

# short stories

story one:



story two:

Save Me,  
Black  
Jesus

Oh,  
Tanner  
Baum

by jay colle

## **Two Short Stories**

Jay Colle

Story One:

**Save Me, Black Jesus**

## Chapter One

With all of the technological genius swirling around the world today couldn't some giant brain spend a few minutes and figure out a way to build a heart monitor with a mute button? Goodgawdamighty. Don't they realize how hard it is to get any rest with that constant beeping twenty-four/seven? Annoying does not even begin to describe what the damn thing does to me but it's all I can dredge up right now. Its constant pinging bores into my brain and then it echoes through my insides, grating like dragging a ten-penny across a chalkboard. I'll definitely add that to my list of things to deal with when I come out of this. And, oh, the list is long, my friend. It is so long. I hate, hate, hate that Hector was right when he kept telling me I should slow down every now and then and recharge, try to see what I might be missing while I sprint through life. I used to laugh at him and go on some rant about living life to the fullest or some other selfish jabber and he'd shake his head but let it slide. But now, being *forced* to slow down—hell, I'm practically at a dead stop—has been really good for me. Made me much more aware of stuff around me. It's given me a chance to check out my surroundings, which, unfortunately right now, is pretty much next to nothing. Ceiling tiles and the ever-present, funky, eye-watering hospital smell. I guess I'm lucky that Hector's a better man than me because he's done very little gloating the few times he's stopped by to see me. I can't say I'd be as kind.

Visits. Some days I hate the visits. My concept of time is all shot to hell so it's always a surprise when someone all of a sudden appears in my room, carrying flowers, cards or balloons—I hate the balloons, by the way; their unpredictability is very unsettling—always sporting a forced smile and spouting every hospital cliché in the book. “You look good.” “How's the food?” Whatever. Eve's been my most consistent visitor, naturally. She doesn't have a lot of choice, seeing as she's married to me. At least she's still taking the “sickness and health” part of the vows seriously and holding up her end of the deal. In a way I'm doing the same thing. Hell, one of us had to be sick. It sucks that it's me but there was always a 50/50 chance. I'm not sure if the situation were reversed I'd of stuck it out this long but most days I'm glad she has. There're times, though, I want to scream at her to leave and get on with her day, quit wasting her time. It's those visits that her happy, clappy attitude and faked cheeriness are so annoying. The way she holds my hand and rubs the top of it while talking to me can drive me crazy. I want to yell “Stop it! Let go of me! It's not doing any good!” but if I did that she'd be hurt and it'd probably make her think twice about showing up the other days I need her here. So I suffer through it. In silence.

Who's here? I hate when I can sense someone's in the room but can't see them until they creep into my way-too-narrow field of vision. It scares me and I can't seem to get used to it. Oh, it's the nurse. The black nurse with the big butt. I think her name is Danella. She's always singing

and I hate that. What is it about black women and singing? It's like a constant, low-level buzz, loud enough to get my attention but too soft to pick out the tune. Not that I'd know what the song was. I doubt Danella and I listen to the same radio stations. When she's not singing she hardly ever says anything to me outside of "good morning." Some of the nurses give me a play by play of what they're doing—"Now, Mr. C, I'm going to check your I.V. right now" or "I'm going to lift you up so I can change your sheet"—but she just smiles and gets it done. I like that. Maybe she can tell I'm not real fond of black people. Nothing personal, really, just something that flows through the sap of my family tree and has for a long time. Not any different than freckles or bowed legs really; it's just who we are. The problem is, lying here has made me a bit more vulnerable than I'd like so I don't get a lot of say in who comes in and takes care of me. There was a time I wouldn't have let a black person touch me but Danella's proven to be all right, at least for a black woman. I got no complaints. In fact, most of the nurses—black, white or whatever—seem to do a good job, at least by me, which is all I can vouch for. To be honest, I'm not too sure what the hell she or any of the other nurses do when they come in for their rounds. If they're poking me or sticking me with needles I can't tell. I quit feeling that stuff a long time ago, which is really odd. Sometimes I see a washcloth and I assume they're cleaning me up. I've heard them refer to it as a "bed bath" or "sponge bath" but I'm sad to report I can't feel that either which moves beyond odd to sad. What I'd give to feel a tingle down there again.

