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## Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

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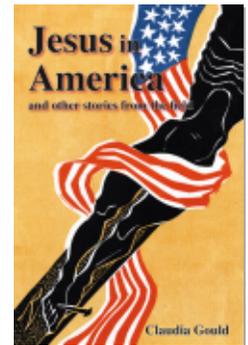
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## A Moment of Rapture

*Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught  
up together with them in the clouds,  
to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be  
with the Lord.*

*Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*

—I Thessalonians 4:17

The dogs had been barking for a good two hours since Jeff started listening. Who knows how long before that. Sounds didn't leak into the house. Jeff and Laurel always went to bed with the windows and doors closed and locked. Closed for the air conditioning. Locked for security. But tonight had been so balmy, so full of smells and summer sounds, that Jeff had hesitated when they came indoors. He had a sense that in a minute he would remember something, recognize something not quite forgotten. But there was only the soft heavy air and the smell of grass. So he said, "It's a nice night," and Laurel had agreed and they had come in and shut the door behind them. He made sure the windows were closed (for the air conditioning) and locked (for security) in his son Alan's room. Laurel checked those in Peter's. Then they said their short separate prayers and went to bed.

They kissed each other goodnight and lay under just a sheet, apart, hands touching. The air conditioning was working; he could hear the hum of it as it passed the air through its entrails and blew it out softly—cooled, dehumidified, and ionized—but still it seemed hot. He fell asleep, listening to his wife's breathing, familiar as his own, and to the unobtrusive breath of the Central Air.

When he awoke, he thought it must be nearly morning. He had been deeply asleep, dreaming of something vanished now. He listened intently for the boys but they had not wakened yet. He looked at the clock. Eleven forty. Funny how that happened sometimes; he had been sleeping for seven minutes.

He would not sleep again now, he thought. The air felt stale, sickly, as though it had been too often breathed. It didn't smell

bad, exactly, just overused. He got up quietly, so he wouldn't wake Laurel, and went to the window. As he started to lift it, the frame caught a little and scraped. At the noise, Laurel turned. He waited, watching her. She opened her eyes and looked at him, clouded, confused by this early awakening.

"What time is it?"

"Night time," he said. They were both whispering, though the boys couldn't have heard them from their rooms. "I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

She frowned.

"Thought I'd let some air in," he said.

"Good idea." She turned over, moving just enough so that her head made a new hollow in her pillow and, so far as he could see, she fell asleep at once.

He turned back to the window and opened it fully. The frame ground against the sash and he resolved to plane it. Or grease it somehow; soap... candle wax. The trouble was, opening them so seldom, you just assumed they were in good shape. He should do regular checks, just to make sure, to keep ahead of things.

Once his window stood open and had stopped protesting, he heard the barking. Someone moving past, he thought. Dogs'll do that. Even a friend, if they turn up at night, will set them off. And a good thing. Security. It sounded like two dogs. He went into the living room where he hesitated for a moment. These were both big windows. And they were close to the floor. A person could climb in and you'd never hear them, not if you were asleep in the other room. And if there was a prowler around... No reason there should be. Only the dogs were still barking. He'd thought they would quiet down when whoever it was got beyond their boundary. Man, they were loud dogs!

Still he hesitated, his hands on the window locks. But somehow, having come into his own living room to open his own windows to let fresh air in, he could not bring himself to leave the locks on. What kind of a man, what kind of a father or a husband, could be afraid to open his windows to the summer air?

These windows ran much smoother and the first one slid upward at his first urging as though it had its own reasons.

He could distinguish their two voices clearly now. One was high-pitched, not yappy like a little dog, no. Full, but kind of screamish; it finished sometimes on what was almost a howl. The other one was deep timbered; the barking started as a rumble in its throat, then

ran out like a holler. He imagined the dog: black and brindled, a big squat beast with a square muzzle and short legs. Old. Grey hairs behind his nose and growing out of his ears. Worse tempered now than when he was young.

The noise was coming from the next house along—the direction was clear now—so why didn't he remember ever seeing these animals? Maybe whoever owned the dogs kept them penned in the day. Maybe he took them to work with him. Stupid thing to do, if he did. Brutes like that.

