

The Curious Prayer Life of Muriel Smith

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2019

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0123-3

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0121-9

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my beloved father, M. D. Sanders, a teacher who
made a difference.

1

What in the world was taking Roxanne so long? She was the only driver in the world inconsiderate enough to leave a seventy-one-year-old friend sitting all alone in her car. Muriel Smith glanced at her watch. More than thirty minutes had passed since Roxanne hobbled off to the other end of the strip mall. The sun was higher in the sky then, the white building blocks of the mall more blinding as they reflected the afternoon glare.

If Muriel hadn't been so eager to escape her lonely house, she never would have accepted Roxanne's invitation. At home she could turn on the TV and look for one of her favorite police dramas.

Or maybe Chloe would drop by. Chloe, the brightest spot in her life.

Muriel peered past the used book store and the sandwich shop to the very end of the sidewalk. The door of *Ye Olde Antiques Shoppe* remained closed.

The clerk must be giving Roxanne another one of her ridiculous sales pitches.

Ye Olde Antiques Shoppe didn't sell antiques at all.

Just junk. Chipped blue and white Corning Ware, 1950's parfait glasses, and bright orange fondue pots that might or might not heat when plugged in. The same household items Muriel's mother, God rest her soul, put in the trash decades ago.

The first time they went into the store, Roxanne found a beautiful ceramic vase. Dainty pink flowers swirled up a body of cobalt blue. But it hadn't belonged to the last tsar of Russia as the salesclerk with the pierced eyebrow claimed.

"That smudge of dirt on the side? That comes from being buried in 1916. The Grand Duchess Anastasia dug in the ground with her own bare hands to save this very vase from the Bolsheviks. Of all her vases, this was Anastasia's favorite." The clerk caressed one of the ceramic sprigs of flowers as if the vase held her own dear grandmother's ashes.

"The last tsar of Russia. Just think of it, Muriel." Roxanne's murmur was hushed and reverent. The type of murmur usually reserved for Rembrandts and Renoirs in museum cubbyholes roped off by tasseled red cords.

"A tsarist treasure? For twenty-five dollars? I don't think so." The words had popped out of Muriel's mouth before she could think them through.

Roxanne had stepped down from the curb and started across the parking lot, two steps ahead of Muriel. "Do you have to say things like that while we're still in the store? Can't you at least wait until we're out the door? If the clerks don't like us, they won't show us their best merchandise."

Best merchandise, indeed!

Every shopping trip since, Roxanne insisted on going into the antiques store alone. She didn't even

show Muriel her purchases. She just placed them in the trunk of her car, brown bag and all.

Muriel sank back into her seat. *Come on, Roxanne. Please. It's getting late.* If Muriel could just catch the teen who lived next door before he left to bag groceries at the supermarket, maybe she could talk him into mowing her lawn one more time. The jerk cord on her lawnmower was too difficult for her to pull. Now there was an antique!

Oh, to be like her daughter, Natalie, who could afford a lawn service. Natalie offered no sympathy at all. "Honestly, Mother. Just buy a new mower. One of the modern ones that starts with a key. You don't need upper arm strength to start those."

Natalie could put a hundred new mowers on her husband's charge cards if she wanted. She was never forced to stretch a small deposit from Social Security so it lasted a whole month.

Natalie's husband, Stan, never let Muriel take money out of the investment account Stan set up for her after Howard died. Muriel should never have allowed Stan to take over her finances. Becoming a widow had made Muriel lonely, not incompetent.

"Twelve percent, Muriel," Stan said. "I'm making you a steady twelve percent every single year. Up years. Down years. Remember when all those people on TV complained their portfolios dropped twenty percent? Yours didn't. It went up the same as always. It's all in the paperwork. You don't want to take your money out of your account now. It might seem to you that I'm keeping you on a tight leash. But I'm doing it for your own protection. Believe me."

Whether the market was up or the market was down, it was never the right time. Stan always had

some excuse. She shouldn't have to beg for her own money. *Oh, Lord, do You think You could find someone to mow my lawn? I don't want to argue with Stan. It'll just strain my relationship with Natalie.*

Natalie already looked down on a mother who had never accomplished more than being an underpaid, unappreciated teacher.

The person God found to mow her lawn would have to be someone responsible and cheap. Soon Muriel would need a machete to make her way to the hedge of peonies that separated her backyard from the alley. The neighbors would start complaining about her yard being an eyesore. Between the unusually high temperatures in May and all the rain they'd had, the grass was weeks ahead of schedule. If her neighbors reported her to town hall, she'd not only have to find someone immediately to mow her lawn, she'd also have to pay a fine. *Please, Lord. If I can't even afford mowing, how can I afford a fine?* She wasn't asking for something big like a romance or a Hawaiian vacation. She could understand why God wouldn't answer those kinds of prayers. But lawn-mowing wasn't a luxury.

