

DATELINE COLORADO



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Glory to God in the highest-- and on earth, peace. . .

A short story especially for this Christmas

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ALL JOB'S CHILDREN

by John J. Fritscher (Jack Fritscher)

A Vietnam War Story

"Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother, when suddenly a great wind came across the desert and smote the four corners of the house. It fell upon the young people and they are dead." - (Old Testament Book of Job, II, 18-19)

Snow. The television said twenty-seven degrees and snow. Three days of snow. This, the third day. The second last day before Christmas, Mag slapped her dustcloth against her dress. In despair she punched the morning TV weatherman. He faded from a talking image to a whistling dot. She watched the dot disappearing, popping like good riddance from the center of the screen. She had read in the papers about sets exploding. For a moment she was frightened. Then the set was quiet.

Quiet in fact lay like dust all around her. The silence of the overstuffed rooms muffled even the sounds of the street. The city suffocated in snow blankets. She felt choked in the small apartment. She felt as if she might

have died and gone nowhere. But Mag was alive. Very alive. A tired old pain in her back sharp as the pain in her mind told her she was not dead.

“JesusMary,” she said “I wish to God I was.” She dusted and addressed a small statue of Mother and Child, “I wish, Mother of God, that I was dead.”

In the street below the apartment, car-mounds of snow inched their sick yellow eyes through the falling white. Mag folded her dustcloth and dropped it unshaken into its drawer. No need to shake it. This was the fifth dusting of the morning. “And it’s only ten past ten,” Mag said. “I’d laugh at myself if I could.”

She wandered into the parlor avoiding the table where the ripped telegram lay in three days’ dust. She vowed never to touch that table again. Instead she straightened souvenir plates from Wisconsin Dells and Colorado Springs. Behind the glass doors to their bedroom she heard Big Jim cough. The ancient double bed groaned as he swung his feet to the floor. Then his room fell silent as hers. She re-straightened the straightened plates.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Jim asked. His voice startled Mag. “You know I wanted to hear the eight o’clock Mass.”

“I thought you’d best sleep,” she said.

“I’ll sleep long enough soon enough,” Big Jim said. He turned away from Mag. “I should have been dead before him,”

Mag touched his arm. “We both should have been dead before him.”

“It’s still snowing,” Jim said.

“Parents should not outlive their sons,” Mag said.

“What’s to be done?” Big Jim said. “The will of God, that’s what, Mag.”

“God couldn’t have willed our Jimmy dead.”

“God let it happen.”

“No,” she said. “It just happened.”

“God turned His head.” Big Jim said.

“Yes,” she said. “God turned His head.” She held her hands to her face. “I don’t even know if it’s winter or summer in Vietnam. I don’t know if he was freezing or sweating as he lay dying.”

“I think,” Big Jim said, “he died instantly. He didn’t know what hit him.”

“You don’t know that,” she said.

“I think that.”

“People always know what’s hit them when they’re dying.”

Big Jim held her.

“I don’t know,” she said, “whether it was night or day he saw last. It’s not fair,” she said. “I saw the look on his face when I bore him and for the last year of his life I saw only his photograph. A year-old snapshot with us standing beside him, me holding his diploma, you wearing his cap. He was always clowning, never serious about serious things.”

“At nineteen a boy’s not serious about too much.”

“How would you know?” she said,

“Once I was nineteen;” he said. “Once...” He paused. “It was another ten years before I met you. By then I was serious.”

“By then you were very serious.” She touched his hand. “Let me go,” she said.

He released her arms. Hurt passed over his face.

“I only want to pour your orange juice.”

“We’ll eat supper late tonight.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I’m going to the evening Mass.”

“We’re supposed to go to the Hanrattys.”

“We can go to the Hanrattys’ after Mass.”

“When will we eat?”

“We’ll eat early, You can hear Mass too.”

“I went this morning.” She opened the refrigerator and held the door wide open feeling the cold. “God didn’t turn His head,” she announced as she pushed the door shut. “He turned His back.”

“Mag,” he said, “Maggie. Hush.”

He turned His back, Jim. I went to Mass this morning and I heard Him say nothing. Exactly nothing.”

“He’s testing us, Maggie.”

“I went to Communion and I tasted bread.”

“Don’t talk that way, Maggie. It’s wrong,”

“My mouth was full of bread,” she said. “Always before I felt God come into me. But today I tasted bread. I walked out of the church without God in my heart.”

He pulled a box of dry cereal down from the neat cupboards.

