

## Sacrifice Play

[I'm a fairly careful guy. Oh, I've had my share of mishaps, but decades working with the phone company taught me to consider safety at all times. Many's the time I stopped in mid-swing, pausing to consider the outcome of what I prepared to strike with a hammer, only to adjust my position, or stop altogether. Movies where the protagonist puts him or herself in needless danger, only to survive by sheer, dumb luck, drive me up the wall! With this in mind, I thought of a story where a careful man deliberately puts himself in danger to try to redeem a situation caused by another's carelessness. Yet, sometimes that move pays off in unexpected ways. – T. H. Pine]

“Idiot driver!” Ron shouted at the windshield, when a woman driving a battered yellow Volkswagen cut in front of him.

Things like that really upset Ron. Compulsively safety minded, he would never do a thing like this himself. It wasn't safe to go cutting in front of people; it could cause an accident. In fact, being safe stood as the nearest and dearest thing to Ron's heart. He made it his life's mission; taking chances anathema to him. Too many things could happen to a person; one had to take as many precautions as possible. Most accidents happened because of carelessness and Ron had little sympathy for those who got hurt because of sheer thoughtlessness. Oh, he regretted the pain and loss, but most people suffered needlessly due to their own lack of concern for their safety.

Many people misunderstood Ron. Not an unkind person, really, his passion for safety and sensible thinking tended to rub people the wrong way. He also had strong religious feelings and did not hesitate to tell others about them. “God helps those who help themselves,” stood as his motto. He knew it could not be found anywhere in the Bible, but thought it should be enshrined there somewhere; in Proverbs, perhaps. In truth, Ron could be very sympathetic. Bring him a problem and he proved a good listener, offering support and good advice. Yet, few people went that far, put off by Ron's abrasiveness.



Ron turned off into the parking lot of the diner he always stopped at on his way to work in the morning. He noticed Sally Kranston's car in the parking lot. He sincerely hoped she didn't feel in a talkative mood this morning. Although she and Ron shared the same religious beliefs, Sally proved the antithesis of all Ron stood for. Where he tended to be cautious and careful, she gave no thought for the morrow, leaving everything “in God's hands,” as she put it. How she managed to make it through a single day remained a mystery to him. It did tend to strengthen his own faith, however, for her continued survival *proved* God's existence.

Entering the diner, he noticed Sally sitting at the counter, deep in conversation with another patron. She gesticulated wildly with her hands as she spoke, to emphasize points she made. Ron knew that she told yet another unwilling listener about how she had found the Lord. Ron stopped in mid-thought, feeling guilty. Sally—a young mother whose husband had abandoned her, leaving her with an infant and a mountain of debt—meant well. As she described it, it almost drove her over the edge, but the Lord reached down and swept her from the precipice, giving her strength and a new purpose in life. Ron could not argue with that, believing in the Lord as he did. Sally sure seemed happy, cheerfully tackling an almost impossible situation. She worked three jobs in order to pay back all her creditors and, in the two years that Ron had known her, had made a pretty good dent in that mountain of debt. He doubted that he could remain so optimistic in such a situation. He had had many a conversation with her after the services at the church they attended and he had even contributed, anonymously of course, to the fund established at the church in order to help Sally out.

“Hi, Ron!” Sally exclaimed, noticing Ron's arrival.

“Hi, Sally,” Ron muttered, somewhat unenthusiastically.

“I was just telling Mr. Brainard here about Jesus!” she announced, oblivious to the stares she attracted.

Ron became conscious of those eyes moving from Sally onto him and he wished fervently that he had decided to go to another diner. “That’s nice,” he said, fixing what he hoped was a sincere smile on his face. He walked quickly to a vacant booth, mercifully located on the other side of the room from Sally. *Doesn’t the woman have any tact?* he thought. *And why does she insist on embarrassing me so!*

“The usual, Ron?” Gloria called from behind the counter.

