

SYNOPSIS

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

In my fictive, Primitive Baptist community of Calvin, Ga. the installation of telephones in ^{THE} 1950's replaces the traditional need to visit, and modern technology, in general, alters the previous communion of rural neighbors and coworkers.

As the party line is replaced by the single party system, separation and lack of communication progress, culminating in complete isolation around a television monitor. This convenient apparatus marks the collapse of community sharing.

The characters in "Party Line" are the last generation to hold to the harmony of the traditional, rural community, and their grasps are slipping. Even the catty Miss Bertie is generous and concerned, albeit curious concern. Cauley is the product of the beginning phase of ^{passivism} ~~materialism~~ sweeping across the plains to the flatwoods like wildfire.

revised 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 bent and retrieved the pair of curled socks from the bottom of the basket, flapped them staunchly and pinned them at the end of the ^{LINE OF} clothes billowing in the August breeze. A taint of chlorine bleach enfolded her as she tagged each wet garment on her dash back to the house.

In her eagerness, her feet became entangled on the bristly mat as she brushed them, and she was delayed by having to beat it out and sweep the ~~morning~~ ^{GA.} mud off the doorsteps again.

"Lordy Mercy," she said as she made her way to the black phone tacked lopsidedly upon the tongue-and-groove wall of the kitchen.

Her efficient right hand extended and fumbled before she neared it, feeling the vibrations before hearing the sounds, and then she clutched it like the neck of a mean rooster.

"Is somebody on the phone?" she said, contributing a high pitch to the buzzing.

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

"Yeah. That you, Sister Eula?"

"Yeah. Me and Ruby Nell was just about to git off. She just called me up to see if I wanted a mess of fish her and Mr. Eck caught yesterdy."

"How you, Sister Ruby Nell?" asked Miss Bertie, straining slightly towards the phone as she squirreled up on the K-Mart stool and perched.

"Fine. How y'all getting on?" Miss Ruby Nell said, gruffly.

"Down in my back. I ain't slep nary wink in I don't know when. I told Cauly last night, I don't hardly get'un with one thing before another'un 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 to get shelled," said Miss Eula. "Yall come over and shell with me," she added.

"I got a bushel waiting on me now. Cauly brung'em in ~~the~~ first thing this morning. You need any, Sister Ruby Nell?" asked Miss Bertie.

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

"We had a mess of pikes for last night's supper..."

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

"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 Miss Addie.

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

"I got aplenty, thank you. Fall peas is just coming in. Yall need any, Sister Ruby Nell?"

"We got aplenty, thank you, Sister Addie. How yall doing?"

"GOOD AS CAN BE EXPECTED."

"Fine. I just got done washing up the breakfast dishes and figgered I'd call up ^{BARBRANN} ~~Ruth Ann~~ and see how the young'uns is doing with their colds."

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

"She ever git over Bobby Dean taking off like that?" asked Miss Bertie.

"Her and the young'uns is fine," said Miss Addie.

"She'e a good strong woman," said ^{MISS}Ruby Nell.

"She's sure is," said Miss Eula.

"She ain't the first'un ever got dumped for a younger woman," said Miss Bertie, standing now to wipe a smudge off the linoleum counter, stretching the cord taut. Waiting.

"The Lord always gives us strength when we need it," said Miss Eula.

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

"She got ary notion what got into him?" asked Miss Bertie.

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

"They ain't nothing I'd like no better'n setting out on your big old porch, Sister Eula, and shelling peas like we used to. It just seems like they ain't time for nothing no more," said Miss Addie.

"Ain't that the Lord's truth?" said Miss Ruby Nell.

"Me and ~~Eck~~ was talking about that yesterdy evening."

"You know that's ^{JUST} what Brother Reeves was preaching on last first Sunday. Time's passing so fast we can't hardly keep up with it. Don't hardly have time for each other no ~~NOTHING~~ ND more," said Miss Bertie.

"Well, yall more'n welcome to come over and set on my porch anytime. I gotta' go now," said Miss Eula.

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

"Like I was saying, Brother ~~Bob~~^{REEVES} was preaching on sin~~ning~~ last first Sunday. Said sin was taking over the world. Families busting up and all. You take ~~Ruth Ann's~~^{BARBRANN'S} case now. They ain't no tellings what she put up with towarge the last. Is they?" said Miss Bertie, hunched over on the stool with her arms wrapped in the telephone^{CORD} like shoe laces. "Like Sister Eula says the last time we talked on the phone, ~~Ruth Ann~~^{BARBRANN} always was timid even as a youngun."

