

T H E B O O K O F
I N J U R Y

* * Y E A R 1 8 4 5 * *

Nif Puddah felt dizzy from the pain of his mate's anger. So strong, it was, he could not shut her out of his new human mind.

But Nif knew, for the first time, the warm embrace of the sun, this solar system's perpetual heaving heart, its bulky furnace of hydrogen and helium flaring feverishly to feed the desperate hunger of this planet's insatiable appetite.

And Nif saw, for the first time, the surrounding hills and valleys of the timberland rich with foliage, rising and falling in jagged waves, the pine trees with their stout trunks driven into the dirt and their slim green needles, the oaks and elms and hickories, the endless canopy of blue sky, the spiral flow of white and gray condensed water vapor swirling in atmospheric cells over this alien planet, this vast sprawling rock called Earth.

What a strange and lopsided picture it all painted. So much contrast, so little symmetry. Size, shape, light, color, smell, distance, even life and death molded into disjointed patterns of coexistence—nothing at all like Wetspace.

No, nothing at all like home.

"Assimilation," Nif said. He'd used his voice. Voice, not mind! "We're safe, Ru, we're adapting."

"Safe?" said Nif Puddah's mate. "We are alone! We are . . . we are . . . nothing! Nothing nothing nothing!"

Nif had expected Ru to struggle with the emptiness of her new consciousness, but if he could calm her, help her through the transformation, help her adjust, she would be fine. She *must* be fine. “No, not nothing,” Nif said. *Something*. “We are adapting, Ru, look!”

Their metamorphoses had begun—they had each developed two miniature spherical structures of jelly-like eyes with which to see their new world. Bodies shrinking, rounding, bending. Bones to support the exo-matter. Small, bipedal, humanoid creatures they would become. Atoms, molecules, joints, nails, skin, glands, hormones, blood.

Adapt. Assimilate. Survive.

Nif Puddah felt the wind against his newly formed face. Smell! What a wonderful, overpowering sensation, this ability to smell, to bring microscopic particles of physical surroundings into contact with the nerves of one’s own nose for the purpose of instantaneous chemical analysis. There were genes in his new body working to produce nothing but these receptors of aroma. Fascinating. Miraculous.

Walking! The walking would be difficult at first, as would other coordination of body and mind, far less comfortable than the curling, rolling, and elongating movements of their liquid otherselves. But to have arms and hands and fingers! To have a face unlike any other! To breathe air—*air* of all things!—such a strange combination of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Atmosphere. Helium, hydrogen, ions, electrons, ozone—

Nothing at all like Wetspace. No. Nothing at all like home.

Ru must find the joy in it. This place was so visceral, so immediate. She *must* find the joy.

“How could you do this to us?” Ru demanded. “Your own son, twelve years in the womb!”

Womb. That was not a Wetspace word. Years. What did that mean? A measurement of time, human time. Ru’s mind was adapting without her knowing it. Their son was almost an adult. Soon he would be born.

He would be born a human being, the first Wetspace born human! The first of many, perhaps. A pioneer. Nif's family a family of pioneers.

Pride, hope, longing.

Ru had used the spoken language of mankind, her mouth and tongue functioning, coordinating with her thoughts, *her* thoughts. Individualism. Had she even realized it? Ears, by God, with which to hear these sounds of a world outside of one's own mind. God? Concept, concept, a portion of this people's collective religious subconscious. Nif had picked up the scent of it in his mind.

Assimilate.

Nif felt the hard land beneath his newly formed feet, the depth and density of the earth, the strata—igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic rock, iron oxide, silica, lime, clay, gems, minerals, crystals, the bones of its inhabitants and its long forgotten beasts.

Fungus, mildew, blight, bacteria, pollen.

Adapt.

Assimilate.

Esophagus, pancreas, lungs, kidneys, taste buds, muscle, heart! Heartbeat!

Axons leading to spinal cord to thalamus to sensory cortex . . .

