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ON THE THIRD DAY

By Julie Long

**We just found a dead robin.** It's on the ground beside Jason Freeman's house. Lisa Scolotti pokes it with a stick to make sure it's dead, but we pretty much know it is since it's lying on its side with its head flopped backward so you can see its red neck.

Poor little thing. We should bury it, I say. Then after three days he'll be gone up to heaven.

Why three days? asks Jason.

Because, that's what we say in church. 'On the third day he rose from the dead to sit at the right hand of the

Father.' If we dig him back up again in three days, he won't even be in that hole. He'll be gone.

Jason gets a big spoon and we dig a hole for the robin way at the back of Jason's yard, where his dog can't reach on its chain. Then Jason scoops up the bird with the spoon and brings it to the grave. Only we didn't dig quite deep enough, so when we cover the robin with dirt we end up with a brown mound sticking up. But it's a nice grave, and Lisa and I put a dandelion on the top because it is the only flower we can find. I am happy for that bird because he is going up to heaven and sit on God's shoulder.

But now it's three days later and we've dug up the dirt and the bird hasn't left. Instead, white maggots are all over it — even in its eyes.

Lisa squeals, Gross!

Jason says, Whoa, cool.

I feel weird in my stomach and I walk home. Mom says just the bird's spirit went up to heaven but he doesn't need a body in heaven so that stays here. I think that it's a good thing people are buried in caskets, not just in the ground like birds, so the maggots and worms can't get to the body. Although I guess you're not supposed to care because your spirit is up in heaven and happy. But still, I'm glad people get buried in caskets.

**I'm a Turner girl.** The youngest one so I'm the baby of the family even though I'm nine. There are us four girls — Cindi, Karen, Susan and me, Julie — and Mom and Dad make six, just like the movie *With Six You Get Egg Rolls* starring Lucille Ball. All four of us Turner girls look just like our Mom, that's what people always say. I don't see why, since Mom has brown hair, and Karen and I have blond hair and blue eyes, and Susan and Cindi's hair is sort of red. But grownups say we all have faces shaped like hearts and the same smile as Mom.

I feel bad for Dad with no boys to look like him. But everyone in town knows we're his girls, Dr. Turner's girls. "These are my girls," he says when we meet one of his patients around town square or at his office. And I stand up nice and straight because I know he's proud of me. When I ask Mom and Dad if they wanted me to be a boy, they say they're glad I was a girl because they didn't know where they were going to put me if I'd come out a boy. That's

because our house only had three bedrooms and us girls had to share. Now we have four bedrooms but I still think Dad is fine that I'm a girl because I like to do boy things like play with Tonka trucks and climb trees and fish.

Us Turner girls fish and canoe and camp with Dad, and Mom comes too. We pack up the camper and pile in the car and Dad drives us from Iowa all the way to the Redwood Forest or Yosemite or the Badlands. For days all you can see out the car window are rows of corn whizzing by until the flat farmland goes away and trees or mountains or canyon walls break up the sky.

**There's a teenager named Carrie at our house with a broken leg.** She fell off her horse at the horse show, and Dad put a cast on it and brought her home with us because her parents aren't around and now she's sitting in Dad's easy chair. She's really neat. She can balance my American flag on her finger, and she looks at all my stuffed animals and she let me sign her cast. Karen says I should quit

bugging her but Carrie says it's okay. She says Dad is a really cool doctor and how nice he is to bring her here until her folks can come.

I'm glad my dad is a doctor and fixes people. The Wulff kids have all broken a leg or arm or finger and Dad set them. None of us Turner girls have ever broken anything, but we've all had stitches. Like when our horse Little John bit Susan when she tried to put his bridle on, and when I was jumping on the cushions in the camper and I jumped right out the door and hit my chin on the metal edge. Dad had to take me to the emergency room and even though we were in another state, they let him stitch me up.

When we get stitches Dad lets us pick the color thread we want: navy blue or green or black.

**Greg Mogged from next door died.** He was in a wheelchair. Before that he was on crutches. Before that he could walk, Mom says, but I don't remember. He never got to play softball or kickball with the rest of us. But we'd watch *Star Trek* with him and *Dark Shadows* even though that show

scares me. Dad tried to help him, but he says sometimes even doctors can't help. Dad is sad because he couldn't help Greg and now Mrs. Mogged is sad, too.

