

Short short story winner, 1990 Brookie & D. K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

OUR PALACE OF GREEN AND GOLD

By Hodgson Van Wagoner



Most of us look at our laps or nap before the sacrament and the sermon.

WE'RE COMING. TO OUR PALACE OF GREEN AND gold pool-room-carpet we move, where awaits us our mobile pulpit and fold-up, stained-plastic window and veneer background facade. The carpet contours to our not-so-weighty rubber-and-spoke wheelchairs beneath our slouching, wrinkled figures which are drawn, and often pushed, to the pulpit, in this room of stale cigarette smoke and long-lost urine. Like a convoy, we come; we few who propel ourselves wind the wheels of our final chariots, then pull to the side to rest, while those stronger shuffle toward the pseudo-chapel, and those weaker glide by, the project of a light-footed priest or deacon. At the door our handsome branch presidency and their silver-blue-haired wives stoop and shake our hands; some faces we

recognize, some seem only familiar, distant, like a mild, misplaced flavor. We assemble ourselves, maneuver into place, and some of us sleep while others talk—one of us plays with a lifelike rubber baby.

To the side, the priests and deacons settle deeply into miniature sacrament preparations and await, in silent trepidation, the next step of this routine they find uncomfortable. The branch president smiles from the pulpit, touches the microphone, and the speaker inside cracks and hisses. He welcomes us—It's so nice to see all of you again, he tells us. One of us lights our cigarette on the front row, and the first counselor's wife, remembering what she has forgotten, retrieves the stand-up ash tray from across the room and sets it down next to the footrest of our wheel chair. The branch president's wife sits at the portable organ, and plays the opening song, while none of us sing and most of us look at our laps or nap before the

HODGSON VAN WAGONER lives in Ogden, Utah.

sacrament and the sermon.

The opening prayer comes first, then the sacrament song, then the blessings. The one with the baby shakes the deacon as he brings us the bread. We want to know, and very loudly, so as to hear ourself, when they are going to bless our baby. We hold our doll above our head and try to stand. The branch president who always waits at the pulpit for this very event, reminds us that our baby was already blessed—he uses the microphone to avoid the tone-of-voice shouting at the near-deaf often brings. Stepping over our leg-rests, the deacons continue. They nudge our shoulders here and there, they take the bread and the water and feed it to some of us, at arm's length, as though, perhaps, avoiding a contagious malady. Others they can't stir from our sacrament sleep—the boys look at the branch president who nods them on; they move to the next.

One of us can play the organ—we stand after the branch president announces our name, and the second counselor helps us to our bench. He turns on one light, two lights, points them at our tattered manuscript. We play the melody slowly, our face nearly against the paper, and we stop along the way to rest so as to play the last chord as long as our arthritic hands will allow. Our foot still on a bass pedal, the note trying to die away, we gather together the music, relinquish the organ, and waddle back to our chair under the arm of our escort.

The branch president announces the speaker, a visitor from the stake presidency. The visitor bellies up to the pulpit—grins broadly. One of us stands up and begins to speak.

"I want to bear my testimony," we say. The stake visitor looks at the branch president and back to us, says something unheard, and strides back to his seat to await his turn. "Ninety-

six good years now and all I want to do is hold out to the end. I just want to hold out for whatever I got left. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen." We sit down and the visitor stands up again. He thanks us for our testimony and sends love to us from the stake president. One of us slides down into our chair until our head is nearly to the seat and our bottom is hanging in space. A nurse pulls us back into place and buckles our seat belt. The visitor reminds us about service—tells us that kind words, as we pass in the halls, make us happy. It's never time to stop serving, he tells us. He sits down.

The branch president tells us he has a surprise for the closing song. His wife goes to the organ and plays through the introduction, and the two counselors come stand beside the branch president, next to the pulpit.

"God be with you till we meet again," they sing and smile. One of us begins to sing along, "Till we me-ee-eet, till we me-eet," more of us sing, "till we meet at Jesus' feet." The one of us with the cigarette adds the bass "till we meet." Our stooping figures bounce slightly as we begin the second verse—most of us are singing now, our thin voices caressing something urgent on the back sides of our hearts, and we only remember the chorus of the second and third verses and must hum or mumble everything else: "till we me-ee-et, till we me-et, till we meet at Jesus' feet (till we meet!). Till we me-ee-et, till we me-eet, God be with you till we meet again!"

A priest says the closing prayer, though most of us don't realize this, for we are asleep, our chins riding comfortably on our breasts or our cheeks on our shoulders. And when we awaken, we are moving, quietly squeaking, through the long halls of our mutual habitation. ☒

WRITHA*

Day's light dies early on deep December nights;
It is day's death, and year's death, too.
Twilight wanes and wastes to embered wanness,
And sunset's sighing breath expires.

Shepherd stars emerge from amber stables
To watch where wandering night might stray;
They spread their sheen on shadowed land or sea—
Ice-furred, they fling their light-filled frost.

We gather in the white-soft glow of stars;
We weave our words—bare crystal wraiths—
To wreaths of winter carols, low and clear,
That bind with boughs of mistletoe.

Dark night, deep stars, and descant evergreens
All merge in Christmas mysteries
To bring us to that Night, that distant Birth,
And sing us sweetly to His cradleside.

—MICHAEL R. COLLINGS

* Old English "That which is wound around"