Nerve endings.

Nif touched the ground, touched himself, thighs, stomach, chest.

Adapt.

Assimilate.

Ru charged at him in a rage, a newborn animal rage. Already she'd learned how to use her stick-like legs to carry the awkward weight of her human form, how to use her fists as weapons. She beat on Nif's shoulders, on his back, his head. Nif was having trouble with the gravity. "How do you push against it?" he asked Ru.

"You! You! You have done this to us!" she cried.

Nif stood. Ru beat him back down.

Violence: the use of physical force to injure or abuse. Anger, out-

rage, vehemence. Nif fell against a tree. Trees, plants, flowers, sunlight, photosynthesis. Wind, humidity, solar radiation. Mammals, insects, birds, fish. Water, oceans, fluorine, magnesium, sulfate, sodium, chlorine . . .

“Stop, Ru, please.”

“Take us back! Take us back home, Nif, *now!*” She kicked him in the ribs. “Wetspace! Wetspace! Take us home!”

But it was already too late. She must know this. She must.

“Ru, please, it is . . . too . . . late . . .”

* * Y E A R 1 8 6 0 * *

Standing at his pulpit, Jacob Piersol looked out at the churchgoers he'd attracted for this day's service. A funeral generally drew a respectable crowd, but he hadn't seen a gathering this strong since Christmas Day, 1852, the year four families of Italian immigrants had passed through just in time for his Christmas homily, on their way to Palmyra, New York.

He cleared his throat and bowed his head in silent thanks. Jacob was no fool. He realized much of Skanoh Valley had come just to see what he would say about the dead man. The foreigner Tink Puddah was no Christian, after all. Oh, he'd proven himself a decent enough member of the community over the years, minded his own business, stayed out of local politics, shied away from village gatherings and festivals and such. He'd pretty much kept to himself up in his small cabin in the hills on the outskirts of Skanoh Valley.

Jacob had always believed Tink Puddah nothing more than a heathenish savage and feared for his misguided soul. And, as any preacher would have done, he harbored a secret resentment for someone who could turn so easily from the Word of the Savior, Lord Jesus Christ, to a belief in . . . well . . . nothing.

Looking out at his congregation, Jacob wondered just how much of that resentment he'd been able to hide over the years, and how much of it had slipped out of the soil and into the crop.

Still, it didn't matter much now. The foreigner was dead—dead and buried—and any preacher worth his salt would take advantage of a full church, regardless of the ill-occasion. Here was an opportunity to show his congregation what a gracious man of God he could be, to teach them a thing or two, a lesson they'd not soon forget: Jacob Piersol was a good, generous man, just like his father, the venerable Nathan Piersol. Jacob had been waiting a long time for them to see that, a damn long time, pardon the expression, and he wasn't about to let it slip away.

And it was spring, by God, *spring*, his favorite time of year, a time of rebirth, a time of hope and new beginnings. Many of these people would rediscover God and prayer and the simple pleasures of hard work—tilling the soil, planting seeds, nurturing their crops—God's good clean labor, the work of the land. This was a time of renewal, and he looked forward to it every year with a thinly veiled eagerness of the soul.

Jacob cleared his throat. "I am glad to see so many people have ventured forth to this special prayer service in honor of our dearly departed friend, Tink Puddah," Jacob said. "It is customary for me on occasions such as this to read Scripture from The New Testament, to offer a guiding light to those who are about to travel the road to the great mystery beyond. But today, my dear friends, in honor of our foreign brother, I am going to diverge from our usual and customary practice."

The multitude looked appropriately surprised. Jacob let them whisper among themselves for a bit before moving on. A weakness, to be sure, his penchant for drama, but he hoped a relatively harmless one in the eyes of God.

