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The Day Grandpa Was Born

191-A

**Series: Fictional Stories:
A Christmas Story**



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The Day Grandpa Was Born

Winters in Forest Grove were not always pleasant. Mountains of snow cleared from the pavement of Highway 619 rose on either side of the freeway like crusty glaciers, half ice and half mud. Trees bowed their heads beneath the weight of daggers which formed downward as the waters froze and seemed to dare the husky old giants to stand beneath their load. The sky was usually an ashen gray, seldom black with storm clouds, and yet the sun had seemingly taken a sabbatical until spring.

The mood in Forest grove as the calendar's pages surfaced the word "November" usually began to reflect the starkness of the wintry season, too. Farms began to shut down in frustrated hibernation. The little shops that lined the narrow center of the town began to feel the loneliness of isolation as the town folk withdrew into a cocoon of self-survival. Many an hour was spent huddling around old pot-bellied stoves waiting for what felt like endless hours for the next customer to struggle through the door, knowing they would be shaking off mountains of powdered snow as they muttered nearly indistinguishable groans about the severity of this current icy blast.

The town folk became little pockets of disgruntled Scrooges, cloistered around mechanical heating devices that appeared to produce the only warmth generated, for none seemed to come from the people themselves. Tourists passing through did so as quickly as possible lest the pall of gloom that so covered this frosty community become contagious. Oh, they could find all the essentials in Forest Grove: groceries at Miss Ella's General Store and hammers, saws and Mixmasters at Richardson's Hardware Store. Drug items were available (more or less) on the dusty, dingy shelves of Grandpa Bill's Drug Store in the center of town. And you could grab a bite to eat at the Regal Restaurant if your hunger had reached the desperation point — regal it wasn't, but a restaurant it was.

The Regal was owned and operated by Billy Simpson and his

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wife Elizabeth with a bit of occasional unsolicited help from their two young children, Beth and Bobby. The Regal was located next door to Grandpa Bill's Drug Store, and it was no coincidence, because Billy Simpson was Grandpa's boy, and Beth and Bobby were his only grandchildren. It was Grandpa who owned the building that housed both the food that sometimes made you sick and the medicines that sometimes made you well.

So you could find everything you needed in Forest Grove—everything, that is, except a smile or a kind word. Smiles and kind words seemed to have been transported out of town with the last load of coal from the old mine down the hill. Even recent photos of family members on summer picnics looked like unexpected snapshots taken by hidden cameras at a funeral. There was no joy in Forest Grove. Life just went on as though the town folk were obligated to exist and just as obligated not to enjoy it.

There was only one church in Forest Grove. It was pastored by a zealous young man who had been brought in from upstate by the denomination to see if indeed he could perform a miracle and inject a little life into this catatonic flock. Thus far, all he had injected were shock waves.

First he had tried to start a youth choir. But a youth choir, he had discovered, was not a Biblically acceptable tool of worship—not in Forest Grove. You see, Grandpa Bill didn't believe in youth choirs, and though young Reverend Thompson was the shepherd of the flock, Grandpa Bill ran the show. He always had. He and his dad had built the church out of rocks taken from the old stone quarry, and he had been chairman of the Board of Deacons for the last twenty-six years. So if Grandpa didn't want a youth choir, those old stones in the church graveyard would be more likely to break forth in singing than the young people of Forest Grove. What Grandpa said was law, and he was so mean, breaking his law was akin to suicide.

Reverend Tom tried his next stab at rejuvenation by starting a Wednesday night prayer meeting. "All the successful big churches do it," the young shepherd insisted. "We can get to know each other better, and prayer never hurt anything," he added, all too apologetically.

But the Deacons vetoed that, too, on the basis that the Forest Grove Church had never prayed on Wednesdays before and they were about as successful as any church around, or

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so they subjectively surmised. That was the reason they gave the reverend anyway. The real reason was that Grandpa Bill's domino club met on Wednesday night, and he figured no ministry could be more necessary to the community's welfare than the four hours he and his cronies spent in the old drug store dealing dominoes and chewing the fat. "That's religion in action," Grandpa philosophized. "That's the crux of Christianity." And while a few people would smirk at his unorthodox theology, certainly no one would challenge him.

Thus Reverend Tom just decided that rather than fight a losing battle he would retreat into his study and pray instead—which ultimately wasn't such a bad idea. Not a bad idea at all!

It was on one of those icy-cold mid-November afternoons when Reverend Tom was in his study that he heard a muffled knock on his front door. He had been studying and praying all day, and somehow his prayers had focused on a somewhat simple but profound request.

