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Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

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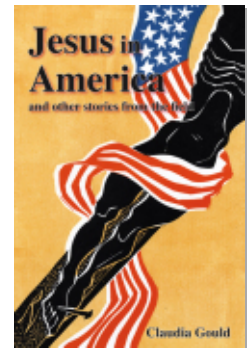
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Jesus in America

Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

—Luke 2:49

Jesse lived with his mother and his father took an interest. Or that's what his mother said. "He cain't be here all the time, honey, but he takes an interest." When Jesse was little, he used to wish that he took more of an interest. He saw his father sometimes. "He never just high-tailed it out, like some men would 'a done." No, Dan, Jesse's father, turned up every so often at the door, and he always seemed real glad to see them, and usually he brought a present. Some kind of a present.

But... What Jesse used to wish when he was little was that he turned up sometimes on the right days. Jesse couldn't remember him ever being there at Christmas, though his mama told him that he was there for Jesse's first one—"and he was just so proud of you!" Jesse asked about that Christmas a lot when he was little, whether it snowed and if they'd had a big tree that stood on the floor instead of a little one you sat on the table, like they always had nowadays. And who else was there—"Did Grandma come?" And whether he could sit up at the table and chew his Christmas dinner already or if somebody had to hold him in his lap and feed him soft stuff with a spoon. He wanted to be able to make a picture in his mind of what it was like, that first Christmas, when he was a little baby. If he could make a good enough picture, he would be able to remember it. Sometimes he thought he did, but then he'd think he was just remembering the picture in his mind. So that was hard.

And he'd never turned up on Jesse's birthday. Not even the first one, the day Jesse was born. "Some men do like to get themselves kindly out of the way for that occasion," Mama explained. That made Grandma laugh, but Jesse couldn't see what was funny about it. And then by the time he was one year old, Dan wasn't there anymore. He had started just taking an interest. When Jesse was little, he used to expect his Daddy would surprise him one birthday and

open the back door just in time to see him blow his candles out. He watched for him, holding his breath for the candles, but holding his breath waiting, too. He never said, because Mama worked hard so he could have a nice birthday every year. And Dan did bring him a present whenever he came. So it was no use to make a fuss. It was just a picture in his mind, like his first Christmas, which had really happened, even if he couldn't remember it.

Now that he was twelve, it seemed to him like he'd spent a long time wishing that Dan was around. Sometimes, even now, when he knew it wasn't going to happen, he'd wish his father would be there to watch him play baseball at Shepherd's Field, because he'd started to be a real good pitcher. It surprised everybody, but he had. Mama came when she could, and Grandma almost always came, unless she was working. And it wasn't as if he was the only boy who didn't have a dad there to watch. Heck, Mama was right about that. Two or three of his friends' dads had just high-tailed it out of there. And one of them had died. In the war, Doodle said. "What war? There hasn't been any war since history." But Doodle just said, "You don't know ever'thin'," and Jesse didn't ask him about it anymore because he looked so mournful. Some of them kept trying to make Doodle talk about it, but Jesse thought it was probably bad enough to have your dad dead without having to explain it to everybody all the time. Hell, maybe there had been a war and he just hadn't heard about it.

Jesse missed his dad, but he wasn't lonesome. He had plenty of friends, and he sort of had a girl friend. Her name was Lois and she didn't go to his school, but she lived on his road. They never said they were going around together, but they usually met on the way back from school and they'd shared a couple of cigarettes Lois had got off her older brother. Once she had a marijuana one. She wouldn't say where she got it from, but she let him have a toke. He didn't like it much, but he guessed he'd get used to it when he was older. Like a lot of things. There was a lot of pot around. And stronger things, he guessed, if he'd been trying to get ahold of it. But he wasn't. Grandma would have a fit, for one thing. She'd have a fit just about the cigarettes. She was real strict. He thought Mama had done some drugs when she was young, and that made Grandma more strict with him. Mama wouldn't say, and he didn't like to ask Grandma. Some people said pot was better for you than tobacco, besides being easier to grow. Jesse wasn't too interested. He reckoned the time he'd tried it with Lois he might as well have

been smoking shredded lettuce like little kids did. But it was the only time she'd let him kiss her—a real, sexy kiss with both their mouths open. That was actually kind of disappointing, to tell you the truth. He was more thrilled that she'd let him do it than the way it felt. And then she'd started laughing and then he had, too, and they'd smoked up the rest of the thin joint, forgetting to hold the smoke in, the way you're supposed to, passing it back and forth as fast as they could until finally it dropped in the grass and neither of them felt like trying to pick it up, they were laughing too much. There was only enough left to pinch between your fingers anyway. "Never mind," said Lois, "we can easy get some more." But they never did, so far.

He'd got into trouble at school. Not because of the pot. Nobody knew about that except for the boys he'd told. Not because of anything he'd done, really. Not because of bad behavior. Only daydreaming, Mrs. Teniers said, though he didn't remember daydreaming. He did look out the window a lot, it got so boring. And the homework he didn't do. And, he guessed, lying to Mrs. Teniers about why he hadn't done it, and lying to Mama about not having any. That was worst. And not going to school at all. And leaving in the middle of the morning. You had to lie to get away, unless you slipped out when the corridors were pretty busy. And the next day when you had to give an excuse. So it was bad behavior in a way. You could say. But not fighting or anything, or stealing. Or carrying firearms. There was a sign at Reception that said, "No Firearms Of Any Kind To Be Brought Onto School Premises." Jesse thought it made sense, especially after Columbine, but Mama almost screamed the first time she saw it. "I thought it was pretty rough when I was at school," she said, "but at least we never needed a sign like that."

