“No, Grandpa, Watch My Mouth: Caffy-Caps!”

Walter Wangerin Jr.

My father's father died young, almost four years younger than I am now. He left this earth at fifty-five. Last week Wednesday, I reached the fifty-eighth year of my own age.

Until bare months before his death, Reverend Walter C. Wangerin had been a Lutheran pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan; but a hellishly high blood pressure so embrittled his body, so endangered his life, that the church council chose to lighten his load in spite of himself: they removed him from active pastoral service, hoping sincerely that the action would be temporary and beneficial. I visited grandpa during that enforced vacation. To me he seemed no different than he had been before; he was the same man that had taught me one year earlier—at his dining room table on a drizzling afternoon—to pray as a mealtime prayer: "Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever." The heart was the same. And it's the heart the young child sees. He knows nothing of the explosions of blood pressure—and shortly after my departure, Rev. Walter C. Wangerin was admitted to the hospital. That was in February, 1948. On the 13th day of that month, in Chicago, Illinois, I was unwrapping presents given me for my fourth birthday. From my mother I received a set of Lincoln Logs wherewith I began to build whole villages. Grandpa, however, lying in his hospital bed, was coming to realize that this bed was his last bed.

As my Aunt Clara wrote me years and years later: "He lived less than two months after that trip."

That trip: Aunt Clara (my father's younger sister, whose warmer name was and is "Tante Teddy") had accompanied me on the train from Chicago's Union Station to Grand Rapids; she and I and Grandpa and Grandma Wangerin then drove north together, to the Straits of Mackinac and the Upper Peninsula. This is the trip my aunt refers to. A most sacred journey, so it seems to me even yet today; for while we sailed the islands between Lakes Michigan and Huron, my grandfather bequeathed unto me the source and the name of our power over that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

When it was all done—the bequest, the trip and its return, our last night's sleep in the parsonage—Tante Teddy and I boarded the train in Grand Rapids and rode the rails home to Chicago, and my Grandpa died. I never saw him again.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, writes Peter the Apostle: *Tend the flock!* Grandpa Wangerin

the Pastor tended his congregational flock, indeed. But Pastor Wangerin the grandpa tended that single lamb, his oldest grandchild, just as well and yet more lovingly.

Peter defines the quality of such tending: *not by constraint, but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as dominating those in your charge but being examples to the flock.* To that grandkid of swallowing eyes and a vulnerable heart.

Cast all your cares on him for he careth for you.

Be sober, be watchful.

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour....

The train still belched smoke in those days. "Choo-choo," to the children.

The train still jerked its starts, because the engine wheels first spun hard and the chuffing grew frantic before metal caught metal, rim caught rail, and the unspeakable weight of the long train finally rolled slowly forward.

When we achieved speed in the sunlight, batting through the small towns, climbing swells of farmland, I kneeled on the seat and pressed my cheek to the window; I nearly gnawed the glass in my hungry desire to see the engine ahead, the great-hearted creature that whistled and roared and clickety-clacked the million little wheels beneath us, drawing us toward our destinies. But the engine stayed hidden in mystery, as impossible to see as to see my own face without a mirror.

And having arrived at the farther station, we stepped down from our coach, Tante Teddy and I, onto a long concrete island that ran between tracks and trains to a terminal I could not yet see. Noises, hootings, hissings, hollerings; the scents of metal heat and steam heat and the acrid coal smoke; dramatic changes of light and darkness—the great, grinding climate the railroad station made an alien of me, small and profoundly cautious. Several tracks away an engine started up, sending a series of hard bangs down its entire length from the choking head to the caboose. Trains still concluded with cabooses in those days.

"Wally?" My aunt adjusted her glasses to see me the better. "Wally, are you all right?" She put forth her hand, and though I didn't take it—my arms being full of a cardboard carrying case—I produced a smile, and so we began to walk. We walked toward the distant terminal, passing along the carcass of our own particular train: the dining car, the lounge car, sleeping cars, the mail car, luggage car, coal tender....

In those days a locomotive still relieved itself by blasting great clouds of steam from lower valves into the paths of oncoming boys, terrifying them.

"Yow!" I cried, jumping backward.

"Wait!" Tante Teddy started to reach for me, "It's okay—" Then, in mid-motion she reversed herself, turning back toward the steam-cloud and murmuring: "Dad?"

Behind the sound of hissing steam I, too, heard a low roll of gentle laughter, and I looked, and a form took shape in the cloud, and the features of a familiar face began to gather there, brown eyes grinning, silver hair enwrapping the sides of his head: grandpa!

Grandpa Wangerin came striding out of the mist and into the clear air. Straightway he slipped his hands beneath my arms and lifted me. He swung me high above his face, then caught me and held me to himself, my case, my squeal, my bones and all.

