

A hand is shown from the bottom left, holding a string of balloons. The balloons are in shades of purple, pink, and blue. The background is a solid, deep blue. The text is positioned on the right side of the image.

**Spiritual
Citizens:
A Christian
Fiction
Anthology**

This anthology is dedicated to our Lord.

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The Battle Cry
by John Mark Miller*

“Years ago, the dark armies of the north waged their first attack on the Dahlian Isle and entire armies answered the call to arms!” Christian shouted for all to hear, his words bringing nods of assent from the hundreds who had gathered in King’s Valley. He sat atop a muscled steed, his full armor glinting in the sun. “Through the years they have fought hard to protect this island from the Dark Ones. We applaud their courage, and are grateful for their lives of service. Now, a new generation finds itself under attack. We must take up the banner our fathers left for us! We must stand up as one people, and fight!”

The people sat unmoved, silently polishing their armor. They appeared to be listening intently, but no one reached for their sword or whistled for their horse. This new generation of Dahlians were very concerned with the appearance of their armor... they gathered for days to polish the steel until it shone like the sun. Many compared their armor with their neighbors’, hoping that theirs would shine the brightest. In an age where appearance was everything, no one dared to actually *wear* the armor anymore.

“Rise up, men of Dahlia!” Christian bellowed until his face turned crimson from the strain. “The enemy is coming. We attack at noon!”

A few men shouted in agreement, but no one moved. Eventually, as the sun deepened to midday, the people grew hungry and began to stir.

“That was a wonderful call to arms,” one man whispered to his neighbor. “I’m so glad the King has sent each province a trained warrior to prepare us for battle.”

“Yes,” his fellow replied. “I feel so inspired. I think I can even imagine myself doing battle one day!”

Christian, the King’s Warrior, strode by on his powerful steed. “Then why do you wait?” he cried. “Why not march into battle today? See - the dark shadow approaches... there is not much time!”

This brought a round of applause, and the people of Dahlia chattered excitedly about this latest battle cry as they headed home to devour their lunch.

Before long, Christian was the sole occupant of King's Valley. Squinting against the late afternoon sun, he could make out the vast armies of the north across the bay, lighting their torches in preparation for battle.

"God help me," he prayed. And he rode into battle.

Alone.

*John Mark Miller invites you to his blog here <http://theartisticchristian.wordpress.com>.

Can't Say I've Ever Done That
by Nancy LaRonda Johnson*

"Well, to tell you the truth, I can't say I've ever done that." Tony looked incredulously at Stephan.

Shaking his head in argument, Stephan said, "That doesn't mean you can't. Look, it's simple. Go into the store and look for the slowest looking guy you see. You can't miss him. Walk up to him and say, 'I need you to put everything you got in there into here.' There's nothing to it."

Tony couldn't believe this. To do a robbery without a weapon? He had no problems with doing commercial burglaries, or robberies for that matter. He'd done many jobs with Stephan years ago. "You must be crazy, Stephan," was all Tony could think to say.

"Try it. You'll be amazed with what you come away with."

Tony shook his head in wonderment, but made his way to the store.

There *was* a dimwitted looking guy there. Tony would have known to go to him even if he wasn't the only person working the store. He walked up to the counter, pointed to the cash register and said, "Put everything you've got in there into here."

The guy looked at Tony with a moronic smile. He then laughed and said, "Oh, you mean everything from here into there!" The guy chuckled again and leaned down to pick up a sack at his feet. He grabbed something from inside, reached over and dropped it into Tony's sack.

Shocked, Tony balled up the opening of the sack and ran out the store. Two blocks away, he opened it and stared in awe. Inside, was a glorious entryway to heaven. Scratching his head, Tony whispered, "Why is it locked?"

*You are invited to visit Nancy LaRonda Johnson at <http://www.nancylarondajohnson.com> and <http://amazon.com/Nancy-LaRonda-Johnson/e/B00A4VZ1I6>.

Casual Walk in the Park
by Gerald Shuler*

The other day I was invited to take a casual walk through the park with Jesus. He met me at the park entrance with a smile on His face, seeming as though He were looking forward to the walk even more than myself. Actually, I was somewhat apprehensive about the “casual” part of the casual walk. Jesus is my Lord, though, so there was no way I was going to miss the opportunity to get to know my Savior better.

We walked through the garden path that led to a large, white gazebo. As we walked, we passed a man nervously hiding behind a large bush. Jesus stopped and faced the man so I stopped as well.

“Who are you hiding from?” Jesus asked.

“I’m hiding from people who would hurt me.” The man stood up and I could see fear in his eyes as he looked at me, as though I had hurt him more than any other person.

Jesus took the man’s hand. “I was hurt by those who loved me and those who didn’t. Have you been hurt more than Me?”

“Lord, that is not for me to decide.” The man knelt down behind the bush and continued hiding.

We walked a little further and passed another man, holding a box closely to his bosom. He was hiding behind a tree stump. Jesus stopped and faced the man so I stopped as well.

“What are you hiding?” Jesus asked.

The man rose to his feet and faced my Savior. “I am hiding my talent.” He seemed compelled to answer.

“Are you ashamed of the talents I have given you?” Jesus’ voice was gentle, yet firm.

“Lord, that is not for me to decide.” The man knelt back down, trying to vanish from sight behind the stump.

Only a short distance later we passed yet another man, hiding behind a massive rock.

“How long have you been hiding?” Jesus asked.

“My entire life.” The man came out from behind the rock.

“Isn’t it time to stop hiding?”

“Lord, that is not for me to decide.” The man reluctantly ducked back behind the rock.

We were nearing the end of our walk and I felt offended and confused. We hadn’t had a chance to talk at all because of the three men hiding along the path. Jesus understood.

“What offends you?” Jesus asked.

“Those men wasted our time together.” I pouted.

“Why do you say it was wasted?”

“Lord, they weren’t even willing to stop hiding.”

“And you think they should?” Jesus waited patiently for my answer. I gave none so He asked me another question. “What made you confused?”

“Each man claimed that he was not the one that could answer your question. Lord, I don’t understand.”

“Let me explain.” Jesus put His loving arm around me. “The man hiding from people has hurt himself more deeply than anyone else has hurt him.”

I could see the truth in what Jesus was saying.

