

A Funeral in Clugg—Uncle Fart Misses a Possum

By Jim Gish

WHY WE LIKE IT: 'Most stories about death are long and wheezy and sentimental. If you are looking for that kind of story which ends with a quote from Longfellow, then you are in the wrong story, so it is best you quit right now and go mow the lawn or go to choir practice.' *We couldn't get enough of this hilarious, cheek in tongue, Trickster-hearted satire where Main Street prose meets home town America. Funerals become absurdly, comically funereal in the author's Mason-Dixon south and the hayseed hijinks are high order entertainment. We also love the 'mosey on down yonda' voice because we know it's one tough motherfucker to write and pull off but Gish was probably born with the words in his mouth. And while it's definitely comedy, it's not comedy that goes nowhere or exists just for its own sake. There's depth in them there grave sites. Y'all read it now, hear!*

A Funeral In Clugg- Uncle Fart Misses a Possum

His name was Arthur Cudwater, but his father shortened it to Art. His brothers, who had to share the bed with him, added a consonant, and that was how I grew up with an uncle whom I called unselfconsciously Uncle Fart. He didn't mind the name, and I think it gave him a sense of distinction in a family with six other siblings. His life was simple and limited, because, frankly, Uncle Fart was himself simple and limited. Under his picture in the yearbook where other kids' highest aspiration was President and professional baseball player or Doctor, Arthur Cudwater listed his highest goal as Farm Hand . He reached that goal rather quickly and stayed there for life, being the handy man and all purpose underling for George Van Heusen, living in a double wide trailer behind the cavernous Van Heusen barn with Aunt Lilly. They never had children because Aunt Lilly had a nervous condition, and Uncle Fart had a sperm count in double figures, so it all worked out.

This story of a funeral in Clugg is not about Uncle Fart's life but his death. Most stories about death are long and wheezy and sentimental. If you are looking for that kind

of funeral story which ends with a quote from Longfellow, then you are in the wrong story, so it is best you quit right now and go mow the lawn or go to choir practice.

It was, coincidentally, from choir practice that Uncle Fart and Aunt Lilly were driving that fateful night, according to Aunt Lilly, who enjoyed the drama of the accident and the funeral and several consecutive nervous break downs so much that I felt bad when Layton Peters thumped down the last of the mud around Uncle Fart's grave. Paradoxically, Uncle Fart's death was the high point in Aunt Lilly's life and you could tell by looking in her eyes that she would do it all again in a heartbeat. For eight days, she was in the hospital waiting for Uncle Fart to die, and this furnished her with lots of doting relatives, much consolation and teary remembrances of all his fine points which were tough to come by under normal circumstances. But since he was dying and hooked up to an IV, and several other monitors, everybody either remembered something endearing about him or made something up. It was all the same to Aunt Lilly. She just loved being the center of attention and having nerve spells and fainting and being awakened, and, well, feeling important, being in the spotlight, which is something you don't get a lot of chances at living in a double wide behind a barn and spending your day in the garden or at Odd Lots, trying to get TV dinners on sale for 99 cents.

But I have gotten ahead of myself.

It was a Friday night, and the Enraptured Lamb of God, Unaffiliated, was having choir practice, led by Pauline Peckinpaugh with her high, squeaky, intense voice, and those big hanging down pockets of fat on the bottom side of her arms which flapped around obscenely as she waved her hands, pretending to quiet the baritones and encourage the tenors, although, strictly speaking, nobody paid much attention to her.

Aunt Lilly and Pauline had a small disagreement about the word "succor" which Pauline insisted on pronouncing "sucker" giving it a flat nasal quality which does not lend itself to hymns. Aunt Lilly was tired already, and in the middle of the debate, she called

Pauline " a fat, evil Nazi bitch" which , not unsurprisingly, rubbed Pauline the wrong way. Pauline collapsed into a heap, and while three other women were washing her face with a wet washcloth, Aunt Lilly hiked on out the door of the church, jumped into the pickup where Uncle Fart was snoozing and said, "Get me out of here, Art. Get me home before I kick her fat ass up between her elbows."

Uncle Fart was having a dream about Nona Bishop, the nineteen year old blond who worked at the Dairy Queen, and it was a jolt to come out of that fantasy where she was French kissing him like she had invented some new form of dental floss to find a homely woman like Aunt Lilly cursing like a sailor .

According to Lilly, they were both saying sharp things to each other, and Uncle Fart was driving "way too fast" when they came upon the Drudge Boat Ditch bridge just as a mean, ugly possum with green, shining eyes scuttled across the road in front of them. Uncle Fart had always hated possums because he had been bitten by one in the hen house when he was twelve, searching for eggs under an over turned crate. Instead of slowing up for the narrow one lane bridge, Uncle Fart put the pedal to the metal and swerved to try to get the possum before it reached the safety of the ditch and the undergrowth .