Ron nodded his assent, grateful for the break in the silence. He noticed that the other patron’s eyes had already returned to their newspapers, or whatever else had been occupying them before Sally had called to him. He wondered what seemed to attract her to him. Often content to sit by himself, more often than not Sally would gravitate his way, spreading the Good Word like rays of sunshine. He sometimes found her constant happiness annoying. At first he tried to detect phoniness, a manufactured quality that would betray her real feelings. As far as he could detect, however, Sally seemed genuine in her happiness. *That’s the trouble,* he thought. *It’s hard to dislike Sally. She’s such a loving and trusting soul and would literally give you the clothes off her back, even though she has almost nothing.* He found it equally hard to argue with her too; as much as she gave away, the Lord seemed to provide, so that she and her daughter never lacked the necessities. Nor could you hang your argument on the church providing her with money. Sally never announced her need, nor did she solicit aid. She received gifts from sources other than the church too; the randomness of it an enigma to Ron’s logical, ordered mind. He sometimes secretly envied Sally’s trusting faith, but stopped such thoughts with the reasoning that he possessed a different kind of personality—no use in trying to deny it.



After his usual breakfast of two eggs, over easy, two slices of dry, whole-wheat toast, orange juice and black coffee, Ron left the diner precisely on schedule and got into his car. He fastened the seat belt, carefully checked all his mirrors, backed carefully out of his spot and finished his drive to work, arriving at precisely five minutes before the hour. He had an extremely busy day and had little time to reflect about faith, or Sally, or God; yet never too busy to be safety conscious. As head of the safety committee at work, he spotted two hazards just the week before and reported them to management, pleased to have made a contribution to the general welfare of the office. On the way home, he got to thinking about that morning in the diner, but someone standing in the road, arms waving frantically, trying to flag down his car, interrupted his train of thought. As Ron braked to a halt, he recognized her as Sally Kranston! Then he noticed her car parked by the side of the road and began to get that familiar sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Ron rolled down the window.

“What’s the matter Sally?” he called, alarmed at her extreme agitation.

“It’s Mary! She’s fallen down a well or something! I can hear her crying! Please help me to get her out!”

“Let me pull my car over and then you can take me there!” Ron moved his car to the side of the road. “And get out of the road before you get clipped by a car!” he added, as he set the parking brake and flipped on the four-ways before jumping out. He looked up and down the road to determine that no cars were close and ran after Sally, who had already run into the field on the other side. Ron ran to catch up and followed her down a footpath, past a small clearing where she had spread a picnic blanket, to what appeared to be the opening of a cave. He followed Sally in, ducking

his head to avoid hitting it on the low entrance. Once inside, he noticed the overhead timbers—an abandoned mine.

“Over here!” Sally shouted from the darkness to his right. As Ron’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could just make out her outline. Sally knelt alongside a hole, recognizable as such only by the fact that it looked blacker than the surrounding dimness. Going on his hands and knees, he very carefully made his way to the edge and looked down into the blackness. He could see nothing, but, by listening intently, Ron could make out the whimper of a child’s crying.

“I’ll go back to my car for a flashlight and a rope.” he called over his shoulder, as he left the mine. “You talk to your daughter to keep her calm and tell her not to move!”

When he got back, Ron’s light revealed Sally; hunched on the ground, talking soothingly to her invisible daughter. The sight made him sad. “Go to the nearest phone and call the police. I’ll do what I can for now.”

“But won’t you need my help or something?”

“You’ll be much more help by getting the police. Now go!” Ron lay on his stomach by the hole, trying to spot the child in the inky depths with his light.

“Mary! Mary!” he yelled down into the hole. When the echoes of his cries died, he heard nothing, not even whimpering. *The child is probably too terrified to react*, he thought. *After all, she’s only three.* Try as he might, Ron could not make out anything at the bottom of the hole. It didn’t seem like the beam of his light even reached to the bottom. How could the child have survived such a fall! He wondered how Sally could allow the child to wander into such a situation—just like her to overlook the obvious dangers—practically a textbook example of what he had thought all along. People went through life, oblivious to the most rudimentary knowledge of safety and forethought and then wondered at the calamity that befell them. When would they learn!