And so in a twinkling we were through the terminal and in his car; and I beside him was no alien, was a citizen, after all; and the sunlit weather felt very good.

I knew grandpa. I knew him by sight and by smell and by the texture of his chin and by the timbre of his voice when my ear received it straight through his bosom. Of course he was familiar to me: I remembered him with the mind of a four-year-old child, whose memories seem taken not from mere months passed, but rather from that perpetual and primal past in which God creates heavens and earths and gardens of savor and sweetness. And I trusted my grandpa, whose presence stretched backward forever, in who presence I was at peace.

Forever and forever, then, Grandpa Wangerin had been a preacher, for I had seen him preach and that was my memory of him. He was noble in the pulpit, splendid in his black cassock and a surplice as white as his own silver hair. Grandpa had a baritone voice as comforting as the Paraclete. My father one told me that Grandpa had been offered a position with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, but that he'd chosen to become a pastor instead. He did sing, of course. All his life long he sang in public, gladly—until the last years when his voice was torn ragged by a persistent cough, and even his preaching was disturbed. Dad said that grandpa would always tuck two Ludens cough drops under his upper lip before he preached, hoping by the drizzle to suppress that cough until the sermon was done.

"But those cough drops destroyed his front teeth," Dad said, "and he lost them."

I don't remember that. I didn't see teeth-gaps. It's Grandpa's softly puckered smile I most recall.

Forever and forever, then, the man had smiled, his brown eyes steadfast and tender. He smiled when he shook hands at the church door after worship. He smiled with anticipation when, in the mornings, he crossed the lot between the parsonage and the parochial school in order to lead the children in a matins devotion. He smiled a private, unattended smile when, in the evenings after supper, he sat down in his study to inscribe the day in his diary. Grandpa had begun this practice already during the first days of the ministry. When one book was full, he closed it and began another, saving the whole series of books against some future reckoning. *My Grandpa writes books*, I thought to myself, watching him from the darkened doorway. *My grandpa writes stories down on paper for*

people to read. But the diary was not, in fact, a journal of his private thoughts. I doubt he ever considered his personal notions worthy of preservation, except as they served the greater good of the Gospel.

Just a few years ago I had the opportunity to see the diaries again for the first time. Yes, they told stories. Or perhaps it is truer to say that they only hinted at ten thousand stories while Grandpa repeated the same daily tale over and over: he was keeping the accounts of a common cleric of uncommon obedience. *Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over this household, to give them their food at the proper time?* My grandfather's diaries record plain facts and calculations: the dates and times of every visitation he made to members of his congregation, whether to serve communion, or to pray with them, or to visit folks who had fallen away. The diaries remember every appointment the pastor made and kept for marital counseling; for the weddings themselves; for baptisms and funerals. They note the Scripture lessons which he chose for occasional services. They are a record of Rev. Wangerin's external duties, not of the thoughts of his internal heart—except as the very keeping of every duty, preciously and faithfully, was his heart and his life, being his deepest vocation: *Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing.*

Yet, if I cannot now read my grandfather's heart in the words he left behind, I did and *could* read his heart in the lines written on his face while he sat in his study writing in the diaries. With a fearsome clarity I see the man's silver head bending lightly above his desk; the lamplight plays upward over his face, his smile appearing and vanishing by turns, unattended. I hear the short strokes of his fountain pen as he moves it across the page, bright in the darkish room. I think that Grandpa doesn't see me in the doorframe, watching. I am the oldest of his grandchildren. My name is Walter, too. I am named after him, though he is Walter Carl and I am Walter Martin, like my Dad. One day I will write just like Grandpa, words spilling from my fountain pen upon pages and pages. My face, too, will work like sunshine and clouds in sky borne exchanges; my face will show the sadness and the gladness of the stories I am writing. And, just like my Grandpa, I won't even be aware that these expressions are revealing my secret heart to someone beloved who is lurking nearby and watching me. But Grandpa screws the cap to his pen (the cap flashing a tiny white dot) and, rising, begins to sing in his slightly ragged baritone:

"Du lieber, heilger frommer Christ,
der fur uns Kinder kommen ist..."

Kinder! That means—as even then I know—"children!" Not looking at me, switching off the desk lamp, Grandpa is nevertheless singing about me. I can hardly stand it:

"damit wir sollen weiss und rein,
und rechte Kinder Gottes sein."

"Unfortunately," Tante Teddy wrote me forty-six years later, when I was fifty, "Dad discontinued writing in his diary early in February 1948, the day before he entered the hospital because of his soaring blood pressure. You and your grandma, I fear, did not realize that your grandpa’s illness was terminal. He lived less than two months after that trip..."

That trip.

The car we drove in seemed full of talk to me. My young aunt was highly verbal then, as now she swims the English language, written or spoken, as smoothly as a porpoise. Into most pauses she introduced sentences of endless delight.