What is she singing? I've heard it before but I can't remember what it is. Very annoying. I hate when that happens. And it happens a lot, especially lately. So many things people say to me sound familiar but not familiar enough to register in my brain and lock in. I used to have a great memory, I think. Then again, maybe I never did and me thinking I did is part of the bad memory I'm dealing with. One thing I can remember, in fact I've memorized, is how many holes are in the ceiling tiles directly over my bed. 1,367. One freaking thousand, three hundred sixty seven, Since the first day I took the time to count them it's always been 1,367. I used to count them every day, hoping I had counted wrong and had somehow added too many or too few. Anything to make it different, break things up a bit. I remember how nervous I'd be as I'd get closer to 1,300. It was pretty thrilling for the first few weeks but it wore off when it became obvious the final count wasn't going to change. I haven't counted them in a while. It's nice to have something in my back pocket for another day. So to speak.

I'm a little tired. I'm not sure why because I don't do much to wear myself out but I find myself only able to stay awake for short periods of time. Being awake takes a lot of energy and before long I'll start fading into sleep, more like rest because I never really sleep, only to get jolted back awake by that beeping monitor. But it's time now. I need to rest. Monitor be damned.

## Chapter Two

Mom? Well, that's a surprise. She hasn't been to see me in a while. Man, she looks rough but, honestly, she should. A lot hasn't gone her way since my father died and she's done the best she could but, sadly, she's come up short. When all you've got isn't enough it'll wear on you. She ended up being not near as strong as she'd put on for us when we were growing up. I'd always watched her and assumed she could take on the world, especially when I was a kid. Hell, even as an adult I'd believed it. But when my father passed the real mom got exposed. She was petrified, scared like a turtle on the side of the road. She shut down, hardly left the house, quit taking care of herself and, if it hadn't been for my sister intervening, she might have gotten evicted or jailed for not paying her bills. She just gave up. Even though she's doing some better now, the way that whole scenario played out shocked me. My sister said it shouldn't have and she swears she saw through mom from early on. I don't know. Maybe I'm naïve but I think dad's passing sucked some of the life out of her and even she was surprised by how much it crippled her. Maybe if it'd been a slow, drawn out death she could have been more prepared. But, it being so sudden, it shook her deep. It's hard to say. Either way, when she shows up it always does me good even though most days she looks so sad. I hope I make her feel better but I can't tell. She always starts out strong, smiling, telling me stories about her day, but she always ends up in tears, repeating my name over and over. Every now and then she'll slip up and say my dad's name but I don't mind. I miss him too.

## Chapter Three

The Oriental doctor just left. I've never been able to figure out if he's Chinese or Japanese. Maybe neither; he could just be from San Francisco. Eve always corrects me when I use the word "oriental" to describe people. She insists that only rugs can be oriental and never people. She said I should use the word "Asian." I don't know about that but what I do know is the doctor's new, at least in dealing with me, and he doesn't say a lot. He usually comes in with a passle of folks—students, interns—but today he was alone. He futzed around for a few minutes, checking the monitors and my heart rate, took some notes and then stood over me and stared. It was pretty freaky. He was looking right into my eyes but we weren't connecting in any way whatsoever. It was like he was looking at me but totally thinking about something or somebody else. I get that a lot. Most people who come see me end up staring at me but not really seeing me, glassing over and looking at nothing. It gives me the creeps. It's even worse when they stare and then close their eyes. I get to thinking they're meditating or, worse, maybe even praying. I hate that. I'm

doing just fine, thank you very much. Don't waste your prayers on me. I never got into that whole religion thing and still don't understand why people would burn up precious minutes in the day praying. To what? To who? It's so stupid to buy into that religious hokum. Thank Zeus my parents were smarter than that. Eve's family dabbled in it a little, but not enough to make me uncomfortable. They were Holiday Christians when Eve was younger, showing up for the two majors and a wedding or funeral when necessary. All that junk's about as useful as a rabbit's foot on a key chain.

