

ALONE AT CHRISTMAS

By John W. Henson III

Loneliness is not the sole property of any one individual. We all possess it at times and we all lose it. It is not a fixed asset that anyone has a monopoly upon; it is a resource that does not diminish as we use it, and is only there by our permission. Being alone is only the absence of those who care and may possess no loneliness.

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A cold, raw wind howled across the mountains and valleys and shivered the timbers in our small clapboard house. Thin powdery snow scurried before the gale. A new sliver of moon glanced through the clouds by interval as they fled before the gale. The moon set in the west at 7:30pm, leaving a dark landscape. It was Saturday, Christmas Eve, and the nation was at peace. The year was 1940, and a Great Depression still gripped the land. There was scarcely enough of anything to go around, and nothing for toys, or other goodies in this wilderness. Love, lonesomeness, and needs were the only commodities we had in abundance.

Our small cottage stood with its back to a deep, narrow valley running north and south behind us, and lined with rock and trees. Through the floor of the valley a small stream trickled and meandered its way to the North. Houses were scattered at remote distances from each other. There were no streetlights on the narrow gravel road that passed to the east of our dwelling. There was no electricity, and within each house was a soft, yellow light cast by one burning kerosene lamp. Long, dark, and sharply drawn shadows projected in all directions away from the feeble light. I sat by a cast iron stove, and thought of the hardy neighbors who were before their hearths on this most solemn of all nights of the year. In my mind I conjured up the scene in each home. Our heater though consuming great quantities of oak wood could not keep the small un-insulated house comfortable. On colder nights, after we had finished supper, we retired to the living room and closed off the doors into the other rooms, to conserve heat. The old wood cook stove in the kitchen cooled rapidly as the wood spent itself.

I remember one dark night during the cold winter months of 1938 there came across the valley and down the long, dark slopes of White Oak Mountain an indescribable scream that pierced the darkness with its shriek. I listened with terror as Mother said that it was a Panther traversing the ridge of the White Oak. I sat transfixed with fear as those calls kept echoing across the primitive countryside. She told me tales of other times when she had heard their frightening scream as the beasts crossed from one ridge to another down in the mountains of North Georgia where she lived at the time.

Winter nights were fearful times when the elements turned against us and the other simple folk in our community. The bedrooms were small, cold boxes. The mattresses on the beds were piled high with quilts that had been made from remnants of cast off clothes, and had been quilted by hand during the warm, torrid summer nights.

When it came time to go to bed, I would enter my icy bedroom and throw back the covers. Mother would take a quilt and hold it closely around the stove until it was very hot. I would then make a dash at her heels into the bedroom. She would lay the hot cover down near the foot of the

bed. I would then jump into the bed with my feet overlaying the warm covers; she would fold them over my feet and lower legs, and throw the other covers over my body, tucking them closely around me.

Our family always opened their presents, when there were any, on Christmas Eve. It was not a long drawn out affair, and usually began by Mother reading the poem, "The Night Before Christmas". My Father had died when I was six months old so there were no siblings, no toys; needs were more important in those hard times than wants. Many things that we would consider necessary today were luxuries back then, or even undreamed of pleasantries.

On Christmas Morning there hung in the living room a red mesh stocking about the size of the sock that I wear each day. In the stocking there were a few pecans, Brazil nuts, an orange, apple, and a peppermint candy cane about the size of a lead pencil. It was all so predictable. It was the same every year. Mother tried to make the time as pleasant as she could, but it was still a very lonesome setting. When I went out-of-doors for a walk, the wind tore and cut through my thin jacket, and pierced the bone. I was alone. There were no other kids to play with. The wind pulled and tussled my hair as it blew its cold breath about me. I was so alone, and lonely!! Loneliness is like love for there is no one heart, and no one body that can contain it all. It is bigger than we, and there is as much left over after we are full of it as there was in the beginning. It comes to everyone in their time. It is times such as this that compassion enters the human formula.

Down in the valley, about one third of a mile to the south of our house stood a small wooden shack belonging to the Byrd Family. There was a Mother and five children ranging in ages from seven to seventeen years. The Father was never seen. His children enjoyed themselves by telling that he was in prison. It was never discussed why he was there; what crime in those lonely hills of Tennessee that had brought him to that turn in life. The children were all very wood wise, having grown up as wild as one of nature's own offspring.

