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## A Needy Reign

by Calvin Dark

On that summer day when Aunt Janie was born Great-Grandma Maggie said we got a needy rain. Needy for the tomatoes and beans that were frightfully dry. Needy for the grazing creatures whose parched throats were not satisfied by the water we provided. We, who toiled in the life-giving ground of the old home place, rejoiced because such a rain was needy.

As Aunt Janie grew, she did exactly for the old home place what the needy rain did for the dry ground and parched throats. She had a way of bringing new life and new hope to folks who felt the toil of the years heavy on their shoulders. So, you know that it hit us mighty hard when Aunt Janie (who was “just a handful of fortnights a woman,” according to Great-Grandma Maggie) said that she wanted to leave the old home place and live in New York City.

Well, the old folks threw up their hands and bombarded Aunt Janie with the Gospel Truth about New York City, or, as the Prophet Ezekiel more aptly referred to it, the valley of dry bones. They said that the air reeked of ashes and sulfur and its wide boulevards were paved with sin and laden with strife. And its poor inhabitants, whose lot it was to travel that hopeless highway, were pitiful, sinful creatures who grazed ignorantly on a dead, desolate hill.

Aunt Janie listened carefully and respectfully, but when the old folks had described every imaginable lurking evil, her mind was unchanged. Aunt Janie said good-bye and promised she would one day return, though the old folks doubted they would ever see her again on This Side.



But when the next summer rolled around, the season of needy rains, we got word that Aunt Janie was coming home to visit and needed somebody to meet her at the Greensboro Train Depot. We sent Cousin Howard after her (for his enterprises regularly took him to that big city 32 miles away) though we didn’t know what to expect when she arrived. (There was no telling—as the old folks assured—of the toll that living in such dry, lifeless conditions can have on even the sweetest soul.) Yet, when Aunt Janie—stylish, sophisticated and regal—stepped out of Cousin Howard’s car, new life was breathed into the old home place in a way that was unmistakably described.

“My Lawd,” Great-Grandma Maggie said. “Janie looks like a queen!”

And on that summer day when Aunt Janie came home, we got a needy reign. Needy for the old folks whose only fear of traveling to the Other Side was the possibility of passing through sinful places far from the old home place. Needy for the young folks who dreamed of stepping out into the world beyond the mailbox at the end



of our dirt road. We, who toiled through the years, surely rejoiced because such a reign was needy.

Per Great-Grandma Maggie's apt coronation, Aunt Janie became our Queen and with the same awe filled enthusiasm that we welcome the season of needy rains, we honored those royal summer visits. Whenever the word arrived, by telegram, letter or long-distance phone call to Crutchfield's Store, the old home place experienced rebirth. Great-Grandma Maggie would make a new whisk broom from a pine tree and give the front porch a good sweeping. Uncle Uriah would take care of all the fixin'up tasks around the old home place that he had been putting off all year. We all, in our own ways, set our mind to putting our best foot forward for our Queen's visit. On the appointed day, Cousin Howard applied a perfect shine to his car and drove all the way to the Greensboro Train Depot to fetch our sovereign. And when Her Majesty gracefully emerged, we all curtsied and bowed as she was lead to the royal suite awaiting her.

Now, the old folks will throw up their hands and bombard you with the real Gospel Truth about New York City or, as we more aptly refer to it, Queen Aunt Janie's Northern Kingdom. Up there, the air is thick with prosperity and sunshine and its inhabitants (our kinfolks by virtue of a place in the same royal family) are enlightened beings. These blessed folks have the pleasure of traveling along those wide boulevards towards happiness, newly repaved with gold and laden with alabaster.

And just when the old folks thought they had described every blessing imaginable, Queen Aunt Janie revealed more glorious details about that magical place, New York City. There were great big tall buildings upon which Queen Aunt Janie claimed she could see Uncle Marvin tending to his tomatoes on a clear day. (The old folks realized that they would likely pass by one of those great buildings on their way Up, but there was no longer a reason to fear.) Queen Aunt Janie could even speak that foreign sophisticated talk of the Northern Kingdom and sometimes showed us breath-taking pictures which proved that she had breathed life into that formerly dry, desolate place.

Now the royal visits followed a meticulous schedule and every little detail was handled carefully. First, Queen Aunt Janie held private audiences with her mother, Great-Grandma Maggie, followed by her sisters, Grandma Mabel, Aunt Fannie and Aunt Hannah. When those private audiences concluded, we feasted on a grand supper of glorious fare fit for a queen. And without fail, we got a good rain on the evenings when Queen Aunt Janie visited. A rain that was always needy.

