

Mormon short stories. A young girl has to fight the Klan in 1960's Mississippi. A betrayed husband demands the return of the kidney he donated to his wife. A young gay man is outed by his dying mother. And more...

The Circumcision of God

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The Circumcision of God

Johnny Townsend

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ISBN 978-1-60910-052-0

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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2009

Cover design by Todd Engel, Engel Creative

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Homework for Hitler

“Come on, Lester, you can help out just this once,” said Cathy’s uncle Willie Ray to Cathy’s father. They were outside on the porch to discuss something personal, and Cathy sneaked over to the front door and listened as hard as she could through the thick wood. She knew something was up. Willie Ray never came over at all unless he needed something.

“You know I can’t,” her father said firmly.

“It’s that damn religion of yours again, isn’t it? You’ve been a real deadbeat ever since you joined. You’re lucky we don’t bomb *your* church.”

“I’ve got to go, Willie Ray. You need to get out of the Klan. It’ll destroy your soul.”

“You standing up for Jews now? You’re the one who’s going to hell.”

Cathy heard footsteps and realized her father was heading for the door. She turned and ran to the bathroom so he wouldn’t catch her listening. The front door opened just as she reached the commode. She waited in the room for several minutes and then flushed.

When she went back to the kitchen, her father was sitting at the table with her mother. Tommy, her 8-year-old brother, was probably in his room reading a book.

“Cathy,” said her father. “Sit down.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

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“You’ll be 13 next week. You’re old enough to hear this.”

Cathy sat down across from her father, her heart beating a little faster. She’d so looked forward for years to her first cup of coffee to show she was all grown up, but when they joined the Mormon Church the year before, she was told she could never drink coffee at all. Ever. She hadn’t been too happy about that then and still found it irritating.

But her father had stopped smoking those awful Picayunes almost overnight, so that was something.

“What is it, Daddy?”

He smiled. “You know darn well what it is. I heard you at the front door.”

Cathy could feel her face starting to burn, and she looked at the floor.

“Cathy, you know I used to belong to the Klan?”

She shook her head. “No, Daddy.”

“Well, you know now that we’re Mormon, we can’t belong to any secret combinations. It’s a sin.” He sighed. “Of course, colored folks still bear the mark of Cain. That’s why they can’t hold the priesthood. But we can’t treat them like they’re not human.”

“Yes, Daddy.” Cathy still heard her mother say “nigger” pretty often, but her father never did anymore. Tommy still said it, too. Cathy was scared of colored folks, naturally, but while most of her friends hated them, she didn’t exactly hate them herself. She just wished they’d go away.

“The Klan is planning another bombing,” said her father.

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“Lester, do we really have to tell the child all this? I don’t want Cathy getting in trouble.”

“Annie Mae, she needs—“

“What does this have to do with Uncle Willie Ray?” Cathy interrupted. “He was talking about Jews.”

Her father sighed again. “The Klan is going to bomb the synagogue here in Brookhaven, like they bombed the one in Meridian last week.”

Cathy didn’t much like Jews. The ones at school always acted so stuck up.

“Daddy, why are you telling me this?”

He sighed again and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked right at Cathy. “I need you to be a grown up.”

“Lester, what are you—“

“Yes, Daddy.”

“That Liverman girl’s in your class, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Cathy said carefully.

“Lester—“

“I need you to tell her what the Klan is planning to do.”

“Oh, my god. Lester, she can’t!”

Cathy felt a chill run down her spine. It was like being asked to be a spy. A secret agent. But wasn’t that kind of like being in a secret combination, too?

“Daddy, I don’t like Linda Liverman.”

“You don’t have to like her. Just pull her aside tomorrow and tell her to warn her father.”

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“Lester, Willie Ray’ll know it was you who told. You’ll still get in trouble. And now you want Cathy—“

“I’ll tell Willie Ray I didn’t say a word to any Jews. I’ll swear on the Bible. He’ll know I’m telling the truth.”

