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Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

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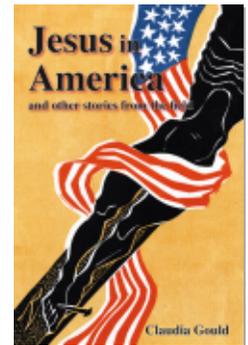
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Jack at the Mercy Seat

What various hindrances we meet

In coming to the Mercy Seat

Yet who that knows the worth of prayer

But wishes to be often there

—W. Cowper and Dr. L. Mason, “The Mercy Seat”

Jack was born in 1926, just too late for the fizz and frivolity of the Roaring Twenties. Not that there was much fizz, frivolity, or roaring in High Ridge, North Carolina. But the tannery was doing good business and reliably hiring the fourteen year olds who came out of school unqualified to do anything else. And the mills were working, turning out stockings (full fashioned, with seams) and tricot and bolts of printed dress cottons and upholstery damasks and artificial silk. The furniture factories kept men and women busy making and finishing suites of maple, beech, and oak, which were shipped north to where people could afford to buy them. Jack was born just in time for the Great Depression. His dad was laid off the day before Jack’s fourth birthday.

The family was poor when he was little, but Jack was dearly loved, well appreciated, generously praised. He was the youngest of three children—five years younger than his brother and seven years younger than his sister. The years between them were so many that the older children, well accustomed to competing with one another, were not inclined to compete with Jack. Rather, they petted him, carried him (Sharon on her hip, the way her mother did, Dick on his back, with Jack’s arms tightened in a strangle-tight grip round his neck), and vied with one another for his preference. Only sometimes they had more important things to do. They were in school; they had friends. Dick and Sharon were Jack’s only friends, but they were the only ones he needed.

When he was six, and had just started school, he noticed for the first time how much younger he was than his brother and sister. His mother told him that was because he was a gift from God. He

was God's surprise present to her and his father, just like Isaac was for Sarah and Abraham when she thought she was too old to have any children. Sharon, who was fourteen and who knew everything, said, "You know what that really means? It means you were a mistake." Jack did not doubt that Sharon was telling him the truth, but he couldn't work out what she meant. And Sharon wouldn't say anything more. In fact, Sharon didn't know as much about babies as she pretended, not as much as her friends seemed to know. She kind of wished she'd never brought it up, now. She hadn't expected little Jack to keep talking about it. "You're too little to understand," she told him. "Just forget it." But how could a person be a mistake? His daddy said, "Now that was a mistake," sometimes, trying to teach Jack about hammering and sawing when a nail went in crooked or the saw blade skittered off its mark, "That was a mistake. We better do it over again." How could you do a person over again if he was a mistake? Not with nails. Was that understanding something that waited in his future, like the long division Daddy darkly talked about?

He had to ask his mother, finally. She said, "I'll have something to say to little miss know all." For the first time it occurred to him that Sharon and not he was in the wrong, and that was a relief. "Don't you think another thing about it," Grace told him. "Do you think God makes mistakes?" He shook his head, but the story of Noah and the flood sat uneasily in his memory, when God said He was sorry he'd ever made Man in the first place. "You're part of God's own plan. We can't even imagine what God has for you to do, but we know it's something. And," she went on, "you're my own dear boy." He was reassured about being his mother's own dear boy but a bit apprehensive about having something to do for God.

By then he wasn't seeing much of his dad, who couldn't find a job, though he worked all the time. There was still some work in High Ridge, and after a few years, F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal kicked in and the federal government started hiring. The local people made fun of the WPA workers, leaning on their shovels, doing work that didn't need doing, and of the younger ones, who would have been in the tannery in good days, out messing around in the woods for the Civilian Conservation Corps. They shook their heads at the foolishness of those politicians in Washington, but in the worst months, government wages were the only wages coming into some houses. Richard wouldn't have anything to do with federal handouts. He disdained them. He and Grace argued about it. They

argued after Jack's bedtime in an attempt to keep the fights from him; the older children were made anxious by the raised voices, the slamming doors, but Jack rarely woke.

Their diet, which had always been simple, became increasingly limited but that didn't hurt as much as wearing tight shoes. "We'll get you a new pair a ways further down in the fall," Grace said. 1934 was the first year they didn't have new shoes to start the school year in. The children got new shoes for Christmas that year.

Richard said he wouldn't beg from that load of bandits in Washington. But he begged—he wouldn't have put it that way—short spells of work from whoever was hiring. He did things he would never have imagined himself doing. For a week, to cover somebody's sick leave, he collected buckets of shit from outdoor toilets. Then the regular man came back and that job was gone too, and the pick-up truck that went with it. Richard owned a truck himself, but he had trouble buying gas for it. He said that he'd do anything legal, with the private addition that it wouldn't have to be very legal. But in fact, the most menial jobs were the first to go. All the boys straight out of school went for them, and so did the skilled unemployed. Richard was unlucky that his job, mending and maintaining the glossy modern looms, had been shared between two men and when the tightening up came, the factory only needed one and it was the other one. He was senior; Richard couldn't complain. He spent a lot of time in the garden, as other men did. There wasn't much to come out of it in the wintertime—cabbages for a while, and brussels sprouts, which didn't wilt so bad in the hard frost. He sometimes retrieved turnips that had been missed, and even shriveled they added some heat to a stew. As the winter deepened, the ground became almost impossible to work, but still he spent hours outdoors grinding a fork into frozen clods. When he came in, his hands were stiff and red, almost without feeling. Grace's heart was wrung by his poor hands. She would take them in hers and hold them against her skin, under her clothes, to warm them.

