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The telephone rang, breaking the somber mood of the women in Erika Amdahl's kitchen. Erika dabbed a tissue at the tear on her cheek and turned to her sister-in-law, and said, "Margaret, could you get that? I don't think I can talk to anybody right now." "Sure." Margaret picked up the wall phone, "Amdahl residence." A moment later she turned to Erika. "It's the funeral director. He's asking about clothes for Arvid." Erika blew her nose then said, "Tell him I'll send down the blue polka-dot dress he liked so much in the morning and ask him to please have Vera do his hair in a nice bun." Margaret's jaw dropped. She cupped her hand over the phone and half-shouted, "Dear God, Erika, you can't be serious!" "Oh, I'm serious all right." Erika stopped sniffing, sat up straight, and in a strong voice said, "I lost his lifestyle argument a long time ago. Why the hell should I send him into his next life any differently?" Erika's mind had been numb since the police phoned to tell her that her husband, Arvid, was killed instantly when his pickup truck careened off the side of the mountain. Was that yesterday or the day before? She remembered thanking the cop. She wasn't sure how long she had sat alone in a stupor until she called Arvid's sister, Margaret. She hated to be the one to break the news to her. She knew Margaret and Arvid had always been close. She first met Margaret at the wedding

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and had taken an instant liking to her, but she didn't really know her well. They cried together for ten minutes, then Margaret, who lived in Boston, said, "Erika, I'm coming down to help with arrangements and anything else you need me for. I'll get there as soon as I can." Erika was touched. "Oh, Margaret, that would be wonderful. You're the only one in your family I know at all. Listen, I have a very good friend, Alice Roget, who I'm sure can meet you at the county airport. Just let me know your schedule. Thank you." "OK, I'll be in touch," Margaret said. "See you soon. We'll get through this." Erika knew she could count on Alice. They had served together as deacons at the Presbyterian church, and she was probably her only friend left there, if not in the whole town. Alice was the go-to lady for anybody in need. She might be a little rough around the edges, but her heart was golden. Alice had picked up Margaret, who had flown in that morning, and brought her to Erika's house. She was still wearing the black dress she had arrived in. She was an attractive woman with subtle makeup and not a hair out of place. Alice was in jeans and a Washington Redskins sweatshirt. They had been comforting Erika at the kitchen table when the phone rang. Alice had also conscripted two other church ladies to help. They had driven themselves and were making sandwiches. They now stood in a wide-eyed stunned silence. Alice, aware of what had been happening in Erika's life, was not sure if the sandwich ladies knew anything about Arvid's activities with the Church of the Good Life. She wasn't about to let them ask. The top sergeant in Alice, which was always close to the surface, took over. There was never a leadership vacuum if she was around. She shooed them toward the door with her hands and barked, "OK, ladies, I think we've helped enough for the day. Thank you so much for coming. We'll see everyone at the funeral." She opened the door, and as they scooted out without a word, Alice called after them, "We just need to give Erika some private time with Margaret. Thanks again ladies." She stood at the door until their car drove out of the driveway. She marched back toward Erika and Margaret, who were both at the table. "Oh dear, Alice," Erika chuckled. "I think you scared them."

It's My Turn

“Well, hell’s bells, they’re good people. They’ll get over it.” She walked directly to Erika. Alice, not quite five feet tall, barely stood above the seated Erika. Her craggy face, withered into deep lines from years of chain-smoking, showed genuine concern. In a rare soft voice, she comforted Erika. “Don’t worry, dear, it’s going to be OK. You’re still young and you’ve been widowed less than two days. It’ll get better.” Erika smiled and sighed. “You know, I wouldn’t take that as an upbeat comment from anybody but you. Thank you.” “Well, it’s true, hon, you’ll see.” Alice took Erika’s face in her hands and kissed her on the forehead. “Now, listen, I’m leaving, and I think you should have a nice long talk with Margaret. I’ll see you in the morning, and I’ll be glad to take whatever clothes you decide on to the funeral home, OK?” Erika insisted, “It’s going to be the blue polka-dot, Alice.” “OK, I got it.” Walking toward the door, she mumbled to herself, but in a loud enough voice to be heard, “You’re sending that crossdressing-church-lady organist out in style.” At the door, she yelled back, “I’ll see you in the morning.” She got into her 1969 Volkswagen bus and sprayed gravel down both sides of the long driveway to the rim road that circled the mountaintop. Alice was well known in the area for bulldogging her hard-driven Billy Bus around the mountain curves; she had frequent discussions about it with the local police.