

Everyone has one decision they wished they could unmake, and for Sam Gardner it was his decision, several years before, to move from his hometown of Harmony, Indiana. He'd been assisted in the move by the Quaker church he'd pastored, Harmony Friends Meeting, who'd booted him down the road for inadvertently marrying two lesbians. In Sam's defense, it was hard to tell who he was marrying, what with how some people dress and cut their hair, and how some names, like Chris and Kelly for instance, could be used for men or women. In this instance, Chris and Kelly were two women, and a month later Sam was out the door, headed to the city to pastor another Quaker meeting.

Looking back, he thinks maybe he'd been too passive. He'd left to spare the church a fight, but some fights were worth having. It wasn't like they'd been arguing over carpet colors, after all. He'd heard on the Quaker grapevine that things weren't going well at Harmony Meeting, that they were down to 30 or so folks, that Dale Hinshaw, his chief nemesis, had clawed his way to the top and was now the clerk of the meeting, the head honcho, and wielding power like a mafia don.

That was back before Christmas, and just as the holidays were winding down, Sam read an article about a new virus killing people in China. Inclined toward hypochondria, Sam had thought of little else since, even announcing to his wife Barbara, several times a day, that he suspected he had it. He'd rewritten his will three times, finally deciding to leave all their money to the

Democratic Party in the event they both died. He was deep in the throes of estate planning when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He studied the screen and recognized the prefix as a Harmony telephone number. Though the number looked familiar, Sam couldn't quite place it. He wasn't going to answer, then thought it might be news of someone dying, so swiped his finger across his cell phone.

"Sam, is that you? This is Dale."

Sam had tried for years to delete that high-pitched, scratchy voice from his memory, without success. Dale Hinshaw, who knew just enough Scripture to be annoying, but not enough to be transformed. Sam couldn't count the times he'd prayed for Dale's demise. Not a gruesome death, not even painful. Sam was a Quaker, after all, and generally inclined toward pacifism, but Dale Hinshaw had a way of testing Sam's most cherished beliefs.

"The Lord has need of you," Dale said.

Sam had a deep suspicion of anyone who claimed to know what the Lord needed.

"What's the Lord want with me now?" Sam asked.

"He needs you to conduct a funeral."

"I thought you had a pastor."

"We did, Pastor Crawley, but he died of that virus thing. Went to a conference three weeks ago and got it there."

"That's terrible," Sam said. "I hadn't heard."

“Could’ve been worse. He wasn’t all that good a preacher.”

Sam’s estimation of Pastor Crawley rose. Any pastor Dale didn’t like was bound to have redeeming qualities.

“So what is it you want from me?” Sam asked.

“We need you to do his funeral.”

“I didn’t even know him. Why don’t you have someone do it who knew him? What does his family want?”

“He doesn’t have a family,” Dale said. “Never married. No kids. No nothing. And right before he died, he left instructions and said he wanted you to conduct his funeral.”

“We can’t even do funerals now,” Sam said. “The governor said no gatherings over ten people.”

“Choose this day whom you will serve, Sam. Are you going to follow the Lord or follow the governor?”

Sam could feel a headache starting in the center of his forehead, just above the bridge of his nose, right where they’d always started when he was Dale’s pastor.

“I’m not attending a funeral with a bunch of other people,” Sam said. “But if you want to have a Zoom funeral for Pastor Crawley, I’m happy to do that.”

“What’s a Zoom funeral?”

“Is there anyone at the meeting under 30,” Sam asked.

“Yes, Amanda Hodge still comes.”

“Ask her what Zoom is, she’ll know.”

So that’s what Dale did, and even though he suspected Zoom was a government plot to spy on people, he asked Amanda to arrange a Zoom funeral for Pastor Crawley.

It was held the next Saturday at 10 AM, when funerals in Harmony were always held. Funeral at 10, burial at 11 at the South Cemetery, then back to the church basement for a funeral luncheon at noon, served by the Friendly Women’s Circle. Ham, green beans, orange jello with carrot slivers, yeast rolls and lemonade or ice tea to drink, mourner’s choice. After dinner, the Circle unveiled an assortment of homemade pies and cakes, except for Fleeta Hampton, who always bought a box of Little Debbie oatmeal creme pies, out of the wrappers and arranged on a plate, as if she had baked them herself.