“But Lester—“

Cathy’s parents kept talking about it, and Cathy didn’t know what to think. There were kids in her class whose fathers and older brothers were in the Klan, and if anyone got wind of what she was doing, life could get plenty ugly for her. Of course, they only had a little more than a week left before summer vacation started. Maybe everyone would forget before school started back up in three months.

Still, that colored man Martin Luther King had been killed just a couple of months ago. And those two Jews and that other colored man had been killed here in Mississippi a few years before. If Cathy said something to mess up the Klan’s plans, maybe *she* would be killed. Maybe *their* house would be burned.

“Daddy, can’t you just tell the police? Can’t they take care of it?”

Her father looked at Cathy sadly and smiled again.

“No, honey, I can’t go to the police.”

“Lester, I forbid it! Cathy, I forbid you to say a word to that girl!”

“It’s up to Cathy, Annie Mae. Cathy’s a young woman now. She can make up her own mind.”

Cathy didn’t know what to think about that, either. It made her feel mature and proud that her father was putting this on her shoulders. But he never let Cathy’s mother make up her own

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mind about anything. Why was Cathy old enough to think for herself but her mother wasn't? Cathy wasn't quite sure she trusted her father.

"Lester, what if they find out?"

"Annie Mae, what if they kill four little Jewish girls like they killed those four little colored girls in that church in Alabama?"

"That's not our problem. If the Jews hadn't crucified Christ, everyone wouldn't hate them so."

"Annie Mae, we're practically Jews ourselves now. We—"

"No, no, no, no, no!"

"Daddy, I'll think about it, but I'm not promising anything." Cathy got up and walked slowly to her room and closed the door. She turned her radio on softly and sat on her bed. She was in the middle of a Nancy Drew book, and she'd always wanted an adventure of her own. Nancy was always finding clues and catching bad guys. She was always getting in trouble, too, but things always worked out for her.

But those were just books. The Klan was mean. They meant business. What if Willie Ray figured out what happened? He wouldn't turn on his own family, would he? But those men were pretty serious about race traitors. And Linda was such a creep sometimes. Always snooty. Just because she had nice clothes and made good grades. She didn't know the first thing about being nice to people. What did Cathy care if the Klan blew out a couple of windows of that synagogue?

But then what about Jeanette and Libby? They'd been Cathy's best friends until her father had made the family join the Mormon Church. Now those girls wouldn't even talk to her

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anymore. So Cathy knew that being mean to people just because of their religion was bad, but at the same time, they *did* act that way, and she didn't need any more trouble than she already had.

Cathy read a few more pages of Nancy Drew. Her mind kept wandering, though, and she had to reread one paragraph three times before she put the book down.

An adventure of her own. But it wasn't exciting. It was scary. She'd wanted to do something really incredible on her own just once in her life. But maybe it was better to read about adventure than to actually live it.

Still, it didn't feel good to be a scaredy-cat like her mother, either.

Cathy stared at blond-haired Nancy for the next twenty minutes, thinking. When Louis Armstrong started singing "What a wonderful world," she snapped off the radio.

The next day at school, Cathy noticed that Linda Liverman looked upset, as if she'd been crying. Had someone already told her? Cathy smiled. She wouldn't have to say anything, after all.

She was curious, though, so at lunch she sat next to Linda for the first time ever. Linda did have a couple of friends here at school, other snobs. But Linda had sat by herself today, so Cathy felt she could risk it.

"Linda? Are you all right?"

Linda looked at Cathy with an expression Cathy couldn't quite figure out. It was half despair but also half anger. Did she know it was Cathy's uncle who was involved?

"Why aren't *you* upset?" Linda demanded.

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It was a good question, Cathy realized. Shouldn't she be more disturbed that her uncle was a criminal? That he seemed so happy to hurt other people, even if they were in fact snobs?

"Well, we never even talk to my uncle anymore," Cathy explained, feeling that somehow this still didn't fully absolve her.