Jacob breathed deeply, paying close attention to his measured breath. How often one breathes, he thought, and pays it no heed. Today Jacob could smell the flowering hyacinths. The morning sun shone through the church's mottled glass windows. He remembered the day the glass had arrived at his father's small church, the Vision of Christ Church, back in 1824 or '25. It was enough to stop farm work for near a full day. The parish

members had contributed what few pennies they could spare and had ordered the glass special from a new factory in nearby Palmyra. Jacob had been just a boy then.

When his father, Nathan Piersol, had come to this small town years ago, he'd fallen in love with the beautiful valley, the teeming forest, and a girl at the livery with the enchanting name of Wisteria. He'd known immediately that he wanted to stay here forever. The town had no place of worship back then, so he'd organized the building of one. The day the Vision of Christ Church was completed, he opened up his Holy Bible, started preaching, and didn't stop until the day he died. Nathan Piersol was a man who had commanded love and respect, got them both, and gave them both with equal fervor.

Technically, Jacob, like his father, was not an empowered minister or priest of any order. But his congregation wasn't interested in anyone else's institutions or pushy doctrines. They'd built their own church and paid their preacher out of their own pockets. They believed in God. They'd had Nathan Piersol marry and bury them for forty years, and his son do the same when his father wasn't around anymore to do it. They kept God in their hearts and in their minds and on their lips in prayer. That was good enough for them.

Jacob brushed off the memories of his father. This was Jacob's day. Nathan Piersol had enjoyed enough of his own.

Jacob said, "It is no secret to anyone here today that Tink Puddah was a non-believer. It may surprise you to know that such a non-believer does not threaten or insult a preacher in God's service. No, my friends, quite the contrary. It is the non-believers who inspire us, who remind us why we are here: to preach the Word of the Lord. To spread *His* Word. To fight *His* battles."

He paused, taking a moment to feel the Bible in his hands, really feel it, the soft yet firm leather, the thickness of its pages and the weight of its message. His father had carried this same Bible his entire life, or at least

for as long as Jacob could remember. It was a beautiful, leather-bound King James edition. His shield, his avenger, Nathan Piersol had called it, clinging to it even at the moment of his painful and sweaty death. Jacob remembered prying his father's rigid fingers from around the spine of the book to wrench it out of his cold hands, as if the old man had been trying to tell Jacob that he was not good enough to carry the message of the Lord Savior, Jesus Christ. Jacob had always resented that: his father's clinging disapproval and stubborn pride, even in death.

"Men like Tink Puddah justify a preacher's existence," Jacob continued. "They validate our missions here on Earth, our service to the Creator. Although I was unable to reach Tink Puddah with God's message, there was a certain beauty and fulfillment in my effort that I might not have experienced had Tink's conversion been a simple matter of introducing him to the Holy Bible."

Jacob pressed the book to his chest and looked out over the crowded room. "I would like to take this opportunity today to thank our foreign brother, in the name of the Lord, for reminding me of my station in life, for keeping me humble, for challenging my commitment to God and his teachings. In honor of the man he was, I will close the Holy Bible from which he succored naught during his all-too-brief lifetime, and I will offer the pulpit to anyone who would like to speak kindly of our friend, Tink Puddah, here under the roof of God."

With that, Jacob Piersol tugged on the edges of his short black frock, stepped down from the pulpit, and sat stiffly in his chair beside the podium. He lowered his head in prayer as his congregation murmured and fidgeted in their seats. He allowed himself a smile, an inner smile, a bit of pride, a bit of vanity, but he was only human after all. He looked forward to earning a great deal of respect this day, something he'd hungered for since his father's death so many years ago.

After a brief silence, old Jed Watkins limped up the center aisle, leaning heavily on his cane. He was wearing a floppy hat and a ragged top-

coat. His tobacco-stained beard splayed out over his face and down the front of his chest like a baby's bib. "I'd like to say sump'n, preacher."

