A Day at the Alamo
Bob Fincham

It was early March in San Antonio, the sixth of March, to be exact. A crowd had started to gather in front of a historical mission reverently called the Alamo.

There was a light mist falling, and Martha Henderson was having second thoughts about bringing her daughter, Rose, here so early in the morning.

She was rethinking the whole idea of taking Rose to visit historical sites in Texas. All Rose wanted to do was listen to rock and roll music all day.

A native Texan, Martha wanted Rose to have an appreciation of the past and a better understanding of how the State of Texas came into existence.

Rose was annoyed with her mother. It was 1961, and fourteen-year-old girls had more important things to do than visit old, dingy places from the past.

She had slipped away from her mother into the crowd that was starting to gather in the Alamo Plaza. She walked across the street to look in shop windows. Tourists were able to buy any number of cheap trinkets related to Texas and the Alamo in these shops.

She noticed an old man dressed in ragged clothing standing in front of another shop staring at something in its window. He had shaggy hair hanging down to his shoulders. It was twisted and greasy looking as it flowed out from beneath an old, well-worn felt hat.

His dirty, woolen trousers just barely covered the tops of his cracked and scuffed leather boots. A worn-out, fringed, leather jacket hung loosely on his shrunken frame.

When he glanced at Rose, she noticed his salt-and-pepper beard stained with what might be tobacco juice. His eyes caught her eyes, and they stared at each other for a brief second.

His eyes entranced her. They were friendly yet showed a depth of sadness she could not understand.

Was this man homeless and wandering the streets of San Antonio? Was he a panhandler or just a lost soul without a family?

While she was thinking these things, he caught her eye once again. This time she noticed the streak of a tear where it had run from the corner of his left eye down into his beard. It had left a streak in what appeared to be black soot covering the exposed areas of his face.

He turned as if he wanted to say something to her but was cut off by the appearance of her mother between them.

“So, there you are,” Martha exclaimed. “I was worried sick that something had happened to you in all this crowd.”

“I am fine, mother,” Rose replied, leaning slightly to look around her.

The old man was gone. He had probably moved back into the crowd.

“What are you looking at?” her mother asked, turning to look along the street.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Well, in an hour or so, there will be a celebration in front of the Alamo chapel. A big battle was fought here 125 years ago. The Mexican Army under Santa Anna killed all of the Texans who were using this place as a fort in their fight for independence.”

“Can I go and sit in the car and listen to the radio? I’m not interested in old places and old battles.”
“No, you cannot. You can stay here with me and learn something worthwhile. That rock and roll music you listen to will poison your mind.”

“If I can listen to the radio when we leave here, I promise to be good and even walk around looking at things.”

“I suppose that would be fair. I want what is best for you.”

“I want to do the tour by myself. I promise not to go anywhere else, and I will meet you in front of that big building in one hour.”

“I would like to trust you. I really would. I know it has been hard since your father passed away only two years ago. He would love to see the young lady you are becoming.”

“Oh, mother. Does that mean I can go around on my own?”

“Yes, but be careful, and if you have any trouble, blow this whistle. It was your father’s and is very loud.”

Taking the whistle and placing it inside her purse, Rose crossed the street and walked toward the large chapel.

Standing by himself and staring at a spot on the ground, about ten feet in front of the chapel was the old man she had seen earlier. As she watched, he took an old rag out of his back pocket and wiped another tear from his eye.

People walked past and around him and acted as if he was not there. They were avoiding acknowledging his presence as if they were afraid that he might ask them for something.

Once again, he caught her eye and showed her a sort of sad smile. Before she could respond, a group of tourists walked between them, and he was gone.

She was puzzled for a moment. That old man was good at disappearing.

Putting him in the back of her mind, she entered the chapel and investigated the gift shop. She did not plan on buying anything, so she walked into one of the small side rooms just inside the main door.

At first, she thought the room was empty, but standing in one of the corners was the old man. He startled her, and for a moment she thought about using the whistle. She pushed that thought aside when she saw a slight, gentle smile beneath sorrowful eyes.

“Hello, young lady,” he said. “This room was the powder magazine for the fort. Barrels of gun powder were stacked in here. They were higher than a man could reach. It was Mexican powder and not very good, but the men made good use of it anyway. The Texians had taken it from a General named Cos when they beat him in battle and sent him back to Mexico.”

