

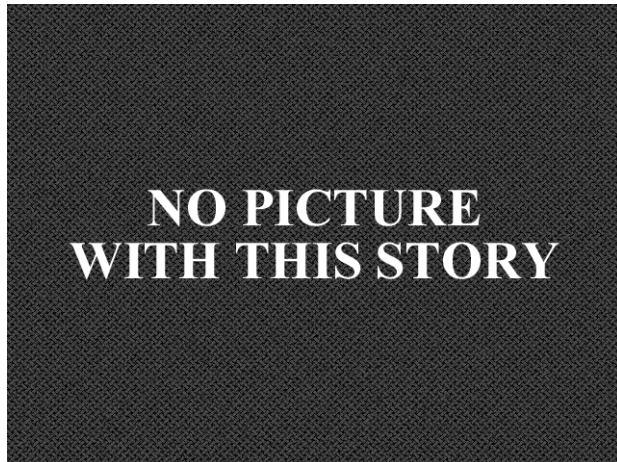
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THE ACCIDENT
By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the minute he heard the wail of the ambulance siren until it faded away in the distance, Jeremy felt cold fear clutch at his heart. It was uncanny, this fear, he thought. After all, he could think of no reason to be fearful. Still, it was there, in the center of his chest and stretching its cold tentacles upward to his throat, giving his mouth the feeling of cottony dryness.

He checked the back door one more time then turned the lights off in Tony's Pizzeria where he worked, and let himself out the front door, making sure he locked it securely behind him ere he stepped out onto the sidewalk and headed toward home.

It felt good to be outside: the cool night air made him feel very much alive and, too, it helped to "sweep off" the pungent odor of onions and seasonings which clung to his clothing in a subtle way. Not that he disliked the odors; he didn't. In fact, he loved the mixture-combinations of herbs and seasonings and onions and garlic which greeted him every time he neared the clean little pizza shop where he worked and where Tony had trusted him to the point of letting him close up and lock the eatery every week day night.

Jeremy's thoughts went quickly to the ambulance again and to the fear that clung to him and wrapped his heart in a shroud of doom. Kirby! Now why should he think of Kirby and why this fear when he thought of him? He wondered. Suppose it was Kirby who was in that screaming, flashing ambulance!

Sweat formed on Jeremy's face in spite of the night's cool breezes. Kirby worked at the pizza place too. But Kirby had left only thirty-five minutes ago. Surely it could not have been he. Still. . . .

Jeremy shivered as he recalled Kirby's last words to him. They were discussing world happenings and current events and he, Jeremy, had told his co-worker and friend that, according to the Bible, what was transpiring and happening and taking place before their very eyes was Biblical prophecy being fulfilled and this at an accelerated pace even. "I believe Jesus could come any moment, Kirby. Even now!" he had remarked and exclaimed.

Kirby stopped what he was doing and gave him a poke in the ribs, saying derisively, "Man oh man, you're farther gone than I realized. Surely you don't believe that old line! I gave you credit for being intelligent, Jeremy. Is this the reason you never do the town? You're a fraidy cat; afraid your Lord's going to come and He'll catch you having fun with the gang and. . . ."

"Don't say anymore, Kirby! Please!" Jeremy begged. "It . . . it borders on blasphemy, what you're saying, if indeed it isn't blasphemous. It's dangerous to talk the way you are and to say the things you just said."

Kirby threw his head back and mocked Jeremy in a parroting manner, laughing hideously as he did so. "So you think what I say sounds blasphemous, huh? Well, preacher boy, to let you know I'm not the least bit afraid, I'm going to The Dug Out. Some friends and I are having a little party.

You know, a party with all the 'trimmings.' We have a blast over there. Anything and everything goes. And to show you that I'll be all right, I promise to be back to work tomorrow."

"Oh, Kirby, no; don't go. Please! That's a wicked place. I'll be praying for you. . . ."

"Save your breath and your prayers for someone who really needs them; I'm not afraid. Not in the least," and with that, Kirby left, got into his car and drove away. Thirty-five minutes ago.

Jeremy's fear intensified as he recalled Kirby's words. God was patient; he knew this; merciful, too. But if there came a time when patience and mercy reached its end, then what? And it was possible for this to happen, he knew.