The sound of sirens in the distance interrupted Ron’s thoughts; Sally had wasted no time in notifying the police. Good. Moving away from the hole, he looked around for a way to anchor his rope. He settled on one of the sturdiest looking of the upright beams, tied it off and carried the rest of the coil to the edge of the hole. He tested his weight on the beam and, satisfied that it would hold, tossed it into the hole. He checked with his light. *Darn! It’s not going to be long enough.* Ron sat by the hole to await the arrival of help.

Ten minutes later, the arrival of two policemen, followed by Sally, ended Ron’s lone vigil. Both men carried coils of rope over their shoulders, and six-cell flashlights in their right hands. One also carried a portable florescent lantern.

“Paramedics will be here soon,” one of the policemen said. He directed his light at the hole next to Ron. “Sure looks deep.”

*No kidding, Sherlock.* “I could hear the child whimpering down there, but I can’t hear a thing now. I can’t locate her with my light either.” Ron then made a statement that caused him much reflection later on. “I already tied my rope to one of these support beams but it’s not long enough. I was hoping you’d bring more rope. We can tie them together to give me enough length to reach the bottom of this shaft.”

“You tellin’ us you’re goin’ down that hole?” the second officer queried.

“Look. Both of you guys are too big. I’m smaller; therefore I should be the one to go. Now, let’s get going. We’re wasting time. The child may be seriously injured.”

Being so safety conscious, Ron would have thought he’d never place his life in this kind of danger. Besides, Sally’s carelessness had caused the whole problem. Nevertheless, he simply felt it to be the right thing to do, with a child’s life at stake.

“Okay mister, you’ve got a point. Joe and me will help lower you.”

While they made a sling with the rope, Ron walked over to where Sally stood. She had been strangely quiet during the proceedings. He would have figured her to be the hysterical type, for all her lack of concern for consequences. She looked up at him with those large eyes of hers. Ron could just see her face in the dim glow of the lantern. Incongruously, he thought of how pretty she looked.

“I’ll do the best I can to find Mary.” He couldn’t bring himself to say that it would be all right, that he would find her, for he’d be lying; he had no idea what he would find.

“I know you will, Ron, and I’ll be praying for you the whole time. I know you don’t think very much of me, but I want you to know that I think you are a fine Christian and a compassionate man. God be with you.”

Moved by her words, Ron saw Sally in a new light. While he had been so busy judging Sally’s approach to life, she had known of his attitude all along and hadn’t held it against him. He realized that she had far more perception than he had imagined—and far less of a judgmental attitude.

“Sally, I—”

She stopped him by putting a finger to his lips. Then she took both his hands in hers and squeezed them. Ron could see her smiling wanly in the dim light. She looked so pathetic and vulnerable. Confused by the turn of events, Ron looked deeply into her eyes and, all at once, the loneliness of his life washed over him. He saw himself for the rigid, colorless fool his carefulness had made him. Among his safely laid plans, he had forgotten to provide for one thing—simple human warmth. Now, that warmth radiated from Sally’s eyes. Not only warmth, but courage—a courage that allowed her to reach out to others, to give her life freely and without reservation. It had led her into much heartbreak, yet Ron wondered who seemed the wiser of the two. He had hoarded the days of his life, like some safety-obsessed Scrooge, and it had left him an isolated husk of a man.

Just then, as if sensing his inner distress, Sally went on tiptoe and kissed him squarely on the lips, shattering his bleak mood. He looked with surprise into her soft, brown eyes and smiled, which she returned. He took her hand, squeezed it and turned back to the two policemen. By this time they had finished making the sling and waited patiently for him to finish talking to Sally. He fitted the sling under his arms, took the flashlight offered to him, and stepped over to the hole.

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Following to the beam of the flashlight, Ron saw that he hung near the bottom of the hole. He had felt one knot go through his fingers, indicating that the entire fifty feet of his rope had played out. He estimated that he had been lowered about eighty feet further, passing the second knot. A couple of seconds later, his feet touched bottom and he sunk over his ankles into soft dirt, like standing in soft snow, the floor of the hole covered with a thick layer of it; probably what had fallen from the sides over the years. He turned slowly, playing the light in front of him. Sure enough, he could see a spot near the center, where something had fallen. Ron played the beam almost all the way around until he spotted a side tunnel, a small opening mostly obscured by the pile-up of dirt, with signs evident in the soft earth that someone had crawled through.