“Isn’t this place a chapel?” Rose asked. “Why would they have a room full of gunpowder in here?”

“It wasn’t no chapel in 1836. It was a fort, and this building had no roof. There were cannons mounted on top of the walls, and it was the last place of safety for the Texian defenders.”

“You seem to know a lot. Do you come here often?”

“Not really. I can visit here every twenty-five years for a few hours.”

“That is a long time between visits. Will this be your last one?”

“It is kind of hard to say.”

“My name is Rose. What is your name?”

“I am sorry. I forgot my manners,” he said bowing. “I am called Johnson by my friends.”
“Hello, Mr. Johnson. It is very nice to meet you. Are you from San Antonio?”
“Tennessee was my home. I came to Texas to start a ranch. I had heard about the
opportunities for a smart, energetic man, and I wanted to take advantage of them. I settled some
distance from here, near a place called Gonzales.”
“Why were you crying out front a little while ago?”
“If I tell you, it will involve a bit of a story, and you might not believe me.”
“Would you lie to me?”
“Never. I only tell the truth. I was not always truthful as a young man, but I never cheated
anyone, and now I have been around too long to bother lying about anything.”
“I would like to hear your story.”
Before he could answer, a family came into the room, and their three young children
were arguing and fighting with each other. Rose stepped to the side of the room and looked for
Johnson. He was gone.
Perhaps he had gone back out front. She did not see him leave during the distraction. He
sure could move fast for a man his age.
When she left the chapel, she saw Johnson standing by a large tree in the park beside the
chapel.
“I thought you might be out here somewhere,” she said as she walked over to him.
He acknowledged her with a question, “Do you know what a palisade might be?”
“I never heard of anything like that.”
“It is a wall made out of poles stuck in the ground.”
“Was there one of those here?”
Pointing toward the southwest, he said, “One ran in that direction. There was a ditch full
of water and a barrier of tree limbs in front of it. That was Davy Crockett’s position to defend
with his Tennessee volunteers.”
“Is this where the Mexicans killed him?”
Johnson walked a short distance into the nearer section of grass in front of the chapel and
pointed to a spot in the grass. He said, “Davy’s blood soaked the ground in this exact spot. They
shot him twice. One of the shots had broken his right arm. He still went on fighting until one of
them bayoneted him in the back. After he fell, they stuck him many more times. The fifty-five
men who fought here with Davy also died in this same area.”
Once again, a tear rolled down his cheek. He wiped at it with his sleeve.
“How can you be so sure he died on that exact spot?”
“Let’s sit in the plaza, and I’ll tell you a story. You need to be comfortable, and I’m tired
of standing.”
“I have to meet my mother in a half-hour.”
“Won’t you humor an old man?”
“Okay. I do want to hear more about Mr. Crockett.”
As they walked toward a bench in the plaza, the people sitting on it got up and moved
away toward the chapel. No one else in the crowd approached the bench before they reached it.
They sat near the Cenotaph and stared at it for a moment. Johnson was quiet while they
stared, and then he said, “That was quite a celebration in 1936 when they unveiled that there
statue. They carved all the big men's names into it, and they sure do look like they are supposed to. They even tried to list everyone who died here.”

“I wonder what it was like during the battle. It must have been horrible.”

This plaza was packed dirt, and it was surrounded by long, narrow buildings with flat roofs and thick walls.”

“Most of that is gone now.”

Pointing to the west, Johnson said, “The west wall would be inside those stores across the street where I first saw you. The north wall would be inside the post office, and the south wall would be in the middle of Crockett Street.”

“So, only that wall is left,” Rose said, pointing at the building along the east side of the plaza.

“Yes, that was a former barracks building where the men could sometimes sleep. But during the siege, everybody slept at their posts.”

“That and the chapel,” Rose said.

“Time does change all,” Johnson said. Then he went on to say, “Now, if you just sit back, relax, and close your eyes, you can picture the story I am going to tell you.”

Rose did what he suggested and soon found herself lulled to sleep by his soft voice as it blanketed any background noise from the crowd.

She stood in the plaza of the old Alamo. The noise was deafening. Men were on the roofs and walls all around the square, firing rifles and cannons at an attacking army.

