

"Party Line" is ~~the~~ first in a series of anticipated short stories in response to the modern dilemma of separation, alienation, & fragmentation.

In my fiction, ^{Primitive Baptist} community of Calvin, the installation of telephones in ~~the early~~ 1950 replaced ~~the~~ ^{the} need to visit, and modern technology in general altered the previous communal ^{of} neighbors and coworkers.

As the party line is replaced by the single party system, separation & lack of communication progresses, culminating in complete isolation around a television ~~set~~ monitor. This ^{convenient apparatus} marks the collapse of community sharing, and ~~the~~

The characters in "Party Line" are the last generation to hold to the ~~harmony~~ ^{harmony} of the traditional, rural community, & their grasp are slipping. Even the calm Miss Bertie is generous and concerned, albeit curious concern. Calv is the product of the beginning phase of materialism sweeping across the plains to the flat ⁱⁿ woods like wild fire.

1950
A. J. P. P.

Aug. 21, 1986

rough draft

"Party Line"

By the second ring Miss Bertie had almost finished hanging the clothes on the long line strung from pecan tree to post.

"Two shorts," she said, scowling with concentration, peering straight ahead as if the chicken yard scattered with clucking white pullets ~~was the~~ ^{focus of} her thoughts.

But she ~~retrieved~~ ^{bent} the pair of curled socks from the bottom of the basket, flapped them staunchly & pinned them at the end of the clothes ~~flapping in the~~ ^{May} wind, bellowing in the August breeze. A faint ^{chime} of bleach ~~infused~~ her as she tagged each wet ~~piece~~ garment on her ~~clasp~~ back to the house.

In her eagerness ~~she~~ ^{she} became her feet became entangled on the ^{3p} brittle mat as she brushed them, and she was delayed by having to beat it out & sweep the morning mud ~~and~~ of the door steps again.

"Lordy Mercy" she said as she made her way to the black ~~note~~ phone tacked ~~copied~~ upon the kitchen wall.

Her efficient ^{right} hands ^{extended} fumbled before she neared it, ~~already~~ feeling the vibrations before hearing the sounds, and then she clutched it like

the neck of a mean rooster. ~~for revenge~~
"Is somebody ~~using~~ on the phone?" she
~~shouted~~ said, contributing a high pitch to the
buzzing.

"That you, Sister Bertie?" asked Miss
Eula.

"Yeh. That you, ^{Sister} Eula?"

"Yeh. The d Ruby Nell was just about
to get off. She just called up to see if I wanted
a mess of fish her & Mr. Jim caught."

"How you ^{Sister} Ruby Nell?" asked Miss Bertie,
straining slightly towards the phone as she
squeaked up on the tall ^{stool} ~~stool~~ ^{perched} ~~perched~~ ^{perched} ~~perched~~.

"Fine. How y'all getting on?" ~~asked~~ Ruby Nell
said ^{stuffy}.

"Down in my back. Hair & sleep many
winks in I don't know when I ~~was~~ told Caley,
"I don't hardly get 'em with one thing before another 'em
jumps on me, seems like. You had any hearing
from Avie Nell?"

"She called up night before last..."

"I'll let y'all have it for awhile. I got a
mess of peas ~~wants~~ to get shelled," said
Miss Eula. "Y'all come over and shell with me,"
she added.

"I got a bucket waiting on me now. Caley bring
em in this ^{first thing this} morning. ~~for~~ You need any, Sister Ruby Nell?"
asked Miss Bertie.

"I've got a plenty, thank you. ~~My~~ I done filled up my freezer. Ain't even got no room for ~~no more~~ fish," said ^{Miss} Ruby Nell. "Y'all ~~all~~ want any fish, Sister Bertie?"

"~~I got a~~" We had a men & pikes ~~last~~ for last night's supper..."

"Sister Bertie, is that you?" trilled a sweet voice.

"~~How~~" How you been, Sister Addie? We got two more on the line with us. Sister Ruby Nell and Sister Eula. Say hey."

"Hey Sister Ruby Nell and Sister Eula. How y'all getting on?"

"Fine."

"Fine."

