

The Celestial Kingdom

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JULIE WAS ASKED TO BE BAPTIZED FOR THE DEAD. Her teacher, Mrs. Dixon, had read down the roll, asking the girls in alphabetical order. She had moved into Julie's neighborhood, just up the street in a new house built with used bricks, or so the bricks looked because flecks of variously colored paints stuck to the surface of the bricks and many corners were chipped. Julie had watched the house go up. She decided that the bricks were meant to look that way because Mrs. Dixon, who had good taste, left nothing to chance regarding her own appearance. Her wavy brown hair was carefully spray-netted into place, and she wore a suit, a frilly blouse, and comfortable heels to class every Tuesday. The bricks reflected a contemporary style Mrs. Dixon might actually have chosen, but they looked authentically old and used anyway. Julie was convinced that the bricks had been salvaged from older houses.

Julie would have said no except that her best friend Bobby Ann had also been asked. Julie habitually said no to requests put to her at church because she didn't like church at all, especially on Sundays. She felt like a stranger in the building, no matter how often she went. At church the adults didn't act like themselves, but like other people. Julie's circle of friends, however, felt differently, and Julie enjoyed being with them the rest of the time to overcome her dislike of church. Bobby Ann loved church, even on Sunday afternoons when she sat with her family. Julie enjoyed it best on Tuesdays, when the kids had the building to themselves and the teachers planned activities just for them. Most of the year Julie walked to the church with her friends for an hour of lessons and activities after school on Tuesday. During the summer the hour was changed to 10 a.m. so they could linger all morning. Julie agreed to be baptized for the dead because Bobby Ann would be with her.

Julie said yes to Mrs. Dixon before asking permission from her mother, which made her nervous. Her mother objected to everything Julie did in church. She especially objected to Julie's request to be baptized, even though she herself had been baptized when she was sixteen. Julie's father, who had been baptized when he was eight, had approved,

but in that cool, detached way of his that signified his lack of commitment to Julie's request. Julie resented the family fuss because neither went to church anyway, although both were members. The rite hadn't been worth the bother. Julie's baptism had taken place in a different building from the one Julie knew, none of her friends had been invited to watch, and her father had hurried her out as soon as her turn was over because he had to see a very sick patient in the hospital. Soon Julie put the dull, uneventful ceremony behind her. Nevertheless, she was glad she had been baptized because it opened the door to more activities she could enjoy with her circle of friends.

Julie held a piece of linen cloth in one hand and a needle with green thread in the other. She read the words she was cross-stitching for a clue to some method of getting her mother's permission to go.

GREET THE DAY WITH A SONG.
MAKE OTHERS HAPPY.
SERVE GLADLY.

Her mother, who approved of arts and crafts, bought embroidery thread for Julie only on the condition that Julie fully understood that these sentiments were disadvantageous to her because the words were meant to teach women to accept the role of obedient servant to men. She asked Julie, do boys cross-stitch? to prove her point. Nevertheless, Julie knew that her mother generally agreed to Julie's requests if she offered to help around the kitchen, spoke politely, and never asked for a ride. Mrs. Dixon's true job as teacher was to explain to the girls that the dead were kept outside God's celestial kingdom until they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ in the new revelation. She only went through the motions of cross-stitching. As Mrs. Dixon was not among Julie's mom's circle of friends, Julie more readily accepted needlework because Mrs. Dixon disliked it.

Julie pondered the problem of asking permission on the way home from the church. She walked along the street with her friends. She would liked to have climbed down the creek bed behind the church to study the water for a while, and would have, too, had she been alone. Instead, she listened to Bobby Ann talk with absolute certainty about being united with her entire family in the celestial kingdom after death because her grandmother had done her family's genealogical work. Julie knew that her family's spirits would live elsewhere because Julie's grandmother smoked cigarettes and drank coffee on her visits to Ogden. In fact, Julie's mother's entire family drank coffee and liquor and smoked cigarettes, even though they had all been baptized. They weren't healthy, either. They attended church when it was convenient, as Julie did. Julie's fa-

ther's family, on the other hand, had years of life ahead before meeting again in the celestial kingdom. Most were young and healthy. Julie's dad wouldn't enter the celestial kingdom with them because he drank liquor. Julie was embarrassed to have to ask her mother's permission to participate in a rite that seemed to divide families. But wanting to see was reason enough, Julie concluded, to ask.

