

THE KING OF THE WORLD

by Chuck Holmes

I was twelve years old when I learned that the King of the World lived in a chicken coop. The three of us – Li'l Fowler, Billy Royce and I – had roller skated down to the end of Church Street, and then, after carefully hiding our skates in the weeds, had walked down the dirt road to the power plant and taken the path that Li'l had shown us through the woods.

And there it was, just like Li'l had said it would be. An old, nearly falling down chicken coop with hens walking around it, pecking on the ground and an old rooster sitting in the doorway. It wasn't painted. It was just boards. But near the flat roof, over the door, in brown or what might have been red paint, it said, "Cursed be anybody who steals my eggs." It was signed, "The King of the World."

Trying to stay hidden in the weeds that grew up in the woods, we crawled as close as we could to the chicken coop. Li'l was looking pretty proud.

"I told you," he said. "This is where ol' Hezekiah lives. He lives with the chickens."

"I ain't seen Hezekiah yet," Billy Royce said. "All I see is a bunch of chickens."

I didn't say anything. I was still reading the sign over the door. "Cursed be anybody who steals my eggs. The King of the World." I was wondering what kind of curse. And why ol' Hezekiah thought he was King of the World.

"He'll be back," Li'l said. "You just wait."

"I don't think I want to wait," I said. "What if he catches us here? He could think we're trying to steal his eggs. He could put a curse on us."

Both Li'l and Billy Royce turned and looked at me like I was somebody's little brother. They both shook their heads slowly and turned back to stare at the chicken coop. "Ain't no such thing as curses," Billy Royce said. "Don't be dumb."

"How do you know?" I asked. And that was a real question.

The longer we laid there in the grass looking at the chicken coop, the more I wanted Li'l or Billy Royce to convince me that there was no such thing as ol' Hezekiah's curse. The more I looked at that sign, the more I wondered if ol' Hezekiah might not have some kind of power. Then I thought of Otha Smith.

"What about Otha Smith?" I said.

"What about him?" Billy Royce answered.

"You were there, on Main Street that night. ol' Hezekiah told Mr. Otha that he was going to die and go to Hell because he was bad to drink. Maybe that was a curse."

"Old man Smith was seventy-five years old, and he had been drunk since before we were born. It don't take a curse to kill somebody like that."

I still wasn't convinced. Even though it was getting cooler because the sun was going down behind the railroad tracks on the other side of the power plant, I was sweating. I could feel the sweat running down my neck into my gabardine shirt. I could also feel my heart pumping real hard. Like it was trying to tell me

something. "I think I'm going to go," I told them.

Li'l glanced at me. "Chicken," he said. "You ought to be out there with them." He nodded in the general direction of the chickens pecking on the ground.

Billy Royce snorted. "Ah, let him go. If he's scared, he ought to go home. I'm going to stay and see if ol' Hezekiah comes back. I still don't believe he lives here."

I was halfway up and halfway down, trying to decide whether it was better to stay here where I had company or walk back through the woods by myself. Suddenly, the decision was made for me.

"SINNERS!"

The voice boomed out from behind us, loud and rasping, and absolutely convincing.

"SINNERS," it said again. Then, softer, but not a bit less frightening, "What are y'all doing about my eggs."

We turned around, and behind us, maybe fifteen feet away, was ol' Hezekiah. From where we were, lying on the ground, he looked about fifteen feet tall. But we knew he wasn't real tall, no taller than my daddy. But that didn't help. ol' Hezekiah had long gray hair that tangled down to his shoulders and a full gray beard that looked just like the one God wore in the picture in the Sunday School room. He wore two overcoats, and brogan shoes. In one hand, he held a Bible, and in the other one a show poster that he rolled up to yell through. And he stood just fifteen feet away.

"You trespass against me and against the Lord.

We were getting to our feet, slowly, without ever taking our eyes off ol' Hezekiah. "We didn't do nothing," Billy Royce said.

"We didn't bother your old eggs," Li'l said.