The maintenance crew was here right before the Oriental doctor came to check on me. They're always good for a grin. Most of them are Mexican, I think, and they're always jabbering and laughing, making a lot of noise and I can't understand a single word they say. There's one older black dude that works with them and he does all the mopping. He stays longer than the others because the mopping takes longer to finish. I'm not sure of his name. I don't think he can understand them either but it doesn't matter. Mopping is mopping—in English, Spanish or Guamanese. He knows his job is to swab the decks and he does it with a smile. He waits until the others leave before he talks to me but he always starts off with, "You awake, Mr. C?" Then he starts in about his day or his grandkids or his church, never breaking his mopping rhythm, chatting and pushing back and forth. I never know what to say to the man but I don't think it matters to him. He just keeps talking and swabbing and telling stories. He also keeps me up-to-date on the rest of the folks on my floor. It's not always good news but it's nice to know what's going on. Tonight he told me the lady in room 412 passed away. It's kind of a sad situation. She was fairly young and left behind a couple of kids. Then he smiled and said something strange. "May Black Jesus save their little souls. Can I get an 'amen,' Mr. C.?" Black Jesus? I wanted to ask him what that was all about but he was already on his way out of the room. Black Jesus. Was that a new Jesus or was the white Jesus a new Jesus? Are there other colors? I wonder if he comes in pink or orange—kind of like rabbit's feet? And if everybody has their own Jesus in their own color, how special could he be?

#### Chapter Four

Had a visit from Hector today. He left a few minutes ago. It was pretty strange because after his usual discussion about how his family was doing he started babbling on about "visual stimulation" and "meaningful inner experiences." I guess he'd been doing some research on my behalf but it was nutty sounding to me. He told me he had asked Eve's permission to try a little experiment and she'd told him to go for it. I had no idea what to expect but in a million years I would've never guessed what he did next. He moved out of my site for a few minutes and then I

saw him stringing strands of little lights all around my bed, weaving them in and out of all the bars and hooks. He even taped some to the ceiling tiles over my head. What a crazy thing to do. At first I thought it might be Christmas—I got no concept of time, so it’s a possibility—but then he began trying to explain to me how surrounding me with lights was going to provide “visual stimuli” and help me recover. Recover? Recover what? I’m in a freakin’ coma, for crying out loud; I’m not the Grinch! Then he plugged them in and I was shocked when they started blinking. The least he could have done is get some old school, white lights but he went the extra mile and bought twinklers. Now I get to lie here and watch them blink on and off in wacky patterns and it’s really, really irritating. To make things worse he didn’t unplug them before he left. I hope to Zeus someone will come rescue me and turn them off. I guess it never crossed his mind that I can’t look away. Oh god, they’re everywhere. Make them stop...

## Chapter Five

There’s been a lot of activity today. More than usual. Actually, a lot more than usual. What’s frustrating is everyone keeps mumbling and I can’t make out much of what they’re saying. The Oriental doctor has been in and out, looking at his clipboard, taking notes, shining that stupid light in my eyes. I don’t know how he expects me to react when he does that but I always seem to disappoint him. Sorry, dude, but I’m a little limited in what I can give you.

Look, all of my bitching aside, it’s not so bad in here. In fact, most of the time I’d call it great and, believe me, I know it could be a lot worse. My life out there was nothing to get all excited about, I can assure you of that. Lots of missed opportunities and regrets which become crystal clear when you look back. Why is that? I hate that about life. When I was a serious player in the game it was all moving so fast. Decisions had to be made immediately, which always upped the potential for mistakes. I’m sure I did okay, had my share of wins, but all I can remember were the losses, the teeth grinding and then the acid-producing anxiety afterwards. Some folks guess better, I suppose, but I was famous for being wrong. Oh, never right away, when it was easier to adjust and make things right. My mistakes always showed up much later, when the impact could be as wide spread as possible. My strongest memories are not of being right but of trying to *set* things right. At least hiding in here, in me, is easy. All the decisions are made for me and I just exist. I used to dream of a life like this, especially when everything was crumbling to hell all around me, and now I’m living it. It’s not perfect, but what is? I don’t even know if I’d come out of this now if I wanted to. If it wasn’t for the constant interruptions it might actually be a perfect existence. If everyone would just leave me alone I’d be all right. I’d miss Eve, though; I’m sure of that. But the doctors? The nurses? The Mexicans? Not a bit. Maybe if I

could work out a scenario where just Eve visits and no one else, I could ride this out a while longer.

