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Babbs Switch: A Commission From The Spirits

By Karen Allen Chapman

A pickup truck of vintage years and questionable color lumbered along highway 183 a few miles out of Hobart. It veered onto a side road, bounced, lurched, then stopped. Interrupted but momentarily, stillness returned to the sizzling quiet of an Oklahoma summer afternoon.

Suddenly, the passenger door burst open. Shrieks and squeals split the sky as two children irreverently broke the spell. Grasshoppers scattered in alarm before them as they ran. "Can't catch me, silly sissy girl! Can't catch me!"

Slowly, hesitantly, the driver's door squeaked open. Cautiously, an old man lowered himself from the seat of the pickup and stood. His eyes pinched into the calculated squint of the farmer long accustomed to scanning the horizon into the sun, evaluating the skies for promise of rain. He spat into the weeds. No sign.

And then his eyes sought that for which he had come to this place — the rose granite marker. He walked toward it, reluctantly. His heart was heavy, but he was piqued by curiosity, propelled by courage. With scarred fingers he felt the smooth surface of the stone and traced the story thereon, as if a reader of braille. Nineteen twenty-four. Such a tumult on that chill winter night sixty-four years ago. So unlike this brilliant windless day. How could this be the same place? Why had he dreaded to come back? But he had finally returned, drawn here like the tongue is drawn to irritate a festering tooth. Why not leave the memories alone? How could this journey expiate his guilt, the senseless guilt that the living feel in the presence of the spirits of the hapless dead?

The grandchildren stumbled toward him, breathless from their sprint, sweaty, and out of sorts.

"See, that's what happens when you take off like racehorses in this heat. Sit down on this patch of grass here and be still. You'll feel better soon."

He sat on the running board of the pickup, facing the children.

"Your hands are ugly, Grandpa," the lad observed innocently.

"Yes, yes they are, Son." The old man looked at his hands perched atop his knees. The skin was angry looking, stretched so taut that he could not make a fist, could not even clasp his knees tightly. "And if you'll rest a bit, I'll tell you why. It's a story. By then maybe you'll be ready for a Dairy Queen ice cream."

He leaned back against the truck door, wiped sweat and imaginary cobwebs from his brow, and began.

"It was right here, December 24, years ago. I was just about your age, and just as full of energy as you two. And kids back then — well, we got just as excited around Christmas time as kids do today.

Babbs Switch school set right over there. It was just a one-room frame building, about the size of your mother's living room, and all thirty-three of us pupils were taught by one lady, Mrs. Florence Terry Hill. She was a wonderful woman, made us each know we were special. 'We each had a gift to offer to the world,' she'd say. . . 'a gift.'

Well, our school was dressed up extra nice to get ready for our Christmas program that year. It was going to be the biggest Yuletide doin's ever, and so the inside was fresh painted, and the students all helped

put up the evergreen. In those days we used cotton and strung cranberries and popcorn to drape around the limbs. And of course we didn't have electricity, so folks attached little wax candles to the branches for light.

The tree wasn't very steady. While we were trimming it, I reached for a branch that I could just barely fetch. When I pulled, the whole thing came over on top of me. Everyone hooted at how clumsy I was, and we had to start over on most of the trimming.

Come Christmas eve, I was getting pretty skittery. I was nervous about saying my Bible quote from the Christmas story for the school program that night. I had those lines memorized frontwards and backwards, but when I thought about standing up in front of all the grown ups, the words just started doing leap frog in my head.

Lots of things weren't going just right. The weather turned off terrible. That afternoon, black clouds gathered up, and soon a norther was blasting us with knifey sleet. On top of that, my baby sis, your great Aunt Lila, came down with the croup. That meant Mama couldn't go to Babbs Switch. I'd sure miss watching her mouth my lines to herself while I did my part. I'd wanted her to see me and be proud of me. . . more than anything.

Course, before Papa and I could go, we had chores to do. Animals have to be fed no matter what, and the weather slowed us up so's I thought we'd be too late and miss it all.

Fact was, we were a little late. But we got there just as Mrs. Hill was announcing the little kids' part; that was the first thing on the program. When Papa opened the door, it kinda dragged on the floor. And when he had to force it inside to open it wider, it made a scraping sound. Everyone turned clear around to shush us. My face flamed red. Well, that was just the first time that contrary ole door was to make trouble for us that night.

There were fifty desks, all in neat rows. (They were nailed to the floor in those days.) All of them were taken. There were even extra chairs in the aisles, and people in all of them too. So Papa and I stood at the back, just inside the door. I couldn't see much, so I stood on top of a stack of books. I knew that I'd get it for sure if Papa or Mrs. Hill saw me, but no one

noticed. And I could see fine.

The little room was transformed. The candles on the tree at the front were so merry. They fluttered and flickered in the branches. The light and shadows of them, and the glow of the kerosene lamps and lanterns made it seem like Santa's elves were dancin' about. Outside, the wind howled, and the ground was covered with an icy crust. But inside, the stove sent out its heat, and everybody radiated their own Christmas glow.

