



Bent Trees is a story of deep family division over slavery and the desire for balance between the love of family and God. It is story of a son's love for his father and his desire to become a man of character, like his father. It is a story of love, guilt, forgiveness and adventure. A God relationship and responsibilities as a Pony Express rider build Levi into the man Janie learned to love.

Bent Trees

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First Edition

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I sunk my double-bitted trimming axe into the stump by the porch. Pa put his axe, sledge hammer and wedges away in the tool shed and walked into the house. "I'll be right in Pa." I wanted some time alone. Maybe that was a part of Pa deep inside of me, that need to be alone sometimes. It had been a hard day. I was tired but I was happy. Pa had built me up more with a few words than he had all of my life before. I doubt he ever knew how much I loved him and how much I respected him. Seems I spent more time with him than my brothers did. I guess I can't really say if that's true about William or not. I was eight when William got married and moved away. John was more of a Mama's boy, I reckon, because of the fear that came upon Mama when he was so sick. And now that his hearing is so bad Mama coddles him even though she thinks she doesn't. Everybody sees it but her.

Mama's a tender heart but she's a worker too just like Pa. She prided herself in being a good help mate. There wasn't a chore around the place she wouldn't do. I could go on and on about her willingness to work and work with a song in her heart. She planted the

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gardens and tended to them all summer. She made our clothes and cooked the meals. She cleaned up after us when we should have been doing it ourselves. She was a good Christian woman. I caught her many times singing 'Just As I Am Without One Plea' while she was hanging out clothes or hoeing the potato patch. I think it was her favorite song.

I walked around the place that evening watching the birds disappear from the sky and go to roost. As the evening darkened a whippoorwill started his night song behind the hen house. The tree frogs began to chirp challenges to one another as they always did on summer nights. "Levi you'd better come in now," Mama called to me from the back door.

I answered back, "Alright I'll be right in." The door popped closed behind me and I pushed the hook latch into its eye. Supper was good and I enjoyed the evening listening to Mama read from Psalms to my little brother John. Pa turned the wick up a might on his reading lamp and the circle of light around his chair expanded. He liked to read from 'The Old Farmer's Almanac'. It was one of the liberties he allowed himself. Pa didn't smoke much during the day but he enjoyed his pipe in the evenings. He smoked a long-stemmed tavern pipe. That was another one of his liberties, as he called it. John fell asleep on the

floor in front of Mama and Pa tapped out his pipe. He reached into his britches and used his pocket knife to scrape the inside of his pipe before he laid it down for the night.

I stood up and excused myself. "Good night everybody. I think I'm gonna hit the sack." I eased up the curved staircase being careful not to wake up Kitty Ann. My straw mattress felt good after a hard day in the timber with Pa. The upstairs window was open near my bed and the evening breeze was cool. It had been a good day.

After chores the next morning a lone rider came down the lane. He was coming in at a distance when I first saw him. He was riding a big bay and as he got closer I could see his red hair. It was our neighbor Jackie Knolls. I came around the brooder house just as Jackie was getting down from his horse. I watched as he walked into the front yard. He stood there several feet from the porch and called out for Pa.

"Samuel Sumpter, are you in there this morning?"

Mama came out on the porch dressed in her usual work dress and apron. "Good morning Mister Knolls. My husband will be out in just a moment. Can I get you something to drink?"

I stood in the side yard and watched James Buster, the Sheriff of Macon County, walk his horse slowly down the lane behind Mister Knolls. Squeeze, as everybody called the sheriff, stopped his horse twenty yards or so back from the house. He was easing his horse up closer when Pa came out of the house.

"Good morning Jackie. What can I do for you?" Pa said standing just outside the front door.

Mister Knolls moved in closer and stood at the base of the steps. "I see you've been cutting timber and splitting rails in the big woods northeast of your place here," Knolls started.

"That's right," Pa said. "My boy Levi and I have got a buyer for some oak rails. Are you needing some rails? The ones we've got stacked are already spoken for but we could split you some."

Jackie Knolls stepped up onto the porch within a couple of feet of Pa. "No I don't need no rails," he said. "I come by to see why you've been cutting my timber."

Pa set his feet apart and with his arms hangin' straight down said, "How do you figure I've been cutting your timber, Jackie?"

Mister Knolls got a little puffed up. He got red in the face and said, "That big woods northwest of here is mine and everybody around here knows it." Knolls looked over toward me for a second and jerked his head in my direction. "You just took it upon yourself, you and that boy of yours over there, to start cutting trees without coming to talk with me about it. That's not just wrong Sumpter, that's outright theft and I came here to get paid for the timber you stole."

I thought Pa did a good job trying to reason with him. I heard him clear when he said, "Now Jackie you don't know what you're talking about. I secured that 100 acre timber last fall. Franny go in the house and get our papers on that piece of woods."

"You're a damned liar!" Mister Knolls was still hot. "That ground's been a part of my place for years. It was part of my Daddy's place and you know it." Knolls was stern with Pa and gave him a shove. He knocked Pa backwards into the house.