“And the man hiding his talents is really hiding from his responsibilities. He has been called by Me but he refuses to answer the call.”

Once again, I could see the truth about that man.

“The man that has hidden all his life is the saddest of all the men.”

Perfectly clear to me. Jesus could still see the confusion in my eyes. With more tenderness than I have ever witnessed, Jesus turned me to face the path we had just walked. All three men had come out of hiding and stood in the middle of the path. My heart nearly stopped when I got a good look at the three men.

They were me.

“Lord, I don’t understand. How could those miserable men be me?”

“I have been seeking you for many years but you have refused to realize you were hiding.” Jesus smiled warmly. “I thought this walk might help.”

I crumbled to my knees. Suddenly, things were all too clear. Only I could answer my Lord and Savior about my wasted life. Humbly, I took a small note pad and ink pen from my pocket and began to write:

Hide and Seek

*Lord, You questioned
my soul
but my soul would not answer.
You searched for my spirit
though I was unaware
my spirit was in hiding.
I am ashamed, Lord,
but not of You.
I am ashamed
and repentant.
Only I can answer
for foolishly hiding.*

Lord, You found me...
I'll not hide again.

*Gerald Shuler welcomes you to read more of his writing here <http://faithwriters.com/member-profile.php?id=31222>.

The Uneducated Pastor Soh
by Chong Shipei*

Ah Soh knew in his heart that his birthday was important. He would be 50 years old. His friend came into his tiny one room flat. Ah Soh was not the kind of person to host a party. He did not have the money!

For him, whatever little money he earned as a coffee shop assistant was just enough to make ends meet. On some of the occasions, he could not even make his ends meet. On such occasions, he needed to seek financial and material help from his church. Fortunately for him, his church members were still quite ready to help Ah Soh tide through his difficult moments.

Ah Soh wanted to be a pastor. He wanted to preach for Jesus so much, so much. But he was not born during biblical times. In those days, anyone could be a pastor. Peter and most of Jesus' disciples were uneducated people!

In Singapore, a person needed to attend a Bible college to be able to preach, officially. Ah Soh could not be a pastor. He was not smart in his studies. He failed his PSLE. Going to a Bible college was an impossible dream for him.

Still, Ah Soh wanted to tell his friends about Jesus. All his uneducated friends. All of them who spoke Hokkien like him. All of them who could not speak proper English. So he saved up his money, little by little. He cut down on his food. He wore the same clothes, year after year, without buying new ones. He walked to his church instead of taking buses. He tried his best to cut down on his transport cost.

Finally, he had just enough money to host a birthday party. And that was what he did.

"Ah Soh, happy birthday!" His friends greeted him one by one. When all of his friends were in his house and they were done with eating, Ah Soh got them to sit in a circle. He spoke about Jesus passionately to his friends. He spoke on and on, ignoring the occasional mockeries that came from his unbelieving friends.

His friends left his home, seemingly unchanged and unmoved. But in Jesus' eyes, unknowingly to Ah Soh or the church in Singapore, Jesus saw a pastor. This pastor was uneducated. This pastor could only speak in Hokkien. This pastor did not win a single soul. This pastor preached only one sermon during his entire life for Jesus.

*Chong Shiwei invites you to read more writing from a Singapore Christian perspective here <http://singaporechristianfiction.blogspot.com/>.

God Unties My Shoe

by Jan Ackerson

I leave for my jog on a clear April morning with the usual thought: *Please don't let her be outside*. It isn't exactly a prayer, because it's entirely selfish—so call it an appeal to luck. I just don't want to have to stop and talk to Sharon.

Sharon lives three houses down, in a dingy white house with blue shutters. There's something wrong with her—I don't know what it is, exactly, but whatever it is makes me want to avoid her whenever possible. I heard this in church once: *you may be the only Jesus some people will ever meet*. Sharon is the person that it is hardest for me to be Jesus for.

She's largely unwashed—her black hair hangs greasily to her shoulders, framing a pasty and blotched face. Some unfortunate hormonal imbalance has peppered her chin with a smattering of dark whiskers. Every time I've seen her, she's worn the same stretch pants, probably once a garish shade of orange but now both faded and stained, a color without a name. They strain over her lumpy stomach and thighs, topped by a graying tee-shirt that may once have been white.

I know what you're thinking—I *hate* that I'm so superficial. I think I could handle the grime and the smell, I really do, but Sharon's impossible to talk to. I can't understand her; she mutters, and a speech impediment thickens her consonants, and she simply...won't...stop...babbling. Once cornered by Sharon, I can't resume my jog for ten minutes or more, until I finally pull away with a forced smile--“Gotta go, Sharon! See you later!”

How does she even know my name? I've never been able to figure it out, but it wasn't long after we moved to this neighborhood that she flagged me for the first time. I've spent every morning since then planning my jog times for the least likelihood of a Sharon encounter—and hating myself for being such a lousy Christian.

So here I am—barely thirty strides from home—when I notice an untied shoelace. I stop to remedy the situation, and in the early morning stillness I realize two things: I am in front of Sharon's house, and someone is crying inside. *Oh, no. Oh, no. I have to go in there, don't I, Lord?* I look around for backup—a wandering social worker, perhaps. None appears. *Here I go, Lord. You with me?*

I tap lightly on the door; Sharon calls out, an unrecognizable syllable that clearly means *help*. The door swings open, and there she is, on the floor in her stretch pants and tee-shirt, her leg splayed at an alarming angle. My cell phone is in my pocket—I call 911 and then sit on the floor next to Sharon, who is now whimpering pitifully. I'm no medical professional, but her injury looks survivable. I take her hand and say *shhhhhh, now* and peek around her small living room while we wait for the ambulance.

It's neater than I'd imagined it, yet sparsely furnished. Plain white walls, unadorned—and then my eyes fall on a Christmas card, taped above the shabby sofa. *I sent that card...*

...Tom and I had only just moved in, the first weekend of December, and the president of the Neighborhood Association had stopped by with gingerbread cookies, the Homeowners' Guidelines, and a list of names and addresses. In our eagerness to demonstrate our Christian Hospitality, we'd sent Christmas cards to everyone on the list: Tom's own design, with the message *...and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us*, signed *Love, Tom and Jill Zimmerman...*

...And now the card accuses me—but Sharon follows my gaze and smiles a watery smile. "I save dat card, Jill," she says. "It so pretty. No one never send me no card before. But what dat means, *Word became flesh?*" She shifts on the floor, grips my hand tighter, and winces.

