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WINTER VACATION
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Carole pirouetted round the room in one of the half-dozen new dresses she had bought, pausing every now and then to survey herself in the full-length mirror on the closet door. "Um-m, pretty!" she exclaimed, wearing a satisfied smile and noticing how the blue of the dress matched her eyes and how well it looked with her long honey-blonde hair. It was perfect; in every way, perfect.

Taking it off and hanging it carefully on a hanger in the closet, she lifted a two-piece lime green dress out of the box and slipped it on.

"How lucky can you get!" a voice bubbled pleasantly from the doorway.

Turning quickly, Carole saw her friend. "Oh hi, Charlene," she said. "I didn't know you were here. I never even heard you come up the stairs. I guess I am lucky -- or whatever one cares to call it."

"You guess you're lucky! You mean you know you're lucky. I surely wouldn't mind if I had an aunt who invited me down to Florida and then sent me money for a wardrobe of brand new clothes. No, I certainly wouldn't object. Not one teeny, tiny bit!" Charlene exclaimed. "Wow! Just look at those dresses. And the shoes, too. How long did you say you'll be gone?"

"Two weeks. And Char, I'll really miss you. I wish Aunt Harriet had sent money for you to make the trip with me. In a way, it's kinda scary going alone. I'll have to change planes in Atlanta, and you know what a mouse I am about such things."

"Why can't your mother go with you?"

Carole grimaced. "With three small children at home?" she said. "Oh, Charlene, you know my morn wouldn't think of leaving Brian, David and Carmen in the hands of babysitters."

Why, I never had anyone but Mom to care for me. She and Dad say we're the most priceless earthly possessions they have. She's quite old-fashioned, really. But I love her for it. At least we're all loved very dearly."

"That's for sure. But I pity you -- going by yourself. But don't worry, Carole, you'll make it fine. There has to be a first time for everything and you may just as well get used to flying now, while you're sixteen, as anytime." Charlene sat on the edge of the bed and picked up one of the three new purses. "Your aunt has excellent taste!" she commented.

"Oh, indeed. You should see Aunt Harriett, she's beautiful. And what a dresser she is! But I guess anyone could dress like she does if they had her money. Mother says it's her god."

"What, the money or the clothes?"

"Both, I guess."

"I'm surprised that you're allowed to go then." Carole laughed. "Dad's not at all keen on the idea, really," she admitted. "Neither is Morn. But between Aunt Harriett calling them and my wanting to go, well, they consented. Quite reluctantly, I'll have to admit, and not without scads of 'Thou shalt nots' and 'Thou shalt,'"
" she confided frankly.

"Will you attend church while you're there? I mean, well, your aunt does go to church, doesn't she?"

"I'm not sure, Char. But from what Mother says, she's not too religiously inclined. But I'll find someplace to go; it's just for two weeks."

Charlene sighed. "I'll miss you terribly while you're gone; so will the other girls from our church. But we'll be praying for you."

"Thanks, Char. Maybe I'll find some prized sea shells and bring them back to you. Aunt Harriet's house is close to the beach so I'll go sea shell hunting every weekday morning, the Lord willing."

"I hear that the most beautiful shells are found right after the tide goes out," Charlene commented.

Carole nodded in agreement. "I plan to be up and out bright and early every morning," she said. "From what my aunt said, I'll get only 'leftovers' unless I'm an early, early beachcomber. And who wants shells that no one else cares about or wants?"

"I'll be thinking of you, Carole -- combing the beach while I snuggle down between my warm blankets and sleep. But, of course, you won't need any thick, warm blankets to sleep under."

"No, I won't. It's really quite comfortable all year round where Aunt Harriet lives."

Charlene sighed. "Lucky, lucky you!" she exclaimed, getting to her feet. "I must hurry along; Mother needs baking chocolate, and since I was on my way to Horn's Grocery I thought I'd stop in and tell you goodbye. Be careful, Carole, and hurry home."

"Oh, I'll be careful, to be sure. And thanks for coming, Charlene. I'll be seeing you in a couple-three weeks."

"The Lord willing. Till then, bye."

A warm feeling washed over Carole. It was so nice to have friends, she thought, wearing a dreamy smile and deciding quickly that now was as good a time as any to pack the beautiful new dresses into her matching luggage.

