He headed into the storm, his head and face buried as far as possible down into the folds of his upturned jacket collar. His eyes were "raining," too; like the torrent of rain pouring from the clouds above him, raining -- tears. Let the fellows call him sissy and soft, or whatever, it felt good to be crying. Good, to know that he could cry. For a long time he had thought he couldn't cry; thought he was past feeling; thought God had finally dried up all his tears.
and had cast him off because of his rebellion. Oh, it was good to know he
could cry! So good . . . tall and manly though he was now. God never did
exclude a six-foot man from crying, did He? No, indeed, He didn't. Nor
anyone shorter or taller, either, for that matter.

He buried his face deeper into the now-soaked collar and sobbed,
allowing the falling rain to wash his tears away at random while he reviewed
the almost-eighteen years of his natural life with open candor. Finally!

These should have been some of the best years, he knew. And under
ordinary circumstances they would have been. But how suddenly can
ordinary, carefree, fun-filled days be turned into painfully-sad, heart-crushing,
unordinary days! he thought, as a flow of fresh tears burst from his eyes.

He was small when it happened, he recalled, forcing his memory to go
over it all bit by bit, fact by fact. But he would never forget it. Even yet, it
seemed like an unreal and unbelievable nightmare; like something one hears
about over the news or reads about in a newspaper, happening to other
people. Only, this hadn't been those "other" people; this time his mother and
his sister and he were the "other" ones; the unfortunate ones. It was a
tragedy, and it made headlines in the papers and was the central topic of
news and of conversation for quite some time.

He remembered the ball game in the back yard with his father that
evening just before his handsome parent had left for his job. There had been
unrest at the plant and talk of a strike. He had been picked up by those
strong arms and hoisted up to his father's shoulders for the usual "ride" into
the house. They had had so much fun together. He felt secure and so
sheltered and loved.

He had wrapped his arms around his father's neck in a tight embrace,
squeezing and hugging for all his might. They had laughed together and
hugged some more. Like always. It was a daily thing; a very special time for
him. He had received another hug, a kiss, and an "I love you, Dale. Be good
and help your mother all you Can."

With his mother and sister standing beside him, they had watched as
the car drove out of the driveway, then they settled down to the usual routine,
he to his toys and playthings, his sister to her dolls, and his mother to the
business of folding and pressing the clothes and bedding that had just come out of the dryer.

He didn't know that, while he slept that night, his father was killed at work, the innocent victim of an irate, angry and wicked employee.

When the news was carefully broken to him he had run away to his room and hidden himself inside the closet, trying to understand it all but too young to do so entirely. Everything pertaining to his father became a blur after that -- the house filled with relatives and friends, the over-abundance of food, the tears, the funeral. He felt alone and totally bereft in spite of his mother's compassion and love and kindness to him. And suddenly he realized that his heart had become bitter and stony-cold. Year after year had done nothing to alleviate or lessen the bitterness but had served only to feed and intensify it.

Between his tenth and eleventh birthday he had felt that, somehow, he must assume the role of breadwinner and he had taken on a paper route in town.

His bitterness mounted. And it had continued to mount until just a few days ago. Shelly could be so winsome; but so candid, too. Yes, so very candid, and almost brutally frank.

"You're hurting no one but yourself, Dale," she had told him as they talked during the lunch hour at school. "Your bitterness is slowly but surely devouring you. It's destroying you. You!" She had emphasized the "you."

"Why shouldn't I be bitter?" he had retorted angrily and far more vocally than he had meant to. "You never grew up hurting over the loss of a father. You can't sympathize. Your father wasn't killed by some hate-filled maniac. I loved my father, Shelly; loved him passionately. Yet he was killed. And why? Because he was the plant supervisor, and was kind and good and trying to be fair and honest and upright with all of the men. And where, may I ask, was God during all this turmoil and unrest and strife? Why didn't He stop that wicked man from taking my father's life if He's as great and powerful and wonderful as you and my mother say He is? Where was God when all of that happened? Answer me."
"Where was God, Dale? -- repeating your question, of course. He was where He has always been and ever will be; in His heaven, beholding all men on the earth."

"Then why'd He allow it to happen? I'm sorry, Shelly, but I can't feel like you do about Him. If He's so truly great, He could have. . . ."

