Gregory Easton carried the hunting equipment out to his car and packed it carefully into the trunk, his thoughts, all the while, some better than two hundred miles away with his brother Rodney. Would Rod show up this year? he wondered, feeling again the deep pain inside his being.
A jet zoomed noisily overhead, breaking into his thoughts and leaving behind it a long tail of smoky-white trailing the sky.

Gregory watched until the smoke tail had dissipated and was erased completely from the sky, then he headed back to the warmth of the ambrosial smelling kitchen.

"You're excited," his wife teased as he closed the door behind him. "Do you think Rod will come this year?" she asked, going to Gregory and putting her hand gently on his arm.

"I don't know, Rebecca," he replied. "Oh, I don't know. I wish I did. But then, who can tell what Rod will do? You invited him for Thanksgiving dinner, didn't you, honey?" he asked.

"Have we ever not invited them, Greg?" Rebecca asked kindly. "And I honestly think Connie is dying to see everybody again. And the children. . . ." Her sentence trailed like the vapors from the steaming tea kettle on the stove.

Gregory heaved a heavy sigh as he took Rebecca in his arms and said, "I guess there are some things in this life we'll just never understand. And maybe it's best. Then again, maybe it's not. I'm thankful that we learned long ago that we can turn these darkly-mysterious and hard to understand things over to God." Releasing her, he said, "Um-m, it smells, well, dare I say, delectably delightfully delicious? Your cooking could whet the appetite of an unconscious man, I do believe, my dear."

"That's carrying it a bit too far," Rebecca declared, laughing and hurrying away to check on the candied yams, bubbling gently and deliciously in the brown sugar and butter on top of the stove.

She looked through the window toward the road. Within a little while the house would be a beehive of activity as the relatives gathered in for the yearly Thanksgiving feast at Greg's and her large and old but durable, country home.

She saw Tabitha and Shiela -- one of Tabitha's friends, who had no place to go for the holiday -- skating on the pond below the lawn, and, on the
bank of the pond, Stephen and Rusty were piling up wood for the bonfire the young people always had each Thanksgiving evening.

Rebecca smiled as she turned from the window. It was rewarding, she mused silently, to see one's offspring happy, and content to be enjoying the simple but satisfying and clean pleasures of their own home. And to share it with others, too. How those youngsters and their friends managed to do a disappearing act to the nearly eight pounds of hot dogs each Thanksgiving evening down by the pond -- after the one o'clock dinner feast -was more than Becky Easton could ever understand. And not only hot dogs, either. There were always marshmallows -- for toasting;, chestnuts -- for roasting; pretzels, potato chips, nuts, pickles and apples and plenty of fresh, hot apple cider and hot chocolate.

Becky felt tears sting her eyes as she thought of Rod and Connie and their four children. If there was anything their four offspring liked better than coming in for Thanksgiving Becky didn't know what it was. The high point of their year, they always declared and avowed, was the yearly feast and get-together in "the big house," as Greg's and her place was fondly called. And for six luxurious and marvelous days, the cousins had the time of their life skating, exploring the woods, roaming the fields or whatever, while their fathers took to the mountains and the hunting cabin for hunting. Now, however, Rusty and Stephen and Rod's two sons were also old enough to accompany their fathers and take part in the yearly expedition, only Rod's stubbornness -- or whatever it was -- had kept the boys -- John and Russ -- from any and all association with their cousins and aunts and uncles. And, yes, from even their grandparents.

A little cloud of white fluff going up from the road alerted Rebecca to the fact that one of the families was at their country place, for the wind from the moving automobile sent the newly-fallen, powdery-light snow swirling upward in a great, continual puff of white. It would be either her parents or Gregory's, she knew, remembering how, from year to year, ever since Greg and she had offered and volunteered to take the heavy load of meal preparation off their aging parents, they were always the very first to arrive.

"Right on target again!" Gregory called from the den. "Your folks are first this year, honey, and mine are right behind them. No latecomers, those two dear old couples. Years of discipline and habit are still as evident as ever."
"They deserve a medal," Becky said, lovingly. "We have so much to thank God for."

"Don't I know it!" Greg exclaimed, going toward the door to greet the two sets of parents.