My breath catches somewhere between my heart and my throat. I can hear a siren coming nearer, nearer, nearer. "Let's get you to the hospital," I say. "I'll come in a few minutes, okay?"

The paramedics help Sharon onto a gurney, and I'm left standing on her faded rag rug. I gently pull the Christmas card from her wall and tuck it into my pocket. The card pokes my leg at every step as I walk home, planning a way to be Jesus for Sharon.

The Boy Who Wouldn't Talk
by Esther and Richard Provencher*

Brendan is six years old, and he doesn't talk. His mother says it's because of a fire in their apartment last month. Someone was burned. And Brendan was there.

"Hurry," his mother said. "You don't want to be late for Vacation Bible School." Brendan nodded. But he didn't smile. How could he smile? He was going to be away from his mother for five whole mornings.

Would anyone make fun of his shaved head? Thankfully other boys were also "buzzed." Today was hat day. And everyone was dressed up. Adult leaders and volunteers also had to wear something bright and cheerful.

Mom gave her son his favorite baseball cap. She wanted to encourage her son with a huge hug and kiss. But she didn't want to embarrass him. "Have fun," mom said.

Brendan's head sagged as he dragged his feet across the sand at the swings. He pushed his hat deeper into his pocket instead of wearing it. In his head he kept hearing shouts and screams from the fire. Laughter and yelling from children here pounded him like waves from the ocean. If only he could be happy like that. Sad Brendan sat on the ground. He wondered if that was a blue jay watching him from the pine tree.

"Okay, line up!" an adult shouted. Everyone entered a large hallway in the church. Sunday school drawings of animals were pasted on the walls. Colorful balloons, and a fisherman's net full of stuffed animals seemed to stare from everywhere. The theme for this week was, 'Noah's Ark'. "Why do they call it an Ark?" Brendan wondered. It's supposed to be just a huge boat, with animal faces sticking out of windows.

All six and seven year olds were part of the Monkey group. However, he did not feel like one. They were supposed to jump around pretending to eat bananas. How silly, he thought.

His lips were silent as songs were sung. Cheers went up, after prayers were said. Some children tried to make him smile. Right now, he was only interested in the fan's "whirring" sound.

Everyone raced off to begin the games. Somehow Brendan followed. He wished he could feel happy like these children. But, all he could do was look at them with sad blue eyes.

Brendan was first one out at dodge ball. He sat down. It was no use. He wanted to go home. Each time someone yelled, he looked around. Was it their warning to run from a fire somewhere? He remembered everyone rushing down stairs to safety. It was scary thinking about all that smoke and flames. Squeezing his eyes tightly until they hurt was one way to shut out the memory.

“Hey there,” another boy said. “Want to be my partner in the two legged race? Please.”

How dare this boy bother Brendan? Didn't this stranger know his house burned down last week? Besides, he wasn't feeling so good right now. But, the boy did say, “Please.”

“Do you?” the boy asked again. “My name is Kyle.” And the look he gave was the same one Brendan had when he hoped for a friend. But he didn't feel so friendly now.

“Find someone else,” Brendan almost shouted. But something told him to watch his tongue. Mom always said, “Eat your words before you say anything mean.” Brendan felt a little punch on his shoulder.

“Come on,” Kyle insisted.

And Brandon, the ‘boy-who-wouldn't-talk’ followed Kyle, who seemed to walk so slowly. They headed towards a group of children. “We'll never win,” said Brendan. “I'm like a turtle in a race.” And he was. But it didn't seem to matter to Kyle. He was having too much fun. His laughter made Brendan smile.

Somehow they still made it to the finish line. For some reason, Brendan had to keep helping Kyle to his feet. And he didn't understand why children and adults were making such a fuss. “YAYYY Kyle! YAYY Brendan!” everyone was shouting.

Two moms rushed over and gave each boy a great big hug. Brendan was confused. Questions popped into his head as he and Kyle ate their cheese and crackers snack. “It's because I'm legally blind,” Kyle answered. “And you were the only one who wanted to race with me.”

“Blind?” Brendan asked. The word just popped out of his mouth.

“Yes,” said Kyle. “I can see only a tiny bit. Mom told me to make a new friend. And you’re it.” And Brendan smiled for the first time, since the fire. The rest of the afternoon was the best ever. Kyle was by his side each moment. Together they became the noisiest Monkeys in the group.

Brendan even wore his cap. And his laughter could be heard all over the church playground. It was a special day for everyone, especially the counselors.

*Google: “Esther and Richard Provencher” to see more of their work.

The Accident
by Tolulope Popoola*

I remember leaving my body ten minutes after the impact. Before then, it was a blur of tyres screeching, horns blaring, a loud scream, a dog barking and an awful thud. I fell off the bonnet of the car, and landed on the stony tarmac. Then I heard voices, and footsteps of people running towards me.

“Call 999!” I heard someone shout.

For the few minutes I was suspended between life and death, I recalled my mother’s warnings. Always look carefully before crossing the road, she said. I thought about her then. How would she react to the news of my accident? I imagined her crying, and I felt sorry for causing her trouble.

An ambulance arrived with a wail of sirens. My head hurt. My back hurt. My left foot throbbed. A light was shone into my eyes.

“I’ll check for a pulse,” a man said.

Somebody touched me. I heard sounds that I couldn’t comprehend. Then I suddenly felt cold. Slowly, I started to rise above the scene of the crash.

“Will she make it?” A voice floated to me, as if from far away.

I thought of my father and baby brother, Paul, barely two years old. He wouldn’t understand any of it. I hoped someone would tell him that I’d gone to heaven.

I visited that spot later. People had left cards and flowers. I wished I could thank them. But what I wanted most was to say goodbye to my family.

*You are welcome to visit writer Tolulope Popoola at <http://www.onwritingandlife.com>.

Grandmother's Scars
by Charles W. Short*

I was raised by my Grandmother. It was a great privilege, but I didn't understand that, until it was too late to say thank you.