“It was like leaving a bakery.” She handed him the plastic milk carton.

“It’s almost empty,” he said. “I’ll walk to the grocery before lunch.”

“You won’t enjoy it,” Mag said.

“I like to walk in the snow,” he said.

“I don’t mean the snow.”

“What then?”

“I mean,” she said, “the butcher, the baker, the candle-stick-maker. I mean everybody who will come up to you and say how sorry they feel.”

“They have to say something, Mag. They can’t talk to us like we didn’t receive that telegram three days ago.”

“I didn’t tell them,” she said, “I refuse to make public conversation about our son’s death. We are private people.”

“It was in the papers,” Big Jim said. For an instant the recall hurt. The terrible moment opening up the paper he had read all the evenings of his life, opening up the paper where things happened to other people, opening up his own evening paper to read about his own son’s death. He thought of that article tucked into his wallet: two paragraphs about Marine Private James O’Conal, Jr., 19, son of Mr. and Mrs. James O’Conal, Sr. The paper had written so little, but for a nineteen-year-old boy there was so little to write. Suddenly he felt very odd.

“What’s the matter,” Mag asked. “The milk isn’t spoiled.”

“Nothing,” he said. In his mind he could not believe what he had done. He had clipped the obituary and put it in his wallet with older ragged clippings of Little Jim’s swimming record and the newspaper notice of his Marine Corps induction. Had he been planning in the back of his mind to show the clipping like some sports record to be proud of?

“Just wait until you hear,” Mag said, “how sorry they are. They’re all thinking how glad they are it wasn’t their son.”

“Maggie,” Big Jim said, “they don’t mean they’re glad it was our boy. They’re just glad it wasn’t theirs.”

“Difference. Difference. What’s the difference.” Maggie filled the sink with water and soap. The long silence impaled them both. She took Big Jim’s orange juice glass and plunged it into the water so that soap gushed down the insides geysering the orange pulp through the white suds. She began to cry. “Difference. Difference. Who’s got the difference?” Her head sagged low. “I don’t know anymore, Jimmy, I just don’t know. I had everything in our lives sorted out. I had it all figured out. We’re good people and God ought to bless us. He shouldn’t have done this. Not to us. Not to our son.”

Jim sat stock still at the table. “I don’t know either, Mag. Maybe it’s some kind of test for us.”

“For us?” she cried: “Why do we have to be tested?”

“For better or for worse,” he said.

“But that’s for us, Jim. That’s a marriage vow. It has nothing to do with our nineteen-year-old son. If he’s killed so we can be tested, how’s that fair to him?”

In their silence the snow-bearing wind raised its lonely wail. In the alleyway below their kitchen window a woman they did not know desperately alternated her stalled car between forward and reverse. The car rocked back and forth unable to move in either direction, its driver shivering and in tears, caught in a morass of snow.

“Job’s children,” Mag said.

“What?”

“Job’s children. In the back of my mind I’ve always wondered about them. About how God explained to them that they were dead so He could test their father,”

“If they were with God, that was answer enough.”

“Was it?” Mag asked. “Is there ever answer enough? The older I get the fewer the answers and the more the questions.” She raised her hands, wrinkled now by the long soak in the water. “I’m afraid, Jimmy,” she said. “I’ve never been so afraid in my life. I’ve nothing left.”

“You’ve got me, Maggie. For better or for worse.”

“For better,” she said. She touched his cheek and flakes of suds clung there like Christmas snow. “I don’t want a tree this year,” Maggie said. “I don’t want to bother with one.”

“It won’t seem like Christmas without a tree,” Jim said.

“It won’t seem like Christmas without Little Jim,” Maggie said. “It’ll never be Christmas in this house again.” She was crying as she took his cereal bowl and placed it in the water. “Oh, Big Jim,” she said. “I’m so afraid. We’re all so lost. I thought I had the answers right here in my hand.” She raised her palms with the water straining through her fingers, the suds mounded high as snowdrifts. “It’s all air,” she said. Nothing is anymore real than these bubbles.”

Jim sat quietly at the empty table.

“One day,” she said, “they sent our son a letter. Another day, he left this house. Another day and someone we never saw and never will see killed him. A yellow son of a yellow mother who worries that another day her own dear yellow son will die. Did our Jimmy kill other mother’s sons because they told him he had to? Who were they to tell him, to tell anybody to kill anybody else? They’re the ones who don’t believe in God. They don’t believe in God, so they act in God’s place. They say who should live and who should die. And another day the Marine Captain came to our door with the telegram. And today is another day. And there will be no day when he will be buried. Because they could not find any of him to send home.”