An hour later Becky's two sisters and one brother arrived with their families, followed almost immediately by Gregory's one sister and two of his brothers and their families. Immediately the house became a place of laughter, mirth and noise and loud talking, as cousins greeted each other with shouts of glee and squeals of delight and excitement after not having seen each other for many months. Everybody was there; everyone except Rodney and Connie and their family; forty-two in all.

Seeing Greg's crestfallen and sad countenance, after the hellos were said and the hugs were given by relatives to relatives, Becky whispered softly-close to his ear, "Maybe next year, honey, God willing. Don't lose hope. We'll be faithful in the prayer closet. No Holy Ghost uttered prayer ever goes unanswered."

Greg brushed tears away, quickly and almost harshly. "I had so hoped it would be this year," he said in little more than an agonized whisper before going to the den, where he knew all the men would be congregated, with little other than hunting on their mind.

For many, many pleasant years his brother and he had hunted together. Then their fast-growing offspring had come of hunting age and along with their fathers, all of them went together to the cabin, which was hidden snugly away among the tall, dark fir and spruce trees near a crystal-clear, gurgling, laughing stream deep in the woods. And now his brothers-in-law, on both sides of his and Becky's family, were all a part of the yearly hunt, jobs and positions permitting. If there dare be called such a thing as hunting fever, Gregory knew that the "off shoots" of the Easton-Rockwell clan were smitten incurably with it.

"Any word from Rodney?" Father Easton asked the question before Gregory entered the den.
"None whatever, Dad," he replied sadly. "I've tried numerous times to contact him, with no results. He has an unlisted phone number now, and all of my letters are returned -- unopened and unread."

Jonathon Easton looked suddenly very old. "It's too bad," he remarked. "That stubborn, unforgiving nature will destroy him yet. Seems like he wants no part of his family."

He turned down the hallway. Then he said, "I guess there'll be no hunting for me again this year, Son: your mother's afraid I'll have a heart attack climbing the hills and roaming the valleys."

"Won't you go along to the cabin?" Greg asked, with a stab of pain in his heart. He knew how much his father had loved to hunt and to camp in the cabin.

"I'm afraid not, my boy. My bones aren't what they once were and my heart's not like it used to be. Your mother and I are getting old, Greg. It comes to all of us. But it doesn't frighten us; not when you realize that each passing day and month and year is bringing you ever nearer and closer to your blessed and eternal home"

"It won't be the same at the cabin without you," Greg admitted sadly. "I'll surely miss you, Dad. So will all the others. There's only one dad, and each of your children agrees we have the greatest."

"Thank you, Greg. You've paid me a great compliment. Your mother and I feel we have the most wonderful children in the world," the gentle father replied, walking away.

Inside the den, excitement mounted as the men discussed their hunting plans for the opening day.

"I think we should go' up to the camp tonight," Greg's brother, Judson, declared.

"But what about the boys?" Becky's brother asked. "They wouldn't miss that bonfire and wiener roast by the pond for anything. And I can't say that I blame them for that," he added, laughing his deeply-soft laugh.
"I enjoy watching them," Eric chimed in. "And to hear them talk about it when we're home! Why, I believe it's the best time of their entire year. Sally and I hear about this year long. That's a fact. So you're right, Robert; we must not forget about our sons. This is a special time for them too; in so many ways."

"Hey, what's wrong with leaving after the fun's over and the fire's burned out by the pond, God willing?" one of the brothers-in-law asked. "None of us in here will get much, if any, sleep anyhow. You know how it is; we'll sit and shoot the breeze till three or four a.m. anyhow." Laughter filled the room.

"Not a bad idea, Frank," Greg declared. "And if everyone finds this agreeable, we'll leave immediately after the kids have had their special time by the pond tonight, God willing."

"All in favor, say aye," Judson said in a parliamentary procedure sounding tone of voice.

In complete unison, a hearty and enthusiastic "aye" was heard, followed by hearty laughter.

"Load the gear and the supplies," Greg instructed. "I have Rusty's and Steve's and mine in the trunk - insulated underwear; socks, boots, sleeping bags, guns, shells -- everything. Thought I may as well do it while waiting for dinner."

"No word from Rodney, huh?" someone asked.