He was asking God for one man—just one—whose heart and soul literally beat only for God. That day in particular, he had prayed specifically that God would send that man his way to at least let him know that such a person existed. And while he was still praying, there came the knock on the door.

"This is my answer," the young pastor thought as he literally jumped to his feet and ran for the door. Only one obstacle stood between the racing reverend and the obvious answer to his prayers that he envisioned standing, Bible in hand, on his snow-covered doorstep. That obstacle was one-half of a pair of roller skates that happened to be the property of his six-year-old son, Timmy.

As the impatient pastor rounded the corner from his study to the hallway, a most upsetting incident ensued. The reverend's left foot landed on the edge of the slippery skate, and with an absence of grace akin to an elephant on ice, his left foot went east, his right foot went west, and his whole body went south while his left shoulder engaged the corner of the coffee table as he came careening to the hardwood floor.

Now there's not much a pastor can say on such an occasion, except perhaps to pray. So pray he did as an excruciating pain shot down his left shoulder. Instantly it was matched by a stabbing sensation in his right leg that somehow had curled itself

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underneath him as he fell.

His wife had gone to the market, and Timmy was at school, so there was no use calling for help unless, of course, he could make it to the door to greet his answered prayer.

“Just a minute!” the petrified pastor moaned as he inched his way towards the front door, crawling on the one leg that still seemed to work. With all the strength he possessed, he pulled himself up until his trembling hand reached and turned the door knob, allowing him to feast his eyes at last on his answer to prayer.

The door inched open. There on the front porch, bundled up enough to pass for Eric the Eskimo, stood young Bobby Simpson, the twelve-year-old grandson of his druggist deacon.

“Oh, it’s you,” Pastor Tom groaned somewhat insensitively.

“You were expecting maybe Robert Redford?” the lad retorted. “I’ve come to talk to you about a problem.” The inquisitive boy went on, “Why are you on the floor, Pastor? And how come there’s blood on your face? You been in a fight, Preacher? Wow, wait ‘til I tell the guys our peace-lovin’ parson just lost in Round 2 of the Olympics boxing match!”

Pastor Tom’s patience was wearing down to the fine line where an explosion seemed imminent; the only question was when.

“Bobby,” he quietly responded, “It isn’t that I’m not glad to see you. It’s just that, well, I was expecting someone else. And I haven’t been in a fight. I fell over Timmy’s roller skates while running to answer the door. Now come on in before I add frostbite to my growing list of ailments!”

Meanwhile, Bobby was struggling to keep a straight face. His twelve-year-old mind had already conjured up a headline for the junior high newspaper:

CLUMSY CLERGY CRASHES!

And written underneath:

IT WASN’T FATE, ‘TAS TIMMY’S SKATE!

Fortunately, he kept all this to himself and determined that to offer to aid the ailing preacher would, at the moment, be in better taste.

Pastor Tom wouldn’t have wanted his mind read, either. He

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was, you might say, murmuring to God over His total mishandling of the situation. “Thanks a bunch, God,” he was thinking. “I pray for a miracle, You send me the world’s greatest twelve-year-old pest, and while I’m headed for the door, You send me crashin’ to the floor. Thanks a bunch, God, thanks a bunch.”

Wisely the pastor kept his murmuring between himself and God, and soon young Bobby was inside and beginning to unwrap the layers of protective coating his mother had insisted he encase himself in.

The pastor crawled up on the sofa and surveyed the state of his body. The shoulder was a nasty sprain, but the leg, it appeared, was no longer connected and in one piece.

Poor Tom! He had played defensive tackle for four years in High School, and four years in college and never broken a bone. Now a ten dollar skate had done what 300 lb. offensive linemen couldn’t do.

“Bobby,” the pastor said in a voice that was now beginning to quiver, “Bobby, maybe you’d better call old Doc Forsythe for me. I believe I’m the proud possessor of a broken leg.”

Bobby stood in a state of semi-paralysis, jaw dropped; eyes bugged; brain in neutral. Racing through his twelve-year-old mind was the fact that this startling turn of events had turned him into a potential hero. He had come to the parson for help, and now here he was, Dr. Kildare standing at the side of his ailing counselor with no one within miles, or at least yards, who could help.

What hadn’t yet crowded into the Superman serial that was reeling through his imagination was the fact that it was *his* unexpected knock on the door that set the stage for this modern medical scenario.

“Bobby,” the pastor pleaded in an amazingly calm voice for one in such pain, “Call the doctor. Please!”

Suddenly something snapped in Bobby’s mind. He bolted from his trance, and apparently still in his imaginary Superman suit, ran for the phone as though only mini-seconds separated the parson from eternity.

