

Chapter 1 – On the Death Beat

Jason stared wistfully at the fax machine, waiting for the phone line on it to screech its warbling tone – but most of all for the “thwack” when the faxed obituary form hit the worn linoleum floor from two feet above with that lovely slap. He had even broken off the folding tray designed to catch the faxes so he could always hear it, like a racehorse waiting for the gate to open. Many families these days would prefer to simply scan the online worksheet and email it, but if they called Jason Blair, he would insist they fax it. Some emailed the paper’s obituary org box anyway, right on Jason’s computer, but that “ding” sound could mean any frickin’ thing and Jason hated false alarms.

Anyway, it was basically his fax machine by now, as certainly as the obituary section was his “beat.” He was really the only one that used it in the news room anymore, and anyone who might want to use it had to endure Jason’s best “evil eye” look, as well as get uncomfortably close to his desk, and his creepy world of reporting on death. The pictures around his desk were framed copies of his own obituary work, hanging like little corpses nailed to his bizarre altar of obituary excellence.

Nobody coveted Jason’s job, and that was fine by him. Writing obituaries is generally reserved for the very young and very old in the news business, a first assignment one works to get away from, and a refuge for the burned-out at the end of their careers. Not so for Jason Blair, whose college journalism professors, while they thought he wrote quite well, were somewhat taken aback when every student-selected topical writing assignment he turned in was an obituary. He had even written them in his English literature and history classes, turning in biographies of writers and historical figures written in the form of obituaries, even when the subjects were still alive. Creative but creepy, born for the work, Jason had found his home.

Jason knew Ina Golightly was going to get his best effort. While Jason dutifully cranked out the usual short death notices for the extremely average, he was part of a movement within the world of obituary writers to tell the stories of ordinary people with something special or unique in their lives. Jason was damn good at it, earning a loyal following locally, but he wanted much more – a national reputation among his peers, recognition in the International Great Obituary Writers Hall of Fame, even a Pulitzer Prize someday. Ina’s story was a good one, if nothing else but for her unusual name, and most certainly for her avocation.

Ina Benson Golightly, wife, mother, farmer, belly dancer

By Jason Blair, Logan Daily News

That people often told her to “shake it,” even into her 90s, comes as no surprise to the family and friends of Ina Benson Golightly, who died in her sleep last Friday at 95. Though classically trained in ballet, with forays into tap and jazz as a young woman, Ina spent the bulk of her long, happy life as someone’s wife, mother and grandmother, putting aside the art she loved except for the occasional dance floor turn with her husband of 71 years, Johnny.

But as Ina found more time to herself in her 50’s, much to the surprise of her family, Ina took up belly dancing as a hobby, joining the Cache Valley Middle Eastern Dance Troup, a group of women famously unconcerned with local notions of how older women ought to act, or how bare-midriff dancers ought to look. Ina loved it. It was sexy, creative, and a little “bad,” things Ina had put aside, then welcomed back with aplomb. Ina performed with the troupe in every imaginable venue, with their colorful veiled costumes and finger chimes, their Middle Eastern music blaring from a boom box, drawing amazed stares from stolid Utahans and more than a few smiles admiring their chutzpah.

Ina was born in Benson, Utah, on 13 September 1916. The granddaughter of early settlers in the Cache Valley, she grew up knowing the value of a hard day’s work on a farm, and the importance of family, lessons she learned during hard years of depression and war. Ina and Johnny met while attending Utah State Agricultural College, and married after Johnny graduated in 1938. They farmed in Benson their whole lives, only interrupted by Johnny’s World War II service in the Navy, during which the plucky Ina kept the farm productive and the family fed. A life full of children, work on the farm, church activities, and wonderful memories followed in a life well lived. Before he passed away in 2009, Johnny was asked what he thought about Ina’s belly dancing. He grinned mischievously and said, “Who do ya think picked the costumes out?”

Jason re-read Ina’s obituary just one more time to make sure it was perfect before he hit “send” to the news editor’s inbox, confident it would appear in print exactly as he wrote it, confident his readers would find it touching and warm. Jason had convinced his editor to place what he called the “obligatory dead/undead list” of surviving/deceased family members in a sort of attached box below the article, associated with but not polluting the essence of his stories. Cache Valley readers, Jason knew, loved stories of the good life, interlaced with humor and the unique character. They would wish they had known Ina, and this made Jason very happy indeed.