We had no worry about keeping up with the Jones, as the saying goes, or the Byrds for that matter. They had as little or even less than Mother and I. They did have the advantage of expanded companionship in a house filled with children. I think of the lonely days and nights spent without a father, or husband to assist with the burdens imposed upon that brave mother. How did she cope? As so many in those trying days she survived just one day at a time. More would have been lethal more would have crushed her.

At the Byrd residence the deeply sculptured valley of rock and trees turned abruptly to the west, growing shallower, and higher as it began to climb the White Oak Mountain a mile beyond. On the morning side of the White Oak stood the shabby cabin of Mr. Clarence Jones. No one had problems keeping up with him. His wife had died many years before, due to extreme exposure, during a fierce winter. He was a hermit alone in the world, and the butt of many jokes and much conjecture in the valley below. To say that he never grew lonely for human companionship would be to deny him the human spirit that lives within us all.

There was no house within a mile of the old recluse. I know nothing of his upbringing, yet Mr. Jones had a certain element of refinement. He was an artist of special gift. He painted wall murals, and other articles of fine art for his betters in the valley below. Had he spent his hours in industrious painting, for he had the soul of an artist, he would have left treasures of more lasting value than the fence rows that he cut clean for others, using up his finite strength, for they grew over again and none ever know that the man had been there.

In a wrinkle of the earth Jones had dug a cellar, and covered it with sturdy pine poles, taken from

the forest, that abound in that area. These floor joists were covered with scraps of board that had been removed from the village some distance away, at great expense to the vitality of the middle aged, under nourished, man. Above the cellar he raised a cabin to be home in this isolated forest. The structure would not have met the building standards even in those primitive days had there been such. At the rear of the cabin a trench lead to the cellar and was closed by a rough hand hewn wooden door. It was in this dark, dank basement that his milk goat wintered when the weather turned vicious. Rocks and mud chinked the areas between the ground and floor joists, and made the cellar quite draft free, if not warm. No great pains had been taken to dig the earthen walls of the cellar vertical. In fact no great pains had been taken in the erection of any of the 8 x 12 foot cabin. Jones was not an industrious man, providing but a small garden to be worked when the sun returned to the northern hemisphere. He had no regular occupation. There were no guests to feed, and he did not raise a surplus of vegetables to give or sell to the community below.

The single room had a front door to gain entrance and a window on each of the two longer sides. In the rear of the spartan dwelling, opposite the door, stood a handsome kitchen clock on a small table, beating out the hours and days of the man's life. A small, built-in cot served as couch, and bed. One chair sat in the room anticipating an unlikely guest. A little stove cooked his food, and provided warmth in the winter, and unwanted, sweltering heat in the summer, encouraging the eating of foods that did not require cooking. A bookcase held some of his choice reading material, and a few trinkets. This was his all. What more did the man want or need? He must have been a true disciple of Thoreau; one who was exercising life on the abundance of things that he could do without.

Mr. Jones was a solemn man. A man who had very little to be joyful about and spoke only when spoken to. He would politely answer any question that was put to him. If he had times of sorrow he did not share them with others. He was a singular sight with a burlap sack thrown across his left shoulder, and a massive stick clutched in the right hand, as he tottered in a forward leaning, staggering gait along the gravel road with his bent head covered by a large, slouch hat. He had the appearance of the grim reaper on an errand. Many were the children who sought out their mother's skirt tails when he came into sight.

Within the tall narrow structure of this silent man could have been the spirit of an Abraham Lincoln, with all of the intellect that went along with it. Many men have not seized upon opportunity, as did Lincoln, or Einstein. Why destiny seeks out certain men from their generation is not clearly understood, but the preparation with which that person has availed himself certainly must cause the smile of fate to favor him. Jones cared little, if any, for the adulation of man. He was a thing of nature, a hybrid, neither man nor beast; something not easily understood or appreciated in the pace with which we wandered about through life. His existence may have been upon a plain much higher than others, or he could have lived on the twilight of expression. Whatever the case he was unappreciated and little known among his fellow earthlings. He did not display joyous love nor unending hate, but one who blended against the landscape as a rabbit squats within the brush.