"Sorry, none," Greg answered with a catch in his voice.

"Too bad! Too bad!" came the sad exclamation. "He's hurting nobody but himself and his family."

The men scattered and hurried away after their hunting gear and supplies, packing as much into the trunks as they could before Rebecca would be calling them for dinner.
"If our families keep expanding," Becky's sister Evelyn said, laughing, "we'll have to find other sleeping quarters when we come in again, God willing."

"Nothing doing!" Becky declared emphatically. "We're a family; families belong together at times like this. And there's still plenty of floor space left," she added with a ripple of laughter. "The girls all say they love the floor. And why not? They have the entire big room in the basement to themselves--nice thick carpet on the floor, two hide-a-beds, and plenty of room for even more sleeping bags, not to mention that enormous walk-in closet and their own private bath and shower."

"Oh, Sis," Evelyn said, "you and Greg are the greatest. I hope we never need to miss this special get together time. I look forward to it every year. God has blest our families abundantly. If only Rod and Connie and their family were here. . . ."

Rebecca sighed as she took the rolls from the oven. "Our family would be complete then," she stated softly. "Ours is; yours and mine, I mean -- Father, Mother, you and Arlis and Robert and I. If Rod were here, Greg's whole family would be complete, too. Oh, Evelyn, you've no idea how Gregory is hurting. And grieving over his brother. If he only knew what happened to Rod; but he doesn't. And, try as Greg has to speak to him long distance, Rod refused to come to the phone even. And the last time Greg tried, he was informed their number is now an unlisted number, I know Connie's dying, under this, whatever it is. Well, I guess you can call the skaters in, and then we'll round up the men folks; dinner's ready for serving."

It was a beautiful thing to see -- the long, stretched out table in the dining room seating all the adults and, another, not so long, along one wall, where all the cousins, except for the smaller ones, had their own well laden table. Seated, one couple at each end of the long table, were Greg's father and mother and Rebecca's parents.

Getting to his feet, Greg smiled at his father. "Dad," he said, "it's your year to ask the blessing over this beautiful spread."

There was a moment of silence. Then, in an emotion packed voice, Jonathon Easton began to pray.
On the drive up to the hunting cabin, Gregory's heart felt like lead because of his brother Rodney. For so long as he could remember, this had been a family tradition -- all the men in their family headed mountainward to the cabin for their annual deer hunt. Years ago, their father had bought a couple-hundred acres of mountain land deep in the mountains and he had built a sturdy and durable cabin on a suitable site within his acreage. Carefully planned, was the building, and scrupulously chosen, the site.

"I want something my sons can come home to," he had said, "their own cabin in which to stay and eat and sleep. During the hunting season, especially. A place to make memories. Away from the beer-guzzling, card-playing, foul-mouthed hunters in many of the cabins. A place where God's name will be held in reverence and not be desecrated. A place not only for hunting but where one can wait in quietness upon God."

Greg heaved a sigh. Inwardly, his soul was in anguish. Keeping his eyes on the road, he prayed, thankful beyond words that, at last, everyone riding in his car had fallen asleep.

It was finally upon them again -- the time of year they had all looked forward to, because of their love for each other -- the close bond that ever existed between them -- and because it was deer season. How many freezers would hold a sizable amount of fresh venison this season he could not predict. He knew this was in the hands of his Heavenly Father and that each member of their hunting party would be truly grateful for whatever amount he could carry home with him. No one would go home empty-handed; everything was shared equally among them. This seemed to have been an unwritten law among them and between them.

Greg glanced in the rearview mirror every now and then to make sure the others were still following: four cars and one pickup: a total of eighteen hunters, he mused in silence. Their largest group ever. And if Rod were here -- Rod and his two fine young hunters -- the grand total would be 21.

Already, Greg missed the companionship of his beloved father. It would be the first year ever that the dear man was absent. And what an absence it would be! he thought tearfully. The bunk bed nearest the stove would be filled, he knew, but it would not be by his beloved parent. If only he could
have come with them and remained in the cabin and been there when they returned from their hunting jaunts. He had done it last year. But his mother had put her dainty little foot down, in strictest obedience to and compliance with the family doctor's orders that, "he must not go. Not at all. Not even just to stay in the cabin. It may excite him too much."