People clapped and cheered after my group performed. And I only stumbled over my lines once. When I got back to where my dad was, he slapped me on the back, proud-like, the way men do to each other, and I swelled up about to pop with pleasure.

Then when all our parts were done, Santa Claus appeared. He was decked out in his regulation uniform, but I could tell by the way Mrs. Bolding helped him when he handed out the bags of candy that he was her son, Dow. He was seventeen, and I had in mind to be just like him someday. He never teased the little kids like some older guys will do. And when he handed me a bag of candy that night, he shook my hand, as if to say we were special friends. He clasped my hand tight, and I gripped his hand hard too, not knowing it was the last time I was ever going to be able to give a man a good hand shake. I'm proud it was with Dow.

After he handed me the last bag he was carrying, he went to the front of the room for more. I saw his hand reaching up into the top of the tree for a present that someone had placed there. (That was a natural place for packages in those days.) Somehow, in that maneuver to get that present some candles ignited the tree. Nobody thought much of it at first; we'd seen the like happen before. I even heard some of my friends laugh and yell out to Santa to back up or he'd catch afire.

But then it all started happening fast. Dow picked up a toy chair and threw it at the tree, I guess to put out the burning branch, but the tree fell and knocked over a glass bowl lamp. That lamp exploded into flames. Fire licked across the newly painted ceiling zippity fast. The curtain we'd made of sheeting to go across the stage came ablaze.



After that, I couldn't see much, just people screaming and crying. I remember Mr. Tom Goforth standing up on a desk yelling for folks to calm down. 'We're all going to get out all right,' he said.

But all of us didn't. Not Mrs. Hill or Dow. Not Mr. Goforth either.

Mrs. Hill had told us, in case of a fire, to drop down to the floor and crawl because we could breathe better if we layed low. I saw some of the children doing just that, but the stampede for the door was leaving them tromped under, and their crawling bodies tripped other people. There was such a cluster of arms and heads and legs that it might have been laughable if it was an act in a slap-stick comedy. but it was real, all right.

I was lucky to be close to the door. Right quick, folks were clamoring for it to get out, and the more they pressed into the door, the harder it was to pull it open. Their bodies just pushed it shut.

Papa and some other men managed to open the door a space, and he grabbed me by the shoulder and hurled me outside, rough as if I was a bale of hay he was buckin' onto a

rack. That's how he saved my life.

Some people who made it outside turned right around and went back in to rescue others, and most times, they died too. Several of us tried to get people out through the windows. There were lots of windows, but they all had sturdy galvanized mesh wire over them, and we couldn't budge the wire. It was fastened with seven-inch bolts and wire staples. Oh, whoever had put that on'd done a good job of it, I'll tell you.

Outside it was freezing sleety cold, but we were so close to the fire and working so hard to break loose the window wire that sweat was rollin' off us. The window glass was broken, and the flames were burning out at us and heating up the metal wire so that it was like grabbin' holt of an oven rack in your cook stove when you've set it on broil.

We could hear the screams and prayers from folks inside, and close to the window I saw my papa. He'd stayed to help others 'til there was no helping hisself. His mouth was open in a cry. I'd never seen him cry, ever. I just kept pulling at that mesh wire until big arms from behind me dragged me away.

Pretty soon the voices inside stopped. All we could hear was the hiss of fire. All we could see was flames and black, black smoke. Thirty-six fine people perished that night."

"Did you burn your hands when you tried to pull down the wire, Grandpa?"

"Yes."

"If you'd died back then, Buddy and I wouldn't even BE, would we, Grandpa?"

He looked at the beautiful pair, so healthy and full of life. He felt the spirits about him, felt their approval, and sensed their message. Those who live out their lives have an obligation — to make the best of their gift, to prepare a good way for the generations after. He had done well. He smiled slightly, nodded.

"That's right, Child," he said. ■

KAREN ALLEN CHAPMAN, a 1963 Weatherford High School graduate, is a free-lance writer living in Park City, Utah. Her specialty is young adult historical fiction.

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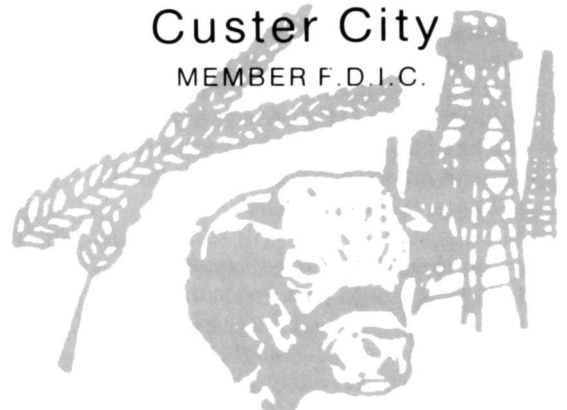


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