She was a woman of rules. She was a woman of faith. I was a child of vanity, and as everyone told me, I was beautiful. This old scarred woman, with a different set of priorities, didn't allow me my vanity. She had little tolerance for my faithless ways.

Living with my grandparents had its advantages though. Grandfather delighted in spoiling me; buying me fashionable clothes, expensive and pretty things for me, his pretty granddaughter. But he was ultimately not the one responsible for my upbringing. I was raised by Grandmother.

She embarrassed me though. Her scars, her temperament, her priorities, but mostly her scars. When I was in grade school I was in a play, so she came to see it. When the other kids saw her, knew she was with me, they asked if she was a witch. That was what they thought of her disfigured face. I was mortified, so she didn't come to events anymore.

She always pressed me to set aside my narcissism. I dismissed her words. She of all people would never know what it was like to be beautiful. Then I grew into middle school and the boys began to pay attention to me. I could control most of them with a glance or a smile. My vanity had grown into a monster, and grandmother was willing to tell me so. But, of course, I wouldn't listen.

Then came high school. The boys were to be manipulated and the girls were to be walked over. I deserved to be queen of – well – everything, and I would humiliate anyone who stood in my way. I had expected more correction from Grandmother, but she didn't really say anything. Shortly before homecoming in my junior year, Grandfather told me she was sick.

I was so arrogant by then I thought it was a good thing. No more Grandmother to reign me in, only Grandfather to spoil me. But when she died my world stopped turning. What had I done; what had I become? Grandfather tried to console me.

“It isn’t right for such a pretty girl to cry all the time. Dry up your tears and celebrate. Grandmother is with Jesus now.”

“Grandfather, why do you always call me pretty? Sometimes I have been so mean. So ugly.”

“You are beautiful. All the women in our family are beautiful. I call you pretty because you remind me so much of Grandmother when she was your age.”

“I remind you of Grandmother?” The statement shocked me.

“Oh, yes. She was a raving beauty in the old country. Every man in town was vying for her hand in marriage, but those were terrible days. The country was in a civil war and at times neighbor turned against neighbor.”

“What does that have to do with Grandmother?”

“Her family and my family were Christians, and attended church together. We knew each other, but I was too young and too ordinary for such a beauty. At the time my father worked for the government. On one terrible night there was a general riot. Everyone associated with the government was being hunted down and killed. We were terrified.”

He wiped away a tear and was silent for a few minutes. I put my hand on his arm and he continued.

“Grandmother was just eighteen. She came and got us. They brought us into their barn and hid us in hay. We could see a little but could hear everything going on. The mob burned our house when they couldn’t find us. They demanded to know where we were. They said they would kill them for hiding us. But they wouldn’t tell. The crowd threw gasoline on her parents, and when they still wouldn’t talk, the mob set them on fire.”

We were both crying. I wondered why I had never heard this story. Then it occurred to me it was my own vanity that I had never asked.

“Grandmother’s scars came from trying to put the fire out. Her scars came from saving me and my parents. You remind me so much of her. She was such a beauty then, but she became so

much more beautiful by her choices. She sacrificed for others. It was a way of life she learned from her parents, at just about your age.”

*Charles W. Short invites you to visit him at www.charleswshort.com.

Rhubarb Crisp
by Joseph Courtemanche*

“They’ve stolen the toilet paper, Pastor.”

“I guess they needed it, Carol. Put two rolls in every stall and set out a big bundle of it near the sink in both restrooms.”

“But it’ll all walk away!”

“I suspect it will. Monday I’ll go and buy more. In the meantime, our guests will be able to blow their noses and wipe their extremities.

Carol stomped down the hall toward the closet. Deacon Lattimore helped her with the key - it didn’t seem to go into the lock when you jabbed at it. “Carol, something wrong?”

She looked over at the pastor. “Yes, he’s giving away the store again. I just filled that supply room. We run out because of his supporting these people.”

Lattimore gently touched her shoulder and pointed. “He’s obeying God’s command to show hospitality to strangers. Would we really want to refuse some toilet paper to a brother or sister in need?”

“If you say so. I’ll do it under protest.”

She grabbed a bale of the stuff and stocked the bathrooms. Nearly every person who came out had a roll stuffed into their pockets. She sat glaring at them as they marched by her hospitality desk.

Just before the last man’s meal was served one of the old timers wandered up for cake. He stared in wonder at the variety available. Grabbing a tray, he picked sixteen pieces and grabbed a pot of coffee and a stack of cups before returning to his table.

That was too much for Carol. One piece, fine. Even two, but a whole tray full of cakes and an entire pot of coffee?

As she got within a few feet of him, she heard low voices in conversation come to a stop. He didn't even turn around when he said, "Come, Sister Carol, and join us for desert." Carol heard a low murmur - he was talking to himself.

She swung around to the other side of the table and sat opposite him. "How did you know my name? I don't know yours?"

The light laughter that bubbled up at the table came from several voices, and to her shock, Carol saw several other men fade into being at the table. All of them had wings, including the one who'd taken all the food. He spoke. "We wanted to remind you that sometimes the least among us is an angel. We know your heart is in the right place, Carol, but that you struggle with being in the world as well. Coffee and cake seemed a gentle way to break this to you. You've earned a break with your labors. All we ask is that you give some breaks in return."

Carol's eyes welled with tears as she revisited her actions that day. She wasn't acting very Christ-like in serving these homeless people. In fact, she was anything but like Him.

Her reverie was broken by a piece of rhubarb crisp being pushed across the table. The angel said, "It's your favorite. All of us have bad days. Can you learn from this?"

Carol lifted her hands in supplication and said, "Father, forgive my rudeness. Let me be the spirit of hospitality in your absence. Let me be your hands and feet."

The angels at the table faded, along with the tray of cakes and the coffee pot. One cup of coffee and a piece of rhubarb crisp remained in front of Carol. Under it was a note scrawled on a piece of toilet paper: Thank you for the supplies. Be blessed, Carol. You are going to make it."

*Joseph_Courtemanche invites you to his site http://commotioninthepews.com/?page_id=3457.