A thin young woman walked an even thinner greyhound across the ribbon of grass that edged the mall's parking lot. The dog's nose was as pointed as a newly sharpened pencil. Muriel turned her head to watch them go by.

"Lady, move over." The voice came from the right. "Lady, what's the matter with you? Are you deaf? Move over."

The passenger-side door flew open, letting a blast of fresh air into the car.

Roxanne had forgotten to lock the doors. And Muriel hadn't even noticed. *Oh, my.*

The man demanded again, louder and more irritated. "Lady! Move over!"

"What are you doing?" Muriel's alto voice hovered on the edge of soprano. "This isn't your car. Shame on you. Close the door." Her heart fluttered. She groped for the handle of the open car door and unexpectedly touched flesh. She jerked back.

The stranger clenching the inside door handle had the smooth texture-less skin of youth. A dragon tattoo adorned his forearm, black and menacing. A blood-red flame shot from the dragon's mouth. The young man wore a surprisingly well ironed shirt and an even more surprisingly youthful face. Too youthful to belong to some would-be carjacker. The fuzz that grew between nose and upper lip was light and sparse. Except for the tattoo, he looked just like the high school sophomores she taught geometry to fifteen years ago.

"Move over." The teen motioned with his right hand as if he were shooing a cat. With his left hand, he hurled his leather jacket into the backseat.

Muriel looked in dismay at the console separating the two front seats. Maybe a teenage boy was limber enough to climb over it. She was not. "You want me to do what?"

The console with its protruding shift lever seemed to grow taller, changing from hard-to-get-over to insurmountable. Years ago when cars had bench seats, it made sense to tell someone to move over. But now?

"Move over, lady." The voice sounded more desperate now. The dragon tattoo flexed as the teen formed a fist.

"There's a thing in the middle. A console. A lever. I can't climb over it. You see my white hair? I'm old enough to be your grandmother."

"Move over or I'll shoot." The teen jerked his right hand to his pants pocket, an exaggerated cowboy kind of move.

Muriel grabbed her left leg and maneuvered it over the center console lever and onto the driver's side floor mat. Then she moved her right leg. Lastly, she put her hands on the car seat, one on each side of her rather substantial bottom, pushed up, and inched to the left. Her breathing quickened. "I can't do this. It's too hard."

"You better do it. And you better do it fast."

Muriel took a deep breath and, with one determined lunge, cleared the lever. She landed with a plop in the driver's seat. "There. Are you happy now?"

The punk climbed into the vacated passenger seat and glared at her. "Well, start the car, lady. What are you? Stupid?" He grabbed his seat belt.

If he were one of Muriel's former geometry students, she would have sent him to the principal's office for his rudeness.

He ran his fingers through the dark strands of hair that fell almost into his eyes. His face was a combination of emotions, one succeeding the other so rapidly that sometimes two contradictory thoughts seemed superimposed.

Muriel gulped in air. The boy smelled like sheets hung out in the summer sun. *Thank You, Lord.* But what a strange clean scent for a carjacker with a dragon tattoo.

"Well? Are you going to start the car or not?"

"I haven't driven for ten years. Not since my husband died." Was driving a car like riding a bicycle? Did it just come back automatically? She had read that in some magazine article in a doctor's waiting room.

She hadn't believed it then. She certainly didn't believe it now. She reached for the keys that hung from the ignition. Thank goodness Roxanne always pulled through a parking place. Muriel wouldn't have been able to go in reverse. She peered to the end of the row of stores. Roxanne must certainly be done shopping by now. The sidewalk was empty.

Poor Roxanne would have to call a cab. And once she got home, how would she get into her house? Her house key dangled from the same key ring as her car key.

Roxanne would stroll leisurely out of that blasted second-hand store, shopping bag in hand. She would find no car, no keys, no Muriel. It would be the worst crisis Roxanne ever faced in her sixty-nine years. Roxanne would panic, thinking she'd not parked in her usual place.

Muriel turned the key in the ignition and the car sprang to life. Her right foot moved to the brake of its own accord. Everything seemed so automatic, so normal, as if she had driven just yesterday. But the last time she drove was a fiasco. Sweat broke out on her forehead. The interior of the car seemed to teeter like a ride at an amusement park. This was no time to faint. Breathe in, breathe out. She counted her breaths.

