

Excerpt from
IN THE DAYS OF THE ANGELS

Walter Wangerin Jr.

A Quiet Chamber Kept For Thee

This is the way it was in the old days:

The milkman still delivered milk to our back door, summer and winter. The milk came in bottles, and the bottles were shaped with a bulge at the top for the cream, you see, which separated after the fluid had been bottled. Cream was common in those days. So was butter. Margarine was less appealing because, according to Canadian law, it had to be sold in its original color, which was white like lard, and could be colored yellow only by the customer after she had bought it. Or so my mother told me. She mixed an orange powder into the margarine to make it butter-yellow.

But this is the way it was in the old days:

The milkman still carried his wares in a horse-drawn wagon, arriving at our house in the middle of the morning. And especially in the winter we would, as my mother said, "tune our ears to hear his coming." That is, we listened for the kindly, congregational clinking of the glass as his wagon toiled down our particular street, and then we rushed to an upstairs window and watched. In the cold Canadian air, you could hear his coming from far away. We were breathing on the window long before the milkman came bustling up our walk with bottles in a wire basket. And that, of course, was the point: my mother wanted us to bring the milk in right away or else it would freeze and the cream would lift its hat on an ice-cream column:

"How-do-you-do?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Cream, and how are you?"

But this is the way it was especially on Christmas Eve Day:

We spent the major portion of the morning at the upstairs window, giggling, whispering, and waiting for the milkman to come. Tradition. My mother was glad to be shed of us on the day she "ran crazy" with preparations. I think we knew that then. But for our own part we did truly want to see some evidence of how cold it was outside. It was important that Christmas Eve be cold. And it was the milkman's mare, you see, who presented us with evidence.

So here came the mare in a slow walk, nodding, drawing the wagon behind her even when her master was rushing up sidewalks, making deliveries. She never stopped. And the mare was blowing plumes of steam from her nostrils. Her chin

had grown a beard of hoarfrost. Her back was blanketed. The blanket smoked. The air was cold. The air was very cold, and our stomachs contracted with joy within us, and some of us laughed at the rightness of the weather. So here came the mare, treading a hardened snow. The snow banked six feet high on either side of the street, except at sidewalks and driveways. The snow was castles we would be kings of tomorrow. The snow collected on the mare, whose forelock and eyelashes were white. She shivered the flesh on her flanks, sending off small showers of snow. And so did we--shiver. Ah, cold! The air was a crystal bowl of cold! The day was perfectly right.

And we could scarcely stand our excitement.

Downstairs, directly below us in the house, was a room that had been locked two days ago against our entering in. This was my father's tradition, which he never varied year to year. Always, he locked the door by removing its knob, transfiguring thereby the very spirit of the room; all we could do was spy at the knob-hole and wonder at the mysteries concealed inside. My brothers and sisters pestered that hole continually, chirping among themselves, puffing their imaginations like feathers all around themselves.

Tonight, on Christmas Eve itself, we would all line up, and my father would slip the knob back into the door, and one by one we would enter the wondrous room. This much we knew: the Christmas tree was in there.

Therefore, even in the morning at the upstairs window, we could scarcely stand the excitement.

Tonight! And lo: it was very, very cold.

Let me be more specific.

We were living in Edmonton, Alberta, then. The year was 1954, and I was ten, the oldest of seven children. I've implied that we were all excited on that particular Christmas Eve morning, and so we were; but though my brothers and sisters could manifest their excitement with unbridled delight, I could not mine. I absolutely refused to acknowledge or signal excitement. They loved the sweet contractions in their stomachs. I was afraid of them. For I had that very year become an adult: silent, solemn, watchful, and infinitely cautious.

So my brothers and sisters laughed and clapped the day away. They spilled colored sugar on cookie dough and covered the kitchen table with a sweet mess, all unworried, unafraid. They claimed, by faster stabs of the finger, their individual treasures from Sears catalogues, and so they allowed their dreams to soar, and so they passed the day. I didn't blame them. They were innocent; they could dare the dangers they didn't see. These children could rush headlong toward the evening, recklessly. But I could not.

I held myself in a severe restraint. Because--what if you hope, and it doesn't happen? It's treacherous to hope. The harder you hope, the more vulnerable you become. And what if you believe a thing, but it isn't true? Well, the instant you see the deception, you die a little. And it hurts in your soul exactly where once

you had believed. I knew all this. I had learned that excitement is composed of hope and faith together--but of a faith and a hope in promises yet unkept--and I was not about to let excitement run away with me or else I would certainly crash as I had crashed last year.

Last Christmas Eve in the midst of opening his presents, my brother Paul had burst into tears. I didn't know--and I don't know--why. But I was shocked to discover that the Christmas time is not inviolate. I was horrified that pain could invade the holy ceremony. And I was angry that my father had not protected my brother from tears. There was a fraud here. The traditions of merry gentlemen and gladness and joy were as thin as a crystal globe and empty. I could do nothing about that, of course, when I was nine years old, nothing but sob in an ignorant sympathy with my brother, nothing but grieve to the same degree as I had believed.