"I hadn't seen y'all since Big Meeting. Where y'all been keeping yourselves?" asked Addie.

"How're you, Sister Addie?" asked Miss Eula. "You need any peas."

"I got a plenty, thank you. Fall peas is just coming in. Y'all need any Ruby Nell?"

"We got a plenty, thank you, Sister Addie. How y'all ^{done} ~~been~~?"

"Fine. I just got through washing up the breakfast dishes and figgered I'd call up Ruth Ann & see how the young'un is doing with these colds."

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"Well, I'll let y'all have it," said Miss Eula.

"She ever get over Bobbie Dean taking off ^{the} ~~the~~ asked Miss Bertie.

"Her & the youngsters is fine," said Miss Addie.

"She's a good strong woman," said Ruby Nell.

"She sure is," said Miss Eula.

"She ain't the first 'un ever get dumped for a ~~younger~~ ^{younger} ~~woman~~ ^{girl}," said Miss Vertie, standing now to wipe a smudge off the ~~linoleum~~ counter, stretching the cord taut. Waitin'.

"The Lord always ~~provide~~ ^{provide} give us strength when we need it," said Miss Eula.

"That's what I told her," said Miss Addie.

"She got any notion what got into him?" ^{asked} ~~Miss Bertie~~ ^{Miss Bertie}.

"Well, I ~~reckon~~ reckon I'll get on to my peas?" Y'all come," said Miss Eula.

"They ain't nothin' I'd like no better than setting out on your big old porch, Sister Eula, I shelly peas like we used to. It just seem like they ain't time for nothin' no more," said Miss Addie.

"Ain't that the ^{Lord's} truth?" said Miss Ruby Nell. "Med ~~Demba~~ ^{Demba} was ~~talking~~ ^{talking} talking."

about that yesterday evening."

~~That~~ "You know that's what Brother Bob was preaching about ~~last~~ first Sunday. Times passing so fast we can't keep up with it. Dad & Dardly have time for each other no more," said Miss Bertie.

"Well y'all morin' & full come to come over & set on my porch any time, 'I gotta' go now," said Miss Eula.

"Me too. ~~The~~ Jan's 's done setting on the seat of the boat waiting on me," said Ruby Nell.

"Like 'I was saying Brother Bob was preaching on sin last ~~last~~ first Sunday. Said sin was taking over the world. Families busting up and all. You take Ruth Ann's care now. They ain't no telling what she put up with towards the last. 'Is they?' said Vertie, hunched over on the stool with her arms ~~wrapped~~ ^{laced} in the ~~cord~~ ^{telephone} like ~~spine~~ ^{spine} striggs. "Like Sister Eula says the last time we talked on the phone, Ruth Ann always ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~frail~~ ^{frail} timid even as a youngun."

"'I ~~didn't~~ ^{don't} recall saying that," piped Miss Eula.

"She's fine," ~~said~~ ^{trilled} Miss Addie.

"Ain't a stronger woman in these parts," Miss Ruby Nell boasted. (boasted).

"I don't reckon Sister Evla meant nothing by it. She was just bringin' up how ~~she~~ ^{Miss Vertie} always let the other young'un in Calvin, run over her when they was ~~swampin' up~~ ^{stayin' up}; " said Miss Vertie, gettin' up and ~~was~~ ^{was} tanglein' herself.

"Quinb's done crunk up the truck ~~again~~. I gotta go. Y'all come," said Miss Ruby Nell.

"I see my milk cow taking off down the lane and they ain't a soul here to get her in but me," said Miss Evla ~~and~~.

"You want me & Quinb to ~~run~~ ^{run} by?"

"No, I reckon I can get her in by myself. ~~She's gentle~~ I'll just gentle her up with some ^{shell} corn. ^{pre-eggate pit.} But I ~~will~~ ^{will} thank you."

"I had a milk cow like that one time. Ever one I got since then 'ud kick the fire out of you. Any of y'all seen the rolling stone ^{comedy} ~~that~~ ^{that} looked Miss Vertie, tryin' to put a pot of ham hocks on to boil for the unshelled peas with her ^{unhanded} left hand. Water sloshed on her feet. She

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grabbed a bleached dish towel and tossed
it to the puddle, stretching ~~it~~ a long
leg encased in white support stocking. The
heel of her big foot scoured the floor, scooted
the cloth up to her hand. And she started
over.

