

The Resurrection

February 1964, Preston Iowa, sixteen degrees outside, snow overnight added two inches to the four already there. More snow tomorrow said Barney Baggert the weatherman at KNOP on the news last night. The Reverent Garland T. Hull padded into the parsonage's kitchen in floppy fur slippers. A Christmas present from Margaret, his loving wife of thirteen years, but two sizes too large; Marge always looking for ways to stretch Garland's anemic salary. The brown synthetic rabbit furry things were 30% off at Von Muar's and hard to resist.

Garland pulled back a stool from the kitchen counter and sat down. "Margie, can't you find something else on that thing?" The thing that he did not have to motion at was the radio. KTTC, Preston's "Today's Greatest Hits, Today" radio station was playing "I Want to Hold Your Hand" which indeed was today's greatest hit. Last month Garland found the song clean and clever – something a Baptist preacher could smile in approval of when the kids sang it to each other after Sunday's youth group was over. He was charmed by the four foppish English boys with their bowl cut hair. But that was thirty days ago. Now it was every day, "I Want to Hold Your Hand," or "This Boy," or "Love, Love Me Do", then back to "I Want to Hold Your Hand." It was too much. The songs had become stupid; they made him sick.

Marge turned the volume down, "It's a nice song Garland. Don't you want to be hip?" Not that Marge or Garland knew exactly what 'hip', or its invariable co-companion 'cool', meant but the Youth Group kids raved over 'cool' songs and 'hip' people. Garland was thirty-seven and they treated him like someone's grandfather – polite, condescending, ignored. You don't get kids fired up for Jesus by being a grandfather. He was younger than Timothy Leary for God's sake and if Leary was 'hip', damn it, he could be too.

Garland answer sounded something like a snort from a horse with the whinges. He was sipping his first cup of coffee and needed another before voice and brain would found their rhythm. "I got 'hip' enough last month when they first started playing them," he muttered. *Dunderheads, all of them, with brains like sieves*, he thought but lacked energy to say.

Garland's was the pastor of the Preston Old North (Baptist) Church. The Baptist Convention in Atlanta rotated him there three years ago. It was his second posting since he left the Seminary. Before Preston, he was at the Winslow County TB Hospital in Winslow Kansas. That was a two year hitch. The reverend Smiley Jones, the Convention's personnel chief, told him the seminary taught him how to use a net but Winslow would make him a Fisher of Men. You would think dying TB patients would be a shoo-in to receive the Lord into their hearts, but Garland found the longer a person lingered in the dark corridors of the institution, the more they questioned

God's benevolence and whatever faith remained in them. For most, the closer they approached death, the more resentful they became about Jesus and, of course, his messenger on earth.

Garland did his two years at Winslow; Preston was the next rung up the ladder. Finally his own church. Reverend Jones' instructions were simple: increase membership. More souls for Jesus meant more money in the offering plate, fifteen percent of which went back to the Convention. That allowed them to build more churches, get more money and the pyramid got taller. Jones said, "You get us a nice jump in revenue out of Preston in the next four years, and I'll get you into the big church in Iowa City. Got 500 members there and comes with a brand new Chevy every year." Sadly, the Old North (Baptist) Church's membership languished at the same level it had been three years ago. He could be in for a long spell in Preston; or worse, sent back up north to chaplain another institution for the poor and bedridden in one of the Dakotas.

The Old North was an old church, founded by 30 parishioners in 1936. They called it simply the Old North Church because they were re-using an old church the Calvinists abandoned in the 1920s. And it was on the north side of Preston. It all made sense. In 1939, the Old North Church in Boston sent the pastor a nasty letter saying they were the original and only Old North Church in the nation so cease and desist. A clever lawyer in Iowa City came up with the idea of putting '(Baptist)' in the name. The Boston Old North Church clammed up after that.

In 1964, the church had about 200 members but it was a pretty good Sunday anytime you got more than 90 people for the Worship service. The church kept a scoreboard on a large wooden plaque hung next to the altar. It had three rows of numbers. The first row showed total members; the second, how many folks were at last week's Sunday School and Worship services; and the last row, the same things for this week's service. Deacons kept score of who came and went.

Worship service was the number that counted – that's when they took the big offering, the one where members were supposed to tithe. The Deacons took care of this too – they counted up all the collections every week and carefully recorded who dropped in their tithe envelope. Myron Cox, took it all down to the Farmer's National Bank of Preston Monday morning. Reverend Hull put the receipt into a bottom drawer of his desk along with all the other receipts Myron had given him. Let his successor figure out how to get rid of them.

The Deacons also watched how each penny was spent. It was pretty simple. 70% of what they got paid Reverend Hull's salary, 15% went to the American Baptist Convention, their tithe of the tithe. The rest covered mortgages on the church and parsonage and their upkeep. If anything was left, it went to the Pastor's Social Fund; but one most Sundays, there was rarely any money

left. The Pastor's Social Fund usually got enough to cover the coffee served in the Fellowship Hall after the evening service.