The pickup went out of control. Uncle Fart yelled, "Sweet Jesus" which Aunt Lily later interpreted as some kind of last minute religious experience, although I have never bought that for a second. The pickup slammed into the bridge abutment and then flipped over twice and landed upside down not five feet from the water. When Aunt Lilly came to on that God forsaken back road, Uncle Fart lay just outside the car, and the possum which he had tried to kill was gnawing flesh off the bridge of his nose, having already scavenged two of his large calloused digits and found them rough as whit leather. Some people have been unkind enough to see this as a sign from God, that Uncle Fart tried to kill the possum, missed him and then was being eaten by the possum

as some form of cosmic justice. I don't think God works that way. I just think the possum was hungry and he saw Uncle Fart as fresh meat. The fact that Uncle Fart was an idiot who killed himself by trying to run over a possum simply was not a part of the equation. The possum did not know it was the meat of an idiot and didn't care. He just cared that his prey was not resisting

Aunt Lilly staggered to her feet, saw the possum eating Uncle Fart's nose and screamed that loud piercing scream which she has been known to do when you sneak up on her and yell boo. The possum took that as a sign that his banquet was over and scuttled off into the undergrowth.

The next few hours were a part of the drama which Aunt Lilly had told countless times and honed to perfection. She held Uncle Fart's head and prayed while the rescue squad came out from Clugg, slowed down a little by the fact that Billy Badger, the driver was a pint deep into some Early Times and had trouble keeping the rescue vehicle on his side of the road.

Aunt Lilly reported that Uncle Fart opened his eyes at one point and said, "You have been a good wife, Lilly. God gave me to you. If he takes me tonight, I will see you at the Golden Gate."

When she related that last part to my Grandfather Buck, he said, "You mean that bridge in San Francisco. He ain't never been in California."

I, personally, have my doubts about that dramatic speech regarding Aunt Lilly and the Golden Gate . I never heard Uncle Fart speak that many words before without using the word "fuck" and I never heard him express himself with such poetic eloquence, although he came close when he talked about his fantasies regarding the Clugg High School cheerleading squad and a mythical Wesson Oil Party he intended to invite them to once he won the lottery.

Anyway, the rescue squad arrived and began administering all manner of CPR and various forms of life saving techniques. They whisked the couple away to the Clugg Community Hospital where Aunt Lilly called some of her friends and many of the relatives before they put her in a wheel chair and took her to ICU.

Uncle Fart hung on longer than the doctor expected. He did tell Aunt Lilly that if her husband lived, his brain trauma was severe enough to render him a man "of limited mental capacity." Most of us privately wondered how your capacity could be much more limited than Uncle Fart's already was, and my Cousin Louise said that maybe he would go from being as smart as a big rock to as smart as a little rock, although she wasn't sure how smart little rocks were.

This went on for several long days and nights. People visited the hospital and went home, went to work, dropped by the hospital again, waiting for Uncle Fart to "piss on the fire and call in the dogs" as my Uncle Linnet said. Then, after a week, on a Friday night, Aunt Lilly came down the hall, her shoulders heaving and told us that Uncle Fart was "brain dead." No one had the heart to mention that he was brain dead well before the accident, and we took it as an omen that he had stopped breathing and would no longer be at our family reunions to tell retarded, gay midget jokes or sit on the front porch in the swing, talking about how much he hated the New York Yankees and indulge in bouts of flatulence which brought tears to your eyes and caused Aunt Rainey who was visiting from the rest home to look around at us suspiciously and say, "Who shit hisself?"

Well, Aunt Lilly brought her sister Gladys in from Hopkinsville where she was a psychiatric nurse, and they commenced to plan Uncle Fart's funeral. My father stopped by two or three times to offer his assistance, but they thanked him for his concern and hustled him out the door.

My father was more than glad to give up any part in that onerous task. He and Uncle Fart only saw each other three or four times a year when a grand aunt or great uncle died. They did not have much in common other than a collection of stories from their childhoods which all seemed to end with Uncle Fart screaming out the punchline, "Then I farted."

On the morning of the funeral, we all got up and did our chores. I mowed the front yard and slopped the hogs. My father spent the time from six to ten thirty plowing out beans in the bottomland. At eleven thirty, we all crawled into the '55 Pontiac to drive to the church. Willard Snard was the undertaker at Snard's Funeral Emporium, a kind of silly name which was perfectly in keeping with Willard who was kind of a silly man who wore green bow ties and told everyone to call him "Willie" although no one ever did.

As we drove up, the hearse arrived, and my father hustled off to help carry Uncle Fart into the church. It was a day of heat and humidity which took your breath away. There was not any air stirring, and the Rapture of the Lamb Unaffiliated did not believe in electrical fans which they had decided were "part of the Communist plot to make us weak so we would be ripe for picking when the red scourge surged across America." The upshot of all of this was that the temperature inside the church was nearly 110 degrees, and we looked like what we were, a bunch of fat, white people dying of dehydration.