It had been rough, too, when his Mama was at school. She'd told him stories about it. She had to get used to having black people in the same school, for one thing. They didn't used to be allowed. And they got some real tough backwoods white kids, too, down from the mountains. "But we never did have guns. And if the coloreds had knives they kept them to themselves." She hadn't liked school much more than Jesse did, Grandma said. One time she'd started to tell him about when Mama was his age and she was sneakin' off school, but Mama came in and said, "Oh Mom, don't tell him all that stuff. It'll make him think it's all right." Which it didn't, of course. He did it, but he knew it was wrong. It didn't exactly say about sneakin' off school in the Bible, but he guessed that bearing

false witness was the same as lying. That's why you had to swear on the Bible when you were a witness in court. And there was honoring your father and your mother, too. Which you weren't doing if you were pretending to go to school and then hanging around town until it was time to go home.

He'd never killed anybody, or even any animals. It wasn't a sin to kill animals. Isaac in the Old Testament liked meat better than vegetables, and so did God. That was what made Cain so mad at Abel. But Jess never even managed to trap a coon when his Uncle Eddie had taken him and his friend Duane coon hunting. He'd liked being out in the moonshine, though, with Duane and Uncle Eddie, staying up all night with the dogs. He called him Uncle, but he was really Grandma's brother and that made him his Great Uncle. There were some commandments he didn't perfectly understand, like having other gods. He guessed that was really aimed at Chinese people and Arabs, people like that. Adultery, of course, you couldn't do until you got married. It's funny there wasn't anything about sexual intercourse in the commandments, because that was a big sin. Maybe it was covered by something else, like lying and false witnessing. But stealing. He was uneasy about stealing. He never had stole much. It never seemed really bad if he only took something like a candy bar and ate it right away or something like that. But the Bible said just not to steal. At all. And it was a kind of stealing, he guessed, even a candy bar. You could call it.

He would be able to put all that badness behind him now, though. He was going to the Christian school. He didn't have to. They would have had him back at the public junior high. They said he was smart enough. Only...they always said it at the same time as they were saying he was bad. "It isn't even as though you were stupid, Jesse." Which made it sound as though it would be better if he was. They would have had him back; they wrote out a contract and he had to agree to it, and he had a book that he had to get signed every day, once at home and once at school. They'd sign it at school if he stayed there all day and Mama had to sign it if he did homework every night. Mrs. Teniers had to write in it what his homework was every day and he had to show it to Mama so she'd know. And there was some more stuff. He was going to have to repeat some subjects, not with Mrs. Teniers but with Mr. Mull, who taught fifth grade. That was because he had missed so much. That part hadn't sounded like a bad idea to him, because he couldn't hardly keep up with sixth grade math, but the principal said, "Now I know it

will be a humiliation for you, Jesse, but you have only yourself to blame. And it isn't as though you were stupid." So then he knew he was supposed to feel bad. But you had to expect to get punished if you'd done wrong. He knew that much.

But it turned out he wouldn't have to do any of that because he was going to the Christian school. Mama said that he needed the discipline and Grandma said she'd help all she could with the fees. It made him ashamed because he knew neither of them had much money. He promised he would be good in the public school, but Mama said not to worry, it was for the best and she'd wanted him to go to the Christian school since he was six years old, but she didn't think she could afford it. "Sometimes God just does find a way to tell you what you can afford and what you can't," she said. And then she told him that it wasn't just the discipline, it was the teaching. The public schools were ungodly; they taught that evolution was true—Jesse hadn't got to that yet, or maybe it was one of the things he'd missed—and that it was all right to be queer, and plus the Federal Government had made it a crime to pray in school. And there were people trying to sell you drugs all the time. Jesse didn't know so much about trying to, because the older kids were always complaining about not being able to find any. But then they usually did find some, so he guessed she was right in a way. And everybody cussed. Well, that was pretty true. He was trying not to now, but before, it had been hard not to say bad words—really bad words—in front of Mama, because he got so used to saying them. Now he said "sexual intercourse" instead of "fucking." If he was talking about doing it. He didn't say neither one in front of Mama. If it was like, whose fucking fault is it, then he'd just have to leave it out. Mr. Daniels said things like "get out of the blithering way," and "what's the drooling idea," and he also said, if somebody made him really mad, "Why don't you just go and dump yourself?" which made everybody laugh, but you couldn't say that yourself. You'd just have to leave it out. When he was younger, and didn't completely understand, he'd heard Grandma say, "bang," to mean doing it. It made him laugh out loud, which was too bad because Mama and Grandma noticed he was still there and they'd kind of forgotten until then. Grandma and Mama and Aunt Alice was talking, and Grandma said something like, "They was always ready for a bang," and that was when he laughed. "It sounds like a firecracker," he said, and Grandma said, "Well, honey, if it's good, it is," and they all laughed, but Mama said, "Mama, hush up," and they sent him

to bed. In the handbook for his new school it said that they mustn't use any vulgar language or there would be Disciplinary Action.