The central belief of the Baptist faith is the Word of God is The Word of God. Literally – no symbolic crap; no poetry. God's servants wrote His words in the Bible and what was in the Bible was what God said. So when the dinosaurs were schlepping around the jungle, humans were right there with them. Noah built a boat that saved his family and a bunch of animals he lured into it from God's cleansing rains. Jonah lived in a whale. Seas divided. It was all right there.

When John (the John The Baptist John) baptized Jesus, he dunked him in the River Jordan. He didn't sprinkle his head – he lowered Jesus's whole body underwater, said some abracadabra stuff while Jesus held his breath, then raised him back for some air. It was a bomb.

So Baptists believe in baptism by immersion. Some still went down to a nearby river for the ceremony but most were like The Old North (Baptist) Church which had a big bath tub in back of the sanctuary. The tub was a heavy metal box ten foot long, four feet wide and deep enough to cover Reverend Hull's fairly large belly. Baptism services were infrequent, only three or four times a year, but when they did occur, they took place during the Sunday Evening service.

Generally, it was hard to get parishioners out for the Sunday evening service. Most had already spent the morning singing, praying and listening to Rev. Hull drone on and on and, to be frank, were pretty much tired of all the Jesus stuff for the day. Plus Ed Sullivan was on and you wanted to watch that because that's what everybody would talk about Monday morning at work. So if the church got its normal ninety people in the morning service, Garland was lucky if thirty showed up in the evening and even this took bribes of free coffee when the service was over.

But baptism Sundays filled the place up even if Wayne and Shuster were on the Sullivan show. Partly it was because for anyone getting baptized, it was a big deal and you wanted all your family and friends there. In theory, it was a once in a lifetime event and, again in theory, it got you your gold key into heaven that could never be revoked no matter how dissipated life led you later.

The other, more important though never spoken, reason for the higher turnout was the prospect that the dunkee might get dropped in the water by the good reverend. Pastor Hull though still in his late thirties was not particularly strong. His only sources of exercise were thumbing through the Good Book or books about the Good Book and the occasional tryst with Mrs. Hull.

Baptists baptized adults not kids so each was a physical challenge for Reverend Hull. In seminary he had learned all about the physics of how to lever a person from standing position to one horizontal under water, do the abracadabra thing, then return them upright. Reverend Hull quickly learned at the TB hospital that people dressed in white flowing robes become much heavier as the water saturated their cotton gowns and most involuntarily stiffen when plunged into the baptistery's waters which had become, by the time that the baptism part of the service rolled around, rather cold. The pastor had dropped more than a few believers during these performances which eroded his self-confidence. Now he prayed to Jesus before each baptism for fortitude and guidance though often these remained unfulfilled.

The first baptism Sunday in 1964 was on February 23rd. There were two candidates for the evening. One was a fourteen year old girl named Corrie Woodlock. Corrie had been 'saved' in November at Garland's *Jesus Is Coming* preaching marathon he did every year the week before Thanksgiving to expand the flock for the Christmas season and its coincidental fund drive. The other baptistee was Myron Cox.

Myron Cox was the senior deacon and bagman of the church. It was not as if he wasn't 'saved' or hadn't been baptized before. He had been saved, as he frequently testified during the testimony segment of the Sunday evening service, more than twenty years ago. He had been baptized before too – in fact he had been baptized six times. This week's would be his lucky seven.

Baptist dogma suggests a person be baptized only once (sprinkling and baptisms of children under thirteen didn't count). Though not a hard and fast rule, multiple baptisms were generally avoided unless a person had a serious and long lasting backslide from Jesus and the church. Myron Cox never could have fit in this category. Since his conversion to Christ as a young John Deere salesman at Malford's Farm Supplies in 1947, he had been a faithful servant of the Lord. Except in his own eyes.

Myron believed he lived in ceaseless sin. Each day he transgressed against God and breeched his covenant with Christ, his savior. Each night, he lay prostrate on the bedroom floor to beg forgiveness from the Lord; yet though he knew the Lord forgave him night after night, the next morning, there he was, sinning again.. Terrible sins. Envy. Anger. Distrust. Even Lust. A lot of lust.

Eventually Myron broke down under all this sinning and came to Pastor Hull crying for more forgiveness, seeking some new penitence and searching for a way to rededicate himself to God and the Holy Spirit. At some point, Hull would suggest another baptism. And that was when Myron would gather himself together, let the tears drain from his eyes and give thanks to God for this yet another chance to be a 'good' man.

This was not an easy path for Reverend Hull to take. Four times before, Hull had baptized Myron Cox and each time, he had dropped him in the water. The last time – just nine months ago - he not only dropped Myron but split the back of pants an event unnoticed by him and the congregation until he turned his back to the crowd to help Myron up the steps from the baptistery and felt the breeze from the church's air-conditioner wafting between his butt crack and scrotum. At the same time, there was collective gasp from the congregation and he immediately realized his naked ass and privates were displayed to all. A fat man's butt cheeks and shriveled balls were not a pleasant sight for the children to see.