After supper, Queen Aunt Janie would go to her porch throne (Great-Grandma Maggie's rocking chair) and sip iced tea with lemon while savoring her Southern Kingdom. She would raise her hand and allow the breeze to caress it in the way that she was used to. She would take in the fresh country air that smelled like rain and rich life-giving red mud. Then she would search the soothing expanse of the porch's panorama for the hustling and bustling of passersby and listen for horns honking, sirens blaring and tempers flaring. But they weren't there and this pleased Her Majesty.

When Queen Aunt Janie raised her hand and nodded her head, the most anticipated segment of the royal visit commenced. One after the other, we lined up around the porch with gifts and tokens for our Queen. Flanking the throne was the royal court, Great-Grandma Maggie, Grandma Mabel and Aunt Hannah, who assisted in the collection of gifts and the facilitation of audiences. The twin sentries, Uncle Protus and Uncle Radius, stood at perfect angles along the porch steps, to guide each loyal subject to the throne.



Typically, Aunt Pauline, wearing a fresh coat of auburn dusk #32 on her graying locks and a new pair of stockings, approached first, bearing polished jars of her best canned beets and string beans. (We had no illusion that Queen Aunt Janie would actually eat or need our canned preserves, for in New York City, professionals package berries and pickles, relishes and beans in neatly labeled containers. Nonetheless, Queen Aunt Janie gracefully accepted the vacuumed-sealed mementos like treasured artifacts from a long, gone, yet tender, epoch.) Once the preserves were put aside, Aunt Pauline and Queen Aunt Janie (born friends and cousins by marriage) remembered the time they skinned up their arms and legs running through the briar patch behind Rev. Uncle A. Passmore Burnette's house. Aunt Eva had promised that the next time those two came home after supper was on the table, their first course would be a whoppin' like no other.

"We got there just in time!" Queen Aunt Janie laughed.

"And we sho got that whoppin'!" Aunt Pauline reminded, causing a tickle to spread across the porch which provoked laughter so potent that tears flowed. (Though they made it in the nick of time, they had ripped holes in their dresses and scarred their arms and legs—habits not becoming of young ladies and, according to Aunt Eva, deserving of a great all-time beating.) When the tickle faded, Aunt Pauline bowed away, allowing the next loyal subject her due audience.

Cousin Lossie genuflected as far down as she could to present a patchwork quilt began weeks before the royal word arrived. The court rose and helped Cousin Lossie unfold the quilt to fully display the sea of red, pink and lavender tulips, Her Majesty's favorite blossom. (We were not so naïve as to think that Queen Aunt Janie would use or need our hand-made quilt to stay warm, for in New York City, professionals manipulate powerful machines to regulate the temperature. All the same, Aunt Janie would prominently display Cousin Lossie's handiwork in her fancy company parlor, like an offering from the kind natives of a foreign, yet specially familiar, land.) Queen Aunt Janie's eyes lit up as she ran her hand over the soft, delicate craftsmanship and marveled at the masterpiece born from the stitching together of insignificant, individual patches. After an appropriate pause, Cousin Lossie rose and the court carefully folded the quilt and placed it next to the throne.

The sky darkened as Cousin Amajean made her way up the porch steps. Still dressed in the black dress and a worn, weary widow's face, she bore the news that her husband, Cousin Raeford had passed just days before we got the word. He fell ill just after the New Year, she said, and he struggled so, through the spring. He tried to hold on through the summer, to see how much corn came in, if the tomatoes would be as promising as the almanac predicted and, Lawd willing, to see his Queen one more time. Then Cousin Amajean finally let loose all her tears as she embraced Queen Aunt Janie who displayed such tenderness and strength that it wrapped around the porch, overtaking all those who toil through the years.

Sis. Marlois's timing is as blessed as the voice the good Lawd gave her, for she was already standing on the top porch step before that great panorama to present her perennial offering. When she raised her hand, an odd summer wind chilled our natural bodies and familiarly warmed our souls as the porch's wooden planks rocked under our tapping feet.

*"Through the years,  
I keep on toiling,*



*Toiling through the storm and rain.  
Faithfully waiting and watching,  
‘Til my Savior comes again.”*

Uncle Protus and Uncle Radius angled their deep voices to form a perfect harmony.

*“Hide me, hide me  
Hide me, hide me  
In your love.  
Oh, write my name.  
Write my name above.”*

And then all who know that the toil of the years will one day come to an end, sang.

