

Miss Deenie

I overheard a startling conversation at Sunday buffet lunch in Jankins, Alabama. Here's my recollection of it:

Miss Deenie gave me a big hug when I saw her in the Piggly Wiggly recently. Miss Deenie was the custodian at the elementary school where I worked, first as a teacher, and then as principal. I'm retired now, so I don't see Miss Deenie often, seeing her reminded me that there are some people you can count on to do whatever the situation calls for.

When I was a teacher, there was a mouse problem in my classroom. Call Miss Deenie. She set out glue traps. When I arrived before class next morning, there was a mouse stuck on the glue trap. Call Miss Deenie. Without hesitation, she yanked the mouse right off the trap, leaving a couple of legs. "It's still good," she said. "Still got some stick," she noted as she placed it in on a shelf in her custodian's closet to be brought out the next time there was a need for it.

Maybe that shouldn't have surprised me. For decades, Miss Deenie routinely cleaned up poop, vomit, and blood at the elementary school. She wasn't squeamish at all, which is an ideal attribute for such work. But she was afraid of thunderstorms. When I was principal, Miss Deenie would always come to my office during a thunderstorm. "I'll be safe here with you because they won't let anything bad happen to the principal." I know that's not true, but it was Miss Deenie's firm belief, and I would not try to convince her otherwise or nor would I ever send her away.

Once while we waited out a thunderstorm together, Miss Deenie told me that Mister Ervin (her husband, also a school custodian) came home smashed from drinking more than his usual amount. "I tied him to a chair on the front porch and beat him good," she exclaimed. I pictured Miss Deenie, frustrated and furious, whacking away at her slouching husband until her wiry arms were exhausted. It was probably a good thing that Mister Ervin was nearly unconscious from the start.

That beating didn't kill him, but when Mister Ervin died some years later, practically the whole school district came to the visitation at the Funeral Home. There he was in the casket, an open pack of Lucky Strikes in the pocket of his

tattered white Tee-shirt! A cigarette propped between the fingers of his right hand! He looked so natural.

“Whose idea was that?” I asked the Funeral Director discreetly. “We honor the requests of the family,” he explained, his palms upturned and his shoulders raised as if to say, “That’s not a choice we would have made.”

Another person at the table described how someone she knew had been displayed in three different outfits at the Funeral Home: dark suit with a tie, work coveralls, and finally the crimson and white gameday attire of a rabid Alabama fan, including a “Roll Tide” cap. Different funeral home, same explanation: “We honor the requests of the family.”

Those diners concluded that if a family is willing to pay, Funeral Directors everywhere are willing to accommodate all sorts of unusual requests.

As the school principal, I knew Miss Deenie’s and Mister Ervin’s salaries. They weren’t in a position to easily absorb burial costs. The school took up a collection. People were very generous. Miss Deenie was presented with a check that was more than enough to cover the bill, but weeks later the Funeral Director confided to me that she hadn’t paid a penny. When we had a few minutes alone during the next thunderstorm, I asked, “Miss Deenie, have you paid the funeral home?”

“No,” she said without hesitation or embarrassment. “I had some other things to deal with. I needed new tires for that old car. And I paid the electric bill.”

Like I said, there are some people you can count on to do whatever the situation calls for, even though their choices are occasionally unconventional. In the grocery store, the situation called for a heartfelt hug, and Miss Deenie, as usual, delivered!

GR Davis
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