Ron yelled up the shaft. “There’s a lot of soft dirt piled up here! I can see a spot where it must have broken Mary’s fall! She couldn’t have been hurt too badly ‘cause she evidently crawled into a side tunnel! I can see imprints in the dirt!”

“What do you plan to do now?”

“I’m going in! Do you have any more rope?”

“Some firemen showed up; they should have some!”

“Okay, tie on what you have and I’ll bring it with me!”

Ron found the end of the rope he climbed down and he squeezed his head and shoulders through the opening. The side tunnel angled down; he didn't like that. The soft earth indicated danger of a cave-in and the thought made his skin crawl. He could see nothing of the child herself, but plenty of evidence of her passing in the soft dirt, leading away. *I was right. She wasn't hurt too badly in the fall, but where the heck does she think she's going?* He looked around nervously, very much conscious of the tons of earth over his head. Steeling himself, he walked slowly forward.

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The two policemen came back with more rope, tied it onto theirs and played it out as Ron needed it, while Sally watched. The one named Joe reflected on how quiet she had been.

"So many women get real noisy at times like this," he whispered to his friend. "All this one does is mutter to herself occasionally." The side conversation stopped when Joe realized after a minute or so that she sat praying.

"Dear Jesus, protect my daughter and guide Ron to her," Sally prayed. "Help them both to be brave. Be with these two policemen and the firemen; give them wisdom and courage." Tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks, leaving a white trail in the grime that had accumulated on them. Her mind went back to the conversations she had had with Ron about being more conscious of consequences. She flogged herself mentally for not being more careful of where Mary went. One moment she sat engrossed in her Bible reading, the next she heard a muffled scream. It had taken her many precious minutes to locate the mine opening. Horrified when she saw the small footprints leading into the blackness, frantic shouting had brought a faint answer. Only then did she run back to the road for help. She had been surprised and glad to see Ron's car coming. Now he had gone down in the hole, looking for her daughter.

"Forgive me, Lord, for being so careless," she prayed, squeezing her eyes shut, causing more tears to run down and wash her cheeks. She sat there, head bowed, waiting to see what the Lord's answer would be.

Meanwhile, Ron moved cautiously along the shaft, following the trail of disturbed earth. Before long, he came to a tee. The trail went off to the left. Ron shined the light down the tunnel. Some of the ceiling support beams had fallen, allowing large piles of dirt and rock to crash to the floor. He saw where the child had clambered over one of them. *Why is she moving? Why can't she just wait for help?* He followed down the tunnel until the rope around his middle brought him up short. Not wanting to go back for more rope, he made another, totally out-of-character decision—he untied the rope and continued on down the tunnel.

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He's untied the rope and gone on without it!" Joe said. "I felt a tug and then it went slack."

"Leave it. He may need it on the way back."

Sally's head snapped up sharply at the news. Ron had obviously been unable to find Mary close to where she had fallen. A chill ran up and down her spine as she contemplated what that meant. Knowing how cautious Ron to be, she wondered at his readiness to place himself in danger; so unlike him to do such a thing.

Though Ron's seemingly cold demeanor put many off, she had seen beneath it and knew what a decent, compassionate man he could be. Ron outwardly tried to avoid her, but, when they had talked together on occasion at some church social function, he relaxed, dropped his guard and the real person shone through.

Sally felt that, given time, Ron could be persuaded to open up, and then the strong, dependable Christian she knew him to be would emerge in a new way. She admired his clearheaded approach to life and sometimes secretly wished she had met him instead of her former husband. Things would

have been so different. At that moment, she realized she had been trying to second-guess the Lord and stopped such fruitless thoughts, asking his forgiveness. If it hadn't been for her trials, she would probably never have come to know Jesus. Sally turned and walked from the cave and, sitting herself down on the grass to one side of the entrance, bowed every fiber of her being in earnest prayer to her God for the safety of Ron and Mary.

