

# The Sea Gave Up the Dead

"Lord, he looks so peaceful," Miss Alice said tearfully. I braced myself for a long two hours at my post—and that was before the funeral started. Interrupting my thoughts, she looked up at me and spoke in a whisper that was loud enough for Pastor Brown, who was standing on the other side of the casket, to hear. "We've missed you at church, Jimmy. Don't be a stranger!"

I'd been a stranger at Zion Baptist Church for two years, ever since I'd started Arkansas State University here in Jonesboro. Most of the girls I'd go to youth group to see were gone now—off to college in Little Rock, Memphis. And when I started going on call nights and weekends at Johnson & Son, doing removals and assisting at funerals, I came up with more reasons.

"Howdy, Jim—I almost didn't recognize you!" whispered Sam Manning in a faux hillbilly voice, shuffling to the left of the casket, vise grip on my right hand. "Don't let that book-learning get you all corn-fused." I smiled and nodded.

The visitation line had died down after about a half-hour, as those who had to work and wouldn't be staying for the funeral had gone through, and the crowd of those family and close friends who would stay for the funeral hadn't yet arrived. Buddy Parkin—today's "case," as my boss had said—was dressed out in a nice blue polyester suit brought over by his daughter, Sarah, the day after we'd picked him up, wedding ring showing on his left hand, folded over his right. I'd known the family since I was little—saw him and his wife, Miss Jolene, at church every Sunday. She'd passed on a few years back. Breast cancer. Sarah, their only daughter, lived across town. They'd have catfish and hushpuppies every Thursday night at the Fish Boat.

Pastor Brown walked over and took a long look at Buddy and sighed, almost happily. "Well, he *does* look peaceful," he admitted, glancing toward me as he finished.

I grimaced slightly enough to merit his question, "Whatta they have you doing over here at Johnson? Is that a pre-med internship or something?"

"Pre-law," I corrected him, trying to sound respectful, "I'm pre-law at school.

Actually, it's just a job. They'd rather have someone else do the removals and stand here for two hours, at half the pay. It's still better—"

"Better than flippin' burgers!" he agreed, with a wild-eyed look that suggested *not really*. "What's that involve, removals?"

"Well sir, you know, when we get a case . . . when somebody passes, the family or whoever finds him calls the funeral home or the Craighead County coroner, and one way or another, Johnson's got to come out and get him, even in the middle of the night. So they call my cellphone and I throw on this suit and meet one of the directors here. Got to be here in 30 minutes. Then we drive over there in the van—people say 'hearse,' but they don't call 'em hearses—and have to get him . . ."

"Well, you're a big strong fella, so I reckon that's why . . ."

"Yeah, but it's tough sometimes. Like with Budd . . . Mr. Parkin. He was in his bathroom upstairs when his heart gave out, and you gotta put him on a gurney and get that thing around the corner and down the stairs."

"Sarah, honey," Pastor Brown interrupted me, calling to a row of chairs on the side of the room, "if you or Tom needs anything, just let me know, OK?" He'd caught her sobbing out of the corner of his eye. She smiled and nodded. "Thanks, Pastor," her husband affirmed.

"That's gotta be difficult, Jim. Was she real upset when y'all got there?"

"She found him there next to the sink," I answered. "Coroner said he was probably gone before he hit the floor. Said he must've had several blockages. When we went in there, . . ."

"Looked pretty bad," Pastor Brown finished.

"Sir?"

"He looked pretty bad, you were gonna say, right? He wasn't . . . didn't look 'peaceful.'"

Now I was staring at Buddy Parkin. "No, to be honest, his face was sort of distorted," I said, after a long pause, then stared some more. "I mean, people always say 'she looks so natural,' or 'I bet he was seeing Jesus,' but they . . ." (I dialed



down my volume a little more) "that ain't how they look when we get there."

"That surprise you, Jim?"

"Well, no, I mean . . . what do you think he was seeing—or thinking?"