Grandpa himself commented on every passing thing: "The solid line's to keep us in our places; the broken lines allow us to scoot." And: "Look, Wally—windmills!" He read all the roadside signs out loud: "Burma Shave!" with a smiling triumph. And sometimes he broke into song. Hymns, actually. *Wachet Auf.* The bass lines of German chorales. *"Come, mein Enkelsohn,"* he urged. *"Sing with me!"*

Once, while driving between the tall pines, grandpa took his eyes from the road and squinted sententiously at the side of my head. *"Kinderschrecke!* he whispered, not looking back to the road: *"Mir gruselt auf Kinderschrecke. Dir auch?"*

And I nearly yipped that my formal, controlled, obedient Grandfather kept his eyes fixed on me, allowing the car to drive itself.

Grandma raised a harsh complaint.

But *"Dir auch?"* grandpa repeated, looking at me. *You, too?*

“Yes, yes, yes, yes," I said, in order to save us alive. Yes to whatever quiz the man was giving me.

Well, well: that quick flash of wickedness passing again from his face. The Reverend Walter C. Wangerin lifted his eyes once again to the road, smiling gravely and uttering his next words with a pulpit clarity: "Bogeymen give my grandson the creeps. Just as they do me. My grandson and me, why, we are the same. Two peas in a pod."

Apart from her various admonitions, I remember my grandmother chiefly by her silences and the marvelous revolvements of hair piled upon her head.

I must have lent my own chatter to the talk as we drove. The car and my relatives invited it.

And then, at the peak of our journey, the four of us were gathered on the deck of a sightseeing boat, sailing from island to island, nudging near the shores. It was

a flat, canopied vessel, set with rows of chairs like pews on the deck. It was populated by people as white-haired as my Grandfather, though older than he was, truly, and wrinkled and grateful to be sitting beneath a canvas shade. I recall two tin speakers attached to the forward wall, crackling now and again with an impossible monologue. I knew that they were issuing words, that someone somewhere was saying something; but I had no idea *what* was being said.

Grandpa drew me near to him and murmured translations for my sake, and then I understood that a guide was describing the sights to be seen ashore; and as Grandpa pointed his finger, I to began to see the sights. Most of them. Not all of them.

To me the scene spread all around was an Eden, raw wood, creation undiscovered: tall trees and a vernal undergrowth, the sudden sweep of eagles in the air, wheeling on a soundless wing. And the air itself was a sun-splintered crystal, a breathless, dimensioned clarity. And through the trees strong rays shone slantwise earthward, splashing the needles and the foliage below.

The speakers crackled, *There! Do you see*—? But I lost the next words.

Grandpa translated, "Two deer on that spit of land, he said, pointing. "See them, Wally?"

"No." No, I couldn't see them, but was suddenly filled with desire.

"Their heads are down. They're feeding."

"Grandpa, no! I don't see the deer."

"Okay," he said. "Come."

And so it was the Grandpa led me to the very back of the boat. He put his hands beneath my arms and lifted me up. But the canopy covered the entire deck; so Grandpa leaned backward over the stern and swung me out, bodily, above the boil of propeller-churned water. My feet dangled down. I regarded the white confusion some ten feet below, but I did so only glancing, without fear, because grandpa's hands were gripped around my chest, and Grandpa himself was raising me higher and higher until I could with my own eyes see over the canopy.

"Do you see the deer," he called.

And I looked. And, yes! Yes, I saw the two deer, both of them, one with its head bent down in a spray of green fern, the other with its head lifted up and looking directly back at me.

"Yes, Grandpa! I see the deer. I see two deer."

Tend the flock, not by constraint but willingly, not dominating those in your charge....

And so I hung above my death, and I was not afraid. In fact, I was sweetly oblivious of every emergent danger—not, mind you, because the dangers were not real, nor yet because I could not know them. In a moment I'll show you how desperately susceptible the boy at four could be to peril and its mortal terrors. No, I was oblivious because I was experiencing—was even in that moment

receiving—my Grandfather Wangerin's sacred bequest: power over Satan and every deadly evil.

But it's a child's manner first to experience some new thing with a mindless subjectivity—and only later to learn the thing, to think *about* it with an analytic objectivity. On the boat I received and had what I did not know I had. It was only later, on the railroad train as it hurtled home to Chicago, that I learned what had been bequeathed me, and whence it was and how to call it by name.

I sat by the window on the right side of the coach.

Again, I was suffering the hungry desire actually to see the steam locomotive that pulled us forward—to see it, you understand, *while* it was active and living, belching smoke and directly affecting me by its monstrous speed.

I climbed to kneeling on my seat. I pressed my right cheek against the glass and, one-eyed, peered ahead.