A straight line being the shortest distance between two points, Bobby charged towards the receiver and never saw the

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overturned table that had already claimed one victim's shoulder only minutes before.

The rest you can imagine. Tripping over the table leg in his enthusiasm, the gawky pre-teen flew across the room and landed—you guessed it—on Pastor Tom's leg. Not the one that still worked, mind you, but the one that already stood as a challenge to medical science.

And though young Bobby only weighed 72 lbs. soaking wet, at this particular time, as he came in for a three point landing on the preacher's dislocated limb, no opposing linebacker had ever made such an impression.

"Oh, Dear Lord," the parson muttered as tears streamed down his face, "Oh, Dear Lord, NO." But it was as if the Lord had answered, "Yes, Tom, yes," for with all the space in that room, Bobby couldn't possibly have landed on that particular leg had it not been in God's plan.

Bobby's hero image diminished quickly as Super-Medic faded into Mr. Misfit, and he scrambled to his feet, unfortunately placing his weight to regain his balance on—you guessed it—the near paralyzed parson's rapidly swelling knee.

Soon the lad, now frightened out of his wits, had found the telephone, dialed the doc, and screamed frantically at the female voice on the other end, "Help, come quick, Pastor's busted his leg. Help, come quick!"

In a second, reality hit again. It was Nurse Stephanie on the other end of the phone. The Smileless Wonder, they called her. "She has all the compassion of a dinosaur with a personality to match," was the way Bobby's dad had described her.

"Calm down, son," the voice came back in tones that sent icicles through the receiver. "The doctor is delivering the Thorndale baby. He'll be tied up for quite a spell.

"And just where is this ailing preacher?" she asked in computer-like tones. "I'll send Doctor after the baby's been born. And who might this be calling?" she asked in a demanding voice, almost as if she were probing to see if the whole thing was a prank.

"This is Bobby Simpson," he responded abruptly, "and the parson's at his house, and he hurts bad, and you just tell that

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baby to get a move on.”

By now Bobby was screaming as he slammed the receiver down with all his might, which would've been bad enough if he hadn't missed the phone, but miss it he did!

As the telephone collided with Mrs. Thompson's newly varnished desk, it became apparent that the freshly gouged hole in the top of the desk would be rivaled only by the broken lamp which went careening to the same hardwood floor that already had a leg to its credit.

There was a blinding flash as the bulb exploded, but no fire occurred, and as the parson's mind raced hurriedly through the first few chapters of Job, the phrase, “while they were yet speaking” kept flashing through his mind.

What could God be punishing him for? He had prayed for a man who was on fire for God, and God had nearly set fire to his house! Not to mention the fact that when it would come to preachin' he wouldn't have a leg to stand on, so to speak, for a long while. Not unless you counted one in a cast, that is.

“Well, sit down, Bobby. I guess we'll have to wait awhile,” the young preacher urged. It was partly his pastor's heart surfacing, wanting to comfort the frightened youngster, and it was partly that he figured the lad could do much less damage sitting still than he could turned loose as a helper.

So Bobby crawled up, this time ever so carefully, on the sofa next to the preacher; and Reverend Tom, suddenly forgetting the intensity of his pain, turned to the boy and pointed out, “You came here to talk about a problem. Well, here we are. Neither of us is going anywhere, so let's talk.”

The pastor, even in his pain, noticed the lad's countenance fall as he suddenly remembered why he had come in the first place.

“Aw, you don't feel like talkin' now,” Bobby argued halfheartedly, shuffling his muddy feet back and forth on Mrs. Thompson's newly covered sofa. By now the reverend realized that something was really weighing on Bobby's heart to make him trudge nearly two miles through the snow to talk to the preacher.

“I'm fine, Bobby,” Parson Tom assured him, bending the truth just a little. “Now tell me what's troubling you.”

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Tears began forming in Bobby's big blue eyes and he was having trouble finding words to say, a problem not normally associated with Bobby Simpson. "It's just that...it's just that..." Bobby tried to begin. "It's just that...remember last Sunday when you were talking about Nicerdemus and about how he was big and important and everything and how he came to Jesus one night and everything?" Bobby melted his words together without so much as taking a breath. "Member?"

"Yes, I remember," Reverend Thompson answered softly, for he was beginning to see why Bobby had come.

"And you said Jesus told him he had to be born...over?" Bobby went on.

The Pastor remembered every word. He had prayed over every word, but Sunday he had seemed to be preaching to lifeless forms whose only response was to glance at their watches.

"Yes, Bobby, I remember. Go on," the pastor replied.

"Well, you told us that being born over was asking Jesus to come into your heart and take over your life and stuff," Bobby went on. By now tears had formed a path across his cheeks and down his wrinkled blue denim shirt.