## Chapter Six

Bad news. Danella, the big-butted, black nurse just came in and had a long talk with me. Apparently, all the recent activity in my room is because discussions have begun about what to do with me. I guess that's what happens when you've been out as long as I have. I must be taking up too much room. Danella told me that if I wanted to shake up the discussions I needed to let them know I was interested in living. Give them some kind of sign. It's the first time she's talked to me like that, like I was here instead of just in her way. That makes me think this is serious. Of course, being black, she had to go on and on about saving my soul or some kind of foolishness like that. When she got into that spiel I got annoyed and tried to tune her out. But the rest of it? This is some serious guano. Her exact words were "let them know I was interested in living." Does that mean they'd be willing to yank my plug if I don't cooperate? Has it come to that? No wonder they were mumbling.

Cutting me off seems harsh. Then again, maybe not. I'm a bit of a problem for everyone. There're a lot of folks invested in keeping me going and, right now, they aren't getting a lot back for their efforts. I guess hope and faith can only take you so far. According to Danella it's up to me; I can do something about it by giving them a sign. I'm not sure what, but if I do I suppose things will stay about the same. Maybe I'd get a bit more attention initially but it would taper off unless I come out of it 100%. If I decide to hang in here, maintain the status quo, then what? I guess I'm looking at dying. Now that's not something I've given a lot of thought to, surprisingly enough. I guess maybe I should have; I've had the time. I just never figured on anyone pushing me into it. I'd always assumed it would be on my timetable.

I wonder what happens after you die? Do I just fall asleep forever? That's pretty hard to wrap my head around. Forever. What's *that* mean? Thinking about it makes my brain hurt. Then again, maybe dying doesn't change anything. Maybe I just hang around and talk to myself. Forever. If that's the case, how will I be able to tell when I die? Hell, I may be dead already and not know it. But would I hear that damned heart monitor beeping if I was dead? In hell, maybe, if even *that* exists. It looks like I have a decision to make and I'm not working with a lot of information to base it on. But first, a nap. And if I wake up and I'm still being bombarded with twinkling lights and chirping monitors I'll assume I'm alive.

## Chapter Seven

When I woke up it was dark. I suffered a few seconds of freaking out, a little dizzy, wondering where I was. But then I heard the beeps and figured that was a sign I was still among the living. Then it hit me that it was dark. I mean really dark and that meant somebody came in and turned off the Blinking Lights from Hades. It's proof there's a compassionate soul left in the world after all. I was just getting used to the calm of the darkness when someone opened the door and messed things up by letting in the light from the hallway. I was surprised when I heard, "You awake, Mr. C?" and knew it was the mopper, the black dude from the cleaning crew. He came over, flipped on the lamp by my bed and sat next to me. He made sure I could see him and started talking to me. He didn't mess around, no chit-chatting about his kids and stuff. He jumped right into the change in my situation and talked about what he referred to as his "troubled spirit" and the only way he could get any peace was to have a one-on-one with me. I'm usually pretty hostile to any religious talk but for some reason, when Eric—he finally told me his name—started talking about it, I wasn't annoyed all that much. Maybe it was something about his voice or that he'd made a special trip to my room on his break. Hell, it could have been that I didn't have anything better to do but whatever the reason, it doesn't matter because when he started in on his story I listened.

He told me about his childhood, being raised by his grandmother and having to attend church every time the doors were opened. He told me how he hated going, how he thought it was the stupidest waste of time and he couldn't wait until he was old enough to do his own thing. Then he would never have to go to church ever again. I laughed at that because I would have been the same way. I kept thinking the whole time he was talking, "Thank Zeus my parents didn't do that to me." And then he started telling me about leaving home, joining the military and how great it was to be independent for the first time, although I couldn't figure out how independent he was in the Army. He just traded a grandmother for a sergeant as far as I could tell. I guess the biggest difference was the sergeant didn't make him go to church. Eric told me he did a lot of things, went to a lot of places, while he was in the Army but the one thing he didn't do was think about God. He said it was easy, which I don't doubt, and he figured he was done with all of the religious stuff forever. I couldn't figure out where he was going with all of this but there was no way to stop him so, short of going to sleep, I figured I'd hear him out.