"Huh?" Linda looked puzzled. "I'm talking about Robert Kennedy."

"What about him?"

"He was assassinated last night."

"Oh." Cathy suddenly felt cold. People *were* terrible, she realized. She had better keep her mouth shut.

"Is that it? 'Oh'?"

"I don't get involved in politics."

"That figures."

Now, wasn't that a snobby thing to say? Cathy picked up her lunch and moved to another table.

That night as supper ended, Tommy asked if he could be excused and then went to his room. Cathy was about to do the same thing when her father said, "Did you talk to the Liverman girl today?"

"Yes."

"You told her about the bomb?" asked her mother sharply, looking quickly at Cathy's father.

"No. We talked about Robert Kennedy."

"You didn't warn her?" asked her father wearily.

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“No.”

“Good for you! I knew I’d raised a smart daughter.”

“Cathy—“

“No, I won’t hear any more about it. The girl’s made up her mind. You said she was old enough to think for herself. Now she has. So you leave her be.”

“May I be excused?”

“Of course, dear.”

Cathy read a couple more chapters of Nancy Drew, but she couldn’t get really interested. She turned the radio on to listen to some music again. “Classical Gas” always put her in a good mood. She wished her parents would get her a record player for her birthday in a few days, but that was probably hoping for too much. She wondered if she could bargain with her father. “I’ll talk to Linda if you get me a phonograph.” But somehow that didn’t feel quite right.

The next day, Linda was back to normal, talking and laughing with her girlfriends, pointing and giggling at the other girls in the class. Cathy wanted to slap her. So what if her synagogue did get blown up? Linda would just get what she deserved. What a pill.

Cathy didn’t sit with her friends at lunch, feeling a little blue, but to her surprise, Linda came over and sat next to her. “It’ll be so nice when school lets out next week,” she said. “You doing anything fun?”

“I’m having my birthday party right after our last day.” She said it almost defiantly, wanting Linda to feel jealous that she was getting such a good start to the summer.

“Oh. You’ll be 13?”

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“Yes.”

“How nice. You’ll be a real woman then.”

Cathy frowned.

“Thirteen is the age of adulthood for Jews. Boys get to become a bar mitzvah.” She shrugged. “Girls don’t get anything, but we’re adults, too. It’ll be July for me, though.”

“What happened to your brother last year when he turned 13?”

“He got a record player.”

“Ooh.” Cathy didn’t know whether she should feel impressed or just mad.

“Yeah, I probably won’t get much of anything. I never do.”

“You always get nice clothes,” Cathy pointed out.

Linda shrugged. “But that’s not special. You should get something special for your birthday.”

Stuck up.

“I’ve been asking for a nice book, though. Maybe I’ll get that.”

“You like books?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Me, too. I love those Mary Jane mysteries.”

“My favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

Jews, thought Cathy.

“You want to come to my party?” asked Cathy. She had no idea why she’d said such a thing. But Linda’s family had money. Maybe Linda would get her a nice gift.

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“Really?”

“Sure. Unless you don’t want to.”

“Oh, no. I think it’d be fun. Gee, I always thought you were too stuck up to say hi.”

Cathy finished her lunch and walked away, confused.

During the rest of the period, Cathy went to the school library and looked for a book about Jews. There was only one that she could find, and it was entitled *The Jewish Problem*. She skimmed through it, and read a few paragraphs here and there, about how Jews had poisoned wells in the Middle Ages, and had had secret ceremonies during something called Passover during which they’d sacrificed gentile children, and how they had a book that told Jews how to take over banks and governments.

“What’re you studying, Cathy?” asked Miss Kyzar, the librarian. “You’re not usually in here during lunch.”

“Just doing some homework.”

Cathy looked at a few more sections of the book, and wondered if this was why Linda was so snooty sometimes, because her father expected to help take over the world. He was a doctor, after all. He had power and money. “I bet he donates to all the wrong candidates, too.” Still, it seemed hard to believe Linda would have ever been a part of a hidden ceremony to kill children.