"You said Jesus took our place on the Cross and that He actually *died* in our place, 'cause we were like cut off from God. That's what you said, and you said now He's just waiting to come in and clean up our hearts and make us brand new people and really live right inside us. Isn't that what you said?"

"Yes, Bobby, that's what I said. Have you ever done that?"

"No, I haven't," Bobby sobbed, "and you were right. You said until Jesus comes into our hearts, we can come to church 'n everything, but we can't be happy, 'cause we haven't had our sins forgiven. We're cut off from God. Reverend Thompson, *I'm a sinner*," Bobby almost shouted.

"I've done all sorts of things that God asked me not to, like when I stole the Barton's cat and stuffed it in the 'cinerator."

The Pastor looked away for a moment to hide a faint smile.

"And when I sprayed Mrs. Norton's fur coat with itchin' powder, and when I lied to Mom and Dad about the 35 cookies I snitched from the boxes you packed for the poor folks last Christmas."

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The pastor's smile faded.

"And every time I try to say my prayers I feel all dirty, and now I know why."

"Why, Bobby?" the pastor asked. "Why?"

"It's 'cause I'm not a Christian!" Bobby blurted out. "I've never been, you know, born over."

"Born again," the pastor caught himself saying, as if the exact words mattered.

"What do I do?" Bobby now began pleading with the preacher. "What do I do?"

The boy's child-like honesty was the most refreshing breath of fresh air Tom had experienced since he came to Forest Grove two years before, and a passage of Scripture from Matthew, chapter 18 became riveted in his mind. There Jesus had called a little child and set him in the midst of the crowd and said,

"Verily, I say unto you, except you be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

The most beautifully spiritual words he had heard spoken in Forest Grove had just come from the lips of this twelve-year-old boy— "What do I do?"

"You get down on your knees, Bobby, and tell God just what you told me. Tell Him you're sorry about the Barton's cat, and Mrs. Norton's coat, and the cookies you stole. Tell Him you're sorry for all the things you've ever done; all the things you ever thought that didn't make God happy. Tell Him you know now that He died in your place—that He did it all for you—and tell Him that you want to become a Christian. Ask Him to come into your heart, right now!

"And Bobby, in that instant, heaven will come down and touch earth. That load of guilt you've been carrying will vanish as the wind of God's Spirit sweeps through your life, and Jesus Himself will come to make *your* heart His home.

"You won't be able to see Him, but you will know He's there, and once He's there, He's said He'll never leave you or forsake you. Why don't you ask Him to come in right now, Bobby? I can promise you your life will never be the same."

Bobby slid to the floor in a single motion and in a matter of

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seconds was praying, head bowed, tears flowing into the cushion of that newly-covered sofa—tears that the reverend knew gave that sofa a beauty no upholsterer in the world could create—the beauty of a life being born anew.

Bobby prayed silently, but the hands of conviction were so evident upon this young lad that the thought of what God might have in mind for his life was to the pastor both awesome and exciting.

As the lad prayed, the reverend could almost see the second that Christ came into his life. The tears began to stop; a peaceful calm settled upon him; and the corners of his mouth turned upward as though he were smiling now; as though someone had lifted a heavy load from his shoulders, a load he had been carrying for a long time.

You could tell he was no longer addressing God as Judge. The glow began to demonstrate that now he was talking to his best friend. Truly, the Comforter had come to take up residence in Bobby Simpson. The pastor's words were prophetic indeed. Bobby Simpson would never be the same again.

When Bobby rose to his feet, his eyes sparkled like jewels of eternity. Before he spoke a word, he crawled over to where the pastor was sitting, this time being super-sensitive about avoiding contact with his throbbing limb, and throwing his arms around the preacher's neck, he whispered, "He came in, jest like you said!

"Jesus came in, and I'm a Christian now!"

Even though the hugging twelve-year-old had his arms resting clearly on his badly wounded shoulder, the parson felt no pain. That kind of joy supersedes pain. Suddenly a feeling of awe gripped Tom Thompson. He had prayed for one man who would be sold out for God. He glanced down at the chubby face of this twelve-year-old newborn babe and shouted in his spirit, "Oh, dear God, thank You. Your ways are so much higher than ours."

The next hour was an amazing phenomenon. Here sat a thirty-one-year-old preacher with a broken leg, sprained shoulder, and dried blood on his face from a nasty cut, with the twelve-year-old grandson of the pillar of the church, having a most exciting adult conversation about how Jesus Christ operates in the Christian's life.

They talked about how you really pray.

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How to really study the Bible.

How to memorize parts of it.

How to tell others what had happened.