At the funeral, my oldest sister Cindi sings in a choir group. They're not like a regular choir. Instead of an organ there's a guitar. And they don't wear robes, just their own clothes. Some of the guys and girls have on tie-dye shirts with jeans, but Dad made Cindi wear a dress. Her hair looks like everyone else's, though, parted down the middle long and straight with no bangs. They sing this song with words that I've only ever heard said not sung: *I am the resurrection and the light. He who believes in me will never die.*

Back home, I ask my mom if Greg believed in God and she says of course he did. So I ask why he died then, since the song says whoever believes in God shall never die. Mom says that Greg didn't really die, just his body died. His spirit went up to live forever with God.

Oh, I say, like the bird.

**I have Braunschweiger breath.** Dad came home for lunch today and, since school doesn't start for two more weeks, I'm home, too, so we got to eat together. We had Braunschweiger sandwiches and now we're napping on the couch because he's tired on account a having to go deliver a baby boy in the middle of the night.

At first when I snuggled my face into the back of his white shirt it smelled good, like Tide and Old Spice. Only now I don't smell Tide or Old Spice anymore. Now all I smell is my Braunschweiger breath bouncing off Dad's shirt. It's smelly and steamy and sits on my lip. Little drops of Braunschweiger breath stand on the ends of my cheek hairs. Susan says when you smell something, something bad like barf, what's really happening is teeny-tiny particles of barf are going up your nose — it's true, her science teacher told her class. Braunschweiger breath is not as gross as barf, but it's still pretty gross. Tiny pieces of pink Braunschweiger are up my nose and on my lip. I am a big Braunschweiger sandwich, stuck between Dad and the back of the couch.

I really want to get away from this Braunschweiger breath, but I hardly ever get to nap with Dad. So I stay put and just try not to breathe too much.

**Today we're having a tornado drill.** Mrs. Ulin, my fourth grade teacher, says it's important for everyone to know where to go from their new classrooms. She tells us that when the bell rings, we should follow her out into the hall and go single file like we do to go to lunch, only we can't talk.

When the bell finally rings it's not like the regular ring that calls us in from recess, but short rings, over and over. We file out like a long snake. I'm following Mike Buford who sits in front of me. Out into the hall our snake slithers. The third and fifth graders are out there, too. It's a hall full of snakes.

Mrs. Ulin shouts, The important thing is not to be by any windows.

We wind through the hallway and down the steps into the basement by the boys' bathroom where it smells.

Mrs. Ulin makes us line up facing the wall and cover our heads with our arms. We lean our faces into the cool blocks of the wall but I can still smell the boys room smell. Some

kids start giggling and Mike Buford laughs like a pig snorting which makes me laugh, too.

Quiet, Mrs. Ulin orders. A tornado is not a laughing matter.

Dad says tornadoes can lift up cars and even houses and carry them off and the owners find them later in cornfields miles away. I picture a real tornado racing over the school sucking up bicycles. Hopefully, it would take my old hand-me-down bike. It's so old, like the bike the Wicked Witch from the West rides with her back so straight and her knees lifting high.

I'm tired of hand-me-downs. I want a new 10-speed bike, where you hunch over the handle bars so the wind whips around you as you fly down D Street hill, going faster and faster so you don't have to pedal so soon when you head uphill. Only with a 10-speed you can put it in different gears so even when you have to pedal uphill it's easier.

**We're having rice pudding for dessert.** I like rice and I like pudding but I don't think I'm gonna like them together.

Dad says, How do you know if you don't try it?

Susan says she definitely won't like it.

Dad says, You're going to try it.

Mom puts a bowl of it in front of Dad, then me, then Susan and on around the table for Karen, Cindi and her. It just looks like vanilla pudding with lumps in it.

Susan says, I can't eat it, it looks like there are maggots in it.

Dad says, You will try at least one bite young lady.

Susan says, I can't, if I do I'll throw up.

Dad says, If you throw up you'll get a spanking.

I follow them back and forth, back and forth, like they're playing badminton.

Susan says, I mean it, I can't eat that or I'll throw up.

Dad says, And I mean it, too: you throw up and you'll get spanked.

No one else says anything. Cindi and Karen are pretending to eat their pudding but they're really just stirring their spoons around in it. Mom is eating hers but

she's just looking down at her bowl (I think Susan saying that thing about the maggots hurt her feelings).

I'm waiting, Dad says to Susan.

So Susan takes a bite. And then she throws up. And then Dad spansks her.

Susan runs upstairs crying and Karen can see her throw up and says, Gross!

Cindi says, Well I can't eat this now.

Dad yells, Godammit!