Mama said she wanted him to grow up to be a good Christian man, and that was more important, she said, even than a good education. Of course the Christian school had high academic standards, too. Not everybody who wanted to could get in. Even if you were able to pay the tuition. Jesse had to be interviewed, when the principal and the pastor mostly asked him about God and Jesus, and then he had to go to school for a day so that they could see what his behavior was like. And he had to have a letter from Reverend Finkle, the pastor at Mount Calvary, to say he and his family were faithful attenders. Even when Mama got the letter to say he'd gotten in, it was on probation. That wasn't anything against him; it was everybody they accepted. Attending Christ the King was a privilege and not a right. You could only stay there if you were willing to make the most of the opportunity.

It was called The School of The Church of Christ the King, but you didn't have to belong to The Church of Christ the King to go there. Him and Mama were going to keep going to Mount Calvary. He was glad about that because church was one of the places he felt happy. He never complained about going to church, and he never sneaked off. The preaching was boring sometimes, but the Sunday school was usually pretty interesting. They had to remember things, but they never had any tests. "All you really need to remember," Miss Gordon, the Sunday school teacher said, "is that Jesus loves you."



Jesse had to start the Christian school in the middle of the spring semester, because that's when he got suspended from junior high. He was a little nervous about being new when it wasn't even the beginning of the year. There wouldn't be any other new kids, so he'd get more attention than he really wanted. Mama said it wouldn't matter because it wasn't like the public school; nobody bullied you or tried to make you feel embarrassed.

Everything was different. Grandma bought him new pants, not too tight, it said in the letter, and not too baggy. You weren't allowed to wear jeans. Or baseball caps. Or T-shirts. Grandma bought him new shirts. You had to button your shirt all but the top button, and you had to have it tucked in your trousers. And you had to wear a belt. His regular haircut was all right; neat and short all round. Grandma gave him a trim the night before he started.

Everybody was kind to him. They'd assigned another boy in his class to take him round and tell him things and make sure he was all right. This boy—Daniel, the same as Jesse's dad—was a member of the church, so he knew everything about the church and the school both; he'd been going there since preschool. Daniel said, "You can ask me anything. Don't be bashful." And Jesse had a lot of questions. In a way it wasn't really his first day, because of the day he went for them to judge him, but it felt like the first day. The time before, he'd been too nervous, trying not to look as though he was noticing them watching him, and trying to be completely good. He was still nervous, but he wasn't quite so bad. He didn't think he could do anything bad enough for them to kick him out the first day. Daniel introduced him to a lot of other boys. No girls. There were girls there, but he didn't meet them. Daniel said they were allowed to talk to them, "Of course! People have some weird ideas about what goes on here—brainwashing and everything," but they just didn't happen to. They weren't allowed to touch them, "Of course, if you bump into somebody, you won't get in trouble, or if you have to tap somebody on the shoulder. But you can't hold hands or anything like that." At his old school, girls and boys walked through the corridors together, arms round each other's waists or shoulders. Jesse didn't know whether he was sorry or not to lose the chance of doing that when he was older. He saw one black boy, but Daniel didn't introduce him. He was a little boy, so he didn't need to. Jesse was surprised there weren't more, because the handbook said, "We do not discriminate on the basis of race, or national or ethnic origin." That meant colored. He said to Daniel, "Are there lots of colored here?" and Daniel said, "No." Jesse waited, but he didn't say any more.

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By the time he came back in the fall—the end of summer, really, because they had a longer year than the public schools—he wasn't the newest any more. He wasn't assigned to take any of the new boys around, but he knew his own way.

They had a Bible Study class every day, and every morning they met in the chapel for a service. And on some afternoons. They had the Lord's Supper, too. But the chapel was always open; they could always go in to pray. That was different from the public schools, where you weren't allowed to pray.

The chapel was very plain. Pastor Happold told them about the grand churches that Catholics had, and synagogues, of course,

where Jews went on Saturdays to pray. They were fancy, with gold and marble, because people like that, who had false gods, put the things of the body before the things of the spirit. Theirs, the Chapel of Christ the King, had a tiled floor with a rug on it and all the benches were wooden and the walls were painted white. It had plain glass windows to let in God's light. At first Jesse thought they must not be able to afford stained glass windows like they had at Mount Calvary, but Pastor Happold explained one time about how man was allowed to create beauty—"Serve God in all things!"—but he couldn't improve on what God had made. So the light of the world—just like, he said, the real Light of the World, who was Jesus—didn't need to be colored or poured through a filter. That was the same as trying to take the Bible and make it mean something besides what it said. The pure light was like the pure gospel. And the gospel was the word of God.

