

REVIVAL  
by  
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"Praise God!" Grandma is shouting. I'd be embarrassed except that everyone else seems to be yelling too.

Reverend Fuller has us at fever pitch with his sermon on God's precious love. This is the summertime evening service. Every Sunday after supper, we clean up the kitchen and ourselves, pick up our bibles and our coins wrapped in hankies, and we climb the hot dusty hill to church.

It's a mile and a half up the Missouri limestone gravel road, but it's also thirty minutes of talking to Grandma and Grandpa without being told to do some chore. We talk about who'll be at the service, or what Reverend Fuller'll preach about tonight, or who got saved the week before.

Tonight I talk about the fact that I'm going to sing a solo. I'm excited because there's nothing I like better than singing in church -- especially by myself. Back home with my mom and sister and step-father, I sing in our conventional, conservative church about once a month. In fact, singing has become my reason for attending church at all, since I got mad at God for taking my daddy to heaven.

Here at Grandma's country church where everything seems more alive, the congregation has heard me before. I like how they clap for the singing, and I barely even feel nervous.

The tiny church fills up quickly even though we're among the first to arrive. Like everyone else, we find our usual seats, pull a cardboard fan from the hymnal rack and begin to create a breeze.

Reverend Fuller soon gets us started with a few words. Then we sing some hymns and pray awhile. I'm impatient for my turn at getting the attention.

At last he calls on me. I go to the piano and take my place. I whisper the title of my selection to Mrs. Bellows who accompanies, then smooth the white cotton pique skirt of my dress, lift my chin, and give the nod.

For those few glorious moments, I am a gift from heaven. My voice pours out like heated honey and the sound seems to surround the entire congregation. The high notes dance in my own ears and make my stomach feel full and happy. I have no fear. I look up into smiling faces and wish the song would never have to end.

I can feel the love in this damp, humid room, smell it amidst the aftershave, toilet water, and healthy sweat. I feel lifted, and my voice rings out with no effort from me.

As the song comes to its end, the congregation applauds. Grandpa beams a broad smile, Grandma coughs into her hankie. The applause doesn't die. I stand there next to the upright piano, wiggling my toes in pleasure, waiting to take my modified curtsy.

Then Reverend Fuller's voice booms out above the clapping. "Diana I believe we want you to sing it again, can you do that for us?"

The audience signifies agreement with shouts of "Amen, Brother," "Let us hear the little Sister again," and "Yes, Lord." I nod my head and Mrs. Bellows plays the introduction again. As I sing the words "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses ..." I close my eyes and create a scene for myself in my mind.

It's early morning and I'm going to see my daddy in heaven. No one else is around and I

am not afraid. There's a great green garden. I pass by a tall white trellis covered with blood red roses as soft as my favorite velvet dress. I come to a stone bench and sit on it, swinging my legs, while I wait for my daddy to show up. Birds sing in the background. Sunshine breaks through the overhead boughs and touches my hand. I look up.

There's my dad, walking up the path. He hurries to me as I run to meet him. He kneels and holds me in his arms.

My face just fits in the crook of his neck, and I smell bleach in his white cotton shirt, the tobacco smoke clinging to his jacket, the faint traces of Old Spice. His warm breath puffs against my hair and his right hand pats its familiar rhythm on my back.

As the last note of the hymn dies away, I slowly open my eyes. Daddy is gone, but he has left me the gift of his love. My chest is filled with it. I feel it pouring out with my every breath. Now it is filling the room. People are bathed in it. No wonder they seem so happy.

I take my place in the pew next to Grandma as the applause fades away. Reverend Fuller thanks me then begins to praise Jesus for making his presence known. Choruses of amens and yes lords are sounded.

Was it Jesus? I think it was Daddy.

The shock of my daddy's death had sent me reeling, and for almost two years now I had been praying to God every night that He would take me too. That He would let me die so I could go to heaven and see my dad.

And now, finally, in one blissful unexpected moment, my prayers were answered. I wasn't dead, but I had seen my father. I closed my eyes and smelled his fragrance again. I could still feel his hand patting my back.

Reverend Fuller's voice roared through my head. His words circled my brain and landed in both ears. "It's here! His love is here in this room! Praise God if you FEEL it! Sisters and Brothers, praise God if you feel the LOVE in this house!"

"Praise God," I said quietly.

Grandma looked down at me, squeezed me close under her arm and said, "Yes, Lord."

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