Rose became frightened, and the vision started to fade, but a soothing voice calmed her, and everything came back into focus.

She was standing near a raised platform in the plaza that held two cannons and a group of men. They seemed to be waiting for something to happen at the north end of the square.

There was an increase in the noise coming from that end of the plaza, and men in colored uniforms came swarming through a large opening in the wall. The Texians were fighting them with knives and fists. Some were swinging their rifles like clubs. The numbers were just too much and the Mexicans quickly broke through. The defenders either died where they fought or ran into the plaza, stopping to turn and fire as they ran. Some of these men ran past her while others ran into the buildings on either side of the square and used them as small forts.

Other soldiers swarmed in from the west, coming over the wall and jumping down into the plaza. The men on the raised platform fired their cannons once and were shot or bayoneted. The whole scene was surreal. She stood there, and nobody paid her any attention, and nothing touched her.

She was so overwhelmed with the carnage going on around her that she wanted to get away and wake up from this nightmare.

The scene faded but came right back from a different perspective. Rose was now inside the small fort in front of the chapel. Davy Crockett and his men were defending this part of the Alamo. Their palisade still stood solid, and few of his men were wounded. They were all deadly shots and the Mexicans avoided assaulting his wall. But now the thousands of soldiers pouring into the Alamo Plaza were pressing against Crockett’s position from a different direction.

Horrified at how the battle became more and more violent, Rose watched the Mexican soldiers surge into this small area. Davy and most of his men rushed to stop them. They had
rifles, but like all the other defenders, no bayonets. It was their Bowie Knives and clubbed rifles against the bayonets of the Mexican soldiers.

The Mexicans quickly overwhelmed the defenders. Davy had his arm broken by a musket ball and fought one-handed with his Bowie. Dead and dying Mexicans soon surrounded him. The fight was violent and short. The numbers were too much, and the Mexicans were fighting like madmen and ignoring their losses. They quickly overran Davy and his men.

Rose was getting agitated. She had tried to maintain the idea that she was dreaming, and all of this was like a violent movie. She had even seen a film on television about the Alamo, but it was nothing like this. Everything seemed so real. She felt like part of the battle, but she also could not feel or smell anything.

As the Mexicans started to blast the chapel doors open with a cannon, things began to fade once again.

She opened her eyes to see her mother sitting by her side. “Did you have a nice nap, dear?” her mother asked.

Rose was confused. She started to think that maybe she had dreamed everything about Johnson and the battle. Before she could answer, her mother went on, “I was hoping you would take an interest in the Alamo. One of your ancestors died here. My Great, Great, Grandfather, Morgan Johnson served here with Davy Crockett. He left a wife and two children under the care of a good man near Gonzales, who raised the two boys as if they were his own.”

“Do you know what he looked like?”

“An artist traveling with Crockett had done some sketches of Crockett with his volunteers. One of the women who survived the battle saved the sketches by hiding them inside her dress.”

She showed a copy of one of the sketches to Rose. Her ancestor was standing next to Davy. He looked very much like the old man she had been talking to for the last hour or so.

“Mother, I have been talking to a man who looks just like him. You must have seen him sitting here with me when you came across the plaza.”

“I am sorry, dear, but you were napping here by yourself. There was no one else around you.”

In a sudden panic, Rose stood and looked all around, but she did not see Johnson anywhere. Taking her mother’s hand and walking quickly to the chapel, she told her mother, “Come along for a minute. He might be in the chapel.”

He was not in the chapel, and there was no sign of him on the outside. Johnson had disappeared. She must have imagined it all. But the battle seemed so real and showed many things she had not seen before. It was all very confusing.

She saw something lying on the grass in front of the chapel right where Crockett had died. It was an old rag with a black smudge on it. She picked it up and could smell a faint odor of sulfur on it.

Rose was confused and all thoughts of listening to rock and roll on the way home were gone. She had to learn more about what had happened to her here today.

Did her ancestor visit the Alamo as an apparition? If so, then why wasn’t he resting with his friends?
He mentioned visiting here every twenty-five years during big celebrations, and Rose would be at the next one in 1986. The 150th anniversary of the fall of the Alamo should be especially interesting.