But you never really knew what people did in secret, did you? No one would suspect that Willie Ray was in the Klan, would they?

Cathy frowned.

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Then again, anyone who knew Willie Ray at all could probably figure that out pretty quickly.

Supper was tense and awkward that night. Even Tommy noticed, looking around at everyone. But he asked to be excused before dessert and went to his room.

“Cathy,” began her father.

“Don’t start,” said her mother.

“I talked to Linda today,” said Cathy, sipping her milk.

There was silence a moment.

“I invited her to my birthday party next week.”

“Do Jews celebrate birthdays?” asked her mother.

“Oh, Mama, of course they do.”

“Cathy, tomorrow is Friday. If you don’t talk to that poor girl before Saturday...”

“Lester, if it means so much to you, you do it.”

“I can’t, Annie Mae.”

“Well, Cathy can’t, either.”

Cathy stood up, her napkin falling into her plate. “I’m so sick of all this! Who cares what happens to a bunch of Jews? If they were good, wouldn’t they be Mormon? Y’all keep saying we’re the only ones with the truth.”

“That gives us a greater obligation to others,” said Cathy’s father.

“Oh, Daddy.”

“My baby girl isn’t going to risk her life because you’re a coward!”

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“Annie Mae...”

Cathy’s mother got up and walked out of the kitchen. Cathy heard the bathroom door close and lock.

“Cathy...”

“No! Mama’s right! You’re being mean to make me do this. I don’t like it. It feels like you’re giving me a terrible homework assignment. Or like you’re asking me to do all *your* homework for you. Just like the bullies at school.” She left the table, too, and stalked off to her room. She turned her radio up, loud, and listened to the Rascals singing, “It’s a beautiful morning.” Cathy almost threw the radio across the room.

She sat on her bed and fumed.

Cathy only got a few hours of sleep, but by morning, she knew what she was going to do. While her parents were in the kitchen, she called Willie Ray at home and woke him up. She hoped no one was listening in on the party line. Cathy told him what she had decided and hung up, with Willie Ray still yelling into the phone.

The kids were all excited at school. After this weekend, they only had two more days of class. They were already celebrating and giving the teacher a headache. Cathy actually paid more attention than usual, though, and she noticed that Linda was still as attentive as ever, too.

Cathy saw that Linda was sitting with her snobby friends again at lunch, and she almost decided to ignore her, but then she took a deep breath and joined the three girls. “Hey, Cathy,” said Linda.

“Hey, Linda.”

“I can’t wait till Wednesday.”

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Cathy knew her birthday party was the first day of summer vacation, and she wasn't quite sure which event Linda was referring to. She didn't want to say anything about the party in front of these other girls, who she hadn't invited and didn't want to invite now.

"Do you think you could pick me up tomorrow morning?" asked Cathy.

Linda's brow furrowed. "What for?"

"I'd like to go to synagogue with you." Cathy felt like an idiot. "Would that be okay?"

Linda stared at her a moment. The other girls stared, too. "I guess so. Why do you want to come?"

Cathy shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Just because." She smiled impishly. "If I'm going to be a woman this week, I want to go somewhere where I'll be considered an adult."

Linda's two friends snickered, and Cathy felt her face burning, but Linda smiled. "Sure. We can come pick you up. Then you can eat with us afterward if you like."

Things were still a little tense at supper that night, though Cathy was feeling fine now. Tommy noticed the strain on his parents' faces, though, and again asked to be excused before dessert.

This time, Cathy's parents didn't take advantage of the opportunity to say anything. Cathy slowly ate her lemon meringue pie, enjoying her parents' discomfort. Finally, she put her milk down and said, "I talked to Linda today. Everything is taken care of."

To her surprise, both her parents looked relieved. "I'm so glad," said her mother.

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Cathy felt confused.