Amanda Hodge had emailed the link to the Zoom funeral the day before, then had phoned Sam to discuss the details. Amanda was 23, fresh out of college, and teaching math at the high school in Harmony. She caught Sam up on family news, discussed the latest drama at Harmony Friends Meeting, including Dale’s insistence that the Lord was bigger than any virus and if they had any faith they’d still be holding worship at the meetinghouse instead of using computers.

“It’s a shame that when a pandemic comes along, it never seems to kill the right people,” Amanda said.

Sam had thought the same thing, but hadn't said it aloud.

"So tell me more about this Zoom thing," Sam said. "I don't have much experience with it."

"I sent out a link to everyone in the meeting, and also posted the link on the funeral home page and the meeting's Facebook page, so anyone can participate who wants to," she explained.

"What if someone is inappropriate?" Sam asked. "I've read things about people crashing these Zoom meetings and showing dirty pictures."

"Not a problem," she promised Sam. "I'm the administrator of the meeting, if someone acts up, or starts saying something stupid, I'll mute them."

Sam fell silent, marveling at a technology that allowed inappropriate people to be silenced.

"So I guess we'll do it like we always have," Sam said. "I'll start with a prayer, do a Scripture reading, give a eulogy, then open it up for others to share as they feel led."

"Perfect," Amanda said.

It sounded easier than it was. Not knowing Pastor Crawley, Sam was unsure what to say about him, but managed to cobble together a string of clichés about Pastor Crawley being in a better place, beside still waters, and walking through the valley of the shadow of death, on his way to a place with many mansions, and how today was the first day of the rest of our lives. He included a poem about footprints in the sand, then concluded with a reminder

that God knows the number of hairs on our heads, obviously not realizing Pastor Crawley was bald as a cue ball.

He woke up early on Saturday morning, read through the eulogy, sharpened it up a bit, ate a late breakfast, then put on a dress shirt, tie, and his funeral suit, which was also his wedding suit, Sunday suit, and anniversary suit, when he and Barbara ate at the revolving restaurant on top of a hotel in the city.

Five minutes before the funeral, he sat down at his computer, clicked on the link, watched the little wheel spin at the center of his screen, then there was Amanda, looking appropriately somber and hopeful, as befitting one who is grieving while simultaneously confident of heaven's blessings.

"Welcome, Sam," she said.

Other voices, old and familiar, called out greetings. The Peacocks, the Hodges, Fern Hampton and her sister Fleeta, Bea Majors, Dale and Dolores Hinshaw. How ironic, Sam thought, to see the Hinshaws on a computer, given their strong opposition when Sam had suggested getting one for the meeting office. Dale had ranted for a solid hour at a business meeting, warning about pastors watching dirty pictures. Dolores had chimed in about churches having their entire savings stolen right through the computer and criminals going online and finding out the addresses of church members and murdering them in their sleep.

“For crying out loud,” Harvey Muldock had pointed out, “we got phone books with our addresses in them. How will it hurt to have our addresses on a computer?”

But Dale and Dolores wouldn't budge, so for all the years Sam was their pastor, he'd used a typewriter.

Now here they were conducting a funeral over a computer, Amanda Hodge standing ready to block perverts and bloviators.

They chatted for a few minutes, catching up on their lives, then Sam took advantage of a lull in conversation to suggest they start. He began with a prayer, thanking God for sending Pastor Crawley to Harmony Friends the year before.

“It was actually two years ago,” Fern Hampton interrupted. “In July.”

“I thought it was in June,” her sister Fleeta said.

Sam felt the beginning of a headache.

“Two years ago, July 1st,” Dale said. “I got the minutes right here in front of me. We fired Pastor Wagoner in June, and Pastor Crawley came here in July.”

“I don't understand why we let Pastor Wagoner go,” Harvey Muldock said. “He mowed the lawn and everything.”

“Perhaps we can discuss this later,” Sam said. “Right now, I'd like to share some Scripture.”

He read about looking to the hills from whence cometh our help, then segued into his prepared remarks, and was sailing merrily along, wrapping up the footprints in the sand poem, when Fleeta Hampton started crying.