When We Live to Manage the Telltale
by Michael Austin*

The door closed behind him as he made his way into the house. It had been a relatively good day at church that Sunday and Henry was ready for some lunch and possibly a nap. His wife was visiting with her sister in Ohio that week, so Henry was on his own for a few more days. While he was preparing a meal for himself, he kept thinking about a conversation he had earlier that day right before church services started. He was walking down the hallway and as he was heading for his assigned place during worship time, someone stopped him to talk for a while. During the conversation, that person hinted that something might be wrong in his life and that he needed to address those issues. Henry quickly left that person to continue into church. He was somewhat put off by the opinions of this person that he had known for such a long time. How dare this person challenge his Christian service?

Henry had been a faithful member of Antioch Baptist Church for over 20 years. During that time, he served as a youth pastor, a Sunday school teacher and more recently, a deacon. It was very strange for him to have someone come up to him and challenge his intentions. Henry came from a broken family and his mom had taken him to church as long as he could remember. She made sure that he was faithful to attend Sunday school and she sacrificed many things so that Henry could attend summer camp and yearly mission trips. Henry loved the atmosphere church provided and didn't hesitate to volunteer for additional activities.

When Henry finished college, he returned to his home town and church ready to assist in any area of service that was available. His mother died a few years earlier, so coming back to Antioch Baptist Church seemed like revisiting a close part of his family as well as reintroducing treasured memories of his mother. He first served as an interim youth pastor for 8 months while his church was looking for a person to permanently fill that position. He had contemplated working full time in that capacity, but decided to back away from the job at the last minute.

One morning, he was asked to temporarily fill in as the Sunday school teacher for a college age class. He was hesitant on teaching the class. He wasn't known as a very outgoing person, so standing in front of thirty to forty college students seemed like a very tall order. He agreed to teach the class and has been teaching the class for over 6 years. Three years ago, Henry met his wife, Tammy at church during a fellowship one summer. They married the following year and both are faithful members at Antioch. Last year, the church body elected to make Henry a

deacon. Henry accepted the offer and was ordained that winter. For someone to challenge his intentions was beyond the pale. After church that day, Henry felt compelled to ask that person to drop by his house later for supper. He didn't want to let this line of questioning go unanswered and hoped that he could give adequate reasoning behind his service.

Later in the day, Henry starting thinking about the supper and his meeting. He became very aggravated and was leaning toward canceling the meeting altogether. He thought that it was below his dignity to justify his motives and explain his actions. Everyone knew Henry and accepted him for what he was. Why should he need to lower himself to answer questions that no one had ever asked him before? It was almost like his service to Antioch meant nothing to this person. He thought about all of the people he had helped. He made a mental list of all the fellowships he had attended and the many church members he had visited in the hospital. How could anyone fault him for those great services? Why would a church elect him to be a deacon if they too didn't agree with what he was doing?

There was a knock at the door. Henry stood there wondering what the person would think if he just decided to not invite him in. It would serve him right, Henry thought. But then, Henry started thinking about a sermon that his pastor had preached not two months ago. For some reason, the message popped into his head. He remembered the pastor reading a verse in the Bible and stating that everyone had sinned and that no one could enter into heaven without forgiveness of their sins. He remembered hearing that our good works did nothing for our salvation and that it was the free gift of God and the grace shown to everyone that offered any hope of heaven. Henry understood that even though he was a good man in his eyes, his good works were nothing in God's eyes and that he would not enter heaven without God's forgiveness. It didn't matter how many services he participated in or how people in church viewed his life. Without the acceptance of God's free gift provided by the death and resurrection of Jesus, the main thing that those services did was mask the fact that Henry needed God.

Henry wasn't sure what to do. If he met with this person for supper, he risked letting people know that he wasn't a Christian and that revelation might lead to embarrassment and ridicule. He wanted to resolve the issues he had with this person, but under the circumstances, he wasn't

sure if tonight was the best time to meet. Henry heard the door knock again. With fear and trembling, Henry walked toward the door and slowly opened it. The person smiled and asked if he could come in. Henry lifted his head and replied back "Yes, Lord".

*Michael Austin welcomes you to read more of his various and unique stories here <http://www.woodlandsonline.com/blps/blog.cfm?weblog=477>.

The Yellow House on the Hill
by Judy K. Haught

He sits alone under a tree, taking out His knife making a carving from a piece of lumber He found lying on the ground. His eyes never stray from the yellow house on the hill. As darkness falls, the lights begin to come on. A light shines out from the front bay window. He sees movement but cannot tell if it is the man of the house or lady as they pass by the window. In another part of the house, another light shines from the side. Must be the dining room, He thinks to Himself.

He curls up under the tree as night sounds begin to sing their song. Crickets chirping, the bullfrogs at a nearby pond croaking, the hoot owl calling out in the dark. Sleep falls upon Him as He thinks about the house on the hill.

The next morning the sun begins to shine on Him, and He stretches. He thinks what a glorious night's rest He had. Again, His eyes go to the yellow house on the hill. He thinks about the man and lady of the house as they prepare for their day. They will be home today; this is Saturday. They will be busy with chores as they have a routine every Saturday. After they eat, they will go to the grocery store and come home to do their chores. He will keep watch over the house on the hill.

He goes into the wooded area and finds some berries and eats, then walks on a path that leads Him to a nearby stream. The water is cool, but invigorating. He hears the birds chirping their morning welcome. They seem to say, "Good morning, good morning." He smiles and walks back to His spot under the tree, never taking His eyes off the house on the hill.

He sees the family leave, and decides to walk around the property. He talks to Himself and knows He will soon get to meet this family. He looks in the window. A fireplace is beginning to burn out. The smell of smoke lingers in the chilly air. He walks to the back of the property and finds a beautiful garden. He loves flowers. These are not ready to bloom, but soon they will.

He walks back to the tree from which He had positioned himself. He whittles some more, and waits for their arrival. His thoughts drift from where He had just come from. He was not welcomed and was told to leave. He knew He meant the people no harm, but He bowed

gracefully, thanked them, and left. He sat musing at the places He had been, people He met. Not all were accepting a stranger's presence.

His eyes now focused on the yellow house on the hill. The family was returning home. They would be taking their groceries in the house. He would give them time. Then, He would make His move.

He hears children playing, and one asks if he could go climb the tree. Dad tells him to put his bike away that he had left out the night before. Reluctantly, the little boy puts his bike away. He thinks to himself, I don't know why; I will be riding it later anyway.

