The Baby Jesus and the Angel of Light

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Neither of my parents told my brother and me many stories. We grew up in the age of television, so the burden of entertaining us did not fall too heavily either on my parents or on our nanny. My mother was old-fashioned enough to read us bedtime stories—Kipling's are the ones I remember best—and Protestant enough to read us the Bible, or at least an illustrated Bible story. This last made us seem like prodigies to the nuns who taught our catechism classes, but I'm afraid none of the stories I heard orally really caught my imagination the way television did. Nothing in *The Jungle Book* or the gorier parts of the Old Testament haunted me like the version of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" I saw on Walt Disney's *Wonderful World of Color*. I was terrified of the Headless Horseman, whom I imagined coming through the window to get me. I slept with Zip, the biggest of my teddy bears, next to me for weeks afterwards. I made sure he was always on the side of the bed nearest the window. I didn't think he would defend me, but I did hope that at least the Headless Horseman would take him first.

But now the television shows have faded, and the few stories that my parents did tell me are the ones that haunt me. I recall two especially, both about miracles. This is my father's:

Once upon a time there was a little boy who was very poor. He and his brothers and sisters lived with their widowed mother, and she was barely able to feed them all. He worked in a store everyday after school and on the weekends. All his clothes were patched and worn. He had only one toy—a little toy car. (I have always pictured it as one of the Matchbox cars that boys of my era collected.) Even that one plaything was broken: the roof was smashed in on one side, all but one of the windows were gone, and two of the wheels were missing. The little boy loved it very much. Since he had nothing else to play with, it became everything: a race-car when he was a sportsman, a tank when

he was a soldier, an ambulance when he was a doctor. Almost every moment of happiness he remembered had to do with that car.

It was Christmas time. The family was so poor that there would be no Christmas presents, but the little boy was excited all the same. He had always wanted to go to midnight Mass on Christmas eve, and this year, for the first time, he would be allowed to stay up for it. Everyone had told him how splendid it was: all the incense and Christmas carols, all the fine vestments. And before the Mass itself began, there would be the blessing of the crèche: It was a very large crèche (evidently much larger than the one we had at our parish, St. Charles Borromeo). There were plaster figures of Joseph and Mary, of the wise men with their camels and their donkeys laden with gifts, of the shepherds with their sheep and their sheepdogs, of the herald angels hovering overhead. And a plaster figure of the Baby Jesus, with a halo still more glorious than Mary and Joseph's, lay on real straw in the center of it all. (We have all seen him: He always wears the same bland beatific smile and lies with his arms spread out wide, both welcoming his adorers and prefiguring his crucifixion.)

In this parish, it was the custom for everyone who came to midnight Mass to bring a gift for the Christ Child. Before taking their places in the pews, everyone would lay some offering at the plaster child's crib. Often they were very fine—splendid chalices for the altar, good new clothes for the poor, envelopes full of money. On Christmas morning, it seemed that the Baby Jesus had been visited by many caravans of wise-men. The little boy wanted very much to give the Christ Child some present.

And there was the problem. What could he give? He gave all the money from his after-school job to his mother. He had nothing else. He decided that he would find another job and work to save enough to buy a present for the Baby Jesus: and he did just that. All through Advent, he got up before dawn and worked at another store until it was time to go to school. By the time Christmas Eve arrived, he had enough to leave a good present at the crèche. He sat at the table in the kitchen of his tiny house, counting the

money he had earned. While he was trying to decide whether he had time to buy a present or should simply leave the money at the crèche, his mother returned home. "Oh son," she said. "What a good boy you are! Now we can have a real Christmas dinner." And she scooped up the money, and hurried off to shop before all the stores closed.

The little boy was heartbroken. Now he had nothing to leave at the crèche. He went to his room, trying not to be angry at his mother. He thought of what he had been taught to do whenever he was hurt or disappointed: "Offer it up to Jesus." On the dresser, he saw his one toy, the broken toy car. He had not had much time to play for weeks, but it had been waiting for him. And then he realized what he had to offer up to Jesus, and when he had combed his hair and dressed in his best clothes and was ready to set off for Mass, the broken car was in his pocket.