What to do to be forgiven when you slip and fall.

The spiritual hunger of this young lad was insatiable. His understanding was incredible. But then, that's no wonder, Pastor Tom thought, his God is supernatural!

They talked about how God had been working in his life to bring him to this moment, and they were just discussing how the angels in heaven were rejoicing that Bobby Simpson had been born again (or born over as Bobby still phrased it), when a rapid fire knock! knock! knock! on the door interrupted.

Bobby ran and opened the door, and in came a room full of blowing snow along with old Doc Forsythe.

"Sorry it took me so long, Pastor," said the grim, but highly efficient sole possessor of medical knowledge in Forest Grove, "but Thelma Thorndale up and had twins," he beamed, quite proud of his day's accomplishments.

"Now what's happened to you? This place looks like Hiroshima after the bomb fell." A quick examination revealed the exact diagnosis that the reverend had so subjectively made a few hours before. "The shoulder's sprained bad! But the leg's plum busted. You must be in all kinds of pain."

Just then it dawned on Tom. The pain. He'd been so engrossed in Bobby's encounter with God that he'd completely forgotten to hurt!

"Doc, to be honest," Tom proceeded cautiously, "I haven't felt a thing. While we were waiting for you to come, Bobby here asked Jesus to come into his heart."

Tom looked intently for Doc's response. You see, salvation had not been a widely discussed topic at Forest Grove Church. They liked to assume that everybody who came to church and had been baptized was a Christian, and after his Nicodemus sermon last Sunday, two of the deacons, including Bobby's grandpa, had admonished him to keep his eee-vangelism (as they called it) for the Sunday School story time. "You might confuse some of the old-timers or even anger them with this born again stuff," they argued.

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So he watched Doc Forsythe's eyes very carefully. He knew Bobby would be traveling in hostile territory when he began sharing his new-found faith.

"That so," Doc responded without looking up from his stint with the splint, "That so. Now maybe you'll stop playin' your music so loud the missus can't sleep," he replied quite seriously.

The Doc, you see, lived next door to Bobby's folks, and the volume of Bobby's bedroom music, which often sounded to the doctor like an unbearable musical invasion from Mars, had become quite a bone of contention at the Forsythe house. Bobby's defiant response to their complaints had only caused the decibels to double.

"I'm sorry, sir, about the music," Bobby quietly answered. "Please forgive me. I won't ever play it loud again. I wasn't considering you at all."

The old medic, who prided himself in being tough as nails, was taken by surprise. He looked down and discovered his left hand was wrapping his right thumb right into the reverend's bandage, the kind of thing Doc Forsythe just didn't do! And out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the crusty old Doctor remove the thumb and wipe what he thought just might have been a tear from his eye.

"Have you ever been born over?" Bobby asked impulsively, but politely. "Have you ever asked Jesus into your life?"

Pastor Tom jerked uncontrollably at the bluntness of Bobby's question. "Out of the mouths of babes," he thought.

"Can't say as I have, Bobby," the Doctor answered. "Can't say as I have." The next few seconds were about three hours long as the petrified pastor waited to see what would happen next.

"Your whole life will be changed," Bobby blurted out, repeating word for word what the parson had said to him. Meanwhile, Pastor Tom was half embarrassed at Doc's dilemma, and half overwhelmed at the boldness of this new babe in Christ, just under two hours old.

"Lord, send me one whose heart beats only for you," he had prayed. Now, like Jonah, he wasn't sure he could handle God's blessing.

The doctor laid down his adhesive tape and scissors, put his

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crumpled black bag back on the floor, and turned and looked Bobby head on, eye to eye.

“Lord, don’t let him discourage Bobby,” Tom prayed frantically. And even that prayer was a little beyond what Tom at the moment had the faith to believe.

“Bobby,” the tired old man said (there was an eternal pause), “Bobby, I believe you’re right. I haven’t slept since last Sunday’s message about Nicodemus,” he said. “I’ve been a member of Forest Grove Church for 34 years, but I’m not a Christian.”

The room became so still you could feel the snowflakes float against the window sill outside; Pastor Tom, at least momentarily, was in the same state of frozen awe that had paralyzed Bobby over the broken limb.

Fortunately, Doc went on, oblivious to Tom’s mental lapse. “All week I’ve been thinkin’ about it,” Doc continued. “I’m about as religious as anybody in Forest Grove. I never miss a service. Give as much as anybody. Even helped pay for the pipe organ. Don’t drink much, or cuss much. Love my wife, love my kids, but when you started talkin’ about having Jesus walk with you, and lead you, and be your best friend— ‘bout that peace in your heart that tells you He’s there—I don’t have that. I never have.”