Richard wouldn't put up with disobedience or what they called "sass." His children knew he loved them, but it wasn't like the way their mother loved them. They understood the love and the fear of God as exaggerations of the way they felt about their father. Richard had always said "a wallop learns a child the difference between right and wrong," and they didn't expect to get away without one if they transgressed. Grace threatened them with their father more

often than she reported them to him. That was one of the things they loved her for. When Sharon was in her teens, she was too old to be spanked. You couldn't pull a girl over your knee when she was nearly a woman. Even though you could say, "Don't think you're too old for a whuppin'!" she was. And Jack was too small. He had swift smacks on his bottom, through his trousers and his underpants, or sharp blows to his hands. "Don't touch!" Richard knew he didn't like hurting his children. He did it for their own good. Sometimes, he said, you just have to give them a whuppin'. He didn't beat them. Not like some fathers. He loved his children. They depended on him. They were smaller than he was.

It was only worry over money and the hard times stretching on. It was the hard cold earth, uneven from digging and hard to walk on. It was not being able to sleep, however tired he was. It was having waited so long to sign up that the WPA gang was full. Jack had never seen a beating like the one his father gave Dick. He had never imagined it.

"Please, please, please!" he screamed. He grabbed his father's furious arm with both his small hands, trying to interrupt the horrible, rhythmic pump-action of the machine that the man seemed to have become. There was blood on Dick's thin legs, enough to gather in little pools in the hollows behind his knees, to drip, to spread onto his trousers. The father's blows went on. It was as though there would never be an end to them. And Jack's voice went on. "Please, please, please!" until he was breathless and hoarse.

Their mother came. She had walked from town and was pink with hurrying in the cold. She entered the kitchen running, following Jack's voice and the other sounds that came from there. Her purse, her bag of shopping, fell away from her as she came. Jack knew that she was there, but he seemed to have caught whatever his father had; he could not stop his hands rising and falling with his father's arms; he could not stop crying, "please, please, please!" Then her hands were on Jack's hands, on Richard's arm, on Dickie's bleeding thighs, and it stopped. She put her arms around Dick and pulled him toward her. Richard straightened himself and looked at her, frowning slightly, blinking. Dick began to cry, his head muffled in his mother's coat collar. Richard said, "It looks a lot worse than it is," and he turned and walked out of the room.

Jack was not to remember what happened next. Mother must have washed Dick's bottom and legs. She must have wrapped them up in clean rags, the way she did when he scraped himself falling

off his bike. She must have held him while he cried. Perhaps she had told Jack to go out of the room, but what would have been the use of that? Years later, when Grace told the story, she said, "He tore my baby up with a rosebush! He tore into him with a thorned switch!" But Jack couldn't remember that. When he imagined it, he pictured blood standing on roses like dew. But there wouldn't have been roses. It was winter.

That spring, Richard got a part time job in the store alongside the Texaco station. He did the graveyard shift, so he went out straight after supper and got back to drink strong coffee at breakfast time. Sometimes he had funny stories about the people who came in to the store while he was there. There was a woman who bought root beer for her dog. She always borrowed a bucket and poured two cans into it and then talked to Dad while the dog lapped up the drink, blinking as the bubbles came up. "She seems like she's in her right mind, except for that." And once he came home with a scary story. A young man came in the store with a shotgun, "he pointed it right at my head," and told him to hand over all the money in the cash register. "What did you do?" "Well, hell, I would ha' give it to him. There weren't but a few dollars there. Old man Martin always empties it out and takes it with him at seven when the shift changes. But I never had to..." He paused while the children and Grace watched his face, "'cause those Goudge boys came in, tanked up like always, makin' so much noise he got spooked and run off." He laughed, and they all did, relieved and excited. His wife would fry him a plateful of potatoes and when he had eaten them, he would take his boots and pants off and slide himself into the bed Grace had left, the covers tucked in carefully to preserve her warmth until he came back.

That spring, Dick said that he wanted to be baptized.

He was nearly twelve, not too young, and his mother had been watching him carefully for signs of the conviction of sin. She meant to establish beyond doubt that it was not the drama of the day that attracted him, or the seal on his adult status. This was a perilous time for the life of his spirit. When she first asked him why he wanted to be baptized, he said, "Because I love Jesus." Jack, watching, saw that his mother did not smile, as he expected, but frowned.

"Dickie," (Dickie was a baby name that he had outgrown for normal use) "everybody loves Jesus, because Jesus is Love. But that's not the same thing as bein' saved."

"Yes, but I am saved, I know."

She went on. "Love is just a feeling. Anybody can have feelings. No, if you're baptized, you give yourself to the Lord forever. It's like this: when you're older, you'll find out about human love. You'll find some girl you think you love just because you have feelings for her."

"Mama, don't."

"And that might happen four or five times. But all those little girls. You might want to hug and kiss and do all those carnal things..."

"I won't either."

"But you won't really love one until you're ready to marry her. Do you know what you say when you get married?"

Dick was looking straight at the floor between his shoes. He didn't answer.

"I know!" said Jack. Dick had forgotten he was there. The older boy sighed ostentatiously and shifted his gaze from the floor to the wall. "You say for-staking-all-the-others and keep...and keep..."

"Well, now that's not quite right," Mama said. This time she was smiling, so Jack knew that what he had said was better than what Dick had said, even if it wasn't quite right. "But you've struck on the right word. It's 'forsaking.' Now Dick, what does that mean?"

"It means you have to give up... does he have to be here?"

"He needs to learn, too." But she told Jack to go play outdoors and he didn't much mind. He had had about enough.

But Dick said the right thing eventually, Jack knew, because he was allowed to be baptized.

On the day, Dick wore the nearest thing to a suit that his mother could contrive—a jacket of his father's with its sleeves shortened and a pair of trousers almost the same color blue, a shirt that was pure white and starched to a reflective shine. Jack wondered why his mother had taken so much trouble, because Dick changed out of it into a sort of nightshirt before he went up to be dunked. He had to go right under, head and all. The preacher held him down while he prayed. It was only for as long as it takes to say, "Bless thy servant Richard Andrew and sanctify him to your use," but Jack was sure he would drown. "Will he go straight to heaven if he drowns?"

"Shh."