Grief filled Gregory's heart; grief and a pain: his father's health was failing, it was all too obvious. Reaching for his big handkerchief, he brushed tears from his face. He was thankful that Rebecca's father was still able to be among the hunting party. But, then, he was younger than his own dear father. By eight years, to be exact and age-wise explicit, he soliloquized, enjoying the deep silence of the night.

His thoughts wandered back to other years; years when his father's steps were quick and sure; when, in the early, early morning hours, the sleepers were roused out of their sleep by the dear man's prayers, climbing, climbing, and pushing through into the glory world. Ah, those precious, priceless, never-to-be-forgotten memories. They would never die. Never! He knew this as certainly and as surely as that he was driving.

He saw the first faint gray streaks of dawn and knew they had been traveling for better than two hours. Only three and a half more hours to go, he thought happily, God granting them traveling mercies. Of course, that didn't include the breakfast stop which, if running true to pattern, would consume another good hour or more since the place where they always stopped to eat was crowded with people, mainly hunters like themselves. The food was superb and the price modest.

Greg recalled how, two years previously, he had had a very special time with a young man sitting next to him at the counter. The restaurant was crowded and the tables were all taken so they had all waited their turn to be seated. The hostess told them there was one remaining seat at the counter. (He was the last of their party to be seated since, out of deference and respect to the others, he had told them to go ahead and he'd take whatever came up for him.)

God's timing was perfect, like always. He had sat down beside the young man and was looking over the menu when he felt a gentle but unmistakable urge from the Holy Spirit to begin a conversation with his fellow traveler who sat so close to him.
"Those hot cakes sure do smell delicious," he said by way of an opener as he smiled into the fine looking face so near his own.

"They certainly know how to feed hungry men in this place," came the immediate and unhesitating rejoinder.

There was a pause and a long drawn-out sigh much like a stifled sob, then a quickly added, "I only wish they had something to fill and satisfy a hurting heart the way they fill one's stomach." There was another long sigh.

A prayer rose up in Greg's heart. "Problems?" he asked ever so gently and kindly, knowing without any question that he was on God's appointed and properly assigned stool in God's designated place and His precise timing.

"Too many of them," was the answer. "And the worst of all things is that no one cares. No one has time to listen -- or to help. Everybody's too busy and too uncaring. Too unconcerned."

"You've got a listening ear this morning, my friend. Care to talk?"

For a brief moment the young man studied Greg. Then he said, "You're serious, aren't you? You really do mean it, I can tell you do."

"From the bottom of my heart, I do." By now, tears were swimming in Gregory's eyes.

"But what about your hunting buddies? You're on your way to a hunting camp, I can tell by your dress."

Greg had reached over and touched the young man's hand lightly. "You're the most important thing on my day's agenda, my friend," he stated truthfully. "The others will understand."

The young man took another bite of his hot cakes and sausage. "It's a long story," he said sadly. "Too long to become extremely detailed. I'll abbreviate it as best as I can without deleting the pertinent facts and the important things."
Gregory knew, instinctively, that he was dealing with a young man who had a brilliant mind and much learning.

"I graduated from Harvard University," the man said, "and have traveled extensively for the company for which I work and in which I have part ownership.

"On one of my trips abroad, I met Patty, a sweet little flight attendant. We fell in love with each other. It was such a natural thing to do, and so right. Each of us sensed this. We were married in less than nine months.

"Patty quit her job so she could become a full-time wife and a loving homemaker for her husband -- me. We were blissfully happy; she, a truly loving and completely happy homemaker and I, an equally loving and completely satisfied bread winner husband. We were happiest when we were together.

"On one of my return trips from abroad, Patty greeted me excitedly with the great news that she had seen our family doctor and he had confirmed her hopes that we were to be parents.

"Brian arrived on schedule, like we expected him to do, and Patty and I were actually transported out of ourselves with happiness and joy and excitement. We were truly a family now, and the joys of parenting and sharing in the responsibilities created by this tiny little fellow drew us together in a bond and a kind of love to which we had been alien heretofore.