Jeff went back to bed. He pulled his pajamas off and pushed them away with his feet. He didn't feel any cooler. Anyway, didn't staying covered keep the heat off you? All those Arabs and Bedouins in The Holy Land wearing their long cotton gowns in the desert. But maybe that was just against the sun. They wore business suits now, didn't they, but they had those black and white bandannas. Through the open windows he could hear, in the brief pauses between barks, the chirruping of cicadas or grasshoppers or whatever insects they were that sang in the short summer nights. Playing fiddles, he thought, instead of storing food for the winter. That was a fable. He remembered being told it when he was hardly more than a baby, when he was first at school. Who was it that stored up the food? Bees, maybe. Or ants. Yes, he thought it was ants. Funny kind of a story to tell kids, if you wanted them to learn it was better to work hard than to spend your time tomcattin' around. Nobody liked ants. Grasshoppers could do a lot of damage—well, locusts could, anyway, and they were some kind of kin to grasshoppers—but just the same, there was something about them, to a child. Leaping up out of the long grass like they did, the same color as the grass, life in the still summer meadows. Who would you rather be like? None of the kids he knew would rather be a farmer than a fiddler. They knew too much about farming.

He'd taken that story home to tell his mama and she'd said it was just like the wise and the foolish virgins. He hadn't known what a virgin was—except for “yon virgin” in the Christmas carol, which couldn't have anything to do with the grasshoppers because, for one thing, Christmas happened in the winter when all the grasshoppers were gone; dead or sleeping, he hadn't known then which it was and he realized he still didn't—and when he'd asked Mama, she'd said it was what they called a girl in olden times. And she'd taken him to her big chair under the lamp and picked up her Bible off the little table and read him Matthew 25:1-12, where it says

that the Kingdom of Heaven is like ten virgins. It was a confusing story then; there were so many virgins, and only one bridegroom. It had made him think of hens around a rooster, more than the kingdom of God. But he couldn't have been more than five years old. Younger than Peter was now. But Mama was right about the grasshopper and the virgins. It was the same lesson. Not everybody would have thought of that. She was a smart woman, and she was a good Christian mother: she found lessons everywhere, found a gentle rein in everything to pull her children toward the Lord. When the grasshopper feels the cold coming on, and he's only wearing his embroidered vest (he hadn't known he remembered so much of it), and he doesn't have any work clothes, any warm clothes, then he knows. He knows he's left it too late. All the harvest he should have gathered in is gathered already, by others, or dead from an early frost. He knows now that he's going to starve if he doesn't freeze first, so he goes to the ants and the chief ant tells him he should have thought of that before. There isn't enough to go around. And that's what the wise virgins say to the foolish virgins, too, when the bridegroom turns up in the middle of the night and they've used up all their oil so they can't light their lamps. There isn't enough to go round, so the foolish virgins have to go buy some more and when they get back the door is shut and they knock on it and pound on it and the bridegroom says, "Verily, I know you not." The bridegroom was a figure of Jesus, he learned. He never confessed it, but it seemed spiteful to him for the girls not to share their oil, and make the other ones miss their wedding. And not so merciful of the bridegroom to shut the door on them. Just like he'd hated the head ant for being so self-satisfied. But that wasn't the lesson. The lesson was to be always ready. The lesson was not to wait until the last minute to get yourself right.

He had almost fallen asleep a couple of times, but he was moving further and further from sleep now. It was like when the boys were babies—especially Peter, he thought—and wouldn't settle to sleep. He'd wake up hearing a whimper and listen to it growing to a wide-awake complaint, and still he'd think, maybe he'll go back to sleep by himself. Maybe he'll drop off. It was easy to forget, now that they lowered themselves into sleep as though it were a pool, throwing their solid little bodies into ever more extravagant postures, so that sometimes they had almost to be unwrapped from their bedclothes, without ever surfacing into consciousness until morning. Sometimes, now that they were such accomplished, such

dedicated sleepers, it was hard to remember how hard-won their naps had been when they were small, how tired their parents were all the time. It was worse for Laurel, of course, but sometimes when he set off for work in the morning, gritty-eyed with fatigue, he had thought that he would give anything in the world for an uninterrupted night. So in the middle of the night he would cling to sleep, hoping that Peter would drift again into a quiet doze, even for an hour, even half an hour. He was ashamed to remember it, but he had probably prayed more often and more fervently for Peter to go back to sleep than he had for anything else in his life. He shifted in his bed now, listening to the dogs as he used to listen to Peter. Between outbursts he drifted, dreaming that he was asleep. A moment's silence and he started counting seconds, nearly holding his breath. There... they had stopped barking. In his dream, Peter was not sleeping, only gathering breath for the next insistent shout, outraged and grief-laden. The child-rearing book in which they— young parents, just learning—had put their faith said that you had to leave them to get through the night or they'd never learn, and Jeff's mother said the same thing: pick that baby up whenever he cries, she had assured them, and you'll be making a rod for your own back. So he and Laurel would lie stiffly in their bed, willing the small, tyrannical voice to release them, wondering which of them would be the first to break, who would have to stride into the next room and pick up the shuddering child, hot and pink from crying, sobbing reproachfully into your shoulder, damp with tears and drool. Usually it was Jeff.