Afterward, when Dick was back in his best clothes, Jack asked him if he still loved Jesus. "Of course," Dick said. "Only it isn't about love. It's about sin."

†

When it was Jack's turn to be baptized, it was 1936 and it looked like times were never going to get any better. He was eleven and Dick was sixteen, nearly seventeen. He remembered to say about sin when he and the preacher had their talk. He said he wanted to take Jesus as his personal savior because Jesus's blood would wash away his sin. He climbed up wooden stairs behind sky blue curtains that framed the baptismal pool. The pool was a zinc-lined tank that stood on a platform. The platform was high on stilts. Jack had seen the stairs and the tank and the platform before; his friends were mostly getting baptized. He didn't expect it to be like heaven...but the wooden steps were as ordinary as back porch steps and even the curtains were just like anybody's window curtains. Dick had told him that he would feel lifted up as he stepped into the water. He said, "Don't worry if your ears ring; that's just the sound of heaven singing all around you." He looked out at the congregation who were just eight steps below him but seemed far away, and there were his mother and father, sitting with Sharon and Dick between them, and between Sharon and Dick was the empty place where he would sit to listen to the sermon and sing the closing hymn after he was baptized. After he was baptized, he knew, everything would be different.

The congregation was singing, but through the water in his ears, he did not hear heaven.

As he had followed Dick into the acceptance of Christ, so Jack followed him into the army. Dick had joined in 1939 because it was the best job he could find. He would have his board and lodging, he argued to his mother, and his on-duty clothes, so he would have to spend almost none of his pay, which was already a lot better than the tannery paid, even if the tannery was taking on, and it wasn't. He could send money home. Richard said they could do without the money. Grace said things were picking up. If he remained patient for a little longer, she was sure that a real good job would come up. He was old enough to sign up without their permission, but he probably would not have gone without their blessing. "They'll learn him a trade," Grace said to his father. They were both sure that the war threatening in Europe wouldn't come to anything. Or even if it did, that America wouldn't join in. Richard, who had been out of the United States twice, once to Mexico when he was hoboing around in his teens and once to France in 1917, did say, "Well, we did the last time," but really they expected Dick to be a peacetime

soldier. Grace even thought that army life might be good for him. It might settle him down. He hadn't been led into bad ways, but she sometimes thought that he had bad companions and that day after day without a job, with nothing to do but kill time, was not wholesome for him. He was bored with things. He might be looking at the wrong kind of women.

Dick was overseas even before Pearl Harbor, and from then on they were afraid all the time.

Jack joined up as soon as he could. He didn't wait to be drafted. He was sent to Georgia, then to San Francisco for just long enough to get on a ship to the Philippines. The sailors told them that ships got blown up on this route after three round trip and this was their fourth. Jack knew it was a joke by the way they laughed, but he was afraid of what might be pursuing him, waiting for him under the sea.

His outfit landed on Leyte at the beginning of December. He learned that the 24th Infantry had taken it back from the Japs in the fall. They had classes every morning. Luzon was the biggest island of the group. Manila was the capital and it was on Luzon. The Japs still had that one and the infantry was going to have to take it back sometime soon. The 6th Army. Take the big island and the Bataan Peninsula and Corrigidor. He'd still been a kid when the Japanese had taken over Bataan. His new buddies told him about the Bataan Death March. Maybe they weren't telling the folks back home what it was like, or maybe he just hadn't been paying attention. He had really only cared about where Dick was and Dick was not in the Philippines. They didn't cover the death march in the classes, but he heard all the stories about what the Japs did to the men they captured. They hated prisoners, Jack heard, for not dying.

So up north was the big island where the big battle was going to be and down here in the south was this bunch of little islands. It was calm here. He learned a few words of Spanish. The Filipinos all talked Spanish. That was a surprise. And it was a surprise that they were all Catholics. One afternoon he and some of his buddies walked out to an old Catholic church. "Many hundreds years old," the Flip boy told them. "It looks like it," Jack said. He sent a photograph home with his next letter. "They don't take care of their churches like we do," he wrote. When he read it over before he put it into the envelope, he added, "I guess they have a hard time doing repairs with the war going on." He sent a picture of some girls,

too, and some grinning kids. The girls liked the GI's; they were always around the camp. They weren't as pretty as the girls at home; they were too dark and their faces were kind of flat. But their eyes were beautiful, like black water in leaf-shaped pools. They were supposed to wear blouses when they were in the camp, but they didn't cover their breasts in their villages or in the fields. They didn't seem to think anything of it. The old men, who had been there a while, said that you get used to it, but Jack never did. He had never seen a woman's breasts before.

Back home he had a girlfriend, Lucille, whose breasts he had touched, but only through her sweater. He carried her picture with him and wrote to her every week. When he came home after his basic training, before he shipped out, she promised to wait for him. They put "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree (With Anyone Else But Me)" on the jukebox and kissed each other. She dropped tears onto his rough wool collar.

They invaded Mindoro in the middle of December, just ten days before Christmas. He had his mother's card with him. It had glittery snow on it that fell off. He found the little flakes of white glitter embedded in his khaki pocket even after it had been in the laundry. As Jack waded ashore he could see parachutes swinging downward through gentle air, white as mushrooms.

He thanked God he had arrived safely. Maybe too soon for thanksgiving, before the battle began, but it was on board ship that he had felt in danger. The ship he was on was a troop carrier, but all around him were warships, ready to be attacked. The Japs were crazy. Something about the war had driven them insane, or maybe they had always been insane and that was why they started the war. They were deliberately crashing their planes into ships. It had started during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October, and at first the Americans and the Filipinos thought it was an accident. But they were doing it on purpose. Not just taking a risk. They weren't daredevils, like the boys who dived down so low to drop their bombs that they were sometimes swallowed up in the explosions before they could get away. They never had any intention of getting away. They were making themselves into bombs. Just a few days ago one of them had crashed into the *Nashville* and killed 130 men. And himself, of course. Jack had been to Nashville once. He and Dick had gone to see the Grand Ole Opry together and had gone out drinking beer in bars. It really felt like being brothers then. Funny, he thought, that they should call a battle cruiser *Nashville*.

