

THE EMPTY CHAIR IN THE FRONT YARD

By John F. Hall

One of things that I enjoy doing is sitting on my front porch swing. In the spring and summer months, especially, I will sit on the swing and draft my stories. One of the pain saving devices, for this writer, anyway, is my extra iPhone that has no SIM card. When I was 17 and a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division, I was a Private and an M-60 machine gunner. The machine gun weighs 23 pounds. During one training exercise on Fort Campbell, in the bitter cold and snow, I was put on a one-man road guard duty. My fingers were starting to freeze, but I had to hold the machine gun. I stopped a tank that was coming down the road. The tank commander opened the hatch. I asked him where he was going. He said: "Didn't you get the word? They called off the training exercise. It's going down to 23 degrees below zero tonight. We are driving this baby back home." Warm steam was rolling up out of the hatch as it hit the freezing air. I thanked the tank commander for the information and told him to move on. I suffered frost bite on my fingers. One finger is numb to this day. I never knew that, 23 years later, I would be in the Army Reserve, as a First Lieutenant, and in a Tank Commander's Certification Course on Fort Knox, Kentucky. I had to learn everything about the M-60 tank that I stopped on that ice covered road, 23 years earlier. From infantry to Military Police, to tank commander, to transportation, it all prepared me to be an Inspector General.



The "Winds of Fate" carried me to today. I use that numb finger to tap on the letter on my iPhone that I want to use. I'm amazed when I watch my grand kids: Andrea, Heather, John-John, Jade, Skyler, and Lexie, use their thumbs to speed out a text on their cell phones. I remember the words in the song by the late George Jones: "My body's old but it ain't impaired." It takes me awhile to tap out a story on my iPhone. From there I go to my desktop computer. I have a nifty holder for my iPhone, and I type out the story with fairly good "turtle" speed. The rheumatoid arthritis is dis forming and crippling the joints of my fingers. But I soldier-on, everyday, working on another story. When the cold winds of Fall and Winter chase me off my front porch swing, I go up to the second floor of my really old Antebellum farm house to work on another story. This is my writing place. The famous writer, Ernest Hemingway, had his typewriter on a chest of drawers, and he would type out his stories standing up. Like me, he had a bad back, mainly from being in three plane crashes. I got part of my bad back from parachuting out of planes and helicopters and having bad parachute landing falls (PLFs). On one night jump, out of a Huey helicopter, the pilot missed the drop zone. I crashed into the trees. It was January and a pitch black night. My parachute was caught in two trees. I could barely see my hands in front of me. When I would take one glove off, my hand would start to freeze. I could not see the ground below me. I had no way of knowing how high up I was. I decided to hold on to one of the parachute risers and release the parachute. When I did, I fell, but I was only a few feet off the ground.

Hemingway called the place, where he sat at a small table and drafted the stories, his writing studio. He was only 61 when he died from an accidental gunshot wound. F. Scott Fitzgerald was only 44 when he died of a heart attack.

Fitzgerald was a fellow Army soldier. He published four novels, four collections of short stories, and 164 short stories. I never thought about this before, because I don't sell my stories, I just give them away. And I decided to write and mail one story a week for Jade, Skyler and Lexie during the pandemic. In the process, I mail a copy to Trish, Audrey, and Dr. Daniel Butler. I'm holding off mailing a copy to my oldest college friend, Mike Herndon. Audrey Lambert puts my stories on her web page. Anyone can go to Google and type in History John F. Hall Stories ajlambert.com. Then they need to tap on History-Denny-Loftis Genealogy. That will pull up the list of the stories that I have written. It is about 115 stories. They can tap on the story that they want to read and copy I've written these stories to mentor Jade, Skyler, and Lexie. I want to leave them for my adult grand kids Andrea, Heather, and John-John to read after I have passed away. The inspiration behind my stories is Jesus Christ. If I cannot give Him honor and glory, then He will take the talent away.

