

That Day in the Manger
by Tim Tucker

“OH. MY. GOD. THEY CAME THIS YEAR?”

Instead of “Merry Christmas”, this is the phrase most often heard at our family Christmas jamboree. “Bless his heart” — or “her heart”, as the case may be — comes a close second. “Merry Christmas” ranks about seventh now, somewhere around “Where’s the cooler?” and “Stop hitting your sister!”

Every year, all the various tangled branches of our family tree converge in our hometown of Dupree’s Fork on the Saturday before Christmas. We have an honest-to-God Uncle Jesse, and we hold Christmas every year at his farm. This gives us plenty of room to avoid each other if we need to.

“How many do you figure this year?” I asked Amy.

“Way over a hundred, honey. Looks close to a record to me.”

“It’s one-hundred-and-forty-four to be exact.” That would be Aunt Sally, the anal-retentive keeper of family records and lore, or more accurately, the keeper of closeted skeletons and juicy gossip.

“Is that with or without the animals, critters, and out-of-town girlfriends and boyfriends?” I kidded.

“Oh, hush. Be nice,” Amy scolded unconvincingly. Aunt Sally looked at me with her school-marm eyes.

“That’s a record isn’t it, Aunt Sally?” trying to placate her.

“Yes, indeed! Exactly six more than three years ago,” Sally reverted back to her comfortable know-it-all mode.

Oh, Lord. What a year that was. Luckily, Aunt Eugenia recovered quickly from that brawl. We haven’t had one since thankfully. I must say she looked quite lovely this year for a woman of 90.

Amy and I meandered toward the Big Field with our son, Ben. We tried to optimize our route so we could run into the people we either liked or tolerated while avoiding the scarier kin. Not living here anymore, we have a harder time these days knowing which are which.

“All this is our fault,” I lamented.

“Don’t remind me,” Amy snickered.

“You just wanted to marry into greatness.”

“I wanted to marry someone I wasn’t kin to. Good thing I like you.”

“Well, that makes me feel better.”

We got married seven years ago. Our wedding was both historic and infamous. My small family shrub of a few dozen was absorbed into the great family tree of Dupree's Fork. Of the 723 people native in some way to our town, everyone officially became kin to everyone else that day. Aunt Sally blamed me for all of this so she called me for tech support before Christmas that year. She said the family tree software had crashed while trying to compute the relationship between Cousin Jolene and Cousin Bob.

"Amy! Chris! Bless my soul! Is that little Ben?"

"Wow, Aunt Becky isn't a blond anymore," I muttered to Amy before she seized my wrist.

"Oh, hi Aunt Becky. How are you?"

"Well, my boils are actin' up, but otherwise I can't complain. Lord, what a cutie he is," grabbing at Ben.

"Why yes he is. Cutest kid ever," Amy beamed. Ben was understandably nervous as Aunt Becky invaded his personal space.

"Where are my manners? Amy, Chris, this is Sue. She's Aunt Jane's daughter's niece's sister from up the holler." I greeted her with a dumb look on my face. It took me twenty minutes and a beer to decipher that one. I could tell I was out of practice.

The glorious smell of dinner blew in on the pleasant, sunset breeze. They started digging out the pigs that had been slow-cooking in the ground since yesterday. Peace seeped into my body. God bless Christmas pig pickin's. It may not be Biblical, but I'll leave that one to the theologians. Barbecue definitely united us as little else could.

I should have known better than to let my mind wander like that.

"Chris! How's it hangin' man? Long time no see." Three hundred pounds, most of it beer, came barreling toward me.

"Hey, Bobby! How're the pigs doing?"

"Man, we're gonna eat good to-night! Where are my manners? Chris, Amy, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Savannah."

We exchanged "nice to meet yous" but he had me at "manners". Since when did Bobby know that word?

"You're looking great, Bobby. Something different about you," Amy winked. Come to think of it, she was right.