This was a beautiful place. The beach was white and narrow and you could see where the land started to rise, covered in green. You could see the mountains, their tops lost in cloud, farther off. "I'd rather be in New Jersey!" Big Jack said, and everybody laughed. In their induction classes they'd been told that Mindoro was half the size of New Jersey.

He could have forgotten that he was invading the island, the air was so warm, so softly damp, so full of the smell of earth and grass. He reacted without thinking when the Jap soldier appeared. Jack shot, then looked around for the others. But the one he shot was the only one. There was no one else between the trees. He heard someone say, "Hell, yes!" and he took in a quick breath. It took him a second to recognize a friend voice. Then it was quiet; some kind of bird was calling with a repetitive, metallic cry. He had the sense that he and the rest of the men were tiptoeing in their big boots. They had all stopped, like his shot had stopped everything, but now they were moving forward in a wavy line, hesitating, then stepping, as though they were dancing.

He came to the place where the Jap he had brought down lay. The man's forage cap had fallen off and his black hair—longer, Jack thought, than he would have got away with in his army—fell toward the ground. He looked at his face, thought that yellow wasn't exactly the right word for the color of it and lifted his left foot to step over the man's outflung arm. As he looked down, the fingers clenched. He jumped back, afraid now as he had not had time to be afraid before. The ground was soaking up the blood as fast as it came out. He watched the brown earth turn black in a widening arc, like a halo around the head. The long black hair was turning sticky as he watched. Big Jack was next to him and he caught his shoulder. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

"He's alive."

Big Jack looked across at the man who should have been a corpse. "Not for long," he said.

Somebody further down the line laughed.

The Jap's head was moving back and forth. There was no sound, but his mouth made the shape of a scream. Jack saw what was wrong. His shot had been too low to kill him. "Sorry," he said, and he shot him again, this time aiming at his chest.

"What'd you do that for? He wasn't gonna get up and follow us."

"My daddy always said to kill a wounded animal," Jack said.

"Hell, he meant a stag. This was just a Jap."

They walked fearfully after that, looking out for men hiding behind trees, in pits, crouched in bushes. Men who would have been alerted by Jack's two shots. But they saw no one. Jack was the only one to kill an enemy. Later one of his buddies reminded him that he should have taken the Jap's rifle. If he didn't want to keep it for a souvenir, he could have traded it. He was entitled. "I sure don't want it enough to go back for it," Jack said.

The landing was accomplished, Lucille and his parents read in the papers, "against relatively light opposition."

There wasn't any real fighting after the first day. The occasional straggler like Jack's Jap. It looked like the Japs didn't want the island any more than the Americans did. The only reason for being on Mindoro was to get to Luzon. They were really there to support the engineers who were building airfields, so the work became familiar. It was just laboring.

"We had a real good Christmas dinner," Jack wrote to Grace, "but I sure was homesick for your cooking." To Lucille he wrote, "I miss you something awful. Next Christmas we'll be in our own little place, what do you say?" To his father, "I'm working so hard I might as well have stayed in High Ridge!"

"Tomorrow we're heading off for Luzon." It was New Year's Eve. All the men cheered, Jack with them. Luzon was the whole point. Once they took Luzon they would have won. This part of the war, anyway. It was going to be a big fleet; there would be naval and air bombardment before the landings. The name of each ship with its tonnage and weaponry was read out, and at each name, they all cheered. Even as Jack cheered he felt sick fear. He looked around at the others and he could see that none of them was afraid. "You bastards will be on the *USS Colorado!*" The biggest cheer of all.

They would sleep their last night in barracks and board the *Colorado* before dawn. Jack rolled his clothes up and stowed them in his bag. Then he went for a walk. They were at liberty until chow time. He made for a ruined chapel he'd seen in amongst the trees a few miles down the track. There used to be a school, too, he'd been told, but the climate on the island was unhealthy. There was malaria, and sicknesses you'd never even heard of. The mountains trapped the clouds and it rained almost every day. When it wasn't raining the air was thick with damp. Even when it wasn't hot you were covered with sweat within a few minutes of any kind of exercise. It was a hell of a climate to build airfields in. As he walked, he could feel the sun sullenly burning through layers of blanketing cloud.

The chapel was roofless and the walls had almost been replaced by climbing vines and creepers. He walked over broken tiles toward a stone altar. At first he thought it had been decorated, but as he got closer he saw that some kind of white-flowering creeper had covered it like a cloth. Above it, where the green growth was less luxuriant, he saw what might have been the shadow of a cross on the pitted stone wall. Maybe where the cross used to be. The crucifix. He reminded himself that it would have been a Catholic church. He guessed the church furniture would have been moved out when the people left it. Long ago, probably, even before the Japanese came, if it was so unhealthy here. He knelt down and tried to pray, but nothing came. He didn't know what to ask for. He wanted to live through the invasion of Luzon, but he didn't see why he should. There were going to be thousands of men on dozens of ships. Some of them were going to die. What difference did it make to God which ones? He thought of the day he was baptized, of the preacher's hand flat on his head, of Dick's hand on his shoulder.

"God," he said. "God, I'm just sorry for ever'thing I've done wrong." He opened his eyes and looked into those of the wide trumpet shaped flowers before him. "I don't know," he said, "I don't know." He closed his eyes again and said, "In the name of thy son, Jesus Christ, Amen." He stayed there a while longer, not thinking anything, feeling the emptiness of the building that used to be a church, that used to be a building. Then he got up, slowly like an old man, feeling his calves ache, and walked back to camp.