It was late afternoon. The sun, standing off my side of the train, had descended nearly to the horizon, giving the country fields and forests a golden hue, as if the trees and the chopped corn glowed with their own sanguinity.

And then the miracle began to happen so reasonably that I in my heart said, *Of course! This is exactly the way it always happens.*

The long train began to curve into a lazy right-hand turn. I peered, and saw a flattened black shape racing in the forefront. The engine! Bending into my view! And soon I saw the tight blow of smoke into the streaming air, and the cloud torn backward, developing over the engine—and then the stretch of that dark metallic snout, and yes! Yes! There it was! There was the force itself, the cause of my rocking here on my seat, the thunderous muscle that was even now drawing cars and cars and a thousand people round a big bend to Chicago.

Almost I turned to tell my aunt of the wonder—but just then the engine's window flared with the bloody red reflected sunlight. I gasped, terrified. To my child's mind, this was a living, angry, glaring *eye.* And all at once I knew the danger: that our engine was the iron head of a serpent, and the entire train was its body, and all we inside the train were in the serpent's belly, and now the serpent was staring straight back at me as if it *knew* that I knew the horror which no one else had realized.

Do not dismiss this experience of cosmic discernment as the foolish imaginings of a child! It is at the promptings of such symbols as these that the child leaps past the slow processes of logic and in an instance understands the presence and the grandeur of wickedness in the world.

Mute, too terrified to let *anyone* know (and so to suffer) the truth that had been imparted to me, I bore alone the conviction that we had been consumed by evil. The serpent, that devil wandering the earth seeking someone to devour, had devoured us....

Grandpa? Grandpa Wangerin?

Spontaneously I called to him in my mind. I did it before I knew that I was doing it: *Grandpa, why aren't you here?*

And then with a spiritual swiftness I learned. I held in my two separate hands these two separate experiences and all in a wordless flash considered their differences.

I am afraid. Because Grandpa is not here.

It was that simple. Grandpa was back in Grand Rapids.

But the very thought, the remembering of the boat and the dangers then and the fact that I was *not* then afraid because my Grandpa's hands then bore me up—that very thought, I say, brought ease into my situation now. Not that Grandpa had come upon the wings of my own memory. No. But rather that Grandpa had bequeathed me something that followed me then and ever. The source of our power over evil was in us. In us, the being together, you see, even when we were not together. And this was the name of that wonder: Love.

I sat down on the train seat. I kept my own counsel. I held my breath until we made Chicago. But I had begun to trust that we *would* make Chicago. And when we did, Grandpa's bequest had become a tangible thing within my breast.

And now that I am a man—and a grandfather too, in my own right—I can declare as a sacred fact, that this manner of being together outlasts every trip we take, even the final journey into death.

Shortly before my Tante Teddy wrote me her remembering letter, I had published parts of the story as you've read it above. She read those parts as well and dearly wanted to add several things and to correct several things.

I recall, she wrote, *that you and your grandpa had some pretty extensive conversations throughout that trip. Grandpa loved to explain how things worked. Grandpa said, "Look, there's a windmill," and you, Wally, four years old, you said, "I call them caffy-caps." Apparently Grandpa didn't repeat your word correctly, because you said, "No, Grandpa, watch my mouth: caffy-caps."*

The boat ride was indeed spectacular. My 22-year-old self was not into scenic appreciation, but I remember being awestruck by the lush virgin timber, the rare wildlife up closed and personal, the rushing, gorgeous waters of the river. And I was right there next to your Grandpa when he lifted you out over the railing to see the deer, with your grandma fretfully admonishing behind us, "Oh, Walter, be careful!"

I don't recall all the towns we saw.

Unfortunately, Dad discontinued writing in his diary early in February 1948, the day before he entered the hospital because of his soaring blood pressure. So what's the tribute?

He lived less than two months after that trip, but oh, what warmth and joy and contentment you showered upon those last two months! You recognize so eloquently his love for you, Wally, dear Wally. You gave as good as you got. For the rest of his life your Grandpa basked in your love and your trust and your irresistible four-year-old wonder at the world around you. Whenever he'd seem in pain or feeling sad during my hospital visits, I would mention a few catch-words from the Upper Peninsula trip, and he'd be instantly diverted to those happy memories and ultimately to peace of mind and of soul.

Thank you for making that visit with me and for doing so much to enrich your Grandpa's life.

It becomes even more evident, then, how in the being together we constitute a power against the greatest evils of this existence, Satan and desolation. And death. And then name of such wondrous being together even when we are no longer together is itself tough, enduring, and scarcely sentimental: Love.

In a postscript Tante Teddy concludes her letter:

I submit reluctantly to your poetic editorial license, but ding-dong it, Wally! There's no way I'd let an iron-headed serpent swallow my nephew down!

Walt Wangerin
March 28, 2002