I didn't say anything. We had been caught. We would be cursed. For a split second I wondered if being cursed and going to Hell had to be the same thing. Maybe there was another kind of curse.

Then I felt Billy Royce grab my arm and we were all running through the woods.

"SINNERS. YOU WILL PAY."

Ol' Hezekiah's voice followed us out of the woods and made us run a little faster. When we got to the weeds where we had hidden the skates, we flopped down on the ground, breathing hard. I could feel the pain in my side like something was trying to pull it apart. But Billy Royce was laughing, and Li'l had a big grin on his face.

"Told you," he said. "That's where ol' Hezekiah lives."

Billy Royce nodded his head, still laughing. "Sinners," he said, trying to sound like ol' Hezekiah. "I guess he's right. We're now officially sinners. Hezekiah said so."

"Everybody's a sinner," I said. "It says so in the Bible. All men sin and come short of the glory of God. Paul said it."

"Listen to the preacher man," Li'l said. "Maybe you ought to get a show poster and stand outside the movie with ol' Hezekiah."

"Don't joke about things like that," I said. "God hears everything."

Billy Royce punched me on the shoulder. "You just worry too much. If God hears what we're saying, I don't think he cares very much. He sure don't care if we go down and look at the King of the World's chicken coop." Then he started laughing again.

We got our skates out of the weeds and started walking home.

We didn't hurry much because we knew we were all late for dinner, and we were probably all going to get some kind of punishment when we got home. Li'l's daddy was the only one that still spanked him. We were all twelve years old, and we thought we were too big to be spanked. Li'l's daddy didn't agree, and Billy Royce's parents and my parents had come up with some pretty good substitutes. But if we were already too late, there wasn't any use to hurry.

It was about six-thirty when I got home. Mama and Daddy were still at the kitchen table.

"Where you been, Jody?" Mother asked, not even turning her head to make sure it was me. "You just about missed supper."

"We were skating. Went further than we thought. Took longer to get back."

Daddy sort of grinned. "I guess you're lucky. We're having leftovers. That ought to be punishment enough."

I just kept walking. Daddy teasing Mama about the leftovers wasn't anything new. Daddy didn't really like to eat leftovers, but about twice a week, Mama said she had to clean out the refrigerator and we would have supper with three kinds of meat and maybe four kinds of vegetables. Whatever was left over from the last several days.

"You be careful, J.D.," Mama said. "One of these days I'm going to figure out how to just cook leftovers, and not have to cook the first meal at all. You go get washed up, Jody. I don't want to be in the kitchen all night."

After putting my skates in my room and washing my hands, I went back to the kitchen and sat down. There was fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and a few butter beans from Sunday dinner. A thin, fried pork chop from Monday along with some green beans and squash and onions, and a couple of pieces of streak o'lean that I couldn't place. I took the pork chop, some butter beans and squash. I got up and poured myself a glass of milk.

"You get into any interesting trouble today, bud?" Daddy was always trying to be funny. Sometimes he was.

"No trouble. Just Li'l, Billy Royce and me. We went skating down toward the power plant."

"I guess there was a time when I thought skating two or three miles could be called fun. I don't remember when it was though."

"How much homework do you have tonight, Jody?" Mother asked.

You could trust her to bring the conversation back to being responsible, doing my homework or cleaning up my room. Especially since we had just gotten a television set. The rule was that I had to take care of all my responsibilities before I watched television.

"Not much. Some arithmetic. Spelling test is tomorrow."

"Well, when you finish supper, go study your spelling. Maybe your daddy can callout the words to you."

Daddy had finished his dinner and was wiping his mouth. He shook his head. "Not tonight. I have to go back down to the paper tonight and write something for the editorial page."

"Okay. I'll do it after I finish in the kitchen."

She and daddy got up and took their plates to the sink, leaving me eating. Daddy gave mama a hug

and a peck on the cheek. "I should be back by ten."