He went into some long rant about finding a job, getting married, having kids—normal stuff, no different than most. Then he got around to the religious part of the story which, I'm guessing, was his whole point of talking to me. It was stuff I'd heard before from all the other people in my past that wanted to "save my soul." It starts with an empty feeling, can't fill the void with money and stuff, get religion, now they're happy and not going to hell when they die. I knew that was

coming. It always ends up there. “If you were to die today do you know where you will spend eternity?” That is so creepy and it’s nothing but a scare tactic to get a notch on their Christian belt. I got bored at that point and started tuning him out. I’m not sure how much longer he talked but I remember him saying something about asking Jesus to “come into my heart” and if I did ask he would do it and I’d be saved. From what, I’m not exactly sure. Maybe Eric went over that when I was ignoring him. Doesn’t matter. It’s all a bunch of hooey anyway. But thanks for sharing.

## Chapter Eight

It’s been crazy in my room all morning. Eve’s been here and all kinds of doctor’s and nurses have been moving in and out of my sight. It made me nervous but I really got concerned when Danella leaned over my face and whispered, “You’re running out of time, Mr. C. Either you decide to respond or some decisions will be made for you and you might not dig those decisions too much.” And she wasn’t smiling.

It’s pretty obvious I’m getting put down. Eve has given me nothing in the way of information. Mom’s a wreck so she’s useless plus I haven’t seen her in a few days anyway. I know they want something from me but I got no ideas. I can’t tell if I want to stick around but am genuinely confused about it or if I’m ready to go to the next level, whatever that may be. I’m tired of thinking about it. Really, I’m just tired. I need to sleep.

## Chapter Nine

Oh my god. Everyone is here. They’re all gathered around my bed and they’re all staring at me, crying and holding each other. Is this it? Is it time? What happens next? Eve? Can’t you tell me what happens next? Mom? Hector? Somebody could say something! Quit focusing on yourself for a few minutes and let me in on the plans! I need something from you.

Oh man, this is really it. I can tell. I can tell just by looking at everybody. Why am I so nervous? What’s there to be nervous about? The unknown? It can’t be worse than where I’m at right now. I’ll probably just go to sleep and not wake up. No more beeping monitors, no more people in and out keeping me annoyed, poking me, shining lights in my eyes. I may finally get some peace.

Uh oh, there’s the Oriental doctor. He’s talking to Eve but his voice is all muffled. She’s just staring at me without blinking, tears running down her face. She just nodded. Now she’s leaning in, right in front of my face and she just told me she loved me. I love you, too, baby. Always have.

I can't believe this is it. Just like that I'll be gone. Will I be sad? I know *they* are. At least they look sad. Will I feel anything? It's frustrating not to know but what does it really matter? It doesn't, does it? This is probably best, me leaving. But where do I go? Am I supposed to do something or will I just kind of know? Will there be a light to follow? I read that somewhere. But if there's a light does that mean something is waiting on me? Now that sucks. I didn't remember that "following the light" scenario until right now. I don't need this, I had it figured out. You know, sleep and don't wake up. But right now I'm wondering.

Oh man, what was that? Something happened, everything just changed... my chest feels like it's caving in. Can't catch my breath. I feel so heavy...dark. It's getting darker... where's the light? Will there be a light? Where's the light?... light... light...save me, Black Jesus...

Story Two:

**Oh, Tanner Baum**

My Daddy set his fork down, placed his elbows on the either side of his plate, laced his fingers almost directly in front of his face and cleared his throat. The rest of us occupying the rim of the breakfast table swallowed whatever we were chewing, sat up straight and quickly shut up.

“When I get home from work tonight, we are going out to get our Christmas tree. Everyone be ready at six p.m. sharp. We will depart at 6:01.” The buzz surging around the table was strong enough to reheat momma’s burnt biscuits. In other households picking out the Christmas tree may be seen as mundane or even a chore but in the Baum home, there was no bigger event. For us, it marked the official beginning of the holiday season and was an activity that involved the entire family. Six o’clock couldn’t get here fast enough and everyone would be ready. Tardiness would not be an issue.

