

Once Upon A Christmas

By John Atkinson

It was Christmas of 1955 when Bobby fetched a Christmas tree for ailing Mrs. Jones. Frank, my best friend and I crossed a field that was glistening with frost and met Bobby at a barbed wire fence.

“Every year it’s the same old crap,” Bobby complained. “Pa makes me get a Christmas tree for old Mrs. Jones, the bag of bones.”

“But she makes you a pie for your troubles,” I teased. I was always hungry and dreamed of eating a slice of Mrs. Jones’ apple pie.

Bobby scuffed a boot. His piercing blue eyes didn’t match his confused teeth. When he spoke, he’d whistle through a wide gap in the two upper beaver-looking teeth. Bobby breathed through his mouth because his nose had been broken twice that year from fighting.

I told Bobby I’d show him where the pretty Christmas trees were. Now he was willing to play and have fun as he held up the barbed wire so Frank and I could crawl under.

“Damn! That old Mrs. Jones is crazier than a loon,” said Bobby like we were stuck in the situation with him. In a way we were.

“One time she gave me candy,” I said.

I liked Mrs. Jones but I didn’t want Bobby to know why. Bobby knew how to hurt one’s feelings just for fun. He thought that made you a stronger person if you could take rough teasing. I couldn’t. Mrs. Jones secretly helped me with my schooling. She wanted me to know when not to use bad words and piss-poor grammar. I was forever being

punished for that and speaking out of turn. I couldn't stop myself. I was so full of energy words shot out of my mouth like machine gun bullets. One teacher said I had been vaccinated with a Victrola needle.

“Candy? That don't mean crap.” Bobby nudged Frank with an elbow. He wanted Frank to side with him against me. But Frank was a true friend. No one got between us. And if Bobby got too uppity Frank would bring him down where he belonged, face in the dirt. Bobby said, “Mrs. Jones thinks William Lee is coming back from the dead. Everybody knows he was killed in the war.”

“He's missing in action and could still be alive,” said Frank.

“Well, I'm sick of the tree-fetching crap. Him missing has done a number on Mrs. Jones' head. She tells me the same BS story every year. I have to sit at her table and listen how William Lee comes home for dinner on Christmas Eve. If that ain't crazy, what is?”

At first I laughed because this was the first time I'd heard about that. It sounded like one of my daydreams. Since Bobby was acting so ugly I butted in. “How do you know he doesn't come home?”

“You've got a wild imagination, Johnnyboy. Dead folk don't eat and walk around.”

“Mama says spirits ride the wind and they can go anywhere the winds blow.”

Bobby had to think about that for a few seconds. He wanted to wise off at me but thought twice. One negative word against my Mama and somebody had hell on their hands. I would go for an equalizer, a big stick, and go onto their ass like a bee sting on the thumb. Bobby kept his mouth shut.

With boyish conflicts settled, I led the way to the Christmas trees. We wrestled a while until that became a bore. Then we felled a tree and carried it to Mrs. Jones' house. She opened the front door and welcomed us in. Taking her the tree was the most heartwarming thing I felt that entire year, to see her wrinkled face shine when she saw us. "Come in boys and warm yourselves," Mrs. Jones said. "That's a beautiful tree. William Lee will love it."

"We can't stay," said Bobby. "Pa is expecting me back home early."

Mrs. Jones didn't pay Bobby much mind when she saw me in the background. She liked me a heap—it was in her smile. But she would never give up our secret. "Who is this?" She pointed to me and winked an eye where I was the only one who could see her.

"This is Johnnyboy," said Frank.

"Johnnyboy has a tongue, Frank. Let him speak for himself."

I spoke sheepishly. "You remember me, Mrs. Jones. I picked up sticks in your yard last spring." I knew better than to wink back at her; the guys would catch on.

"Oh, yes. Nice boy, just like my William . . . always doing for others."

Bobby whispered to Frank so Mrs. Jones couldn't hear, "Man, is she confused or what?" The guys snickered.

While we erected the Christmas tree and placed the North Star atop, Mrs. Jones repeated the same story she'd told since 1943 when the postman gave her the bad news two days before Christmas about her only son, William Lee. She asked Bobby, the tallest, to hang a very old Christmas ornament in a certain spot on the tree because that's where

William Lee liked it. Mrs. Jones talked as if her son was still alive. Because I was such a dreamer, I believed her. “Mrs. Jones, what time does William Lee get here?”