“Your father and I decided that the best way to get you to help was for me to pretend I was against it,” her mother went on, laughing. “You never do what I want you to do.”

Another secret combination, Cathy thought. But she didn’t feel particularly upset, because she knew she hadn’t been completely honest, either.

“So the Jews will be on the lookout tonight?” asked Cathy’s father.

Cathy smiled. “There’s not going to be any bombing,” she said confidently.

“I’m glad,” said her mother.

“You did a brave thing, Cathy. Thank you.”

Cathy smiled again.

After supper, while her parents were watching channel 3, the only station they got from Jackson, Cathy went to the spare bedroom and set up the ironing board and started ironing her best dress. Her mother usually did the ironing, but it was probably about time for Cathy to start doing some things herself.

She went to her room and hung the dress on her closet door, and then she sat in bed and picked up Nancy Drew again. Bobby Goldsboro sang “Honey” in the background, and Cathy turned the page of her book eagerly to see what would happen next.

The Buzzard Tree

Patty Lou looked out the door. She was waiting for her grandson Robert to come. She hadn't seen him since her 90th birthday party three months earlier, when the whole family had come out to Brookhaven, Mississippi, to celebrate with her. Robert only came up from New Orleans to see her three or four times a year, and she was looking forward to seeing him.

She looked out at the sky. There were four buzzards circling slowly and gently over the farm. She remembered the rhyme she'd learned some eighty years earlier. "One for sorrow. Two for joy. Three for a letter. Four for a boy." Well, she'd be getting a boy today. Robert. She'd actually be getting two boys. Robert would be coming with his friend, Joseph.

Patty Lou had long since stopped worrying about Robert being gay. At first, being Mormon, she'd worried that he'd go to hell, but he still seemed like a decent man. Then she'd worried about him catching AIDS. But he'd told her six years ago he had the AIDS virus, and he still seemed okay. Now she just worried she wouldn't see him enough.

Patty Lou went and sat back down on her sofa. She had a window unit air conditioner, which the family had forced her into buying five years ago, threatening not to visit her again during the long summer months unless she got one, but even though it was 90 degrees outside, she decided to wait until closer to the time Robert and Joseph were coming before turning it on. She still believed natural air was healthier. She'd lived 85 years before getting an air conditioner, hadn't she? And

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now, facing leukemia, she needed all the natural air she could get.

It wasn't the same kind of leukemia her daughter, Marsha, had died of 21 years earlier. Patty Lou still remembered seeing her daughter in her temple clothes in her casket. She herself hadn't converted till after Marsha's death, doing so largely so she could be with her daughter again. Marsha had had acute leukemia, while Patty Lou had chronic. There was more to the name than that, but she couldn't remember it. Patty Lou remembered when she'd been diagnosed ten years earlier. The doctor had said, "With this disease, I'm afraid you've probably only got ten years to live." Patty Lou had replied, "Well, I'm 80. I'll take it." But now that the ten years had passed and the Leukeran pills no longer worked, ten years didn't seem like enough. She knew heaven would be nice, and it would be great to be with Marsha again. Patty Lou had had Marsha sealed to her in the temple by proxy after joining the Church, and she felt that the afterlife with her would be pleasant enough. She just wasn't ready to go yet. Was it being selfish to still want to live when you were 90 years old? It might be, but she couldn't help it. She liked being alive.

As it neared noon, Patty Lou turned on the air conditioner in the living room, and she heated some field peas and green beans on the stove. She also heated some mashed potatoes and a pot roast she had cooked earlier. The family had always loved her cooking, though it was simple enough. It was one thing she could still do, so she did it. She ate well, even though she was just cooking for one most days. She wanted to stay healthy, and she was in pretty good shape, except perhaps for a bruise or two lately.

Around 12:30, Patty Lou heard the dogs barking outside. She went to the door and saw Robert and Joseph walking up.

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Robert had dark hair and a graying beard, and Joseph was short and Italian-looking. Robert was 43, the same age his mother had been when she died, and Joseph was 55. How could her grandson be so old?