Jacob nodded. He couldn't imagine what Jed Watkins could have to say about anything, let alone the foreigner, Tink Puddah. Ever since his logging accident near a dozen years gone, Jed never bothered with church, never came to any of the Skanoh Valley meetings, kept no friends. The man sulked in his small cabin on Pine Hill, fashioning his snake canes. Come to think of it, the preacher frowned upon Jed's canes. For some reason, perhaps because of how snake-like the canes looked, eerie and devilish, Jed's handiwork struck him as blasphemous.

Jed stepped up to the pulpit, looked out over the congregation, and scratched at his scraggly beard. "So this is what it looks like from up here!"

Everyone laughed, even Jacob.

Jed removed his floppy hat and allowed his smile to sag slowly into a frown. "Shoot, I ain't no polic-a-tician, and God knows I ain't no preacher, so I'll just say what I got to say and be done with it. Tink Puddah was as good a man as I ever come across in all my days. Everybody knows the hard times I falled upon when I had me this here loggin' accident." He stuck his leg out so people could see it around the pulpit. It was easy enough to spot the unnatural bend just below Jed's right knee. "I was just a settin' around my cabin feeling sorry for m'self for nigh-on two years, fit for the coffin, you all know it's true. Then one day Tink comes a callin', says he wants to show me sump'n special. He's got this here cane in his hands."

Jed held up the cane for all to see. It was a handcrafted snake cane, a black snake curling around a sturdy post, with a snake's head for a handle. Even the preacher had to admit it was a finely crafted piece of work. He wasn't surprised that it had once belonged to the heathen foreigner, Tink Puddah.

"'Try it out,' Tink tells me. Bein' in my self-pitying way I didn't want to have nothing to do with it, but he kept on me about it. 'Here, just lean on it, give it a try.' So I tried it, just to get rid of the little scrap rat. Right off,

there was sump'n about the feel of the cane in my hands, the way it filled my grip, the way it just seemed to lift me up like I done been reconciled with a long lost brother. It kind of woke me up out of a long, dark sleep. To this day I remember taking that cane from Tink's skinny little fingers, and I remember smiling for the first time since my loggin' accident."

Jacob Piersol noticed some nods and whispers pass among his parishioners. He leaned forward with interest. He'd never heard this tale.

"Anyway, soon as I touched this cane it made me want to walk. I had to know where he got it, so I asked him outright. He told me he made it himself. Imagine that! So I asked him, can you teach me to do it? 'Sure can,' he says. And he spends the next couple of weeks at my place, day and night, showin' me how to pick just the right kind of twisted sourwood to make good snake canes; showin' me how to use the chisel, gouge, maul, and drawknife to get the proper cuts in the wood; showin' me how to carve out the curl, score the shaft and rough it out, taper the tail, chisel the scribe of the snake scales, burn the wood black and buff it nice and smooth. Showed me all of it, yes sir, till I had the knack of it and could do it m'self.

"Well, the rest of the story you all pretty much know. Folks up in Saginaw and Palmyra and Buffalo started paying me top dollar for my canes. Folks want them now far away as Pennsylvania and Ohio. Weren't for that foreigner, I most likely would a died a broken man. I make a good cane, mind ya, but to this day I still carry the cane Tink carved. Never been able to match his work. Not even close."

Jed raised the cane up over the podium. "Tink Puddah gave me more than a cane that day. He gave me back my life. So I came here to this service for no other reason than to say goodbye, and to thank him one last time, and to thrash the daylighters outta any fool got a bad word to say 'bout him." He glanced over at Jacob then, gave a snort as if to say that includes you, and with that, Jed Watkins returned to his pew.

A few people said, "Amen." Some folks nodded and whispered.

Something bothered the preacher about Jed's story. Why was it he didn't know that the foreigner had taught Jed his snake cane trade, when it seemed most everybody else in Skanoh Valley did? He shook the thought away. No matter. Why should he have known? Jed had turned away from God and the church a long time ago, and Tink was never a churchgoer.

"Thank you, Brother Jed," said Jacob, standing. "It's good to see you in God's house again. Remember, the Lord never turns away from any member of His flock. You are always welcome here."