He looked at his clock. Nearly one.

Well, these dogs weren't going to quit. They were set for the night. And so was he. Funny that Laurel could sleep through it. Well, he couldn't stand it. He wouldn't stand it. Carefully, he slipped himself out of the bed, making as little disturbance as he could. He felt for his discarded pajama bottoms, and Laurel shifted and sighed in her sleep. He stopped and waited until she was still, then he went out into the hall. He looked in on the boys. They were deeply asleep. Well, he thought, they were on the quiet side of the house—away from the dogs.

He unlocked the back door and put on an old raincoat that was hanging on the peg beside it. Underneath the row of gardening sweaters, padded jackets for backyard cold weather, forgotten plastic coats and ancient capes, stood their collection of outdoor footwear. He put his feet into a pair of rubber boots, feeling

garden grit in his bed-warm, night-softened feet. He closed the door behind him and walked outside. The barking was explosive, now, and continuous.

He hesitated, standing on the dry grass. He and his neighbor weren't friends. The way to go to his house in the middle of the night would be to go round to the front of the house, down his own front walk, along the short stretch of sidewalk, and in at next-door's front walk. But...well, he had nothing on but a raincoat. He overlapped it, knotted the belt and cut through his own back yard. He stepped through the bushy boundary between the two properties and walked toward the sound as though he were following a line drawn for him.

He was right. The dogs were tied up. They were on short ropes, the other ends of the tethers tied around a big old maple tree. They were leaping frantically toward him, their front feet off the ground as their collars hauled them back from each lunge. He walked past them. He wasn't scared of dogs. He knew dogs. He could handle dogs. These ones were sure crazy, though, he thought.

He walked across the front porch, slapping the boards with his overlarge boots, and knocked on the door. Nobody heard, of course. His knock was like a finger snap against the constant background of noise. Now that he was up here, he could see how it was they could stand the noise of the dogs. A television inside was on at a terrific volume. The boom of declamatory voices crashed with waves of laughter not just through the closed door but, it seemed, from every surface of the frame house. They were probably the only people in the county who couldn't hear their dogs. He knocked more, and harder. He rang the doorbell over and over, although he had an idea from the look of it that the doorbell didn't work. He waited. Nothing. He rang again, knocked again. The dogs were ecstatic with excitement, but there was no response from indoors. He walked to the big window and looked in. The man—what was his name? Shameful not to know your neighbors. In the old house they'd known everybody in the neighborhood—the man was asleep, dead to the world on the sofa, his head back on the cushions, his legs splayed out before him. In his hand was a beer can. Or some kind of a can. Could have been Pepsi. All the lights were on. He knocked on the window, but he couldn't make much noise on the glass unless he hit it hard enough to break it, so he went back to the door. He wasn't going to go back without getting this done. For sure.

He was just about to walk around and try the back door—not that he thought he'd have any better luck there—when he saw a child on the stairs. A boy about Peter's age—a little older, maybe—creased and rumpled all over: hair, pajamas, even his cheek, with the imprint of the wrinkles of his pillowcase on it. The little boy opened the door (why hadn't he been taught never to open the door without knowing who was on the other side?) and gazed up at Jeff.

"Hey," said Jeff. The child was blinking in the light. "Can I talk to your dad?"

The boy nodded and walked into the living room. Jeff stayed at the door, watching. Could his mother still be asleep? Maybe there wasn't a mother. Poor kid. The boy pulled on the man's arm, without any effect that Jeff could see. Except that his head bobbed over onto his shoulder a little more. Dear Christ, I hope he's not dead! But, with no seeming anxiety or sense of hurry, the child kept pulling and pushing and finally the man opened his eyes and looked first at the TV, then at his son. There was no hearing what the boy said, but the man nodded and pushed himself heavily off the couch. He was a big man when he stood up, the belly Jeff had noticed while he was sleeping distributed somehow over a long torso. Jeff was surprised to see him bend over and kiss the top of his boy's head. He steered the child toward the stairs and patted his seat to send him on his way. The boy started carefully to climb the stairs without looking again at his father or at Jeff.