“Hi!” said Robert as she opened the screen door. “How’re you doing?”

“Okay.” They hugged, and both boys gave her a kiss.

“Here. We brought you some treats.” Robert handed her a bag, and she saw inside it a pack of chocolate-covered peanuts, some peanut butter cups, and a pack of maple-covered peanuts. She loved peanuts.

“Thank you,” she said. “Come on in the kitchen. Dinner’s ready.”

The boys went in the bathroom to freshen up after their two-and-a-half hour trip while Patty Lou poured some Coke. She knew the Church frowned on caffeine, but she also knew Robert liked Coke, so she always served it when he came to visit. The boys soon joined her at the kitchen table, which was already set. Robert’s father, Henry, had made the table some 45 years earlier. He’d left New Orleans to come back to the country after Marsha had died and had married a local woman, Joann, a Baptist, a few years later. He no longer came to the Mormon meetings, but he still came by Patty Lou’s house every few months to bush-hog her weeds.

“Would you like to say the blessing?” Patty Lou asked Robert.

He nodded and bowed his head. “Dear Heavenly Father. We thank thee for this food, and we ask thee to bless it that it will be good for us. And we ask thee to please bless Grandma

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that her medicine will work and she'll be okay. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen."

Patty Lou liked to hear him use Jesus' name. Robert had started going to the Jewish church in New Orleans when he'd been with his last friend, a Jew. She wasn't sure God would take him to heaven as a gay person, but there was no sense making it worse by being a Jew. Of course, her doctor was Jewish, and he seemed nice enough. Maybe being a Jew didn't matter, either.

"Your sister Joyce was up here last night for your Dad's tractor pull. She came by for about fifteen minutes with Veronica before going to your Dad's place." Joyce was a year older than Robert and also lived in New Orleans. She came up to see her even less than Robert, usually just for Christmas and maybe one other time a year. While Veronica was 17 and still lived at home, Joyce's oldest child, Mark, was 27 now. He also lived in New Orleans and came up to visit his grandfather Henry several times a year. Patty Lou knew this and couldn't help but feel hurt that he usually never bothered to stop by to see her as well.

"They're doing okay?" asked Robert.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Did Mark come up, too?"

"I don't know."

Mark usually rode in each of Henry's tractor pulls, but Patty Lou hadn't asked Joyce if he was coming up yesterday. If he didn't show up to visit, it was better not to know he was in town. They were all still active in the Church, at least, and that was some comfort. If they couldn't be together now, they might

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still be together later. Maybe she'd be more fun to be with in heaven.

"Veronica still in the ROTC?"

"I think so. They were only here fifteen minutes." She took a sip of her Coke. She had to admit, she liked it once in a while, too. "Y'all didn't want to come up for the tractor pull?"

"It's not really our thing."

After the meal, Patty Lou went out on the back porch and brought in a yellow cake with chocolate icing. She brushed a few ants off the plate and set it down on the table. "I've got some Robbie-cake for you." As a child, this was the only one of the several kinds of cake Patty Lou made that Robert would eat, so it became known in the family as Robbie-cake. She still made it every time he came to visit.

"Thanks, Grandma."

When they'd finished eating, Robert washed the dishes in the sink. The other grandkids never helped clean up. Patty Lou felt awkward about it, not liking to impose when they were visiting, but appreciating the thought. If they helped, it made her feel they thought she was weak, but their not helping made her feel unappreciated. It was bad either way. When Robert was through, they all went back in the living room to sit down on the two sofas.

"How's work?" asked Patty Lou, hoping she'd be able to hear over the sound of the air conditioner.

"It's okay," said Robert. "A new girl just started at the library. She's obsessive-compulsive, so she drives me crazy."

Patty Lou didn't exactly know what that meant and didn't really care to ask. She was sorry Robert didn't do something

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more important with his life, but no one in the family really had. Being a good person was more important than being successful, but why couldn't you be both? "And how's work for you, Joseph?"

