

PRAISE FOR THE EVAN WYCLIFF
MYSTERY SERIES

MULTIPLE-AWARD-WINNING NOVELS

This is literature masquerading as a mystery. Carefully yet powerfully, Gerald Jones creates a small, stunning world in a tiny midwestern town, infusing each character with not just life but wit, charm, and occasionally menace. This is the kind of writing one expects from John Irving or Jane Smiley.

— MARVIN J. WOLF, AUTHOR OF *THE RABBI
BEN MYSTERIES*, INCLUDING *A SCRIBE DIES IN
BROOKLYN*

This is an excellent read. Such an engaging storyteller! It really sucked me in. That last page did cause a triple-take, quadruple-take, and whatever comes after, up to about eight. Jones is definitely one of my favorite authors.

— JOHN RACHEL, AUTHOR OF *BLINDERS
KEEPERS* AND *THE MAN WHO LOVED
TOO MUCH*

PART I



Southern Missouri, eight months into the pandemic...

CHAPTER 1



Evan Wycliff didn't consider Stuart Shackleton his adversary, but the investment banker certainly was his nemesis. Every time the fellow made a request of him, it led the preacher into a nest of snakes. And now, as a result of Evan's curious meddling into matters that needn't concern him, Shackleton was in detention pending trial on a charge of first-degree murder. So, if he were convicted, perhaps the consequences of the man's schemes would soon be at an end.

It was the height of the pandemic. The balmy spring weather in Southern Missouri at least offered more opportunities for holed-up families to venture outside and greet their neighbors. Here in the courtroom, fewer than half the participants were wearing masks. State government hadn't mandated wearing them, and Evan well knew that whether on or off was pretty much a badge of political affiliation. Predictably, the defendant wasn't masked. He had friends and connections in Jeffersonville. Evan had one on, and his reputation as science apologist to his church congregation required him to set an example. Now that he was pastor, those pressures were wearing him down.

Despite what I think and advise, if all of the folks were wearing masks, it would look like a convocation of the Klan in here.

The alleged murder of Father Michael Coyle of Flat Bank Catholic

Charities had occurred more than a year ago. As the pretrial of the case had dragged on, Shackleton was in jail because he was a flight risk. A guy with all that money and access to private jets would have to be.

So it was ironic in the extreme when last evening Shackleton's attorney Elvin Harrison phoned Evan and urged him to pay a compassionate visit to Ann Shackleton because her husband was in lockup.

"She's in a bad way" was the only explanation — and perhaps all the attorney knew.

Evan had never visited the assisted-living wing of the Myerson Clinic. He'd certainly had enough to do with the adolescent treatment and rehab programs when he'd counseled teenage Luke Shackleton. He was struck by the signage on the building: *Myerson Memory Center*. True, many if not all of its patients were challenged with dementia. But he doubted whether the focus of treatment was improving or even recapturing their memories. Now he was here to see Ann because presumably her husband was worried about her, but the reasons were still unclear. Before erstwhile pastor Rev. Marcus Thurston had retired, regular compassionate visits had been part of his routine. Now Evan realized making those rounds would fall to him.

Local medical facilities and assisted-living centers were still permitting compassionate visits. Family members were counseled to come less often and to distance themselves when they did. But as a member of the clergy, Evan was permitted everywhere except inside an ICU, but he had to wear both a mask and a plastic face shield as well as answer a checklist of health questions to gain admission to each facility.

Before she'd slipped into dementia in recent years, Ann Shackleton had been a devout Catholic. She might not know or care about Evan's denomination, but it baffled him why Stuart Shackleton should be so eager to enlist a Baptist minister — especially Evan — for this personal mission.

What about her home church? Do they even know I'm involved?

When he asked after Ann Shackleton at the desk, Lucille, the receptionist, looked puzzled. Rather than waving him back, she advised him to go back to Urgent Care and take a seat in the waiting room. After what seemed a long delay there, a registered nurse came

out to greet him. Her badge identified her as Ornette Wheeler. She was middle-aged and slender, with a gaunt face the color of cocoa and more than a lifetime's share of worry lines. She'd been sweating so much the perspiration was fogging her face shield.

When he introduced himself, she also looked puzzled, asking, "Reverend, may I ask the purpose of your visit? The priest has only just left, and I must tell you it's been a difficult few hours."

"The priest?"

"Father Vasquez from All Saints," she sighed, adding in a subdued tone, "he'd come to give her the last rites at two this morning, but she went too quick."

"Oh, my," Evan said, regretting right away he hadn't asked more questions of Harrison. "I assume someone has informed her husband."

"The contact information we have at the nursing station is for his lawyer. Last night I let Mr. Harrison know she was having arrhythmia, but she's had those episodes before. Then early in the morning, as I say, she got very much worse, very fast. There's always a priest on-call, but by then all we got for the lawyer at that hour was voicemail."

I doubt you know I'm her son's guardian, but does his mother even know the boy exists?

The situation with Luke would be too complicated to explain just now. All Evan could think to say was, "I wasn't aware of the urgency. I should have come earlier. I'm too late, then."

"No," the nurse assured him, "I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say that at all."

"I don't follow."