That night Jack wondered if he was the only one who was shouting "Happy New Year" just so he wouldn't be the only one not to. There was beer but not enough to get drunk on, and they were keeping the Filipinos away, so there was no local liquor. They tried to be merry. Somebody shouted, "Come on, boys, this is your last chance to raise hell!" but there was a silence afterward and a feeling of embarrassment. "Shit, I just meant before the invasion." But they did not revive. The sergeant came in and said they should go to bed. "I wouldn't order you to retire on New Year's Eve," he said, sounding almost gentle, "but you're not going to have much sack time anyhow." Jack was relieved. It was an effort to stay up until midnight. Last year, he hadn't gone to bed at all, but stomped onto the front porch at sunup, laughing at the sight of his mother's face, trying to reflect fury and relief at the same time, just like after all the other scrapes he'd been in over the years. You could tell she wanted to hit him and hug him both and couldn't decide which to

do first. She'd brought him in and made him drink coffee and then he went out and threw up in the yard. He thought back on it now with fondness. He wished his mother could get mad at him now. He wished nothing worse was going to happen to him than vomiting behind the bushes.

Some of the boys were still singing when he got into his bunk (he recognized Redwing, the dirty version), but it didn't bother him. It sounded cheerful through the end wall. When he was a kid, he had only been allowed to say his prayers in bed if he was sick, but in barracks he always did. "Now I lay me down to sleep," he began, "I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take, amen." He knew grown-up prayers, but right now he couldn't call any to mind. "Bless Mother and Father and Dick and Sharon and..." he went on with the old childish list, adding a few he hadn't included for a while; Aunt Ruth who lived out west and Jacob, who used to be his friend at school. Jacob was the best friend he had in those days, but he hadn't had any really good friends. Dick was his best friend. He started working his way through his outfit. God bless Frank and Big Jack. God bless... When he woke up, the singing had stopped. The sky was black, with a pale shadow where the last sliver of moon hung behind clouds. He had fallen asleep during his prayers. "Amen," he said. He wondered how long it was until morning. He felt as though he had slept all he was going to. He looked wide-eyed from the dark sky into the dark room. A different quality of dark and nothing to be seen. He shut his eyes, retreating to the darkness he carried with him behind his eyelids. His mother's face was there again. Perhaps he had been dreaming about her, but he couldn't remember now. Only her face, angry and loving at the same time.

In the morning they were all laughing, shouting, making too much noise. A little redheaded man called Art said, "Hey, you know what day the Flips call this? The Feast of Three Kings!"

"You're just pig ignorant," said one of the guys from New York. "That's not today, it's next..." he paused for a second, calculating, "Saturday. The sixth. It's the day the kings came with gifts. Epiphany." Jack had already worked out they were Catholics. Something about the way they talked. Something about the way they stuck together.

"Well, you sure as hell know a lot of shit!" This came from among the cluster at the door, amongst the heaving of kit bags, the shoving forward. The New York guy shrugged and finished rolling up his

mattress, then he, too, moved toward the door. They were all passing through, and Jack felt he had missed an opportunity to speak up for Jesus. He should have said something about “hell” and “shit” so close to Christ’s manger. But now it was too late.

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Onboard the ship, in the dark afternoon, he watched silently while one of the old men lit a cigarette. They were sitting on the deck with their backs against a bulkhead, not quite listening to the steady thrum of the ship moving ahead, not quite seeing the glimpses of olive land that sometimes colored the gray air at a distance, and then faded into gray again.

The other man said, through the smoke that filled his mouth, “You know about this ship, don’t you?”

Jack shook his head, nervous, wanting to hear and wanting not to hear the story that was impending.

“Blown all to hell last November.”

“What do you mean?” Maybe this character was crazy. Maybe he thought they were all ghosts already, on a ship that had been blown to hell. Jack was cold in his stomach. Had he ever seen this man before? Where had he come from?

“Kamikazes,” he said.

“Kamikazes.”

“Hell, yes! Those crazy bastards fly out from Tokyo and drive straight into a ship.”

“I know what they are.”

But the man would not stop. He had lit a fresh cigarette and blew his gray smoke into the gray air. He said, “They don’t *carry* a bomb, those fuckers *are* a fuckin’ bomb!”

“I know.”

“They can’t even turn those planes around; they just go straight ahead. Nose full of explosives, tank full of gas, pilot full of shit...” He lifted his right arm suddenly and made a fast diving motion with his hand across his body until it slammed onto the deck. “Wham! Up she goes!”

Jack looked at the man’s hand, flat on the deck. “I know what they do,” he made himself say.

“You ever seen it?” the man asked.

Jack shook his head. “You ever seen it? Were you here?”

The man laughed. His breath was full of smoke and his teeth were long, like a horse’s teeth, and yellowish. How old was he, anyway, Jack wondered. Suddenly he seemed too old to be on this

operation. He did not move but he felt himself shrinking away from the presence beside him. He whispered, "Who are you?" but the man was still laughing. It sounded hollow, like the laughing man that stood outside the fairground in Washington D.C. The same ha ha ha, over and over. The laughing man was supposed to make you want to laugh too, but it never did.

Finally the laugh turned off and the man spoke. "Nineteen dead," he said, "seventy two wounded."

So he could have been one of the wounded.

"You should 'a seen the wounded washing the dead off 'em," he said. "Pieces of dead people no bigger than a dime. Red and black. Black ashes falling down out of the sky like they was snow. You couldn't tell what was Jap and what was American meat. You couldn't even tell what was meat and what was ship. Boy, you should 'a smelled it!"

The cigarette had died in his hand. He struck a match and relit it. The flame did not waver in the still air. Again he proffered the pack to Jack and again Jack shook his head. "Twenty-third of November," the man said, and shook his head. "Goddamn."

Jack looked away, out at the oil colored sea. The twenty-third of November—that would have been Thanksgiving. That must have been hell. Real hell. He turned back and the man was gone. Jack felt a deep, sick stab of fear. How could he be gone? They were side by side, almost touching. Even out of the corner of his eye he should have seen him get up. He would have heard him walk away, even the rustle of his clothes, the creak of his boots. He should have missed the animal warmth beside him. He put out a hand to touch the deck and felt no warmth there beyond the warmth of the shrouded sun.