"I just finished teaching summer school this week. I had some good students. The fall semester starts in three weeks."

"Y'all going anywhere?"

"We're going to San Francisco for several days next week," said Robert.

Patty Lou nodded. The boys had spent two weeks in Europe in the spring and now were going to California for a week, but they were only coming to see her for the afternoon. They weren't even staying the night. Of course, she knew she was boring. She never had anything interesting to talk about. She never did anything different. Robert used to ask her to tell stories about when she was growing up, and he'd written her early history up in a 40-page booklet and given copies to everyone in the family, but there were no new stories to tell. At first, seeing the printed booklet had made her feel important. But after a while, she felt dismayed that her whole life, her whole being, had been reduced to a mere 40 pages. It seemed somehow disappointing.

"How's your blood count?" asked Robert.

"It's at 100,000. It was at 160,000, but it's supposed to be 4,000, so they want me to start chemotherapy tomorrow."

"You have to go to the hospital?"

"No, I just go to the doctor's office for a half hour. They'll give me an IV for 30 minutes a day every day this week. Then

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I'll be off it for three weeks, and then we repeat it again the next month the same way, for four months."

"What's the name of the drug?"

Patty Lou got up and went to her dresser, returning a moment later with a piece of paper. "It's called Fludara." She handed him the paper and let him read about the drug.

"Possible kidney problems," said Robert. "I guess you better drink lots of water. Unless your feet swell up. I expect the doctor will tell you what to do."

"I just hope it doesn't make me sick. Remember your mother? I think the chemotherapy killed her before the leukemia would have."

"Well, diarrhea isn't supposed to be a problem," said Robert, still reading the paper, "but nausea might. You could be okay, though. The paper doesn't say what percentage of people experience these side effects."

"I'm just glad I don't have to go to the hospital. People die in hospitals. You never knew my sister Margaret Missouri. She went in the hospital to have a tumor removed, and she got lockjaw and died. She was only 38."

"Tetanus," said Robert. "How awful. Your whole body is just one big charley horse for two days and then you die."

"And my sister Nelda Sue. She was 44 when she went in to have her tonsils out. And she bled to death on the operating table."

Patty Lou thought about the rest of her family. She was the ninth of ten children, and now she was the only one left. James had died of diphtheria when he was three, and Aubrey had died in his 20's when the glass in the back of the truck he was

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driving caved in and the dirt he was carrying suffocated him. Virginia, the youngest, was the last to go five years ago, of cancer. Patty Lou's parents were gone, her brothers and sisters were gone, her husband was gone, her daughter was gone. She should be ready to go, too, but she still wanted to stay a bit longer.

It wasn't that the grandkids were so good to her, but she still liked being around to see that they were okay. Her son, Shane, lived a couple of miles away and either he or his wife Lisa stopped by to see her every day for at least five minutes, but their two teenage sons didn't come by any more often than Robert or Joyce.

No one called her, but she knew that was her fault. She could never think of anything to say over the phone, and the conversation never lasted more than two minutes. But Robert did write her every few months. Her eyesight was still good, so she enjoyed that. He often wrote her about his gay friends, but that was okay. They seemed to be nice to him, and that made her feel good. She didn't know if he was going to hell, but she still wanted him to have a good life. A good life was important.

"They'll probably stick you in a different vein every day this week," said Robert, "but I'm sure they have someone who will do it right and won't hurt you."

"You think they'll use a big needle?"

"I expect it'll be about medium."

"I hope I don't start going downhill," said Patty Lou. "I don't want a lingering death. I want to go in my sleep."

"I hope you go in your sleep, too."