Bobby was wearing his dress camos and a clean work shirt. Last year he wore his festive, greasy, red wife-beater and green-splotched, torn painter's jeans accompanied by his flavor of the month, a dark-rooted blond who looked like she had defeated a bottle of Clorox in hand-to-hand combat. Savannah was a real improvement, though admittedly that was like breaking the thirty-day mile. Bobby got us all a beer from the busted old washing machine someone had turned into a giant cooler near the barn, handing one to Savannah first. Amy and I exchanged raised eyebrows. This must be serious.

I took Ben over to the big campfire to make some “s’ mores d’oeuvres”. There would always be room for barbecue after all. With even less subtlety than usual, Uncle Ron was parading around Debbie and their two best friends. By this I mean the two, recently-enhanced best friends she unnaturally smuggled in under her shirt. I hurried on by, hoping Ben wouldn’t use his rapidly-expanding vocabulary to express his appreciation of her new features.

“I think this feller might be a little lost,” Short Travis said as we walked by.

A thoroughly-wasted but clean-shaven man stumbled toward the fire like a dazed moth, dressed head to toe in the Civil War equivalent of a Class A Confederate uniform.

“Wow. A dress uniform and spit-shined boots, all while sloppy drunk. That’s impressive.” Short Travis nodded agreement, looking like he was uncertain whether to salute. Somebody diverted Sergeant Snocker from the fire, handed him a ham biscuit, and poured hot coffee down his throat.

“We should let him rest out there with White Lightning,” I suggested. While Uncle Jesse’s albino jackass seemed like a reasonable, Christian companion given that our Lord was born in a manger, I was voted down, though not without widespread temptation. To this day, we still don’t know who that guy was.

My great-great-aunt Mama Lily, who was so old she graduated high school with God, was holding court underneath the giant poplar. “Well, you know Oliver” – rest his soul – “he brought home Lady Bird one day, that crazy, old cat. She was sweet after he died. He was dumb as a sack of switches, bless his heart, but I loved him so.” God bless her. She told the same stories over and over again, but you still felt better for hearing them. Everything in hindsight was OK with her.

Uncle Billy kept interrupting her with “you know, Mama Lily, that reminds me of...” to get attention. He was the only one who had missed him being here.

“What in hell and Georgia brought Billy back this year?” Bobby remarked.

“Parole,” I said.

“I thought he ran off with somebody.”

“Yeah, his two drinking buddies who were trying to help him fence Tickle Me Elmos a few years back.”

“Good thing his barn full of marijuana burned down when his still blew up. That would have added a few years,” Amy said.

“He should’ve gotten life. A stoned milking cow is just cruel,” I said half-jokingly.

Uncle Ron bellowed over Billy’s attention-seeking, forgetting the concept of both inside voice and not thinking out loud.

“You mean a Gol Dang Mexican is coming, to *our* Christmas?”

“Oh, this should be good,” Amy rolled her eyes. “Cousin Lisa’s pretty brave bringing her new boyfriend.” I did detect a hint of guilty pleasure in her voice like those who stare

at fiery car wrecks on TV, which was what this could turn into. People with two first names were plenty common here, but not necessarily someone named Juan Antonio de la Fuente.

"Hey, Ron! He's really from the Dominican Republic." I couldn't pass this up.

"Jesus H. Christmas! He's a Communist too?"

"But, Ron," Debbie chimed in whatever-ly. "He's got five names. That's so romantic." Yeah, I know, but it made sense to her. I decided it was time to start searching for another drink before the need to scream overtook me. I hoped for an In Case of Emergency - Open Can sign on a tree nearby. A few minutes later, Lisa and Juan Antonio came down from the Big House.

"Philly Nacho Dogs, Juantonio! Como say yo' mama!" Ron bellowed in a surprisingly friendly tone, amplified by the beer can near his mouth. Emergency beverage in hand, I figured now was a good time to go lubricate my brain somewhere.

I spied on some of the less-savory cousins across the field firing an arsenal of weapons at Uncle Jesse's shooting car, a derelict old F150 that was more holes than metal. They gave powder muskets to the ones too drunk to shoot so they wouldn't hurt anyone but themselves. It's quite a sight to see someone fall backward so fast his body doesn't have time to buckle.