"Now listen up, lady," the punk said. "I don't want to repeat this. Don't go too fast. Don't go too slow. Don't even think about putting on the flashers or blasting the horn. I'm stronger than you are, and I'm faster than you are, and I've got a gun. So you'd better not try anything stupid. If you draw any attention to this car, I'll shoot to kill. You first. Then me. One bullet each. Right through the temple." He banged on his right temple with his forefinger, one, two, three. "You

don't want to get shot, do you?"

"Of course not. Nobody wants to get shot." *And Lord, I need to see Chloe's baby before I die. I can hardly wait to see its eyes focusing on my face. To count its fingers and kiss its little toes. My great-grandchild. I won't die before I see it. I absolutely refuse.*

"So here's the story: You're my grandma. We're out shopping. You got it, Gram?" The teen drew the word "gram" out as if it were composed of three syllables, the consonants emphasized and guttural.

"Got it." Muriel's left hand pushed down on the turn signal. The green arrow flashed and clicked. How amazing. If someone asked her yesterday how to put the turn signal on in a car, she wouldn't have been able to answer. Her right hand, too, was shifting from *park* to *drive* as if it had a mind of its own.

As Muriel pushed down the gas pedal, the car inched out of its space. She grasped the steering wheel and aimed the car at the two-lane ramp that exited the mall. "Two questions." Her voice quavered. She hated when it did that.

"All right. Two questions. But after this, I'm the one who asks the questions. 'Cause I'm the one who's got the gun. That makes me the boss."

Chills washed over Muriel. She struggled to keep her voice calm. "OK. You're the boss. So you have to tell me whether to go right or left at the traffic light. It might take me some time to get into the proper lane. Remember, I haven't driven for ten years." She could almost feel the wheels turning in the teen's brain as he contemplated the options.

"Right," he said. "You're going to go right at the traffic light. I don't want to wait for it to change."

Muriel stopped at the end of the exit ramp and

looked out the driver's side window.

"Well? What's the matter, lady? Are you going to go or not?"

Muriel forced a pretense of calm and confidence into her voice just like the first September morning she stood alone before a classroom of twenty-five wiggly teens. "There's no need for you to get upset. Don't worry. I'll go. I'm just waiting for the traffic to clear."

"Traffic? What traffic?"

"There's a truck down there."

The punk leaned closer to the driver's side window and peered out. "You mean that tiny blue dot on the far horizon?"

The teen was close enough to Muriel that she could smell mint on his breath. "Not so very far. I don't want to get rear-ended. I'm sure you don't want that either. There'd be accident reports, and insurance forms, and police cars coming from all directions."

"Rear-ended? Are you kidding me? That truck's a million miles away."

"It's better to be safe. You know, I don't think I can do this. Not if you're going to rush me. This road's a lot busier than I anticipated."

"You'd better do it. Right now, your driving ability's the only thing keeping you alive."

The car behind Muriel honked loud and long just as the blue truck put on its turn signal and pulled into the far left lane.

Muriel eased out into the right lane, going a good ten miles below the posted speed limit.

The punk pushed his hair out of his eyes again. "So what's your second question? You'd better make it a good one. It's the last one you're ever going to get."

My last question? Ever? What does he mean? Did he

mean he wouldn't allow her to ask him any more questions? Or did he mean he planned to shoot her before she could? Either meaning could be inferred by what he just said. She didn't dare ask him to clarify. She didn't want to know.

Muriel couldn't die now. Not with Chloe's baby on the way. And not until she'd accomplished something important on earth. Motherhood and teaching. That was her life. Now she had nothing to show for either. No loving daughter to be with in her old age. No grateful high school graduate sending her Christmas cards year after year. Her old students probably never used geometry. Not in real life. Muriel never used it either.

Her great-grandchild. Imagine! It seemed only yesterday that Muriel watched Chloe in her crib through the hospital nursery window. Natalie stood beside her in her hospital gown and cashmere bathrobe. Muriel had felt so close to her. Bound by the experience of childbirth. Bound by the baby in the crib. To think now that twenty-one years had flown by. Muriel had to stay alive. She would do anything the teen told her. Even drive. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It had no calming effect at all.

"Well? You going to ask me something else or not, lady?"

"In a minute. I have to stop at this red light first."

"You put your foot on the brake. You press the brake down. Are you telling me you can't talk and brake at the same time?"

A long silence ensued as Muriel crept up to the light.

The punk's voice increased in volume with every word. "Good grief, lady. What are you? The world's

worst driver ever?"

"I haven't had an accident in ten years. Not even a parking ticket." That much was true. No need to go into details.

