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December 18-31, 2025

NOW ABOUT THAT STAR ...

BY ANN BAILES

"O beautiful Star of Bethlehem
Shining afar through shadows
dim
Giving the light for those who
long have gone.
Guiding the wise men on their
way
Unto the place where Jesus lay
O beautiful Star of Bethlehem,
shine on."

Anyone who has ever been in a Christmas service in any one of thousands of churches all over the South, will immediately recall this song and the following scene that has been repeated, with variations, countless times. The finale of the annual Christmas program arrives, and the children of the church, dressed in bathrobe costumes and wearing headpieces made of towels, arrange themselves on the stage into the nativity scene. "Angels" in white sheets file in behind the stable, and someone holds a star, made of yellow poster board and edged with glitter or garland, over the stable. The pianist gives the introduction, and then the churchgoers sing the old familiar carol. "Oh beautiful star. . ." rings out, and everyone feels the heart of the Christmas season.

(What's usually not stated is that, according to the book of Matthew, the Star guided the wise men, who were not thought to have arrived for two years! By then Joseph, Mary,



and Jesus would have been in a house rather than a stable.)

Is there a scientific basis for the Star of Bethlehem? Many experts over the years have explored this question. Most of them, both sacred and secular, are in agreement: Though several possibilities exist, none are good explanations, and we simply don't know.

The Star would not have been a meteor, because meteors flame out within seconds. Perhaps the Star was a conjunction of planets. Jupiter and Saturn were fairly close in the sky in August of 3 BC, but that is only a possibility, and conjunctions

do not appear as a single light source. Maybe a rare supernova, a massive star that explodes and can be seen for weeks or months? Or a comet? Halley's Comet was present in 11 B.C., but the first Christmas took place several years later. No historical records exist that a supernova occurred during that time period, or that another comet had been seen. Furthermore, the ancients usually saw comets as objects of doom – not as heralds of a great supernatural event.

Another complicating factor is that the Star of Bethlehem moved from west to east as it guided the

wise men in their journey. That is completely different from the motion of stars and planets, which move from east to west. No good explanation is known for a celestial object that can move west to east and hover over one location.

The Star would have been a wondrous astronomical event to announce another wondrous event. And though we do not have a good understanding of the "how" of this occurrence, we can still acknowledge that something awesome did happen in that night sky, and conclude: "O beautiful Star of Bethlehem, shine on."



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IT'S SKI SEASON

It's that time of the season to go skiing. Some people go to Colorado to places like Vail, Snowshoe or even Aspen, but we're fortunate enough to have it right in our back yard. We're so lucky to have so many great mountains to explore around here, like Sugar Mountain, Beech Mountain, and Cataloochee and Gatley



Point. If you're an avid skier or snowboarder, you definitely need all the good gear to make the most of it, plus who doesn't love looking like a snow bunny in a cute outfit? You may be more of a ski lodge, "I'm just here for the champagne not the chairlift type person", and sip drinks

or hot chocolate and just watch your people and hang on to their gear for them. I'm more of the latter.

There are some really swanky outfits to wear now. Thankfully, those overstuffed eighties style ski bibs aren't "it" anymore.

I love the company Moon Boot for shoes. They're actually inspired by Astronauts. They keep you warm and come perfectly insulated. They also come in so many cute styles and colors. So fun and funky. I really like the Shearling style, but the nylon pairs are great for snow.

Another line I'm loving is Gsou Snow for snow suits. They make really flattering ones that have a little flair at the bottom of the pants and come in cool stripes and colors that fit you just right.

Ski goggles are imperative and Farm Rio makes really beautiful ones for 99\$. Ski apparel gets super

expensive so try to find things on sale.

Gloves are definitely a must and you can never go wrong with The North Face for those. You want your hands to stay warm and dry and they certainly will in those.

You'll definitely need a good lip moisturizer and Super goop makes Lipservice glossy balm for your lips with an SPF that makes you look glowy and keeps you safe from the cold and the sun.

