

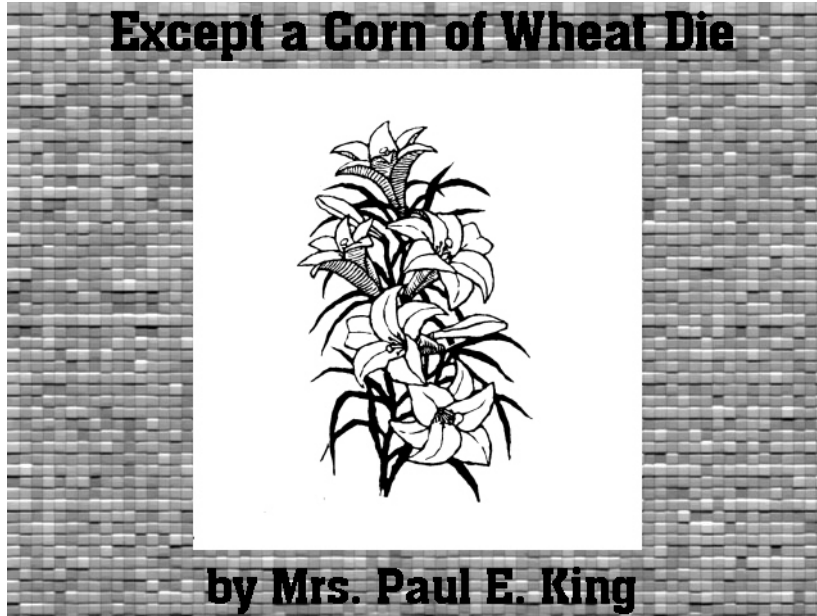
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EXCEPT A CORN OF WHEAT DIE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

"I am the resurrection and the life," the minister read from John's Gospel, "he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. . . ."

Chip Lowrey rose to his feet and all but ran out the church door, fuming inside with anger and bitterness. Once outside, he headed straight for the sleek little sports car parked alongside the curb at the church.

He slid behind the steering wheel and inserted the key into the ignition then slammed his fist against the dash board, exclaiming vehemently, "It's not true; it isn't! Aaron believed in You and he . . . he's dead. Dead! Do You hear me, God? He loved You; he served You and . . . and You let him die!"

By now, Chip was sobbing; great, deep, heaving sobs, they were.

Turning the key in the ignition, he pulled away from the curb and sped up the street toward the country. He couldn't stand to hear another word from the minister. He wanted to shout to him and tell him that the open casket holding Aaron's body at the front of the church mocked the words which he had just read to the listening audience. Never die? Aaron was dead, wasn't he?

And the Easter lilies! Ugh! Their fragrance made him sick. Easter lilies; resurrection; life. He had heard and seen and smelled until he was sick. Everything -- everything! -- seemed to mock the words which the minister had just read. Life? Aaron was dead, and soon his body would be lowered into the cold ground. Life? What was life? Aaron had once lived and laughed, hadn't he? And now . . . now. . . .

Chip nosed the car toward the open road. He felt like he was suffocating; he wanted to get away. He hated to be disloyal to his friend and not stay through the service nor follow the casket to Aaron's final resting place, but he had to get away. That part about whosoever would believe in Christ should never die, was just more than he could take. If he had heard it when Aaron was alive he could have accepted it better, and he may even have believed it. But Aaron was gone; dead: this changed everything.

Chip's thoughts raced back to the time, six months ago, when he had the first inkling that all was not well with Aaron. And even then, he had passed it off as something that would right itself with time, much like the common cold. But he should have known and should have suspected, as Aaron's activities became more and more taxing on his strength and he was able to do less and less. Still, he and Aaron's many other friends thought that perhaps a good vitamin was all that he needed.

He was totally unprepared for the diagnosis when Aaron's mother finally told him what the tests revealed; and he went into shock when Aaron gave him the doctor's prognosis. For weeks after learning that Aaron had leukemia, the students in Aspen High school were numb. They seemed to have gone into a state of inertia: those in the senior class especially.

Chip now recalled a conversation Aaron and he had had before the terrible disease had rendered him too weak to speak.

"Chip," Aaron had said, "as you know, I have been praying for you ever since coming to Aspen High as a student and meeting you. We are fellow classmates. This is the big year; our graduation year. I may or may not be here to graduate with you and the others. But either way, I will be graduating. If I live, and if I'm physically strong enough, I'll be standing up there with the rest of you to receive my long-awaited diploma, God willing. And if I'm not able to be there, I'll still have graduated -- into Heaven."

"Stop talking like that, Aaron!" Chip remembered having exclaimed. "You're going to graduate with us, come spring."

"Only God knows the answer to that," came Aaron's quick reply "I'm just so thankful that I know I'm ready to die, Chip. My sins are all forgiven and the Holy Spirit abides and resides in my heart. When I die, I'll be in Heaven."

"You're not going to die, Aaron. Don't mention this again. Modern medicine will pull you through."

