

## **Burning Questions**

I'd heard of spontaneous human combustion, but never gave it any credence until I saw Lavinia Baker go up. She went up with all the flash and ferocity of phosphorus in pure oxygen, and was totally consumed. Nothing was left behind but the misshapen plastic of the chair she had occupied and two porcelain crowns.

Also present at Lavinia's demise were Hollis Byrd, George Ferris, Jack Vanderberg, and our pastor, Vern Berry. Except for that single, extraordinary occurrence, it was a perfectly normal meeting of the church board. We talked about purchasing new

hymnals and about the problem with the carpenter ants. We were just getting on to setting a date for the sunday school picnic when she burst into flame. It was all over before any of us could grasp what was happening.

Not present at our meeting, the police continued to doubt the existence of spontaneous human combustion, and spent a good many hours tormenting poor Fred Baker, Lavinia's husband. Five or six years older than his spouse, Fred is past eighty. Nobody who knows him would ever believe him capable of torching his wife by remote control. Even if he harbored some secret animosity after almost sixty years of marriage, he lacked both the imagination and the skills needed to accomplish murder by such unorthodox means.

"Earl," he said to me after a four hour session at the station house, "I'm not a bad man. I've been a pretty straight shooter all my life, and you can attest to that, being my lawyer for a good piece of that time. What'd I ever do to deserve this?"

I tried to assure him that the police would soon tire of their efforts to make a case against him, but he had something else in mind.

"Hell," he continued, "I don't mean the cops. They're just ordinary guys trying to see things in an ordinary way, and I doubt I'd act any different if I were in their shoes. You and me, though, try as we might, we know this thing with Lavinia is anything but ordinary. Well I believed in ordinary things for

eighty years, but now it looks like I was wrong. Eighty years is a long time to be wrong."

I tried to look sympathetic, but he had something else in mind.

"Don't you get it, Earl? Lots of fellows my age have lost their wives, but me, I've lost a heap more than that. I mean, well, if I'd died last week I might have gone thinking my life made some sense. Now I'm not so sure. Suppose all those sensible things I was doing all those years were just pure jackass nonsense. Suppose I've lived eighty years never really knowing which end was up. Doesn't leave me much time to get straightened out now, does it? Hell of a situation for a man my age. So tell me now, what'd I ever do to deserve it?"

Now I'm not a young man myself, although I'm nearly twenty years younger than Fred, and for a minute there he almost got me. Suppose I'd been getting things wrong for the past sixty-one years, I thought. Then what? That was only for a minute, though. Just because something unusual happens, just because we're surprised every so often, that's no reason to discredit everything we ever believed. There had to be a rational explanation for what happened to Lavinia, even if we couldn't quite figure it out just yet.

"You want a rational explanation?" Fred replied. "I'll give you one. You and the rest of the Church Board got in this big fight with Lavinia at the last meeting, maybe over the carpet for the vestry or some such thing. She could be a mighty stubborn woman from time to time, and even I felt like poking

her in the snoot once or twice. So George and Hollis grab her while Reverend Berry tries to beat some sense into her, you and Jack cheering him on. Whoops, Vern, I guess you hit her a little too hard, she sure appears to be dead, what'll we do now? Hey, I know, something I saw in one of those crazy papers from the supermarket, they called it spontaneous human combustion. That ought to do the trick. Jack's the dentist, he pops out the crowns. Put them on that plastic chair with a little gasoline, find some other place to stash the body, and bingo, the perfect crime. Rational as all hell, Earl, the only problem being that it's not what happened. Was it?"

There wasn't a thing I could say to that, but I was thinking that maybe old Fred had a few more brains than I'd ever imagined. There had to be dozens of explanations that would seem, to those who hadn't been there, more rational than anything I could think of to account for what I'd seen. What people believed would depend, more than anything else, on their own ideas about what was ordinary. I suppose that lawyers who do jury work live with that idea all the time, but I do contract law. I'm more comfortable with things all laid out in black and white.

Lieutenant Rose and Sergeant Lovaglio were not members of our church, but they were present at the next meeting of the Board. Only three days after Lavinia's demise, Hollis Byrd can be forgiven for convening the meeting in the conference room at his bank rather than in the meeting room at church. The two policemen were the first order of business.

"Gentlemen," Rose began when all were assembled, "thank you for allowing us to speak to you here today, because there's something we want you all to know. The police lab has finished analyzing the residues from the area where you claim Mrs. Baker went up in flames. They found nothing to indicate that any living thing was occupying that chair when it melted. They tell us that the heat necessary to consume a human being so completely would have killed everyone in the room and burned down the rest of the church for good measure. In other words, the story you told us just isn't true.

"I imagine that as soon as we're gone, you'll all try to come up with a more believable story. Let me suggest one or two. You might decide that you were all the victims of some mass hallucination. A lot of people might buy that. They'll figure that you're all pretty religious, and that religious people are wide open to that kind of thing. But you'll still have to explain what happened to Mrs. Baker, because she's gone. That's no hallucination. And please don't try to convince us she was taken straight off to heaven. From what we've been able to learn about her she was a decent old lady, but she was hardly a saint."

There was no doubt about it, he was actively trying to antagonize us. Maybe he thought he could prod somebody into confessing something, but all he got for his trouble was a bit of outrage from George Ferris, including lists of our varied accomplishments and all the people who would attest to how we were pillars of the community. George's own lists, naturally, were

the longest. Along with our church, George helps run the Rotary, the Little League, the Chamber of Commerce, and the volunteer fire department. Little decals that say "Ferris Motors" must be on half the cars in town.