The girls walked slowly down the hot street, as if going no place in particular. They inspected the fronts of the houses and yards intently, as something needing to be done regularly. The girls pretended to know all the families in every house they passed, and, by trading information, they could name most: the Andersons, the Belnaps, the Sessionses. Julie herself knew only one or so neighbor on each block because only a few families had children exactly her age. She had been inside one maybe of the four or five houses on each block but, like the other girls, pretended to know them all. The girls agreed that all the neighbors were nice once you got to know them. Occasionally Julie daydreamed about scouting her way along the creek bed behind the houses, where things grew wild near the water. She found minnows and puff balls. The water exposed giant tree roots to the air. She had explored the creek once or twice, and felt more herself when she did because she wasn't pretending anything. Those times were few, however, because she went to church to be with her friends. None would skip church to explore the creek with her, not even Bobby Ann. Eventually the girls acknowledged they were going home and separated to make it in time for lunch.

Julie's mother was busy feeding Julie's little brother and looked tired, so Julie fixed herself a peanut butter sandwich. Her mother asked her to bring up a can of tomatoes next time she went downstairs because they were going to have macaroni and tomatoes for dinner. Then her mother smiled because she remembered that Julie's aunt had called to see if Julie wanted to go swimming at the club with her cousins later that afternoon. Julie did want to go swimming, even though it meant that she would watch her cousins eat their hamburgers afterwards, which Julie would not because her parents did not want to make a habit of children eating expensive meals at the club. Julie took a moment to say that Mrs. Dixon, who was also a member of the country club, had asked if she could be baptized for the dead with some of her friends, and Julie's mother agreed, because not too much could go wrong with a daughter who was going to go off swimming at the country club later on. Julie was genuinely relieved because she would not have to make excuses in front of her friends. She was doubtful that the dead would ever express their gratitude to her for being baptized in their behalf. Anyway, to Julie, Jesus said that his words were for the living, and Mrs. Dixon said that the celestial kingdom existed in a more perfect galaxy far away in the distant heav-

ens. Julie completely doubted the existence of the celestial kingdom.

Downstairs her older brother and his friends were working on his electric train. The boys had been migrating from house to house during these intensely hot summer days because the basement rooms in all the houses were cool. Julie's brother's train board, as large as a ping pong table, folded up into the wall like a Pullman bed, so all the track had to be nailed down and the miniature city and surrounding countryside glued carefully in place. Therefore, although his required more work than the other boys' train boards, the results were superior and permanent. They listened to the radio while they worked, and in between the songs the disk jockey announced all sorts of fun events for young people being sponsored by this or that business in town. Julie received only the slightest nod of recognition from the boys because her presence made each aware that he was really learning how to be a man later on in life. She listened to the end of "Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" and then inspected the fish tank for any changes. A female guppy was swollen with eggs. Julie moved on to the unfinished part of the basement.

The storage room wasn't mysterious, just scary, even with the lights on. Julie's parents bought only a few household items in cases, tomatoes, peaches, pears, beans, corn, and toilet paper. The cans themselves looked small on the shelves, which were broad and deep and filled a whole wall. The cans were significant in their inadequacy because they would not last a week in the event of disaster. Furthermore, disaster was inevitable—both her school and Sunday school teachers agreed on that point. At school Julie had been carefully taught the civil defense procedures to follow during an atomic blast, and at church she had been assured that Christ's second coming was at hand. At church her teachers had said that if two men were standing in a field, one would be taken and one would remain, a description that resembled the school's educational films in which, in their peculiar way, atomic bombs destroyed some buildings and spared others. Julie believed that her teachers were describing the same event. Some neighbors stored a two-years' supply of food in their basements. Julie's mother, however, refused to "stockpile," a position she had taken during World War II. The rest of the room was better supplied. Julie's father owned a lot of camping equipment. There were tents, sleeping bags, canteens, coolers, Coleman stoves, and lanterns, as well as fishing poles, tackle, boots, and guns. The smell of canvas and dirt reassured Julie of good times hunting and fishing in the mountains. Although he could not tell her to quit worrying, Julie's dad scowled at her impatiently and argued that he was not going to build a bomb shelter because it would lower the resale value of the house. Therefore, Julie worried and planned alone. During an atomic blast her family would have to retreat to the unfinished area behind the furnace, which was covered by the

front porch upstairs, and then they would have to move to the windowless storage room and do the best with what they had. They wouldn't follow her plans, however, because they all had ideas of their own. Prepared to die, Julie sighed, as she always did whenever her mother sent her downstairs for a can of something.