"I gave you the doctor's prognosis, Chip; it doesn't sound to me like modern medicine can do much of any thing for me. Let's face it, Chip, unless God performs a miracle on my body, I'm going to die. The sentence of death is upon me. It's inevitable"

"Don't sound so morbid, Aaron. I hate the mere thought of death, and the less you speak of it the happier you'll make me feel. You're not going to die. You can't die; you're too young"

"Chip, listen to me,' Aaron had cried. 'Someday you'll be facing death. Why don't you get ready for that day and surrender your heart and life to the Lord? Now, Chip! Please."

"Don't bother me with such things," Chip remembered having told his friend. And then, for so long as he would live, he'd never forget what Aaron had told him -- with tears in his eyes.

"I have asked the Lord -- for four years, Chip -- to save your soul and to get you ready for Heaven, at any cost. The Bible says, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (St. John 12:24). I am willing to give my life, if this will bring you to God."

Sweat broke out on Chip's forehead now. His hands felt trembly and cold. "I am willing to give my life, if this will bring you to God" The sentence-statement replayed itself over again and again Could this be why Aaron had died? Had God allowed it so that he, Chip, would get saved and become a Christian? Could it be? he wondered.

He pressed the accelerator hard. The car shot forward like a flash. Chip tried to throw Aaron's words off by concentrating on watching the road, but it didn't work: over and over, he heard his friend's voice pleading with him to get right with God He saw the tears, shimmering brighter than ever, it seemed, in Aaron's eyes.

He didn't notice the sharp curve in the road until he was in it. He had forgotten about the curve; forgotten, too, about the six crosses that were erected there, each one a solemn reminder of the six lives that were lost by not being able to negotiate the dangerous curve. And this, in spite of the warning signs; the admonition to slow down.

He felt the car go crazy; he heard the screeching of the tires and then, nothing.

When he finally opened his eyes, what little light he could see out of them for the bandages, he was confused and terribly frightened. Where was he? he wondered. And why couldn't he move his body? He felt like he was being held in a strong vise. He wanted free. Free.

Desperately, he tried to lift his leg. Nothing happened. But with the attempt, he felt a searing, burning pain go from the sole of his feet to his spine. He screamed out in pain. "Chip! Chip!"

He recognized the voices of his parents. They were calling his name. And then he remembered the curve and the crosses and his car.

"Chip, can you hear me?" his mother asked anxiously, somewhere close to his ear.

He tried to see her face, but the bulky bandages obscured it. He saw only little slits of light. "Can you hear me, Chip?"

He tried to say yes, but all that came out was a muffled sound.

"He hears us," his father said with a positive note in his voice "He's alive"

"You can thank God for this, Mr. Lowery. The surgeons declare it's a miracle. If only he hadn't left the funeral service last week! Had it not been for God's mercy and His grace, your son would have been in the grave by now."

That voice! It . . . it was the minister's voice. It was! Why was he here? Chip wondered foggily. And . . . and . . . what had the minister said about leaving the funeral service last week! Was he in a hospital? Where? Where was he? And for a week!

"The Lord's mercies are so marvelous," the minister was saying. "He spared Chip for a purpose and He. . ."

Chip tried to speak. He was crying. I hear you. I hear you, he wanted to shout. But only garbled sounds came from his weak voice.

"May I have prayer with you and your wife, Mr. Lowery, please?"

"Why, yes, of course Thank you."

Chip's astonishment over his father's willing response sent a flow of fresh tears to his eyes. If only his parents had been Christians, like Aaron's parents were, he thought, maybe he would have been saved too, like his dear friend was.

He heard his name then. The minister was praying for him. For him, Chip!

"Please Lord, save Chip's never-dying soul. Get him ready to meet God. Bring him through this crisis and give him another opportunity to repent and to come to know Thee, whom to know is to love, and to have life everlasting. . . ."

Life everlasting! Why, that's what Aaron had told him once. And, suddenly, Chip's blinded eyes were opened to see the correlation between life everlasting and the scripture, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

He was crying hard now, totally oblivious of the minister's and his parents' presence. He was praying, calling on God to save his wicked soul and to give him the joy and the peace that Aaron had and about which his friend had so frequently told him. He felt his lostness. Felt it keenly and deeply. He knew that if he had died, and been buried, like Aaron, he would not have gone to Heaven.

A horrible darkness settled down upon him. He shuddered. Then he prayed the more earnestly from the deep of his heart, "God, for Jesus' sake, forgive me. Save me. I'm a wicked sinner. Be merciful to me. Give me eternal life, please. . . ."

In a moment of time -- instantly! -- Chip felt the load and the guilt of sin roll off his heart and then he knew why Aaron was always joyful and full of victory. He felt like he was now in another world; a world where everything was new and full of peace and joy and rest.

He wanted to shout and sing and clap his hands. He was filled with Heavenly joy. His soul was free: Free from the shackles of sin that bound him and free from the bitterness that fettered him. Suddenly, and with perfect illumination, he understood the meaning of, "I am the resurrection, and the life, he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

He smelled the fragrance of Easter lilies then, and suddenly their existence brought to his memory the wonderful account of Christ's resurrection. So many things were now made clear and beautiful to him.

Easter! What a wonderful time of the year! Resurrection time. Yes, for him, especially: Resurrected from sin into newness of life: Everlasting life!

Weakly and feebly, Chip raised his arm. He could not yet speak but he could sign for all to read and see. With his index finger, he pointed toward Heaven.