At Catawba Junior High School, you could sign up for scripture class as one of your electives, but here it was different. There was scripture in everything. In science and history and English composition. That was because it was God's world and Christ was the king of everything, not just church. God was the god of basketball, Pastor Happold said, just as much as He was god of heaven. Pastor Happold said that the whole world was shining with the presence of God, if only we knew how to look. One of the boys in his class lifted his hand to his head and made screwy circles with his pointing-finger. Jesse looked around, sick with anxiety that their teacher would see Tom, but she was looking at Pastor Happold and not at them. "But," he thought, "God has seen him," and he felt cold with what was in store for Tom. Jesse was surprised that anybody laughed at the pastor. In his old school, everybody made fun of the teachers, and did imitations of them, sometimes while they were right in front of you, with their backs turned, and then they'd stop the second the teacher turned round, which was the funniest of all. Sometimes you couldn't help but laugh. But here...it was almost like laughing at God. Besides, it said in the handbook, "Ridicule of the Christian teachings and ideas presented will not be tolerated."

The fact was that he didn't always get it. Mama was right that nobody bullied you, but that didn't mean they didn't laugh at things you hadn't heard or didn't exactly understand. Maybe he was still too new.

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Dan turned up. Jesse knew him from the shape of his face and his hat through the truck window. He was driving a little blue truck that Jesse hadn't seen before.

It looked almost new. Jesse ran out of Grandma's back door—they were staying at Grandma's house—and out onto the dirt driveway before he'd even stopped.

"Hey, Dad," mindful that he wasn't a little boy. Nobody was going to swing him up in his arms now.

"Hey, Son. I declare you've grown a foot! What's she feedin' you, tomatater fertilizer?"

He took his father's hand and led him up the steps onto the porch. "We got some coffee," he said. "Mama and Grandma's both at work. You want to go see Mama?"

"Sure do." Dan sat down at the kitchen table. "That coffee hot?"

"I'll pour you some." His heart was hitting his chest. He had only just got here and already Jesse was trying not to ask him how long he was going to stay. "You want Carnation in it?"

"Just sugar," he said.

Jesse put the sugar jar out, and a spoon for stirring. He sat down in a chair across from his dad.

"Ain't you havin' no coffee?"

He shook his head and made a face. "Don't like it," he said. "Hit's too bitter."

Dad laughed. "You like tea?"

"Sweet tea, I do. Ice tea."

"And I bet you like that good ol' rye whisky."

Jesse laughed and shook his head.

"Not yet, huh. Not yet. Well, it'll come. Hell, Jesse, you're nearly a man now. There's all kinds of things you got to develop a taste for."

Jesse laughed again and then he said, "I'm a-goin' to a new school now."

"Is that right? How come you're doin' that?"

"Mama says I need the discipline. And the teachin's better."

"Is that right? How come you need all that discipline? You been in trouble?"

"Not really. Not bad trouble. I was sneakin' off school a little."

His dad laughed. "Just a little, huh. I bet. Do they whup you in that new school?"

Jesse shook his head. "They do, but I ain't got whupped yet. I ain't been bad enough yet."

"How bad you got to be?"

Jesse shrugged. "Pretty bad, I guess. Usin' vulgar language or bein' disobedient."

“Well, you got it in you, boy, I believe that. If you got any a’ me in you.” He slid his empty cup across the oilcloth-covered table to Jesse. “You go put that in the sink for me and we’ll go round to the store and get your mama.”

Jesse put the cup under the spigot, ran it full of water and carefully turned the water off before he ran to catch up with his father. He took the key from above the door frame and pulled the door closed behind him.

“You scairt a’ burglars?” Dan asked.

“Better safe than sorry, Grandma says.”

“I bet she does, too.”

“Are we gonna go get Grandma, too? She’s nearly done workin’.” He climbed up into the passenger seat and stroked the upholstery. “I sure do like your new truck.”

“Well, it ain’t a real truck, you know, you couldn’t haul nothin’ much in it. Just a kind of a materiel-carrier.” He winked at Jesse as he settled himself behind the wheel. “She still at the same place?” he asked as he turned out into the road.

“Yeah. She likes it there. She says they’re real understandin’ when she has to take time off or somethin’.”

“She got herself some ol’ boy she’s seein’ up to that store?”

Jesse laughed. “No sir, not Mama. She says when you’re away I’m the only boy she’s got.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

They drove past a straggle of houses and fields and along the straight road that led into the town. “Grandma’s at the Oxford plant, if you want to go down that way,” said Jesse.

“Well now, I guess we’ll leave your grandma alone this afternoon and not disturb her arrangements. I’ll see her when she gets back home this evenin’.” Dan drove in silence until the first traffic light stopped them, then he said, “How come you was home today? I would ‘a thought you’d be out playin’ or raisin’ hell or somethin’ on a Saturday.”

Jesse laughed. He liked the way his dad talked about him, as though they were the same. “I been out a while, but I came on home when it started to get cold.”

“Ain’t your friends got houses?” They stopped in front of the Family Dollar store and Dan turned the engine off and started to get out. Jesse followed him, scrambling down the high step and slamming the door as he ran.

Mama had already seen them through the glass and she was

walking toward them when they got to the door. "Well, God help us all," she said, "if he isn't here again!"

Jesse hugged her waist, exuberant, and Dad leaned across him to kiss her. Jesse was still just short enough so he could do that.

"I'm s'posed to be workin', you know," she said, and pulled away from them both. She was turning to walk to the back of the store, but Jesse could hear that she was smiling.

"Well now, Babe," Dan said, "cain't you just have a little time off on account of it's a special occasion?"

"It is a special occasion, I believe, when you show your face around here," she said, but she didn't sound mad.

