

Gifts

by J. Annie MacLeod

She sits in the back pew, a bird-boned woman with hard hands and soft eyes. Wind parts the church's steeple, and the oak ceiling creaks like a ship, king-built by Baltimore freedmen two centuries before.

Patterning his words to the wind, a bald man stands at the pulpit, talks of grace and heaven, of the departed's many gifts. Three years in the dead man's service, the woman knows of his donations and charity dinners, his "Honey, there's ten dollars in my top drawer. You take it. Spend it on yourself." Yet the woman knows of other gifts, too—a tycoon's fortune left to one son but not the other, guilt to a daughter, grief to a wife. Of course the minister doesn't tell how the dead man once said to the woman, "Get your goddamned self out of my goddamned house" when she dropped a cup of tea.

Whenever the dead man spoke, no matter what he said, his vowels spread wide like smiles.

Above the altar there's an anchor instead of a cross, iron-tight and wound in a purple cord from Africa. The minister visited Africa, wears the gift of a rainbow stole down the front of his robe. The whole church was made through gifts. Donated organ, donated chapel. Trees cut and stretched into pews. Glass ground into windows that read "In Memoriam" and "In Loving Memory Of."

For the woman, water is church. When she needs God, she takes out a borrowed skiff, follows the curves of wind and wave. If the dead man swatted her wrist or if she emptied his bedpan without thanks, the woman would ask for patience. "Tomorrow I'm going to tell him I'm leaving," she'd say, and the water would make a constant sound against her boat.

The woman had found the dead man. An hour before, she'd put her dark hand over his own blue wrist, had said, "Here," changing a pillow. He'd said, "Honey, here," touching his chest, now creaking like a door on old hinges. "I'll get some tea," she'd said, but when she came back, he was twisted in the sheets, sickness everywhere, a smell like the scooped-out bottom of a river. And so the woman had cleaned him—turned his body to strip the sheets, changed his pajamas, soaped his hair with a washcloth, rubbed his eyeglasses clear. Only then did she get his wife, out gardening, dirt to the knees. "He's gone," she'd said to the old woman. "Come on up, now. Come on."

Pale walls, cold floor, windows that block light more than pass it, the woman thinks hard on the dead man, listens. A blower beneath her pew starts up like water rushing, a steady sound. The woman's eyes grow wet—another gift.



Carrie Patterson