Until dark he looked for the man. The ship was crawling with sailors and infantry and it seemed that everyone was moving. You could cover every inch and miss the man you were looking for because he was on the move, too. He ran into Big Jack and asked him if it was true that the *Colorado* had really been blown up.

"Hell, yes!"

"Why didn't they tell us?"

Big Jack shrugged. "Fraid it'd spook us, I guess. They say it was the fastest repair and refit in the history of the US Navy. Let's hope it holds together, what d'you say?"

When night fell, he went into the cabin they had been assigned. They were supposed to sleep there until the first dawn. No one

else was there yet. They had all congregated on deck, quiet and excited. There was no light, but there was liquor. Jack's mouth was burning with the sweet heat of bourbon. It was the night before the battle. He knelt down and started to say the twenty-third psalm. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for thou art with me." Suddenly he thought the man with the long teeth was kneeling next to him. He started, turned, searched the dim light for him, but there was nothing to see. There had been nothing this afternoon. "Thy rod and thy staff..." There was a laugh from somewhere. Drifting down from the deck. "Thy rod...spare the rod and spoil the child." No, not that; that was the wrong rod. He tried to concentrate on the precious blood of Jesus, shed for him, but he saw only Dick's blood, in little pools in the hollows behind his knees. He saw bloody pieces of men falling from the sky. They were falling and screaming, each bloody piece feeling a whole body's pain. He saw them fall into the fire on the deck, screaming with pain and then fly up again, "as the sparks fly upward," and then, swirling in the heat, the sharp grit, the dizzying, sickening fall back into the flames. He saw the diminishing tail of the kamikaze plane, growing lacy as it was consumed, sticking out of the hole in the deck. The hole was edged in yellow fire and its heart was black and filled with screaming. The deck, he saw, was as thin as paper and beneath it was hot black breath and the boiling sea that burned and burned with searing heat and no light and was not quenched.

The world, he saw, had just such a thin crust and tomorrow he would fall through it into hell. "Oh, sweet Jesus!" His baptism had been a sham. He had committed every sin. Women and girls had filled his foul imagination; he had even thought about pure Lucille that way. He had polluted himself. He had lied, he had stolen, he had taken the Lord's name in vain many times, he had caused his loving parents to grieve for him. While Dick was going closer to Jesus, he was going closer and closer to hell. He had forgotten God. Jesus God, there was whisky in his mouth this minute, with his immortal soul going to meet its judgment in just a few short hours. It would make God sick to look at him.

He had risen to look into the thin darkness for the devil he knew had been sent for him; now he sank down on his knees again and cried out, "Oh, Jesus, sweet Savior, save me! Oh, Jesus, save me by your precious blood!" Over and over again, through tears, he said Jesus's name. Finally, he heard something in his own voice

that wasn't horror, but longing. "It isn't about love," Dick had told him, "It's about sin." He saw now: the sin first and then, oh then, the love. There was a feeling he remembered from when he was little, from when he'd done something bad and been punished, and finally, when he'd been sad for long enough, Mama would put her arms around him and say, "You're my good boy." It wasn't that, but that was the nearest he could get to what he felt now. As though Jesus were saying, "You're my good boy."

The crust of the world closed over again; the black boiling sea was hidden. He stood up and wiped his face with his handkerchief, blew his nose, pushed his fingers through his hair. He walked to the door and looked at his watch in the red light of the gangway lamp. It was 10:35, twenty two hours and thirty five minutes into the new, sweet year of 1945.

Jack's unit took part in a small-scale operation that was designed to deceive the Japanese about Allied intentions. They had little effect on the main action. But of course they played their part. U.S. and Filipino troops entered Manila on the third of February. Jack was back home by Christmas.

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Before he and Lucille were married, he told her that he had been saved while he was out in the Pacific and she said, "Well, that's fine." They had three children during the next five years. She sat up in bed holding newborn Gracie and said, "Well, that's it. I'm shutting up shop now."

He didn't try to rush her. He knew she was tired, and sore in her woman's places. He could wait until it was time. But she never did think it was time. He tried to convince her that when God made husband and wife one flesh, he meant them to act like it, but she was stubborn. "It's all I can do to look after these three," she said, "without makin' any more." He promised he'd be careful. She just laughed at that. He tried to raise his kids right, but she wasn't a good disciplinarian. She let the kids run wild, he thought. He asked his mom what she thought but she wouldn't say. He didn't ask his dad, but he could tell the biggest one, Sandy, got on his nerves, with her all the time talking and singing and running around. Still, they were all right, him and Lucille. They got on, he said, all right.

Then he found out that Lucille was cheating on him. He walked right into his own house and found her sitting on the studio couch with Earl Sawyer's arm around her. "I caught her red-handed," he

said. "I had 'em bang to rights, and she still had the nerve to tell me nothin' was goin' on!"

"Well, maybe nothing was. Maybe it was just a hug," said his friend Walter.

"Hell! What the hell she want a hug from him for? Have my arms dropped off?"

He thought that was a good answer, and so he said it again to Lucille. She said, "I've wondered about that myself."

He tried to talk to her about it and then he tried to fight with her about it but she wouldn't talk and she wouldn't fight. She told him there was nothing the matter but his dirty mind and his filthy lusts. It was her filthy lusts that he wanted to talk about, but she wouldn't admit she had any. It drove him crazy to be almost sure she was committing adultery and every time he tried to accuse her, because he was her husband and he had a right to, she acted as though he was the one who had done something wrong. "I'd forgive her," he said, "if I could just get the chance."

It preyed on his mind. Nobody had any sympathy for him. His friends didn't laugh in his face, but he could see they thought it was funny. And she had a way of getting people on her side. When he went to talk to his mother, she listened and was kind, but he found out Lucille had been there before him. "Honey, you should try not to give in to this awful jealousy," his mother said. "It'll break down a marriage quicker than anything in the world."