I’m the second child in a string of five, all of us tow headed and thin. Too thin, according to my grandmother, but I think it’s because my momma refuses to get glasses and she tends to burn half our dinner because she can’t read directions or the numbers on the stove. Even though a diet of charcoal isn’t very filling, the plus side is we all have very pleasant breath. Since I’m almost the oldest, I have experienced the Christmas tree gathering almost more than any of the other kids. Momma told me it wasn’t as big a deal when it was just she and Daddy but something came over him when she birthed my older sister. Momma said he jumped from not caring too much about the tree to caring way too much, but she likes this way better even if he does take it too seriously. I’m glad he does because our trees are always the best in the neighborhood every year, and Daddy says that doesn’t happen by accident. “Planning, preparation and perfect timing” are the three “P’s” Daddy lives by, and we don’t go get our tree until he says it’s time. I guess he woke up this morning and could sense today was the day because he wouldn’t have made the announcement unless he felt it deep in his spirit. And he sounded mighty sure this morning, like he had a special feeling, more special than other years.

I couldn’t concentrate in any of my classes at school knowing what was waiting for me when I got home. I got called out by three different teachers for not hearing a question or just staring out the window. I snuck one of Momma’s pine scented air fresheners into my locker at school to serve as a pungent reminder of the upcoming event but after lunch I almost messed up everything by getting sick to my stomach from sniffing my math book. Daddy doesn’t take the weak and infirmed on the tree hunt and that includes children with queasy stomachs. For the last fifteen minutes of my final class I just stared at the clock, watching the second hand spin toward three o’clock. If I was given an assignment during that time I have no idea what it was because I was paying zero attention to my teacher. I ran all the way home, which was pretty stupid since we live three miles away and all of my siblings had already finished their snack before I got home

because they rode the bus. I put up with the laughing and the name calling from my brothers and sisters because it was such a special day, although I will remember to get back at Oleta for continuing to chant “treetarded” long after everyone had agreed it wasn’t very funny.

When Daddy’s car pulled into the carport every one of us was dressed and ready to go. As he walked through the family room and passed in front of all of us sitting lined up on the sofa, he nodded approvingly and told us he needed to change clothes and then we would leave. When he left the room we all grabbed hands and simultaneously contorted our faces into silent screams. I kept my eye on Hootie during the scream because he always made the best faces due to his lazy eye and his current transition between baby teeth and permanent.

My father is shaped like a box. He is as wide and tall as he is thick. If he ever had a visible neck it was long gone before any pictures were taken of him. He has great posture but he is as wide as a door jam and he walks with tiny, bouncy steps that make it look like he is skipping everywhere he goes. I guess he’s kind of funny looking but we never laugh about it because we’re used to it. He’s not the snazziest dresser but the one day Daddy can be counted on to look fine is the day we get our Christmas tree. This time he put on a crisp pair of blue jeans held up by plain brown suspenders that overlapped his favorite green and red plaid flannel shirt. He always rolled up the sleeves, one turn each, because it gave him some breathing room when he needed to slide on his gloves. The rugged, manly, leather gloves hung exactly halfway out of his right back pocket, thumbs lined up, far enough away not to be a nuisance but close enough to grab when needed. On his feet were a pair of boots purchased over ten years ago that were still as shiny as the day he bought them. They were brown to match his suspenders and they were cut high, climbing midway to his knees, which gave him ample room to tuck his jeans into the top before he laced them, tight and secure, tied with a double knot. The whole fashion package was topped off with a bright orange John Deere baseball hat. Daddy liked wearing it really high on his head. I think he thought it made him look taller but it really just looked like he needed a bigger hat.

When he walked out of the bedroom and stood framed in the doorway, he was the coolest Daddy that any of us had ever seen. I had witnessed the transformation for 12 years and the initial sensation of pride never faded. Our Daddy was going to get us a Christmas tree and we were going to help.

The only person in the house not allowed to go with us was Momma. Daddy liked having her stay back at the house to make sure the tree lights were functioning and all the ornament boxes were open and ready to be raided. Whenever Daddy kissed her goodbye she would salute and thank him in advance for the task he was about to undertake. The way Momma smiled when she said it made me wonder if she was talking about getting the tree or the fact that Daddy was

taking all five kids out of the house at once by himself. Either way, I liked the salute and I think he did too. We all piled into the mini-van and once Daddy was sure we were all buckled in, he got us on the road, heading out to find our tree.