Pastor Brown smiled, but seriously. "I don't know, but I bet he was thinking, 'Lord, my chest hurts!'"

I was still staring, and the humor slipped past me. "People don't know it, but those looks aren't natural. They fix 'em up with cotton in their cheeks to make a little almost-smile. Then they shoot this—they call it a ligature—this plastic thing into the mouth to keep it shut looking like that. Then they run that embalming fluid through. Colors their skin. You know, you can actually see that stuff travelling through their veins, if they've got good ones. You can watch the arm go pink again."

I was fixing to start telling him about how they'd cover up bruises and wounds with makeup and blue lighting when he interrupted again. "Well, none of that's too big for God, Jimmy."

"I'm sorry?"

"You don't like hearing about how 'he looks peaceful' because of what you've seen. But you're not taking into account the Resurrection. You know, when they laid the Lord Jesus in that tomb, He was . . ."

"Pastor Brown?" a female voice half-whispered through a bereaved grin. "I'm Buddy's cousin Irene, from Lepanto."

"Well, ma'am, I'm so sorry for—"

"I was hoping to sing this number—I've got a tape with the background music, and I was *planning* on singing Buddy's favorite song at the service."

"Ma'am, we've already planned out the service and selected some fine hymns—'In the Sweet By-and-By,' 'Beulah Land,' 'The Old Rugged Cross,' and—"

"I am family!" she furrowed her brow.

"We worked this all out with Sarah

and Tom on Tuesday morning after he passed on."

"I Saw the Light!" she said, indignantly. When Pastor Brown didn't reply for a few seconds, she added, "Hank Williams?"

"Yes, I know," he assured her.

Irene looked at Buddy, as if she hoped he'd back her up. "I just know he'd want us to hear that Gospel message."

Pastor Brown put his arm around her shoulder firmly. "Excuse us for a minute, Jim."

Quickly, she shoved a cassette toward me: "Here's that tape—you're with the funeral home, right?"

As Pastor Brown started to guide her over toward Sarah and Tom, he turned back. "Jim," he said over his shoulder, gravely, "What do they look like when they pull them out of the water?"

Flummoxed, I glanced back to notice that the line was building again. As I drew breath, I noticed Pastor Brown, Cousin Irene, Sarah, and Tom were already having it out on the side of the room.

*What did he mean?* I wondered, as Buddy's extended family filed by. *That boy they pulled out of Lake Frierson was white—soapy looking. I'd seem him on the table—adipocere, they call it, where*

*the layer of fat beneath the skin—*

The pianist started playing through a verse of "Sweet By-and-By," and, startled, I hurried to the back, next to the pall-bearers, whom I'd forgotten to instruct. There'd be time after the service, I thought nervously. We sang four verses, and Pastor Brown went up to the podium and, in typical Baptist fashion, opened in prayer, then read the obituary. "Lyle 'Buddy' Parkin, 64, born in West Memphis to A.V. and Louise Parkin, died Monday of a massive heart attack. He is survived . . ."

*He'd been missing for six months when some fisherman found him, turned up near the big weedbed where the bass are in spring. We'd picked him up at the morgue—his mama was weeping uncontrollably. "He looks so white," she kept saying, "like an angel."*

"Brother Buddy loved Gospel music," Pastor Brown was saying, "and his favorite was an old song written by Luther Presley. The Zion Baptist Quartet is coming now to sing it, and you can join in if you know it—'Praise the Lord! I'll Have a New Life.'" And away they went.