But by ten I was an adult. And if Christmas gave me nothing really, and if the traditions could not protect me from assault, then I would protect myself.

No: the more excited I was, the more I was determined not to be, and the more I molded my face into a frown.

I'm speaking with precision now. None of us could stand the season's excitement. But I was frightened by mine and chose to show it to no one, not to my father, not to my mother, and not to myself.

Adult.

By supper the world was black outside, so the noise inside seemed louder than it had been, and we the closer together. In bathrobes we ate soup. We had bathed: bright faces, soft faces, sparkling eyes in faces glowing with their soulful goodness. My brothers and sisters ran to their bedrooms, bubbling, and began to dress themselves.

I stood before the bathroom mirror and combed my hair with water, unsmiling.

Always we went to church on Christmas Eve to participate in the children's service. Nothing happened at home till after that. This was the tradition; and tradition itself began when we would venture into the cold, cold night, on our way to perform the parts we had been practicing for endless Saturdays. And if we were nervous about the lines we had to say, well, that only intensified excitement for the time thereafter: the room, the mystery, and the tree.

My hair froze as soon as I walked outside. It crackled when I touched it. It felt like a cap. Cold.

My face tightened in the night wind, and I blew ghosts of steam that the wind took from my lips. They were leaving me and wouldn't come back again.

The family sat three, three, and three in the three seats of a Volkswagen van, I in the farthest corner of the back, slouched, my hands stuffed in my pockets. I

forced myself to repeat my lines for the pageant. I was to be Isaiah.

So then it was a blazing church we crowded into, a small church filled with yellow light and stifling excitement. People were laughing simply at the sights of one another, as though familiar faces were a fine hilarity: "You, Harold, ha-ha-ha! You!"

In the narthex the press of people squashed us because we wore thick coats; and the children were shooed downstairs to giddy into costumes, and the adults clumped upstairs to wait in pews, and holly greens were knocked from the windowsills, and the windows were black with night. Who is so foolish as to laugh in such an atmosphere and not to fear that he's losing control?

Not me.

Class by class the children tromped into the chancel. As the pageant proceeded they sang with wide-open mouths all full of faith, eyes unafraid. The little ones waved to their parents by the crooking of four fingers, like scratching the air. They positively shined for happiness. No one thought to be fearful.

I, in my turn, stared solemnly at the massed congregation and intoned: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son."

I saw the adults jammed shoulder to shoulder in ranks before me, nodding and craning, encouraging me by grins, not a whit afraid.

"Wonderful, Counselor--"

No one was ready to sob in the midst of so much cheer and danger. Naive people--or else they were cunning. Well, neither would I.

"Mighty God!" I roared.

I would not cry. Neither would I succumb to the grins of these parents, no.

"Everlasting Father!"

Oh, no, I would not risk disappointment again this year.

"The Prince of Peace!" I thundered, and I quit.

No emotion whatsoever. I did not laugh. I did not smile. Both of these are treacherous lapses. I made a glowering prophet altogether. My father and my mother sat nearly hidden ten rows back. I noticed them just before descending from the chancel.

Walnuts, tangerines, a curled rock candy all in a small brown bag--and every kid got a bag at the end of the service. A bag was thrust toward me too, and I took it, but I didn't giggle and I didn't open it. *No sir! You won't entice me to gladness or gratitude.*

And the people, humping into coats again, called, "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!"--the pleasant tumult of departure. They were flowing outward into the black night, tossing goodwill over their shoulders like peanuts: "Merry Christmas!" *No, ma'am! You won't disarm me again this year.*

Even now my father delayed our going home. Tradition. As long as I can remember, my father found ways to while the time, increasing excitement until his children fairly panted piety and almost swooned in their protracted goodness.

"Don't breathe through your noses," my father sang out, hunched at the wheel of the van. This was his traditional joke. "You'll steam the windows," he called. "Breathe through your ears."

Silliness.

We breathed through our noses anyway, frosting the windows a quarter-inch thick, enclosing our family in a cave of space in the night. With mittened knuckles and elbows we rubbed peepholes through the muzzy ice. We were driving through the city to view its Christmas decorations, lights and trees and stables and beasts and effigies of the Holy Family. This, too, was tradition.

I peered out my little hole and regarded the scenes with sadness.

There was a tremendous tableau of Dickensian carolers in someone's yard, some dozen singers in tall hats and scarves and muffs, their mouths wide open, their eyes screwed up to heaven in a transport of song--their bodies a wooden fiction. Two-dimensioned ply-wood. They didn't move. They didn't produce a note of music. So nobody heard them. But nobody minded. Because no one was singing. And not a living soul was anywhere near them anyway. Except us, passing at the behest of my humorous father.