The man proceeded to the door and said, "Hey."

"Hey. I just came over to see if you were okay. I'm sure glad to see you are."

The man looked at him steadily. "Yeah?" he said finally.

"Well, I heard your dogs was barkin' so long, I thought there must be somethin' the matter, so I came over to see." There was a pause. "Dogs don't usually keep it up so long." Jeff smiled.

The man nodded. "No," he said, "there ain't nothin' the matter. Don't worry about the dogs. I'll see to 'em."

"Well, that's fine. I'll be on my way, then."

The man nodded again. "Thank you for callin'," he said.

"Well..." Jeff hesitated, "neighbors..."

"Sure thing."

"Goodnight then."

"You too," the man said.

As Jeff walked across the yard toward his own house, the note of the dogs' racket altered. He looked back and saw that their master

had put them both on one leash and was dragging the creatures toward the house. The next time he looked, he was pushing them through the front door. Standing amongst their common forsythia and sweetbud bushes he could hear the creatures still baying or howling or whatever it was they did, but muffled. He realized that they were going to go on barking all night inside the house. He shook his head and laughed out loud. A nice guy, his next door neighbor. He was sorry he hadn't asked his name, glad he had got through it without making an enemy of him. Who knew how he could sleep. Clear conscience, maybe.

When he got back, Laurel was awake, standing in the back doorway looking for him. "I didn't have any idea in this world where you'd gone," she said. She watched as he kicked off the boots in the entryway.

He was surprised at her tone. She sounded...worried? More than worried. Edgy. As though she'd been through something. "Well, Laurel," he put his arm around her shoulders, "You knew I hadn't gone far."

"No, I didn't! I didn't!" No doubting now the quality of her voice. Reproachful. Just this side of angry. Scared, even. "You should 'a told me you was goin' out!"

"Well, I wasn't gonna wake you up just for that. Besides," he smiled, "you could 'a guessed. Listen." They were silent for a moment and then he turned to her. "What d'you hear?"

"Nothin'. I can't hear a thing."

"That's just right! I was out shuttin' those dogs up."

He had caught her attention. She looked at him, turning in his light encirclement. "Jeff, what did you do? You didn't...hurt them, did you?"

He took her hand and she moved with him toward their room. "Lord, woman! No, I didn't. What do you think I am? I don't go round shootin' other people's dogs in the middle of the night."

"Well...I didn't say shooting, only...what did you do?"

"I talked to the man. Mister dog-man."

"Franklin. Their name's Franklin."

"How did you know that? I didn't know his name."

"His wife brings the littlest one to Day Care."

"At the church?"

She nodded.

"I never seen them at church."

"They don't go to our church. I'm not sure if they go to church.

That child didn't know any Bible stories when he first came. Not even Noah's Ark. Myra had to teach him a little grace to say before juice and cookies when it was his turn."

"I didn't think he'd got a wife. The state of that place."

"She's a nice woman, Jeff. Judge not that ye be not judged."

"That's the truth," he said. Then he added, "I just can't believe, Laurie, that I'm standin' here in the middle of the night in a dirty raincoat talkin' about next door's religion."

He waited for her to smile, but she frowned. "You can't tell what will happen," she said. "A little child shall lead them. Who knows but what that baby brings home from Day Care will be the saving of them all."

He took the coat off and dropped it over the back of the bedroom chair.

"You're naked," she said.

"Well, I can't deny it, Laurel, but I used to have a raincoat on."

"She didn't reply. She watched him as he moved toward the bed.

"Well, Laurel..." he said, "I am in my own bedroom in the middle of the night." He got himself under the sheet, oddly embarrassed.

He relaxed into his pillow. "Are you okay?" he asked. "You seem kind of...are you upset?"

She shook her head. "Just glad to have you back," she said. "Safe and sound." Then she leaned over him and kissed him. First tenderly, lips to closed lips, then deeply, breathlessly, and her cool fingers slipped down over his warm skin. Her night-scented hair hung over his face. He was aroused and bewildered. "Laurel," he said, "what's come over you?"

She laughed into his mouth, into the hollow of his neck, into his chest. "Nothin'," she said, "I'm just glad you're here. I just thought I'd kiss you with the kisses of my mouth, while I've got the chance. If you don't mind."

"How crazy d'you think I am, woman?" and he drew her into his embrace.