Mama gave him a hug back. "I hope so. You're just too grumpy when you don't get enough sleep." They both sort of laughed, and daddy went out the back door. Mama started washing the dishes.

"Mama, is there any such thing as a curse?"

She stopped washing the dishes and turned around, wiping her hands on her apron. She looked like she was trying to figure out if I had really said what she thought I had said.

"What do you mean, Jody? What kind of curse?"

"I mean, could somebody put a curse on you and hurt you." She walked back over to the table and sat down, watching me very carefully. "I don't think so, Jody. Some people, like those people who practice voodoo may believe that they can. But we don't believe that. We're Christians."

"Do we believe in Hell?"

She thought a minute. "Yes. We believe in Heaven, and we believe in Hell. You know what it says in the Bible. Why are you so interested in curses and Hell. You get involved in something you shouldn't have?"

I thought about telling her about our run in with ol' Hezekiah, but I didn't think about it for long. It could get real complicated when I tried to explain to Mama that I hadn't really done anything, but was worried about what I had done. I just shook my head. "Li'l, and Billy Royce and I were talking about it. I don't think they believe in Hell."

Mama got up and went back to the sink. "At twelve years old, I don't think there's a whole lot of point in any of you worrying about it a lot. There'll be time for that."

I went into my room and pulled out my arithmetic book and my spelling book, but before I started studying I picked up my Bible. It always stayed on my bedside table because I was supposed to read my devotional every night. Sometimes I did.

I looked in the back, in the Concordance. In Matthew 5:22, it said that if I called somebody a fool, I was in danger of hell fire. In Matthew 10:28 it said that I should fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. Then in the next chapter Jesus said Capernaum would be brought down to hell. In Matthew 23:15, Jesus was talking about the Pharisees making something called a proselyte into a "child of hell." I kept looking up the places in the Bible that talked about hell. There was the rich man pleading for water. There was the eternal fire.

The Bible had a lot to say about hell, and that was just in the New Testament.

I was sitting there wondering about a fire that burned forever when Mama knocked on the door. "You ready for me to call out your spelling, Jody?"

"Just a minute, Mama. I'm almost finished."

"Okay, just bring it out when you're ready."

I put the Bible away and pulled out my spelling book. It was hard to concentrate on the spelling. "Character" doesn't seem important, at least spelling it doesn't, when you've been thinking about burning for eternity.

I got through my spelling and my arithmetic and was getting ready for bed when Daddy got back from the paper. He came in to tell me goodnight.

"Your mama tells me that you were asking her some questions about curses and hell. Anything we

should be talking about, bud?"

"No, I just don't understand it. I can't understand just burning forever."

He patted me on the shoulder. "I don't think any of us can understand that. I don't."

"Don't you believe in hell, Daddy?"

"I guess I do. It's in the Bible. So's Heaven. I'd rather think about heaven."

"Preacher Cavanaugh said that if we didn't believe in Jesus and didn't do right, we would go to hell." Preacher Cavanaugh was the preacher at our church. We're Baptist, what some people call "hard shell," whatever that means.

Daddy stopped and thought for a minute. He looked very serious, which was unusual for him.

"Jody, I don't know if this is the time for us to be talking about this. Maybe we should wait until you're older. But you asked, and I'm going to give you the best answer I can.

"I think some people, preachers mostly, try to scare people into being good, doing the right thing. They think that, if they convince us that something really bad, something so bad that we can't even imagine it, is going to happen to us if we don't do what they think is right, we'll do it. Just because we're afraid.

"If I understand it right, for everything in the Bible that talks about hell, there's something else, or maybe two or three things that talk about how much God loves us, and how he made us like him. I'd rather think we do the right thing and believe the right thing because God made some of him into us. Does that make any sense?"

"I guess so. I still don't understand it. How can God love us and throw us into a fire that burns forever." In one of my Sunday School lessons the quarterly had said that if a bird went to a beach and picked up one grain of sand and carried it miles away, then came back and picked up another one, by the time he had moved the entire beach, the first minute of eternity would not have passed. How could something like burning go on and on?