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"How far can a three year old *go* in so short a time," Ron muttered to himself, as he clambered over yet another pile of rubble in his path. It was the third he had encountered down this tunnel. He sincerely wanted to find the little girl and get out from under this oppressive mountain of earth. He felt as though the weight of it pressed down on him, making breathing difficult.

Ron almost blundered over the edge of a drop-off, as the tunnel came to an abrupt end. Probing into the darkness with his light, he found that he crouched at the entrance of a natural cavern. Thousands of tiny facets, minerals embedded in the rock, threw shards of light back at him from the ceiling and walls of the cavern. Looking down, Ron saw that the drop only went down a foot or so, with a steep slope leading down to a small pool in the center. Stalactites on the ceiling dripped water into the pool, disturbing the glassy surface. Some of them had broken off and lay shattered on the floor around the pool, victims of the same forces that had dislodged the ceiling beams. He hoped Mary hadn't blundered into the water and the thought made him shudder.

"Mary!" he yelled, the name bouncing back at him from all directions. When the sound reverberated into silence, he listened carefully. At first he thought he might be hearing things in his eagerness at finding her, but he finally detected a small sobbing sound. He directed the beam of the flashlight around the cavern to where he thought the sound came from. He stopped abruptly, when two, red reflectors shone back at him. Eyes! Then he noticed, huddled next to a stalagmite, a small figure. Mary! Her bright red jacket stood out like a beacon.

"Hello! Mary!" Ron shouted joyfully, but the child did not respond. *Probably in shock, poor thing.* He eased himself over the ledge and crawled on his hands and knees to where she sat, so as to avoid slipping on the wet rock.

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Sally's mind snapped abruptly back from her intense prayers. At first she wondered what had caused this, for the peaceful surroundings belied any disturbance. Then she felt it. A low, ominous rumble, coming from deep down in the earth. The realization caused her heart to turn to ice. She jumped up and ducked into the cave, running into Joe, followed closely by Mike, on their way out.

"There's nothing you can do in there ma'am," Joe said, steadying her.

"What if Ron needs help getting out!"

"We won't be any help at all if we're trapped too."

As if on cue, the earth began to rumble again. This time Sally could feel it beneath her feet. As the rumbling increased, dust began billowing out of the cave entrance.

"Mary! Ron!" Sally screamed, fighting to free herself from Joe's restraining grip. Finally, she slumped against his chest in defeat, sobbing out her helplessness and grief, while the earth beneath her rumbled an accompaniment to her anguish.

"It's no use!" Joe said to Mike, who was stood alongside him. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a white smear in the black dust that grimed his face. "The entire hole is filled, right to the top! Most of the ceiling has caved in. There's no telling what it must be like in the horizontal tunnels, but I'll bet most of 'em are filled in too."

*Poor woman,* Joe thought, looking down at Sally. *Not only does she lose her daughter but she loses her boyfriend too. Some people get all the bad breaks!*

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Oblivious to the commotion created by the hastily gathered search party above, Ron huddled in a corner of the cavern with Mary sheltered beneath him. He had chosen this spot, down where the ceiling sloped to meet the floor, because it remained free of any overhanging stalactites and, to his way of thinking, seemed structurally stronger. His theory turned out to be correct. For a while, the noise had been tremendous, the air choked with dust. Finally, it had subsided, leaving them scared but unhurt. Although it worried Ron that Mary remained so quiet and unresponsive to what happened to her, other more urgent things squeezed that worry out, foremost among them finding a way out.

If one existed.

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“Hey, Pete! Over here!” one of the rescue party searchers shouted excitedly. He knelt by a small hole in the ground. When his shouting died out, he could again hear the muffled sounds emanating from the hole. He bent low and shouted down the hole.

“Hello! Can you hear me down there?!”

“Yes! Yes! I can!” the muffled, but excited voice replied. “Lower a rope so I can send up the girl!”