The Man watches the little boy from under the tree where He now stood. He sees him climb up on to a limb. The little boy sits there, legs swinging back and forth. The Man could hear the little boy singing a familiar tune. He never takes his eyes off the child.

A rabbit hops past the Man. It stops and looks at Him with His brown eyes shining. The Man looks at the rabbit and smiles. Just at that moment, a scream pierces the air. The sound comes from the house on the hill.

"Call 911, call 911," a voice cries. "He has been hurt. Oh, dear Lord, please let him live. He is our only child."

Blood seeps out from his skull and pours out on the ground.

"Oh please God, get them here quickly." She yells for her husband to get a towel so she could apply pressure. "Oh, Lord, save my little boy," she wails.

The Man walks up to the tree that stood next to the yellow house, and He asks if He may do something to help.

She is startled. Where did he come from? She is so intent on stopping the bleeding. She concentrates on that more.

The Man asks again, "What may I do to help?"

She says, "Sir, if you are a praying man, please do that for him. He is our only son."

"May I touch him?" asks the Man.

She thinks, Why such a strange question? Can't he see my child is losing blood? "What do you want to touch him for?" she asks.

He replies, "I would like to speak to him. You may keep pressure on his wound."

The Man places his hand on the little boy's shoulder and says, "Be healed."

The mother looks startled. Is he crazy? That is all he is going to do?

Several moments pass by and the little boy opens his eyes. His mother lifts the towel from his wound. It is bloody, but no blood is coming from the wound.

"You are amazing," she says to the Man. "How, what, who, how did you do that?"

The little boy says, "Mommy, I am hungry." She grabs him and holds him next to her and weeps with joy.

The father comes out and says the ambulance is on its way.

She replies, "I don't believe we will need one."

"What?" he exclaims. "He is bleeding. He fell out of the tree. Have you lost your mind?"

"No," she replies, "this Man touched him and healed him. Sir, thank you, thank you so much."

Her husband glares at the Man. "How dare you touch my child! If you ever come back to my house again, I will have you arrested for trespassing."

His wife says, "Sam, please no. Don't you see? I was praying and asking God to help. This Man came immediately."

Sam says, "I don't want a religious fanatic around my house. Get out now!"

The Man walks away. He can hear the woman sobbing. Her tears are tears of joy but also hurt that her husband treated the Man so badly. The sirens get louder as they approach, and the Man walks away. He would go to another town.

The woman is grateful to Him, and her heart is filled with love and gratitude. She accepted Him and knew what happened was a miracle. Unfortunately Sam, on the other hand, was so self sufficient that he wanted no part of what he thought was a religious nut.

As the Man walks away, He knows He found a place in the heart of a lady who recognized who He was. His heart aches for the man, because he had no room for Him in his heart.

"Father, some will accept Me," He prays, "and some will reject Me. I thank You for the one who became Your child today."

The Man walks on pondering where He would be needed next, knowing another will be given a chance to accept or reject Him. As long as there is an earth to walk on, He will always be ready for the next one who calls out to Him.

Snakes Alive!
by Lynn Wehmeyer

Nobody knew how the snake got into the church.

Sunday morning Pastor Larry was delivering his sermon about the hidden temptations of sin. It was a stirring sermon so at first he didn't notice that there was a stirring in the congregation.

Someone said, "What's that on the podium?"

"Looks like a rope," was the reply.

"No. It's moving!"

The whispers became louder and the Pastor stopped speaking and looked quizzically around the sanctuary.

Miss Marilyn, who always sat in the front row, whispered loudly and pointed at a spot behind the Pastor. He turned and suddenly jerked erect.

"Is that a snake?" he queried, to nobody in particular.

There was a muffled scream and several people stood as if to run out of the building, but the pastor quickly considered how the snake might react to a commotion.

"Nobody move," he spoke in a level tone.

As the congregation calmed down Pastor Larry slowly backed down the steps of the podium, keeping his eye on the snake and trying not to fall.

The snake was keeping its eye on Pastor Larry, too. It was pressed against the wall of the podium, just in front of the baptismal pool. There had been a baptism that day, and the pool was still warm, so that may have been the reason the snake had appeared where it did. Its brown and tan coloring had partially camouflaged it.

In a low, calm voice, Pastor Larry said, still watching the snake, "I would like the deacons to remain and would like everyone else to leave quietly."

He didn't have to say it twice. How quietly they left is subject to controversy, but it wasn't long until only Pastor Larry and the deacons were left standing in the middle aisle, looking at the snake as if it were the devil incarnate.

"Maybe we could catch it in a pillowcase," Joe Stern suggested.

"Are you kidding?" was the retort from Harve Spinnel. "That thing must be all of 6 feet and heavy as all get out. Even if we could get our hands on it we'd never get it into a pillowcase. And I for one do not think we should try to get close to it. Could be poisonous."

The standoff continued, snake and humans locked in a staring contest.

Maybe the snake got bored with it all and decided it had had enough of these creatures, or maybe it was as scared of them as they were of it. After a few long minutes, the snake slithered across the podium and disappeared from sight.

The air was pierced by sirens. Someone had called 911. Two officers came in to assess the situation.

"A snake you say?"

"And it just up and left?"

"Well, if I were you I'd call animal control tomorrow. Nobody there right now, it being Sunday."

The next day Pastor Larry called Animal Control and found out that if the location of the snake was not known there would be no use for anyone to come, but if it appeared again they should try to contact an emergency service to come out and try to catch and remove the snake. So the problem was tabled.

Pastor Larry made a cursory search every now and then to see if he could find the intruder, but to no avail. The snake had found a good place to hide, and Pastor Larry did not relish sticking his head in a hole and actually finding the snake staring back at him.

The next Sunday was nearly a repeat of the previous one. Sermon, snake, skedaddle. It was noticed, however that the head count this week was half again as many as usual. However, that blessing was ignored as a future of snake visitations was contemplated.

Pastor Larry was perplexed. The snake never showed up during the week. At least nobody would admit to seeing it.

Then he had an epiphany.

The next Sunday, he waited for the unwelcome visitor to show its ugly head. He heard and felt the wave of excitement coming at him from the sanctuary.