He leaned on the counter. "Now don't go haulin' up all my sins of yesteryear," he said, and his wife laughed.

"Yesteryear!" she said, "It just keeps on bein' yesteryear if that's when you do your sinnin'."

"You're a hard woman, Edith," he said.

"Well, I guess I am," she said. "I need to be, what I have to put up with."

"Come on, now," he said, "ain't it time we had a little family life?"

"I'd be ashamed, if I was you," she said. "It's nearly time I was quittin' anyway. You can just hang around and wait for me if you want to." She gestured widely to the tables of shirts and underwear, lengths of cloth, children's shoes and knick-knacks. "You can do some shoppin'."

Dan began to walk methodically through the aisles, picking up cellophane-wrapped objects and scrutinizing them as though he couldn't make them out. Jesse followed him, trying not to laugh. There was a high stack of dishtowels and Dan started sorting through them as though he were looking for a particular design. Finally he held up one that was printed with a calendar for 1998 under a picture of Christ in a garden, his hand raised as though in blessing, his sandaled feet set on the 1 and the second 9. "Now here," he said. "This is real nice. I think I better buy this for your grandma. You think she'd notice it's a little out of date? I reckon I should get a little discount, don't you? Seein' it's past its sell-by."

Jesse laughed, but he felt scandalized, too. He had a feeling that his father was making fun of Grandma and of Jesus at the same time. He was glad they were too far away from Mama for her to hear him.

When they were ready to leave, everybody said goodbye to Dan and Mr. Randolph said it sure was nice to see him again. Jesse was glad everybody was so friendly, but when they got outside, Dan said,

“He seems pretty familiar, just to be your boss.”

Mama looked at him and shook her head. “You know you’re as crazy as a coot, don’t you?” They had been walking toward the new blue truck, and she turned to Jesse, “You ridin’ home with your daddy, or you want to come with me?”

“I’ll ride with Daddy, please,” he said, “if that’s all right.”

“Sure is.” She looked at the truck. “That’s pretty,” she said.

“It was a bargain. Fact, it was almost a present. Fella owed me some money.”

“Well, there’s a first,” she said.

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When Grandma walked in, she looked at Dan and said, “I thought it was you with that truck.”

“Classy,” he agreed.

She shook her head. “Bumper sticker.”

Jesse ran outside to look. He hadn’t actually stood behind the truck yet. It said, “Country Music’s My Religion and Hank Williams is My God.” He felt a little worried by it, although he knew it was only a joke. He guessed he couldn’t come to pick him up from school Monday after all, if he was still here Monday.

They all went out to eat together, Grandma too, at the Moondance Fish Camp. They had the all-you-can-eat special and Jesse had three platefuls. Then when they got home, Dan tried to get Edith to go out dancing at Cat Square, but she wouldn’t. “Come on, Sweetness,” he said. “Gloria don’t mind keepin’ an eye on Jesse, do you Gloria?”

Grandma said no, she didn’t mind a bit, but Edith said that Cat Square was a dive and she was a married woman, “though you wouldn’t know it.”

“But honey, you got married way too young. You never would ‘a done if it hadn’t ‘a been for...” an inclination of his head. “You’re just a young thing at heart. You better get you some fun while you got the chanst. Before you got a whole bunch more kids.”

“You better not start countin’ ‘em,” she said.

They did go out together after Jesse was in bed, walking off down the road because Mama said she wasn’t getting in the car with him if he was going to be drinking. Jesse stood at the window and watched them walk in and out of the tree shadows that lay across the road, his mom’s pale coat appearing and vanishing.

Then he went to bed. When his dad was away, Jesse always prayed that he’d come back and when he was home, he always prayed that he’d stay.

Dan didn't wake up in time for church on Sunday, and when they got home he was out of bed, but he was still drunk. Jesse heard Grandma say, "I believe he's got hold of some liquor already today. Did he bring some back last night?"

Edith shrugged. "I didn't see any," she said.

"It beats me how he pays for it," said Grandma.

He couldn't eat dinner with them, but in the afternoon he was better and he took Jesse for a walk down the creek. Grandma said how could Mama trust him with that boy, but Mama said Jesse would always be safe with his daddy. Jesse wasn't ever worried about being with Dan unless he was awful drunk, and he was fine now.

"You got school again tomorrow?"

Jesse nodded.

"They don't give you much time off at that school, do they?"

"No sir, they don't. And they'll keep you late if you have to wait for somebody to come get you, on account a' work or somethin'."

"It's a Christian school, right?"

"Christ the King," Jesse said.

"You like that? All that church and Jesus and Bible all day?"

He shrugged. "I guess." Then he remembered Columbine and Cassie Bernall and he said, "Yes, I do."

"Well," his father said, "just as long as you like it."

They walked along together for a while, crossing back and forth across the road so as to stay in the sun, which was getting low and red in the sky.

"It's hard, ain't it," Dan said, "livin' with women."

Jesse had never thought about it. "It ain't hard to live with Mama," he said. And then, feeling disloyal, he added, "or Grandma, neither."

"Well, that's good," his father said. "That's real good. The longer you stay a boy the better you'll do, I believe."