I can look out my second story window and see my mail box. I have extra chairs on my front porch. One day, I decided to take one chair and put it behind my mail box, under a Dogwood tree. I remember someone saying to me that I should start each day by saying: "Jesus! What can I do for you today?" How can I welcome Christ on this hill and ask Him to stay? He owns this world and all the cedar trees along Dyers Hill Road that I look at everyday. So I decided to put in the yard a chair for Jesus. Symbolic of my love for Him and in thankfulness for all that He has given me. Every Winter, Spring, and Fall, I can look out my second floor window and see that chair and think of Jesus. Next spring, I need to sand off parts of the metal that have rusted and



repaint them.

In Matthew, Chapter 7, Verse 12 are these words: "In everything, do to others what you would want them to do to you. This is what is written in the law and in the Prophets." When I wrote my first story in 1978 called "A Cry in The Night," I decided that all of my stories had to be nonfiction and based on what I have experienced and observed. I rewrote that story and changed the title to, "A Righteous Tackle." Now life is not always fair or easy as I tell Jade, Skyler and Lexie. Hard times come to everyone. Murrah Roger and Allan Mark wrote the song "Where Corn Don't Grow." I identify with parts of that song as I sit on my front porch swing and look out at the fields as the farmer's workers disk the dusty fields. These are most of their lyrics: "As we sit on the front porch of that old gray house where I was born and raised. Staring at the dusty fields where my daddy 'worked hard everyday. I think it kinda hurt him when I said, 'Daddy there's a lot that I don't know. But don't you ever dream about a life where corn don't grow?' He just sat there silent staring at his favorite coffee cup. I saw a storm of mixed emotions in his eyes when he looked up. He said 'son I know at your age it seems like this ole world is turnin' slow. And you think you'll find the answers to it all where corn don't grow.' I remember

feeling guilty when daddy turned and walked back in the house. I was only 17 back then but I thought that I knew more than I know now. I can't say that he didn't warn me this city life's a hard row to hoe. Ain't it funny how a dream can turn around, where corn don't grow. Hard times are real there's dusty fields fields no matter where you go. You may change your mind 'cause the weeds are high where corn don't grow...".

When I was 17, I foolishly though I knew more than I know now. The other day, on a certain matter, I thought that I had totally lost. I don't like to accept defeat. My opponent was so much better and smarter than me. I felt that all my hard work had been in vain. In desperation I prayed, "Jesus, please help me." So many times in the past I have prayed that simple prayer. Had I gone to Christ's well too often this time, I wondered? I may not be doing justice to explain what happened next. It was like Jesus took my hand and had me look at three words in a 19-page document that changed the trajectory of the matter. I suspect that my opponent thought the contest was over and that I had lost. But time will tell down the road.

Ruthmarie Brooks Silver wrote a short piece titled "Trials." These are her words: "As unexpected trials surface along our walks of life, we bow to being vulnerable, accepting each new strife. These things that happen suddenly were not in what we planned. We can't just override them; we need a helping hand to get us through the tough times, we humbly seek out aid - it seems our life is spinning and nothing 'round us staid. Somehow, in time, we're through them, with lessons learned and gleaned. The trials and tribulations are part of where we've been and add to who he's grown to be. The trials set before us make up the you and me."

Clay Harrison wrote a short piece titled "A Time for Thanksgiving." These are his words: "Autumn's a rainbow of colors that's merry and bright, before Winter arrives with her blankets of white. It's the tree's last hurrah before the shedding their leaves, when scarecrows are forgotten somewhere in the sheaves. It's the season now for pumpkins and candy apples galore, and the pecans are falling like I've never seen before! There will be pies in the oven for some time to come, and soon fruitcakes for Christmas will be soaking in the rum. It's the time of year for hayrides, for asters and mums, before maple trees are tapped once mid-Winter comes. Autumn's a brief, shining moment when Heaven seems so near, when we celebrate Thanksgiving this glorious time of the year."

So I put a chair in my front yard, for Jesus, for all the world to see. Christ has always been welcome in my house, and I hope to live with Him, in His house for all eternity.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
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