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Patty Lou smiled. The others wouldn't even talk about death, but Robert did. She liked that. She wasn't really afraid of death. She felt she was going to heaven, maybe not the highest degree in the Celestial Kingdom, but heaven nevertheless. She'd always tried to be a good Christian back when she was Methodist, and she tried to be a good Mormon now. So she believed the afterlife would be good. She simply wasn't ready to go just yet. When she was a girl, they didn't have running water. They had a horse and buggy to get to town. They had kerosene lanterns for light in the evening. The world had changed so drastically since then. It certainly wasn't all good, but it was definitely interesting. She didn't want to miss it.

They managed to talk till 3:00. So often when the grandkids visited, they would all just sit on the sofa in silence, struggling for something to say. But today it had gone pretty well. Then at 3:00, Robert said he and Joseph had to go over and see Henry for an hour but would be back.

Patty Lou quietly sat on the sofa waiting for them. She didn't really like to read, and there was never anything good on TV on Sunday afternoon. She could listen to music or watch one of the videos the kids had given her, but she preferred just sitting and thinking. She always had lots of thoughts. She simply never had anything to say. She thought again now of the possibility of death. She had her will made out already. She'd had it done twenty years ago. Everyone got an equal portion. Of course, they'd have to sell the 200 acres and divide the money. She couldn't divide the land seven or eight different ways.

Robert and Joseph came back around 4:30. The dogs barked again but let them pass. "We went by the old buzzard tree down near the creek," said Robert. "There must have been 75 buzzards in it. It was incredible."

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“Yeah, they’re always out circling, waiting for something to die.”

Patty Lou opened the pack of chocolate-covered peanuts, and everyone ate a couple. She used a twist tie to close the package, and though the conversation had flowed pretty well before, now it seemed to flounder. “So you like San Francisco?” she asked.

“It’s great,” said Robert. “The weather’s always nice, in the 60’s in the day and 50’s at night. The hills are pretty. And the city is clean and lively, not at all like New Orleans.”

Patty Lou had never been out of Mississippi, but of course she had seen a lot on television. “Y’all planning any other trips?”

“We’ll probably go see my Mom in New York for Thanksgiving,” said Joseph. “She’s 85 and is having trouble walking.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

They found a couple more things to talk about, and at 5:30, Patty Lou heated up the supper. They ate mostly in silence.

“I want you to be one of my pallbearers,” said Patty Lou. It sounded too abrupt.

Robert stopped eating and nodded. “Okay. If I’m not too old by then.”

“You won’t be.”

They had cake, drinking milk with the evening meal instead of Coke. Then they went back to the living room.

“Joann said she could take you to your doctor’s appointment a couple of times this week if it was too hard for

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Lisa to take you every day,” said Robert. “She’s a retired nurse, so she could probably answer some of your questions, too.”

“I’ll think about it.” It was nice of Joann to offer, but Patty Lou thought she’d feel too awkward with her, the woman who had replaced her daughter.

They sat in silence a while, looking at the wooden floor. Robert had varnished it a few years ago on one of his trips up, but it was starting to get worn in places. Maybe if she was still alive next spring, he could do the floor again.

Around 6:30, Robert stood up. “Well, I guess we better go before it gets too dark. We’ll be praying for you tomorrow.”

Patty Lou hugged Robert and Joseph and opened the door for them. “Will I see you before Christmas?”

“We’ll have to see what our schedule is like.”

“All right.”

Patty Lou gave Robert a jar of homemade pickles, and she stood on the porch with the dogs as he and Joseph got in their car. They all waved, and soon the car had gone off down the curving gravel drive. Patty Lou stood on the porch a moment longer after they left. There were still three buzzards circling in the sky overhead. Three for a letter. Maybe someone would write to her soon.

Patty Lou went back inside and turned off the air conditioner. Then she sat back down on the sofa and stared at the floor. An hour later when the sun went down, she was still sitting there, thinking.

Chemotherapy started tomorrow at 9:00, and she wanted to live. She went to the kitchen, took out the pack of chocolate-covered peanuts, and brushed the ants off. She didn’t usually

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have two desserts, but if she was going to be nauseated this week, putting on a few extra ounces now wouldn't hurt. She poured some milk and sat down to eat.

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