Grumpy Bobby punched me in my side. Good thing Mrs. Jones had her back to us. I punched him back and Frank stepped in-between to stop a fight.

“Oh, how nice of you to ask, Johnnyboy. Please sit and we’ll talk. I’ll explain everything over apple pie.”

That put my friends into fast forward. “I have to go,” Bobby exploded, working his way to the front door.

“Me too,” said Frank, “but Johnnyboy can stay.”

“Johnnyboy has a tongue, Frank.”

“Yes’m. Sorry we can’t stay, Mrs. Jones,” Frank said on the heels of Bobby, and Bobby was out the door without the first bite of apple pie. I didn’t mind because the house was filled with the aroma of cinnamon and apples. Like always, I was hungry. With the guys out the way I had a good chance of having their slices of pie.

Mrs. Jones put the hot pie fresh out the oven on the table. She said it was too warm to slice but was concerned I would leave too and sliced it anyway. It looked fine to me, ready to be eaten, but I didn’t tell her that. Even though she’d helped me with my grammar, I was always shy and didn’t talk to grownups unless cornered. I was either talking too much in school or too little and no one could figure why.

The house got quiet after my friends had left. Mrs. Jones moved slower than usual. She seemed uncertain of what to do next. She’d opened the icebox and stared a long while before she reached for a quart of milk. The milk had never been opened. The bottle had two inches of pure cream at the top. She stood over the table holding the milk

to see if everything was in its place before she sat it down. “Please join me in prayer, Johnnyboy. I’ll say grace.”

I nodded in agreement, but there was no way I’d open my mouth during a blessing. Suddenly she changed her mind and spoke directly to me. “William Lee comes home Christmas Eve, Johnnyboy.” She spoke softly and looked me straight in the eye. “Folks tell me he’s dead, but that’s not true. You believe me, don’t you?”

“Yes ma’am. Mama says I’m a dreamer.” I didn’t know if I answered her right or not but I knew Mrs. Jones was unhappy at that moment. That was an easy thing to recognize in my neighborhood. I had a special gift to see a soul entering into Dreamland, a place where I hid most of the time. It was safe there and I used my dreams to escape what a life of illiteracy held for me. It was fine with me if Mrs. Jones used Dreamland. I had other things on my mind. My mouth watered waiting to eat apple pie with a golden brown crust as thick as Mama’s wool blanket.

Mrs. Jones’ blessing was short and pretty just like Mama’s. I liked that. Why wait and drool? I grabbed the glass of milk first. The cold milk tasted good. She’d filled my glass with the cream. I couldn’t get enough milk at home. I wolfed down the first slice of apple pie before she’d hardly touched her plate. Mrs. Jones certainly knew how to bake an apple pie. On my second slice, she sang a song I’d heard before, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” Her voice was shaky but nice and oh, so kind. I didn’t know how to respond to the sadness of the song when she looked at me, so I did what came natural—looked around the room for nothing in particular.

She had quilts scattered about, some not completed. Maybe they were Christmas gifts. Across the room was an old lawyer’s cabinet stuffed tight with books. I didn’t

understand why that added to the sadness; the room now felt like it was filled with gloom. Maybe it was because I couldn't read. My eyes had to move away from the cabinet and onto a dark green velvet sofa with a patch sewn on the armrest at one end closest to a brand new black and white TV. I wanted to see TV but hadn't yet. Mrs. Jones had everything a soul could want and everything clean and neat and that made me a little uncomfortable, like I would mess something up. Mama said I did that without any trouble. My eyes shifted to a window next to the table. I spotted a wonder world outside. From the joy I could spew bad words like got damn, but I didn't. I caught myself in time. "Look, Mrs. Jones. It's snowing!"

I sprung to my feet to get a closer look. The white flakes seemed to help Mrs. Jones' sadness like they did mine. "So it is," she said, dreamy-eyed. "Johnnyboy, we'll have a white Christmas. I should pack my things. William Lee said we'd leave the first white Christmas."

