

Vespers

by Steven G. Spruill

Margaret went to Vespers just before her father died. She slipped into one of the back pews beneath the balcony, where it was darkest, and let the old church seep into her. Twilight sank through stained glass. The scent of polished oak, the murmuring organ, the elders propped, somnolent, in cocoons of light on the platform touched old hurts; prodded and then soothed. But why had she come *here*? This was not a place of objectivity. Her father would ask her about the church. He would ask her if she had returned yet, back to the fold. She would have to tell him something, and now here she was, on impulse, at Vespers.

Vespers had been her favorite service. She thought about it now; wondered. Had it been the delicious last squeeze of piety before the release of sundown? No, that was too cynical, surely. Perhaps a part, but only a part. Maybe it was that they never asked for money at Vespers. *Oh, Margaret, give them a break.* The quiet, the music, the sense of peace

and contemplation, those had all come at Vespers as in no other service, and it had been *real*, and part of her still wanted it. Especially now, when she needed to think calmly, to decide.

Mrs. Jacobs turned stiffly in the pew two rows ahead and smiled at her, and she smiled back, stabbed with love, a giddy excess, because her father's cancer had made her vulnerable and because the old piano teacher had always smiled at her that same way in the Vespers of fifteen years ago when life was simpler and death hardly existed at all. Mrs. Jacobs' smile said, *it's all the same, like you never left us.* And, in a way, she never had. Her name was still on the books of this church, still on the books after many letters, one or two from each new pastor. The pastors came and went, and some were full of administrative zeal. There were always two boxes on the letters and would she please check one: I am faithfully living the Advent message and attending services and would like to transfer my membership to the following church_____. I am not now living as a Seventh-day Adventist and request that my name be removed from the church records for the present. No middle ground. No *I'm not living a message, I'm*

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living my life and I still love the people of my church, my culture, the thousand intangibles upon which I have, for good or ill, built my life. . . .

Margaret realized that her hands were clenching the pew beside her legs, that the front edge of the seat was digging into her fingers. She forced her hands to relax. The letters were fair, as fair as the people who wrote them could be. You were either in or you were out, as if the only thing that existed was the doctrine, the words written down on paper somewhere. It was their idea of integrity. Black and white. There was even a text they like to quote, about being *lukewarm*. In her thirty-five years, Margaret had felt many things toward her church, but never *lukewarm*. She no longer tried to explain it. They couldn't believe she was following her conscience — not and believe they were following theirs. She understood that. She understood it and she hated it, because it seemed so arrogant, and because it cut them off from each other.

But there were other reasons for the letters, too; other reasons than having to know if she was in or out. There were General Conference Ingathering quotas based on church membership. Tithes, offerings, other financial expectations. How many times she had fantasized writing them a check for ten thousand dollars to go to the local academy supported by the church. She loved the academy too, where she'd gone to school, but her fantasies were unworthy, because in them she always imagined herself handing them the check and watching their faces and thinking, *now will you leave me alone; stop asking if I'm in or out?* She didn't have ten thousand dollars. Her art shop back in New York was just breaking even, and maybe they wouldn't want money from paintings like the copy of Renoir's "Bather Arranging Her Hair" sold last Sabbath.

Last Saturday.

Yes, and maybe they'd find a way to accept the ten thousand dollars — money wasn't dirty, just people, *oh, stop, Margaret*. The church *did* need money, and she was hardly the one to judge from the temple shadows

whether the moneychangers had sneaked back.

The organist was playing "The Lord Bless You and Keep You," softly. The organ was behind the pulpit, at the front of the choir loft, and the top of the organist's head, the white hair, shone brilliantly, haloed in the single cone of light which poured down on the pulpit.

Margaret left quickly, getting out the back door of the sanctuary and through the lobby, with its floor of ancient glazed tiles, and onto the broad steps which led down to the street. It was dark, cold; snow fell in great wet flakes which melted and ran down her cheeks, and she was glad for the snow.

Her mother and her younger brother, Paul, hurried out of her father's hospital room, meeting her with wordless hugs. Paul stepped back, still holding her shoulders. His eyes lingered, oddly, just above her own, and then she realized he was inspecting her eye shadow. A muscle in his jaw rose and delivered its speech and sat down again.

"Where were you, Sis? We've been expecting you for over an hour. Did you have trouble getting a cab at the airport? I would have picked you up, but Dad. . ." Paul stopped. His face was there, behind the deadpan with which he met all things; miserable, eyes rimmed in red. Impulsively, she touched his cheek and he drew away just that fraction, because her makeup made her unfit for the morally superior role of comforter. The electric clock on the wall of the waiting room hissed softly.

"I was at Vespers," she said.

"Vespers. Really?"

"Really. How is he?"

Paul glanced at their mother. "He's. . . getting along fine. He's been asking for you."

Asking for his prodigal daughter, right, Paul?

When they stepped into the room, Margaret knew that her father would die soon. The knowledge was there in the sickly sweet smell, in the waxen face, in the head angled back so that her father's eyes glared up at the top of the iron bedstead. He rolled his head to look at her, and he smiled. There was a white

stubble on his chin, and Margaret remembered when the stubble had been brown and when her father had picked her up and hugged her, and had tickled her cheek with that stubble, mornings, before he treated it with soap that smelled like pine trees, and with flourishes of the safety razor. She took his hand and blooded the inside of her lip, because there's a time when physical pain can stop tears.

"Dad, Margaret just got here," Paul said. "From Vespers." He emphasized the last word. "She went to Vespers and then she came straight here."

"Vespers?" Her father's voice was surprisingly strong, but hoarse, as though the vocal cords had begun to fray, to come unraveled. "Are you coming to church again?" he asked.

She hesitated. She sensed her mother and her brother behind her, gelled, even their lungs stopped. The pressure of their fear seemed to swell against her back.

"I'm coming home, Dad," she said. "Home. Back to the fold."

He smiled and closed his eyes, and squeezed her hand, and she noticed that only the thumb and forefinger had any strength left. He went to sleep after that, and the nurse shooed them out just as if he were going to wake up again. In the waiting room, her mother hugged her and Paul grabbed her hand and said, "That's wonderful, Maggie. Just wonderful. You're coming back to us, to the church."

"No," she said. "It was what Dad wanted to hear. I wanted him to be happy." She didn't say the rest of it; didn't say *there are lots of ways I've never left the church, could never leave it, no matter what the books say*, because to Paul she was either in or out.

Paul's mouth dropped open and two spots of color appeared at the tops of his cheekbones. "You lied? You *lied* to him? How could you do it?"

She stared at him. The clock made fizzling noises, as though the second hand was fretting that it couldn't choose a single black line or white space and stay there.