"There'll be a lot of things in this world that you don't understand, Jody. After a while you'll understand that you don't understand them, and you won't worry about them. Now, it's about time you read your devotional and went to sleep."

He kissed me on top of my head and left the room. I got my Bible, but instead of reading in Samuel about David, which was what my devotional was about, I read about Hell in Revelations. Then I turned off the light and thought about Hell. Would I go to Hell because I made ol' Hezekiah mad? Or even if I stole some of his eggs? Did you go to Hell because you went to the pictures on Sunday? Or because you thought bad thoughts? By the time I finally went to sleep, I had about decided that if all the things I had been told were bad would make me go to hell, I was surely going to hell. The last thought I remember that night was ol' Hezekiah standing over us in the woods with his big gray beard and his long gray hair, yelling "SINNERS!"

The next morning my mind hadn't changed much, but I knew that before I went to hell, I had to go to school. So I did everything I usually did - got dressed, ate my cereal, brushed my teeth, and walked to school - but while I did it, there was something deep down inside me that was different today than it was yesterday. Something that said I might be scared. On the way to school I said a prayer. "God, help me to know what I have to do not to go to hell. Please."

That afternoon I told Li'l and Billy Royce that I couldn't go skating with them, that I had some chores

to do. What I really wanted to do was talk to ol' Hezekiah. I thought maybe if I told him I wasn't going to bother his eggs, he wouldn't be mad at me and wouldn't put a curse on me. But I knew if I told Li'l and Billy Royce they would laugh at me.

After they left, I went to Lane's Candy Store and bought a ball of caramel corn, then I went over to the old grove where the town had put some benches and sat on them for a while, nibbling on the caramel corn. I still couldn't decide whether it was better to go see ol' Hezekiah and take a chance on making him madder or not go see him and worry about his curse. I wondered what would happen if Jesus came back and I was cursed but I hadn't died. Would I go to hell, or maybe the curse wouldn't count? What would happen if the Russians bombed Cranville and wiped everybody out?

I finally finished the caramel corn ball, wiped my hands on my pants, and started walking toward the power plant. I knew that I was going to go to ol' Hezekiah's, but I hadn't decided to. I was just walking that way. I wondered if he had some sort of power over me.

Before I knew it, I was in the woods, staring at the chicken coop. "Cursed be anybody who steals my eggs." But I didn't steal his eggs. I didn't get close to his old eggs. What was I so worried about.

"What do you want, boy?"

The voice came from behind me, just like last time. But this time he wasn't yelling. He was just talking.

I turned around and there he was, almost close enough to reach out and touch me. But he didn't. He just stood there in his two overcoats and brogan shoes.

"I don't want anything. I was just going to tell you that I wasn't going to steal your eggs yesterday. Really, I wasn't."

"What was you boys doing here, then?"

"We just came to see where you lived. Billy Royce, and Li'l and me."

"Well, you've seen it. Now, get on."

"I don't want you to be mad at us. You called us sinners, Mr. Hezekiah."

For the first time it looked like his lips sort of turned up in a smile under the beard. Maybe nothing really moved, but his face looked different.

"You don't think you're a sinner, boy?"

"I know I am. It says in the Bible that everybody's a sinner."

"Read your Bible, do you?"

"Yes, sir. Every night."

"That's good."

We stood there a minute looking at each other. I guess I looked as funny to him as he did to me. My ankles sticking out of my pants where I had grown so much, and my feet that had suddenly gotten too big for the rest of my body. At least if ol' Hezekiah had shaved and taken off just one of those overcoats, he'd looked pretty normal. I worried about the fact that parts of me were growing at different times. ol' Hezekiah started walking toward the chicken coop. After a couple of steps, he turned around.

"I'm tired now, boy. But you come back and talk to me sometime. We'll talk about the Bible."

I started walking back to town.

