

A Georgia Prodigal

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There was a Presbyterian family in north Georgia. They were what Georgians often call an “Old Family” which gave them some distinction in their community—nothing haughty like some old families in Savannah, but good, solid, and respectable folks. Their family had been farming in the neighborhood since the 1830s when a young man and his bride had moved from the upcountry of South Carolina to the rich farmlands along the Etowah River of Bartow County. Over the generations, the family had seen good times and bad, but through it all they had nurtured their children in the strong if sometimes legalistic faith of their Presbyterian ancestors. Like his father and grandfathers before him, the father in this present generation was an elder. The mother was a Sunday School teacher, worked with the young people, and had on several occasions served as president of the Women of the Church. They had two sons.

In the years following the Second World War, their family fortunes began to change, as did that of their whole community. As Atlanta began to expand, their family farm, with acreage accumulated over the generations, grew more valuable. Then in the 1970s, I-75 was cut through one corner of the farm, and they were suddenly wealthy. Being good, solid folks, they continued their modest ways, but they did remodel the old two story farmhouse, and moved from a Chevy to a Buick. It was during these years, that their two sons grew to maturity. They were, said their mother, “good boys.” And they were. They did well in school, at least reasonably well. They went to Senior High Fellowship at the church, played football, and went to church camp during the summer.

The oldest son, when he graduated from high school, went off to Clemson like his father and grandfather before him. They had studied agriculture, but times were changing, and he took a degree in business management. While he was there he was joined by his younger brother. The younger brother wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, and at the end of the first semester of his third year he came home and announced that he wasn’t going back. There was no use, he told his folks. He simply wasn’t interested in his studies. They tried to talk him out of it. They called on all the wisdom that they had and all the prayers they could pray to change their son’s mind, to try to get him to get hold of his life, to get some sense of direction and purpose. Late into the nights they sat around the kitchen table and talked, but it did no good. He had made up his mind. At first the parents were crushed. They had feared for the last year that this was coming, but he had been a good student in high school, if not a brilliant one, and had always been such a good son. But as he talked they caught a glimmer of hope. He had plans for the future. He had been thinking. What he really wanted to do was to open a music store. He had worked in one in Marietta during high school and summers home from college and felt he knew a lot about the business. If they would provide the capital for him to get started, he knew he could make a success of it. He had, he said, lots of energy and some good ideas. And so at last, against their better judgment, but in the hopes that it might turn things around for him, they gave him a substantial gift. It was, they said, his inheritance.

He opened a store in a mall on the north side of Atlanta. He knew something about music and the store was an instant success. He bought a condominium overlooking the Chattahoochee. From his balcony the Peachtree Plaza Hotel could be seen glowing

gold in the evening light. He traded in his Toyota for a BMW. And he got in a fast crowd. With his store, and his condominium, and his BMW, that was easy enough to do, even for a boy from Clemson. But if he knew something about contemporary music, he didn't know as much as he thought about the nature of the competition. His early successes began to fade, and he poured more and more of his money into trying to keep his business afloat. To make matters worse, his personal life was getting out of hand—too much alcohol; too many women from single's bars; too many joints and too many pills at parties. A bitter spiral began. Much to the distress of his parents, he no longer called home. Soon his money was gone; then his BMW; then his condominium; then his friends. He couldn't believe what was happening to him. Somehow, he was not sure just how, he found himself on the streets of Atlanta. He spent his first night in a small grassy park, not far from Georgia State University. Thank God, he thought, the weather is good. He was sure that he could get back on his feet. He began going to the labor pool. It was humiliating. The bathroom never worked and sometimes he would have to sit there long hours with no public restrooms near. He had trouble getting jobs, because most were construction jobs that needed transportation to get to them. And when he did, the minimum wage, with tax and social security taken out, left him little—certainly not enough to get a room in Atlanta.