Rose waited patiently while George said his piece, then continued as if there were no interruption. "So just in case anyone missed my main point, it's this: the forensic evidence in this case directly contradicts the stories you've told us. That means the four of you, intentionally or unintentionally, have made false and misleading statements to the police. If anybody wants to speak to me or to Sergeant Lovaglio in confidence, you can reach us at the station house. Thank you for your time. We'll let you get on with your meeting now."

They rose and left the room, but the Sergeant poked his head back in. "Oh, the Lieutenant didn't mention this, but the case has been reclassified from death under suspicious circumstances to missing persons, seeing as we can't be sure Mrs. Baker is actually dead. If she turned up alive somewhere, it sure would save us all a lot of trouble."

Once they were gone, nobody knew what to say. It was Hollis Byrd who finally broke the silence. "They made a mistake. That's all there is to it, they made a mistake. There's no other explanation."

Jack Vanderberg offered some tentative support. "Labs make mistakes. You wouldn't believe the trouble I've had with dental labs over the years."

"But what about the heat?" I asked. "I hadn't thought about it until the Lieutenant mentioned it, but I was only four or five feet away from her, and I don't think I felt any heat at all. Did any of you?"

"Well, we all saw that melted chair," Hollis grumbled.

"It should have burned," said Jack. "It's plastic."

We all fell silent again, except for some low mumbling from Vern Berry. I suppose he was praying.

The next suggestion came from George Ferris. "You know, I was thinking about what the Sergeant said. What if she's still alive?"

That got our attention. Even the Reverend stopped praying to join the chorus of protest.

"No, listen. Remember the Rotary meeting when we had the magician, back before Christmas?"

Apart from George, only Hollis was present at that meeting.

"Well," George continued, "at the end of his act he made himself disappear. A flash of light, a puff of smoke, and poof, he was gone. Except to pick up his check, of course. Nobody could figure out how he did it."

"Lavinia didn't poof," objected Jack. "She sort of, well, flamed away from the outside in. It took some time, and she left her crowns behind, and I know those crowns. They were her crowns, and I'd swear to it."

"So it wasn't exactly the same trick. That doesn't mean it wasn't a trick. If Lavinia wanted to disappear, what better way to do it?"

That brought another chorus of objections. Why should Lavinia want to disappear? If she did, why would she pick such an odd way to do it? Where would she learn a complicated magic trick? Wouldn't she have needed special equipment? And what about Fred?

George had answers for everything. According to George, Fred was in on the deception. The idea was that Lavinia would appear to die so that Fred could collect her life insurance. Our board, all respected members of the community, would testify that we saw Lavinia die in a way that would explain the absence of a body. In a few months, Fred would sell his house and move to Florida, where he and Lavinia would enjoy their old age in affluence. As Fred might have said, it was rational as all hell, the only problem being that it was not what happened.

That was when Jack Vanderberg turned to Vern Berry and said, "You've been awfully quiet, Reverend. Maybe you might let us in on what you've been thinking."

Vern looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, not being an actual member of the Board, I thought, well... Well, I've been praying for poor Lavinia, and for Fred, of course, and for all of us here."

"But what do you *think*," Jack insisted. "Lab mistakes? Magic tricks? Or how about this? How about the possibility that God had a direct hand in what happened to Lavinia? God can make a fire burn however He wants, like the burning bush or the fiery furnace. Maybe God had some good reason to take Lavinia right in the middle of a church board meeting. I know, the cops



will never believe it, but that doesn't mean we can't, does it? You're the expert, Vern. What do you say?"

It seemed to me that if God had any reason to take Lavinia, a stroke or a heart attack would have done the trick just fine. Just the same, I gave my close attention to our pastor. He had been with us for over five years, and I was one of the people who interviewed him for the job. In all that time, I don't think a single member of our church ever asked him a theological question. I'll have to hand it to him, though, he was ready with an answer.

"I'm sorry, Jack, but we can't make God responsible for the things that confuse us or sadden us. We'd be no better than those who claimed the Black Death or the Lisbon earthquake were sent as punishments for some specific sins. That's not the way God operates. I don't know what happened to Lavinia, but I do know it was entirely natural."

"That's not what the cops say."

"Then we should pray that the police are able to discover the truth."

Jack just shook his head, his face wearing an expression of disgust. I figured it was time to offer some legal advice. No matter how many threats the Lieutenant made, we had seen what we had seen. The fact that our testimony contradicted the police lab report was the Lieutenant's problem, not ours, at least as far as legalities went. There was no evidence to show we intentionally lied to the police because we hadn't done so.

As for explaining what happened to Lavinia, there was no reason for the church board to reach agreement. Each of us could believe whatever he was inclined to believe. Someday, perhaps, we might learn the truth.

Over the next two weeks, Lieutenant Rose and Sergeant Lovaglio questioned each of us three more times. Other policemen poked long steel rods into newly dug garden plots and dragged two or three local ponds, but found nothing of interest. In most ways, our lives went back to normal.

All that happened seven months ago. Since then, Hollis Byrd read a magazine article and decided Lavinia was the victim of spontaneous cold fusion, a cause of death beyond the experience of police forensic experts. George Ferris continues to believe that what we saw was a carefully contrived illusion, and often asks how soon Fred means to leave for Florida. Jack Vanderberg joined a different church, one more inclined to see direct involvement of the Divine in our day to day affairs.

Vern Berry is no longer with us, having accepted a pulpit in another town, nearer to his aged mother. The new parson is a much younger man, straight from the seminary. He is very interested in theology, and many members of the congregation find his sermons fascinating. As for me, I seldom attend the service anymore, and I gave up my seat on the board. Sometimes I go fishing with Fred Baker.

Fred no longer feels the need to re-examine the long years of his life in the light of Lavinia's mysterious departure. The essential question, he says, is not why she went as she did, but

why she had to go at all. Life's cruelest, most potent mysteries, according to Fred, are those that are most mundane, familiar, and ordinary. I am inclined to agree.

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