Kristin and Johnny slowly drove up toward us in his giant Super Duty, keeping a safe distance from the riflemen. At about thirteen-months pregnant, it took three men to help her out. They guided her the few feet to the barn, and she sat in a chair near the Port-O-John. Amy rushed up to see.

"Baby, now explain this to me again?" I asked.

"Last time I did you laughed so hard you fell on the floor and hit your head."

"Humor me. The alcohol is helping."

"OK. Johnny was married to Cherie but started seeing Kristin about five years ago, all while Gary was having an affair with Cherie. But Kristin is Gary's sister. So they basically divorced, swapped, and still ended up all directly related to each other."

I stood there for a minute.

"Ow."

"I know, sweetie," Amy said, patting me on the shoulder. "Well, everyone's happy now."

"Daddy? Can we go see Big Don's big truck house?" Ben asked in his usual, carefree voice.

"Sure, little buddy."

Big Don's RV was coated in Christmas lights, which we oohed and aahed over, though some of us more convincingly than others. And there on top of the RV's air conditioner, spinning like a disco ball, was a foot-wide Star of Bethlehem.

As if on cue, Uncle Jesse flipped the dedicated breaker for the nativity scene. The vulnerable baby Jesus was swaddled in a lowly manger with Mary and Joseph looking rapt at him. The cows, sheep, donkeys, wooden deer, snowmen, and reindeer peacefully held their vigil. The Three Wise Men were bringing gifts and their reverence, though I would have preferred a ham and a pecan pie if I was Joseph.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, Ben?"

"What are those?"

Not far behind the noble Wise Men stood two, seven-foot-tall replicas of the Statue of Liberty.

"It's a long story, Ben," was all I had in response.

"Oh."

"Um, let's go eat."

Eventually the tender, slow-cooked pig overrode our need to worry about such things. Ben got absorbed in his potato chips for a while and then wandered off to play with the other kids. Amy and I soaked in the well-smoked flavor of the evening. Three after-dinner desserts later, we were on the verge of a peaceful food coma. Weird as we all were, we had our good moments.

Our contemplation of the Lord and his wondrous blessings, confections, farm animals, lighting effects, and symbols of freedom was broken by a wail from inside the barn that sounded both animal and human.

"Oh, Lord. Mama Lily probably slipped on the manure again and hurt her back," someone exclaimed from behind. We heard the sound again.

"That's not Mama Lily," I said. I'd been yelled at by her enough growing up to know.

"Maaaaama!" That was my sister, Sarah, drawing it out in a way that was never a good sign for her.

"What is it?" Mama hollered back.

"Kristin's having contractions! I think she's having this baby! Like now!"

Mama came running from behind the serving table and hurdled the pig pit, apron trailing in her wake and still wielding a carving knife. Like a big herd we followed behind, though at a safe distance.

"Lord Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Moses, that fat thing down at the Chinese place, whoever! Somebody boil some water and get sheets out of the closet! Just don't get the ones

MawMaw gave us last year. She'd be madder than a hornet. And somebody call Doc Adams!"

Doc probably had delivered Yoda, too. There wasn't a person in town he hadn't seen naked, which may be the most frightening thought I'd had in ages.

"Dangit!" Short Travis shouted.

"What is it, son?" Big Travis yelled back.

"My cell phone can't get a signal."

"Mine neither!" For some reason Debbie had three cell phones, all useless.

"Durn!" Uncle Ron swore. "They ain't fixed the cell tower yet. Mama Rose was out shooting turkey vultures off it the other day and knocked it out."

Juan Antonio was sprinting toward the guest trailer like he was being chased, which didn't seem out of the question. Aunt Jean was trying to wave him off. "Hey! The phone-o ain't worked-o in the trailer-o in months-o. Go to the Big-o House-o and call...o."

"Aunt Jean, he does speak English," I said.

"Well, how was I supposed to know?"

Kristin was near hyperventilating, screaming "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!" with each quick breath.

"No, baby. Remember what the labor lady said. Like a cow, like a cow!" Johnny said.

