

The Degree

IF YOUR first child might be one — or maybe mine. Maybe your sister would have one. Would you still think we should snuff them out? No, you wouldn't think so then. If you looked into the cradle you would know that even though the baby could never grow right it would be your niece. Your niece.

How do I know? I just know. I've thought about it for a year now. It's been a year, a year since — Oh, Hell! My sister . . .

His voice stopped. The room was silent except for a clatter as the waitress washed dishes over behind the counter. They were the only ones left. Outside, the streets were quiet and gray. Only a few cars glided by the cafe window in the silent city night-blinking of neon signs. Just the two of them across from each other in the booth, and the waitress. The three like a spider caught lowering itself on a silken thread in a bright shine of light.

John "Pud" Stevens rested his chin in his cupped hands.

If you think we should destroy them, then you deny love and compassion too, which is to admit the ultimate defeat of mankind, for if man is wholly explained biologically then he might as well be a monkey and then his only purpose is to evolve into a higher type monkey.

The waitress cleared off their table. The glass-clinking noise was the spark to the fuse of memory, the fuse which conjured up long-gone events, caused them to burn and sear the tender nerve endings of memory. The boy across from John only questioned occasionally like a catalyst to the reaction. He listened, and the words poured out.

My sister, Binny, had a bady. It was born last December. The doctors said it was the shortest labor they could remember. Binny labored for half an hour, and then the baby which was loved even before birth as only a mother can love her child was born almost before it gave warning *on the table as they wheeled her into the room Harold said she almost rip-*

ped the side of the table off the doctors said she could fifteen more babies have fifteen more babies

One weekend I went home. Binny and Harold were there. It was the first time I'd seen her in three months and she had swelled so. They say a woman is most beautiful during her first pregnancy. Binny was. And she was proud too, as if her stomach was the symbol of the great female achievement. She would try to anticipate kicks so we could feel them.

Yes, the baby kicked, kicked as all babies kick, and once I put my hand on her stomach and I could feel it kick. It was my niece that kicked *Binny stop that don't kick I'll kick you where it hurts she said you wouldn't I'd bash your face in cut it out father said cut it out or you'll both get it* My parents' first grandchild.

I really didn't think it was a cute baby. I don't think any baby is cute at first — but everybody else thought it was cute. It had features of both parents depending which side of the family the critic was on. It was a girl. They named her Christine Stevens Christenson, which soon became Christy.

I didn't know that there had been any difficulty with the baby until the Thursday night my mother called from home. But the baby, when it was three months old, had gained only a pound. One of the doctors at Pine Falls, the doctor that spanked the first breath into Christy, said she had a weak heart. Later we decided that he knew about the baby all along, that he didn't think he should be the one to break the news, or maybe he didn't have the guts.

No. He never really came out and said anything. He just mentioned the heart ailment and suggested new formulas to get the baby started gaining. My parents were worried some, but there was no way of knowing.

Harold's mother was proud of Christy, too. She was so good, never cried or caused a fuss. There was nothing to prepare her, and I don't think she ever did believe that anything was wrong except the heart.

We loved Christy. Once I held her close *my niece* and she reached up to pull my ear *loved with the love that goes beyond telling beyond even consciousness doomed to a cradle with a little half-witted girl standing over* Then that Thurs-

day night my mother called from Carleton. She said the baby wasn't well, so they wouldn't be going to the family dinner, but maybe I could come down anyway. Already she was beginning to feel the impending disaster and I could feel it in her voice.

Saturday afternoon the living room was full. Harold's folks were there and my folks and my other sister, Ruth, and her husband. Binny was sitting in the rocking chair holding Christy. Harold stood behind her. When I walked in, Binny looked up. Her eyes were red. She smiled a little. She came over to me carrying Christy in one arm. She looked up still trying to smile. She bit her lip and quickly ducked her head against my chest. Oh, Pud, she said. I put my arms around her, held her shaking, *come on Puddy she said, we got on the rug and slid bouncing all the way down the stairs let's do it again Binny but Father stopped us and spanked us pretending to cry until Father left and we laughed wasn't that fun Puddy yes Binny my sister that held her daughter, my niece in my arms was held.*

We sent her upstairs to try to rest. It was then my mother told me the story that she must have already told the others and that she told all the people, except she told them that the baby had a weak heart and would have to remain in the hospital for special treatment, until we decided to come right out and tell them the truth. Because if it was just a weak heart they would keep asking about her, but if we told them straight that would be it. There could be no further questioning.

On the preceding Wednesday night, Harold and Binny had decided to bring the baby home. We have a good clinic.

Christy hadn't gained a pound and they were worried. Were worried because none of the formulas had worked and because that night while they were doing the dishes she started crying and didn't stop for an hour. They thought she was constipated, so they gave her an enema but she kept crying until she went to sleep.

That was on a Wednesday night. The next day Christy was all right; quiet, wisp-haired, blue-eyed baby with a button nose. You'll have to stop sticking your tongue out like

that, Christy, Binny must have said *is man a monkey whose goal is to become a higher type monkey who may have abnormal monkeys which are still monkeys just the same and if he is is he* But they decided she couldn't be well.