Upstairs the world, with all its familiar predictability, was less dreadful. Julie's mother had put her little brother down for a nap, which he had outgrown but she hadn't. The doors were closed to both bedrooms, but only Julie's mother was dead to the world. Julie peeked in to see her brother sucking the corner of his blanket and staring vacantly at nothing in particular. Seeing him caused her to forget about being blown up. She smiled, whispered go to sleep, and closed the door. Then she planned out the afternoon at the club. She would need thongs to guard against the thorns from the pink rose bushes planted just outside the pool's fence. They often fell inside the fence and pierced her feet. Otherwise, all Julie needed were a swimsuit and a towel. She wouldn't ask for money for a hamburger because she wasn't embarrassed not to eat around her cousins and had been lucky to get permission to be baptized for the dead so easily. She picked up *Lorna Doone* to read while she waited until it was time to go swimming. Eventually she heard the familiar noise of toy cars rolling on the floor in her little brother's bedroom.

Julie and Bobby Ann walked to Mrs. Dixon's house because she lived up the street. Mrs. Dixon looked smart in her navy blue pants suit, yellow blouse, and silk scarf which she had tied around her neck, and she drove her brown station wagon, a "woody." Both Julie and Bobby Ann wore cotton skirts and blouses just as they had decided the day before. The girls sat patiently in the back seat while Mrs. Dixon drove to the other houses to pick up the other three girls, whose names were Marsha, Shari, and Esther and who could have walked, but didn't. Both Marsha and Shari wore shorts, and Esther wore a skirt. When Mrs. Dixon drove across the viaduct, Julie asked her why she was driving north towards Bear Lake instead of south to Salt Lake City. Mrs. Dixon explained that they were going to be baptized in the Logan temple and told them to roll down the windows because it was going to get hot. At that Julie settled in to worrying about not getting car sick when they reached the windy canyon road to Logan. On the way to Bear Lake once Julie had asked her father to take another road, but he had explained that every car from Ogden had to drive through Sardine Canyon to enter Logan because that was the direct route.

Mrs. Dixon drove quickly, creating a strong breeze in the car. Julie whispered to Bobby Ann that she couldn't talk because she had to look intently out the window to keep from getting sick. She didn't want Mrs.

Dixon to know, or Mrs. Dixon would make her sit in the front seat next to her, where Esther was sitting, and that would be worse than throwing up. Julie stared with relief at the cattle and horses in their pastures, at the fruit orchards, and at the Great Salt Lake shimmering like a mirage in the far distance. She believed she wouldn't get car sick because everything was so peaceful that the view would settle her stomach. Julie wasn't missing much because Bobby Ann and Marsha were talking about their families' genealogy, making up stories as they went along. Bobby Ann said that her aunt had told her that she had traced their family's history back to a baron who had left Scotland in the sixteenth century, and Marsha said that her grandmother had told her that she had found out that her family had come over from France to England with William the Conqueror. Julie didn't tell them that her mother had told her that her grandfather was a bootlegger in Idaho and had made her mother paste labels on the liquor bottles because she might throw up if she opened her mouth. When the car entered the canyon, Bobby Ann and Marsha started to compare their patriarchal blessings. Both had been told, among other things, that they would live to see Christ's second coming. The scenery was beautiful because stands of dark green trees on the mountains alternated with golden meadows. The road rolled and turned. What little water there was cooled the air, and Julie closed her eyes and felt the breeze as she struggled to keep from throwing up.