“Everyone quiet, now,” the pastor said calmly. “We are going to do what we should have done in the first place. We. Are. Going. To. Pray.”

Quiet overtook the room as this statement was absorbed. It was all well and good to pray when someone was sick or lost a job, but for a snake? What could God do about a snake? The doubt was palpable, but Pastor Larry was not deterred.

“Everyone hold hands and try to concentrate and ask the Lord to give us an answer,” he ordered. It was one of the few times that nobody closed their eyes in prayer.

“Dear Lord,” he began, “You know all about this quandary we’re in. We worry that someone will get hurt. So we are here today to ask your help.” Pastor continued praying and the congregation remained in solemn silence. After a while, the snake waved its head in the air a few times, then slowly slithered out of the church, followed by audible gasps as it moved through the sanctuary, down the middle aisle, out the double doors eased open by an usher and out the main entry that was opened by another usher. Pastor Larry, who had also not closed his eyes, watched the sight in awe.

It was the beginning of real faith for a lot of the congregation. Several testimonies came later, baptisms were up by 100%, and the offering had never been better. Pastor Larry just pointed to Romans 8:28 “...God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God...”

Flash Mob
by Voni Harris*

Ever since her teenage granddaughter, Jewel, had shown her a video of a flash mob on the internet on TubeYou—or whatever it was called, it had been on the list.

It was just what the senior center needed to spice things up from the usual Bingo and quilting routine, so she had dragged Jewel around—constantly urging her to quit giggling and attracting attention of the others—to show the video to a few of her friends.

All five agreed: walkers, wheelchairs, Ben-Gay, support hose, sensible shoes and all.

So there they sat, eating their ham and scalloped potatoes for lunch separately, each pretending nothing special was going on. Jewel sat with her. She'd smuggled her portable stereo and her Eye-Pod—whatever it was called—in her backpack for them.

She watched the clock like a hawk. Five more minutes, then three, then one. Then the clock finally showed 1:07. She grinned at Jewel and stood up, with the other five, praying they wouldn't give anyone a heart attack. They pumped their fists in the air and yelled into the quiet of the lunchroom.

“BUCKET LIST FLASH MOB!”

Then Jewel started her Eye-Pod, and the music came through the stereo, pumping a strong beat.

She and her friends stomped, danced, rolled wheelchairs back and forth, twisted, and turned. Just as they'd practiced. She let the music take over. Certainly she was far too old for cool dance moves, but she could enjoy the music. It was her bucket list, after all.

The other seniors first gaped, then one at a time, they began laughing and clapping along.

But it was when she saw Jewel in the corner with her Eye-Pod laughing so hard she was crying, that's when she really started to have fun.

* Voni Harris welcomes you to enjoy her blog at <http://www.vonildawrites.wordpress.com>.

Stolen Apples
by Kim Bond*

Twelve-year-old Juni tossed the apple core on top of the stack sitting next to him. It felt good to be full after being hungry for so long—even if it meant stealing apples off the back of a delivery truck. He was an orphan living on the streets of the Manila in the Philippines. He hardly remembered his parents and his life before the flood took their lives so many years ago. Still, he often wondered why God had taken them from him. That is the exact thought that Juni was dwelling on as he drifted off into a deep sleep.

In his dream, he was walking down the road when he spotted a man with wings carrying a letter sack.

Juni tugged the angel's white robe and said, "Excuse me. Where did you get those letters?"

The angel said, "These letters are replies to questions humans have asked God. Did you ask the Lord a question?"

The unkempt boy nodded excitedly. "I asked Him why He took my parents from me like a million times! Please check and see if there is a letter for me. My name is Juni."

The angel flipped through his bag and lifted out a beautiful white leaf of paper with a golden seal. "Here you go!" He handed it to the young man with a smile.

Juni broke the seal and ripped open the letter. He read, "Why do you blame Me for taking your parents from you? I came to give life—not steal it." The boy cringed as he read the word "steal." He felt so guilty about stealing the apples now that he was standing before an angel reading Jesus' words. He shook off the shame and continued reading, "There is one who comes to take life and that is the prince of this world—Satan."

The boy looked up, "I blamed the wrong man! It wasn't God who orphaned me. It was Lucifer. Can you tell Jesus...."

"Tell Him yourself with your prayers, young man. I only deliver messages from God. Peace be with you." The angel's wings flapped and lifted him from the ground into the sky.

In his dream, the delivery truck Juni had stolen apples from sped by. As it made a sharp turn, it flipped on its side. The Filipino boy ran to check on the driver, but he could not find a pulse. It was too late. He jumped up and down to flag down help, but no other cars passed.

There was only a pedestrian walking slowly toward him. As it neared, Juni saw its hideous shriveled skin and blank eyes. In its grasp was a giant scrapbook with gold trim.

The demon said, "I have been notified there has been a death. Tell me precisely how this man died." He opened the book and took out a pen and propped it in his hand to write.

Juni said, "Why?"

"My master wants to know for his history book. Every death since Abel's has been recorded in this book. He reads it every night and cherishes every detail."

"Not anymore!" Juni snatched the book out of his hand and began to run.

The demon called after him, "I should have known better than to ask a thief like you. That's all you will ever be!"

Juni turned and walked back to the demon. He handed him the book filled with every gory and murderous detail. "Not anymore! I quit!" He looked up to heaven and said, "I promise never to steal again, Lord. I'm sorry—so, so, so sorry. Forgive me."

Two hands were shaking Juni as he awoke from the dream. As he opened his eyes, he saw the delivery driver standing over him. The boy was so glad to see him alive that he gave him a big hug.

The driver smiled. "I guess that nice hug makes up for that stack of apples you stole from me. All is forgiven. You must have been pretty hungry. I'm Taupo." He looked around. "Where are your parents, boy? Don't they have money to feed you?"

The dark-skinned boy said, "I have no parents, sir. I will pay you back for the apples somehow. I am pretty strong. Can I unload some apples for you?"

Taupo said, "I bet my wife would like to meet you. Come on home to dinner with me tonight. How old are you? Do you know?"

"I am twelve, sir."

"Our son would have been twelve just like you— if he were still living. He died of Tuberculosis five years ago. We loved him so much. I just can't understand why the Lord took him from us."