Just as I was getting back to the house, Billy Royce and Li'l came skating up. Billy Royce, always

showing off, came up to be as fast as he could and just before he hit me, he skidded into a turn, hit the grass and fell down. When he turned over and sat up, he was laughing.

"Where you been?" Li'l asked. "We went to get you, but your mama said she hadn't seen you."

"I had some things to do."

Billy Royce stood up. "He's been to see Zona Faye," he hooted. "Jody has a girl friend."

I just shrugged. "Okay, if that's what you think."

Both Billy Royce and Li'l quit laughing and looked at each other. Li'l shook his head. "He didn't go see Zona Faye. If he had, he'd say he hadn't." He turned to Billy Royce. "I guess we'll just have to get it out of him."

Li'l grabbed one arm. Billy Royce grabbed the other, and they pushed me down on the grass and started tickling me.

"Stop it," I wheezed between giggles. "These are my school clothes. I get grass on these, and mama will kill me."

They stopped tickling me, and each one of them knelt on one of my arms. "Okay, tell us where you been."

"Okay, I'll tell you. Just get up."

We all got off the grass, and I brushed my pants off. I twisted around to look on the seat, but I didn't see any grass stains.

"I went to see ol' Hezekiah."

They looked at each other, then back at me. "What did you do that for?" Billy Royce asked.

"I didn't want him to be mad at us. I didn't want him to think we were there to steal his eggs."

"What does it matter if he's mad at us," Li'l said. "He's just a crazy old man. And we didn't do anything to his old eggs."

"No, and I wanted to make sure he knew that."

Suddenly Billy Royce and Li'l weren't very interested any more.

"Okay, now he knows," Billy Royce said. "You going to the pictures tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"You ought to go with us. I want to see if Nyoka got untied before that rope burned through. If she fell over that cliff it would have killed her."

Nyoka stopped the conversation for a minute. She was queen of the jungle and she didn't wear much clothes. She was always saving somebody or getting out of a trap.

"She got out," Li'l said. "That was only Chapter Nine, and all of the continueds are fifteen chapters. If she died, this one would only be nine chapters."

We all agreed, and I told them I'd see about going tomorrow.

I didn't know.

When I got home, Mama was in the kitchen, rolling out dough for chicken stew. She smiled at me when I came in. "Your buddies were just here looking for you," she said.

"I've been downtown." I went to the refrigerator and got the milk. Mama handed me a glass. "Just don't spoil your supper. It's late."

"Okay," I said. I grabbed a hand full of vanilla wafers out of the box and went into the living room. I

didn't think anything could spoil my breakfast, dinner or supper. It seemed like I was always hungry lately, and since we had to eat at the new cafeteria at school where they served lunch, I didn't ever feel like I had had enough to eat until after supper at home, which Mrs. Garner my teacher said we should call dinner.

"Dinner is the largest meal of the day," she said. So I figured that any meal I didn't eat in the new cafeteria was probably dinner. I just couldn't figure out what it mattered what you called it.

The next day after school we went to the movies at the Princess. Cranville just had one theater, the Princess. Sometimes, when he thought somebody else was going to open a theater, Mr. Bailey would open up another one called the Gem about two doors down. Then when whoever was going to open the new theater lost interest, he'd close it again. He'd already done that two or three times.

They were charging fourteen cents for the movie now. It had been nine cents for children, and if Mrs. Elliott, the lady who sold the tickets found out that Li'l and Billy Royce and me had turned twelve, it would cost us forty-nine cents. She either hadn't found out yet or didn't care.

The movie was Cisco Kid with a Three Stooges comedy and, of course, Nyoka, Queen of the Jungle. She got herself untied before the rope burned through and managed to use the rope to swing to safety just as it popped. Then she chased the bad hunters some more before she got in a fight with one on a raft in the river. He had knocked her down just as the raft went over a waterfall about two hundred feet high. We'd have to come back next week to see how she got out of that one.

When we left the movie, ol' Hezekiah was standing right outside the door yelling through his rolled up show poster.