This was worse than silliness. This was dangerous. I found myself suddenly full of pity for the wooden figures and their plaintive gladness--as though they could be lonely in the deserted snow. Any feeling at all, you see, made me vulnerable. I stopped looking.

My boots crunched dry snow when we walked to the door of our house. A wind with crystals caused my eyes to tear. But resolutely, I was not crying.

And still my father delayed our going into the room.

Oh, who could control the spasms of his excitement? Dad! Dad, let's *do* it and be done!

But it was tradition, upon returning home, that we change from our church clothes into pajamas and then gather in the kitchen.

Across the hall the door was still closed--but its knob had been replaced. I saw that knob, and my heart kicked inside of me. So I chewed my bottom lip and frowned like thunder. *No! It won't be what it ought to be. It never is.*

Adult.

And always, always the hoops of my father's tradition: we line up in the kitchen from the youngest to the oldest. I stood last in a line of seven. My little sister Dena was clasping her hands and raising her shining, saintly face to my father, who stood in front of her, facing us all. Her hair hung down her back to the waist. Blithe child! Her blue eyes burst with trust. I pitied her.

My father prayed a prayer, tormenting me. For the prayer evoked the very images I was refusing: infant Jesus, gift of God, love come down from heaven--all the things that conspired to make me glad at Christmas. My poor heart bucked and disputed that prayer. No! I would not hope. No! I would not permit excitement. No! No! I would not be set up for another disappointment!

We were a single minute from entering the room.

And I might have succeeded at severity--except that then we sang a song, the same song we had always sung, and the singing undid me altogether. Music destroys me. A hymn can reduce me to infancy.

Nine bare voices, unaccompanied in the kitchen, we sang: *Ah, dearest Jesus, holy child--*and I began to tremble. *Make thee a bed, soft, undefiled--* The very sweetness of the melody caused my defenses to fall. I began to hope, and I began to fear, both at once. I began to wish, and wishing made me terrified. I began all over again to believe, but I had never ceased my unbelief. I began to panic.

--Within my heart; that it may be--

Dreadfully, now, I yearned for some good thing to be found in that room, but "dreadfully" because I was an adult; I had put away childish things; I had been disillusioned and knew no good to be in there at all. This was a pitiless sham!

--A quiet chamber kept for thee.

My father whispered, "Now."

He turned to the door.

Little squeals escaped my sister.

He grasped the knob and opened the door upon a muted, colored light; and one by one his children crept through the doorway, looking, not breathing.

There, shedding a dim and varied light, was the Christmas tree my father had decorated alone, every single strand of tinsel hanging straight down of its own slim weight since he draped them individually, patiently, never hastening the duty by tossing tinsel in fistfuls (tradition!)--the tree that he had hidden three days ago behind a knobless door.

There, in various places around the room, were seven piles of presents, a pile for each of us.

There, in the midst of them, my mother sat smiling on the floor, her skirts encircling her, her radiance smiting my eyes, for she verged on laughter. My mother always laughed when she gave gifts, however long the day had been, however crazy she had almost gone.

I began to blink rapidly.

But there, unaccountably, was my father, standing center in the room and gazing straight at me. At me. And this is the wonder fixed in my memory forever: that the man himself was filled with a yearning, painful expectation; but that he, like me, was withholding still his own excitement--on account of *me*.

Everything else in this room was just as it had been the year before, and the year before that. But this was new. This thing I had never seen before: that my father, too, had passed his day in the hope that risks a violent hurt. My father, too, had had to trust the promises against their disappointments. So said his eyes still steadfast on me. But among the promises to which my father had committed his soul, his hope and his faith, the most important one was this: that his eldest

son should soften and be glad.

If I had grown adult in 1954, then lo how like a child my father had become!

The colored lights painted the side of his face. He gazed at me, waiting, waiting for me, waiting for his Christmas to be received by his son and returned to him again.

And I began to cry.

O my father!

Silently, merely spilling the tears and staring straight back at him, defenseless because there was no need for defenses, I cried--glad and unashamed. Because, what *was* this room, for so long locked, which I was entering now? Why, it was my own heart. And why had I been afraid? Because I thought I'd find it empty, a hard, unfeeling thing.

But there, in the room, was my father.

And there, in my father, was the love that had furnished this room, preparing it for us no differently than he had last year, yet trusting and yearning, desiring our joy.

And what else could such a love be but my Jesus drawing near to me?

Look, then, what I have found in my father's room, in my heart after all: the dearest Lord Jesus, holy child--

The nativity of our Lord.

I leaned my cheek against the doorjamb and grinned like a grown-up ten years old, and sobbed as if I were two. And my father moved from the middle of the room and walked toward me, still empty-handed; but he spread his arms and gathered me to himself. And I put my arms around his harder body. And so we, both of us, were full.

This is the way that it was in the olden days.

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