Lastly, you need skis or a snowboard. You can always rent them from the resort or you can buy your own if you're planning on going a lot. Nordica and Burton make really nice and affordable ones. So now you're good to go and hit the slopes with friends and family. Make memories and not to mention it's good for you. It's great exercise, but still really fun and you get those



beautiful views instead of being in a boring gym.

So, get outside this winter to keep your spirits up, and make the ski slope your runway. Remember kindness always matters y'all!



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CITY OF ANDERSON CHRISTMAS EVENTS

Ice in the Park

December 1 - January 4 | *Carolina Wren Park*

Celebrate the holiday season with ***Ice in the Park***, a real ice skating rink in the heart of Downtown.

**Please note that Ice in the Park will be closed on Christmas Eve, Christmas, and New Year's Day.*

Christmas Caroler Pop-Ups

We will have Christmas carolers popping up around downtown on Dec. 4, 11-12, and 18-19!*

**Weather permitting*

Anderson County Christmas Tree Lighting

December 5 | *Courthouse Square*

The Chamber's Cookie Crawl: 4:30 - 6:30 pm

Live Music - 6:00 pm

Tree Lighting - 7:00 pm

Professional Figure Skater Performance - 7:30 pm

City of Anderson Christmas Parade

December 7, 3:00 pm

North Main Street

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December 13, 5-7 pm

Carolina Wren Park

Holiday Window Display Contest

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Winner will be announced at the Anderson County Tree Lighting on December 5!

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SURPRISE! IT'S CHRISTMAS!

Christmas is full of surprises, but the last place you expect to be surprised at is a Christmas parade. The entrants are pretty standard: marching bands, dance studios, pageant queens, civic clubs, church groups, community organizations, and Santa. But if you've seen any news this week, you'll have read that a black bear surprised a LOT of folks last weekend by wandering in and out of the Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Christmas parade. And while I've never been chased by wildlife at a parade, I've seen my share of surprises.

ANDERSON CHRISTMAS PARADE

During the first Christmas parade I can remember, I WAS the surprise. It was the annual Anderson Christmas Parade in 19-A-Long-Time-Ago, and my Camp Fire Girls Troop appeared on a float, singing Christmas carols. At the age of eight, I was sure that I was destined to be a singing sensation, so when we finished the only verse of "Away in the Manger" that we were to sing,

I seized the moment and began to belt out a solo of the second verse. I had gotten through the first bar when one of the troop leaders said in QUITE a loud whisper – more of a hiss, actually – that there would be "...no solos on this float! We sing TOGETHER! I can only compare it to being on "The Voice" and

getting chewed out by Reba McIntyre after no chairs turned.

COLUMBIA CARILLON HOLIDAY PARADE

When our daughter, Elizabeth, was a toddler, we loved to take her to the Columbia Carillon Holiday Parade. Main Street is a nice, wide street, perfect for the Carillon as it allows floats of all sizes to pass without getting too close to the happy families that line the parade route. On this occasion, it also allowed

a street sweeper to pass before the parade started. It was being driven by a man who had clearly hit the Christmas punch before getting behind the wheel. The vehicle had a low center of gravity and could turn on a dime, and as he went down the street, he would randomly turn directly towards the crowd, turning away at the last minute and cackling as the now-terrified families shrieked and screamed. He was eventually corralled by the police. I should mention, though, that over three or four blocks, Main Street was spotless.

TOWN OF BLYTHEWOOD CHRISTMAS PARADE

When the Town of Blythewood began sponsoring a Christmas Parade, we loved going to see our friends and neighbors in all their holiday splendor. It was one of the last parades to allow entrants to throw candy to the crowds, and I'm pretty sure that some of those throwers went on to pitch in the major leagues. I caught a Starlight Mint in the forehead at that first parade and almost passed

out. I'm glad I didn't because the biggest surprise of the parade was the arrival of Santa. In Blythewood, Santa doesn't arrive in a sleigh or on a float. He rides in on a donkey that is shod with tiny, tiny sneakers.