Shelly broke in quickly with, "Dale, please don't say any more about God." Tears shimmered in her eyes. Sadly, she said, "I have never been able to understand why One so great and righteous and holy should be charged with all the ills that befall mortal man. Never! His love was so immeasurably great and wonderful that He gave His only Son to die for our sins. Your sins! And mine. And here you sit, poor mortal man that you are, and question God for something which He was in no way responsible for. Why . . . oh why . . . does God always get accused for everything that happens?" And Shelly was sobbing by then.

"Hey, I didn't mean to make you cry! It isn't your fault that God didn't stop that man and. . . ."

"Oh, Dale, can't you understand?" Shelly had cried. "God had nothing to do with what happened. Don't blame Him anymore. Please! He's innocent of your accusations. What happened was not God's fault. Wicked men, out of the corruption and the wickedness of their evil hearts, commit crimes and every other evil thing."

"But God could have prevented it; this is my point. He certainly didn't have much love that night or He would not have allowed my dad to be killed."

Shelly had bowed her head and closed her eyes. When she spoke, she said, "I feel it isn't right to argue, Dale, so I shall merely quote what St. John's Gospel says. It is all summed up in two beautiful verses: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

"'For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved' (St. John 3:16-17).

"If that isn't love, I don't know what is. You are slowly killing your mother, Dale. Is there very much difference between your father's slayer and
That had been the climax for him. It was as though her words had shocked and jolted him out of the past to the immediate present. He had gone home that afternoon, when school was dismissed, and observed his mother. Yes, for the first time in all the years since the tragedy, he had scrutinized his parent. What he noticed had given him another "high voltage" shock. So wrapped up in his bitterness and rebellion had he been that he hadn't seen the gray hairs on his mother's head. Nor had he noticed how she had aged and how thin and pale and frail looking she was. Where had her beauty gone? And when had she lost her appearance of youthfulness? he wondered.

Something twisted and wrung his heart. His mother had suffered from the tragedy, too. How she must have suffered! And, instead of being a help and a consolation to her, he had become an added burden!

He had left the house, after the revelation, and had walked the streets. He almost, if not entirely, loathed himself. What a disappointment he must have been to his heartbroken mother! And how grieved his deceased father would be if he were living and knew of his son's bitter attitude and his rebellion.

He had passed by a church that day and felt strangely drawn to its door, but in stubborn rebellion he had deliberately set his jaw and hurried by. Now, however, with the rain pelting his head and his back, he decided to go by the church. Perhaps its door wasn't locked and he could find shelter until the storm had abated. With the thought in his mind, he hastened his footsteps.

Thunder rolled and lightning flashed. The earth seemed to tremble and vibrate with the mighty roll and rumble of the thunder and Dale knew the worst was yet to come.

He lifted his eyes upward from the folds of the collar and saw the little church a short distance away. Running now, he reached its door only moments before there was a violent cloudburst.
He turned the knob on the door and was greatly relieved to find it unlocked. Stepping inside was like walking into a quiet woods. He sensed the atmosphere; it was one of peace and restfulness.

He pulled his dripping-wet jacket off and hung it on a coat hanger in the vestibule. Then he walked down the aisle and sat in one of the church pews. Outside, the rain fell in torrents. He listened to its ceaseless downpour for a while, then he sensed that he was on sacred ground. Immediately, the violence of the storm was forgotten. He looked toward the front of the church and saw the altar. Memories flooded over him. He had gone to an altar when he was small. His father had been so happy when he had told him that he had opened his heart and asked Jesus to come into it.

Tears fell again. What was wrong with going to the altar now? Sure, he was pretty much grown up. But wasn't an altar for anyone, and everyone, when they needed it?

He felt something stirring in his being, very, very gently. Something was pulling at him, at his heart. It was drawing him, leading him, to the altar. He must follow.

It was easy, once he had taken that first step forward. And it was just as easy praying, when he knelt, weeping and broken, at the altar.

His prayer wasn't eloquent, this he knew. Little matter. It was the "broken and contrite spirit" which the Savior said He would not despise. So he prayed, simply, honestly, openly, and much like a child. He prayed the sinner's prayer: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." And God heard! Bless His name! He not only heard; He answered! He, Dale, was forgiven. Forgiven! Born again.

He walked back and forth in front of the altar, hands upraised, praising God. The bitterness was gone. Gone! Washed away, with the forgiveness of his sins, by the Blood of Jesus.

He could scarcely wait to get home to tell his mother what had happened. And Shelly, too.

Outside, the rain poured, thunder rolled and lightning flashed; in his heart, all was at rest and peace.