Jesse wished he could take it back. He'd rather be a man for his father, a friend. But he hadn't got it in time. And Mama and Grandma were always there, but Dad... So maybe that was right. Maybe he was a boy.

Dan didn't get drunk again, not that Jesse saw, and he guessed he would have. He came and picked him up at school and nobody saw the bumper sticker. Or nobody said.

He had supper with them every night, and he and Mama talked about moving back to their own house. "It wouldn't take me two weeks to get that insulation finished," he said, "if I can get some help. We could be back there before Christmas."

“We could have Christmas dinner,” said Jesse. “Grandma could come.”

“She sure as hell could,” said Dan, and he squeezed Jesse’s shoulders. “We’ll get us one of those big ol’ sugar-cured hams from down the country.”

Dan took the keys to the house and went over there with fat rolls of pink fiberglass. When Jesse asked if he could help, he said, “I’m relyin’ on you!” He said he’d get Jesse some thick gloves and a breathing mask because you have to treat fiberglass with respect. Jesse went up to his old room while Dad was looking at the walls he’d opened up last time. Once the insulation was done, he’d ask if he could paint his room. It was still in baby colors, pale yellow, pale green.

Dan started the insulation the next week. He was real good at things like that. Grandma said she’d believe it when she saw it, but Mama brought home some material from the store to make curtains with. “It’s too thin, really,” she said, “but it’ll do ‘til we get some better.” Jesse was going to help over the weekend. Weekdays, it was nearly dark by the time he got back from school, and they hadn’t had the electric turned on again. They didn’t have the oil burner going either, and Dan said for his next job he was gonna insulate an igloo.

Thursday night it started to snow and Jesse thought for sure they’d have a snow day. First thing Friday morning he saw the light coming in his window was that flat bright everywhere-at-once light that you get when there’s snow on the ground, and he put the radio on to hear the announcements even before he went to look out the window. The truck was gone and its tracks were in the new snow. He knew Dan was gone. He said out loud to himself, “I bet he’s over to the house, startin’ work early,” but he knew he was gone.

Downstairs, Mama was at the table crying and Grandma was standing at the stove, but Jesse couldn’t see that she was cooking. Mama’s face looked as if she’d been crying for hours and hours. Puffed up like bug bites.

“Did you and him fight?” Jesse asked, wondering why he hadn’t heard.

“I never got the chanst,” she said. “He just took off. I would ‘a fought. I would ‘a said he cain’t do us this way. I would ‘a told him...” She put her head on her arms on the table and Jesse could barely hear her say, “I guess that’s why he just took off. He never could stand bein’ told.”

Grandma came and sat down and beckoned to Jesse to sit on her lap. He was too big, really, his heels dragging the floor and his elbows sticking out, but she put her arms around him and he rested his head by her shoulder, where her collarbone would have been if you could feel it through her flesh. She sat and rocked him like a baby, and Mama sat with her head on her arms and nobody said anything.

It wasn't a snow day after all, and Jesse begged to be allowed to stay home. "I want to take care of Mama," he said.

"Well, there's no need, because you're goin' to school and I'm goin' to work."

"Honey," her mother said, "Do you really want to go with...feelin' the way you do?"

"It don't matter what I feel like! I cain't afford to lose a day's pay on top of ever'thing else. And I won't feel no different tomorrow."

"Honey..." but she didn't listen, just went and washed her face again.

In a way, it was better being at school. At school he was the only one that was sad, so he could forget about it once in a while.

His friend Daniel asked him if anything was the matter and he said that his dad had to go away.

"Well, don't feel bad about that," he said. "He's coming back, isn't he?"

"'Course."

"Shoot, my dad goes away all the time. There's not enough work around here to keep him busy, he says. He calls every night, though. Does your dad call?"

"Sure. Sure he does."

"Well, you don't need to feel bad. Just think how bad he's gonna feel when you grow up and leave home! Just think about that!"

Jesse did.

At lunchtime he went into the chapel. He was allowed. "The chapel is the heart of the school," Pastor Happold said. "You're always welcome there." Jesse had decided he would sit and think about his father, but really, once he had put himself into his usual seat, he didn't think of anything much. It got darker while he sat there and he wondered whether it was fixin' to snow again and if they'd send the bus children home early. He smelled the varnish and paint of the place and looked at the snowlight coming through the clear panes. He kind of wished there was an angel with a red robe in the window to color the light, like there was in Mount Calvary, but it

didn't matter. If you kept looking you could see colors in the glass anyhow, the way the clouds moved over it and the reflections of the outdoors came and went.

Grandma came to pick him up after school and she asked him how he was.

"Okay." They drove on for a ways. "How's Mama?"

"I haven't been home yet."

"Was ever 'body workin' today?"

"I guess."

"Where do you think my daddy is now?"

"I don't know..." Her voice ended on an upward note, as though the sentence had another half that she didn't say.

"D'you think he'll come back?"

"You're askin' the wrong person entirely, Jesse."

"I wish he would come back, Grandma."

"Precious, I know you do, but... well, sometimes it's hard for us to know what to wish for."

"I'll pray about it."

"Well, that's always a good thing, Jesse. If you take your burdens to the Lord, you'll see how they get lighter to bear."