BOYKIN CHRISTMAS PARADE

The cat-daddy of South Carolina Christmas Parades has to be the Boykin Christmas Parade in Kershaw County. It has an anything-goes quality to it, and people arrive hours early to tailgate like they were at the Palmetto Bowl. There are motorcycles and golf carts and farm equipment of every description. Once there was an outhouse on wheels, pulled by a mule. There's even a Fatback King and Queen. The most surprising thing about this parade, though, is that when it's over, those same revelers gather at the Historic Swift Creek Church for a gospel singalong. It's reverent and beautiful and expressive of the true meaning of Christmas.

And that's even more surprising than the bear.



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Happy birthday to me

Wow! Has it been 2,025 years already? It seems like just yesterday I was lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, surrounded by three wise men gifting me gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I still have those gifts, I just never found a use for any of them.



Neal Parnell

I'm happy that all of you could attend my birthday party. I know you've been busy rushing around and buying presents for everyone to celebrate my birthday. Don't

worry, I get it. It's tough to buy something for a 2,025-year-old and much easier to give to a youngster. I usually get a lot of sandals, robes, combs, and foot care products, but in my present state, I have no use for those either.

Now I know you must have thousands of questions to ask me, but there is no need;

all will be revealed to you upon my return. I hear all of your prayers, and I will answer the requests I receive most often...

No, I will not teach you to turn water into wine.

No, I will not turn your little sister into a pillar of salt.

No, I will not let you walk on your above-ground pool. No, I will not continuously fill your KFC bucket.

No, I will not bench Clemson quarterback Cade Klubnik.

I'm often asked if I have a sense of humor, as there is no account of me smiling or laughing in the Bible. I'll answer by sharing a few of the things I've heard my precious children say...

"Our Father who does art in Heaven, Harold be thy name." The kid who exclaimed, "Please don't come back before the next 'Cars' movie." Then there was the little boy who was asked by his Sunday school teacher what my father's name was. He said, "Verge." Teacher says, Where did you get that? He responds, "Well, they're always talking about Verge n' Mary. When Neal was little, he asked his grandmother why he had to be quiet in church. He thought she said, "You see those two men in the back by the doors? They're HUSHERS."

The adults want to know things like, Did I have a dog when I was young? Let me put this

in the Southern vernacular, "Y'all Cray Cray".

Listen, folks, the Bible is a source for understanding my nature and will, while providing spiritual nourishment that guides you through life. It is not a biography of my life that details my toddler and teenage years. 2,025 years ago, dogs were not pets; some of them worked, but most were just scavengers. There was a dog that reminded me of myself. He protected a flock of sheep, his name was Shep, which is short for shepherd.

Enough of that, let's get back to my birthday,

or as you call it, Christmas....I'm honored to have a birthday, as only living, breathing things on earth can have one. Santa Claus doesn't have one, and the Easter Bunny doesn't have one. Giving something a birthday means that you have honored it as one of your own and accepted it as part of the family. Thank you for allowing me to be in your life. I don't need to wish for anything. I have given you the tools to forgive and love one another, and I pray that you all will use them.

MERRY CHRISTMAS



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THE GARDEN SHOP

To be seen, or not



**SUSAN
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Inspiration comes slowly now and then for Garden Shop, and this was one of the times. Then a coworker asked me to identify some shrubs he had planted last year. They liked them and wanted more but lost the tags. Their back property line is about 200 feet long, and he wanted to plant a row of the name forgotten shrubs. The first thing when thinking of such is do not plant a row of any one thing, no matter what that one thing is. Monocultures, as experts call a large group of one type of plant, are never a good idea. Red tips (*Photinia spp.*) were the go-to plant for privacy screens in the 70's and 80's. Then fungal diseases set in and there went those privacy screens.

Gardening errors continued with leyland cypress. Quickly growing big, easily found any place selling plants, leylands became the go-to for privacy screens. Trees with a mature size of easily 15 feet wide were erroneously planted five feet apart, provided that privacy in a few years, then diseases set in. Cankers, root rot, and needle blight started killing those privacy screens. What is a person to do who doesn't want to see their neighbors, or their neighbors see them, or build a fence? Variety is the secret for successful privacy screen plantings.