Juni patted his arm. "Maybe the Lord didn't take him from you. Maybe it was... someone else."

Taupo furrowed his brow, then smiled again. "I like you, kid. Hop in the truck so I can give you a hot meal and a soft bed for the night. It might be more than just one night if my wife takes to you like I do."

The boy felt loved for the first time in a long time. He climbed into the delivery truck and fastened his seatbelt as the driver sat behind the wheel.

Juni fidgeted. "There is a sharp turn up here. Remember to take it slow."

*Kim Bond invites you to help children in need at www.compassion.com.

Julian and the Leper
By Gustave Flaubert*
(Adapted from "The Legend of Saint-Julian the Hospitaller")

[Julian volunteered as a ferryman across a dangerous river.] One night he thought that someone was calling to him in his sleep. He listened intently, but could hear nothing save the roaring of the waters.

But the same voice repeated, "Julian!"

It proceeded from the opposite shore, fact which appeared extraordinary to him, considering the breadth of the river.

The voice called a third time, "Julian!"

And the high-pitched tones sounded like the ringing of a church-bell.

Having lighted his lantern, he stepped out of his cabin. A frightful storm raged. The darkness was complete and was illuminated here and there only by the white waves leaping and tumbling.

After a moment's hesitation, he untied the rope. The water presently grew smooth and the boat glided easily to the opposite shore, where a man was waiting.

He was wrapped in a torn piece of linen; his face was like a chalk mask, and his eyes were redder than glowing coals. When Julian held up his lantern he noticed that the stranger was covered with hideous sores; but notwithstanding this, there was in his attitude something like the majesty of a king.

As soon as he stepped into the boat, it sank deep into the water, borne downward by his weight; then it rose again and Julian began to row.

With each stroke of the oars, the force of the waves raised the bow of the boat. The water, which was blacker than ink, ran furiously along the sides. It formed abysses and then mountains, over which the boat glided, then it fell into yawning depths where, buffeted by the wind, it whirled around and around.

Julian leaned far forward and, bracing himself with his feet, bent backwards so as to bring his whole strength into play. Hail-stones cut his hands, the rain ran down his back, the velocity of the wind suffocated him. He stopped rowing and let the boat drift with the tide. But realising that an important matter was at stake, a command which could not be disregarded, he picked up the oars again; and the rattling of the tholes mingled with the clamourings of the storm.

The little lantern burned in front of him. Sometimes birds fluttered past it and obscured the light. But he could distinguish the eyes of the leper who stood at the stern, as motionless as a column.

And the trip lasted a long, long time.

When they reached the hut, Julian closed the door and saw the man sit down on the stool. The species of shroud that was wrapped around him had fallen below his loins, and his shoulders and chest and lean arms were hidden under blotches of scaly pustules. Enormous wrinkles crossed his forehead. Like a skeleton, he had a hole instead of a nose, and from his bluish lips came breath which was fetid and as thick as mist.

"I am hungry," he said.

Julian set before him what he had, a piece of pork and some crusts of coarse bread.

After he had devoured them, the table, the bowl, and the handle of the knife bore the same scales that covered his body.

Then he said, "I thirst!"

Julian fetched his jug of water and when he lifted it, he smelled an aroma that dilated his nostrils and filled his heart with gladness. It was wine; what a boon! but the leper stretched out his arm and emptied the jug at one draught.

Then he said, "I am cold!"

Julian ignited a bundle of ferns that lay in the middle of the hut. The leper approached the fire and, resting on his heels, began to warm himself; his whole frame shook and he was failing

visibly; his eyes grew dull, his sores began to break, and in a faint voice he whispered, "Thy bed!"

Julian helped him gently to it, and even laid the sail of his boat over him to keep him warm.

The leper tossed and moaned. The corners of his mouth were drawn up over his teeth; an accelerated death-rattle shook his chest and with each one of his aspirations, his stomach touched his spine. At last, he closed his eyes.

"I feel as if ice were in my bones! Lay thyself beside me!" he commanded. Julian took off his garments; and then he got into the bed; against his thigh he could feel the skin of the leper, and it was colder than a serpent and as rough as a file.

He tried to encourage the leper, but he only whispered, "Oh! I am about to die! Come closer to me and warm me! Not with thy hands! No! with thy whole body."

So Julian stretched himself out upon the leper.

Then the leper clasped him close and presently his eyes shone like stars; his hair lengthened into sunbeams; the breath of his nostrils had the scent of roses; a cloud of incense rose from the hearth, and the waters began to murmur harmoniously; an abundance of bliss, a superhuman joy, filled the soul of the swooning Julian, while he who clasped him to his breast grew and grew until his head and his feet touched the opposite walls of the cabin. The roof flew up in the air, disclosing the heavens, and Julian ascended into infinity face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ, who bore him straight to heaven.

* "Julian and the Leper" is the conclusion of a longer piece called "The Legend of Saint-Julian the Hospitaller." This classic masterpiece is in the public domain and can be read in its entirety for free here <http://www.online-literature.com/gustave-flaubert/2122/>.

A NOTE TO READERS

Is God calling you into action? Perhaps you read “Battle Cry” and now feel stirred to begin a ministry. Is He calling you to repentance as in “God Unties My Shoe”? Perhaps you were encouraged to keep on preaching after reading “The Uneducated Pastor Soh.”

It is possible you realized the Lord is confronting you as in “When We Live to Manage the Telltale.” Maybe you read “The Yellow House on the Hill” and heard the Lord asking you if you have room in your heart for Him. If you want to accept God’s promise of eternal life, then pray this prayer of salvation right now:

Father God, I need a Savior because I have sinned against You. I trust Your Son Jesus paid for my sins with His death on the cross. I believe He rose from the dead on the third day. I welcome Your Holy Spirit into me to guide me. Thank You for making eternal life a free gift to me. In Christ’s Name, Amen.

Congratulations on your decision to accept God’s free gift of salvation! I hope you will continue to grow closer to God by reading the Holy Bible, praying daily, and staying in fellowship with other Christians.

Thank you for reading this collection of short stories. If you feel it has benefitted you spiritually, please consider sharing *Spiritual Citizens* with others so they can also enjoy spiritual growth through free Christian fiction. May God’s favor shine upon you!