"If I ain't been by here yet, but I'm
expecting him any time ^{now}," said Miss Addie.
"His stuff's done got too ^{high} ~~expensive~~ for
me," said Miss Ruby Nell.

"But ain't it ~~convenient~~ ^{right handy} to have a
store come right by your house. We
been doing business with her since before
the war," said Miss Eula.

"He's getting on up there in age. Ain't
he?" asked Miss Ruby Nell.

"He's showing ~~his age~~," said Miss Addie.
"I got two dozen eggs to swap off for
nocher eggs. Them hens is laying them down
to death in this rainy spell."

"We have had ~~some~~ rain," said Miss
Eula. "Old Betsy's come back up eating
on the pear tree."

"I know you got to go. Pinks is cut off
the truck, just sitting there. ~~Miss~~ Addie,
I reckon you needin' to get on and

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call up Ruth Ann before you start dinner."

"You tell her we're all praying for her. She's been on my mind ~~regular~~ regular, ever since that good for nothing ~~Dobby Duggan~~ took off. I told Cauley last night, they ain't no call for such. Her a fine upstanding woman. And her with three little ones to look after. He ~~sending~~ helping her out any with the money?"

"I expect," said Miss Addie.

"How much is he giving her for groceries and stuff?" asked Miss Bertie sitting again and shelling a bowl of peas while she scowled over the black receiver bracketed to her shoulder like to her mouth like a brace.

"He's giving her some along & along," said Miss Addie.

"It's a crying shame," said Miss Bertie, looking up to watch Cauley pass ~~to the~~

He went on to the ~~the~~ long plank table & sat, propping his arms ~~up~~ and resting his chin ~~so~~ watch her with his black eyes.

His black hair was wet with sweat & ~~splashed~~ matted on his forehead. The a spring stuck up on top like black bird feathers. He was pale & passive. ~~Just watching.~~

"Yall done got done with ~~that~~
~~the~~ tobacco?" asked Miss Bertie.

He nodded.

"Run get a change of overalls on &
~~Yall~~ while I get your dinner," she
said.

"Yessum," he said, tagging each
straight back chair on his way out.

"That was Cawley. He just come in
for dinner. Wore out from ~~working~~ sheeting
up tobacco since first light," she said,
into the black brace.

"I ~~was~~ glad we ain't got it no more,"
said Miss Eula.

"Me too. They ain't nothing I hate
no more ~~than~~ working tobacco," said Miss
Ruby Nell.

"You still stopping?" asked Miss
Bertie.

"Who, Me?" asked Miss Ruby Nell.

"Was you talking to me?" asked
Miss Eula.

"I ain't deppid in twenty some
odd year," said Miss Addie.

"I was asking Ruby Nell Dice," said
Miss Bertie.

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"Oh!"

"I take a dip now & again setting out
on the river bank," ~~the~~ Mrs Kelly Nell
said.

"Well, I got to get dinner on. You
be coming," said Mrs Vertu as Carly ambled
back through in sun fresh overalls.

"You'll come to see me," said Mrs. Euler.
"We'll set & shell peas together like old
times."

"You'll know when I'll live!"

"Me too. Got to take off & catch
Jimbo. He's ^{drove} ~~at~~ ^{on} the ^{up} ~~the~~ road. ~~Bye~~"
Bye, bye."

"See you later."

You come.

~~Have come.~~

Mrs Vertu slid the precious
receiver back on the hook & set
about hastily preparing dinner, snappy
peas that were shells.

Carly sat again & cupped his
chin in his stained hands.

"Go get washed up for dinner," his
mother said and he ~~ambled~~ ^{glomped} off.

She watched him go and gently
removed the receiver again, & ~~swaddled~~ ^{swaddled} tea.

month piece in a quilt towel and
~~listened to the buzzing as she~~
~~went about her daily~~
contented with the buzzing as she
stretched toward the stone.