Designers follow the rule of plant in odd numbers. This does provide a good look. Personally, in my plantings, this rule is generally not considered because I don't care much about such designs and have such a hodgepodge of plants. Knowing my coworker likes a formal look, and loves his lawn, the first suggestion was to choose a tree to anchor each corner of their yard, and one of the same in the middle. He liked pictures of Green Giant (*Thuja*). They grow very similar in size and almost as fast as leyland cypress. Green Giant will provide cover and nesting for birds. The foliage is excellent for arrangements and lasts a long time when cut. Then we looked at Little Gem Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem'). He really liked that. Glossy leaves will suit his formal preference. Blooms in summer will give fragrance; his wife can cut the foliage for Christmas decorations. I also encouraged him to let the limbs grow to the ground, or else his love of lawn will cause him to hate the magnolia. If one does not have room to let a magnolia grow to the ground, choose another tree. Limbing up is going to be consistently



Mixed plantings for privacy

messy underneath the tree, and nothing much will grow under it. Then we talked about Nellie Stevens holly (*Ilex* 'Nellie R. Stevens'). This will benefit birds with its berries, plus bees and pollinators when in bloom. Beautiful red berries in winter will give seasonal interest. His wife can cut branches for Christmas decorations too. As each of these plants grows large, he won't need as many to fill his space either rather than having to get so many shrubs.

October until late February is the best time to plant trees and shrubs. Put in the effort to dig a hole ideally three times as big around as the container. Bigger plants are not always better. Smaller plants will establish faster, hence, start to grow faster. Nothing will start growing until it is established. Don't remove all the "bad" soil, mix amendments with what is there. Otherwise, when roots hit the "bad" soil, they may be prone to circle in the better soil. Hold off on fertilizing until the plant has new growth. Water when dry, slow and low, focusing on water to the roots, not foliage.

QUITE A JOURNEY

Life transitions ... are we ever prepared?

Little more than nine years ago (Dec. 8, 2016) was a personal milestone. A Facebook note reminded me that was the day the Florida Times-Union newspaper was splintered by a decision to "centralize" the news desk by removing all but two-page designers and copy editors to Augusta, Ga.



Brian Hodges

Morris Communications, our owner at the time, needed to cut costs despite several rounds of layoffs in Jacksonville, shedding reporters, photographers and writers.

Morris eventually sold their daily newspapers, including the Times-Union and Augusta Chronicle, to GateHouse, which is now part of the Gannett media empire.

For what it's worth, the Times-Union still exists but tries very hard to have a strong computer presence. Circulation figures had once reached as high as 250,000 but now that number is quite a bit smaller.

On that momentous day, the top editor of the paper called me while I was eating a scrumptious meal at Piccadilly Cafeteria.

She spoke with deliberation so I knew this was serious.

"Boom," I wrote on Facebook that day. "Thoughts and prayers for all of us on the Times-Union desk. Big Changes."

It was the lightning bolt we all feared. Hard changes were coming.

I had visited Augusta National golf course several times over the years, but never had the desire to live there.

I was fortunate to be chosen as a Jacksonville editor and that meant I could keep my townhouse and my sanity, at least until the next round of layoffs.

The downside was it wasn't business as usual at the paper anymore. Our team of 12

copy editors and designers were reduced to two or three.

We still had some top-notch reporters and photographers but our Jacksonville crew of editors was reduced and overwhelmed. Plus, we had to edit copy and send it to our Augusta, Ga., brethren.

The process was becoming awkward.

The next 3 years were a blur of new ownership (GateHouse bought Morris' newspapers) and GateHouse had their own computer system, new editing procedures and deadlines were moved from 11:30 p.m. to approximately 6 p.m.

My newspaper career (which began in 1975 as a part-time sports writer) lasted until late 2018 when I decided to leave as I closed in on 65 years old.

My editor complimented me.

"You know, you are getting out at the right time," she said. "You started your career during the Watergate era. (President Nixon had resigned in 1974). It's been a good run for you."

I moved back to Anderson, my hometown, and began writing for The Electric City News, a job I am grateful to have.