On the resurrection morning  
When all th' dead in Christ shall

rise

I'll have a new body,  
Praise the Lord, I'll have a new life

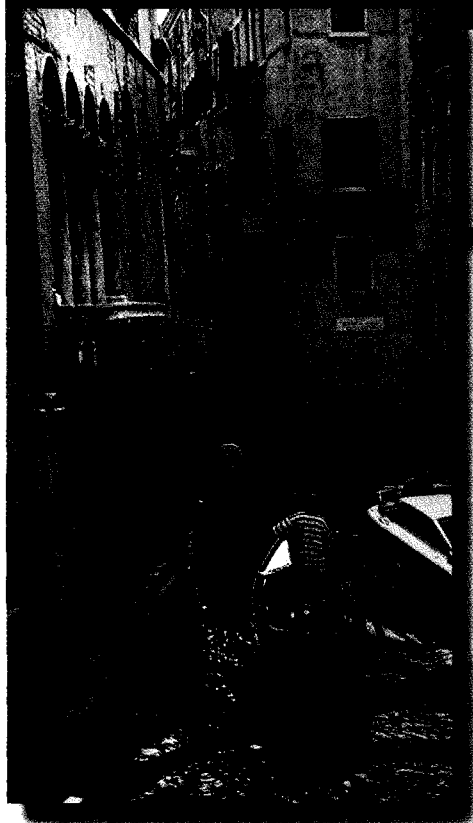
Sewed in weakness, raised in power  
Ready to live in Paradise  
I'll have a new body,  
Praise the Lord, I'll have a new life

I couldn't help thinking, *This music is a little too happy for a funeral. What were they thinking?* Then, I felt that tape in my pocket and glanced over at Cousin Irene. She was fuming.

Pastor Brown cleared his throat—he was in the middle of a Scripture reading, something from Revelation. And he was looking right at me. "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

"Dearly Beloved, when I asked Sarah what her daddy's favorite verse was, she said 'Revelations 20:13.' I said, 'That's a funny verse to be your favorite. What made him like that one?' And you know what she said? 'Cause he knew that, if the Lord could put someone back together who'd fell in the sea, He could raise up anyone. Nothing's too big for God.'" <e>

***"What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants are the kings,  
Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?"***



The Rockford Institute and Chronicles announce an international convivium:

## **Venice and Ravenna: Gates to the East March 27-April 4, 2008**

Robert Browning is only one of a long list of great writers—from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Byron to Henry James, Thomas Mann, and Ernest Hemingway—who fell in love with Venice. Who wouldn't go to Venice, if he had a chance to go in the company of congenial souls and to learn something about the amazing republic that challenged kingdoms and empires (while making a profit) and stood in the path of the Ottoman Turk? William McNeill called Venice "the hinge of Europe" because it was Venice, and before Venice, Ravenna, that connected Europe with the vital culture of the Byzantine Empire, a culture manifested in the domes and spires of San Marco and Ravenna's exquisite mosaics (Italy's finest).

***In the spring of 2008, a few lucky people will join The Rockford Institute Convivium in Venice and Ravenna. Space is strictly limited, so call Institute Vice President Christopher Check at (815) 964-5811 for details or to reserve a place.***

## A Highly Personal History

We're about 50 miles east of Toledo, cruising along the Ohio Turnpike on our way to Cleveland for the wedding of longtime *Chronicles* contributor Tom Piatak. Satisfied from a lunch of cabbage rolls, paprikas dumplings, and Hungarian sausage at the original Tony Packo's, I have Amy's Mac-Book open on my lap and Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* album shuffling on the iPod. "Dancing in the Dark" isn't helping me shake the feeling that I should quit browsing news items in NetNews-Wire, avoiding the writing I intended to do. ("I get up in the evening, and I ain't got nothing to say / I come home in the morning, go to bed feeling the same way.")

The *Rockford Register Star's* newsfeed provides only headlines, so I'm running through it quickly and inattentively. As I move on to the next item, the words of the previous headline finally register: "Local author, historian Lundin dies."

Startled, I read Amy the headline, then pull out the cellphone to call the office. When Aaron answers, I ask him if he's heard the news. "I don't have internet access out here on the turnpike, so I've only seen the headline. What happened?"