“Pastor, you want to know something?” said Doc, riveting his eyes on Tom’s.

“W-w-what?” Tom replied, still overwhelmed by what was happening.

“I need to be born, uh—born over myself—like Bobby here,” he concluded with obvious Spirit-controlled intensity.

“I think God let you break your leg for a reason,” Bobby quietly said to the parson, “I think the angels are fixin’ to have choir practice again.”

And in those next few minutes, heaven came down to Farm Road 43 outside of Forest Grove for the second time in three hours; and the angels in heaven, along with a newborn twelve-year-old, a sixty-year-old doctor, and an overwhelmed thirty one-year-old preacher with a broken leg, joined in singing anthems of praise to a God who still makes all things new.

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Now the following week in Forest Grove was not your average week.

Word was out. Young Bobby Simpson got “saved,” whatever that was; Old Doc Forsythe got “religion,” whatever that meant; and young Reverend Thompson broke his leg in the process!

Rumor had it that some wild religious experience had occurred and the result was two souls and a busted limb, and since skepticism was the cardinal mood in this town of doubting Thomases, the phone wires burned with sarcasm, and the question of questions was, “What is Grandpa Bill gonna do about these strange goin’s on?”

They just knew if they brought in an outsider—the Pastor was born a good 200 miles away so that made him an outsider—something like this was bound to happen.

Pastor Tom, meanwhile, was undaunted. He was clinging to a promise they had given him in Seminary from Philippians that said, “He that began a good work in you will perform it.” He had prayed for one man, and it seemed that God had let him break his leg in order to give him two.

So Tom began meeting every day with the two new Christians in his flock. Every morning he met for breakfast with old Doc Forsythe. They’d share and they’d study and they’d laugh and they’d pray. Old Doc already knew a lot about the Bible; now all of a sudden he was learning a lot about its author.

And every afternoon after school young Bobby Simpson trudged through the ice and snow, his school books over his shoulder and his Bible under his arm, all the way to Pastor Tom’s house where an excited pastor would teach his newborn friend about the Bible, and an equally excited twelve-year-old would share how Jesus had helped him through the day and tell about how he had been sharing with his classmates one by one about what had happened in his life.

They wanted to know—
why he smiled all the time now,
why he seemed so encouraged about life,
what had happened to his violent temper,
his uncontrollable sarcasm,
and his “big man on the campus” attitude that loved to pick
on the little guys and show off for the girls.

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Not everyone understood, but everyone knew something had happened to Bobby!

Meanwhile, Doc's life was changing too. His gruffness had given way to a more sensitive spirit; his impatience was dissolving in an ocean of love for people; and he was making time to tell every patient—he chuckled that he had a captive audience—how all he could treat was their bodies, but that he'd just met someone who could treat what was really ailin' 'em.

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he'd often say something like, "Mrs. Jones, I can help your rheumatism, but only Jesus can help your heart problem." Then, when the stunned Mrs. Jones recovered, realizing he didn't mean her physical heart was failin', she would stop and listen to what he had to say.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, at the church house, there was a strange sense of division taking place. There was the excitement being generated over the obvious change in young Bobby and old Doc Forsythe as well as the new-found interest in "religion" being stirred up as kids came home from school asking their folks what it meant to be "born over." And then, too, there were older people going to the good doctor to be treated for the flu only to come home talking about this "Great Physician" old Doc Forsythe was describing to them.

The result was a new boldness in Tom's preaching. Nearly every Sunday some mention was made of this "new birth" thing. He was even talking about heaven and hell, something Forest Grove hadn't heard for a generation or two.

On the one hand, the spiritual temperature was rising as fast as the thermometer was plunging; but on the other hand, there was an underground revolt afoot in the Forest Grove Parish about this unsolicited unsettling of the status quo.

And Susie Sterling, the switchboard operator, who folks figured knew almost as much as God about the goin's on in Forest Grove, had told her best friend that Pastor Tom's days at the old stone church could be counted on a set of fingers and toes. She overheard (and don't tell a soul or I'll kill you, she warned) Grandpa Bill tellin' the Bishop up in Northton that "either the denomination reach down and recall this heretic or the Forest

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Grove Deacons were goin' to boot him plum out of town." And all the words Grandpa Bill used (Susie blushed) weren't all that religious.

So as the Christmas season approached, there was a mixture of joy and apprehension in this tiny snow-covered village.

Christmas lights flashed their seasonal signals in every shop window in town. The Regal Restaurant set up its moth-eaten artificial tree on the counter, and Bobby's daddy fussed over how much more old man Richardson was chargin' for Christmas tree lights this year.