Aunt Alice was there when he got home. She was standing at the table covering a big square cake with white icing. Mama sat with her hands on the table before her lying quiet on either side of a bowl. It made Jesse uncomfortable to see her sitting still. She never did, usually.

Grandma said, "Well, I brought him home. I guess we'll have to keep him, now."

Mama looked up and smiled at him. Her face wasn't as puffy as it was this morning, but there was still something wrong with it. Specially when she smiled.

Aunt Alice wiped her hands on the dishtowel she had over her shoulder and came to hug him. "Hey, honey," she said. "Are you feelin' okay?"

Jesse shrugged. "I guess," he said.

"Well, you will be, darlin'. You and me and Mama and your mama, we'll take care of each other, won't we?"

He shrugged again. He wanted to speak, to agree, but he couldn't.

"Well, you come over here and make me some pink icin' I need for the edge of this cake. It's for a 40th birthday. Why anybody should celebrate that, I do not know, but they asked for it, so..."

She interrupted herself to lean across the table and slide the glass bowl away from in front of Edith and put it at an empty place. "Now you put down that stuff and wash your hands," she said to Jesse. "And here's the cochineal. Whatever you do don't put too much in or I'll have to mix up more white."

Edith looked up. "Oh, Alice, I don't know what's the matter with me. I meant to do that. Give it here."

"Well, I know what's the matter with you. Never mind, Jesse'll do just fine, won't you, Jesse?" Jesse nodded. "I don't know why anybody has to do it; I should a' brought some ready mixed, but there you are. I didn't and it's poor little Jesse's got to pay the price."

"If that's the hardest work poor little Jesse ever has to do he'll be luckier than most," said Grandma.

"I don't care how hard I work," said Jesse.

"Bless your heart, I know you don't. I'm just jokin'," said his grandmother. "You sit down here and I'll put on a pot a' coffee. You want some hot milk and syrup, Jesse?"

"That's a baby drink," he said. "Can I have a coke?"

"As cold as it is? Well, if you can find a can in the ice box you can have it."

He hesitated. "I'll have a cup a' coffee," he said.

"Well, I never did." But when the coffee was made she poured him a cup. "Put in plenty of sugar, darlin' and it won't taste so bad."

†

"Mama," he said, "Do you think Dad's comin' back?" This was later, when she was back like herself.

"Jesse," she said, "I wouldn't have him back."

"Mama, you would, too."

"Jesse, he can't go on treatin' us this way. What are we supposed to be? We're not a vacation. Just for when he hasn't got anything else to do."

"But don't you love him anymore?"

She sighed, "I don't see as it makes much difference either way, Jesse."

"But he's my dad."

"He sure acts like it, too."

"Oh, Mama."

When he asked his grandma, she said, "You better talk to your mama."

"I did. She says she won't have him around no more."

"Well then."

“But she don’t mean it.”

“You reckon.”

“Does she mean it?”

“I think she does, Jesse. At least she does now. Don’t ask me what she’ll say the next time he turns up.”

“I guess we won’t move back to the house now, though, will we, Grandma?”

†

People didn’t get asked to lead prayer group. Usually one of the teachers did it, but if none of them was there, then anybody could start. Or sometimes even if one was. Whoever felt moved. Pastor Happold said not to worry if you never felt moved to preach. It was a gift of the spirit, like speaking in tongues and those gifts were not distributed equally. Everybody had different gifts. Just listening and being obedient was a gift, too. Girls couldn’t be called to preach, for instance, but they could be just as good Christians as a man. This worried Jesse a bit. His grandma had a cousin—some kind of cousin—Sister Mary Mercy, and she preached all over. People would come from miles around to hear her. Grandma took him to listen to her once at homecoming at her church. This was when he was little, before he started at Christ the King, before he was even baptized, and he’d been baptized when he was ten. And she preached all day. And she healed and spoke in tongues. She was a big woman and she had lots of gray speckled hair tied up on the top of her head and she wore a long dark red dress and it was the most exciting preaching Jesse had ever heard. People were crying all day, they were so touched by the conviction of their sin, and there was speaking in tongues all over the room. And people falling down with the healing. Jesse wanted to cry himself, not because of his sinfulness but because...he didn’t know why. He was just so...something. Something high, like a string inside him was being pulled upward and the whole day he breathed hard as though he’d been running. He didn’t cry and he didn’t come down to the Mercy Seat and give himself to Jesus, but he’d always thought the Holy Spirit was in that room, and that’s what was doing all the pulling and making the people shout. But if Sister Mary Mercy wasn’t really called to preach, then it must not have been the Holy Spirit after all. So what was it?

But anyhow, at Christ the King the women didn’t preach. Or girls. They had women teachers, but that’s because they were children. Women could be called to teach children, and other women,

but not men. “What would we do without our women?” Principal Lowell said. He meant for teaching the children.