Pa held up both hands at shoulder level with open palms. He reset his feet and said, "Jackie, that's not right. Franny will be here in just a minute with the deed papers. She and I went down to the clerk's office last fall and found that piece of woods had never been properly deeded. I thought you knew that or I would have said something to you about it then."

I looked to my right and the sheriff was setting back there quietly on his horse. I'm not sure if Pa saw him or not. The sheriff was just watching. He didn't interfere but I could tell he was ready.

"That timber's mine," Knolls returned. "It was my Daddy's and he left it to me when he died. Just 'cause you came into this county long before most of us did doesn't give you the right to take whatever you think is yours."

"Jackie hold on. It's not like that." Pa tried again to make sense with Mister Knolls.

"I ain't gonna say it again, Sumpter. That ain't your ground and you're not gonna push me around about it."

Before we knew it Knolls pulled a long butcher knife from his coat and lunged at Pa trying to stick him in the belly. Pa grabbed Knolls' wrist and pulled that big knife to one side. Mister Knolls lost his balance and wound up on the other side of Pa. It looked like he hung his boot on the head of a nail. He and Pa both fell off the edge of the porch. Jackie Knolls fell first with Pa landing on top of him. I heard a popping crunch as Mister Knolls landed on my trimming axe. Pa got up and stood over him. He bent over to help him up but Jackie's eyes were fixed. Bright red blood was bubbling out of his nose and mouth. He was barely breathing with a gurgling sound when Pa pulled him off the axe. I don't think Pa even realized the axe was there, buried in that stump, when they both fell.

It happened so fast. I was numb standing there trying to take in what I saw. Squeeze was off his horse

and running to the porch. He and Pa tried to make Jackie comfortable. They cleaned his mouth but the blood kept bubbling out every time he tried to breathe. I stood back at a distance as Mama came out of the house and stood at the edge of the porch. She was white with fear. She and I watched as Jackie Knolls took his last breath. His chest just quit moving and the foaming blood stopped. His eyes stared straight up at Pa.

Squeeze stood up as did Pa. He guided Pa over to one side. "It's alright Samuel. I saw what happened. The man tried to kill you. This was an accident and no one is going to say anything different."

Pa returned, "I hope so Squeeze. I'm sure glad you were here. Had you been following Jackie or what?"

The sheriff answered, "Yeah I was following him. I had some trouble with him last week and then my wife told me he'd been making threats around here about you. I went over to his place this morning to have a talk with him and saw him step into the saddle and head toward your place. I thought it would be a good idea just to hang back and follow."

Mama had me hitch a team to the wagon and pull it around as close as I could. Pa and the sheriff loaded the body of Mister Knolls in the back of the wagon. Sheriff Buster escorted Pa over to the Knolls place. I never really knew how that went but I was sure glad the sheriff went with Pa to take Jackie Knolls' body back to his family.

While Pa was gone I tried to comfort Mama. She was worried sick about Mister Knoll's family and about Pa. I thought she was going to throw up she was so upset.

She tried to comfort me too. I told her it was partly my fault for sinkin' my trimming axe into that stump. If I had put it away like I should have it would have never happened. "It's not your fault Levi. Things just happen sometimes. I don't want you to be blaming yourself. It's not your Pa's fault either. Jackie should have never pulled that butcher knife on your Pa."

John and Kitty Ann never saw any of it and Mama kept them busy until bed time. She and I sat on the back steps and talked until Pa got home. It had been dark several hours when we heard the wagon coming. He was quiet and didn't want to talk much about it. He hugged Mama hard and never said a word. I didn't know what to say. I'd said everything that was in me to Mama. They held each other and stepped into the house. I didn't think I'd ever get to sleep that night. The way Mister Knolls died kept playing over and over in my head. Seemed I couldn't make it stop. I kept seeing that look of shock on his face and the

foamy blood gurgling out of his mouth. I wondered half the night if the folks were ever able to get to sleep.

The next morning everybody was quiet except John and Kitty Ann. Mama tried to keep them busy and away from Pa. As soon as I could I eased out of the house and pulled that axe out of the stump. That was a hard thing to do. The bit that sunk so deep into Jackie's back was covered in dry blood. I carried it over to the cistern, drew some water and cleaned it twice. When I put it away in the tool shed I realized my hands were shaking so bad I could barely set it down without dropping it. I told Mama about it and she hugged me so hard I wondered if she was ever gonna turn loose. When she did she held me at arm's length. Her face was soft with compassion when she spoke. "It's not your fault Levi. It was an accident. You believe that don't you?"

"Yeah I know Mama."

"Listen here. You need to understand what men do affects others around them. Most times its nothing big but sometimes lives are changed by the decisions we make. Mister Knolls made a poor decision when he pulled that butcher knife on your Pa. You're not to blame at all. You understand Levi?" "I know Mama," was all I could say. I kept thinking if I hadn't left that axe there in that stump Mister Knolls would still be alive.