"Not likely I'll be back!" Jed shouted from his pew.

The congregation laughed, but not too loudly.

Jacob said, "Would anyone else like to speak?"

Young Miss Anna Goodlowe stood up then, made her way out of her pew, and walked up the center aisle. Jacob had no idea what the good Christian girl Miss Anna would have to say about a heathen foreigner the likes of Tink Puddah, unless she wanted to pray for his lost and miserable soul. That would be just like her, though, wouldn't it?

Jacob was happy to see her standing tall and proud and upright at the pulpit. She was a beautiful, healthy young woman. Surely God had smiled upon her. Just to see Anna Goodlowe walk through the church doors every Sunday morning was a blessing. Today she was wearing her best Sunday outfit, a pretty blue frock with a lace shawl and a straw spoon bonnet. She was growing more and more into the beautiful woman her mother had been. Jacob would have to remember to tell her so.

"Good morning, everyone," Miss Anna said.

"Good morning, Miss Anna," they answered.

She smiled and said, "Thank you, Preacher Piersol, for letting me speak today."

He nodded. "Of course, child."

"It's no secret to anybody here that my daddy, Papa Bear Goodlowe, has always had a terrible struggle with the bottle."

That was certainly true. Jacob had tried to counsel him time and

again, but he could never get the man to listen. Papa Bear's wife had died on the very day she gave birth to Anna, and he'd harbored both a grudge against God and a romance with the moonshine ever since.

"And I suppose you all know the joy I've shared with my papa lately, him swearing off the bottle for good."

Jacob sat up straight in his chair. Papa Bear had sworn off whiskey? When could this have happened? And why hadn't he known about it? Miss Anna came to church every Sunday. She'd never mentioned it. He'd asked her directly, too, on several occasions. "How's Papa Bear, Miss Anna?" he'd asked. And she'd responded, "Faring well, Preacher Piersol," and nothing more.

"Thanks to Tink Puddah, my papa is a changed man. It all started when Papa Bear was having another one of his rages. He'd sneaked some of my sewing money and bought himself three bottles of mash and when I came home late from the mercantile he'd already drunk through two of them bottles and was heading for the third. He lost his temper with me, kicked over our table and broke one of our chairs and howled like the devil himself. Then he ran out into the woods with his axe, thrashin' at the tree branches, so violent I was scared to chase after him. Finally he collapsed in the woods.

"Lucky for me Tink Puddah happened by then, although I've come to think of it more as providence than chance. Papa had passed out cold, and Mr. Puddah helped me drag him back home. I was crying so hard I couldn't barely breathe. But Tink calmed me down, and when I saw that my papa was all right I couldn't thank Mr. Puddah enough for what he'd done. He helped me change Papa Bear's clothes and clean him up and get him into bed.

"Well, being as upset as I was, I just started talking and crying like a fool. I told Mr. Puddah how much trouble I been havin' with Papa Bear for so many years, how the bottle was killing him and me too because I couldn't take much more of it, of watching my papa hurt himself so bad,

and I felt kind of silly telling Mr. Puddah all our personal problems, but he didn't make me feel bad about it at all. He just listened real quiet and patient. Then he told me to lie down and get some sleep, and he would sit by Papa Bear's bed and make sure he was resting warm and comfortable. That's the Tink Puddah we all knew and loved, very generous, always thinking of others."

The Tink Puddah they all knew and loved? Jacob Piersol clenched his fists. Tink Puddah was a heathen, for God's sake. Didn't these people realize that? The worst kind of heathen, Jacob was beginning to see. The foreigner had not only denied the existence of God, but he was a manipulator of innocent souls.

Miss Anna went on: "I was just going to rest for a few minutes, but as it happened I fell fast asleep. It's hard to explain, but I felt real safe with Mr. Puddah there, like everything was going to be all right. When I finally woke up, the morning sun was shining. I glanced over at Mr. Puddah and Papa Bear, and to this day I still can't believe what I saw. There was Tink, sitting in the chair next to my papa just where he was when I fell asleep, but now he was reading to him out of a book. And there was Papa Bear listening, sitting up in bed, sipping on some tea that Mr. Puddah had made for him. I mean, Papa was really listening with all his attention.