The Methodist Church was only five blocks away but it felt like eight. It always seems to take longer to get some place than it does to get back. Daddy found a parking space right near the front of the tree lot and, before he turned off the van and unlocked the doors, he turned in his seat, as much as his body would let him, and went over the rules just like he does every year. “Number one: don’t act like little hooligans when we get out of the car. You represent our family and its good name while you’re in public. Number two: Help me with this one... Who makes the final decision about which tree we buy?”

We all shouted, “Daddy!” And with that we were released.

As we approached the entrance the smell of pines buckled my knees—caused by my stomach’s memory of that afternoon—but I recovered by taking a swig of ginger ale from Cecil’s flask. He was always getting car sick so he had special permission to carry carbonated soda with him every time he rode in the car, no matter how short the trip. Fortunately, since ginger ale lacked caffeine, it didn’t interfere with his Ritalin. Since I had to hesitate in the parking lot to settle my stomach, I got left behind. By the time I caught up, Daddy had already grabbed a measuring pole and was marching into the first row of trees. Boy Scout Troup 1412 always ran this particular tree lot and we kept coming back every year because they gave returning customers \$5.00 off the purchase of a tree. Coupons are a big deal to the Baum family. I found Daddy and the crew halfway down aisle one, being led by one of Troup 1412’s finest, a little dude with buckteeth sporting his Scout shirt, scarf, khaki shorts and what looked like size twelve white sneakers. He looked nervous and I was guessing he was probably new. No one ever waited on Daddy twice. As I got closer I could hear Daddy getting ready to explain why.

“What was your name again, son?”

“Bart, sir.”

“Okay, Bart, here are my expectations for the evening. If you want to sell me a Christmas tree, you will need to follow these rules. One, I point to a tree I am interested in with the measuring stick. You will then pull it into the aisle and hold it straight. Two, I will measure for height, which will determine its price, which will determine whether it is in our price range. If it qualifies, we will proceed to three, which will require you to spin the tree one-quarter turns when I say the word ‘spin.’ I will say the word four times and you will spin the tree four times until I have inspected the tree from every angle. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Bart’s response was barely a whisper and his hand was shaking as he mindlessly raised it, holding up three fingers like he was going to start reciting the Boy Scout pledge. Daddy smiled and then made everyone jump by spinning 90 degrees and pointing the measuring stick toward his first evergreen subject, shouting “That one!” Bart recovered and ran over to Daddy’s choice, pulled it out of the stack and dragged it to the middle of the aisle. We all watched silently as he struggled to gain enough leverage to pull it upright. He was so little that it took him a long time to get it balanced perpendicular to the ground. By the time he succeeded, he was sweating through his shirt and his hair was starting to stick to the sides of his face.

“Good Lord, man!” Daddy shouted. “If you’re that slow with all of these trees we’ll need to order breakfast!” Bart was deflated and right before he started to cry, Daddy told us kids to help him with the trees, which was what we were waiting to hear. Humiliating a Boy Scout is part of the Baum family tree buying tradition, at least for Daddy.

As we started running toward the tree Bart was holding, we all stopped at the same time and stared. The tree was pathetic. The trunk was crooked and the left side of it looked like it had survived a hurricane, limbs curled back over themselves and needles sticking every way but right. There was no way Daddy would accept a tree in that condition and he proved me right by telling Bart to get that one out of his site and grab another. The next one Daddy pointed to got displayed a lot quicker because all of the kids were helping. We couldn’t help the way the tree looked, though. It was possibly more wretched than the first one. It was so bad that Daddy didn’t even have us spin it, not even once. Daddy decided to change his luck by trying another row of trees, but each one we pulled out to show him was pitiful. They were either really thin or had giant holes in them big enough for baby Cephus to hide in. Daddy was spinning and pointing that stick so fast he looked like a wizard casting spells, except he would have to be from the Minnesota Wizard Clan where they are more accepting of flannel and lace-up boots.

Whatever he was trying to conjure up with that stick it wasn’t working. Every single tree we hauled in front of him was useless. I was starting to get scared and, by the amount of fingernail chewing being conducted by my brothers and sisters, they were too. Bart had to go home when his momma came to pick him up an hour into our hunt. He looked relieved. As we all gathered around the latest choice, Daddy told me to run get one of the adult Boy Scouts because he had some questions for him. I grabbed the first dude I found and we hurried to the back of the lot to talk to Daddy.