*“And when the gates swing open,  
I’ll walk on in.”*

(Now we had no doubt that Queen Aunt Janie would keep and need this melody, even though in New York City, professionals use sophisticated and shiny instruments to perform life’s score. More than anything, Queen Aunt Janie would let our song shine like a light on a hill, a powerful binding illumination from the old home place visible any day from atop those great big tall buildings of the Northern Kingdom.)

The procession of offerings continued as the stars lit up the throne room. In fact, every soul but mine was wrapped up in the observation of audiences. I was four years old and mighty troubled because I had nothing to give. So, I snuck away from the porch to look for a gift worthy of royalty.

Just beyond the porch, near the old swing, lived Bro. Belvedere, Great-Grandma Maggie’s holy Billy goat. (Common farm animals have but one name, but Bro. Belvedere’s holiness, uncommon of folks and beasts, earned him fellowship with the saints and the respected prefix.) From his quaint fenced-in residence, Bro. Belvedere watched the presentations and prayed that Sis. Marlois would render another moving selection. In his short and blessed life, Bro. Belvedere had seen three royal visits and the proximity of his sanctuary to the throne distinguished him from the pitiful, sinful creatures that ignorantly grazed just over the hill.

In the far corner of Bro. Belvedere’s sanctuary, tiny scattered unfamiliar objects called out and beckoned me to my knees for a closer look. What I saw appeared to be a luscious, yet undiscovered, fruit—small, round, brown berries dusted by Mama Nature and in plentiful abundance. I reached under the wire fence and gathered two heaping handfuls before racing back to the porch. Though Bro. Belvedere didn’t take his attention off of his Queen, he did manage to lift his head to Heaven and whisper “Lawd have mercy” as I awkwardly ran with my discovery.

When I returned, Queen Aunt Janie had just thanked Cousin Bess for an oddly shaped metallic article attached to a crank and a bucket. (Queen Aunt Janie had only vague recollections of its usage, but was sure that its function was in dairy.) When Cousin Bess curtsied out of the way, I approached with my head bowed and deposited into Queen Aunt Janie’s waiting palms the offering from the toil of my hands and the soil of Bro. Belvedere’s home.

Now my gift was not at all familiar to the Queen nor could she speculate on this strange fruit's origins. When she turned to her court for enlightenment, Grandma Mabel easily recognized the manure of the most upright and sanctified goat in the county. (Now we were sure that Aunt Janie would never want or need my offering, nor would it ever earn a prominent place, for in New York City, professionals handle the manure of all creatures—holy and sinful, ignorant and enlightened.) Her Majesty's face contorted and she let out an exclamation truly unbefitting of royalty (but one her loyal subjects quickly forgave.) My gift was hurled off to the side of the porch and the audience was dismissed so that Queen Aunt Janie's hands could get a good, royal cleaning.

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**T**he years and toil of both the Northern and Southern kingdoms passed and we were blessed with many royal words and visits. Through decades of presentations and offerings, our annual audiences never lost nary a hint of their splendor. Yet, even we knew that though great reigns are timeless, they are never without end. The last time we received the word it came from a doctor at the nursing home in Greensboro where Queen Aunt Janie had chosen to spend her last days. He informed us that Her Majesty was mighty low and the hour of the final royal audience was nigh.

In her room that night, we joined hands around Queen Aunt Janie, though medical professionals assured that she remembered little and was conscious of even less. Aunt Pauline approached and bowed those beautiful white tresses—long free of auburn dusk #32. She tenderly slid her finger above Queen Aunt Janie's elbow to that precious scar that earned that great all-time beating. Cousin Bess straightened the corners of Cousin Lossie's patchwork quilt that had been brought down from the attic just for the Queen. Sis. Marlois stood at the foot of the bed-turned-throne and said a silent prayer before rendering a selection that caused an oddly familiar breeze to blow. We, who still toiled, and those, like Bro. Belvedere, whose toiling was done, patted our feet and sang along.

I prayed that night that royalty would be passed down, as it tends to be. When the song was over, I approached my Queen and offered her my hand. To everyone's surprise, Queen Aunt Janie opened her eyes and slowly reached towards me. And just as our hands touched and the transfer of power began, Queen Aunt Janie used the last measure of her strength to jerk away. Then, her face contorted as she laughed much harder than medical professionals would have believed.

We laughed until we cried as Queen Aunt Janie departed this kingdom for the Next. ■

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