Though he had hardly needed to, Jason visited Ina's family just two days after her death, even before her funeral service. Unlike many of his colleagues in larger markets, he did his interviews in person rather than over the phone. He wanted, he needed, to become part of the grieving process, and the earlier the better. Jason wanted to get inside what he called his "window of numbness," right after death, in the hopes of gaining insights into the real person, hoping family members would tell him things they might not a few days later.

Ina's farmhouse had looked much like Jason expected, its white clapboards reflecting the wear of many Utah winters, its roofline and covered porch sagging ever so slightly, wooden steps bare from three generations of children pounding up and down them. Ina had spent her last three years at the Sunshine Heights Assisted Living Facility, and Johnny had died almost five years before that, so while the family had respectfully kept the place, it was clear that neglect had taken a toll, nowhere more so than in Ina's beloved kitchen garden, its once bright white picket fence line long since faded to gray and leaning this way and that, its posts rotted. Abandoned to weeds and even Cottonwood saplings from the trees lining the nearby stream bank, it seemed to Jason that few things told the sad story of age and decline better than a garden gone to seed.

Ina's oldest son John Jr. met Jason at the door, shaking his hand tentatively. The master of so many things in his life, like his father before him, John Jr. was as uncomfortable dealing with his mother's death as anyone, yet he knew it fell upon him to be the source of strength for the entire family. Although puzzled why a reporter would want to talk to his family about his mother's life, he welcomed Jason into the family home and introduced him to Ina's four other sons and their wives, all gathered for the occasion to honor their beloved mother.

As they sat down around the well-worn kitchen table, Jason wondered how many times these children had gathered here, sitting in chairs with rungs dented from their heels as children, dark patches of patina freshly added to by their own children, a living history of life in this home. Jason did nothing to break the ice, nothing to ease the obvious tension. He eagerly scanned their faces, wondering how they felt about Ina's passing. Were they relieved? Did they wish they had visited her more often, been there when she died? His fascination with the reaction to death often conflicted with his need to "get something good," but he was patient, waiting for the family to start talking about her.

John, Jr. broke the silence with his usual straightforwardness and asked, "Mr. Blair, we were wondering why you want to write an article about our mother, I mean...she was a great lady, but..." Jason finally spoke, "Well, what I do is tell stories about people's lives here in the Cache Valley. Not just "important" people, but ordinary folks who led interesting lives. I know Ina comes from one of the original Cache Valley families, so that is interesting, but I don't really know if I will do a full article, it really depends on what I can learn from you about her today." Jason didn't let on that he already knew a great deal about Ina, especially about the belly dancing. He was a regular at Sunshine Heights, collecting

interviews from nearly every resident, saving them lovingly in his “for later” file. He wanted *them* to tell him about Ina’s belly dancing, and maybe some “life color” she hadn’t mentioned when he interviewed her. He wanted to know if Ina had embarrassed them with her rediscovery of dance, or her willingness to demonstrate the latest technique she mastered anytime or anywhere? But he didn’t ask directly. Patience.

Gradually, Ina’s family relaxed around Jason, following his general questions with short answers at first, then longer, more thoughtful responses, sharing many stories about Ina, most centered around life on the farm and the family. A favorite recipe Ina made, or how she helped her grandchildren learn to read, or her kindness and sense of humor. Still, no one mentioned belly dancing until Jason asked an increasingly narrow set of questions leading up to it. “Did Ina have any hobbies,” answer, “oh yes, she like to knit, blah blah blah...” Finally, Jason risked spilling the beans by asking if Ina liked to dance, to which her daughter-in-law Kate quickly replied, “Oh yes, she even belly danced!” Bingo! He thought to himself, feigning surprise and delight. The somewhat withering looks Jason saw around the room confirmed his earlier suspicion, and Kate, looking chagrined, did not volunteer anything further on that topic. Nonetheless, his interest suddenly, artificially, piqued, Jason wanted to know all about Ina’s belly dancing adventures.

Jason’s genuine interest and patient approach won the day with the Golightlys. By the end of the afternoon, he was happily plowing thorough cardboard boxes of old photographs and other mementos of Ina’s life, savoring every moment of what a fellow member of the International Association of Great Obituary Writers called “Vintage Porn.” The increasingly detailed and increasingly tearful memories of Ina’s children washed over him and made him feel so much a part of their grief.

He knew he could accomplish his mission with Ina, to rescue her life from obscurity, to let people know she was extraordinary, even as an ordinary person. It was worth it to him, the long hours, all the visits to Sunshine, the work to win the family’s confidence, the careful writing and editing of her story – heck, her story was so good it had even been worth it to kill her.