Pastor Hull wore underwear at baptisms after that. But still it was only with great reluctance that he offered Myron the seventh baptism. A reluctance only overcome by the exhaustion of listening to Myron's plaintive sobs for five hours and his fear of the rising ire of Mrs. Hull for the Reverend's cow toeing to a sixty year old man-child and her suspicion that Garland was using the 'Myron Excuse' to once again avoid dinner with her sister Eunice.

So that was the date: February 23rd, 1964. The evening service was well attended – almost as good as Christmas. Members of long standing in the church recalled Myron's six earlier baptisms with fondness bordering on glee. Everyone remembered the pastor's embarrassing rear end - the kids incessantly cracked jokes about it during Sunday School no matter the amount of shushing from the parents.

Reverend Hull, of course, was the person most nervous that evening. Garland Hull had a beautiful baritone voice and usually sang a solo most Sunday evenings accompanied by seventy year old Alberta Watkins on the Wurlitzer. That night, right before the service began, he told Alberta to skip the solo – he had the sniffles, he said and feared he wouldn't reach the high notes.

During the opening prayer, his voice was wobbling and unsteady. It didn't improve as the service progressed. It didn't sound like the sniffles to Alberta and she, like most of the congregation, figured it was stomach butterflies before the main event. She wished they were allowed to bring popcorn and licorice sticks.

The theme of the sermon was, of course, the symbolism of baptism. Most of Hull's sermons were endurance exercises, a penitence for the faithful. But not tonight. He mostly read scripture; gave a listless ramble around its significance and wrapped up with a short prayer.

The choir sang all three verses of *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood* while Reverend Hull, little Corrie Woodlock and hunky Myron Cox went back behind the sanctuary to get ready to step into the baptistery.

As the choir finished its last verse, Hull entered the baptistery. He said a prayer. No one listened. Corrie Woodlock was first and he beckoned her down the steps. Corrie stood on his left as Hull asked if she accepted Jesus Christ into her heart and as her savior. Corrie affirmed she did and Hull pushed her lightly on her chest with his right hand and lowered her down with his left. As she went down, Reverend Hull bellowed, "Buried in the sins of the earth." Five second pause, then "Raised by the blood of Christ" and up she came.

Hull murmured a few words in Corrie's ear, they both smiled and he led her back up the stairs. Alberta cued up the choir for the first verse of *There Is a Fountain* again. When they finished, there was only the sound of heavy footsteps splashing down the stairs as Myron Cox came into the baptistery.

Myron was not basketball tall but he was much taller than Garland Hull, towering over him as he moved into place. Hull asked Myron if he was ready to renewed his life in Christ and serve the Lord. Myron looked at the pastor and replied hoarsely that he was. Hull's wrapped his left arm around Myron's back; his right pushed on his chest. Hull started the 'Buried in the sins....' and pushed Myron back. Myron fell backwards suddenly and deeply into the pool. Water splashed up the wall, over Reverend Hull and out onto the altar. Myron seized Hull's hand that was on his chest as he was going down, pulling the preacher down into the water with him. As they both floundered about trying to regain their footing, water sprayed over the pulpit and into the first rows of the congregation. The two were only submerged for a second or two but to the congregation, eyes riveted on the baptistery, it was much longer.

There was silence as they finally stood upright out of the water. Hull recovered quickly putting both of his hands on Myron's head and saying the finishing 'Raised by the blood of Jesus Christ' to which he added an exhausted 'Amen!'

The conversation in the Fellowship Hall after the service buzzed over the two baptisms. A few people made snide remarks how watching Myron's plunge into the sea of salvation was worth far more than the price of the offertory's admission. Four or five of the youth group were gathered around a table arguing which of the Cox baptisms were the best. They finally agreed it was last one, when Reverend Hull lost his trousers could never be beaten in its sheer Chaplinesque razzmatazz. But tonight's was right up there, two overweight misshaped men, legs and arms hopelessly entangled, struggling for air in the bosom of the Lord.

Alberta said it the best. Tonight was little Corrie Woodlock's night and it was ruined. This was the evening when the little teenager would publicly give her heart to Jesus for the whole world to witness and take the plunge into the cold waters of the Old North (Baptist) Church. Everyone was there: her parents, her Uncle Ned and Aunt Sally and a half a dozen Woodlock cousins. It was all ruined.

Corrie sat at a table in the back of the Fellowship with her mother. Corrie's hands covered her face and muffled the soft sounds of crying. And it was all Myron's fault. Myron sat two tables away, sipping coffee, wrapped in a towel; far enough away that the curses Corrie's mother muttered went unheard. Underneath the towel, Myron's clothes were soaked but he felt warm and at peace. The Lord had redeemed his sins. He looked over to Corrie. He could tell the girl was as enraptured with the whole thing as he was. Tears of joy ran down her cheeks. Myron blew his nose. His own eyes were misting. He turned to cry.