He shivered slightly as he walked. All he could think about was Kirby. He liked his co-worker; liked him a lot. Kirby was a good, hard worker; jovial and amiable and congenial. He had charisma and a pleasing personality. He never lacked for female attention. Not Kirby.

When he first came to work for Tony at the pizza shop, Jeremy found Kirby to be an attentive listener to what the Bible had to say about eternal values; spiritual things. But that changed completely after he started dating Rilla, the dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty of Middlecreek High. Rilla was anything and everything but religious. Her influence over Kirby was almost unbelievable. It was like she had wound him, not around her finger but in a tight little web to her liking and making; a web from which he had no power to escape or, perhaps, had no desire to be free from. He loved Rilla deeply, so he had told Jeremy, and his one desire was to please and delight her, no matter what the cost.

Jeremy began to pray for his friend as the impact of Kirby's "no matter what the cost" words spun around in his brain. That his friend was treading on dangerous ground, he was sure of. If only Kirby would remember some of their early conversations about God, and Jesus Christ and His death and burial and resurrection -- and why He died! If only! Maybe there was still hope for Kirby; after all, the gospel seed was planted, wasn't it?

Jeremy saw the lights were still on at his house and he raced up the four porch steps, thankful for God-fearing parents who loved him and waited up until he was safely inside.

"Hi Mom. Hi Dad," he called as he stepped inside. "Sure is great of you, waiting up for me. You can't imagine the feeling this gives me, knowing you'll be waiting. I love and appreciate you both so much."

"We love you, Jeremy," the parents said in unison.

"Say, isn't there a Kirby somebody working where you work?" Mr. Collins asked his son quickly.

"Kirby Rowe, yes. Why do you ask, Dad?"

"He was just in an accident. Your mother turned the radio on to get the news and the weather report a little while ago and the announcer said there was a serious accident on the curve before you get to the river bridge."

"But . . . how do you know it was Kirby? I mean, well, he left the pizzeria only thirty-five minutes before I did."

"And this happened about that time. After notifying the family as to whom the accident victim was, the announcer named this Kirby's name, that's how we know. Guess it must be pretty serious, son."

Jeremy was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Dad do you mind if I take the car and go over to the hospital, please? Kirby may need me. I know he's not the same Kirby as when he first started working for Tony; but maybe, now that he's in a serious condition he'll let me talk to him and pray with him. Maybe he'll listen again and not make any bad remarks or . . .or. . . ."

The phone jangled noisily, cutting off Jeremy's unfinished sentence. "It's for you," Mr. Collins said as he passed the phone over to his tall son. The moment Jeremy heard Tony's voice on the line, he knew there was bad news.

"Jeremy," Tony said sadly, "Kirby had an accident. . . ."

"Dad just told me, Mr. Franca. I'm so sorry."

"It was a bad accident, Jeremy. Very bad! Kirby is dead."

"Dead? Did you say, dead?" Jeremy cried. "Oh, no. No! Not Kirby!"

"His father just called me, Jeremy. He was speeding again. He never made the curve. The car careened up the steep embankment on the opposite side of the road and rolled over three times before it stopped, upside down, within inches of an oncoming truck. He was crushed to death. . . ."

Jeremy put the phone back in place after thanking his employer for calling him, then he excused himself and hurried away to his room. Less than an hour ago! Yes, less than one hour ago, Kirby was a living, breathing, much-alive young man, on his way to The Dug Out, where some friends and he were "having a little party; a little party with all the 'trimmings.'" And now Kirby was dead. Dead! But very much alive -- in eternity; in the lake of fire, unless he repented and got saved. What change one hour could bring! he thought. No, even more sobering, what change a minute could bring!

Dropping to his knees beside the bed, Jeremy renewed his vows of faithfulness and total consecration and commitment to the Lord. By God's grace he meant to stay ready to meet the Lord. Life was too fragile and fleeting a thing to play fast and loose with God. The Bible compared it to a vapor, and to a weaver's shuttle. It paid to be ready to die. To stay ready. Yes indeed, it paid -- in eternal life!