Friday after Harold was through with work they packed their car and went home to Carleton. During supper Christy began to cry. They called the pediatrician at the clinic and made an appointment for seven o'clock that night. At nine o'clock they came home. Mother said she and Dad were listening to the radio when they heard them on the porch. Harold opened the door and said, Here, take Christy. I guess we'll go to the show.

Mother said they had talked about going to the show during supper so she didn't suspect that anything was wrong. She didn't suspect what she was to find out in the morning and what she told me that noon when Binny was resting. What she tried to tell me while all the others sat listening, biting their lips, and she broke down and Dad finally managed to say the word. . .

Jesus, the boy across from John said, What was it, Pud?

John Stevens did not stop. He stared past his friend, stared out the plate glass window at the bleak, blackened walls across the street not seeing, thinking *she might have become one of the squatting figures in the cages down the long corridor from which comes a stench so strong because they can't control their bowels that most people can't stand it who reach out to grab who howl howl howl Christy Christy or is that the way that kind develops* and saying, blurting on, Mother said, They didn't let on. Binny never said a word about it. They kept it to themselves until the following morning. She kept it inside her all that time until she came in the door after they had been down to the clinic again that Saturday morning. She looked frightened; so did Harold, and she said. . . *junny munny Puddy stop that Binny that tickles you kids stop wiggling and look up there but Binny is blowing on my hair straighten up and Father took the picture in front of the new 36 Chevie this baby that is born in sin is born in sin this baby this baby had to be baptized to deliver it from sin the sin of eve and adam this inno-*

cent baby that cries like all little babies only longer but why should they call it that name that name for a little baby some of them become fourteen years old the minister said this baby was born in sin but Harold's mother had to have it baptized because most of them die very young and all Lutheran children must be baptized to deliver them from the sin of Adam and Eve so when she died in June she was delivered from Woodward taken from the little half-witted girl that cared for her delivered to the grave free from sin and Binny was pregnant again the doctors told her to have another baby as soon as possible and late that summer we drove to the graveyard to water the flowers by the small copper and aluminum plate that said Christine Alice Christenson, December 26, 1950 to June 11, 1951 made at least four trips to the pump and Binny said she wished that they had gone to Woodward to see Christy that she was sorry and Mother said it was all right except she told me once she couldn't understand how Harold and Binny could push it so completely from their minds but she went ahead and made all the arrangements for the burial as they had agreed only now Binny was sorry they had done it that way but now he knew that they like he and Mother and Dad had been and always would be haunted because you just can't forget your own baby even though you can't bring yourself to believe it could happen to you can't forget it because it is your baby and if it is it must be

. . . Go on Pud; go on.

Pud looked a little startled. He turned his eyes from the window to stare at his friend as if he had just determined not to complete the sentence he had broken off. And then he said,

The remarkable thing was that my father had gone downtown that morning and he saw Binny and Harold driving back toward home. When he saw them he changed his mind and came home, but he got home before they did. They must have driven around some before they decided to break the news. When he came in the door, Mother said,

What are you doing here? And he replied, I just saw Binny and Harold driving home and I thought maybe I ought to come back. . .

* * *

The boy across from John stood up and pulled on his coat. John got up too. They paid their checks and walked out, the door slamming behind them. The waitress pulled the shade and locked the door.

The air was cold. John's friend walked silently looking into the windows along the sidewalk. He couldn't talk. He wanted to say something but there was nothing. He had guessed what was wrong, but he knew that John would talk on. Now that he had started John couldn't hold it after holding it for all those months.

John stared at the blinking light orbs twinkling and winking far down the street. Then he said, Man is just a higher monkey. Human indicates no more than homo. What lifts him above the lower animals is only a matter of degree. Why are men born who don't even have that degree, some of whom live in stinking cages huddled nude, resting their heads on their knees? Are these human too? Can they be animals lacking sufficient degree to make them man? If God favored man above the animals would he except a few from that degree. Then suddenly he said,

Binny looked frightened but she didn't cry. She said, Mother, try not to take this too hard. The doctors told us something last night, and we went back this morning to make sure about it. Mother, your grand-daughter, Christy, Christy . . . That is where Mother broke down telling me the story and Father had to finish because she didn't like the word, couldn't understand why they had to call a baby that name.

Jesus, Pud's friend said muttering, Jesus, Jesus. . .

Christ Then Father said, Son, your sister had. . . Your niece, Christy. . . Christy is a Mongolian Idiot.

Now they both had admitted the word. His friend looked at him. John looked straight ahead. He stared

straight ahead as they walked along, not saying anything.
They walked on up the street in silence.

* * *

And overhead, framed between the walls, stretched the sky, to which only man attaches a religious meaning. The heavens he calls it. And it may well be more than its physics. But he can never reach it, unless it be by his imagination — which is, after all, only part of the degree.

—*Richard Day, Sci. Sr.*



WINTER

Sad, still
September's sheaf
Of scarlet sumac, now,
Coldly sheared by snow's silver sword,
Is sleeping.

—*Lou Hale, Sci. Jr.*



Vanity's Woman

Gleaming blond hair, sharp blue eyes,
You rest in peace by the window.
When you walk, you're proud,
When you're hurt, you're defiant.
Vain as vain can be,
Simba, my cat.

—*Jane Hammerly, H. Ec. Sr.*