"Moo! Moo! Moo! Moo!" she screamed in rapid-fire.

The milking cows down the row tried to help. "Mmmmmmmmmooooooooooooo. Mmmmmmmmmmmoooooooooooo."

"No, like those cows, baby!"

"Johnny, I would like you not to say any more words right now if that's OK, dear," Kristin replied calmly. OK, I'm making that part up. This is a family story after all.

Somebody had marshaled up enough sense to run next door to the McBride farm as here came Major Leah McBride flying over the fence and across the field like she was coming ashore at Normandy. She started barking orders while still in full stride to anyone not fleeing in an opposite direction.

"YOU! GET HOT WATER! YOU! CLEAN SHEETS! YOU! PUT THAT PLYWOOD ACROSS THAT LADDER! WE'LL USE IT AS A STRETCHER!"

Bobby tottered forward with minimal sobriety and said, "Honey, I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies!"

"You've waited a long time to say that, haven't you?" I replied without blinking.

"Yep," he said, completely deadpan.

Major McBride shot him a look that could have burned him a third nostril. I expected her to order someone to fire something downrange, probably Bobby. She'd have had plenty of takers among the rifleman, now advancing cautiously like well-armed, drunken Magi to investigate the ruckus.

"YOU! STACK UP THOSE MILK CRATES AND PUT THAT PLYWOOD ON TOP! GET SOME SHEETS AND PILLOWS TO PUT ON IT! Y'ALL THERE! DON'T STAND THERE LOOKING STUPID! START PRAYIN'!"

Uncle Ron wandered up alongside. "Dang, she's hot when she's bossin' people around," he muttered, clearly fearing for his life. "Anything I can do, darlin'?" he said more boldly.

"YOU CAN SHUT UP, STAND OVER THERE, AND DRINK YOUR BEER! YOU'LL DO LESS HARM THAT WAY!"

"Yes, ma'am!" shooting her a salute and nearly knocking himself out with his almost-full beer. "I've never been ordered to drink beer by a woman before. I'm in love."

In a world record for our fire department, three burly firemen – one who was the spitting image of "Billy Ray Cyrus: The Mullet Years" – showed up a few minutes later. Apparently the dispatcher had focused on the more motivating aspects of the story like 'woman in distress' and 'barbecue'. If she had told them they might have to deliver a baby, they'd have intentionally wrecked on the way there. Either way, they weren't going to have time to drive her the 25 miles to the hospital.

"Ma'am, please don't push until the doctor gets here, OK?" the mulleted one pleaded.

Kristin told him to do something that even I, with my complete lack of medical training, knew to be biologically impossible, followed by other suggestions likely to mess up our family tree for sure. Major McBride glared at him and he retreated like a wounded dog.

Johnny looked up at my mother with scared eyes. "Aunt May, you may have to do this." Then even slower, "You're the only one I trust."

"Honey, I'll do what I can," Mama said softly. I realized this was why I loved and respected her so much. She might panic at first, but she ran toward her fear, never away. I could see her will harden; the Devil himself could not bar her way now.

Mama talked softly and calmly to Kristin, cleaning her up without comment when needed, and encouraged her along.

"Honey, I had five babies. I know you think you're not going to make it. Try not to get too flusterated. It'll be fine. Just hold my hand and think how beautiful he's going to be. That's a good girl. You're doin' fine."

Kristin drew from Mama's resolve. I knew the face she now made. It was a lot like Amy's hospital game face. Ben was nine pounds, nine ounces, and Amy got him out the old-fashioned way. Afterward, she did everything except jump on the table and flex her biceps. That a way, Kristin.

"I can see the top of his head! He's got so much hair! Bless me, how precious," Mama said. She started twirling the thin, black curls in her fingers, radiating calm to mother and child.

Finally, Doc Adams came barreling past the house and across the field in his red, three-gallons-to-the-mile, '74 Impala, taking flight like the Dukes of Hazzard. I forgot that Doc used to run in the Thursday night quarter-midget races at the dirt track up in Boonesville. He'd have put the Holy Ghost in the wall if he had to. He slid sideways in a cloud of dust and jumped out of the car like one of those scrawny, thousand-year-old, kung-fu masters on TV, doctor bag in hand.