By this time Pete, a local fireman, came up alongside his fellow searcher. “Looks like you found ‘em Dave! Thank God!”

“It must have been his doing. All at once, I got the idea to check the boarded up openings along the mine’s tunnels.”

“Well, you’re vision, or whatever you want to call it, panned out. Good job!”

Before ten minutes had passed, a crowd formed around the now all-important hole in the ground. Much speculation occurred over whether it would be large enough to allow the little girl passage. Enlarging the hole had also been discussed, but a tremor put an end to that avenue of approach. They lowered a rope and hastily enlarged the uppermost portion of the vent. Ron made a harness of sorts, covered Mary’s upper torso with his jacket to avoid injuring her as they pulled her up. He smiled and waved at her as she rose, and Mary, who had recovered somewhat, smiled back.

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When Sally heard the news, she wasted no time getting herself to the site. The rescue worker told her that Ron had evidently found a side tunnel leading to a boarded up natural vent. One of the crew of searchers, looking for another way into the abandoned mine, heard a small sound coming from the hole in the ground.

Not one doubt existed in Sally’s mind that God had provided a miracle in answer to her prayer. She could hardly wait to hold Mary in her arms, to thank Ron from the bottom of her heart for his amazing courage in rescuing her daughter!

As she arrived on the scene, they had just lifted Mary from the hole. Sally raised her arms in front of her and started toward her daughter. She didn’t make it. The ground seemed to fall from beneath her feet and she tripped, barely getting her arms under her to break her fall, the earth beneath her face rumbling again! Many long moments passed before the ominous sounds subsided. Sally just kept her eyes squeezed shut, praying fervently to her Lord.

When the earth quieted down and a hubbub of voices began, Sally opened her eyes and lifted her head. There stood Mary, not twenty feet away! She scrambled to her feet, ran to her daughter and swept her up in her arms. Tears of joy flooded down her cheeks as she knelt there and hugged Mary to her. As though her emergence from the ground had resuscitated her, Mary came out of the stupor she had been in and cried along with her mother, hugging her tightly. Meanwhile, a couple of

men knelt by the momentarily forgotten vent hole. Although they shouted into what remained of it, they could plainly see, even in the rapidly failing light, that the hole had filled in.

Not a sound could be heard from below.

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Ron had no idea how long he had been down beneath the earth. It seemed like an eternity since he had last seen the sun. Glad that he had been able to get Mary to the surface in time, that last tremor had nearly been the end of him. When it stopped, he had been half buried; thankfully, most of the rubble soft earth. He managed to dig himself free with his bare hands and crawl into a clear section of tunnel. Now he appeared to be hemmed in on all sides. The air had become stale and his light, on the whole time, began to dim.

Ron propped himself against a pile of earth and shut off his light to conserve it. While he rested, his chest laboring to suck in the stale air, he thought about how ironic the whole situation seemed; “Mister Careful,” down beneath tons of dirt, about to shuffle off his mortal coil. He never figured it would end this way. He *never* took chances, made safety his Golden Rule, and now he literally found himself in a hole because he took the biggest chance of all—to put his life on the balance for another.

“Serves you right,” he scolded himself. “Christians aren’t supposed to be so concerned with their own skins. Sally was right. We have to learn to put our trust in God, not ourselves.”

Many such reflections ran through Ron’s mind as he sat in the total darkness considering his imminent demise. Yet, he felt strangely at ease in his spirit; not *at all* afraid. He had often heard people speak of obtaining God’s grace in troubled times, but had never considered how true the statement could be. He had never been so sure of God’s presence as at this very moment. He knew that he had made the right decision when he went down the hole after Mary. He could die knowing that it all figured into God’s great plan. He wondered if Mary and Sally would remember him. He just knew Mary, with Sally as his mother, would grow up into a fine woman and have children of her own. He prayed that she would stay close to the Lord and learn to put her implicit trust in him.