“That’s my favorite poem,” she said. “The pastor read it at my mother’s funeral.”

“I don’t remember that,” Fern Hampton said. “Are you sure about that?”

“I was there. A person remembers something like that,” Fleeta said.

“Well, I was there too, and I don’t remember it,” Fern shot back.

“Didn’t your mother die in the early 60s?” Dale Hinshaw asked.

“September 25, 1963,” the Hampton sisters said.

“I’m on Google,” Dale Hinshaw said, “and it says here the footprints poem was written by Margaret Fishback Powers in 1964, so Fern’s right and you’re wrong, Fleeta. I don’t know whose funeral you heard it at, but it wasn’t your mother’s.”

“I knew a lady whose last name was Powers,” Opal Majors said. “We used to work together at the telephone company. But I didn’t realize she was a poet. Of course, you never know. Some people go all their lives not knowing they have a gift and then all of a sudden they’re 70 years and writing books and music and painting pictures. You just never know.”

“Friends, let’s let Sam finish the service, can we?” Amanda asked.

Sam didn't wait for their assent, but launched right into God knowing the number of hairs on our head, said a quick amen, then landed the eulogy straight down on the runway.

He thought about inviting others to share their thoughts about Pastor Crawley, but decided against it. He'd had enough.

"Thank you all for attending Pastor Crawley's memorial service," he said.

"Is that it? What about lunch?" Harvey Muldock asked. "Usually we eat after a funeral."

"Where's Pastor Crawley?" Fern asked. "It's a shame he couldn't attend his own funeral."

"They put him in a cooler to kill off the virus," Dale said. "We get his body in four more days, and we'll bury him then."

"We don't have to wait four more days to eat, do we?" Harvey asked.

"There isn't a dinner," Fern Hampton said. "You'll have to eat at home."

"There's always carryout at the Coffee Cup," Dolores Hinshaw said. "Dale and I got fish sandwiches from there just yesterday."

"I have to go now," Sam said. "It's been wonderful seeing all of you."

He clicked the little X in the upper right corner of his computer screen and watched as the Harmony Quakers faded from view, still discussing meal options.

He took off his funeral suit, hung it back in the closet, slipped into blue jeans and a flannel shirt, and walked into the kitchen just as Barbara, his wife,

was putting lunch on the table. Grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, his favorite meal.

“How was the funeral?” she asked.

He paused. “Imagine having a dozen people from Harmony Friends Meeting on a computer at the same time thinking they can speak whenever they want.”

She winced.

“Well, it was kind of you to do it,” she said.

“The weird thing was, it was nice seeing everyone again. Sometimes I wonder if maybe I should have dug in my heels instead of slinking off the way I did.”

“You didn’t slink off. Dogs and criminals slink off. You were fired. You didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“I don’t know. I think maybe I should have stood up for myself.”

She studied him closely.

“I know that look, Sam Gardner. You get all nostalgic and the next thing you know you’re applying to be the pastor back in Harmony. Please tell me we’re not going to do that.”

“No, of course not. Besides, they’d never have me. Dale’s the clerk now and he’d never agree to it.”

“Besides, it would be a disaster,” Barbara said. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily have to be their pastor,” Sam said. “I could maybe be a chaplain at the hospital in Cartersburg. Every other weekend off. Home most nights. Health insurance. Not having to get the approval of 30 Quakers before you do anything.”

He sighed wistfully, thinking of it. Freedom.

“That’s a great idea,” Barbara said. “Let’s move away from a perfectly good church where people actually think, and move back to Harmony and buy a house, so you can get a job at the hospital and be let go when the hospital realizes your job can be done by volunteers. That’s a great plan for our future.”

“Remember when we got married and you promised to love, cherish, and obey me until death do us part? Whatever happened to that?”

“I was young and stupid, that’s what happened to that.”

Sam didn’t know what to say about that, then decided his interests would be best served by not saying anything. Instead, he finished his soup and sandwich, then walked across the church parking lot to his office, where he sat and thought about how when he was 18 all he wanted to do was move from Harmony and see the world and now all he wanted was to go home and live in the house he’d grown up in and fall asleep listening to the train on its way to Cartersburg and points beyond.