There's a conversation in the Netflix movie, "To the Bone" as Keanu Reeves plays a counselor trying to help a struggling patient.

"Things don't all add up (in life) but you are resilient," he tells her. "Stop waiting for life to be easy. Face some hard facts and you could have an incredible life."

He's right. It has been quite a journey.

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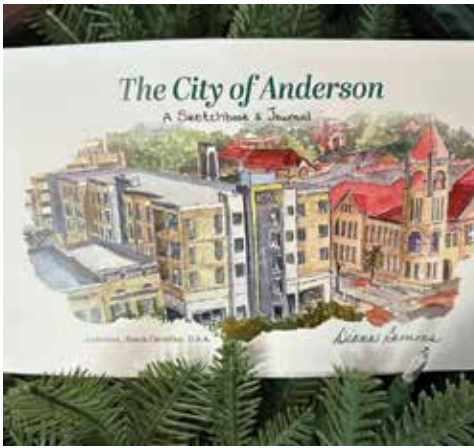
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CHRISTMAS, 1941

BY RICH OTTER

Christmas in December of 1941, in Anderson County and throughout the country and world, was under an unparalleled shadow.

On December 2, a coded Japanese message had been sent authorizing a prearranged action to occur any time after midnight on December 7. It read: "Climb Mount Niitaka." At 7:55 a.m. on December 7, the attack began by Japan on Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. Three hours after the attack, Japan declared war on the United States and England.

On December 8, President Franklin Roosevelt delivered a message to Congress, initiating with the statement: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy..." Congress declared war on Japan.

On December 11, Germany declared war on the United States and Roosevelt asked Congress for formal recognition of war with Germany and Italy. Numerous attacks had occurred coincident with the Japanese action on

December 7, including those that further infuriated the American public, such as Wake Island and Batan. From Batan there followed the notorious death-march.

The United States, with a strong isolationist foreign policy, had maintained neutrality to that point. The country had previously introduced some programs permitting sale, with favorable purchase arrangements, to friendly nations. That had incurred some objection from the American military, fully anticipating war materials would be needed by the United States.

The people of Anderson knew Japanese, from a little island way across the Pacific Ocean, had been harassing other far-away countries, but attacking America's Hawaiian Islands and declaring war on the United States was inconceivable—and then Germany! America had a huge German population.

Public reaction was slow, but certain entities immediately jumped into action. The Red Cross established an emergency drive. The county's Civil Defense Organization was

placed on a war-time basis. Nurses immediately were enlisting. It was announced that blackouts might soon be mandatory and gas masks might be issued. Portman Dam was placed under guard and soldiers were placed at vital bridges, airfields and industrial sites. The FBI rounded up aliens, including both Japanese and Germans. Anderson's City Hall tower bell provided the official air raid alarm warning system.

Newspapers were gradually receiving information as to losses sustained at Pearl Harbor and throughout the Pacific. Clemson College was immediately undertaking to prepare its seniors who would become officers in June. Veterans of World War I were asked to help with civil defense. Wood already had become hard to find. Timber was needed for paper, explosives and war chemical industries. Military aircraft were being flown into the Anderson airport.

It was December 18, when the first pictures of the Pearl Harbor devastation began appearing. It was suddenly realized—the threat was real.



Anderson's air raid bell

It was reported Anderson had sold 50,000 tons of scrap iron directly to Japan in the previous year—some of it likely being from fairly recently abandoned railroad tracks and train wheels. That re-purposed iron would likely be delivered back to the United States and its forces?

These things were all occurring between December 8 and Christmas eve. It was all, to the extent passing censors, being frantically reported by radio and newspapers. It was stated in the Anderson Independent, that

"except for the youngsters, the usual Christmas spirit hasn't prevailed locally up to now"—a considerable under-statement.

It was not just hard to believe, it was incredible—beyond comprehension. Actions were being taken that anticipated Anderson, South Carolina, could actually be bombed or invaded. Those things just happened elsewhere.

On December 23, England's Winston Churchill secretly flew into the United States for discussions with President Roosevelt. His visit corresponded with the lighting of the traditional Christmas tree at the White House on Christmas Eve.