Thinking of Mary brought Ron around to thinking again of Sally. His regret at this moment centered on the fact that he wouldn’t be able to get to know her any better. He remembered how sweet she looked to him just before he went down to find Mary and remembered her soft kiss. He wondered why he had not noticed that long before; probably because he was too preoccupied with himself. A good woman, left to fend for herself, yet maintaining a positive outlook on life, he did nothing more than criticize her for her fervor. What a Class A dope he had been! He did much praying from his Jonah-like place deep in the earth. He shed many a tear of regret. Finally, his soul unburdened of its load of guilt, he slept.

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In his sleep he dreamed. He dreamt he awoke to a great light; his eyes almost totally blinded by it, but he could just make out the form of a figure that looked like the Son of God, standing with one hand outstretched, beckoning to him. “Yes, Lord,” he croaked through dust-caked lips. “I’m ready to go home.”

He got up and followed.

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Sally sat in the bentwood rocker by the window, wearing only the oversized tee shirt she slept in, since it the clock marked four hours past midnight. Mary had finally calmed down and slept quietly in the next room. Moonlight slanted through the window, bathing the room in its peaceful, silver-blue light, so bright that she could clearly make out the familiar furnishings in the room. She hadn’t been able to get much sleep the past two nights; her thoughts kept turning to Ron. For all his

apparent coldness, he had not hesitated to give his life to rescue Mary. Sally wondered often about how different things would have been had he come out alive.

Just last night, she had dreamt that Ron had come back to her. She dreamt of being married to him, of sharing her bed with him. She could feel his hands gentle upon her, the wellsprings of passion rise in her as they hadn't done in years. Even now, the thought of that dream made her blush with shame, even as the thought warmed her. How she wished that God had seen fit to bring him back to her! She would have spent the rest of her life trying to make Ron happy. He had been a good man. The love of a devoted woman would have been all he would have needed to bring him out of his shell. As Sally thought about these things she rocked in her chair, knees drawn up, tears occasionally wandering down her cheeks, her thoughts interspersed with prayers of forgiveness—and of sorrow.

A knock at the door shattered Sally's somber mood. A wave of fear momentarily coursed through her, but she mastered it and went to the window beside the door and pushed the curtain aside a little for a peek. What she saw made her hand fly to her mouth to stifle a cry. She fumbled with the lock and could not get the door open fast enough. When she finally did, she stared at the figure framed in the doorway, a grimy, tattered figure, stooped with fatigue. She did not have time for another thought, for the figure stumbled forward and collapsed into her arms, nearly bowling her over. Sally wept as she hugged the figure to her breast, having all she could do to hold him upright.

“Ron! You've come back to me!” she cried.

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Sally looked down into the tub from her perch on the toilet seat. Ron lay back in it, soaking in the deliciously hot water, drifting in and out of sleep. Occasionally he shivered, as if remembering some terrible thought.

Overriding unnecessary modesty, she had coaxed Ron out of his clothes and got him into the tub. As she washed off the grime, she listened eagerly, as he related the story of his miraculous escape. He told her of the dream he had had of Jesus, of how he had found, just on the other side of the dirt blocking one end of the tunnel he lay in, a way out—he just needed to dig through.

However, his ordeal would continue. The tunnel led to a back entrance of the mine that honeycombed the whole area. It took Ron almost two full days to negotiate the maze of partially blocked tunnels. He would have given up in despair many times, but for the inner vision that led him every step of the way, as if he followed an inner compass, or some guiding light. Almost totally exhausted, and suffering from terrible thirst and mild hypothermia, he emerged into the night a couple of miles from Sally's small house. In a daze, he had shambled there.

Now, as Ron drifted in and out of sleep in Sally's bathtub, she could still hardly believe he had come to her. She helped him out of the tub, towed him off as best she could and helped him into her bed, where Ron fell instantly into a deep sleep. She kept a vigil at the bedside, offering prayer after prayer of heartfelt thanks, as the eastern horizon turned pink with the dawn.

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Ron awoke to the sound of a woman's voice singing. Sunlight slanted into the room and touched the bed; the warm sun on his face had awakened him. For a moment, he couldn't remember where he lay and in whose bed. The sweet scent on the pillow seemed strange, yet vaguely familiar. Finally, the recollection of his ordeal and miraculous deliverance seeped into his brain.