Christmas Day was as blustery as the day before. For me there was always an element of sadness at Christmas. We were drawn inward, filled with our own thoughts. It was anticlimactic because of all the excitement of the days leading up to it. Things returned partly to normal the day following the sacred holiday and by the second day things were back to normal for another year. Men met at the Post Office, and discussed the news, the weather, and the happenings at their homes during those special days. Still this Christmas was a day that neither man nor beast wished to be out and about.

At last, during the conversations someone asked, "I wonder how Sarge Jones is making out in this weather?" Sarge was a belittling name by which he was better known than by his real moniker. It was not a title from some days that he might have spent in the military. Of its origin, no one was certain. In answer another said, "I don't believe that I have seen him for several days, maybe a week or longer!" Anxious glances were exchanged, and fervent conversations held. In a short time a band of four men had been organized and were pushing their way through the cold, and the white snow drifts along the edge of the White Oak. A stretcher, food, and other items were taken as the men submerged themselves into the depths of the white, silent forest. The snow was deep and the grade steep at times, but the rescue mission slowly proceeded toward its goal. The men were silent, each wondering what would be found when they arrived at the frontier homestead.

About a week before, Mr. Jones needed to go to the Village Market for supplies, but turned in early, not feeling well. The next morning he was burning with fever. He arose to build a fire in the old pot bellied stove to drive the cold from the cabin, and from his bones. A severe chill caught him, and sent him back to bed before the fire was laid or lit. It took several goes before the fire was started, and each time he was up, a chill returned him beneath the pile of covers. All day long the burning continued within his body. There was wood in the cabin and he kept the fire going. Evening came early at that time of year, and in the shortening days he grew restless. Glancing to the floor he clutched the covers in fear of falling from the bed. The floor was moving and seemed so far down, as if he were on a tall, thin pedestal.

During the night the fever increased. He slept by fits and starts. Dreams were intermingled with reality. He spoke but no one was there to answer.

"Maude", he called, "Maude, is the fire out?" "Where are you, Maude?" "Oh, Maude! I let you die, Maude!" "Forgive me Maude, and bring me a drink of water. Don't ignore me, please.

My throat is dry, parched, and cracking, Maude. Don't hold it against me, I let you die..." His voice trailed off and his arm fell limp from the couch.

Sleep came and went, and after a restless night the sun began to cast its long slanting rays through the glass of the front door. Between the bleating of the goat in the cellar, and the howling of the lonesome wind, he raved on. This day no fire was lit and the bitter cold fastened its grip firmly about the shelter, and the man.

"Nanny, I'll milk you soon." "Maude the fire feels hot. I am burning up!"

With that remark he threw off the covers, but it was not long before a violent chill wracked his body. He released a long, slow moan, as his slender fingers searched for the covers. He drew them haphazardly about his shaking body, never opening his eyes.

Thoughts ran through his head about the carefree days of his childhood, and the loving care of his mother. Voices of his brothers and sisters mingled with Nanny's cry and the howl of the western wind spilling over the spine of the White Oak. It was wedding day and he stood before the Justice of the Peace with a tall, slender girl. They pronounced their vows, and someone said, "Reverend how can you marry this young girl to such a man? He has neither the means nor the ambition to support her."

"Maude... Oh! Maude. Help me. I stood over your burning, childless body as life ebbed out. Return the deed. Help me, Maude."

Days and nights began to blend, and then he lay silent as the mumbling subsided.

When he was next aroused, a figure in white was standing over him. Reaching out he took her hand in a tender embrace, and said, "Oh Maude! Maude you are here!" and fell back into a deep sleep or coma. Sleep continued, and he would only respond to a loud voice, or a gentle shake on the shoulder. His recovery from pneumonia was long and slow, but the care of the Hospital and Staff had him up and going before the first warm days of spring came back to the White Oak. He was weak, but home again with only his memories and his thoughts.

Not even Santa can bring a better Christmas gift than that of good companions! It was a lonesome time for Mother and me, but we did have each other. So it is in all sadness. There were always others in more destitute condition than we. How Mr. Jones coped with those years of loneliness we shall never know, for the soft moan of the breeze in the pine trees will never tell, and neither will ole Sarge!