When she finally looked again at the clock, she said, "You're gonna have to sleep fast. You've only got three hours before Alan's gonna be in here jumpin' on you."

"Runs in the family," he said, smiling into the dark.

They lay silent. Finally, ready to sink into sleep, he said, "Why were you so worried anyway, Laurie? You'd been cryin'."

"Never mind," she said. "It all turned out all right. I'll tell you in the morning. Go to sleep."

In the morning they shut the windows against the growing heat, got the children dressed, had their breakfast together and began another day. There wasn't time to talk about the events of their disturbed night.

†

The next Sunday they all went to his sister's place for dinner. Jeff told them about the dogs and what Tod, his sister's husband, called his "midnight ramble." Everybody laughed and Tod said, "You are one hell of a diplomat!" Laurel looked briefly toward her children, but they were playing on the stairs, too far away to hear their uncle's careless language.

"Well," she began, "while he was out bein' a diplomat, I woke up in an empty bed. Nobody there. 'I sought him and I found him not.' Not a sound to be heard."

"Well, there was your clue," said Jeff.

"There was not a soul to be seen," she resumed, "and I called out. 'Jeff!' I said, 'Where are you?' and there wasn't a word of an answer. So I got up out of bed and went to hunt for him. There wasn't a light on in the bathroom, but I knocked on the door anyway, and then I went in, and it was dark, and he wasn't there. And he wasn't in the kitchen getting' a drink, and he wasn't in the livin' room, and he wasn't down the cellar, and he wasn't anyplace. So I went back into our room and looked again. There was his pajamas all in the bed, and his shoes and his slippers both sittin' on the rug. And it was so quiet. And there wasn't any moon. And I thought, Oh, my dear Lord Jesus, it's come. The Rapture has come and Jeff has been caught up. And I got down on my knees on the rug and I said, 'Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, come back for me.' But I knew it couldn't be. I knew I'd been left behind to endure the Tribulations by myself. Oh, I can't tell you how lost I felt in that time!"

"Laurel!" said Jeff, "Oh, my Laurie." He got up from the table and moved toward her, but she motioned him away and went on.

"I'd thought I was saved, but in that hour I thought of all the times I'd doubted my salvation, and all the times I'd said the words of a prayer while my mind wasn't there, and I thought how easy it was to think you're hearin' the voice of the Lord when really it's the deceitful urgings of the devil that you're listenin' to. Like Eve in the garden. And Jeff never talks about it like I do, and I thought, well, that's because I'm like the scribes and the Pharisees, prayin' for outward show. I always knew he was a good man. I always knew he was a saved man."

The others watched her, silenced by the flow of her passionate telling. Her eyes were hot and bright, but she did not cry.

"And then," she went on, "I thought of my children. I thought to go and look into their rooms, even though I knew they would be gone, in their innocence.

"I went into Peter's room and my heart just about stopped when I saw him layin' there. The first thing I thought was we never should 'a let him be baptized at Easter. He was awful young, but it seemed like he understood, and he wanted to accept Jesus into his life and I thought it was a security for him, in his growin' up in the world children have to be in in these times. But bein' baptized made him the same as a grown man in the eyes of the Lord, and he was responsible for his own sins. No..." she interrupted herself, as though afraid one of the others would interrupt her first. "I know it's not exactly that way. I'm just sayin' how it looked to me in that terrible midnight hour. And I thought he had been left behind with me to face war and pestilence, famine and death. I could 'a screamed like a panther then and there, but you know...he just looked so peaceful and so...so *good* layin' there, I wanted to leave him in peace as long as I could. So I shut the door and I went next door and went into Alan's room and do you know, I put the light on, that's how sure I was he wouldn't be there. But there he was. His legs all splayed out all over the place like he does. And he turned his head around to get his eyes away from the light. And that's when I knew that it wasn't the Rapture after all, because my innocent baby would never a been left.

"So I kissed him and pulled the sheet up over him where he'd kicked it off, and I turned off the light and went out into the other room to wait for Jeff to come home. And I thanked God for givin' me a little more time to perfect my salvation. And I still do thank Him."

No one spoke. Finally Jeff said, "Laurel, you...Laurel, your price is above rubies," and Tod said, "Well, that is the dam—the durndest thing I ever heard." Nancy did not speak.

"I take it as a warnin' not to slumber and sleep," said Laurel. "God sure got my attention on that night." She laughed a little, then sobered. "One day it won't be a mistake. It's to come one day soon. I take it as a warnin'."