He was going to Mass alone, because his mother had to stay with the younger children. When he arrived, the church was already filling up, and he was almost lost among all the adults in their bulky coats. He felt very much alone, for almost everyone else seemed to be with their family and friends. He walked up the aisle, genuflected just as he had been taught, and turned to the crèche, which was set up before one of the side altars, the one dedicated to St. Joseph. Most of the plaster figures had been in place every day that week, but tonight, for the first time, the Baby Jesus was in his manger. Gifts were piling up before him. Some splendidly wrapped—perhaps toys for poor children whose mothers were not as fiercely proud as the little-boy's. Some were unwrapped, so you could tell how expensive they were. The little boy stood shyly before the crèche and laid his broken toy car amid all the treasures.

The organ had been playing preludes, and it was clear that soon the service would begin. The little boy squeezed into a pew close to the front, so that he could see the priest bless the crèche before Mass began. Almost everyone was in place, and an usher took a last look at the crèche to see that everything was ready. What the usher saw made him very angry. "Who would leave a piece of trash like this at Our Lord's crib?" he said,

loud enough for the little boy to hear, and he picked up the broken toy car, and threw it across the floor of the church, so that it came to rest at the far end of the other transept. The little boy could see it, lying on its roof with its two wheels spinning, looking like a wrecked car indeed. But he could not go to retrieve it, for the procession had begun, and everyone had stood up to sing the first hymn.

The little boy was crying, but he stood up, too. The procession advanced down the aisle. The priests were in their finest chasubles, and before them were crosses and banners and a swinging censer filling the church with incense. But the procession came to a dead stop when it reached the crossing, and all the singing died away into awed silence. At first the little boy could not tell what had happened, but he wiped away his tears and looked to see what everyone was staring at. And then he saw: the Baby Jesus had come to life and left his bed of straw. He was crawling across the cold stone floor of the church. He crawled until he reached the corner of the other transept. He tucked the broken car under his arm, and crawled back to his crèche. By this time all the people had fallen to their knees. At last the priest rose, and approached the manger: there was, just as before, a plaster child with a bright halo lying in the straw, but now his smile was the smile of a happy child, and his arms were folded tight around a broken toy car.

I can't remember how I reacted to the story when my father told it to me. I may have seen it, as children see so many of the stories they are told, as propaganda. There was clearly a message here: I was *not* a good little boy, and should be begin making some effort to be one. If this was the message, it was the very worst sort of propaganda: the absolute truth whose force cannot be resisted. During the holidays I was even less like a good little boy than during the rest of the year. My usual reaction to the piles of treasure presented to me every Christmas was, more or less, "Is this all I get?" (That is a question, I admit, that still often presents itself when I think of my life.)

I may have resisted it especially because a couple of my father's other stories seemed to cast him in the role of the good little boy. The most extreme one was the

potato story: When I was your age, I had to walk to school five miles through the snow, with only a hot potato to keep my hands warm, and the walk to school wasn't nearly as bad as the walk back, because that potato was all I got for lunch, and once I'd eaten it there was nothing to keep my hands warm on the way home. (All fathers of a certain age seem to have told this story in some form. These poor men innocently assumed that their off-spring would believe anything, and they all discovered with shock that they had somehow begotten hardened cynics.) Beyond that tall-tale, we heard about hard work at paper routes and the magazines routes, though we frankly doubted that our father had been a particularly exemplary child. We *knew* he was nothing like a good little boy now.

We went to Mass with my father every Sunday morning. He also went to confession every Saturday afternoon. It was just what we were taught to do in our catechism classes. It was, as everyone would have agreed, a good thing. I hated him for it. I knew that when he was not passed out, dead drunk, he was often a mean, foul-mouthed terror. I was afraid of him and I despised him. We always had some fresh evidence of how bad he was: Beyond what presented itself naturally, my mother and brother and I baited him unmercifully so that he would round on us and prove that we were right in all the evil things we said about him. I hated the idea that this ogre who darkened my life would be *forgiven*—and so easily, too.

Years later I myself began seeking the "Sacrament of Reconciliation" after a lengthy hiatus. Like many Catholics of my age, I decided that frequent confession was not actually all that important at about the same time I began committing sins that were more embarrassing to talk about than "I disobeyed my parents." Besides, I didn't want the cheap, insincere, formulaic forgiveness my wicked, hypocritical father had been after on those Saturday afternoons at St. Charles Borromeo. But now I felt that I understood the sacrament better, and for a while after my new confession, I felt pure. I had worthily received the sacrament my father had profaned. And then, with some shock, I realized that I was just a little Pharisee. I hated the idea that another poor sinner—especially one

who had sinned against me—would seek forgiveness. Jesus realized how reluctant brothers are to see each other forgiven, but they are generosity itself compared with sons. Had the prodigal been the *father*, I suspect he would have been sent back, with a good deal of filial sarcasm, to eat acorns with the pigs.

