



"HANG ON!" I TOLD MYSELF - - -

by Theo Halladay



UH, SURE . . . sure, let's go there," I said tonelessly.

My date looked over at me with curiosity before turning the car into the exit lane. "You seem sort of—of dreamy," he commented.

Dreamy wasn't the word. I was on the verge of suicide. "Hang on!" I had told myself when the good-looking blond tenor from the Bach Society had called that morning. "Talk normally to him, act like any graduate student welcoming a date." And I had pulled myself together, accepted his invitation, forced myself to think about clothes and makeup as if my life depended on it—which was not far from the truth. Now we were cruising in his parents' car, about to seek entertainment on Good Friday evening by joining the crowds we saw converging on a large brightly-lighted church.

I of all people had never expected to find myself in a state of barely supportable tension and anxiety. I had had a happy childhood, was

blessed with a sense of humor and a resilience to ups and downs, could give love and security to others. I had done well enough in college to merit a position as Teaching Assistant to the head of the department at the university where I went for my MA. After years of campus give-and-take, an ordinary date-type conversation should have been no trick at all for me to handle.

But now, as the year of study and work drew to a close, everything had gone wrong. Continued late nights had put a noticeable tremble in the morning coffee cup. I was 60 hours behind in the work I owed the department head. The mathematics which my advanced courses required had proved to be a stumbling block, and the onerous exams lay ahead. My thesis topic had been turned down; and the tall glowering journalism student for whom I had fallen so hard had left me flat.

The worst thing was that I realized that if I failed altogether, even, perhaps, if I killed myself, it would

cause scarcely a ripple in the flowing current of the great university. And even if there had been someone who really cared, I knew that those who had not experienced a real anxiety attack, such as I had been having, could not possibly understand the terror and reluctance that accompany them. In a few short weeks I had lost all my enthusiasm and self-confidence. Life had become something to be slogged through, dreaded, hated. I sat there next to this semi-stranger, trembling, forcing out monosyllables, trying to remember how I used to act.

We parked and entered the church. I was immediately struck by the colorful stained-glass windows reaching to lofty heights around us. How long it had been since I entered a church—and how different it had been the last time! Back then I was secure; now I felt as if my personality were about to break in pieces.

The service began; the liturgical voices rose and fell. The mass of humanity around me faded away, the jumpy brittle thoughts calmed somewhat in my overwrought mind. Loneliness kept vigil with me, as it had been lately. When humanity faded out a vacuum was always left. As I sat here now, through the terrible vacuum a thin trickle of words was penetrating. They seemed to come from a long distance.

"He was bruised for our iniquities, and with his stripes we are healed." He? Oh yes, Jesus, the large figure on the cross up there.

Bruised . . . stripes . . . pain. PAIN! He was in pain. With a rush of recognition I knew that I was in pain too. For some reason I had called it everything but pain, and yet pain it certainly was. No physical suffering could be worse. And this man—man? Yes, but more than a man, more like a Presence: he knew suffering. And of course he must have suffered intense mental pain, not too different from mine.

As the service continued, the trickle widened and the vacuum filled. Fitfully, but with increasing conviction, I knew that the Presence was there. I saw a figure, suspended on a huge cross above the procession of suffering mankind; and I knew that here were understanding, forgiveness, love—the very qualities I had been about to die for lack of. And they were alive and real! Who could explain how it was so? But that moment I knew.

Tears ran down my cheeks. As we rose with the congregation at the close and moved toward the exits, a kindly woman looked into my face, took me briefly by the arm, and murmured, "God bless you!" before disappearing into the crowd.

That service was the beginning of the turn upward. My date, who seemed to understand better than I expected what had happened, became in due course of time my husband. He now treasures with me the moment when the Spirit guided us into the presence of God on our first evening together . . . that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

† † †