“Maggie!”

“It’s true. I heard what the Captain said. Missing in action. Presumed dead. I know what that means. It means that my son, the flesh of my body, is part of the air, is part of the snow. And one day when the wind from wherever this war is blows here, he will come down in the rain and in the snow.” Maggie dried her hands, now in full control of herself. She spaced her words deliberately. “That’s why we will not have a tree in this house this Christmas. Our tree must stand outside where the rain can freeze on it, where the snow can bend it down.”

Jim thought of the tree they had bought the week before. It would have to stay untrimmed on the drifted back porch of the apartment.

“If you believe in Job and you believe in God,” Maggie said, “then you and God will have to have Job’s patience with me. If we had something to bury, it might be different. If we had a grave to visit every Sunday until the day we die it would be different. That’s the difference, Big Jimmy. That’s all the difference in the world. We have nothing,”

Big Jim dropped the milk carton into the plastic-lined wastebasket.

“What I have,” Mag said, “are things they gave me. I have his birth certificate. I have his death certificate. I have some certificates in between. All that certification and no son. I know that he was born at 12:28 on

a Tuesday afternoon, the twentieth of June, 1950. The certificate says 12:26, but the certificate is wrong. And the death certificate? They couldn't even find his young body."

"Maggie, I'm calling the doctor." Big Jim stood at the phone.

"Why?" she asked. "Tell me why,"

"You need something to quiet you down."

"No," she said. "I've been quiet all my life." She pulled herself up to her full height. "Now I will be heard,"

"Maggie," Jim said. He stood, broken, over the phone, his head hanging. "I'm afraid too. Jimmy dead is part of me dead. When a man gives his son his whole name, when they're junior and senior, it's almost like it takes both of them to make one whole man." He looked directly at her. "Now the best half of me is dead and the other half you see dying,"

Mag walked to her husband. She held him to her, "You're not dying," she said, "You'll not die today."

"I want to," Jim said.

"You'll die with me on some tomorrow. On some day far from this Christmas. After we've had time to think this out."

"I'm afraid," Big Jim said, "And you said you were afraid."

"Everybody's afraid." Mag said, "People in laundromats and supermarkets and offices. People in restaurants. Even people in churches. Everybody's afraid of something, deep down afraid of they don't know what. Every morning getting up afraid and every night bedding down afraid."

The woman led the man to the window.

"We're going out in a few minutes," she said.

"Into the snow," Jim said.

"We're going to go into the laundromat. We're going to go into the supermarket. We're going to go into the church."

"Yes," Jim said,

"We're going to show people we're not as afraid as we once were. The death of our child was one of our greatest fears."

"And he is dead,"

"But we still live, and we need fear that fear no more. Life is simpler."

"That's hard, Mag. You're turning hard."

"Hardness can be called strength, and until today I believed in God, and then I doubted, and now maybe I believe again. Because He gave me this strength. He made me hard."

"I don't understand you, Maggie."

"I don't pretend to understand God," she said, "But this I know. God is, and we are, and our son was; and none of the four of us will ever be the same. We're not just private people anymore. God has given us public things to say,"

"I don't know why my son died," Jim said."

"That he's gone is enough," Mag said.

"Too much."

"Tonight we'll eat early," she said. "Then we will go to evening Mass."

"And the Hanrattys?"

"Then we will go to the Hanrattys,"

"And when we come home will we still be so brave?" Jim asked.

"And when we come home," Maggie said, "we will hang a Christmas star in the window and we will leave it there."

"Even after Christmas?" Jim asked,

"Forever," she said, "So that in winter it will light the snow on the ledge and on rainy summer nights put

a shine on the sill.”

“It will be hard, Maggie,” Jim said.

“Yes,” she said, and in her voice was a little trace of the old fear. “I know.”

He took her hand.

“But we’ll try,” she said. “God help us. We’ll try.”

On the table the telegram lay, needing never to be read again.

THE AUTHOR: “All Job’s Children,” a short story especially for this Christmas 1969, was written by Dr. John J. Fritscher. Dr. Fritscher is assistant professor of American literature and drama at Western Michigan university, Kalamazoo. He is the author of many stories and poems and his work appears frequently in Catholic magazines. He describes his forthcoming novel “What They Did to the Kid,” as a “truth telling tale of Catholic seminary life.”