"MOVIN' PICTURES are the images of the DEVIL. MOVIN' PICTURES are a SIN and an ABOMINATION."

Everybody, mostly kids like us, just walked by him and didn't pay any attention. We were used to ol' Hezekiah standing outside the picture show. But I looked at him, and when I did, he stopped yelling for a minute, and it looked to me like he smiled. Or maybe he didn't. But his face looked different.

It was already almost dark, so I went straight home. As I walked, I thought about ol' Hezekiah. I wondered where he came from, and why he didn't have a job like Daddy. Was he really crazy? When he just talked, instead of yelling, he didn't seem crazy.

Thursday and Friday were busy with school and Scouts and raking the leaves. Billy Royce, Li'l and I ganged up on the leaves. We worked together and raked all three yards. I don't know if it saved us any time, but it was more fun than each one of us doing it by ourselves.

But Saturday morning when I got up, I knew I was going to see ol' Hezekiah. I had been thinking about him off and on all week. I didn't really think he had put a curse on me, but I still hadn't decided whether I thought I was going to hell. Every now and then I would worry about it.

Daddy had already gone down to the paper when I got up, and Mama was getting ready for the ladies to come over and play Canasta at what they were calling lunch. She was just as happy for me to get out of the house.

I cut through the back yard and went down Hill Street to the highway and through the cemetery to the woods. I was coming up on ol' Hezekiah's house or chicken coop from the back. But I made plenty of noise so that he wouldn't think I was trying to sneak up on him.

As I was pushing through the weeds and branches, I thought about the Nyoka in the jungle when

she caught the bad hunters and could have thrown them down to the lions to eat. "I'm giving you a chance that you wouldn't give anybody else," she had said, as she tied them up. It sounded good. But later they got away. Maybe she should have gone ahead and thrown them to the lions. Maybe giving them a chance wasn't a good idea.

When I got to ol' Hezekiah's he was in front of the chicken coop at a little fire. There was an old blackened coffee pot on the rocks at the edge of the fire. He was reading his Bible.

He looked up when he heard me. "So you came back," he said. "I wondered if you were going to."

"Yes, sir. You said I could come back to talk."

"Yeah. Well, have a seat. I guess you're too young to drink coffee."

I had been drinking coffee since I was six years old, but I decided that maybe it would be better if I didn't drink his.

"Thank you anyway," I said, sitting down on a log.

"You're a polite youngun. That's good. You're J.D. Powell's boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir." I was surprised that he knew me or even knew Daddy, although about everybody in Cranville knew Daddy. He was the editor of the paper. We sat quietly for a minute while he poured his coffee in a tin cup. He sipped it.

"You a Christian, boy? I know you told me you read the Bible, but that don't make you a Christian. You believe in Jesus Christ."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hezekiah. I joined the church last year."

"It's good to join the church, but that don't make you a Christian either." He sipped his coffee again. Then I could have sworn that he laughed, or chuckled or something. It was just a sound, but it was a sound like something inside him had struck him funny.

"I guess I can tell you. It's been a long time since I told anybody. Name's not Hezekiah. It's Amos. Amos Thomas."

"But, why do they call you Mr. Hezekiah?"

"They don't. Nobody calls me mister, except maybe you and that to my face. Mostly they call me ol' Hezekiah. I'm old.

"I guess, because of the way I act and the way I look they thought I ought to be called something out of the Old Testament. Showed some of them didn't read their Bible much. My real name, Amos, is a good Old Testament name. Amos was a prophet. Hezekiah was a king, but they probably thought he was a prophet. But since they called me a king name, I kept it." He motioned to the words over the chicken coop door. "That's how come I painted that." He made that sound again like a chuckle or a laugh.

"I thought it was just right. A king in a chicken coop. Like Jesus who came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Yeah, it was just right."

The way he said it, he sounded like the whole thing was funny to him. "You don't think you're the King of the World?"