Her departure from the airport the following morning was anything but joyful every member of the family (including herself) was in tears by the time the 747 was loaded and had taxied down the long runway. Sitting by a window, watching and waving until the buildings were left far behind, Carole wished for one brief, fleeting moment that she had not wanted to go to Florida.

Once airborne, she watched in profound fascination the kaleidoscopic scenery patterns of fields and houses, trees and highways and rivers and, finally, of the clouds. How soft and fluffy the clouds looked, she thought, almost like marshmallow islands. If only she could drop on one this very minute and float gently back to Mother and Father, she mused silently, annoyed and agitated by the "popping" in her ears as the plane gained altitude, and experiencing her first pang of loneliness and homesickness, too.

The change in Atlanta was made with no trouble at all. Carole felt suddenly very much grown up and mature, and when she was finally greeted by Aunt Harriett in Florida, she decided that, after all, the flight down was worth the reward at the conclusion of the trip.

Aunt Harriett was her usual bright and pleasant self, looking younger and more beautiful than ever to her niece who tried, in many ways, to emulate the person of her fashionable relative.

Seated in the classy Mark IV -- one of many of her aunt's status symbols -- Carole was suddenly very, very thankful for her new wardrobe of

clothes. They would do justice to her environment, she soliloquized with satisfaction and pride. For once in her life, she would be "Lady Elegant" -- like Aunt Harriett.

The thought sent shivers of excitement racing up and down Carole's spine. Simultaneously, her mind raced to Charlene and the other young people in the church back home. What would they think of her if they knew the thoughts and imaginations of her heart? she wondered. But they'd never know, she decided quickly. She had no intentions whatever of telling on herself, and Aunt Harriett was dead-set against revealing secrets. When it came to talkativeness, Auntie was "clam-like." For all her extravagance and worldliness, she was never given to gossip. This to her credit, Carole mused happily as the sleek car raced down the highway.

True to her word, she was up early the following morning. The tide had gone out, and washed up on the beach were the most beautiful and magnificent sea shells she had ever seen. The breeze off the ocean was pleasantly cool and refreshing, and the meowing, screeching gulls fascinated the teenager as she "combed" the beach in search of rare, unusual shells. Her aunt, an avid collector herself, had provided valuable information for Carole, stating, "If you want to, honey, you can make yourself quite a bit of money while you're here. I sell to numerous collectors and merchants. The 'collectors' generally care only about the rarest kinds of shells, paying top prices when and if I have something they're wanting or are interested in. If you want me to, Carole, I'll show you what to look for. . . ."

Was she interested! Carole thought now, recalling her aunt's careful instructions and information of the previous night. She'd like nothing better than to find several collectors' items.

A dog bounded up beside her, barking playfully. He frightened her dreadfully. Where had he come from? she wondered, turning quickly and coming face to face with a smiling young woman.

"I'm sorry if Boo alarmed you," she said.

"He . . . he . . . did," Carole stammered. "He really did!"

"He's quite harmless," the young woman said. "He loves to play." Quickly she added, "That's a beautiful dress you're wearing. But naturally I'd

think it was lovely; it came from my shop. An original. Harriett Smyth bought it for her niece; so I gather you're the niece?"

"Ye . . . yes . . . ma'am," Carole stammered.

"It's most becoming on you, Miss. . . ."

"Carole's my name. But if you'll pardon me, I must be moving along." And without so much as a backward glance, Carole raced up the beach, feeling miserable and wretched. But why should she? she asked herself, finding a little niche in a rock and sitting down. After all, she wouldn't wear the sun dress up town, only around her aunt and out on the beach. She was in "Rome," she mused, and she would "do as the Romans do." This one winter vacation only.

The days slipped by on shimmering, sun-slipped feet. Loathe to leave the land of sun and flowers, palms and gulls, sea and sand and surf, Carole went daily along the beach in search of more shells, her heart aching within her at thought of returning home. She had had a taste of a different kind of life and it had appealed greatly to her fleshly appetite and desires.

Walking along the beach in early dawn two days before she was to leave for home, she noticed beautiful gleaming bluish-purple bubbles. They were like nothing she had ever seen before. The tide had washed them up on the sand in the night, she was sure. Stooping down quickly she examined them more closely. Smiling at her find, she watched them for awhile, deciding that they looked like balloons and noting that they seemed to change color in the golden rays of the rising sun.