The school play was the same as every year, but this year Bobby Simpson played Joseph, and everyone said he brought to the part a spirit of realism they had never seen before.

Grandpa Bill, meanwhile, plugged in the same string of lights he had used since his third year as a druggist, and some of them even worked. He never bothered to take them down anymore. "Just plug 'em in on the 15th; turn 'em off on the 26th," he mumbled, and they looked like every year would be their last.

Young Bobby had once remarked that if the fire department didn't condemn his drug store, they ought to at least condemn that string of lights. But then Ben Beasley was still Fire Marshall, and he wasn't about to condemn anything that belonged to Grandpa. Ben was Grandpa's domino partner, and domino partners stick together.

So for Forest Grove, it was Christmas on the outside for many; Christmas on the inside for a few.

But as the pages of December approached the twenties, it was evident that however mundane the holidays had been in the past, this Christmas was not to be categorized as commonplace because Grandpa Bill had up and mailed to Pastor Tom and all the flock a mimeographed letter calling a church business meeting for—you guessed it—Christmas day!

He had refused to answer the pastor's phone calls and cancelled the December deacon's meeting, and he hadn't shown his face in church since the pastor broke his leg and his grandson met the Lord.

Now, in his usually vindictive manner, he planned to bring Forest Grove Church back to what he called "a regular kind of

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church” and put an end once and for all to this emotional kind of religion that talked about being “born over” and all that kind of stuff.

Pastor Tom finally took his phone off the hook Christmas Eve. The lines were almost burned to a crisp, and other lines were forming that he knew would shatter that fellowship forever.

He purposed in his heart that it mustn't ruin Christmas for Timmy. So at 6:00 a.m. Christmas morning, Tom plugged in the lights on their little tree, called his wife Ellen and Timmy around him and read the Christmas story. It had been a long night for Tom and Ellen. They had prayed nearly all night long. “Father make them one as we are one,” they quoted Jesus, and they pled with God for a miracle.

As Timmy opened his presents that Christmas morning, he sensed a strangeness in the air, but it was immediately overcome by the presence of an electric train he had longed for all year.

Then Tom and Ellen opened their gifts and their cards as had always been their custom, and Tom saved until last a tiny box with his name on it that appeared from out of nowhere under the tree. Opening it, he found a beautiful silver ring with a cross on it, and a neatly printed card that read:

“To the one who led me into the Kingdom, even on a broken leg. I love you! Bobby.”

Tears began to form in the Pastor's eyes, and a new sense of purpose welled up within him. “It is worth it all,” he whispered. “It is worth it all.”

* * * * *

The church house had never been so packed. Little children were being shoved into the Nursery Room, dragging their new toys behind them. People were lining up on either side of the aisle, depending on whether they were “fer or agin” Pastor Tom, and daggers crossed the aisle continually as old friends were now behaving as new enemies.

And all on Christmas Day!

At ten 'til three the organ began playing “The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ, Her Lord” and “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me”.

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With the music, the mood shifted from one that would characterize a call to battle to more of a funeral-like atmosphere. Folks expected the preacher to be pronounced “Dead on Arrival”.

But at 2:59, Pastor Tom and Ellen, very much alive, slipped in the side door and took their seats. Ellen had been crying; Tom simply looked hurt but at peace.

At 3:00 p.m. the organ stopped, and from out of the side door, down the winding stairs and into the pulpit came the man whose word had always been final in Forest Grove.

Grandpa Bill had his head down as he walked into the pulpit, so no one could see just how wrought with anger he might be; but as he lifted his head to speak, you could see that his face was red. To the pastor, it looked almost like... “Oh, never mind,” he thought, “that’s absurd. For a minute it looked like...but of course it couldn’t be.”

Grandpa began to speak, and an eerie silence took control of the audience.

“Friends and fellow members of Forest Grove Church,” he began, “I have called this meeting to talk to you about the kinds of things that have been goin’ on in our midst these past six weeks, and to let you know that I know who’s responsible for it. People have been makin’ religion their whole life!

“They’ve been claimin’ to have personally met Jesus.

“They’ve been claimin’ to have been ‘born over,’ as my grandson calls it.

“They’ve been claimin’ they weren’t Christians before, even though they’ve been baptized.

“They’ve been claimin’ Jesus has come into their hearts.

That’s what’s been going on,” Grandpa said, “and he’s the man responsible for it!”

With that, he pointed a gnarled finger directly at the young parson, who looked him straight in the eye in return, wounded, but not angry.

“I have here in my hand,” Grandpa went on, “a letter of resignation for one Pastor Thomas E. Thompson, stating that effective tonight, December 25, he hereby resigns as pastor of Forest Grove Church. It only lacks his signature, and I brought

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this paper for him to sign in all our presence.”