One of the boys—Jesse knew his name was Michael, but he didn’t know him; he was in the secondary department—stood up and said, “Dear God our heavenly father, thank you for our teachers and our parents and for the chance we have to become good Christian men and women and thank you for this good weather we’ve been havin’ after our real cold winter and please God help us to honor your name and be faithful to your will and God...we know it ain’t right to pray for anything that’s bad for other people, but if it be thy precious will please let us win the basketball tonight in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.” Some people laughed and some said amen. Jesse said amen. He was going to the basketball game. He knew he wasn’t ever going to be tall enough to play high school basketball, but he knew a lot about it, and he liked it. He was fast on the court, but besides not being tall enough, he wasn’t very accurate. Just the same, he liked playing with the kids. There was talk that Michael was going to leave Christ the King next year and go to Catawba High so he could go play basketball there. One of the girls in Jesse’s class said he was hoping to get an athletic scholarship to college, and Catawba had a lot better facilities. Most of the older boys left at that age.

When Jesse stood up, he wasn’t even sure what he was going to say, only he felt moved at least to stand up.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” he said, “We thank you for all our good homes and our good lives and we pray you make us remember all those children in the world who don’t know your glorious name or your son’s name that is Jesus Christ our Lord.” A few people said amen and he went on, picking up speed. “Dear Heavenly Father, we pray you make us faithful unto death, because we know that the world is going to vanish away like smoke and the heavens are going to be rolled up like a scroll but thy heavenly kingdom will last forever and we won’t last forever but we will be like grass before the mowers and the moth will eat us up like a garment and the moth will eat us like wool except if we’re in your heavenly kingdom and we pray that you let us come into it. And we know that at the end of time the whole world will be like the best party in the world, with all the lost and strayed sheep found and carried home and the hearts of the fathers will be turned to the children and the hearts of the children will be turned to the fathers and peace will flow like a river and righteousness like a stream.”

“Amen.” Everyone was watching him now, but he was looking over their heads, through the clear pane of glass into the shifting light.

“And we shall be borne upon your sides and dandled on your knees and we will suck and be satisfied with the breasts of your consolation.” No one spoke. “And we will milk out and be delighted with the abundance of your glory and we shall be comforted in Jerusalem and our bones will flourish like a herb. Amen.” He looked at the others, who were looking at him. “We pray in the name of your blessed son our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.” The others said amen and Jesse sat down.

Pastor Happold spoke from the doorway. “Thank you, Jesse. I will just lead us now in a closing prayer that we may enter our afternoon’s work refreshed to glorify Him in all that we do.”

Jesse hadn’t known Pastor Happold had been listening to him. He hadn’t hardly been listening himself. God had been listening.

When Grandma got there to pick him up in the car, Pastor Happold walked out with him and leaned down to the window while Jesse walked round to the other side to get in.

Grandma started to open the door, but she couldn’t because Pastor Happold was leaning into the window. Jesse knew it would make her uncomfortable to be sitting while the pastor had to bend over to talk to her.

“We were real proud of Jesse this dinnertime,” he said.

“Is that right?” She looked around at Jesse, who was settling into the seat.

“I should say so,” he said. “He gave us a real good sermon in prayer meeting.”

“Did he?”

“He surely did.” He paused for a moment, looking into Grandma’s face. “Did you know that Jesse is American for Jesus?”

“Well, now...”

“Yes ma’am. If Jesus had ‘a been born in America, the angels would have said to name him Jesse. That’s the truth.”

“Well, now...”

“Now, Jesse don’t you be gettin’ the wrong idea.” He was smiling broadly.

“No, sir.”

“Only...” Pastor Happold stuck his head a little further inside the car and lowered his voice. Jesse could still hear him. “Only there’s some parts of the Bible—in particular in the Old Testament—that’s a little bit strong for a boy. Do you know what I mean?”

“Well, I sure don’t, Pastor.”

“In particular in the Book of Isaiah.”

Grandma shook her head.

“He can’t go wrong with the gospels,” said Pastor Happold. “Now, I’d never tell a boy not to read any part of the Good Book, only a boy needs...sometimes a boy needs a strong hand,” he said.

Grandma nodded, frowning.

Pastor Happold pulled his head out and straightened up slowly, putting his hand to the small of his back. “Well,” he said, “you have a safe journey home, now. Be good, Jesse. God bless you,” and he waved as they drove away. “See you tomorrow morning!”

“I did good, Grandma, didn’t I?”

“Well, I guess you did, Jesse.”

“Grandma, did you know that my name was American for Jesus?”

“No, I surely did not know that.”

“Grandma, did you know that once I heard a angel’s voice?”

“Now, Jesse...”

“No, honest. I did. It was right after Daddy left that time. Do you remember that?”

“I do.”

“Well, I saw such a beautiful face up in the air—only you could see through it, so I knew it wasn’t earthly—and I heard a voice. Only it was a voice...it might ha’ been in my head or it might ha’ been out in the chapel, I couldn’t tell, but I know I heard it.”

“Well, Jesse, what did it say to you?”

“It said I was supposed to be some kind of a teacher or a preacher and bring people to the word of God.”

“A teacher or a preacher?”

“I can’t remember the exact words,” he said. “I think it wasn’t exactly in words. But it was real clear.”

“Well, Jesse, I think that’s a fine thing.”

“Is it a callin’ do you think?”

“It sure does sound like it.”

“And just think of my name bein’ the same as Jesus’s name.”

“Almost.”

“Almost. Grandma.”

“Jesse.”

“Do you think it’s better to be saved or be smart?”

“Now that’s hard, Jesse. What do you think’s better?”

“Well, I think it’s better to be saved, because that lasts forever and ever. And I know I’m saved.”