Churchill recognized the great trepidation prevailing in America. He had lived with it in England. England had entered the war in September of 1939 and had endured constant bombing since September of 1940.

The Prime Minister was invited to speak at the tree lighting ceremony and commented, in part: "We may cast aside, for this night at least, the cares and dangers which beset us, and make for the children an evening of happiness in a world of storm."

May 2025 host a Merry Christmas and 2026 produce a happy and safe new year.

FROM THE SHELF

On The Devil is a Southpaw by Brandon Hobson

It's fitting for *The Devil is a Southpaw* by Brandon Hobson to be my last review of 2025, a year that's been relentless and surreal, much like the novel. As a piece of metafiction (a novel within a novel), Hobson uses the overlapping parallels of the two stories to blur the lines of past and present, reality and fiction. *The Devil is a Southpaw* is literary fiction at its finest; a brain-freezing heady endeavor that leaves you questioning everything, especially what exactly you just read.

We start with a mysterious Brandon H. (Hobson claims it's not him, or at least this version of him) receiving a manuscript in the mail from an old eccentric friend, Milton, who he knew from their shared time in a juvenile detention center in Oklahoma. The manuscript and Brandon (the character—not the author (I think), allude to the story spawning from Milton's jealous obsession with his childhood friend Matthew, a fellow writer and artist. The manuscript is titled *The Devil was*

a Southpaw, however, it also references a film and book by the same name. At least I think it does, as with most metafiction, I'm not 100% positive on which parts of the narrative are the "fake" novel written within the "real" novel.



Sara Leady

I have a love-hate relationship with metafiction. As a student, I wrote a few papers about the use of the tool as a means of creating a commentary on the art of storytelling,

or less eloquently put, exactly how serious writers take themselves as they try to sound extra smart. It's both delightful and maddening. *The Devil is a Southpaw* takes the idea of writers taking themselves too seriously to an entirely different level thanks to its nature as a metafiction. I think Hobson is likely cackling to himself thinking of readers. Much like the dude

who duct-taped the banana to the art gallery wall. Is it art or is it a joke? Wait, am I smart or am I the punchline to the joke?

As poorly as I'm selling this complete mind-screwing experience, I would genuinely encourage people to read it. I think we'd likely all benefit from more of us reading books that make us think this hard and google the definition of so many ridiculous words. It's an ode to the ritual of self-reflection through examining ourselves against the mirror that only another person's story, or truth, can provide. A unique ritual that can only come from the act of reading.

Part of the perfect timing for my reading and reviewing of *The Devil is a Southpaw* is its happening as I annually reflect back on my year of reading and think about what I might want from my upcoming year of reading. For the most part, in 2025 I read for pleasure and escape. Reading for pleasure, or "trash," or any other "not serious" reason behind the act of reading is incredibly important. I think, however, it's also important

to actually engage with stories beyond the surface level and to truly sit with them.

Recently I came across the "Anti-Brain Rot Reading Challenge." A challenge created @thistoryaintover (Jananie), that's meant to challenge intentional reading. It's an intense challenge but also motivating. For 2026 I want to find balance between the brain-candy of surface level reading and the act of digging into a story and looking at what it might be saying. It's not just heady literary metafiction that can say something either. I think the latest BookTok madness can say a lot too. Book trends reflect current society, and looking at what those trends might represent can be a heady thought exercise. I used to love annotating and analyzing everything I read, I just quit doing it when I quit being a student. Part of the "brain rot" countering is this process of annotating what I'm reading. It has annotating while reading set for an allotted amount of time daily. I'm at least committing to regularly doing it, but 45 minutes daily feels...

There are other parts to the challenge that I plan to engage in fully, but the daily annotation ritual will likely be shorter, or the thoughts may even get compiled collectively on the weekends.



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Just Me and Jesus

BY DR. SHEILA HILTON

If you ask my mother, she will tell you I arrived in this world on December 25, 1956, wrapped in equal parts baby blanket and divine significance. Anderson Memorial Hospital even sent me home in a bright red Christmas outfit, complete with a tiny Santa hat — a fashion choice I did not approve but could not prevent. I was also, according to family legend, briefly on television as the only Christmas baby born at the hospital that day. As far as I was concerned, this cemented my status as a national treasure.