The temple had thick granite walls and looked dignified amidst the tall, green trees and brightly colored flowers planted around it. Mrs. Dixon pulled up in a shady corner of the parking lot because everyone was sweating. Julie forgot all about getting car sick the minute her feet touched the gravel. Mrs. Dixon asked the temple worker if they could wait their turn inside because it was too hot to stay outside—in fact, Mrs. Dixon insisted because the temple worker had strict instructions not to let in anyone without a proper temple recommend, and the girls had only a modified recommend based on their youth and innocence, not a proper recommend based on their church standing. The temple worker had wrapped her braided hair around her head and wore a faded cotton blouse with little flowers printed all over it to go to work that day, and she grudgingly gave in to Mrs. Dixon's request. But the temple worker straightened her back and used her authority to order the girls to sit quietly and not touch anything because, by acting strict and stern, she forgot about feeling slighted in the presence of Mrs. Dixon, even though she had addressed her as "Sister." The girls were led to a large living room with thick blue carpet. From her place on a velvet couch, Julie could look at the chandeliers and gilded mirrors throughout the room. Bowls with prisms had been placed on the polished table tops. Julie wouldn't touch anything because fingerprints could be traced. Eventually Bobby Ann

suggested that they look for the face of Jesus in the painting on the wall. Julie stared until she was cross-eyed and then found it in the foliage, but Bobby Ann found it in six places, including the haystack. Julie was relieved when the temple worker returned to fetch them for baptism because, being stained and blemished, Julie knew that she lacked holiness, so her presence violated the sacred house of God.

The girls undressed in a locker room like the one at the country club, to Julie's delight because she belonged in locker rooms, knowing what to do in them. She didn't have to be especially holy, either. Mrs. Dixon had assured them that the baptismal room, where the less pure were ordinarily allowed, was spiritually apart from the temple proper, reserved as the latter was for the recommended and approved. The girls removed their clothes nervously, giggling occasionally to break the silence of the locker room. They knew what each other looked like naked because they had been to slumber parties together. The stiff canvas gowns had yellowed here and there from previous use and were too big and dragged on the cold cement floor. Julie could smell the water and chlorine. She set her glasses on her clothes and closed the locker door. Julie was too nearsighted to see much without her glasses. Although she knew she looked silly, Julie felt like an angel.

The blurry baptismal room, dramatically beautiful, was everything Julie could have wished it to be. The blue room was light here and shadowy there, and it was filled with the echoes of lapping water and mysteriously whispered words. The big, golden bowl of water had been placed on the backs of twelve huge golden oxen, each representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Although Julie called to mind the golden calves whose worship had brought death and destruction to the faithless Israelites fleeing Egypt, to her the statues honored the sturdy oxen that had carried the pioneers across the plains to Zion. Elderly men in bleary white robes sat indistinctly at a table and carefully inspected papers with the names of the dead to be sure that the authorizations and signatures were in order. Were these patriarchs like those that had blessed Bobby Ann and Marsha? Up close they looked like Julie's grandfather. Their wisps of gray hair stuck to their blotchy scalps and their wire-rimmed glasses slipped down their noses. They sat solemnly, concentrating on their holy work. They had no time for the likes of Julie and her friends, who giggled and huddled together, but ordered them to get into the baptismal font at once and without fuss. Marsha complained that the water was too cold. Julie, used to getting into cold water, quickly stepped off the ladder and dropped down until it reached her shoulder because the bowl was like a swimming pool on a smaller scale. One of the younger men, less somber than the other men sitting gravely at the table, climbed in after the girls and assigned them numbers, Julie number two.