The weather began to turn cold. He tried to sleep in the emergency waiting room of Grady Hospital, but the security people chased him out. He began sleeping across the street from Grady on the steps of a building. At least it was safe there with the Grady security nearby. At last in November, a night shelter opened in the gym of a downtown church. He was embarrassed to tell the hosts who greeted him that he was a Presbyterian like those who gave him a cup of hot tea and two baloney sandwiches. With 150 other men, he spread a mat on the gym floor and slept amid the sounds and smells of the poor. The women and children were in a separate room.

In January, on a bitter cold evening, he got jumped by a guy who wanted his ticket to get in the night shelter. That night he huddled inside an abandoned building and thought he was going to die. A small fire, built from refuse, and a brick wall were all the protection from the wind as the temperature dropped into the teens. Beaten and alone, he began to think of his home and of his parents. For months he had pushed them out of his mind. The thought of them was too painful. It was almost more than he could stand. He was too disgusted with himself, too sure of his own worthlessness, to think of them. But this night, as he huddled against the wall, he remembered them.

And he remembered old Harold, with his great bulging goiter on the side of his neck, and how he would come shuffling into their yard. "Has you got a quarter?" he would ask. Of course his father always had a quarter and more. He would give Harold a little work to do around the yard and old Harold would take the rake and rake up a few leaves. And his mother would bring lunch to him. Almost every day there was lunch with tea or coffee in Harold's coffee cup or fruit jar that sat on a shelf on the back porch. They had seen that he had a place to stay, a simple block house with a kerosene heater, and the clothes he needed. And finally, after a lot of red tape at the courthouse, they had gotten him on disability. The son remembered all of this and that night he decided he would go home. Maybe, in spite of the pain he had caused them, his parents would let him stay with Harold. He could at least tell them how he hated what he had done.

When morning came, he walked slowly and stiff-legged to the one place he could get some money for a bus ticket—the blood bank. The room was warm. They gave him a cup of tea. When his time came, he stretched out on the table, and as his blood flowed

into the waiting bag, he felt the warmth of the room and some peace at last. When he got up, they gave him some more tea, some crackers, and \$25. He caught the bus to Cartersville and hitched a ride.

Late that afternoon, his mother looked out of the kitchen window and saw down at the end of the drive a car stopping. She watched as a solitary figure got out and said something to the driver before the car drove off. She called her husband. Someone, she said has been let off at the bottom of the drive. He went to the front door to look. "Mother," he said, "it's our boy!" He ran down the drive like he was young once again. He threw his arms around his son and pulled him close. "Dad! Dad!" he whispered, "I am so sorry." "Oh mother," was all he could say as she reached them.

They took their boy home and brought him in the kitchen. They sat with him while he ate, and they laid out clean clothes for him while he took a long, hot shower. And all night they talked.

The next afternoon, the oldest son came driving in to see his parents. He had been away on a business trip and had come straight from the airport through the late afternoon traffic on I-75 for one of his regular visits. As he turned in the drive, he was at first alarmed. Cars were parked all over the yard and down the hill toward the road. Near the back door he saw a delivery van: "Jake's Hickory Smoked Bar-B-Que" it said on the side. Getting out of his car, he heard music from inside the house. Someone was playing Willie Nelson awfully loud. Then the door opened and Jake came out towards his van. "What's going on, Jake?" he called. "Don't you know? Your brother has come home and your folks are throwing a great party for him. Go on in. The whole neighborhood is here."

"Would you mind asking my father to come out?"

"Sure," Jake said.

"I don't understand it," he said to his father as they stood there beside the car in the cold and talked. "Here he comes home after all he has done to you and Mom, and you throw a party for him. To tell you the truth, it makes me mad as hell. He goes off and lives like a bum, and when he comes home, you do this. I work hard and come home to see you and Mom every week, and you never make anything special of it."

"Son, be careful. You have been with us all along and we love you with all our hearts. But your brother was as good as dead. Now he is alive. He was lost. He was really lost. We thought we might never see him again. But now he is home. Come on in, son, out of the cold. Let's join the party."