The Nehi Sisters, a local gospel group, favored us with two hymns. They were skinny, cross-eyed girls who wore identical orange print dresses and had buck teeth. It was hard to concentrate on the message in their songs because you were sitting there wondering how two girls could look so much like ferrets.

Uncle Joe, who was closest in age to Uncle Fart, got up to read a little tribute, but somehow he had got his notes mixed up and stumbled and fumbled around for five minutes, finally rewarding us with a big, dumb smile and a last reminder, "And the thing

we should all remember is that Art would want us to live our lives pure and clean in the light of Jesus." He sat down, thinking that mentioning the Savior was a good way to finish up a botched speech, but most everyone was thinking what I was thinking, that, to the best of our knowledge, Uncle Fart had never cared much for purity nor Jesus and did not have any kind of code he wanted anyone to live up to, having never lived up to one himself. It was a confusing speech but several older men trumpeted "Amen" in affirmation which made Uncle Joe feel better, I hoped.

The regular minister at the Enraptured Lamb of God, Unaffiliated, and the minister who knew Uncle Fart best was Looney Dresbach, but Looney was now in the penitentiary for embezzling ten thousand dollars from Haynes Dry Goods Store where he was a clerk. When the crime was made public after a team of accountants discovered it, Looney came before the church to admit that he was saving his money to go to Denmark because inside Looney Dresbach, there was a woman named Luna who was waiting to come out. Looney intended to get himself some hormone treatments and have a vagina installed and then he was going to pay Haynes Dry Goods Store back when he got a job stripping at the Vixen Lounge up in Paducah. The congregation listened in stunned silence, and then they got up and walked out. Looney Dresbach felt so misunderstood that he walked two miles down the road and hung himself in the old Double Log barn with a strong piece of rope. The rope, it turned out, was weak and frayed, and Looney came crashing to earth where he was found and arrested and has since spent his time wearing purple underwear and shaving his underarms and calling himself Luna May Starlight. Rumor was that he intended to marry an Hispanic prisoner named Jose in ten years when they both got out.

The new preacher was named Estelle Norton, and he had come to preach straight from his day job as a sawyer at the Clugg Saw Mill. There was still a little saw

dust in his hair, and he seemed to have lost a lot of sleep because while he was musing over the scriptures, I could swear he dropped off for a few seconds.

"Arthur Cudwater was a good man," he told us. "He loved his family and he loved God. I think he is in heaven now, looking down and hoping that his death has taught each and everyone of us an important lesson."

It went on like that for another twenty five minutes, but I quit listening. This man evidently knew nothing at all about Uncle Fart, and, in my opinion, if Uncle Fart was in heaven, he was probably blasting off some good toots just as he did in life. If his death taught us anything, it was that you should not try to run down possums on a narrow road at night when you are likely to run into a bridge abutment and kill yourself. It was a simple lesson.

After Estelle Norton quit lying about Uncle Fart, we all walked up and looked at Uncle Fart being dead and hugged Aunt Lilly. Most everyone said the same thing, "He sure looks natural."

What I was thinking is , "He sure looks deader than a doornail," but I kept that to myself.

The pallbearers carried him out to the grave. We all sang "Going Down the Valley" and the preacher said, "Dust to dust" and crumpled some dirt into the grave. Aunt Lilly fainted again, but nobody was watching her this time and she pitched right into the grave, hitting that hard wood coffin and knocking herself out. Her dress came up nearly over her head, and you could see all those varicose veins running up into her cotton white panties. It was a vivid image that was hard to get out of your mind, never mind how much you wanted to.

At home that night, up in my room after supper, I thought over Uncle Fart's death, and it came to me that I had spent a lot of time in high school screwing around and getting into fights and pulling pranks and throwing spitwads. Lying in the darkness, the terrible truth came to me. If I did not change my ways, if I did not study and go to college and amount to something, ten years from tonight, I might be living in a double wide somewhere with somebody like Aunt Lilly, sitting around at night, drinking Milwaukee's Best and laughing over my own flatulence. When I died, the whole thing would be just as sad as Uncle Fart's funeral, and everybody there would know that I was just a big zero who had never written a good poem or done a good deed or had not done a damn thing to make the world a better place .

Two days later, I set the curve on a Geometry test.

A week later, I had the highest grade in the three classes on a US History test over Theodore Roosevelt and the Trust Busters.

Two years later, I graduated Salutatorian.

So in a way, his funeral, however pointless and goofy it seemed to be, turned out to be a lesson in life which changed everything for me.

So once a year, I go to his grave and leave a few flowers and I tell him the truth, "Uncle Fart, you did not die in vain."

And somewhere on that far celestial shore, I hear his answer, an answer which comes wafting back, clear and true, exactly the kind of thing Uncle Fart would say if he had been there, "Who gives a rat's ass?"