"I don't ~~recall~~^{RECOLLECK} saying ~~that~~^{NOTHING LIKE}," piped Miss Eula.

"She's fine," trilled Miss Addie.

"Ain't a stronger woman in these parts," Miss Ruby Nell bolstered.

"I don't reckon Sister Eula meant nothing by it. She was just bringing up how ~~little~~^{OLE BARBRANN} ~~Ruthie~~ always let the other young'uns in Calvin run over her when they was growing up," said Miss Bertie, getting up and untangling herself.

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

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

"You want me and Eck to run by?"

"No. I reckon I can get her in by myself. I'll just gentle her up with some shellcorn. But I 'prechate it."

"I had a milk cow like that one time. Ever one I got since then'ud kick the fire out of you. Any of yall seen the rolling store come by this morning?" asked Miss Bertie, trying to put a pot of ham hocks on to boil for the unshelled peas with her unhandy left hand. Water slosed on her scrubbed floor. She grabbed a bleached dishtowel and tossed it to the puddle, stretching a leg encased in elastic stockings toward it. The toe of her big foot scoured the floor, scooted the cloth up to her hand, and she started over.

"He ain't been by here yet. But I'm expecting him anytime now," said Miss Addie. "That's how come I was calling ~~Ruth Ann~~ ^{BARBRAWN} up now."

"His stuff's done got too high to suit me," said Miss Ruby Nell.

"But ain't it handy having a store come right by your house. We been doing business with him since right after

the war," said Miss Eula.

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

"He's showing it," said Miss Addie.

"I got two dozen eggs to swap off for grochries. Them hens is laying theirselves to death in this rainy spell," said Miss Bertie.

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

"I know yall got to go. Eck's cut off the truck, just setting there. Sister Addie, I reckon you needin' to get on and call up ~~Ruth Ann~~ ^{BARBARA} before you start dinner."

"You tell her we're all apraying for her. She's been on my mind reg'lar, ever since that good for nothing Bobby Dean up and took off. I told Cauley no longer'n last night, they ain't no call for such. Her a fine upstanding woman. And her with three little ~~ones~~ ^{'s} to raise. He helping her out any with the money?"

"I expect so," said Miss Addie.

"How much is he giving her for grochræes and stuff?" asked Miss Bertie, sitting again and shelling a bowl of

peas while she scowled over the black receiver bracketed from shoulder to mouth like a brace.

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

"It's a crying shame," said Miss Bertie, looking up to watch Caulley pass, THROUGH THE ^{GENEROUS} ~~LONG~~ WINDOW STRIP OF NOON SUN,

He went on to the long plank table and sat, propping his arms and resting his chin to watch her with his black ballbearing eyes. His black hair was wet with sweat and matted on his forehead, pale and passive. A sprig of hair stuck up on top like a rooster's cone.

"Yall done got done with that tobaccer?" asked Miss Bertie, lowering the receiver a fraction with the motion of her jaw.

He nodded.

"Run git a changing of overhauls on while I git your dinner," she said.

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

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

"I'm glad we ain't got none no more," said Miss Eula.

"Me, too. They ain't nothing I hate no worser'n working tobaccor," said Miss Ruby Nell.

"Tobaccor dinner was what I despised. Lord, I tell you that was rough work. Up before day picking stuff out of the garden to fill hands up on. They was a many of a day I was wringing chicken necks at sunup for chicken and rice. And, remember, we used to have to ~~cook on~~ ^{STAND OVER} them ~~hot~~ ^{CONSERVED} wood stoves in the middle of summer. Women don't know what hard times is these days," said Miss Bertie. "You still dipping?"

"Who? Me?" asked Miss Ruby Nell.

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

"I ain't dipped in twenty some odd years," said Miss Addie.

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

"Oh!"

"OH!"

"I take a dip now and again setting out on the river bank," Miss Ruby Nell said.

"Well, I got to git dinner on. Yall be acoming," said Miss Bertie as Cauly ambled back through in sunfresh overalls.

"Yall come to see ME," said Mrs. Eula. "We'll set and shell peas together like old times."

"Yall know where I live at."

"Me, too. Got to take off and catch Eck. He's done took on off up the road without'n me. Bye, bye."

"See you later."

"Yall come."

Miss Bertie slid the precious receiver back on the hook and set about hastily preparing dinner, snapping peas that were shells.

Cauly sat again and cupped his chin in his stained hands.

"Go git washed up for dinner," his mother said, and he slouched off.

She watched him go and gently removed the receiver again, swaddling the mouthpiece in a dishtowel, contented with the buzzing as she stretched toward the stove.