The whole family attended the funeral. Sheriff Buster watched my folks as they tried to offer their condolences to Jackie's family. I watched too and it was obvious they wouldn't have anything to do with it. After that Sheriff Buster made sure the Knolls family kept their distance from Pa and the rest of us. After the funeral he came to talk to the folks. He told them again how sorry he was. I think he understood, better than anyone else at the funeral, the sorrow that engulfed both families.

On the way home from the funeral Mama said the church had brought in an evangelist and there were tent meetings all week over in Goldsberry. Pa refused to go. I wanted to stay home with him but he made it clear I was going.

I drove the wagon with Mama sitting beside me. John and Kitty Ann rode in the wagon box. The meadow was full of horses and wagons. Folks made tent meetings a social affair. People milled around talking and laughing with each other. Some folks brought watermelons or muskmelons. It was late enough in the summer all of the gardens were beginning to produce especially melons, squash and

cucumbers. As the evening darkened some of the men lit kerosene torches and placed them around the big white canvas tent. The socializing gradually stopped and folks moved under cover of the tent.

I had been a church-goer all my life. Mama made sure of that. But I had never been to a tent revival or tent meeting as Mama called it. We sat toward the back of the tent. Some of our friends from church and other folks from around Macon County played guitars and mandolins as everybody sang church songs. They even had a piano and a bass fiddle. I listened to the testimonies of people I knew and from folks I had never seen before. They talked about how God changed their lives and how Jesus took away their sins. Some even talked about how the love of God helped their marriage or healed the sick.

The preacher came into the tent from somewhere. He was dressed in a black suit and his suit coat came nearly down to his knees. That heavy, black coat must have been hot in the summer heat and humidity. I remember how strange that looked and I wondered how he could stand wearing that thing. I was used to seeing men in overalls. Even our preacher wore overalls most of the time but then he was a farmer like Pa. But this preacher was different. He had a boldness I had never seen before and his voice was

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like the rumblings of a thunderstorm on a cool summer evening. You know how a storm rumbles now and then way off in the distance and then gets louder and stronger the closer it gets. That's the way his voice was.

He spoke soft and gentle when he was talking about Jesus and the love He showed when He was here on earth. He talked soft about God's love for me. He was kind and compassionate. I could see it in his eves as he walked back to me. He stood tall over me that night. It sorta made me nervous. Just his presence made me uncomfortable. I said something to Mama about it after he walked away. She just smiled and said that was the unction of the Holy Spirit whatever that meant. He told us we were all sinners. Our preacher had told us that before but when this man said it I swear he was talking about me. I felt like he knew everything about me, all the good things I'd done and all the bad things I'd done. I knew I'd done wrong leaving that axe hanging in the stump beside the porch.

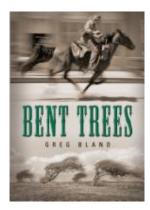
Then he started talking about hell and the devil and how the devil wanted to steal my soul away from Jesus. Sweat started pouring off that preachers face and his jacket hit the grass floor of the tent. That thunderstorm was getting louder and closer! He was all over that tent. Some people were yelling out hallelujah and amen brother, others were sitting quietly trying not to be seen especially by the preacher. He came over to me again. When he came to that part when he asked, "Do you want to go to hell tonight?" he pointed right at me.

Pretty soon our neighbor Martha stood up and hollered "Glory! Glory be to Jesus! Jesus - Jesus -Jesus!" Then another lady got up and started running around the tent.

The preacher told us if we didn't want to go to hell and if we wanted Jesus in our lives to get up front. He said, "Get up here now! Now is the time for your salvation. Don't wait. You may not have another day. No man knows when his last day is. This is your opportunity to find salvation." All I could think of was Mister Knolls and how he never figured when his last day was gonna be. I knew I had a part in his death and I wanted Jesus to forgive me. I wanted to be able to forgive myself.

I don't remember standing up. Before I knew it my legs were walking and I was standing in front of the preacher. There were ten or so other folks coming up front too. I heard all kinds of shouts from the people behind me. The preacher came over to me and laid one hand on my shoulder and the other on my forehead. His voice was gentle and soft again. He quoted Romans 10:8-11 and asked if I was ready to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

From somewhere deep inside of me I knew that's what I wanted. "Yes I am," I said. And I meant it. I needed to know I was forgiven. I needed to know there was a release for the things I'd done wrong and a help to be strong in this world. He led me in what he called 'the sinner's prayer' and I felt good. I felt fresh and clean. I remember feeling so vulnerable and innocent as I turned around and looked at Mama. I never saw her smile so big or look so proud.



Bent Trees is a story of deep family division over slavery and the desire for balance between the love of family and God. It is story of a son's love for his father and his desire to become a man of character, like his father. It is a story of love, guilt, forgiveness and adventure. A God relationship and responsibilities as a Pony Express rider build Levi into the man Janie learned to love.

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