"I was to leave early, on business, that morning in late April. Patty got up to prepare any breakfast, stopping by the baby's nursery on her way to the kitchen. I had just turned the water off in the shower and was dressing when I heard my wife's scream."

The young man's shoulders drooped as he said it and for a long while he couldn't speak. Gregory bowed his head and prayed.

"Our . . . son . . . was dead!"

The declaration was, a painful thing, Greg noticed, praying silently.

"Crib death," the wounded man added brokenly.
"Your son's in heaven," Greg said softly. "He's with the Lord Jesus Christ and he's joyously happy. Are you going to meet him there some day, my dear friend? You can, you know, by inviting the Savior into your heart and by being born again."

As though he hadn't heard -- or perceived -- the man continued: "Party's never been the same since that fateful April morning better than a year ago. The shock of it plunged her into a state of hopeless depression. She lost the will to go on; the desire to live. Sir, plainly speaking, my wife wants to die. She blames herself for our son's tragic and untimely death, saying she should have checked more often on him. Not that such a thing was necessary; Brian was a healthy child who slept straight through the night.

"Oh Sir, Sir, if only I could find help for my wife! It's killing me; gnawing me to pieces on the inside, seeing her dying so, a little bit day by day by day."

"I have a Friend who can help," Greg volunteered tearfully. Assuredly. "His name is Jesus. He understands everything you're feeling -- your grief, your pain, your hurt. And believe me, He cares."

The young man put his fork down and looked Greg full in the face. "I believe you," he stated with childlike trust and simplicity. "What must I do to become acquainted with Jesus? I'm ready to know Him now. Once, years ago, I wasn't interested. But now . . . well . . . I'm ready. I want to know Him. And you said my little son's living with Him. . . ."

"He is, my friend, and he's supremely happy. Heaven is full of singing, rejoicing, joyous children."

"What must I do to . . . to . . . get to Heaven?"

"One scripture says, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' Another says you must be born again -- by Christ. So, if you will confess your sins to Jesus -- tell Him you know you are a sinner--and ask Him to forgive you and to come into your heart, He will do it. He's been waiting a long time for you to come to Him," Greg said softly. "And He said that whosoever would come unto Him He would in no wise -- or no way --
cast out. He invites you to come, dear friend. He -Jesus -- said, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' Will you come?"

"Here?" the young man asked softly.

"Yes, my friend, if you will. Or, if you'd rather, we can go out to my car and I'll pray with you there," Greg said.

"Oh please, Sir, let's do it now. Right here. I have such a heavy load in here," he said, smiting his chest with his fist.

And sitting there at the counter, at one extreme end of it to be exact, the young man was gloriously converted. His heart and life was radically changed.

"It's strange," he told Greg after his conversion, "how I came to be here. You see, I've never traveled this road before. Always, if I drive to this particular city, I take the Interstate north of here. Today, not caring if I lived or died, I drove aimlessly and, suddenly, I found I was on an unfamiliar road. Little matter, I thought. And then, at the top of the hill, I saw this restaurant.

"I had no intentions whatever to stop for I wasn't hungry. Since Party's depression, eating's a forced thing with me; I do it simply because I know I must or I'll break physically and emotionally and, ultimately, my part of the business will fail.

"I felt almost like someone, or something, was drawing and pulling my car into the restaurant's parking lot, so strong was the urge to stop. And now -- now -- I know what it was. And why! The Savior was waiting here -- right here! -- for me. He knew He was sending His ambassador-servant here to help me. Oh, I am so thankful to God for sending you. Now that my sins are gone and my heart is set free in Christ, I'll be able to help Patty out of her dungeon of sin and gloom and depression."

They exchanged addresses then, and Greg and Becky kept in close contact with Peter and Patty Van Styck, inviting them down on Peter's days off. Within a short time, Patty was gloriously converted, Peter was sanctified wholly and, ten months later, God blest their home with Rebecca Lynn, a beautiful little girl whom they named after Becky.
"Blessed be God forever and forever!" Greg exclaimed aloud now, recalling that very special God-appointed meeting and the radical changes that took place in both Peter's and Patty's lives. They were now shining-bright witnesses for the Lord.

"Hey Dad, when do we eat?" Rusty raised himself part way up from the back seat and leaned over his father's shoulder as he asked the question, smiling broadly.