As I think of my father's Christmas story now, I realize that I cast him in the wrong role. My father was, indeed, not a good little boy who gave his last plaything to the Lord. My father was a smashed matchbox car with a couple wheels missing. He had failed in his public life, and he knew that his family thought of him as an enemy. I often wish I could know all the causes and sort out what was his fault from what was the result of the war and his other misfortunes. But whatever had darkened his life, it had been enough to break him: Failure was not an event that might be redeemed by later success; it was the essence of his life. He was a wreck. But despite—or because of—all this, he clearly longed to be cradled in his savior's arms, to have Christ still seek him after he had been rejected by everyone else. And in the end, perhaps he was like the good little boy after all: he kept dragging himself to church and laying that sorry offering before his savior, trusting that it would not be refused.

My mother also told me a story about a miracle. There is, she said, an angel who goes through the world visiting the blind. This angel is called the Angel of Light and Sight. Sometimes she finds that the damage that has blinded someone is not too bad, and she can make them see again. Then she is called the Angel of Sight. But often, the damage is too much for her to heal. When restoring sight to the blind is beyond her power, there is another gift she can bestow. She can make it so that instead of seeing only blackness, the blind see only light. That is when she is called the Angel of Light.

That's the whole story. No characters. Not much plot. Nothing flashy and Mediterranean. Even when describing miracles, my mother was not one to indulge in anything vulgar. I suspect that she believed that if Jesus had not been dealing with Jews

and Romans, he would have been able to conduct his earthly ministry more decorously. Like Irish Catholics with their statues, those Jewish peasants and Roman Centurions wanted to *see* something. For them, he had to make things theatrical, so when he gave the blind man at Bethsaida his sight, he used an ointment of dirt and his own spittle and, so that the simple crowd would realize something important was happening, he let the man glimpse a wonder—men who looked like walking tress—before seeing clearly. But with people like my mother, all that show would have been unnecessary. A word would have been enough to heal them—and, besides, they would have stoically borne their blindness had they been asked.

My mother had been raised a Congregationalist and sent to Episcopalian schools, and on the few occasions she went to church as an adult, she attended what is now the Episcopal Cathedral in San Diego. But her family's real religious doctrine was "Do your duty"—and if that is hard, remember that "God is Love," try to keep a good thought, and avoid dwelling on whatever is unpleasant. (My grandmother took that principle so far that when she visited her daughter in a Catholic hospital, she insisted that the bed be turned around: she would not have her child see that depressing crucifix all day long.) As my mother's story suggested, they did not expect the Lord to favor them with any displays of extravagant love, but they did trust that he would send his messenger to help them bear their burdens and do their duty.

And indeed my mother did do her duty as she saw it. She had her own career as a journalist—mostly covering fashion and society, but also working as a sportswriter for a while. But she had a larger career as—what would we call it? Let us say a philanthropist. There was hardly an organization to which she did not devote her efforts. She was on the board of a medical school. She was on the boards, often as president, of the symphony, the opera, the ballet, the Fine Arts Gallery. And she was not just a patron of the arts: she gave the greatest amount of time to the U.S.O., trying to see that when they were in port, the lonely sailors had some place to go besides the clip-joints south of

Broadway. I am afraid that when I first read *Bleak House*, I recognized a bit of my mother in Mrs. Jellyby, since I always felt she was less concerned about me than about any number of charities. But she had none of Mrs. Jellyby's aggressive piety—and she would never have given me something just to teach me to give it to the poor. More importantly, she actually accomplished a great deal in all her work: the museum expanded, the ballet found the funds to go on dancing, the sailors had a quiet library where they could sit and write their letters home.

And she accomplished all that even though she was as damaged as my father. She had always been ill and never been lucky: crippling asthma as a child, a spine so twisted that she had to wear a padded bodice so that a hump would not show under her fashionable clothes, one baby lost, a kidney removed, most of a fortune squandered. But, unlike my father, she would not be broken. Despite every failure or disaster, she would hold up her head and go on.