“So, it wasn't a dream after all,” he said to himself.

In another moment, a head with blonde hair piled atop it, popped into view in the doorway. “You're awake! How are you feeling?”

“Not bad, all things considered.”

Ron started to get out of bed and realized his nakedness. He stood anyway. “I don’t suppose my anatomy’s a mystery to you,” he said with a chuckle. “I recall, tired as I was, that you undressed me and bathed me.”

Sally blushed. “I didn’t have pajamas for you, so I just put you to bed after I dried you off. I guess I had better get your clothes, so you can come to the table for breakfast. I just took them out of the dryer.”

A small head popped into view in the doorway. A wide, jelly-covered smile lit its features.

“Mary’s just bursting to say thank you, too. You slept off and on for almost two full days, you know!”

Shortly, Ron stood at his place at the kitchen table. He surveyed the cozy domestic atmosphere of Sally’s spotless kitchen. As he watched her bustle around, performing the breakfast duties with Mary following her every move like some miniature mirror image, a yearning filled his heart even as a smile spread across his features. In a sense he had come home, where he belonged. He felt very sure of that.

“Sally, would you come here?” he asked.

Sally walked to him and gazed up into his face with a look of expectancy on hers. Ron reached out and put his hands on both of her shoulders. Standing there in her housecoat and slippers, her piled-up hair still sleep tousled and her cheeks beginning to color with embarrassment, Ron thought that he had never seen a more beautiful woman.

“When I was down in that mine and thought that I was about to be gathered up to my eternal reward, my one outstanding regret was that I wouldn’t be able to tell you how much I really loved you.” He looked into Sally’s eyes and, as he looked, he saw them well up with tears and a smile begin to light up her face.

“Oh Ron! You don’t know how many times I prayed those same words. I love you too, more than I ever realized!”

“After we’re married—”

“You want to marry me?”

Ron nodded. “I sure do, and you’re going to have to spend a lot of time teaching me to loosen up a little. Will you marry me Sally?”

“Oh, yes Ron! Yes!”

Ron brought Sally closer and felt her arms go around him. He bent his lips to hers and kissed her, long and hard, with all the fervor that his thankful heart contained. He broke off the kiss reluctantly. “I did a lot of thinking in that hole and had a lot of regrets. I realized I had become a crusty old bachelor. But do you know what my biggest regret was?” Sally shook her head. “I regretted that, were I to die in that hole, I’d never get to know you, to *love* you.”

“Oh Ron!” Sally cried. “I’m so glad God saw fit to preserve your life. I want to love you too, for the rest of my life!”

Sally threw herself against Ron and hugged him fiercely. They stood there in the kitchen, hugging each other for a long time, until Mary broke the spell.

“Are you gonna marry Mommy?” she asked, looking up at Ron with the innocent expression only a child can possess.

The two of them looked down at the little girl, laughter erupting from them. Ron squatted down to her level. “Would you like that, Mary?”

Mary responded by giving Ron a big hug. “You’d be a good daddy!”

“Well, I think I could, with God’s help ... and yours. Will you help me to be a good daddy?”

“Uh-huh,” Mary said brightly, as she hugged him again. She looked up at her mother. “Right, Mommy?”

“Yes Sweetheart. Come; let’s let Ron eat his breakfast. He must be starving.”

“Not as much as I’ve been starved for love.” Ron admitted.

Sally’s warm smile told him his love malnutrition had ended.

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As he sat across the table from Sally, Ron took time between mouthfuls to study her. More often than not, she looked back at him; smiling with a look of puzzlement on her face, wondering at his scrutiny. He could almost feel the fervor in her heart, which matched his own. He knew that she too offered up the same prayers of thanksgiving he did, thanks for the second chance they both had gained, but not expected. Then again, God existed as the God of second chances. He, who gave His Son for a sinful mankind, understood the sacrifices they entailed.

He invented the *sacrifice play*.