Greg patted him on the hand. "Hungry already, Son?" he teased, grinning for all he was worth. "You mean the turkey and all those hot dogs and marshmallows and pies have evaporated already?"

"Afraid so, Dad. I'm hungry. And I mean hungry," Rusty answered with a smile.

"We're not far from where we'll be stopping, God willing," Greg replied. "Until we get there, read a few chapters to me out of my Bible. It's on the window ledge behind you, Rusty."

"Be glad to, Dad." And thus saying, the teenager picked up the Bible, lovingly, and began reading.

(Part 3)

Snow began falling, not heavily at first; tiny little shiny bright flakes, they were. The sky had that unmistakable and certain heavy lead-gray overcast, however, which, Gregory knew, was, in itself, a silently-unspoken prediction of what was coming. He pulled into the restaurant at the top of the hill and looked back at his son, with a broad smile on his lips. "Still hungry?" he teased.

"Starved," came the instant reply.

"Okay, it's all out for breakfast," Gregory said loudly, waking Stephen and his cousin and a brother-in-law beside him on the front seat.

"I say, that was the shortest night ever!" his brother-in-law remarked with a hearty laugh. "But now that we're at the restaurant, I'm hungry."
Again Gregory laughed. He got out of the car and stretched his legs then flexed his tired muscles and took a quick, brisk walk over the big parking lot while the rest of the party drove in and parked. They were a happy bunch whose good-natured, clean, light banter was as much a part of them as was their kindness and their tenderness and, teasing one another, they went into the restaurant.

The snow was falling heavily by the time they left the restaurant. Gregory prayed silently as he drove. The last six miles could be treacherous, he knew; the road up the mountain to the cabin was not only narrow but it had some hair-pin curves as well. Still, there was something wonderful and thrilling to be deep in the heart of the mountain when there was a heavy snowfall, he mused with deep satisfaction. If only Rodney and the two boys had come! he thought, with great inner pain and a deep longing to see his brother again.

In the back seat, the three boys were talking furiously and laughing hilariously over something one of them had said. But Greg's thoughts were not on what was going on inside the car; they were with the brother whose absence from the family gathering was shrouded in mystery. Mystery and pain.

As he expected, when he saw the first small flakes of snow begin to fall miles back, it was now coming down in a steady and heavy sheet of white as they neared the mountains and their destination. He was anxious now to get to the cabin and start the fire in the wood-burning stove. Already, he could almost feel its warmth. The crackling of the burning wood and the soothing sound of the steaming tea kettle on top of the stove, plus the smell of a pot of slowly simmering beans and ham and onions, always gave Greg a greater and deeper sense of appreciation for the simpler ways and things of life.

The drive up the mountain to the cabin was, as he expected and suspected, slow and stressful. The snow lay deep and the road was hard to discern at times. One mile. Two. Then three. Four. Five. And finally, after a long time of snarl-paced driving, Gregory heaved a sigh of relief -- the six miles were made in complete safety. The car came out into the clearing where the cabin stood in pristine whiteness; a thing of welcome and beauty.
Gregory got out and hurried toward the door, his key in hand. The door was already unlocked. How? He wondered. Who was the trespasser?

He stepped inside. A fire burned warmly and briskly in the stove and the smell of freshly-brewed coffee lingered aromatically in the air.

"Hey, we've got company," he exclaimed as the group came into the cabin, carrying hunting gear, food stuffs, clothing and sleeping bags.

"I wonder who it is," someone ventured, shocked. "Was the door unlocked; Greg?"

"Sure was. But say, let's unload and get settled in. We can investigate after we're all settled. I surely do appreciate coming into a warm cabin though, don't you?"

"You can say that again!" was the chorused exclamation of response.

"And it was super-kind of this stranger, whoever he is, to have a pot of fresh, hot coffee ready for us," someone teased on his way to the car after more things.

"Look at this refrigerator!" the cousins exclaimed, as they opened the door to put in the homemade chili, the vegetable soup, sauerkraut and pork, spaghetti and meat balls and the baked ham. "Someone's pretty well stocked it."

Just then the door opened and an old, dear, familiar voice said, "Hi. I'm here. The boys and I."