Mom gets up to clean up Susan's throw up. Now I can see it, too. It isn't just the rice pudding but the green beans and pot roast we had first. I feel bad for Susan because it's awful to throw up. I feel bad for Dad because he hardly ever spansks us and I know he didn't think he would have to spank Susan either but who knew she would really throw up? But mostly I feel bad for Mom. She made rice pudding because she likes it and she never gets to make what she wants because us kids never like anything, and now she has to clean up rice pudding *throw up* (and green beans and pot roast) off the kitchen carpet.

To make her feel better I try a bite of my rice pudding, but just a real little bite in case it might make me throw up too. It tastes just like vanilla pudding with little lumps in it.

Hey Mom, I like it, I say.

Good, she says, Then you can have mine.

**A storm is coming.** It's not here yet, but I know it's coming because our dog Daisy is hiding behind the couch in the family room. She's a big yellow lab and she's scared of storms and I wish she wasn't because she kind of makes me scared too. Her ears are back and her head is down between her paws, like she's trying to hide in the yellow carpet. I try to coax her out with treats but she won't come so I lie on my stomach on the floor and reach in to pet her.

It's only the angels bowling, I tell her.

When the sky turns black and spits rain, Daisy starts panting and trembling. Then the thunder comes like a drum roll in the symphonies that Dad listens to on tape. *Rumble-rumble-rumble. Rumble-rumble-rumble BOOM!*

The raindrops grow bigger and splat onto the patio cement. *Rumble-rumble-rumble.* The rain comes down harder and Daisy pants faster. Her front paws are soaked from her

slobber, and she still pants. The sky's so dark it's like someone laid a blanket over our house — and then it's split open by lightening so bright, so big I don't know where it's coming from. I remember to count the seconds before the thunder to know how many miles away the lightning is. *One thousand one, one thousand two* — the thunder drum begins, but so soft it must be far away — *one thousand three* — the drum stops, like a half-note rest from my piano book, and the only sound is Daisy's panting — then *CCCRRAACK!* As crisp as a watermelon split in half with the big kitchen knife, only a thousand zillion times louder.

**I'm watching Saturday morning cartoons.** I'm in Mom and Dad's room, sitting in the green swivel chair, being careful not to rock and spill my bowl of Cap'n Crunch. After I finish my cereal I'm going to change out of my pajamas, so when Dad comes home I'm ready to help him put a new basket on my old bike. Now that I'm in fourth grade I

have real homework and books to bring home and everything, just like my sisters. But Dad says I'm still not old enough for a 10-speed. Maybe when I'm 10.

I'm never old enough for things. Cindi got to go to gymnastics camp up in Iowa City and she won't be back for a whole week. Susan and Karen are at the Pony Club today, whitewashing fences. I wanted to go paint too but Mom says I'm too young and might get in the way. I didn't even get to go with Dad to the lumberyard this morning to pick up more wood for the deck. But Mom says that's my own fault because I was such a sleepy head.

The doorbell rings. I let Mom get it because I don't want my cereal to get soggy. And besides, Scooby Do is coming on.

Out in the living room I hear Mom scream, Oh my God!

My mom never uses God's name in vain. My dad says Goddammit sometimes, but I didn't even know that was a bad word until I said it in front of Mom. For Mom to scream and cuss, something is really wrong.

I put the bowl of Cap'n Crunch on the floor and tiptoe out of my parents' room and peek around the corner. Mom is standing in the middle of the living room hugging Dr. Dunlevy. When we have dinner with the Dunlevy's, Mrs.

Dunlevy always kisses Mom hello and goodbye, but I've never seen Mr. Dunlevy hugging Mom before.

I hear Mom say, How did it happen?

I don't wait for the answer. I don't think I'm supposed to hear this. I go back in the bedroom and close the door.

I know something horrible has happened. Maybe that mean old horse that no one can ride trampled Susan or Karen. Maybe Cindi fell off the uneven bars and is paralyzed. What if Dad had a heart attack like Dr. Lawson?

I step over my cereal bowl and sit in the chair to think. If someone has to be hurt, who would I choose? What a mean thought — I am a bad person for thinking such horrible things!

Where is Mom? I stare at the door. She'll be coming in any second now.

Why isn't she coming in? Maybe she's waiting for Dad to come home so they can tell me together.

I swivel back to the TV, back to Scooby Do but I can't hear what Daphne is saying. In my head I'm chanting, Please Mom and Dad, come and get me. Come and get me. Come and get me Mom and Dad, and tell me who is hurt.

The door opens and I swivel around and see Mom. She's crying and I know I've never seen Mom or Dad cry before. And then I see that Dad's not with her. And then I know.

