

Church Ladies

The original concept of the leaders of the Davenport First Church in Christ (Reformed) was to have enough volunteers so that the pews could be carried into the parking lot and painted there. Unfortunately, only Ida and Louise volunteered for the much-needed painting job, and because they couldn't carry the pews by themselves, the pair worked in the nave instead. There were two rows of pews with a center isle between them. Although none of the candles were lit in either transept, the light was brighter than one might expect with the overhead chandeliers at full brilliance.

To protect themselves (and to reduce liability to the church), Ida and Louise were made to wear gloves and goggles, the latter held in place by wide elastic straps around their heads. OSHA regulations indicated that they should also wear in-line respirators, but the powers-that-be deemed simple dust masks to be sufficient since the nave was so well ventilated.

They had quickly worked out a system whereby they'd lay the groundcloth between two pews and Ida would paint the seat side while Louise painted the back of the pew in front. Louise's task was more intricate with the rack for Bibles and hymnals to coat; therefore, she carried a small can and used a narrow brush. This suited her because she was meticulous. Ida, meanwhile, used a gallon can and a large brush. Technically, they weren't painting; they were staining, restoring the wood to its dark walnut glory, but the process was the same.

The volunteers were not friends; they were acquaintances. They knew each other enough to politely say hello at church functions, but they travelled in different circles. Consequently, they mostly worked in silence, although eventually Ida grew chatty.

"How many years do you think it took to make these seats so shiny?" asked Ida. "How many butts sliding to and fro buffing it with suit pants and dresses?"

"Ida," Louise said, "that's not proper talk for in here." She spoke in hushed tones from behind her mask.

"And why not?" Ida said, not moderating her volume. "Why else do we need to do this chore if not because people's butts wore off the paint?"

"Stop saying 'butts.' It isn't proper." Louise adjusted her goggles with gloved hands unmarked by stain.

"Oh Lou, you can be such a stick in the mud sometimes." However, Ida stopped talking while they finished their respective pews.

They carefully lifted the groundcloth and laid it in the next row. They picked up their cans, Louise gripping hers by the bottom and Ida by the wire handle. As Ida leaned forward, her can clipped the pew's armrest and dumped a large puddle of stain onto the seat.

"Shit!" she said. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Ida! We're in church! Don't you blaspheme in here."

"Saying 'shit' isn't blasphemous." Ida's eyes twinkled. "The Commandment is about taking the Lord's name in vain, which you very well know is about swearing a promise to God, like swearing to tell the truth, but then lying. We just had a sermon on that topic last month."

"Don't be profane, then."

Ida used her gloved hand to scrape some of the excess stain back into the can.

“Well, what do you expect me to say? ‘Poop,’ like I’m a two-year-old?” She laughed. “‘Shit’ is a perfectly ordinary and acceptable thing for an adult to say when they’ve spilled a bunch of paint.”

“It’s rude, and I don’t like it.”

“Oh, *you* don’t like, so *I* need to stop.”

“That’s right. It’s potty talk, and I don’t like it.”

“Potty talk?’ So you *do* expect me to talk like a two-year-old.”

“Ida, I won’t argue. It’s rude, and it’s ugly.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Lou.”

Louise shrieked and flung the contents of her can of walnut stain into Ida’s face. Ida stood in shock for a moment before wiping the stain off her goggles with her gloved hands. The stain plopped onto the canvass below like heavy rain. Her formerly yellow tunic was now yellow and brown, and her jeans and blue tennis shoes were clotted with paint.

“Jesus Christ, Lou!”

“Don’t you blaspheme in here! Don’t—”

Ida dumped her gallon can on Louise’s head. Now the shock was Louise’s. She stood, dripping stain from her head and shoulders, her arms half-raised in protest. Before she could speak, however, Ida slapped her across the face with her brush.

“Goddammit, Ida!”

“Aha!” came the reply, followed by a second thwap to the face by the wet brush. “Don’t you blaspheme in here!”

Now Louise was on the offensive, blindly charging Ida and wildly swinging her brush. Her swings failed to land, but they flung drops of paint everywhere as the two ran around the pew like a drunken game of musical chairs. Louise pulled down her mask and bared her clenched teeth, an off-white picket fence in a dripping mass of walnut. Ida laughed and danced out of her reach.

“Goddammit, Ida!” Louise said again, just as the rector entered the nave from the vestibule to see what the commotion was about.