"So my Papa says, 'Anna, my child, come and sit with us, you must hear this wonderful story Tink is reading from his book.' I thought maybe I was in a dream, but if that was so, it was the best dream I ever had, so I walked over to Papa Bear and sat on the edge of his bed.

"Mr. Puddah said, 'I'm reading your father a story called *The Old Curiosity Shop*, by Charles Dickens.' Then he smiled and went back to reading the book. At least I think he smiled. As you all know it was sometimes hard to tell, what with the poor man's mouth being so bad-formed and all. But I sat there and watched my papa for a spell. He was really involved in this story by Mr. Dickens. Papa was having the time of his life, sometimes laughing—big, huge belly-laughs the likes I never heard from

him in all my days—other times frowning, shaking his head, looking like he might even want to cry.

“Naturally I had chores to tend to so I left the two of them to their story. Come time to prepare supper, I asked Mr. Puddah to our table. He’d earned that and plenty more as far as I was concerned, just by giving my papa a day of peace. But Mr. Puddah said he had to get back to his place and tend to some chores of his own. Well, Papa Bear just about exploded. He said, ‘You must stay and continue the story, Mr. Puddah! I never knew people could write stories like this. I thought people only learnt to read and write so they could study the Bible.’”

This drew hearty laughter from the congregation. Miss Anna turned to the preacher, blushed, and said, shyly, “No disrespect intended.”

Jacob nodded. “None taken, Miss Anna.” But the anger was growing in him, not at the beautiful child Anna Goodlowe, certainly not, but at . . . at . . . what? *Things*. Things kept from him. Secrets.

“Anyway,” she said, “Mr. Puddah graciously declined our invitation, but told Papa Bear that he’d come back the next evening and continue the story, under one condition. Papa had to promise not to take another drink all night.

“Well, sure enough, Papa Bear agreed. Mr. Puddah took the last bottle of mash with him and told me I had to watch Papa closely, and that it might be a difficult night for both of us, and I’d have to stay strong. Mr. Puddah sure was right about that. Papa couldn’t eat and fell to shaking and sweating, and he paced the floor a hundred times or more, and I think if there had been any more mash left in the house he would have broken his promise and indulged, but as luck would have it, or providence, there was no more.

“When dawn came, Papa Bear hadn’t taken a drink for a whole day, and seemed a little sturdier than the night before. Mr. Puddah came back that evening and read some more out of his book, stayed for supper, and read another chapter by lamplight. Then the two struck another bargain.

For as long as Papa Bear refused the bottle, Mr. Puddah would continue to read from *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

“I never would have believed it could work, but Papa Bear stayed off the mash ’til Mr. Puddah finished the book. That’s when he told us that Charles Dickens wrote many other wonderful stories, and that if my papa learnt to read he wouldn’t need anyone to come over and read to him. He could read any book he wanted whenever he pleased. So they made another deal. Mr. Puddah would teach Papa Bear to read if he promised not to take a drink the whole time he was learning. Well, it wasn’t easy for my papa to learn to read. Took Mr. Puddah all through the winter. And the whole time Papa Bear and I had such wonderful times together, talking and laughing, he even told me some stories about my mama. He’d never said a word to me about my mama before, and I never dared ask. Papa Bear put his mind to reading and learnt as best he could, and never took to the bottle once all winter.”

The congregation murmured, adding a few nods and sighs along with it.

“Then one evening Mr. Puddah came over with a present for my papa. It was a book called *A Tale of Two Cities* by that same Mr. Charles Dickens. It was a beautiful book with gold trim around the cover. He’d ordered it special from some printing press far away. Mr. Puddah said—and I’ll never forget his words—he said, ‘Through your own hard work and determination you learnt to read. This book is my gift to you.’