"But it ain't me! What she's..." He could not find words for his outrage. "What she's been doin'!" It was the best he could do.

"Now you don't know she's been doin' anything, son. You just think she has. And whatever you think, she's the woman God gave you and you have to find a way to be together like you promised in His sight you would. And," she added, "you just think of those sweet children of yours."

He went home that night desperate with longing. It was true, he did have a terrible lust, but it was not for flesh. What he craved was her remorse.

He hit her finally because he couldn't think what else to do. He didn't sock her, he didn't hit her with his fist; he always said he despised a man who would beat up on a woman. He just slapped her with his open hand. It took a second, less than a breath, less than a heartbeat. Later he explained that it would never have happened if she'd just been the least little bit sorry for what she'd done. But when he said she was like Jezebel, whose flesh was like dung on the

field, when he told her that God had a place for whores and adulterers and if she didn't repent it would go hard with her on the Last Day, she didn't even answer. She just turned around and looked at him and shook her head. It was like she didn't even think it was worth answering him back. He couldn't think of anything to say to that look. He hit her harder than he meant to. "Hell," he said, "I never meant to hit her at all." Even so, it wouldn't have meant anything except for her stepping back, away from his hand. These things happen between couples. Only when she stepped back, the sole of her house shoe, that was a little bit loose, got caught up on the edge of the linoleum and she fell down onto the floor and on the way down she just hit her head on the corner of the range. It wasn't much. Everybody knows how much a cut on the head will bleed. They would have just washed it and forgot about it. Only the baby was in the doorway and she started to scream.

Lucille was sitting on the floor, moving her head slowly while blood ran into her eyes, and Jack didn't know who to pick up first. He went to Gracie, scared by her wide frightened eyes and her open mouth, sucking in air for her next scream. But before he reached her, Lucille had half stepped, half slid across to the child and gathered her up. She got to her feet awkwardly then, holding the baby, wobbling, unable to brace herself with her arms. Her blood was caught by Gracie's curls as the little girl lay her head against her mother's shoulder. She was quieter once Lucille had her, sobbing now, not shrilling frighteningly into the room any more. The blood was starting to stiffen around Lucille's cut. "That's a good sign," Jack thought. He went across, his arms out to hug them both and comfort them. He wasn't angry any more. He would forgive Lucille. He would wash both their faces and get a band-aid for Lucille's forehead. First thing tomorrow he would fix that linoleum. It was dangerous to have an edge that wasn't fast to the floor. But again, Lucille was quicker. She stepped back from him as though, he thought, he had raised his hand to her again, but she must know better.

"Keep away," she said. Her voice sounded strange and he realized that neither of them had spoken for a long time.

"Now..." he began. He took a step toward her.

"Keep away!" This time she shouted. The baby lifted her head and started to cry, turning her hot, wet face toward him. Lucille put her hand over Gracie's head and drew it back toward her breastbone. "Shh," she breathed softly, "Don't you be scared. Mama won't let him hurt my baby."

“Now...now you just stop that,” he said. He couldn’t work out what was going on. Why say that? She knew he’d never hurt a hair...

“I’m takin’ Gracie into the bathroom,” she said. “Don’t you come.”

“But you need me to help,” he said.

She just looked at him and then she turned around and went out the door behind her.

He heard her walking through the living room and down the hall. It would have been quicker to go through the other door, but then she would have had to walk past him. He stood, listening to them. Running water, low voices. Gracie shouted, “No, no, no!” It was the favorite of her small collection of words. He could tell Lucille was trying to wash her hair. It was easier when he held her while Lucille poured the water over her head. He took a step toward the kitchen door and then stopped.

They didn’t come back into the kitchen. Lucille put the baby into the buggy and pushed her out the back door without speaking to him. He waited for a while, listening for them to come back, and then he went out. It was time to pick the older ones up, Sandy from school and Johnny from kindergarten. She was upset and probably wouldn’t remember, so he would do it. Then when he got them home, Lucille and Gracie would be back. They’d all have supper together and then he and Lucille would work everything out. This could turn out to be a good thing, he thought. Not a thing you would plan, but now that it had happened, it could be that they had turned a corner. He would be more careful from now on, and she would have learned that he meant what he said.

When he got to the Raggedy Ann and Andy Day Care, they told him that Johnny had already been picked up. “Was it his mom that come get him?” he asked. Miss Jean told him that yes, it was. He didn’t like the way she looked at him. He wondered what Lucille had said. After that, he didn’t expect Sandy would still be at school, but he went anyway. Gone. He stopped on his way home and bought a quart of rocky road ice cream. They weren’t home when he got there.

He tracked them down finally. They weren’t with her folks, which was the first place he’d tried, but they were at his mom and dad’s. He had only tried them as a last resort; he wished he’d thought of it sooner, before he had phoned so many of their friends. It was embarrassing. When he asked for her, his mother said, “Honey, if I was you, I’d leave her alone tonight. You talk to her tomorrow and she might feel different.”

“What do you mean, different? How does she feel now?”

“You call her up tomorrow.”

He hung up. Never in his life before had he finished a conversation with his mother without saying goodbye and I love you, even when he was mad, even when he was drunk. Her “God bless...” was cut off by the click.

Then he did another thing he'd never done. Not just having a drink. He'd done that before, God knows. He'd got drunk often enough to make his mother tell his brother Dick to speak to him about it. And Dick had done that once or twice. But he'd never gone out of an evening with the intention in his mind of drinking until he couldn't drink any more. He'd fallen in with friends and had a second after his first and a skinful before morning, and sent himself home laughing at how crazy his feet were behaving. He'd never gone to seek out drink in a spirit of desperation before. He'd never seen himself as a skin curled around a kind of hole that couldn't be filled with anything but whisky.

That same night he met Sandra. The first thing he said to her when they were introduced was, “My little girl's got the same name as you,” and she answered, “Well, I ain't no little girl, that's for sure.”