He hasn't heard, so he pulls up the *Register Star's* website. The story is under a different headline now: "Lundin was Rockford's 'Historical Consciousness.'" Indeed. Rockford has had her share of historians over the years (though relatively few serious ones since the 1940's), but only Lundin ever truly earned the title of "Rockford's historian." Through his books, most notably *Rockford: An Illustrated History*, and his constant presence whenever and wherever anyone might require an historical perspective on the challenges facing Rockford (especially in manufacturing), Lundin worked tirelessly to remind Rockfordians of their heritage. His interest didn't stop at the borders of the city, or even of Winnebago County—a proud Swede, he wrote a brief book on Swedish immigration to Rockford—but like every good patriot, he put those broader interests in the service of his hometown. He placed himself in its service as well: Jon cut short a promising academic career at Yale and Oxford, where he was completing his dissertation on a Jacobite poet, to return home. It may

not be fair to say that, if something had no relevance to Rockford, Jon wasn't interested in it; but in the time I knew him, he certainly was much less likely to talk about it, and he always had a way of turning the conversation back to what *did* interest him—and what should have interested his interlocutors as well.

Unfortunately for me, our conversations were too few. I had met Jon a few times over the years, but my first extended discussion with him was held standing up in my office, when he came to buy a stack of the November 2005 issue of *Chronicles*. My column that month ("Revitalizing Rockford") was based on a speech I had given at a one-day conference on the crisis in manufacturing. Jon had come to the lunchtime talk by Rockford Institute board chairman David Hartman on border-adjusted value-added taxation, but he couldn't make it to the evening presentation, where I had presented a Frank Capra-esque solution to the crisis, drawn from the history of manufacturing in Rockford and from the contemporary experience of organizations such as the Manufacturing Alliance of the Rock River Valley.

When the column came out, MARRV board member Bob Trojan sent a copy to Lundin, which inspired the unexpected visit and the purchase. I couldn't have gotten a word in edgewise if I had wanted to—but I didn't want to, because it was fascinating just to listen to Jon explain the overlap he saw between his ideas and mine, and how manufacturing could yet be revived in Rockford, and how the future didn't have to look like the present. He asked if he could come back sometime to talk at greater length, and then, without warning, he said goodbye and was down the stairs and out the door.

Jon never did come back to the office, but, a little over a year later, we met up again, this time at an awards ceremony for MARRV. I had written a profile of MARRV in this space ("A Third Way," October 2006), and Dee Lynn, MARRV's secretary, had called to ask me to come. Under the pressure of deadlines, I almost blew it off at the last minute. I arrived late, and, on the way in, a young lady handed me a form to fill out for door prizes. I almost passed the opportunity by, but she



gave me a pen, and I obediently filled out the ticket.

The top prize, I discovered when the drawing began, was a big-screen TV donated by Wal-Mart, and I spent the next several minutes in fear of actually winning it. I didn't have to worry: My ticket was drawn a few prizes before. Jon's friend Mike Molander had donated autographed copies of *Rockford: An Illustrated History* and Lundin's *Swedetown*, and I couldn't have been more pleased to win them. I've consulted *Rockford: An Illustrated History* extensively over the years, but I had always had to check a copy out of the library. Mike, who had attended the conference on manufacturing and read my article on MARRV, insisted that Jon should personalize the autographs.

When I presented the books to him, Jon told me how sorry he was that I had won his books and not the TV. I looked up at him in surprise—he stood a few inches above six feet—and saw the twinkle in his eyes. He had about as much love for Wal-Mart as I do. We spent the next half-hour discussing my columns, manufacturing, Wal-Mart, MARRV, National Lock (one of the greatest manufacturing success stories in the history of the United States, let alone in Rockford), and P.A. Peterson, perhaps Jon's greatest inspiration and one of the giants of Rockford industry, whose investments in local companies, and his philanthropic work, helped usher in Rockford's golden age. Then Jon asked if we might meet sometime for lunch, said goodbye, and once again was gone.

Thus began my acquaintance with Jon Lundin. I wish I could write "friendship," but that would be claiming more than I have a right to, and it would do a disservice to the many, many men and women in Rockford with whom Jon maintained lifelong friendships. I think that we were