As I grew older, I became absolutely convinced the entire world celebrated my birthday. Lights? For me. Caroling? For me. Christmas parades, peppermint bark, Bing Crosby crooning from every radio? All for me. My mother casually mentioned that I had been born on the same day as Jesus — a fact I interpreted in the least theologically accurate way possible. In my mind, it was official: it was just me and Jesus.

This delusion lasted beautifully until third grade, when Susie Pike announced during recess that she was also born on Christmas Day. The audacity. I informed her — with great confidence — that this was simply impossible, because my mother said otherwise.

Mrs. Leona Tyner, our saintly teacher at old Estes Elementary, intervened before the situation escalated into a full-blown playground revival. She explained gently that many people were born on Christmas Day. My world crumbled. My uniqueness vaporized. My specialness — poof — gone. My mother denied saying it was just me and Jesus until her dying day, though I remain suspicious.

My father, James Roy Finley, loved telling the story of my birth — conveniently edited for comedic effect. He and my mother were married on Christmas Eve 1954. I arrived on Christmas Day 1956. Daddy would tell people, “We got married on Christmas Eve, and Sheila was born on Christmas Day,” always omitting the two-year gap. Mama would swat him with a dish towel while he laughed himself breathless.

Of course, eventually I realized the Bible never specifies Jesus’ actual birthday. Scholars suggest December 25 may have been chosen because it’s the darkest time of year, when “the light of the world” would be most symbolically powerful. Yet again, my importance dipped a notch. Apparently, the universe had not, in fact, been aligning itself around my arrival.

My parents tried to make my birthday feel special, but let’s be honest: it’s tough to create a “line of demarcation” between Christmas joy and birthday joy when both involve wrap-

ping paper and sugar. The big difference was that I always got a birthday cake. My brother Ronnie, arriving six years later, complicated matters. Why did I get more presents? My parents’ solution was to buy him more presents too. This is what historians call “a gross injustice.”

Restaurants offering free birthday meals were useless, since none were open. I tried going the day before and the day after — the waitstaff looked at me like I was trying to perpetrate coupon fraud. It was so unfair.

When I finally earned my driver’s license, I discovered that the wider world was determined to remind me of my birthdate every time I bought anything more significant than a stick of gum. Every cashier who checked my ID launched into the same script:

“Oh! You’re a Christmas baby! Do you get one present for both? That is so sad. You poor thing. You can’t even have a party!”

I have had this conversation 122,556 times. Eventually, I started covering the birthdate with my thumb, but they always found it.

Then there was the matter of birthday deserts. What are the odds your birthday cake might actually be a fruitcake with a candle stuck in it? Or a leftover pecan pie with your name scrawled in icing? Quite high, actually. Mama tried to keep me special by making her famous Butternut Pound Cake — until one year it mysteriously became “for company” instead.

School birthdays? School was closed.

Work birthdays? I became a teacher — school was still closed.

Parties? Everyone was at Grandma’s house

eating ham.

I learned to make do with singing “Jingle Bells” as my unofficial birthday anthem and “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” as my personal tribute song.

Cards? I have received every combination of Christmas/birthday wordplay known to humankind:

“Merry Birthmas.”

“Happy Christday.”

“For Your Christmas Birthday.”

Two-for-one sentiments, like a greeting-card BOGO special.

And yet — years later — something shifted.

Somewhere along the line, Jesus became far more than my imaginary birthday twin. He became my comfort, my guide, my source of peace in storms. My reason for gratitude. My joy. My strength. My Savior.

As it turns out, I wasn’t special because I was born on the same day the world celebrates His birth. I’m special because He loves me — on December 25th, on December 26th, and every day in between.

So no, it’s not just me and Jesus.

It’s Jesus and everyone who needs His light.

And these days, that makes my birthday feel more meaningful — and far more joyful — than any childhood belief ever could.



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