She died when I was sixteen, and during her final illness, I saw her truly afraid only once. The latest report had arrived, and it said that—despite all the surgery, the radiation, and now the hellish chemotherapy that tortured her for weeks on end—any treatment would be only "life-prolonging." At first she kept repeating that word, seeing it for the death sentence it was. And then, as if she had found a deeper cause of anguish she began crying over and over, "I have this ball to do." For that year she was chair of the Viennese Ball, an important social event that raised money for the symphony. She was terrified she would not be able to carry out the job she had accepted. She made my brother and me promise we would do all we could to help her. And suddenly the hysterics were over: She had a ball to do.

She did it, and she did it well. Perhaps some comrade of the Angel of Light who gives strength to the dying instead of light to the blind aided her. Not a detail escaped her. She did not want to serve the "Rubber Chicken" so common at large gatherings, so she charmed and figured and wheedled until there was a good slice of beef on every

plate. There had recently been a rash of burglaries in the area, and many of the victims had been at events announced in the society pages. She would not have her guests robbed or her publicity eclipsed, so she devised a plan: A Nazarene College had just moved to town, and she wanted to involve them in community affairs. Since she knew they didn't dance anyway, she thought they could help the symphony by providing house-sitters for those who did. And they were happy to. With the Nazarenes on guard, not a single ball-goer returned home to find his house ransacked.

The Viennese Ball was also a debutante ball, and my mother wanted to see that the young ladies' presentation to society was perfect. Each girl needed a suitable escort, and suitable escorts were evidently in short supply. (My female friends assure me that they remain a scarce commodity—though I doubt their ideas of what constitutes one would perfectly coincide with my mother's.) To see that the debutantes' first official waltz as adults would be memorable—at least to their parents—my mother decided on men in uniform. She investigated every ROTC program in Southern California. First she determined that the Navy's dress whites were more impressive than other uniforms. Then she checked the grooming standards of each unit: Under Admiral Zumwalt, the Navy had made some concessions to the long hair and side-burns of the 70's. My mother had not, and she chose the midshipmen of USC over their fellow cadets at UCLA because their commander had ignored the more liberal Z-grams.

The ball went off perfectly, and in the months after that, my mother had to do her public duty only once more. When she was suffering the agonies inflicted by another round of chemotherapy, which brought on nausea so intense that she could hardly eat or sleep, my father went to the hospital for what seemed a minor breathing problem. We all thought it was nothing, but he died almost before we knew his illness was serious. Although my mother had not left the house except to go to the doctor or the hospital for months, she roused herself to attend the funeral Mass and even take her place at the cemetery while the priest blessed her husband's grave.

During those months I remember praying more than I ever had before. As a child, of course, I had prayed all the time: it was part of life. We learned our prayers in catechism class, we lit candles before the statues of Mary and Joseph, we were told to offer all our sorrows up to Jesus. As a teenager, I no longer prayed every morning and evening as I had been taught—and if I did pray, I certainly did not kneel down beside my bed like a good little boy. But I was terrified by the prospect of my mother's death—and terrified, until he died, that I would have to live with my father alone. And one afternoon, I knelt and prayed as fervently as I knew how that my mother would not die. I still remember the room, I remember the smell of the bed-spread I buried my face in. I remember how I felt, as I had never felt before, that my prayer had been heard.

And then she died. I have read too many novels in which the unanswered prayer leads to a speedy loss of faith. I understand why that would seem the obvious reaction—but I wonder if that is indeed how most people—even most children—respond when what they pray for does not come to pass. I suspect many people find their unanswered prayers as sure a sign of God's love as the ones that are splendidly fulfilled. What we seek is communion with the Almighty, not the instant obedience of a divine servant. Or perhaps I did not feel cheated and abandoned when my prayer was not answered because I had been told by my mother herself about the Angel of Light and Sight: sometimes the damage is too great to heal, but then she will turn the darkness into light.

I call these stories to mind now because they are reminders of the some of the few truly intimate moments I had with my parents—with my distant, busy mother, with my frightening, unhappy father. They also they help me understand two tribes that are sadly disappearing from our culture: the immigrant Catholics who were not ashamed of their plaster saints and the dry, unemotional main-line Protestants who knew God was best served by the decorous good works that their theology told them were meaningless. And taken together, I think of these stories as a legacy that almost balances the myriad things I

hold against my parents. I still ask the old question when I think of my childhood—"Is this all I get?" For I can think of many things I wish that they had given me: their time, the security of a peaceful home, the feeling that I was their pride and joy instead of a something of disappointment. But I treasure what they have given me: stories promising that if I am damaged, God will send a messenger to help me bear my sorrows, and that even if I am broken, my savior will still love me and seek to clutch me to his heart.