Daddy didn’t give the Man Scout a chance to introduce himself before he barked, “Sir, your allotment of trees this season is deplorable. What say you?”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Mr. Baum. Seems we tried a different supplier this year and what they sent us has been a bit disappointing.”

“Disappointing? That, my man, is a gross understatement. These trees should be burned!” I admit I would love to see a whole Christmas tree lot set on fire but I know what Daddy was getting at. So did the Man Scout.

“I tell you what I can do, Mr. Baum. If you can find something in here you can work with, I’ll sell it to you half price.” When Daddy heard that offer, he softened up a little. If coupons are big in the Baum family then half-off deals are huge. The Man Scout was speaking Daddy’s language.

Daddy placed both his hands behind his back and took on a serious look. He stared at the Man Scout and said, “I will take that offer under advisement and let you know in a reasonable time what my decision will be.”

“As long as a reasonable time is within fifteen minutes because we close at nine.”

Daddy turned away from him and started to pace. This was a good sign because when Daddy paced it seemed to charge up the part of his brain where The Genius lives. Some near miracles have occurred from Daddy’s hands once he has spent a little time pondering. The kids knew to let him be and work through it on his own time. After ten minutes the Man Scout got tired of waiting and he walked back to the front to begin the process of shutting down the lot for the night. In all my years of hunting the tree, we have never come home empty handed, proving that when Daddy got the special feeling, great things happened. I could not imagine tonight would be different but just as a little seedling of despair started to germinate in my gut, Daddy stopped, turned to face us and pointed the measuring stick at me.

“Tanner, go find the man in charge and tell him to bring me a saw and a ball of twine and meet us in aisle two. The rest of you, follow me. There is work to be done.” I ran off to find the Man Scout. Daddy was getting us a Christmas tree.

By the time we found Daddy and the kids, they had pulled two nasty trees out of the stack and had them lying on the ground right next to each other. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what Daddy had planned but I was in no position to doubt him. He instructed my brothers and sisters to stand the trees straight up and hold them side-by-side. When that was done, he stepped back, setting one end of the measuring stick on the ground, holding it out from his body, looking like Moses before he parted the Red Sea. Since I wasn’t a participant at that particular miracle, what followed next will have to suffice as my Children of Israel moment. Daddy started barking out instructions, simple and clear, and that’s when we all knew Daddy was either a genius or a saint.

“Right side, spin!” The kids holding the tree on the right spun their tree one-quarter around. This was followed by a moment of silence before Daddy barked, “Left side, spin!” The kids on the left quickly obeyed. “Left side, spin!” They turned it once again. When Daddy told the kids on the right to spin their tree back to its original position, Daddy’s plan became crystal clear. It was like the heavens opened up and a big angel choir started singing one of those fancy church songs. Even the Man Scout muttered, “Well I’ll be...” Without being told the kids holding each tree moved toward each other, stopping as their two trunks met. The result was one of the most beautiful, full trees any of us had ever seen in our lives. Daddy had found two perfect halves to make a glorious whole and his reputation as a blessed genius was forever seared in our minds.

After a few moments of respectful silence, Daddy grabbed the saw and twine from the Man Scout and instructed the kids not to move. He started snipping and hacking, ridding each tree of its bad parts until the two orphans fit together like conjoined twins. Then he grabbed the twine and united the two at the top, middle and bottom, securing them so tightly that no man would ever put them asunder. When Daddy was through, the Man Scout offered to hold the tree (it was one now) and let the whole Baum crew inspect Daddy’s work. “Spin!” we all shouted at once and repeated it until we had seen the tree from every angle. It was perfect, probably the best-looking Christmas tree we had ever found. Then I had an idea that, weirdly, seemed to strike all of us kids at once, because we all grabbed hands and let out the biggest silent scream we had ever mustered. Daddy laughed but the Man Scout lost his smile briefly. I believe he happened to be looking at Hootie and, if you’re not ready for it, his silent scream can disturb you.

As we piled into the van, Oleta remembered Bart and wished out loud that he could have witnessed our Christmas miracle. Cecil said he believed the Man Scout would be telling that story for a lot of years to come so he was sure Bart would hear about it. Then everybody started talking at the same time and, for once, Daddy didn’t try to shut us up. It was a very special night indeed.