"So now you're stopped. Get your second question over with before I change my mind and shoot you just for the fun of it."

Muriel spit her words out before she lost her nerve. "If I'm going to pretend to be your grandma, don't you think I should know your name?"

The silence stretched between them, thinner and tauter with each passing second.

If he gave her his real name, she'd have something substantial to tell the police when this was over. It wouldn't be that hard to ID him. Not with his long dark hair and his dragon tattoo. If he gave her his real name, he'd probably have to kill her.

If only she'd accomplished something in her seventy-one years. She didn't want a funeral like her husband's. Five people standing around a six-foot grave. It had been embarrassing. Even now tears came to her eyes when she remembered.

Though a bullet to the head might be better than Howard's slow, agonizing death. Chemotherapy. Radiation. He had suffered through so much at the end. Indignity after indignity. Most disturbing of all were Natalie's sporadic appearances. Her own father! With just months left to live. And Natalie only came to visit when she had nothing better to do.

It hadn't bothered Howard at all. He had been so pathetically grateful to see his daughter, his whole face lighting up each and every time she deigned to drop by. He never seemed to notice the fresh salon highlights in Natalie's naturally blond hair or her

newly manicured nails, items higher on her list of priorities.

Muriel sighed such a deep sigh that the punk turned to look at her.

He pushed his long hair out of his eyes. "I'm thinking."

"So was I. I asked you something, didn't I? Oh, yes, I asked your name."

"That's what I'm thinking about."

"You don't have to give me your real name. I won't know the difference anyway. But it has to be a name you'll remember. And a name you'll answer to. Otherwise, we won't be fooling anybody. Not if you want me to pretend I'm your grandmother."

If he gave her his real name, she'd have no hope of living through this ordeal. Absolutely none. Why had she ever asked such a stupid question? It was too late to take it back now. One of these days, she'd have to learn to think before she spoke.

The punk slouched down in his seat, his long legs spread out one to each side. "Kevin," he finally said. "My name's Kevin."

"Kevin's a nice name. I like it. Is it your real name?" *Now why had she asked that?*

"That's none of your business, lady. The light's green now. Just shut up and drive."

The longer Muriel drove, the more she remembered why she'd stopped driving. It wasn't just the one time she entered an exit-only ramp and went the wrong way on the highway. She hadn't known what to tell the police officer who showed up, his patrol car lights flashing. Her husband had died just hours before. How could they have a funeral with only five attendees? How could she manage everything on

her own? The policeman was so unsympathetic that she'd burst into tears.

Muriel glanced to her right. Kevin had reclined his seat a little and seemed to be watching the series of industrial parks they passed by. He acted as if they were out for a casual Sunday afternoon jaunt. True, Kevin was rubbing his hands together nervously, but he did not bang his foot on an imaginary brake on the passenger-side floor. Incredibly, Kevin seemed to assume that Muriel was competent.

Her hands began to shake.

Kevin snapped to attention. "What's the matter with you? You got some old lady disease or something?"

"I don't drive."

"Looks to me like you're driving."

"I mean I haven't driven since my husband died ten years ago. I don't remember the traffic being so heavy then. Would you like to take over? I could just pull into one of these company parking lots. Right in, right out. That should be easy enough. We can change seats. It'll only take a minute."

"Sure, lady. That's a great idea. Why don't you just pull over and stop the car so you can get out and run for your life. How dumb do you think I am?"

"How far can I run if you have a gun?"

"Good point." Kevin was silent for a long time.

"I can't keep driving like this." And yet she was.

"I can't drive either," Kevin finally said. "I've never even been behind the steering wheel of a moving car. It's all my father's fault. He says I'm irresponsible. He's such a jerk. I hate him."

You think carjacking an old lady will make your father decide you're responsible? The corners of Muriel's lips

curled. The students in her geometry classes had thought in similar convoluted ways. Teen brains were different from adult brains. It was a scientific fact. A teachers' workshop on the subject had lasted a whole day. No wonder teaching teens geometric proofs was so hard.

"Don't laugh at me, lady. I'm warning you. I'm a dangerous man."

"Sorry." Muriel set her lips back into one straight line. Why, Kevin was just a child. She dared not speak the words out loud. Child or not, he had a gun. She glanced again at the boy. Fuzz above the lips but the cheeks were clean. He'd probably never even shaved. After fifteen years teaching high school, she knew that age group well.

"Watch out, lady! Didn't you see that man walking his dog? Are you trying to kill someone?" Kevin cleared his throat. "So, lady. You know my name now. Maybe you should tell me your name. I don't want to keep calling you lady. It sounds weird."