"You see, we thought we'd lost her. Actually, we *did* lose her. She'd been in a-fib through the evening. We medicated — but suddenly, arrest. She coded, the team tried to resuscitate her, but she stayed flat-line. The doctor called it, and the team left the room. I sent a pickup order to the morgue. But evidently miracles do happen. I don't know how, but when they came to get her, she was back! Sitting up and chattering like a jaybird!"

"How is she now?"

"That's the thing. Before this, she was withdrawn. She has hardly said a word to anyone for months. Listless, low appetite. After a

serious episode like this, we'd expect to keep her in ICU for a while. But today she's sitting up and a motor mouth! She's not making much sense, which is her way, but she's acting like she's got a new lease on life!"

"May I see her? This may not be the time..."

"She's negative for Covid, so this cardiac episode is unrelated. The night-shift attending has gone home. The resident is here, but he wasn't on the floor when she coded. Me, my shift was over an hour ago, but I really want to be sure she's stabilized. You shouldn't stay long, especially if it makes her more agitated. We'd give her a sedative, but all that adrenalin right now might actually be what's sustaining her. So I'm thinking, if seeing you might help her calm down, it could be just the thing. If it's all right, I can stay in the room — I'll give you a nod if it's not working."

"Actually, she doesn't know me at all, so I don't expect she'll be telling me anything you shouldn't hear. I'm a friend of the family. Her husband is indisposed, which is why you had to go through Mr. Harrison. I want to give Stuart a report, but if this is not the time, I won't stay."



IT WAS JUST past eight in the morning. Ann Shackleton was indeed sitting up in bed in a private room. There were oxygen tubes in her nostrils, and she was hooked up to a heart monitor, which was displaying a steady sinus rhythm.

"Doctor!" she declared as Evan entered the room with Ornette. The patient's cheeks were rosy, her eyes were sparkling blue, and her hair was a mass of white curls. She didn't look at all like an invalid who had been anywhere near death's door.

"Doctor of Divinity," Evan muttered as he sat. "I'm Reverend Wycliff from Evangel Baptist. Stuart asked me to call on you." Nurse Wheeler stood next to the bed and gently took Ann's arm by the wrist with her gloved hand as if taking her pulse. The monitor's electronics were already doing that, but Evan guessed the nurse thought her touch

might be comforting to the patient, and it was her excuse to linger by the bed.

“Stuart. Stuart. Stuart. Stuart,” Ann tsiked, with a pronounced lisp. “That man will be the death of me. But not yet!”

And of how many others? Wait — innocent until proven guilty!

“He’s had some life challenges of his own recently,” Evan offered. “I’m sure he’ll want to see you as soon as he can put things in order.”

“You know, doctor,” the woman insisted, “my left arm was hurting s-s-something awful. And pressure on my ches-s-st! But now I’m breathing easier. What did you give me? Must be good s-s-s-tuff!”

Evan realized her hissing lisp was because several of her upper teeth were missing.

Ornette interjected, “We gave you medicine to keep your heart beating steadily. You’re doing fine now. But you need your rest. The Reverend can’t stay long.”

Evan suggested to Ornette, “Does Mrs. Shackleton perhaps have a denture? She might be more comfortable talking if she can have it.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Ornette exclaimed. “In all the excitement last night I forgot where I put it!”

She started to open the drawer to the bedside table when Mrs. Shackleton shouted, “Not in there! You put it in my slippers, dear!”

Evan looked where Ann was pointing to see a pair of fuzzy pink slippers near his elbow, perched on the radiator. The slippers were monogrammed with the patient’s initials, AKS, except the S was larger and in the middle, spelling *ASK*.

Now, there’s an omen!

Evan was startled to hear Nurse Wheeler gasp as she rushed over to grab the slippers. She slipped her hand inside to retrieve Ann’s dental bridge, removed it from its clear plastic bag, and quickly handed it over. Ann shoved the denture in, and her face lit up in a broad smile. Having all her teeth certainly made her prettier. Also tucked inside one of the slippers was gold jewelry, which Ann clutched at eagerly, perhaps not realizing her watch and wedding rings had also been missing.

“And put those slippers back on me!” Ann commanded, this time with no lisp. “My feet are cold!”

The nurse turned the covers down, replaced the slippers, and tucked the patient in. Then she turned to Evan and whispered, "Could we have a word outside?"

Ornette looked solemn, and she was shaking. Evan couldn't imagine what had transpired in the last few moments to upset her so.

As Evan got up to follow the nurse out, he said to Ann, "We'll have a longer visit when you're feeling better. Is there anything you'd like me to bring you?"

She flashed him a girlish grin and replied, "You always tell me I already have all that I need, Father."

First I'm the doctor, now I'm the priest. Yet she seems to know her husband's name.

"Wise words," Evan agreed.

She must think I'm her parish priest. I wonder whether he was the one who came to give her the rites.

In the hallway just outside Mrs. Shackleton's room, Nurse Wheeler grabbed Evan's arm as if clutching him for support.

"What's the matter?" he asked her. "Are *you* feeling okay? I suppose it's been an ordeal."

She responded breathlessly, "I removed her slippers, then I removed her denture. And her watch and her rings. I was gathering her personal effects. Procedure is to bag them before they come to take her to the morgue. But I didn't have a bag handy, so I just set them aside."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"She couldn't have seen me do it! She'd been clinically dead for fourteen minutes!"