, and smiling delightedly at the little kids in their Sunday clothes. His Spanish-American War pin shone brightly from his lapel and he walked so youthfully that it was hard for most people to

believe that he had lived six decades since earning that pin. Finishing his greetings, he would march to the front of the church and take a seat in front of Mrs. Mahaffey and just a little to the left of the pulpit.

They were usually the only occupants of those first two pews.

Having situated themselves, they sat quietly, deep in thought. Heads bowed, their age, clothing, and demeanor set them apart from the rest of the congregation as clearly as the age, size, and demeanor of Mr. Morgan's old black Chevrolet set it apart from the brightly colored, chrome-accented, low-slung models parked around it.

At a quarter to eleven, give or take a straggler or two, the Methodist choir began a soft but stately call to worship from the back of the sanctuary. The noise urged Mr. Morgan from his reverie and he turned to Mrs. Mahaffey.

"Sure is a beautiful day, isn't it?" His voice floated out over the congregation clearly.

"I beg your pardon?" Her high voice cracked a little, harmonizing with his aging baritone.

"I don't think I'll need a coat next Sunday, if this warm weather holds."

The minister, Reverend Francis Love, began a solemn yet friendly greeting from the back of the church and the congregation rose for the opening hymn at the organ's cue.

"Yes, I'm a little chilly myself," returned Mrs. Mahaffey. The choir filed solemnly past, their combined voices creating gentle vibrations in the leaded panes of the stained-glass windows. The sopranos began filling the first row of the choir loft.

"My niece called from New York last night. I could hear her just like she was in the next room," Mrs. Mahaffey said as the altos finished their row and the men began taking their places in the back row of the choir loft.

Mr. Morgan considered her comment.

"Yes, you're right, I might not even need a jacket," he replied thoughtfully.

Dr. Smith slipped into the back pew as the choir finished the last verse of the hymn. Reverend Love took his place at the lectern and opened his Bible to one of several marked places. The congregation rustled attentively.

"She has had some trouble with her bursitis again," said Mrs. Mahaffey into the relative quiet of the sanctuary. Mrs. Bickford, sitting in the front row of the choir, raised her eyebrows in an automatic reproach to this breach of etiquette, then allowed a little smile of acceptance and apology when she realized the source of the disturbance.

"—but we haven't had blackberry winter yet, so I don't know—" Mr. Morgan's comment coincided with the opening lines of Reverend Love's Scripture reading.

"Then saith Jesus unto him, get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, thou shalt worship no other Lord before thy God..." Reverend Love's voice rose over the stately din of their comments.

"Well, it looks like we're about to start so I'd better turn around and pay attention. Let's hope it stays warm." Mr. Morgan turned away as Mrs. Mahaffey nodded, smiled, and pulled her shawl about her.

They would both be asleep before Reverend Love finished the reading.

Although Reverend Love's sermons were full of fiery oratory and delivered from a distance that could not have been more than ten feet from either Mr. Morgan or Mrs. Mahaffey, they were seldom roused from their Sunday morning slumber. Reverend Love was of the old school and did not allow many deviations from the straight and narrow to escape his attention. But he seemed never to notice that the only occupants of those first two pews were sound asleep.

And they always were.

Every Sunday morning service at the Methodist church ended with a hymn and as the last verse began, the choir marched down from the choir loft. Simultaneously, the acolytes snuffed the altar candles and closed the huge Bible on the lectern. Somewhere during that last verse, Mr. Morgan and Mrs. Mahaffey joined the now-standing congregation and they, too, sang the final "Amen."

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"I sure enjoyed the sermon, Reverend," Mr. Morgan said as he shook Reverend Love's hand at the door.

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan. I must say you're looking well today."

Mr. Morgan smiled, nodded and started down the steps.

"Thank you, Reverend, it was a lovely sermon," Mrs. Mahaffey beamed up at him.

"Not as lovely as you, Mrs. Mahaffey," responded Reverend Love. Mrs. Mahaffey's smile would last all the way down the front steps, through the crowd outside, and across the street into her little white house.

As the choir removed their robes, the old black Chevrolet would pull out of the post office parking lot, slip silently into second gear, and head home.

"Step around, Granddad," Mrs. Austin said. "We'll be late for lunch." She hurried the forty yards down the hill as Mr. Austin strolled along, smiling at the blue of the sky, the brilliant red of early tulips and the sun glinting off Mr. Morgan's old Chevrolet as it rolled by.

"It sure is a beautiful day, Granny," he called into the house from the front porch.

"I know, but if you don't step around, your food will get cold."

“Well, I’d better step around then.” He smiled to himself and took another appreciative look at the day before he disappeared into the house.

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“Comments?” Munford asked.

For once, no one said anything for a few moments. There was no anger, confusion, or fear: quite the opposite, it seemed no one wanted to interrupt the sense of ease, of...peace.

Although there was no sun visible in the sky above us, warmth filled the room.

“Why did you title your story *Rituals*?” Munford asked Taglia.

Taglia thought for a few seconds, then said, “It just felt right. I guess I felt my relatives lived their lives in simple but formal ways. They were kindly people, and when I went to church with them, the church services had the same kind of formality, but basic kindness.”

Again, no one spoke, but I saw several nods and smiles directed at Taglia, and Euell’s hands, balled into fists on the table surface, flashed two thumbs-up across to Taglia.

“I think your story’s structure worked just fine, at least for this audience,” Munford said. “Shall we return to writing?”

At her cue, I returned to my story and wrote without stopping.

I had been writing smoothly and easily without really having to re-think or re-write what I had written. This story just seemed to come out. But maybe that wasn’t a good thing because I

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wasn't sure of something about it: I just didn't know what. By the time I got to the end, I didn't know if there was a problem or not, so I just stopped.

Ms. Munford asked quietly, "Martin, are you at a place where we could read your second story?"

I glanced up, thought a moment and said, "Yes, I think so."