"Rodney!" the word was uttered by all, in what was almost a prayerful unison.

"Where are the boys? John and Russ?"

"Exploring the mountains. They couldn't wait to get here. And before we go any further, I want to ask your forgiveness. All of you; each of you. Please, can you forgive me?"
Joyous commotion broke out as everyone started talking, assuring the prodigal of his forgiveness. Hugs were shared. The Lord was praised. Tears flowed freely. Unashamely.

"I'm so ashamed of myself," Rodney remarked as his tears fell thick and fast. "I blamed you, Gregory, for telling the preacher that I killed a buck out of season."

Gregory sucked his breath in, quicklike. "I never knew anything about it, Rod. You didn't, did you?"

"Yes, I did. And when we all sat together in the church service my last trip home, and the preacher preached on sin, and named -- specifically -- killing deer out of season, I thought someone had squealed to him. And I felt it was you, Gregory.

"Naturally, I wasn't even saved or I'd never have acted like I did toward all of you. I still professed to being a Christian, to be sure; but in my heart I knew I was only an actor. And a poor actor at that!

"It made me mad. Yes, I mean mad, to think that I should have been betrayed like that. But that's sin for you. Sin, and a tortured, tormented and guilty conscience; it makes you accuse and hate the innocent. I was so carnal. So very carnal. I made life pure misery for my dear Connie and our two sons. Oh, you wouldn't believe how terrible and mean and hateful I've been to them. I'm ashamed of myself. So ashamed. But the devil's a hard taskmaster: he drives one to do things he never dreamed he'd do."

Everyone listened in total silence.

"It took a near tragedy to shake me out of the dungeon of sin and misery. Connie Was almost killed by a drunken driver. She lingered for two weeks on the brink of eternity, not knowing anybody. I felt so alone, the boys and I. I longed for the love and the caring responses of my family, but I was too stubborn and too proud to call and ask for your prayers. Then late one night, when the chief surgeon told me he'd done all he could do, and so had everyone else, that it was only a matter of a short time until Connie would be gone, I ran downstairs and, in the chapel, I flung myself over a pew and sobbed until I thought I'd die."
"I remembered the family altar of home, and the family prayers that ascended upward like sweet incense to God, and how those prayers were answered, not just once, but time and time again.

"I humbled myself. I mean, humbled. I saw my heart as God saw it--and me. I began confessing and repenting. Not mere lip confession, but honest-before God confession and repentance. And there in that little hospital chapel--alone with God--I prayed and wrestled and yielded, and I was converted. Gloriously and radically and wonderfully, converted. Changed.

"I went upstairs to the intensive care unit where Connie was. The wall clock had it hands pointed to 3 a.m. I had prayed for two and one-half hours in the little chapel. And when I stepped up to Connie's bed a nurse came to me with tears in her eyes.

"'Your wife's going to live,' she said thankfully, with trembling lips. 'Fifteen minutes ago she opened her eyes, smiled at me, and said, "Rodney's saved. It just now happened. An angel brought me the message. Now I want to sleep for a while then you must let me see him."'

"Connie's healing was rapid and fast. Two days later, I brought her home from the hospital. She's completely healed and well. And the day I brought her home was the day I went to the garage and stayed on my knees until the old man of sin--the carnal Rodney--was dead and crucified and sanctified wholly. I had a glorious resurrection! Oh, what a resurrection! To newness of life; a life lived in the Spirit and led by the Spirit. But where is Father?" he asked suddenly.

"He had to stay home with the women and children this year; doctor's orders," Greg answered, wiping tears from his eyes. "And where's Connie?" he asked.

"Oh, she dropped John and Russ and me off here late last night then went to your place. She's as excited as a child, to get to see everybody again. This will be a Thanksgiving none of us will ever forget," Rodney declared. "I'm finally fulfilling an obligation, long overdue, to our two fine sons and my wife--that of getting together--like always--for our Thanksgiving rendezvous."

"Praise the Lord! Welcome home. Rodney!"
The exclamation of praise and welcome ascended upward like sweet incense.

"Hey, let's go find John and Russ." And with a war whoop of delight and joy, the cousins raced out the door in search of their two, dear, never-forgotten, much-loved other cousins.

-- The End --