His head turned real quick, and he started to say something.

Then he stopped and took another sip of his coffee.

"No, I don't think I'm king of the world. There's not but one king. That's God and his son, Jesus. I was a farmer, over in Sampson County. But I guess I spent more time reading my Bible than tending my

crops, so I wasn't a good farmer. The people in my church didn't like me much either. I thought different from them. My wife left me. I lost my farm to Mr. Price over there who used to lend me planting money. So I didn't have any reason to stay there.

"When I got here, I felt like God had a reason for me to stay here."

"What's that, Mr. Hezekiah?"

He studied his coffee. "Call me Amos, son. Or Mr. Thomas if you want to. I'd like for somebody to call me by my right name, now. I don't know why I'm here. I believe that everybody is put some place for a reason. God told me to come here. He told me to stay here. He hasn't told me why."

"Can you really put a curse on somebody?"

He looked at the painting over the door again. "No, but it keeps some people from stealing my eggs. That's mostly what I eat, and I trade some of them for coffee and bacon. I can't put a curse on anybody. People mostly put curses on themselves by what they do and not listening to what God wants them to do."

He poured himself some more coffee. "What do you like most in the Bible, boy?" He blew on the cup to cool it and waited for me to answer.

I started to say I liked all of it since the Bible was the word of God, and it might not sound good to say that there was one part I liked better than the other. But what I said was, "I like the stories in the Old Testament, the battles. And I like stories like David and Goliath, and where Samson pulled down the building on the Philistines."

"You like it when the good wins out then."

"Yes, just like in the pictures." As soon as I said the word pictures I wanted to cram it back in my mouth. I knew what he thought about picture shows. But he didn't say anything about **it**. He just kept looking at his coffee.

"Well, remember, boy. This is God's world and good always wins out, even if it don't look like it sometimes. This is God's world."

He stood up, slowly like it hurt him to move. He threw the coffee in the bushes like the cowboys always did at the chuck wagon. "I got things I got to do. But I'm glad you come, boy. You keep reading your Bible. You keep being a Christian." He turned around and walked slowly back to the chicken coop. I knew it was time for me to go.

I walked back home, looking at the red and yellow leaves on the maple trees and the brown leaves on the oak trees. It was November, and all the leaves weren't gone yet. Mr. Thomas had said he thought everybody was put somewhere for a reason. I wondered what kind of reason God might have for me, and if I could figure it out or if God would tell me before it was too late. And I wondered what did make a Christian. I thought reading the Bible and going to church had something to do with it. I knew you had to believe in Jesus, but I figured you had to do something, too.

I went back to see Mr. Thomas a couple of times after school, but he wasn't there. And I saw him on the sidewalk outside the Princess, but we didn't talk. He would speak to me. He knew my name was Jody. And I would speak to him. It became so usual that Li'l and Billy Royce didn't even tease me about it.

When Thanksgiving came, I asked Mama if we had enough turkey and dressing for me to take some to Mr. Thomas. I had told Mama and Daddy about my going to see Mr. Thomas, and how his name wasn't

Hezekiah, but Mr. Thomas. They hadn't said much. They mostly listened.

"Do you think he would rather come have Thanksgiving dinner with us?" she asked.

I hadn't even thought of that. Somehow, the sight of Mr. Thomas with his long hair and long beard at our dinner table hadn't occurred to me.

"I don't know. Can I go ask him?"

"Go ask him. Tell him he'll be welcome, and we have plenty."

That Saturday morning I went down to Mr. Amos's chicken coop. I went early, like I had before, and he was sitting out by his fire drinking his coffee.

We talked for a minute. He asked me if I had been reading my Bible, and I told him I had. Then I asked him if he wanted to come have Thanksgiving Dinner with Mamma, Daddy and me on Thursday.

He did something I hadn't seen him do before. His face changed again, but he wasn't smiling or laughing. It looked like he almost cried. He looked down into his coffee cup.