He saw Sandra for a while, the same time he was meeting Lucille, explaining to her how that hadn't been the real him that night, telling her that if he could forgive her for what she'd been doing with Earl Sawyer, she ought to be able to forgive him for one smack. She'd put her hand to her head then, where she'd had two stitches. “But that was the stove that done that!” he said. It wasn't as if he'd taken a knife to her. And then she'd never admit that she'd done wrong with Earl, and that always made him mad, and all their conversations ended the same way, with her pretending to be afraid of him. After a while she moved out of his mom's house and back to their place, but by then she'd seen a lawyer and got them to say he had to move out of there.

He lodged with his friend Rob for a while, but they didn't really have room for him and he had to leave, finally. He always thought it would have been all right for him to stay if it had been up to Rob, but his wife didn't like him. He could have moved back in with his parents, and he did stay there for a week, but it didn't work out. He was always doing something wrong. Once Sandra came to pick him up in her car, for instance, and his dad treated her like she was some kind of a slut. So he moved into a room. It was easier. He kept his job and he gave most of his pay to Lucille for the kids. But she

made it hard for him to see them. "It seems like I never can come when I want to," he said to Rob. "It seems like she's always got her own ideas. She's got to be right about ever'thing."

Later on he never could remember how he got into a fight that was bad enough to get him arrested. He knew he'd had a drink, but no more than usual. A man called Jake said something to him that made him mad and even though Jack gave him a chance to take it back, he wouldn't. It struck him funny, in a miserable way, that he couldn't remember what it was. It was something mean. Something insulting. He remembered telling him to take that back and Jake saying "Make me!" and then there was nothing either of them could do but fight. The police said afterward that he'd hit Jake with a chair, but he was sure he hadn't. Either somebody else had joined in and done it or Jake had just slammed into it by accident. He tried to explain but they were dead set on making him go to court. Then, instead of giving him a fine, the justice said he would have to go to trial. It wasn't going to be for disorderly conduct; they'd decided it was assault, even though Jake had started it. In view of his previous good character and his honorable discharge, they gave him bail, which his dad put up, and a date for his trial.

As the day got nearer and nearer, he became more and more sure that he could never get justice from the law. He left his father a letter to tell him that he would pay him back the bail money as soon as he could, and he left town without saying goodbye to anybody except Sandra. But he didn't say where he was going.

He stayed with his sister Sharon for a while in her nice house in Washington DC. It was good to see her again and he liked being Uncle Jack to her kids but she wouldn't stop arguing with him to go back. "You'll have to face the music one day," she said. After a while he couldn't stand it any more so he moved on.

He hadn't been at Dick's place an hour before Dick was on the phone to home. If he'd tell their mother where he was, why wouldn't he tell the police? He told him so. He called him a Judas.

"Does that make you Christ?" Dick asked. Jack hadn't ever heard that sound in his voice before. That sound of giving up on him, of not expecting anything.

"I wouldn't talk to a dog like you talk to me," he said.

"No," Dick said, "I expect you'd beat it to death."

Jack raised his hand. He didn't hit him, but he was ready to; he could have. He had raised his hand against him. "Thy brother's blood is crying out to Me from the ground." So he had to go. It was

the hardest parting yet. He felt as though he was leaving Dick and God both.

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He went on leaving places for twenty-five years. He had jobs and left them or lost them; he went with some rough women and some good ones who deserved better. He got married once. He knew it was illegal. He always thought that one day he'd put it right—get back in touch with Lucille and get a lawyer and a divorce and then explain it to Margie and get married again. But he never got around to it and after a while they split up anyway. So it was probably just as well. In all that time he went to church every so often, but he never went up for the Lord's Supper.

It came to him one night while he was awake in the hospital that he would soon be an old man and that he'd thrown his life away. There was a storm outside the window and maybe it was that made him think of the terrible storm in the Pacific. Had there been a storm? He was sure he remembered lightning. He had been so scared of dying that night, and he'd been so scared of hell. Here he was now in the emergency ward where they'd found out his liver was about shot and there was some kind of mess in his lung that needed raking out. It came to him that if he had died that morning on Luzon, after he'd seen hell and the devil and found himself under the loving arm of Jesus, it would have been better. But God had spared him. For all this shit.

A nurse came to see what was wrong with him because he was making a noise crying. "Now, what's the matter with you?" she asked.

He said, "I wish I'd a died thirty year ago."

The nurse sat down next to him, smoothed his hair, wiped his tears. "Oh now, you don't mean that," she said. "Everybody gets to feeling miserable when they're sick. I expect you're missing your folks."

When he went back to High Ridge after he was better, his mother was dead. She'd been dead long years and he hadn't known. His father said, "I wanted to tell you, but nobody knew where you'd gone." Richard was old, unrecognizable, his wrists like chicken bones, his eyes pale. He lived alone in the old house, but Dick or his wife looked in on him most days. Dick still looked young. He looked younger than Jack, and he looked like he'd done well. "I'm awful glad to see you, Jack," he said, "I've been worried about you." He talked as though he'd been away for a week or two, and

he never mentioned the last time they'd seen each other. Sharon was living in California. Her oldest was married out there. Lucille had remarried. Dick said that her husband was a good man, and he had treated her three just like his own. Lucille had divorced Jack in his absence after she'd met this new man, Samuel. Dick couldn't remember the year, but a ways back, he said. So maybe he had really been married to Margie after all. His children were grown up and they didn't remember him. Well, Gracie didn't, and Johnny just barely did. But they weren't very interested. Sandy lived in Charlotte, but it just happened she came back that weekend. She did sometimes. She remembered him.

When Jack said he wanted to go to church on Sunday, Dick said to come to his church. They brought their father with them. Richard didn't always go—it was too much of an effort—but he would this time.

And Sandy came. She sat at the back with her uncle and her grandfather. Toward the end of the service, she joined in singing the hymn of invitation. "Just as I am, Lord, without one plea," and watched Jack go up to the Mercy Seat to make his testimony.