“I started to cry right on the spot, and I think Papa Bear was fighting back a tear himself. He accepted the book, and held it in his hands as if it was a great lost treasure. Then Mr. Puddah pulled something out of the inside pocket of his coat. It was a bottle of mash, the same bottle he’d taken home with him that first night when Papa was in such bad shape. Mr. Puddah set the bottle down hard on the table. Papa looked at it, kind of surprised and uncertain. Then Mr. Puddah said, ‘The way I see it, you can have one or the other, the book or the bottle.’

“Papa Bear picked up that bottle and stared at it for a time, then he

threw it into the fireplace, and it smashed into a million pieces.”

“Amen!” someone shouted.

“Amen!” echoed the congregation.

Amen, mouthed Jacob Piersol, amazed.

“That night, after supper . . .” Here Miss Anna’s voice faltered, and she swallowed a couple of short breaths, and it was plain as day she was choking back her tears. “That night after supper, Papa Bear and me and Mr. Tink Puddah all sat down at the table, and my papa read to us from Mr. Dickens’ book.”

“Amen!” shouted the congregation, clapping their hands and stomping their feet.

Miss Anna reached inside her reticule, removed a handkerchief, and dabbed at her eyes. She said, “So I came here to say that there aren’t any words that can express the thanks and joy in my heart for the gift given to me and my papa by Mr. Tink Puddah, but I had no choice but to come and say it best I could. Thank you, Mr. Puddah. I know you are sitting right beside God and Jesus and his angels as I speak, even if you didn’t believe in God. Thank you so much. I hope one day we’ll all meet again and sit down with Jesus and read a book together.” She paused, and then said, “Now there is something Papa Bear would like to say.”

Papa Bear? A hush fell over the congregation. All heads turned toward the back of the church. The door crept open, and there, standing under the archway, a huge shadow of a man blocked out the sun. The preacher slowly rose from his seat. Papa Bear Goodlowe hadn’t set foot in Jacob Piersol’s church since the day his wife died of childbed fever fourteen years ago. The preacher remembered that day all too well.

Papa Bear had knelt in the front pew and prayed and prayed to God to save his wife, Ellie, refusing even to look at his newborn daughter or take a meal. Jacob had tried to console him, but the man had wanted to be left alone with God. Later, Jacob and Doc Oberton went to the church to tell Papa Bear his wife had died. The huge man said nothing to them.

He just stood up from his prayers, turned his back on Jacob and the doctor, and walked out of church, never to return. And now Papa Bear stood at the threshold of God's house for the first time since that day.

He strode right down the center aisle, dressed in a fancy suit and tie, his hair all neat and slicked back. He stepped up to the pulpit, lifted his daughter's hand to his lips and kissed it, a gesture so uncommon to the man that it drew a collective gasp from the people in the church.

"I thought I would read something for my dear friend, Mr. Tink Puddah," he said, "something from my daughter's Bible." He lifted the Bible that had been all but hidden in his huge hands. Squinting at the small print, he read:

"A-hem. From Matthew, Jesus' mission to His disciples. 'Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.'"

Papa Bear closed the Bible and glanced over at Jacob, looking almost apologetic, a look so out of character for the man that Jacob couldn't quite make himself believe it.

"I've always been a God-fearing, God-loving man," said Papa Bear, "even through all these sorry years missing my Ellie. It was Tink Puddah who reminded me there are more important things in life than hurt and anger and self-pity. Maybe he weren't no Christian, but I believe he was a messenger of the good Lord. Freely he did give. I was sick, and he healed me. So I came here to thank Mr. Puddah for what he done."

Papa Bear then extended his arm to Miss Anna. She grasped his elbow, and together they walked down the aisle.

Jacob just stared at them for a moment, not sure what to make of it all.

For the first time in a long time, maybe since his father's death, Jacob Piersol found himself speechless.