She must get some, she thought, and take them home with her. Her two brothers and her sister would love the strange things, she reasoned, seizing the nearest beautiful sea creature. Suddenly, and instantly, it felt like a million needles were piercing her flesh. In vain she tried to drop the jelly fish; it was impossible. Purple strings laced themselves tightly around her hands, her arms and her body, stinging, stinging, stinging -- like hornets.

Screaming with pain she ran along the beach, trying with all her might to extricate herself from the vicious thing that remained fastened upon her with tenacious ferocity, but it was impossible. She was found later,

unconscious on the sand, with great red welts on her body. For days she lay in the hospital, at the very threshold of death.

"Oh, if only I would have informed her!" Aunt Harriett exclaimed tearfully to Carole's parents who had flown down to be with their daughter. "If only I'd have warned her. In spite of its fascinating beauty, that big purple blob of jelly is one of the sea's most deadly creatures."

"You're talking about the 'Portuguese man-of-war,' I presume," Carole's mother commented matter-of-factly. "I've heard some weird tales about them."

"And they've been true, no doubt!" Harriett exclaimed sadly, watching the labored breathing of her favorite niece. "These deadly creatures follow the warm waters of the Gulf Stream," she related. "They are sometimes blown by the winds upon the beach, where they die. Swimmers in the ocean, laced by the vicious purple strings, may tear them off, but in a few seconds they will be in great agony and great red welts will appear wherever the tentacles have touched them. They must be hospitalized. They may become unconscious, or even die."

John and Evelyn Motter looked at each other anxiously as Harriett continued.

"I should have warned her. I should have," she lamented brokenly. "But I never gave it a thought. Beneath the blue-purple float that glistens with its fluted sail filled with gas, are long snake-like strings that reach out for food in the ocean water. Each string -- or tentacle -- perhaps 100 feet long, is covered with thousands of stinging cells so tiny one cannot see them.

"Each of these little unexploded cells is filled with deadly venom. Curled up with it is a microscopic dagger that has barbs and thorns. At the first touch of something like a fish or human flesh, these daggers shoot out with a force powerful and vicious enough to pierce the toughest skin. Six-inch long fish die instantly, they tell us.

Evelyn gasped. "How horrible!" she exclaimed in a muffled cry.

"As soon as the fish is dead," Harriett added, "the blue strings begin to shorten, and like a boy pulling a fish line, the fish is drawn up to the

underside of the beautiful balloon where red, orange and pink colonies of tiny living polyps are waiting to eat it. They writhe and twist greedily until their hungry mouths fasten on the fish. The polyps have digestive juices, we are told, which they pour out on the flesh to help soften it, acting as the Man-of-War's stomach."

"The Man-of-War is like sin," John said quickly. "Deceitfully enticing to look at but deadly to touch or tangle with. Sin is sweet in anticipation to the beholder, but bitter in retrospect."

Aunt Harriett's head dropped in condemnation and conviction. In her heart, she knew that her sister and brother-in-law were traveling on the right road.

Several days later Carole opened her eyes. "Mother! Father!" she exclaimed weakly, looking with almost unbelief at her parents who sat beside her hospital bed, "Wha . . . what . . . happened? Whe . . . where . . . am I?"

"You've had quite a frightening experience, honey," Mrs. Motter said as bright happy tears flowed down her cheeks. "But everything's all right now."

"Father . . . Mother . . ." Carole's voice trembled; tears rushed from her eyes. "Forgive me. And . . . and please pray for me. I violated God's law and your rules of modesty while here. Sin -- the sin of my heart -- is like that horrid creature that . . . that almost killed me: beautiful and appealing to look at but deadly to touch. I . . . want to come home to God, and . . . to you. 'The wages of sin is death.' I know; I've been at death's door and I . . . I . . . wasn't prepared to die. Please, pray for me -- now."

Warm sea breezes ruffled the drapes in the hospital room before skipping gently across the bed where Carole lay and a mockingbird threw a joyfully-lusty song into her room just as she prayed through to a clear born-again experience.

Her recovery now was speedy, and the flight home held only eager anticipation for her. She had tangled with death, but God had delivered her. Now, since her recent experience of heart cleansing following her conversion, she had only just begun to live.

Carole could scarcely wait for the plane to land; she had so much to tell the young people in her church. Yes, so very much: "The wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ."