Celeste’s Baptismal Day

Ruth Johnson*
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In Webster City, Iowa, on top of a steep incline reached by Maple Street, a narrow and pot-holed road, is a small, old church. A few people are filing in through the open doors at the back of the church. The men are all dressed in suits and the women have on hats, every one of them: a woman’s head is to be covered when in “meeting.”

Actually this is a second-hand church, once owned by the Methodists and, when their numbers were dying out in the ‘50’s, sold to a tiny religious group called the “Plymouth Brethren assemblies.” The children squeal in delight when they see the cow tank at the front of the church, sitting up on the platform. It is skirted with a white pleated cloth and there are steps to one side of it. The tank is half-filled with water. Nine young people will be baptized in this while about two hundred people watch.

So now there are three men standing in a cluster in the side aisle at the back of the church, talking. They are brother, Arent, Rich and Ansel Bolt. They are from another chapel, The Ames Gospel Chapel, and they are here with their families for the baptism. Ansel’s middle daughter is to be baptized, as is Rich’s youngest daughter. Arent will do the baptizing for the three girls from the Ames Gospel chapel; the other one is Judy Thompson. Rich is the rich one of the three; Ansel, the poor one and Arent, in-between, though more poor than rich; at least that’s the way it appears.

“I think we should try a different combination,” says Ansel. “I mean if we put in more terrimycin and reduce the filler, we’ll probably have a mixture which will do the trick for the farmers.”

“It’ll cost us more,” Arent says, “and can we afford that? If we boost the amount of terrimycin, we’ll have to raise our price. Will the farmers tolerate that?”

They think about that for a little while. Then Rich says, “I’m with Ansel on this one. Whatever we’re mixing now is not doing the trick and our customers aren’t going to keep on buying it.”

Arent has no choice but to go along. He is the oldest so he doesn’t want to seem to be outdone by his brothers. “Well,” he says, “what we could do is beef up the mixture, sell it at the same price as before and then just as the farmers are seeing results, we raise the price.” the brothers nod; it’s a kindred thought.

“What about fruit punch mix? How much are you going to order for summer sales?”

Arent!” a woman in a tattered veiled hat hisses into the cluster. She is
standing at her husband’s elbow. “Come here!”

The two break apart from the group and move into the narthex of the church.

“I really don’t think this is the time or the place to be discussing business,” Helen says with such energy that a light spray of saliva sprinkles on Arent’s face. “You do the same thing in Ames and I thought we agreed that when were in meeting it was God’s time.”

He lowers his eyes and then, finally, reaches out to grip her arm. He goes with her to stand outside the front door of the church in the warming May sunshine. A good place, he thinks, to think about God; his thoughts turn to the baptizing he will do that day. He has never done this before but he is so countrified and ignorant that the prospect of his looking foolish while trying to do something new never occurs to him. He leans over and pulls a long and tender grass stem from near the stone wall of the church and chews on it.

Rich and Ansel are still talking. Now Rich is trying to convince his younger brother to buy a car, a used car would do fine, he says. “After all, Ansel, you have three children and doesn’t it get too much to unload the panel truck every Saturday evening to use to transport your family to meeting on Sunday?” Rich drives a Cadillac, a 1956, bought used two years ago; still, he paid a lot of money for it. He is glad he is making quite a bit of money for an uneducated, unskilled middle-aged man. He wonders why Ansel is not doing as well. Ansel always looks so...tattered and so do Stella and the girls.

Why just look at the way Celeste looks today, and she’s the one who is to be baptized. Rich’s wife told him that Stella told her that she had got Celeste’s dress at a garage sale. A garage sale! And this is one of the most important day’s in the girl’s life, more important than her wedding day or her funeral, at least that’s what the Plymouth Brethren say. Rich doesn’t go along completely with everything the assemblies say, but he knows Ansel does. He just can’t understand his brother’s poverty.

Maybe Ansel isn’t doing so poorly. Maybe he’s just cheap. That’s what Arent says. Rich glances around to see where Arent went. He cannot locate him but he does notice that quite a few people are now sitting in the pews. His watch read 9:35; the service will start at 10. Ansel says, “We’ll see,” in response to Rich’s suggestion about the car.

II

“What scares you the most?” Celeste asks Valorie. The two cousins are sitting on a gravestone on the south side of the church. Valorie is dressed in a
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soft pink eyelet cotton dress with a long bright pink ribbon in her dark hair. She has on nylons.

Celeste is wearing a pink-and-blue-and-white plaid cotton dress. Her blonde hair is cut semi-short and has been home-permed. She wears plain white socks.

Valorie unfolds and folds her hands and plucks them into her lap. “I’m afraid I’ll get water in my nose and come up coughing and choking.”

“But you know how to swim.”

“Yea, but have you ever gone backwards into the water? I mean, I know what to do when I’m diving into the water. But what about backwards? If Uncle Arent tips us too far back, water is just going to naturally run into our nose. That’s what worries me. And Mom says I can’t hold my nose. She says I have to have both my hands over my chest, like this.” Here Valorie leans back over the gravestone to simulate a prone position and clasps her hands over her small, budding breasts. “Just like we’re dead. No, I guess dead people’s hands are more like this,” and now she puts her folded hands down over her crotch. “Anyway, I don’t want to cough and choke. I’ll be mortified if that happens.”

Some early June bugs are whirring in the grasses around the graves and along the fence. Birds sing, and now and again a rabbit hops by. It’s really a very nice day, much too warm for late May; the fringe of clouds on the western horizon is thickening. It could rain. If the heat builds up too much more, the coming storm could develop into a tornado.

Valorie is lost in her thoughts. “I’m scared, too,” Celeste says after some time.

“What about?” The question is asked absentmindedly.

“I’m afraid I’m going to bleed too much while I’m waiting for my turn and that when I come up out of the tank I’ll have blood on the back of my dress.”

“Celeste,” Valorie is all ears now, “I didn’t know you were having your period now. I thought we had that all calculated…” Valorie pulls on her shoulder-strap and tugs it open. She takes out a small leather-bound diary and opens it to read it.

“Yes,” she says, “you’re due in…let’s see…three days.”

“It came early,” says Celeste. “Remember last winter when I started and you told me it wouldn’t be regular for a while? Well, it came early. Now, what am I going to do?”

This is a problem bigger than choking on water. Wouldn’t it be simply awful to step up out of that tank and walk through the side door of the sanctuary, in front of all those people with blood on the back of your dress—or running down your legs. I mean, in front of all those people, especially Tim and Ivan,
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Frankie and Steve and...Celeste shudders.

“We’ve got to think about this one,” Valorie says. “Are you bleeding heavily?”

“Yes, this is the second day.”

“Gosh! Why do things like this always have to happen?”

“Oh, Valorie, I’ll just want to die if my dress is stained and all those boys see it. I’ll just run away and disappear. What am I going to do?”

“I’ve got to think. Let me just think about it for awhile. I’ll think of something.”

Celeste hugs her knees to her chin and rocks back and forth. She is sweating, as much from the thought of her disgracing herself as from the weather.

“Valorie!” someone yells from the direction of the church. “Celeste! Time to come in!”

The girls stand up. “Listen, Celeste,” Valorie grabs her cousin’s hand, “if worse comes to worse, you could skip it today.”

“You mean, forget about getting baptized?”

“Yeah. You could fake being sick.”

“But, Valorie...Well, I guess you’re right. It’s better than never facing all those cute boys again! But, please, help me think of a way. Please.”

“I’ll try. Com’on now. My mom called. They must be ready to start.”

“Go on. I’ll be there in a minute,” Celeste says.

She watches as Valorie runs off, her beautiful and rich cousin Valorie. How many times has she wished she were her! The Celeste feels the blood oozing out of her again and she sinks down onto the gravestone in desperation.

“Please, Jesus,” she whispers, “please let me get through today. Please let me get baptized without anything happening. Please. I know you’re my Friend. Please hear me. If you let me get through today, I’ll tell Janie in school tomorrow how you helped me. I’ll ask her if she wants to be saved.”

“Celeste!” someone calls from the side door of the church.

She walks slowly toward the building. She see her uncles, Arent and Rich, standing up on the landing by the front door. Their backs are to her, but she can make out a wisp of smoke coming from Rich’s hand. His cigarettes and smoking have always confused her: Celeste doubts that he is saved because he smokes. But he’s an elder in the Ames Gospel Chapel. Sometime what grown-ups do doesn’t make sense.

She enters the building and there is no hint that the service is ready to begin, no hint except for an enormous silence emanating from the scores of people sitting in the pews. They are waiting for one of the elders to give out the
first song; the silence is very loud.

Inside a meeting of the Plymouth Brethren there is no clergy; the elders of the assembly conduct the service, with no formal program agreed-upon beforehand. There is no altar or pulpit, no choir or choir loft. There is no piano or organ and no stained-glass windows. God, the faithful of this persuasion believe, wants nothing artificial.

“What did Helen have to say?” Rich asks Arent.

“Oh, the usual gripe—that we’re not supposed to be talking business in the church...Don’t pay any attention to her,” he adds.

Rich takes a puff on his cigarette. “No,” he says, “in a way I think she’s right. We shouldn’t be talking business when we come for Meeting.” He thinks for a moment. “But, have you noticed, it’s always Ansel that starts these conversations.”

“You’re right. And I can’t understand it, especially today. Celeste is getting baptized and he talks business. If that were my kid, I’d be thinking about her. This is her day. By gum, I’m excited just thinking about being the one to baptize her and Valorie and Judy.”

“Ansel always has money on his mind,” Rich says. “And that’s something I can’t understand. He so much poorer off than I am and he’s been at this Watkins selling longer than I have. I can’t figure it out. What do you suppose? Is he just not making it?”

Arent says. “I’m not sure. He came out here to Iowa two years after I did and has been at this job ever since. Either he’s not good at it or he’s stashing his money away. Of course, he does have Stella and the three girls to look after.”

“But I spend more on one dress for Valorie than he spends on all four of them! And I help out Naomi and Rich Junior, in their new lives, too. And I still live better than him. Can’t figure it out.”

“Well, you’re right. One thing I can say, though, is Ansel usually has pretty good ideas. I’m in favor of mixing this feed formula a new way.”

Rich laughs. “Let’s not get into that again right now. Helen’ll get on us again. I think it’s time to go in.” He rubs the cigarette against the painted iron railing and tosses the stub onto the grass.

Celeste walks down the side aisle towards the pew where Judy and Valorie are sitting, but then stops before she gets there. She has found where her mother is sitting. She leans over Aunt Helen and Aunt Ruth and pulls on her mother’s

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sleeve. “Mom, I’ve got a problem. I need your help...now.” Mom puts a finger up to her mouth to tell Celeste to hush up. And then Celeste feels a big hand clamp down on her shoulder. She knows it’s her dad. She doesn’t resist him and he drags her further up the aisle to where Valorie and Judy are. He holds her in his vise-like grip and with his other hand swats her on the rear end. “That will teach you to disturb the meeting, young lady. Where have you been?” and before Celeste can answer, Dad strides away.

Tears blind her eyes and Celeste feels behind her to where the pew is. She sits down. She hates him and she wants to reach out and strike someone or something and yet she doesn’t because she is now in meeting.

“How,” Valorie hisses. “Take this.” She thrusts a long, slender paper-wrapped tube, much like a thick pencil, into Celeste’s hand.

“What’s this?” Celeste whispers back.

“A Tampax.”

“What’s it for?”

“Your problem. You’re supposed to stick it up inside you.

“Do you think it will work?”

“I suppose. I’ve never used one before, but Mom said it will work.

You’re going to have to find a way to leave before your turn so you can go to the toilet.”

Celeste turns the cardboard tube over in her hands. Life is so complicated sometimes.

“Please, Jesus...” she mouths the words to herself.

The congregation begins singing “O Happy Day.” Pretty Sherry Woods is the first one to step to the baptismal tank, with her father. He is going to baptize her. Celeste’s attention is taken up with looking at Sherry’s gorgeous dress—long and silky and soft-colored. Sherry, too, has a bright ribbon in her hair.

“O Happy Day, O Happy Day, When Jesus washed my sins away...” The singing wafts to the ceiling and out the windows. It is a happy day for these people, all sunshine and salvation. The smell of honey-glazed ham and scalloped potatoes seeps up from the basement kitchen. There will be a sumptuous dinner after the service. Homemade pies and breads, salads and vegetables, jellies and pickles, and, most of all, what the Plymouth Brethren call good fellowship.

“I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” says Mr. Woods as he dips his daughter down into the water. “Amen,” the people affirm. Each person must be completely immersed in the water, a symbol of being buried with Christ and rising again from the dead.

Valorie nudges Celeste as Sherry steps up and out of the tank. “She looks
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like a wet rat! Do you think we’ll look that bad? Sam and Peter and them won’t even pay attention to us if we look like that!"

“Shhhhhhh,” Celeste says, “my mom is watching us.”

And Valorie falls silent by her side. Who will be next, Celeste wonders? Then she sees Mr. Green stand up and tiptoe to where Frankie and Steve are sitting: it is their turn. But where, Celeste thinks desperately, is Brother Ben? Why isn’t he here? She had seen him earlier and now...

“Where’s Brother Ben?” she leans over into Valorie’s ear. Brother Ben Tuininga is the most prominent elder here today, a traveling evangelist from Minneapolis, who has been invited especially to this occasion to hear each young person’s testimony of salvation before he is baptized.

“He’s in the back room, behind the platform...see, through that door,” and Valorie points into the back of the wooden pew towards a door off to the side of the alter. “That’s where we first go to give him our testimony, you know, before we get baptized. They have to make sure we’re saved.”

Of course Celeste knows. If it weren’t for her period coming at the wrong time, this is what she should be thinking about—giving her testimony to Brother Ben. She has a very special one and telling it to the important assembly leader will make this a very special day.

“Jesus,” she says to herself, “I’m so glad I know You. Thank you for being my Friend. Thank you for being with me for as long a I can remember...”

Celeste has known Jesus since, well, she says to herself, for as long as she can remember. And that’s what’s special about her testimony: she cannot name a day and an hour when she accepted Jesus as her Savior. He has always been her Savior and Friend. She has never heard anyone else give this kind of testimony and she is sure it will please Brother Ben very much. Can you imagine—knowing Jesus since you were two or so? It is wonderful! The only thing clouding this day now is her period.

“Please, Jesus, let everything go all right.”

IV

“Celeste, come with me.” Dad whispers. He tries to take her hand and she cringes from him.

She stands up and the tampon slips off her lap onto the floor. It seems to make a big sound, drawing everyone’s attention to it and Celeste. She blushes and picks it up.

In the back room Dad reaches to put his hand on her head, in his friendly, let’s-make-up way. Celeste hangs back, not liking him, not wanting him to...
touch her. She says, “Dad, I have to go to the bathroom. Is there time?”

“Go quickly,” he says, and his hand drops to his side. “Judy is getting baptized now. Then it’s Valorie’s turn while Brother Ben hears your testimony. So don’t waste time.”

She goes through the door at the back of the room. It is very bright in the hallway and she goes down the steps to the basement. The sunshine casts a rectangle of light at the bottom of the stairs, and the smell of ham and apple pie fills Celeste’s nostrils. If she can just figure out how to get this thing in, this day will be perfect. “Jesus, help me…”

She pulls at a string on the outside of the white paper wrapper, sort of like opening a box of coughdrops. She looks at the contents. The outside is hard, made of cardboard, and there is a cotton tip on one end and a string coming out the other end. Celeste pulls at the string but nothing happens.

Then she pushed on the lower half of the cardboard, and it slides up, pushing out the cotton tip which now looks like the sort of cotton pad that the dentist sticks in her mouth when she has a filling done. She figures out what to do.

She feels the cotton swab go deep inside of her. It’s all white and clean and safe. Celeste pulls out the cardboard tube and tosses it into the toilet.

“Thank you, Jesus,” she says.

Celeste carefully wraps her used sanitary pad in a long, long piece of toilet paper. She drops it into the wastebasket and goes up the stairs.

Brother Ben motions for her to come sit beside him. “Today is a big day for you, Celeste,” he says. He looks right into her eyes and she looks back, falling in love with his grey ones. “Can you tell me what it means to be baptized?”

“It means that I want to identify publicly with Jesus.”

“Yes, good. Can you tell me what happens when you are baptized?”

The brightness in the room dims as a cloud skitters across the sun. Light flickers in and out, on and off, through the plain glass window with the wispy cloud’s sojourn.

“When I go down into the water,” Celeste says, “I am being buried with Jesus. When I am brought up, I am being raised with Him. Then I am a new creature.”

“Yes, good. Can you tell me, does baptism save?”

“No, I must accept Jesus as my Savior first and then be baptized.”

“Yes, very good.” Brother Ben scratches the mole on the side of his nose. He runs his hand over his slicked-back hair. “Tell me about when you accepted Jesus.”

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Celeste takes a deep breath. “Brother Ben,” says she, sitting up very straight in her chair, “I’ve known Jesus as my Savior since I was about three.”

Brother Ben sucks in some air. Celeste say, “He has been my Friend for as long as I can remember. There isn’t a time when I’ve not known Him. I talk to Him all the time.”

There, she had said it—the most important thing in her life. Celeste feels warm and safe inside. Everything is going perfectly today. She can feel that the tampon is working; she’s all dry down there. And now she is going to be the “star” today because hers will be the most spectacular testimony. When Brother Ben starts spreading the word that Celeste gave the most impressive testimony, then everyone will notice her, especially the teen-age boys.

Brother Ben clears his throat. “I am most happy to hear that our Lord has been your Friend for so long. I am most moved by what you said. Celeste, my dear. But, please, tell me just one more thing: on what day did you accept Him as your Savior? Just tell me the time and the place—was it at Bible camp or during family devotions or in Sunday School class? When, Celeste, did you accept Him as Savior:?”

Celeste looks at Brother Ben, a question mark on her face. Had he not heard. “He’s been my Friend and Savior for as long as I can remember. There isn’t a time I haven’t known Him. He’s always been in my life and I talk to Him often.”

“I understand, my dear. But we need a day and a place that your Salvation happened. Think back. When was the time and where were you when you prayed, ‘Lord, I am a sinner and I accept you as my Savior?’”

Celeste stares at the evangelist. He is sweating in the warm May air; she is, too. Something is not right. “You don’t understand,” she say, “He’s been my Savior all along. I know I’m a sinner and I need Him. That’s why I’ve accepted Him all along. I can’t remember a day or a place when that happened. We grew up together. He’s been my friend for as long as I can remember, for always.”

“Celeste, you must be able to tell me where and when this happened. It can’t just happen. Don’t you understand?”

Celeste drops her eyes. She twists the plaid of her dress between her fingers. “All I can say,” she whispers to the floor, “is that I’ve known Him all my life. He’s my Friend and my Savior.”

Far away Celeste hears the congregation singing, “O Happy Day, O Happy Day, when Jesus washed my sins away.” He had washed her sins away; she felt it. But what is going to happen to her now? She certainly has not pleased Brother Ben with her testimony. The people sing, “He taught me how To watch and pray And live rejoicing Every day; Happy day, Happy day, When Jesus
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washed My sins away.’’

“This is not acceptable,” Brother Ben says, mostly to himself. “I have to

speak with your father.”

He stands up and crosses the room to where Dad is standing. “Please,

Jesus, make Dad straighten this out for me. Please. I want to be baptized.”

Dad is shaking his head, shaking it slowly from side to side. Celeste

understands that she will not be baptized today. A big emptiness, a cloudiness

fills her; she wants to cry.

Go back into the sanctuary? Without being baptized? How can she face

Judy and Frankie and Steve and Joyce and all of them? They will know she is a

failure. A failure? Does not getting baptized mean she isn’t save? The thoughts

overrun her mind. From faraway she sees Valorie come toward her, towel

wrapped around her hair. Celeste catches a glimpse of her father in the corner of

her eye; she desperately wants help.

He looks at her sternly and mouths the words, “Go on,” and points to the

door leading to the sanctuary.

Celeste grips the side of the chair and pushes herself up. She takes a step

and grabs the back of the chair for support. Valorie is coming to sit beside her.

“Everything o.k.?” Valorie say brightly.

Celeste grabs her hand. “No,” she says and tears squeeze out of her eyes.

“I’m not going to be baptized.”

“What happened, Celeste? Come on. don’t cry.” Valorie hugs the girls in

the wrinkled plaid dress and now she cries harder. “Is it your period? Can’t you

make it through?”

“No,” she gasps. Her breath comes in choking sounds. “Brother Ben says

I’m not saved so I can’t be baptized.”

“What do you mean, ‘not saved’? What are you talking about?” But

Valorie sees that Celeste cannot talk now. She also sees that her Uncle Ansel is

coming towards them. Savagely she pulls Celeste very close to her. “I don’t

care what anyone says. You’re more saved than anyone else I know. You’re a

beautiful girl. I’m glad you’re my cousin. why don’t you just go on to the car

and sit and wait there for a while?”

Celeste vigorously shakes her head from side to side. Before she can say

anything. Ansel is there.

“Celeste, go on, I said. Go and sit with your mother. I’ll have a word with

you after the service. Now get going.’’

He walks away. Celeste looks at Valorie. She knows that her cousin

understands, that she feels this misery and this shame.

“What am I going to do?” she says. “I’ll die if I have to go through that
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doors. All those people looking at me.”

“I don’t know, Celeste, but I do know my dad would never make me do

that.”

“You’ve got a good dad,” Celeste say very softly. She drops her voice
even more and steals a glance at her father. “I wish he were mine and I wish

you were my sister.”

Then she counts twelve steps to the drop, puts her hand on the knob and

opens it. She counts forty-three more steps and slides herself in to sit next to her

mother. She feels very dizzy and sick to her stomach.