After the talk of snow was over I sat back down and Mrs. Jones came to my end of the table. I looked up at her and she stroked my cheek with icy cold fingers. What a kind face she had at the moment. All her wrinkles seemed to have vanished. "Johnnyboy, there's nothing wrong with the way you talk. Always remember that. I'm an old retired schoolteacher who knows a nice voice when I hear it. Speak freely. Don't be shy."

"Yes ma'am." I had to get out of the intimacy. I didn't know how to deal with closeness. "Frank is getting a BB rifle for Christmas. He said I could shoot it too. The snow will make everything perfect."

"Good boy," she said for the way I spoke. "Johnnyboy, finish your pie and run along. I have things to do."

A little later Mrs. Jones closed the front door behind me. I stood in a wonderland with snow that had painted everything white and sparkling clean. I felt a comfortable feeling inside. My stomach was filled with milk and apple pie. Still, I stuck out my tongue to catch a snowflake for fun. How nice the snowflake felt when it melted and transformed into cool wetness in my mouth. So simple a gesture from me to Baby Jesus, it revealed I was grateful for the snow and happy to be alive at Christmas, His Birthday.

Down the road to home, my friends had stopped to throw stones into a creek. Bobby yelled before I got there, “Hey, Johnnyboy, I told you that old woman is crazier ‘an hell.”

I wanted to be friends with Bobby like I was with Frank, but I’d be unhappy with myself if I ever denied my feelings about someone. Mrs. Jones made me feel good about myself. I liked her for that reason. Also she gave me her precious time to help me with reading, a lost cause. “Yeah, but she makes delicious apple pie. You two shit-faces missed that.”

Frank raised a leg and slapped his knee, laughing at my boldness. He liked that I was following in his footsteps. Frank asked, before I threw my first stone, how did I get away so fast.

“Oh, she said William Lee was going to take her away this Christmas. She had to pack.”

“Man, what a loon,” said Bobby. “What did I tell you? Crazy!”

Frank didn’t go along with Bobby. He could see Bobby was making me angry. He asked me, did she do any singing?

“A little,” I said and our attention shifted to skimming rock off the frozen creek.

That night in Glen Allen a heavy snow fell, and before I knew it, it was Christmas morning with Bobby banging on the washroom door where I slept. I let him in and he looked scared. With each word from his mouth I could hear his breath pass through the wide gap in his front teeth. But what Bobby had to say was carved on my brain like angles on a diamond.

“Johnnyboy, Mrs. Jones died last night. You were the last person to see her alive. Pa said she died peacefully in her sleep. Wasn’t nary a wrinkle in the bed covers. Get this; her bags were packed beside the bed.”

I felt a cold chill pass over me like Mrs. Jones’ spirit went by. Shocked to no end, I spoke, surprising myself. I wanted to do like Mrs. Jones had taught me, speak boldly using correct grammar. “Maybe William Lee and Mrs. Jones are together now . . . you know, in the sky riding the wind with Jesus. This is Christmas, right?”

Suddenly I lost vision from welled up tears. I was embarrassed to cry in front of Bobby. I didn’t know him like Frank. But I couldn’t hold back the tears. Nothing could stop them.

“I’m sorry,” said Bobby. “One thing’s for sure—Mrs. Jones won’t be needing any more Christmas trees.” Bobby reflected his relationship with Mrs. Jones. “She wasn’t all that bad. I’ll miss her.”

This was my chance to become friends with Bobby. He didn’t like fetching the Christmas tree but he did it anyway. “I’ll miss her too. I’ll tell Mama to ask Jesus to watch over her and speak to the Six Powers too.” I covered my mouth. I talk too much about Mama’s spiritual beliefs. But Bobby didn’t seem to hear what I had said. He was deep into his thoughts.

Suddenly something rushed through my mind like a kid running out of the schoolhouse to the playground. “Mrs. Jones’ apple pie sure was good . . . and she could sing, too. They say folks in the spirit world like good singing. You think that’s true, Bobby?”

Bobby’s sky blue eyes were sad for all the bad things he’d said about Mrs. Jones. It took him a few minutes but he came around with his feelings. “Yeah, they like singing, Johnnyboy.” Then Bobby whispered an afterthought like old folks sometimes do. “That they do, Johnnyboy.” With a far off stare, Bobby repeated, “That they do, Johnnyboy. That they do.”

I can hear Bobby saying those very words to this day.