"I don't think so, boy. It's been a long time since I sat down to eat with people, and I might not be able to do it right. But you tell your mama and daddy that I appreciate it. I really do."

"Well, could I bring you some turkey and dressing. We always have sweet potatoes and cranberry sauce. I could bring you a plate Thursday."

"That would be right nice. I don't know when I've had good turkey and dressing. My mother made it. My wife, she won't much of a cook. I guess I'd really like that."

We agreed that I would bring him his plate right after dinner on Thursday. He said he would be there.

The week went real quick, especially since we didn't have school on Wednesday, and the scouts took a hike down to Johnson's Cross Roads and back. That was almost twenty miles, and when we got back, our legs were aching and all we wanted to do was go home.

But, on Thursday, we had Thanksgiving dinner just like we usually did. My uncle Fred and his wife came over. They hadn't been married long and didn't have any children. And Mama's sister, Beth Anne, who hadn't ever married came. We all gathered around the dinner table in the kitchen.

After dinner, Mama got a paper plate out of the cabinet and began to pile turkey and dressing on it. She got another plate and put two sweet potatoes and some butter beans and some cranberry sauce on it. Then she put some tinfoil over both plates.

"Can you carry both of these, or do you think your daddy ought to give you a ride?"

I picked them up and some of the butter bean juice ran down on my hand. She wiped it off, and walked to the kitchen door.

"J.D., can you give Jody a ride to take this food to Mr. Thomas.ⁿ

Daddy had already sat down in the big chair and unbuckled his belt. He looked like he didn't want to get up, but he just nodded and buckled his belt back. "I'll be back in just a minute," he said to uncle Fred.

He helped me carry the plates to the car, then we drove down Church street to the road to the power plant. I started to tell him where to stop, but Daddy already knew. We got out, with him taking one plate and me taking the other one and we walked through the woods to Mr. Thomas's house. The door was open, and the chickens were pecking at the dirt around it.

"Mr. Thomas," I called. I didn't see or hear him.

"He said he would be here," I said to Daddy. Daddy just nodded.

"Let me look in the house, Jody," he said. And he walked up to the door and peered in.

He put the plate down on the ground, and went in the chicken coop. I walked up to the door.

It wasn't big. On one side, there were some boxes with some cups and plates and a few cans of food. Across the back there was an iron cot. On the other side there were the roosts for the chickens. There weren't any lights. All the light came in the door or in the space between the roof and the walls. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw Mr. Thomas was on the cot. Daddy was kneeling by him. He turned to me and shook his head.

I started to come in, but Daddy held out his hand. "I don't think you should come in, Jody." Then he stopped. "Maybe you should. He was your friend."

I walked up to the cot, and Mr. Thomas lay there with his eyes closed. He looked like he was sleeping. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Daddy nodded. "He was an old man. He told me he was tired."

I was surprised. "You talked to him." Somehow, I thought that I was the only one who ever talked to him.

"Sometimes. Sometimes when I was working late at the paper, he would come in and have a cup of coffee with me, and we'd talk."

"You never told me."

"There wasn't any reason to. He came by. We talked. I tried to give him some clothes one time, but he said he couldn't do that. I don't know that he ever took anything from anybody. Your friend had some dignity."

I looked at Mr. Thomas again. It was the first time I had ever seen anybody dead except in the moving pictures. But it didn't look bad. His face looked like it did when he looked at me and it changed like he was smiling.

Daddy took one of the overcoats that were laying on him and pulled it up over his face. He saw that I was still holding the plate of turkey and dressing.

"Leave the food, Jody. We need to go get Mr. Williams to come get Mr. Thomas. We need to get him buried."

I put the plate down on the floor of the chicken coop, and Daddy and I walked back through the weeds to the car. I had to stop and look back.

"Daddy, Mr. Thomas told me he thought God told him to stop here for a reason. I wonder what that reason was."

"That's another thing we don't know, Jody. I imagine he was put here for a reason, but we don't know what it was."

But I couldn't help but wonder.