Bobby Ann walked into the middle of the bowl to be baptized while the others clung together to watch. Julie was next. The man placed her two fingers on her nose to pinch it shut, then, holding her back with one hand, her shoulders with another, tipped her backwards, submerging her completely under the water, or almost completely because the man had noticed the tip of her pony tail floating on the water's surface, invalidating the baptism. Julie slipped her ponytail under her gown so they could perform the baptism again. She was shaking with the excitement of having an adventure worthy of Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher. She climbed out of the water and sat in the golden chair made wet from Bobby Ann. An obscure man placed his cold hands heavily, soberly on Julie's head while the men at the table proclaimed that she was being confirmed in the name of the next person on the list. While awaiting her turns, she listened for anyone she knew, Charlotte Brontë, perhaps, or Charles Dickens, people whose accomplishments made them important. She recognized none of the names. To Julie's thinking, Charles Dickens's and Charlotte Brontë's own baptisms in their own churches probably were the ones that mattered to them anyway. She heard names like Charles Smith, Elizabeth Rigby Smith, and Catherine Mathilda Rigby, ordinary names for ordinary American families that Mark Twain might have described in his novels. She was too confused being dunked and confirmed to catch the names of the people she was being baptized for, although she tried to listen carefully each time. Julie laughed away the indignity of honoring other people's families, not her own, because she believed in facing difficulties with a light heart. She was baptized for the dead thirty times. That morning the five girls had helped hand the keys to the celestial kingdom to 150 waiting spirits.

Mrs. Dixon stopped at Maddox's for hamburgers before beginning the last leg home. Julie had taken two dollars from her toy letter box, which she used as a bank, just in case Mrs. Dixon decided to stop. Her friends' parents always made sandwiches for their children's friends at home, but never bought them meals in restaurants. Julie ordered a hamburger for herself and gave a dollar to Marsha, who forgot to bring money. Marsha ordered ice cream. While waiting for their food, the girls listened to Mrs. Dixon give the lesson. She explained that the baptisms allowed the dead to be united with their families in the celestial kingdom because every spirit had to be baptized under the new revelation given to Joseph Smith and the church prophets. Some spirits, however, might reject the keys to the celestial kingdom. Julie, who listened politely, appreciated Mrs. Dixon for trying to give an explanation for the rite of baptism for the dead. Impossible though it seemed to Julie to track down the names of every person who had ever lived, those families who were interested were free to try. Mrs. Dixon blessed the food after the waitress

brought it.

Julie was glad to get home. Although she disapproved, Julie's mother discussed Julie's participation in the temple rite with good humor. She had found a poem by Ogden Nash to read to Julie after dinner in which Nash argued that people would spend more time with their loved ones "If one's kin and kith/ Were more fun to be with." Julie's mother also referred to her family as the "in-laws and out-laws." Julie reassured her mother that she didn't believe in the celestial kingdom, but enjoyed herself and had at least been inside the Logan temple. Then Julie took the cheap paperback book of Ogden Nash's poetry to read because it seemed doubly funny to read the poetry of a man named Ogden in Ogden.

For the next two weeks Bobby Ann teased Julie daily about being in love with Malcolm Fergusson. Bobby Ann, who was in love with Gary Hadley, wanted Julie to be in love, too. In fact, Julie was in love with Jerry Boyle, but was too self-conscious to say so. Bobby Ann never mentioned Jerry Boyle to Julie because Bobby Ann believed that another girl had prior claim to him. Julie tried to tell Bobby Ann again and again that she did not love Malcolm Fergusson and that Malcolm Fergusson did not love her, but finally gave up because, to Bobby Ann, saying it made it so. During this time Julie checked daily on the female guppy. One morning little transparent guppies swam among the plants near the top of the tank. She counted fourteen, all in good shape. She inspected them carefully because a year earlier two baby guppies had been born deformed, one a Siamese twin with a dead guppy attached to its back, and the other with a crooked back bent inward. Julie attributed the deformities to radiation because at the time all the children in the neighborhood had had to play indoors for a couple of days when fallout from atomic testing had blown upwind to the north. She had no proof for her belief, however. Relieved that this set of guppies was in good shape, Julie fed the fish. Later she and her brother would scoop them out with a net and feed them separately. Julie expected that, in the meantime, some of the baby guppies would be eaten by other fish, in accord with the natural order of things in the fish tank.

Julie wanted to do something to protect her own family. So she asked her mother if she could store just a little water in case an atomic bomb was dropped on Utah. Julie's mom agreed to let her have an empty Clorox bottle and a shelf in the storage room because it wouldn't cost anything. Julie thanked her for the bottle. Because her mother never did laundry as often or as thoroughly as her friends' mothers did, a year could go by before Julie got a second one. Still, a Clorox bottle was a first step. Julie had been baptized by water. Strengthened by her love for her family, Julie filled the Clorox bottle to await Christ's return to earth.