

# **BITUARIES**

**Agatha Hoff**

## **One thing is for certain— we will all die—be we lawyers or vegans.**

**B**ecause I am the healthiest person I know, having a hangnail is enough to send me into thoughts of my mortality.

Recently, I broke my arm and shoulder in a bike crash. Too much time on my hands has led me a step beyond morbid thoughts. I have taken up reading the obits. This has given me an utter inferiority complex. It seems as if not a single person has departed this world who was not dearly loved and fondly remembered.

I pray that my favorite correspondent from traffic court will not be asked to add his two cents' worth when my time comes. Describing me as a "fascist terrorist cross-dressed in the cloak of justice" might jolt the average reader's sensibilities. I think I even prefer that my obituary include the graffiti from the bathroom wall at the Hall of Justice, which read, "Judge Hoff, Jesus Loves You, but the Rest of Us Think You're an Asshole."

The sanitized obituaries in the newspapers aren't nearly as much fun as the things people blurt out before they put their brain in gear at memorial services. Not long ago I attended a gathering that brought together those who knew my first husband, the father of my children. An elderly gentleman approached my youngest son, whom he had not met before. He introduced himself, shook hands, and declared, "Your father was

a real SOB, you know!" Though my son smiled and quietly replied, "I know," my children chose to leave that line out of their father's obit.

I must confess that over the years I've had occasion to help compose the obituaries of friends who have died and in doing so I have been at a loss as to how to capture certain quirks of the departed.

My friend Claire lived out the final eight years of her life at St. Anne's Home for the Aged. Oh, how she hated that name inscribed over the front door of her residence. She was feisty until the day she died at eighty-one, and she never came to terms with being "aged." She locked horns with St. Anne's administrators over dietary requirements, her ability to come and go as she wished, and numerous other concerns. Should Claire's obituary have read, "She never aged"?

Or how might I have captured the time she was summoned to a meeting with the nun in charge, Sister Peter Rose, and her assistant, Sister James, which was a quintessential Claire moment? Claire called me late one afternoon, beseeching me to accompany her to what she termed the inquisition. "They want to throw me out of this dump," she said. No amount of cross-examination on my part gave me a clue as to the possible cause for Claire's threatened expulsion. I showed up for the meeting to lend my friend moral support.

"The state accreditation people are coming to inspect St. Anne's next week," Sister Peter Rose informed us.

"You must get rid of the newspapers before then," Sister James added, looking expectantly at Claire.

Claire sat solemnly, facing Sister Peter Rose's desk in an overstuffed chair, but said nothing. The chair just about swallowed up Claire's tiny frame, and her feet dangled a few inches above the floor.

"What's this about newspapers, Claire?" I asked, utterly mystified by the conversation.

"There are piles of *Chronicles* all over Claire's room," Sister James told me. "We couldn't get a gurney in there if it became necessary."

"The rules are very strict about gurney access to residents' beds," Sister Peter Rose added.

"Why on earth are you saving all those *Chronicles*, Claire?" I laughed.

Claire, who had been fighting diabetes for sixty years, and was tickled pink when someone younger than she was predeceased her, gave us an impish grin and replied, "I haven't had time to read the obits."

Would *schadenfreude*—the perfect word for one who delights in someone else's misery—have been an appropriate word to use in Claire's obit? I settled for her having "fought diabetes for sixty years," instead.

I suspect that most obituaries are composed by guilt-ridden folks, since no matter how they try to treat the nearly departed with compassion, there's always something left undone at the time of someone's death.

Claire and I had a long-standing deal that she would call me when she felt her death to be imminent. She had fought the good fight against diabetes during all of her adult life, adhering to strict dietary requirements. It was her dream, before she died, to have a giant

hot fudge sundae with nuts, whipped cream, and not one but three cherries on top.

She called me one evening around 8:30, and all she said was, "It's time for my hot fudge sundae."

"Do you want it right now, Claire?" I asked.

"No, I've got too much to do to enjoy it tonight. Bring it in the morning," she instructed.

The next morning, I was at Mitchell's Ice Cream at eleven on the dot, right when they opened. I ordered the sundae made with three scoops, one each of chocolate, coffee, and vanilla, per Claire's instructions, not forgetting about the three cherries. The clerk gave me a quizzical look when he heard about the cherries, so I explained. "It's the last request of a dying eighty-one-year-old diabetic friend, who hasn't eaten ice cream in sixty years."

"It's on me," the clerk smiled. "There is no charge."

I drove across town to St. Anne's as fast as I could, to keep the ice cream from melting. When I reached St. Anne's and signed in at the front desk, writing Claire's name in the column marked "Person You Are Visiting," the nun manning reception looked up and said quietly, "Claire passed away during the night, dear."

I hope those who read Claire's obituary smiled when they came to the line, "In lieu of flowers, please savor a hot fudge sundae with three cherries on top."

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