Muriel could lie about her name. That was a possibility. But then she'd have to remember what the lie was. And she'd have to answer to an unfamiliar name. No, that would be too complicated. Anyway, there were so many Smiths in the world. It would be almost impossible for him to track her down. "My name is Mrs. Smith."

Kevin clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Well, that's a likely story. I think I'll call you Mrs. B. I like that better than Mrs. Smith, anyway."

"That's fine, Kevin. You can call me anything you want. You're the boss." She'd never had a nickname. Mrs. B sounded like a plump farm wife with pies cooling on the windowsill. She could live with it.

Kevin pointed ahead. "That's where we're going. Up that ramp. See that big green sign on the right? We'll get on the highway there and drive west. I'm thinking maybe Montana. Or Wyoming. It doesn't much matter. As long as it's a place my father won't find me."

Muriel's whole body stiffened. "Highway? I don't think so, Kevin."

"What do you mean you don't think so?"

"I don't merge. Not onto the highway. I haven't merged for years."

"You're going to merge today, Mrs. B. Remember I'm the boss."

Muriel looked at the cars speeding along the overpass. "Is that the highway all the way up there?"

"That's the highway."

"Those cars are going awfully fast."

"That's what you do on a highway. You go fast. That's the whole point."

The cars followed each other so closely that they looked more like a line of freight train cars than a succession of automobiles. No space existed to squeeze a car in between them. *I can't do this*. Her hands, which had been steady, trembled again. Death on the highway or death at gunpoint. Neither option appealed. But at least one would not be her fault.

"The ramp's coming up, Mrs. B. Put your turn signal on. What's the matter with you?"

The ramp was only feet away. Muriel took a deep breath and stepped hard on the gas pedal. She zoomed past the entrance to the highway.

"What? You didn't even try to turn!" Kevin's head swiveled as the entrance ramp disappeared.

"I did try to turn, Kevin. Honest. I tried really

hard. I just couldn't do it. I told you. I don't merge. It scares me."

Kevin's voice went up half an octave. "Merging scares you more than my gun? Are you crazy? Didn't I tell you I'd shoot? You can't just say you don't merge. You have to do what I say. That's how it's supposed to work."

"I am doing what you say. Mostly. I moved over. I'm driving. And I did think about merging. Even if I couldn't do it. Please don't shoot me. My granddaughter's pregnant. My great-grandchild is due in just a few months. Don't shoot me now. Please. Maybe you can shoot me after the baby comes. I could give you my address."

There was a long pause. "Are you crazy?"

Muriel ignored the question. "And please don't ask me to make a U-turn either, because..."

Kevin banged the heel of his hand on his forehead. "Let me guess. You don't make U-turns. They scare you."

"Especially those broken U's. I'm too slow. Somebody always honks at me. I hate being honked at. It's so rude. And it's not easy for me to go in reverse either. I can't see over the headrest."

"I can't believe I picked a loser like you. So what's your plan?"

Her plan? She didn't have any plan.

Muriel looked out the driver's side window. Heavy traffic had disappeared and factories with smoke billowing from their chimneys had morphed into blue horizons with occasional cirrus clouds. In the distance, a herd of black and white Holsteins chewed their cuds. "I kind of like the road we're on right now. There's not much traffic."

"You can say that again. We haven't seen more than two cars since you missed that entrance ramp."

"I know." Muriel leaned back in the driver's seat and relaxed her grip.

Kevin banged his head on the headrest. His long legs sprawled out so one knee was touching the shift knob and the other was wedged against the door. "I don't believe this. Of all the people in the world..."

A ringing from the backseat interrupted his complaint.

Kevin twisted around, grabbed his jacket, and took a cell phone out of one of its pockets. He glanced at the display. "My father. So I'm irresponsible, am I? I'll show him." He lowered the window and threw the phone into a patch of thick brush. Then he tossed his jacket into the backseat.

Muriel bit her lower lip to keep from speaking. How could Kevin be twisting that much with a gun in his pants pocket? Or was the gun in the jacket? Maybe there was hope to get out of this predicament alive. She had to get possession of his gun. Then she could take control of the situation.

Maybe Natalie would be proud and no longer embarrassed to introduce her mother to her high-society friends. "Only a school teacher. Never accomplished much of anything." Natalie never used those exact words. Sometimes she didn't introduce Muriel at all. Maybe now Natalie could brag that her mother had been commended for catching a carjacker. No, apprehending. The word had a nice ring to it. *Mrs. Muriel Smith apprehended a fugitive from justice today.*

Fugitive from justice.

That was good, too. Better than "carjacker." Perhaps heroically apprehended. The imaginary