"Somebody throw a sheet around me! He's crowning! Kristin, honey, don't push."

Kristin replied, "Sir, I'm having a little trouble complying with your admittedly understandable request. I hope you don't mind." Yes, I'm lying again.

The whole of our kin stood there fixed in silence, a true act of God if I ever saw one. Mama had barely gotten the sheet around Doc Adams when the baby's head slid out, followed by the rest of him, baby Jell-O and all. One of the firemen and a couple of the shooters passed out. The Confederate soldier threw up again.

Mama raised her hands to the sky and broke out in revival. "He's out!"

Kristin's body involuntarily sank into the pillows and plywood. No one made a sound. I remember this moment when Ben was born; I prayed for that first sound of life. The silence lasted forever. Just cry, little man. Just one good cry.

Then it came. "Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Waaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Everyone leaped into the air, running around whoopin' and hollerin' like a second Pentecost. Johnny cackled with uncontrollable joy.

"Does somebody have a sharp knife? I need to cut the cord," Doc Adams said. About three dozen people whipped out pocket knives. He took the nearest one.

"What's his name?" Mama asked them.

"Call him Jesus!" someone yelled from the crowd.

Johnny smiled and said, "Noah." He looked out at nobody and everybody at the same time. "We never thought we could have children. He is our miracle."

Amy reached out and gently took my hand, then quietly said, "Kristin miscarried three times before." I hadn't known. A tear slid along the inside of her cheek as we both remembered how we'd almost lost Ben. That old dread still haunted me, but I felt too grateful now to let it stay for long.

Well, I thought, welcome to the family, Noah, such as we are. We may not always get along around here, but you'll never have to go it alone either. And we do know how to do a holiday in style.

Ladies scurried between the house and the barn carrying cool washcloths, a week's worth of clothes, a makeup bag, a grocery bag overflowing with cookie tins, a suitcase

apparently for a month in Italy, and God knows what else. Odds were good none of this actually belonged to Kristin. If anyone here badly needed clothes, most everyone else would have gotten naked and handed them over, though I'm glad it hadn't come to that.

Aunt Sally stroked Kristin's hair and Mama was still rubbing lotion on her hands as they lifted her and Noah into the ambulance that had just arrived. She was flanked by six men acting as her personal honor guard. Each slapped Johnny on the back as he climbed in.

The less-savory cousins out in the yard aimed their weapons to the sky and gave Noah a few-dozen gun salute. And a handful of them fell straight backward, as a sign of respect.

Word spreads quickly in Dupree's Fork even without cell phones, and blue-haired ladies still wearing their nighttime muumuus started lining up on the road into the farm with casseroles, baked hams, pecan pies, and fried chicken. We already had enough food to feed the entire Tri-County Area, but that didn't matter. This was what we did in times like these. Kristin and Johnny wouldn't need groceries for a month.

The sky was crystal clear; the almost-full moon looked down at us like an old, kind, understanding eye. The North Star shone brightly overhead. These ladies knew where they were going anyway, but you gotta admit, the good Lord had style.

Uncle Ron and Juan Antonio were shuttling heaping platters of food to the house. As they walked by me on the way back to the cars, Ron looked at him, offered his hand, and said, "Hey. Merry Christmas, man."

"Thanks. Feliz Navidad to you, too." Juan Antonio smiled in return and then reared back laughing. Uncle Ron gave him a hard, friendly slap on the back, and left his hand there as they walked on.

And so it was that Noah Allen Dupree came into the world on the shortest day of the year to carry on the name of our town and add to its legend.

Amy nudged Ben over to me, motioning her head repeatedly in my direction. He cracked a little smile.

"God bless us, every one."

"Mommy put you up to that?"

"Uh huh."

I looked over to her and she grinned mischievously. I mussed Ben's hair and we laughed until we snorted. It's what you do when you know all this makes you the luckiest man in the world.