An angry murmur spread through the congregation.

“But,” Grandpa’s voice boomed now, “But...I have an even better idea. Bobby, you come here and tell these folks my new plan.”

Young Bobby jumped up from his pew, his face aglow with excitement, and now the congregation was petrified on both sides of the aisle.

Bobby walked to the pulpit, stood beside his Grandpa, and reaching up to the pulpit, took the pastor’s “Letter of Resignation,” held it up before the congregation and tore it into a million pieces.

Now a fly would’ve sounded like an airplane, as not even a soul dared to breathe.

Then a huge grin covered the face of the old deacon, as young Bobby shrieked into the microphone,

“Merry Christmas!

“My Grandpa’s been born over!

“My Grandpa’s been born over on Christmas Day!”

Tears began to run down the cheeks of the old man no one ever thought could cry as he related how all of Christmas Eve he had wrestled with something in his soul.

“What if the pastor’s right? What if what’s happened to Bobby is real? And what about Old Doc Forsythe? He’s a changed man!

“So I found my Bible,” the old man sort of chuckled, “I’m here to confess, I carry it on Sunday, but I never read it.

“But I found my Bible, and I began to read the Gospel of John. All night long I read it, over and over. And then, just as I was convinced that I had to decide one way or ‘tother, the doorbell rang. It was my grandson, Bobby here, at 5:30 a.m. on Christmas morning.

“He’d walked all the way over just to tell me he loved me, and that he wanted me to know the joy that God had given him. So we got down and prayed, and he showed me how to ask Jesus into my heart, and I did! And God took and lifted a load ‘oft my shoulders I been carryin’ for over 50 years!

“I’m a Christian now!” he shouted. “Jesus is in my heart!

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That's what's been happenin' in Forest Grove," he grinned, "and *this* man, as I said, is responsible!" He pointed again at Pastor Tom, who by now was weeping uncontrollably. "He's responsible, and I praise God for him!"

Then the old man, with a gentleness never before seen on his face, turned to the congregation and said, "Dear friends, how many of you are like me; so full of religion; so important in the church; so pious on the outside but so miserable, so empty in here," he said, as he pointed to his heart.

"Don't leave here today that a-way," he urged. "For the first time in my life, I'm livin'! I've been born over. I've been born over on Christmas day! Today's my birthday. Maybe it'll be yours, too!"

The service lasted for two hours. No one bothered to count the number of people who stood up and said, "I want Jesus to come into my life, too."

No one took records of the folks who ran across the aisle, huggin' their friends and asking forgiveness for things they'd said or done. No one had to take records; God kept a good account!

No one counted the dry eyes as little Bobby Simpson gave his testimony. No one had to; there were none! And no one ever had to count the vote for removing Pastor Tom, either. There was none!

No one had to write it down because the little town of Forest Grove now marks its calendar, "December 25, THE DAY THAT JESUS WAS BORN, and THE DAY THAT GRANDPA WAS BORN, and in parenthesis (the day a little church and a little town came alive with Jesus.)

* * * * *

It has been three years now since the day that Grandpa was born. Winters in Forest Grove are still cold, and sheets of ice still wrap their fingers around this tiny town.

Farms still shut down, and small groups still huddle like little families around pot-bellied stoves for warmth. But now there's a different kind of warmth in Forest Grove. Truckers up the highway all take the detour down Highway 619 just to stop there. "Folks are friendly there," they'll say. "Folks are different in Forest Grove. There's a kinda family feelin' there—a feelin' you never find anyplace else. They're addin' on to the church, I hear.

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Seems the old one just won't hold the crowds anymore."

"And Oh, if you go to Forest Grove, be sure to stop at Grandpa Bill's Drug Store. It's right in the center of town. It's especially neat at Christmas time. It's been all re-painted, and a brand new Christmas tree with brand new lights stands right in the middle of the store. You can't miss Grandpa! He's got a smile that stretches all the way to Redrock County, and every Christmas, he has a big party at his place—not just a Christmas party—a birthday party!

"And after everybody's sung Christmas carols, they all sing, 'Happy Birthday to Jesus.' And then they sing, 'Happy Birthday to Grandpa Bill.' And then they just keep singing verse after verse for all the people who've gone and been 'born over' in Forest Grove.

"You stop there if you can. They'll most likely ask you if Jesus is in your heart, too. They really want to know because they want you to celebrate more than Christmas! They want you to celebrate—personally— "THE DAY THAT GRANDPA WAS BORN OVER!"

"They know it just could be the day that you were born over, as well!"

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